

CONSOURCE



The Constitutional Sources Project

Revolutionary War Unit

Oaths of Allegiance: Moravians and Andrew Giering

TIME AND GRADE LEVEL

One 45 or 50 minute class period in a **Grade 4-8**. This lesson can be used in conjunction with the ConSource lesson “**Wartime Pacifists: Quakers.**” Alternately, either lesson can be used on its own.

PURPOSE AND CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT QUESTIONS

History is the chronicle of choices made by actors/agents/protagonists who, in very specific contexts, unearth opportunities and inevitably encounter impediments. During the Revolutionary War people of every stripe navigated turbulent waters. As individuals and groups struggled for their own survival, they also shaped the course of the nation. Whether a general or a private, male or female, free or enslaved, each became a player in a sweeping drama. The instructive sessions outlined here are tailored for upper elementary and middle school students, who encounter history most readily through the lives of individual historical players. Here, students actually *become* those players, confronted with tough and often heart-wrenching choices that have significant consequences. History in all its complexity comes alive. It is a convoluted, thorny business, far more so than streamlined timelines suggest, yet still accessible on a personal level to students at this level.

In this simulation, elementary or middle school students play the role of Andrew Giering, a Moravian pacifist who refuses to take an oath of allegiance to Pennsylvania’s Revolutionary government. Students learn why the oath conflicts with Giering’s religious beliefs, but they also encounter the consequences of his refusal: imprisonment. While in jail his family struggles, but a Moravian leader urges him to hold firm. Students are asked: If you were Giering, would you now take the oath so you can get of jail and help your family, or would you stay true to your religious beliefs? Giering’s example personifies the recurring conflicts between deeply held religious beliefs and the demands of government. The lesson can be used as an unbiased introduction to the separation of church and state and to various contemporary issues that arise when interpreting that basic premise.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

*Students will be able to define “oath of allegiance.”

*Students will be able to explain why state governments during the Revolutionary War required citizens to sign an oath of allegiance.

*Students will be able to explain why members of pacifistic religious communities refused to take an oath of allegiance.

*By citing the consequences, students will be able to explain the quandary faced by those who refused.

*Students will be able to explain the meaning of “separation of church and state” and give a brief historic background for that doctrine.

*Students will be able to cite some of the unresolved contemporary issues that involve differing interpretations of that basic premise.

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON

Prefatory homework:

Handout A: Oaths of Allegiance and Religious Communities in the Revolutionary War

In class:

1. Homework review and discussion: 10 minutes
2. Students, as Andrew Giering, consider whether to take the Pennsylvania oath: 15 minutes
3. Presentation of historical outcome: 5-10 minutes
4. Introduction to the separation of church and state: 10-20 minutes

Summary Homework / Extended Activities

MATERIALS

Background Handouts (Students read.)

- A. Oaths of Allegiance and Religious Communities in the Revolutionary War

Classroom Handouts (Teacher presents or students read this material.)

- B. Historical Outcome: Andrew Giering’s Decision
- C. Separation of Church and State.

Vocabulary List

PREFATORY HOMEWORK

Distribute **Handout A: Oaths of Allegiance and Religious Communities in the Revolutionary War**. Go over instructions on that sheet. If the class has already participated in the ConSource lesson “Wartime Pacifists: Quakers,” teacher can make a transition: *Serving in the army is an obligation imposed by the government. Often, especially in times of war, the government also requires citizens to take an oath of allegiance—and that, too, conflicted with the beliefs of several religious communities during the Revolutionary War.*

CLASS ACTIVITIES: 45-50 MINUTES

1. HOMEWORK REVIEW AND DISCUSSION: 10 minutes

Open by explaining “oath of allegiance,” defined and explained in the vocabulary list for this lesson. In the homework reading, the meaning is revealed in context, but bring it home now by referring to the United States pledge of allegiance, known to the students. An oath of allegiance is like that but stronger—legally, it *must* be obeyed. Then go over the reviews question and set the stage for student discussion.

2: STUDENTS, AS ANDREW GIERING, CONSIDER WHETHER TO TAKE THE PENNSYLVANIA OATH: 15 minutes

Discussion should be in breakout groups to allow full participation. At the end, students make their personal decisions.

3. PRESENTATION OF HISTORICAL OUTCOME: 5-10 minutes.

Teacher presents or students read **Handout B. Historical Outcome: Andrew Giering’s Decision**. Teacher emphasizes that even within a specific community, members differed.

To spend more time on the next section, the separation of church and state, teacher could present **Handout B** in abbreviated form: present the first paragraph, bypass the second and third paragraphs, and briefly summarize the fourth and fifth paragraphs.

4. INTRODUCTION TO THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE: 10-20 minutes

Teacher presents or students read **Handout C. Separation of Church and State**. Class can discuss any of the issues raised on that sheet. This, of course, is only a beginning. Teachers wanting to focus on religious freedom can use this whole lesson as an introduction.

SUMMARY HOMEWORK / EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

(Some topics also appear in the ConSource lesson “Wartime Pacifists: Quakers.”)

1. Pacifists during the Revolutionary War were Christians, and according to the Bible, Jesus said, “Render [give] unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God that things that are God’s.” Caesar was a famous Roman emperor who enforced laws and made people pay taxes.

Some people say this meant that Christians should obey the law, even if they don’t believe in it. Other people think this means that you should obey a country’s laws *except* if that means breaking God’s law. God’s law is higher, they say, so you must obey it first.

What you think?

2. Research and report on any of the pacifistic religious communities during the Revolutionary War: Quakers, Shakers, Moravians, Mennonites, Amish, Dunkers, Schwenkfelders. To find sources for some of these, consult the references in Ray Raphael, *A People's History of the American Revolution*, chapter 4, "Loyalists and Pacifists," in the section "Tests of Faith."
3. Research and report on the history of pledge of allegiance here in the United States. When did it start, and why? How has it changed over time?
4. In the United States, immediately before many sporting events, people stand while someone sings or a band plays "The Star Spangled Banner," our national anthem. In the past few years, some professional football players have decided to "take the knee"—kneeling rather than standing during the national anthem—to protest what they believe is racial injustice in this country. Some people say this is unpatriotic. Everybody should stand to show respect for their country. But those who "take a knee" say they *are* showing respect by kneeling quietly, and they only wish to point out that their country could be doing better with respect to racial equality. Like the pledge of allegiance, standing or kneeling during the national anthem is a symbolic gesture—a small act that has greater meaning. Weigh in on this issue. Why has this symbolic gesture become such a big deal? What are people *really* arguing about?
5. Research and report on any issue today that concerns the separation of church and state. See Handout C for background information.

Vocabulary for “Oaths of Allegiance: Andrew Giering”

allegiance — loyalty to a person or a group, often to a nation or a state

oath — a formal promise that has the force of law

oath of allegiance — a legal promise to obey all the laws of a nation or state. Immigrants take an oath of allegiance in order to become a citizen of the United States. An oath of allegiance is stronger than our pledge of allegiance because an oath *must* be obeyed.

pacifist — a person who does not believe it is right to kill other humans, even enemy soldiers

persecution — treating a certain group of people very badly

politics — deciding who makes the laws and what laws to make

religious community — people who share religious beliefs and come together to worship

separation of church and state — A government (“state”) should not make any laws that interfere with a person’s religious beliefs (“church”), and a religious organization should not interfere with the government.

Handout A: Oaths of Allegiance and Religious Communities in the Revolutionary War

The Moravians were a religious community that had come from Germany. They were pacifists. That meant that they did not believe in killing people, even during wars. But in Germany some of the men had been forced into the army, and Moravians were persecuted in many other ways there. But once they made their way to Britain's North American colonies, these immigrants were free to practice their religion as they pleased—until the Revolutionary War came along.

In June of 1777 the Pennsylvania Assembly, which made the laws for that state, required that all male, white inhabitants above the age of eighteen sign an oath of allegiance:

“I —— do Swear (or affirm) that I renounce & refuse all Allegiance to George the Third King of Great Britain his Heirs & Successors; and that I will be faithful & bear true Allegiance to the Common Wealth of Pennsylvania as a free & independent State.”

The Pennsylvania Assembly passed this law because many Loyalists lived in their state, and Loyalists still supported the British government. The Assembly wanted people to support and obey the Revolutionary government instead. By signing the oath, a person promised they would do that. Moravians, like everyone else, were supposed to sign the oath, but they didn't want to swear allegiance to Pennsylvania and turn against King George III and Great Britain. That government had let them come to America and had treated them well. On the other hand, they didn't want to help the British fight a war. They didn't want to take sides. They just wanted to be left alone.

Moravians also believed that a person should take an oath of allegiance *only* to God, not to other humans. If they obeyed the new law, they would be going against their religious beliefs. But if they refused to take the oath of allegiance, they could be put in jail. They talked and argued about what they should do.

Andrew Giering, a farmer who also made shoes for money, decided not to take the oath. The government then arrested him. Week after week Giering sat in jail. Meanwhile, back on the farm, his wife and children and children struggled. It was almost harvest time, and without Andrew, they would not be able to harvest enough food for the winter.

Andrew thought about taking the oath so he could get out of jail, but a Moravian leader, John Ettwain, urged him not to. If Andrew Giering gave in, John Ettwain argued, the Pennsylvania government would win and force *all* Moravians to take the oath. On the one hand, Andrew agreed with Ettwain — but how could he feel at peace with himself if he left his family in distress?

What would you do if you were in Andrew Giering's situation?

INSTRUCTIONS: Later you will talk this over with others with your classmates. For now, respond briefly to these questions:

- *Who were the Moravians?
- *Why didn't they want to take an oath of allegiance to the Revolutionary government in Pennsylvania? Give two reasons.
- *What did John Ettwain want Andrew Giering to do? Why?
- *What do you think Giering's wife wanted him to do?

Handout B. Historical Outcome: Andrew Giering's Decision

After 11 weeks in jail, Andrew Giering took the oath. He said, "My poor Emily is in great Distress." Although he really needed to help her, he didn't like giving up. He hoped that "God knows my Heart & Circumstances & will in Mercy pardon me, if I do wrong."

Most Moravians, like Andrew Giering, opposed the oath, but they disagreed on *how* to oppose it. Should they write a petition to the Pennsylvania Assembly, asking for permission to not sign it? Some thought they should "do nothing in the matter." For years, in Germany and America, Moravians had managed to stay out of politics. They found that if they simply did nothing, people forgot about them and left them alone. Would that work this time? One Moravian said: "It is my duty to remain quiet and to evade the issue as long as I may."

In the end, that is what the Moravians did, but they never did vote on the decision. Instead they "cast lots." They gathered stones of different colors. They believed that the colored stones carried instructions from God, who determined everything and would make sure they picked the right colors. One color, for example, might tell them to agree to something and another might tell them *not* to agree. The casting of lots was a practice mentioned in the holy book they read, the Bible. In this case, by "casting lots," the Moravians decided that God wanted them to simply wait and see what happened.

Other religious pacifists—Quakers, Shakers, Mennonites, Amish, Dunkers, and Schwenkfelders—didn't take the oath either. When one group of Mennonites refused, a sheriff came and took their "beds, bedding, linen, Bibles and books," they said. Even their food was seized, with "not a morsel of bread left for their children." When their iron stoves were taken, families lost "every means of keeping their children warm in the approaching winter, especially at nights."

Such punishments eventually stopped because so many people refused to take the oath. Putting them all in jail simply took too much time and too much energy. Besides, Pennsylvania needed all of its hard-working farmers and workers. It didn't make sense to jail thousands of them just because they refused to put their names on a piece of paper.

On April 1, 1779, the Assembly passed a new law. People who refused to take the oath couldn't be elected to public office or serve on juries. That was their only punishment. No longer did Moravians like Andrew Giering live in fear of imprisonment.

Handout C: Separation of Church and State

Can the government ever interfere with a person's religion? Many of the earliest colonists came to America to escape religious persecution. But some of these same people, once they were here, wanted to make *their* religion the official religion of the government. That, of course, made people who had *different* beliefs very angry. They protested. They said that government should stay out of religion altogether.

This had been going on long before the Revolutionary War. So when religious pacifists refused to take an oath of allegiance to the government or refused to fight in the army (See ConSource lesson "**Wartime Pacifists: Quakers**"), they were doing what others before them had done. They were saying to the government: please do not interfere with our beliefs.

Eventually, people seeking religious freedom won. The First Amendment to the Constitution, written a few years after the Revolutionary War, said: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Notice that there are two parts to this, separated by a comma. The first says that it's not the government's job to *establish*, or pick, a religion that everyone has to believe in. The second says that the government can't *prohibit*, or stop, people from believing in whatever religion they choose.

Thomas Jefferson later called these two guarantees of religious freedom the "separation of church and state." *Church* referred to any religion, and *state* referred to the government. Today, although nearly everybody in the United States thinks religion and government should be separated, people have different opinions about *how far* they should be separated. Can taxes be used to support religious schools? Can people offer religious prayers at government meetings? Can symbols that promote a particular religion appear in a public place that is owned by the government? Can a man have two or more wives, which is permitted in the Mormon religion?

These are all tricky questions, and there are no easy answers. Consider any one of these issues—or any other issue regarding the "separation of church and state"—and develop arguments for both sides.