

1754

By Mark Kaharas

Swarthmore College, Class of 2008.

1754 was an important year in the development of Quaker stances against slavery. Most well known is the publication of John Woolman's first of two essays against slavery "Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes." This essay was first drafted in 1746, when Woolman was only 26. This was four years after Woolman first spoke in meeting and was the year of his first substantial ministerial journey; he traveled twice for a total of almost four months and 1,840 miles. Shortly before his death in 1750, Woolman's father encouraged him to present the essay to the Overseers of the Press, which he did in 1754. This essay was the widest distributed anti-slavery essay penned by a Friend to date.

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting also authored an epistle in 1754 that condemned slavery. The arguments present in the epistle are markedly similar to that present in Woolman's essay, which primarily center on the Golden Rule of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The Epistle is notable for positing god's wrath being a consequence of slavery, noting that "[man-stealing is] the only Theft whc. [sic] by the Mosaic Law was punished with Death." Moulton states in his introduction to Woolman's Journal (p. 12) that he was the author of the epistle, although the minutes does not state that he was on the committee that drafted the epistle nor was he a signatory to it. The minutes state that the Epistle arose out of a concern of the delegates from Philadelphia. Woolman was a delegate from Burlington, although another prominent Quaker critic of slavery, Anthony Benezet, was a delegate from Philadelphia. Woolman and Benezet were the sole two members of the committee that drafted the epistle to Virginia Yearly Meeting, although that epistle makes no obvious mention of slavery.

In his Journal Woolman only perfunctorily addresses the publication of his essay and does not mention either epistle at all, choosing instead to focus on an epistle drafted by the Yearly Meeting in the spring of 1755 concerning Friends' views of pacifism in relation to the French and Indian War. However, the two publications of 1754 mark a turning point in the public stances of Quakers - both to non-Quakers and to other Friends, towards slavery.

Available on this online collection are the original 1754 edition of Woolman's "Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes" and the epistle approved at Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. The other epistle - authored by Woolman and Benezet - is available at the Swarthmore Friends Historical Library, MR-Ph-479.