

The First Jews in America

A Cincinnati Museum Center and online lesson.

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Exhibit Panel: “The Beginnings of a Community”

Ohio Standards Correlation

People in Societies Standard	Grade Eight	Point 1
People in Societies Standard	Grade Eight	Point 6
Government Standard	Grade Eight	Point 1

Introduction

The American Jewish community began as a small band of approximately two dozen refugees fleeing Brazil in 1654. They arrived in New Amsterdam, which later became New York City, and faced discrimination, most notably from New Amsterdam governor Peter Stuyvesant, in their attempts to establish their businesses in trading and commerce. Jews later spread to other communities where the ports were good and the opportunities to trade were excellent, such as Newport, Rhode Island, Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia. In each of these merchant centers, Jews founded synagogues that certainly heralded their intentions of remaining as citizens in the colonies. To this end, Jews participated in small numbers in American efforts to break from Great Britain and otherwise demonstrated their beliefs that the American promises of freedom and liberty applied to them as well. This hope that American ideals would match American reality led several leading Jewish leaders to correspond with the founding fathers to exact from them their position on the place of Jews in the United States. The answers to those queries provide the basis of this lesson.

Themes

Teachers could incorporate two themes into this lesson or just pick out one. Clearly, the theme that seems most obvious is the separation of church and state. Teachers could use this lesson to track the development of this idea, especially in a Constitution unit. Also, teachers could consider the theme of “American idealism versus American reality” by taking a look at some of the most important documents of the founding era, as well as the exhibit documents, and then comparing them to events in US history that might contradict them. In this regard, the lesson could be used at various times of a US survey course.

Learning Objectives

Pre-Exhibit: To allow students an exploration of the sources that support the arguments for religious toleration and a separation of church and state. The theme of religious toleration should be student generated—have them figure it out. The pre-exhibit activity is broken up into two options, one for 10th graders and one for 8th graders.

Exhibit: To allow students to work with primary source documents and analyze them in groups or alone, depending on the teacher's preference. The questions posed to students are intended to guide them through the exhibit and encourage critical answers of the sources. The questions for the exhibit and the extension exercises could be used for both grade levels.

Post-Exhibit: To help kids make sense of what they have just seen by putting it into another format.

1. Historical Role Play (10th grade): Using primary and secondary sources for research, students will construct the arguments that the characters to which they have been assigned would have made in 1791. Yes, some of these characters are dead, but that never stopped anyone from voicing their opinions before!! These websites are intended to help them begin their research, though other research would probably be helpful.
2. The Editorial (8th grade): This is an opinion piece in which students will use the historical information they have been given to take a position on the question: Should the United States government be religiously tolerant? They are to support their assertions with historical evidence, but it is not really an analytical piece.
3. The Research Paper (10th grade): This assignment uses a Supreme Court website to investigate other areas in US history where the issue of separation of church and state or religious toleration has been addressed before the Court. This is a good opportunity for students to make current connections to the history they have already studied, as well as the history they have learned in the exhibit.

Pre-Exhibit Activity

10th grade: A scenario activity

-The President issues an executive order giving the rights of citizenship only to Baptists. Refute this mandate using the First Amendment, the Declaration of Independence, the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.

Teacher's note: Clearly, this is a counterfactual scenario, and the President does not have this power. You may want to make note of that in your classes, to avoid confusion among your students.

8th grade: A brainstorming activity

What do these items have in common?

-The First Amendment, United States Constitution

<http://www.usconstitution.net/const.html>

-The Declaration of Independence

http://www.archives.gov/national_archives_experience/charters/declaration.html

-The Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom

<http://www.worldpolicy.org/globalrights/religion/va-religiousfreedom.html>

-The Northwest Ordinance

<http://earlyamerica.com/earlyamerica/milestones/ordinance/>

Some debriefing questions

1. What does “toleration” mean? Does it mean you must accept the beliefs of others, even if they differ with yours? Explain.
2. Is it important for the government to be tolerant? Why or why not?
3. In what ways, then, could toleration be manifested in the government, as it relates to religious beliefs? (Try to get students to the separation of church and state during the discussion.)
4. Some have accused the founding fathers of being anti-religious. Based on what we have discussed, do you think that is an accurate assessment of these men? Why or why not? (Have students write down their answer to this question.)

In considering these questions, view these websites to help you in your response:

http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article_display.cfm?HHID=33.

5. George Washington lived by the lessons taught in Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior, which he read when he was a boy of 16. Read through some of these lessons on the website below, and try to find connections between the lessons in the book and the position he took with Jews in America:

<http://www.history.org/Almanack/life/manners/rules2.cfm>

Exhibit Activity

Note: Due to the low lighting required to preserve some of the documents in the exhibit, students may have a difficult time reading the documents. It is recommended that teachers print, copy, and make available to students a clearer version of the letters below. Website links are therefore included.

The Moses Seixas Letter: Questions for both grade levels

<http://www.tourosynagogue.org/seixasLtr.php>

1. In what ways does Seixas find a connection between his religious faith and George Washington? To what degree is that an effective tool to connect to the reader?
2. Characterize the tone of Seixas’ letter. To what extent does he seem grateful? Why?
3. Hypothesize what the purpose of this letter to George Washington may have been.

Note: Seixas was one of Newport’s Jewish leaders who welcomed Washington on his trip to the city while at the same time tried to establish his hopes and expectations of his administration.

The George Washington Letter: Questions for both grade levels
<http://www.tourosynagogue.org/GWLetter1.php>

1. Some historians have argued that this quote, “All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship,” is the most important in the letter.
 - a. Explain what the quote means.
 - b. Is it important that Washington quoted from Seixas’ letter? Why?
 - c. Agree or disagree with the historians’ assertion about whether this is the most important quote in the letter. Support your position.
 2. Characterize George Washington’s opinion about the status of Jews in America. Provide two quotes to support your assertion.
 3. To what degree is it significant, for precedent’s sake, that George Washington sent this letter as an official part of his role as the President of the United States?
- Note: This was George Washington’s response to Seixas’ letter.

Post-Exhibit Activities

Option 1

Have students research on the internet the opinions of other founding fathers with regard to religious toleration.

Jewish Virtual Library—“Judaic Treasures of the Library of Congress: The Author of the Declaration of Independence and the Architect of the Constitution”
www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/loc/madison.html

Note: The letters sent to the Presidents were penned by Jewish leaders throughout the country, mostly on the occasions of a dedication of a synagogue.

Adams’ Letter to Mordecai M. Noah:

In what ways does John Adams’ letter reflect the sentiments of George Washington? Provide a quote to support your assertion.

Thomas Jefferson’s Letter to Mordecai M. Noah

Explain this quote: “Your sect by its sufferings has furnished a remarkable proof of the universal spirit of religious intolerance inherent in every sect, disclaimed by all while feeble, and practiced by all when in power. Our laws have applied the only antidote to this vice, protecting our religious, as they do our civil right, by putting all on an equal footing.”

Later in the letter, Jefferson argues, “But more remains to be done, for although we are free by the law, we are not so in practice.” What does he mean by that statement? Consider at least one historical example that might support Jefferson’s argument.

James Madison’s Letter to Dr. Jacob de la Motta

Characterize Madison’s belief about religious toleration. Back up your argument with evidence.

According to Madison, in what ways does religious toleration benefit those of various religious denominations as well as the country as a whole? Explain.

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

1. In a letter to Dr. de la Motta, Thomas Jefferson once remarked, “Divided we stand, united we fall...” How does that quote relate to Jefferson’s belief in the separation of church and state?
2. Does the founding fathers’ belief in the separation of church and state make them anti-religious? (Refer back to initial question posed before the exhibit)

Option #2

Historical Role Play—A Talk Show, “Religious Roundtable” (More appropriate for 10th grade)

Question: Should the United States government be religiously tolerant?

Directions: In groups of three, research the primary and secondary sources related to your character. Come up with at least two arguments for your position to the question of the day. Your character may not have ever made known explicitly what his views on this question were, but your job is to infer to the best of your ability what he might have thought based on his other writings. Your teacher will be your moderator.

Goal: Using primary and secondary sources for research, please construct the argument your character would have made in 1791. Yes, some of these characters are dead, but that never stopped anyone from voicing their opinions before!! These websites are intended to help you begin your research.

YES

-Roger Williams
-George Washington
-Thomas Jefferson
-Mordecai Noah

NO

-Jonathon Edward
-Cotton Mather
-John Winthrop
-Peter Stuyvesant

Roger Williams: <http://www.learner.org/amerpass/unit01/authors-10.html>
<http://oll.libertyfund.org/ToC/0082.php>

George Washington: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0915/p12s01-lire.html>
http://www.revsonfoundation.org/publications_liberty.htm

Thomas Jefferson: <http://www.monticello.org/education/asktj/index.html>
<http://etext.virginia.edu/jefferson/quotations/jeff1500.htm>
<http://www.pbs.org/jefferson/enlight/religi.htm>

Mordecai Noah <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/loc/noah.html>

Jonathan Edwards <http://www.jonathanedwards.com/sermons/Warnings/sinners.htm>

Cotton Mather: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/historyofus/tools/browser3b.html>
<http://oll.libertyfund.org/ToC/0082.php>

John Winthrop <http://classiclit.about.com/library/weekly/aa112600a.htm>
<http://www.constitution.org/bcp/winthlib.htm>

Peter Stuyvesant <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/USIsrael/amsterdam.html>
http://www.cjh.org/about/Forward/view_Forward.cfm?Forwardid=13

Option #3

The Editorial (More appropriate for 8th grade)

Have students write an editorial on the option #1 question, asking them to cite at least three historical examples from their research and class lessons to support their position.

Option #4:

The Research Assignment (More appropriate for 10th grade)

Essay Question:

Looking at the First Amendment, the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, the Northwest Ordinance, and the letters from the exhibit as a reference, have Supreme Court rulings allowed American reality to match American idealism?

Questions to Consider When Writing This Piece:

Under what circumstances has the issue of religious toleration and the separation of church and state been addressed by the Supreme Court? How did the Court find? Analyze the significance of the Court's findings in light of America's religious and political heritage.

This website might be helpful to you in your research:

US Supreme Court Multimedia Database: www.oyez.org/oyez/frontpage