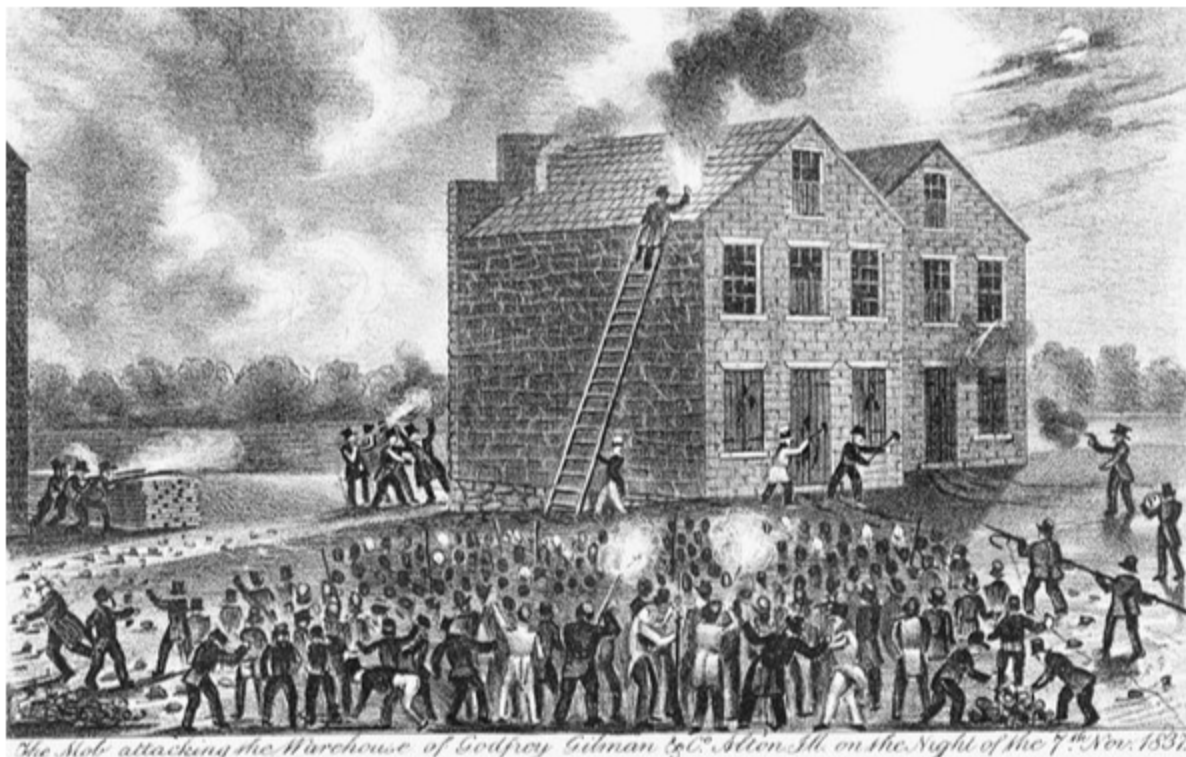


LESSON PLAN X - Thomas Wilson Dorr and Antislavery Politics in the 1830s

Authors: Erik J. Chaput and Russell J. DeSimone

Grade Levels: 10-12

Time Period: Two nights of preparatory homework and one 75-80 minute block lesson



An anti-abolitionist mob attacking a warehouse where the abolitionist [Elijah Lovejoy](#) was killed in 1837. (Library of Congress)

SUBJECT AREAS:

- History and Social Studies > U.S. > AP U.S. History
- History and Social Studies > Themes > Politics and Citizenship
- History and Social Studies > Themes > Antislavery Reform
- History and Social Studies > Themes > Slavery
- History and Social Studies > Themes > U.S. Constitution

RHODE ISLAND GSE:

- HP 1-1; HP 1-2; HP 1-3; HP 2-1; HP 2-2; HP 2-3 2
- C&G 1-1; C&G 1-2; C&G 3-2

SKILLS:

- Critical analysis
- Critical thinking
- Discussion
- Evaluating arguments
- Historical analysis
- Interpretation
- Making inferences and drawing conclusions
- Online research
- Presenting ideas and information orally, graphically and in writing
- Using primary sources
- Writing skills

INTRODUCTION:

This lesson is designed to help teachers explore the contours of antislavery politics in the nation in the mid-1830s. The lesson should be administered after students have explored other features of the Dorr Rebellion Project website, in particular “[The Road to Rebellion](#)” letter collection and accompanying lesson plans. One of the main goals of the lesson is for students to see the emergence of Thomas Wilson Dorr’s antislavery politics in the years *before* the Dorr Rebellion and to make connections to his expressed ideology and actions in 1842.

The story students will explore takes place several years before Thomas Dorr's attempt to overturn the sitting Rhode Island government. In the 1830s, Dorr emerged as a central antislavery figure in the General Assembly. After a year of practicing law in New York City, Thomas Dorr returned to Providence in 1832 and embarked on a reform course. From the start of his political career, Dorr was connected to a third party effort by middle-class reformers. The Constitutionalist Party (largely reform-minded Whigs) took over the reform efforts of the state's labor leaders. The declared goal of the party when it was formed in December 1833 was "a constitution, the equalization of representation, the extension of suffrage, and amendment of the penal code."

In March 1834, Dorr was elected as a hybrid candidate of the Whigs and Constitutionals, to represent Providence's Fourth Ward. During his first term in the legislature, Dorr attempted a series of multifaceted reforms within the ranks of a small group of what was referred to as "New School Whigs," that is politicians who were not dismayed by the democratic revolutions of the Jacksonian Period. If they have not done so already, teachers should take time to review the discussion of the origins of the Whig Party and the ideological differences with the Jacksonian Democrats. This [e-book](#) created by the National Archives will help teachers with the Second Party System. In the 1830s, Thomas Dorr championed numerous reform causes — public education, freedom of speech, banking, suffrage extension, reform of imprisonment for debt, prison reform, and, most notably, antislavery.

Dorr's faith in the Rhode Island Whig Party was eventually shaken by the proslavery stance of some of its most prominent members. The arch-conservatives Benjamin Hazard and Richard Randolph (both from Newport) continued the state's long standing connection to slavery by leading a fight to enact a state gag law on Rhode Island abolitionists at the behest of the

governors of North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. For more on the [history of slavery](#) in 18th century Rhode Island see the *Encompass* digital textbook from the Rhode Island Historical Society.

Richard Randolph was a Virginian who married into Newport's high society. It was no coincidence that after Hazard and Randolph put forth their resolutions, the [Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society](#) was formed. Dorr led the fight in the General Assembly against the proposed gag rule that mirrored what had happened on the national level in the corridors of power in Washington, D.C. Hazard and Randolph were brothers-in-law having married two Newport sisters. Randolph had strong family ties in Virginia where his family were slaveholders and helps explain both men's staunch pro-slavery views. On the state level their verbal exchange on the House floor with the anti-slavery Providence attorney Thomas Dorr was more than just about the proposed gag rule, it was the harbinger of more profound verbal battles that would ultimately lead the nation into the Civil War.

In May 1836, Dorr was appointed chairman of a select committee to consider Hazard's and Randolph's pro-slavery resolutions and the petitions against them. Perhaps realizing the potential damaging political effects of his resolutions, Hazard attempted to dissolve the Rhode Island legislative committee. Sensing Hazard's ploy, Dorr pressed for the debate to continue. Hazard lost the war to Rhode Island's antislavery forces because no formal vote was taken on his gag rule measures. Hazard had some revenge in the summer of 1836 when he defeated a motion championed by Dorr to allow Newport abolitionists use of the city's courthouse. Hazard and Richard Randolph later banded together to defeat a motion by Dorr to present a memorial to Rhode Island's Congressional delegation on abolishing slavery and the slave trade in Washington, D.C.

In the lesson students will be exposed to the significant proslavery forces in Rhode Island in the 1830s through a series of primary source documents. Students will also see the development of a powerful abolitionist block that was trying to stop the spread of proslavery ideology. An overview essay authored by historians Erik Chaput and Russell DeSimone will help students understand the contours of the national debate over a gag rule and the inner workings of the Rhode Island legislature.

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR THE LESSON:

- How would you characterize the arguments of the proslavery forces in Rhode Island and in Washington, D.C.?
- What role did the First Amendment to the Constitution play in abolitionist arguments?
- Why did the abolitionists pose a threat to the Union according to their opponents?

PREPARATION INSTRUCTIONS:

- Two homework nights of preparation will be necessary so teachers will need to plan accordingly. On night #1, students should be assigned the overview essay by Erik Chaput and Russell DeSimone. A reading comprehension quiz should be administered in order to assess student comprehension before moving further into the lesson:

Possible quiz questions to pose to students:

1. Ask students to explain the controversy over abolitionist mailings in the early 1830s.
2. Ask students to identify the main components of the Gag Rule that was adopted by the U.S. Congress.

3. Ask students to identify at least 1 component of the proslavery argument and 1 component of the antislavery argument on display in the 1830s.
 4. Were anti-abolitionist northerners pro-slavery or just opposed to abolitionist tactics?
- After the quiz, teachers should show this [15-minute video](#) featuring historian Raymond Lavertue discussing Thomas Dorr's antislavery activism. Students should focus their notes on Professor Lavertue's remarks about Thomas Dorr's time in the Rhode Island General Assembly. The video should be paired with the Gilder Lehrman Foundation's teaching [abolitionism page](#).
 - The second night of homework should entail a reading of Representative Silas James' 1836 anti-abolition memorial to the Rhode Island legislature. Students should use the transcribed version.

Possible quiz questions to pose to students relating to James' anti-abolitionist memorial:

1. Identify two reasons Silas James thought abolitionists posed a threat to the sanctity of the Union?
2. Does James see any middleground for compromise?
3. Is James in favor of the expansion of slavery?

**IN-CLASS LESSON ACTIVITIES (75-80 MINUTE BLOCK CLASS
FORMAT)**

After reading the background material (overview essay) and one lengthy primary source (Silas James' memorial to the RI Assembly), students are now ready for the activities.

Activity #1: (35-40 minutes): Students should be broken up into 4 groups to [analyze](#) the following primary source documents accessed on the [Dorr Rebellion Project website](#):

Group 1: January 1837 Abolitionists Petitions to the General Assembly (2 petitions), along with 1838 Abolitionist Petition

Group 2: 1836 Petitions from Kentucky, Mississippi, Georgia (3 total)

Group 3: 1836 Anti-abolition document

Group 4: 1836 Committee report

Activity #2: (15 minutes): Group 1 and Group 2 should meet and compare notes on their respective documents. Group 3 and Group 4 should do the same.

Activity #3: (25-30 minutes): On the whiteboard, students should highlight the main points relating to abolitionist, northern anti-abolitionist, and pro-slavery opinions in the 1830s.

Homework:

Students could read and analyze this [1837 letter](#) from Thomas Wilson Dorr to abolitionist William Chace and compare it to the classwork just completed.

EXTENDING THE LESSON:

If students have previously examined other portions of the Dorr Rebellion Project website, they could be tasked with writing a reflection paper on what connections they see between Thomas Dorr's antislavery activism in the 1830s and his efforts to expand the franchise in Rhode Island the 1840s. This [video](#) on Thomas Wilson Dorr and race could be assigned, along with this [essay](#) from the journal *Commonplace*.

