

TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT – 2009-2012

***Lesson Title – The Wall of Separation?
Submitted by Russell T. Hart***

Grade - 10 Early U.S. History/Civics

Length of class period – 60-90 min. (variable)

Inquiry – (What essential question are students answering, what problem are they solving, or what decision are they making?)

What is the origin and what are the implications of the commonly used phrase, “Wall of Separation between church and state?”

Objectives (What content and skills do you expect students to learn from this lesson?)

1. Students will examine and interpret the correspondence between Thomas Jefferson & the Danbury Baptist Church in 1800 and 1801.
2. Students will analyze and discuss (in oral & written format) several important questions regarding religious freedom

Materials (What primary sources or local resources are the basis for this lesson?) – (please attach)

Attached:

Letter from the Danbury Baptist Church of CT to T. Jefferson 1800

Letter from T. Jefferson to the Danbury Baptist Church of CT 1801

Analysis Questions Sheet

Activities (What will you and your students do during the lesson to promote learning?)

1. Either individually or in small groups (or as a homework assignment the previous evening) students will thoroughly read the letters.
2. Students should be divided into 4-5 discussion groups of equal size.
3. Allow students time to collaborate to answer the Analysis Questions. Students may complete the questions individually or select a group recorder. Teacher should circulate to ensure students are focused and progressing at an appropriate pace.
4. After collaboration time (variable), groups will report answers orally to class, with teacher encouraging discussion or debate of group conclusions as time allows.
5. As an extension, students may research court cases in which the Supreme Court has invoked Jefferson’s “wall of separation” such as:
Reynolds v. U.S. - 1878

McCullum v. Board of Educ. – 1947,1948

6. As a further extension for the ambitious, James Hutson, a Curator at the Library of Congress has written a fascinating article about the FBI's effort to restore Jefferson's original draft as well as the backstory and analysis of the letter. The article is on the LOC website, entitled:

'A Wall of Separation'

FBI Helps Restore Jefferson's Obliterated Draft By JAMES HUTSON

How will you assess what student learned during this lesson?

- Informal assessment of student workgroups/oral reports
- Formal assessment of student written responses
- Question (s) could be created from this exercise on the next test

Connecticut Grade Level Expectations-

Standard 1.9 - Understand the rights and responsibilities of U.S. citizens

Standard 2.2 - Interpret information from a variety of primary sources

The Danbury Baptists' letter to Thomas Jefferson

The address of the Danbury Baptists Association in the state of Connecticut, assembled October 7, 1801. To Thomas Jefferson, Esq., President of the United States of America.

Sir,

Among the many million in America and Europe who rejoice in your election to office; we embrace the first opportunity which we have enjoyed in our collective capacity, since your inauguration, to express our great satisfaction, in your appointment to the chief magistracy in the United States: And though our mode of expression may be less courtly and pompous than what many others clothe their addresses with, we beg you, sir, to believe that none are more sincere.

Our sentiments are uniformly on the side of religious liberty--that religion is at all times and places a matter between God and individuals--that no man ought to suffer in name, person, or effects on account of his religious opinions--that the legitimate power of civil government extends no further than to punish the man who works ill to his neighbors; But, sir, our constitution of government is not specific. Our ancient charter together with the law made coincident therewith, were adopted as

the basis of our government, at the time of our revolution; and such had been our laws and usages, and such still are; that religion is considered as the first object of legislation; and therefore what religious privileges we enjoy (as a minor part of the state) we enjoy as favors granted, and not as inalienable rights; and these favors we receive at the expense of such degrading acknowledgements as are inconsistent with the rights of freemen. It is not to be wondered at therefore; if those who seek after power and gain under the pretense of government and religion should reproach their fellow men--should reproach their order magistrate, as a enemy of religion, law, and good order, because he will not, dare not, assume the prerogatives of Jehovah and make laws to govern the kingdom of Christ.

Sir, we are sensible that the president of the United States is not the national legislator, and also sensible that the national government cannot destroy the laws of each state; but our hopes are strong that the sentiments of our beloved president, which have had such genial effect already, like the radiant beams of the sun, will shine and prevail through all these states and all the world, till hierarchy and tyranny be destroyed from the earth. Sir, when we reflect on your past services, and see a glow of philanthropy and good will shining forth in a course of more than thirty years we have reason to believe that America's God has raised you up to fill the chair of state out of that goodwill which he bears to the millions which you preside over. May God strengthen you for your arduous task which providence and the voice of the people have called you to sustain and support you enjoy administration against all the predetermined opposition of

those who wish to raise to wealth and importance on the poverty
and subjection of the people.

And may the Lord preserve you safe from every evil and bring you
at last to his heavenly kingdom through Jesus Christ our Glorious
Mediator.

Signed in behalf of the association, Nehemiah Dodge

Ephraim Robbins

Stephen S. Nelson

Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists

The Final Letter, as Sent

To messers. Nehemiah Dodge, Ephraim Robbins, & Stephen S. Nelson, a committee of the Danbury Baptist association in the state of Connecticut.

Gentlemen

The affectionate sentiments of esteem and approbation which you are so good as to express towards me, on behalf of the Danbury Baptist association, give me the highest satisfaction. my duties dictate a faithful and zealous pursuit of the interests of my constituents, & in proportion as they are persuaded of my fidelity to those duties, the discharge of them becomes more and more pleasing.

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church & State.

Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.

I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection & blessing of the common father and creator of man, and tender you for yourselves & your religious association, assurances of my high respect & esteem.

Th Jefferson

Jan. 1. 1802.

Thomas Jefferson & the Danbury Baptist Church Analysis Questions

1. Why do you think the Danbury Baptist Church wrote their letter to President Thomas Jefferson? What were their concerns?
2. In your own words, what was President Jefferson's response?
3. What psychological approach did the Danbury Baptists employ to assist their attempt to persuade President Jefferson?
4. Give examples of how President Jefferson echoed the Baptists' strong statements?
5. Where in the Constitution do the founders address religion? Write down any such statements.
6. Since the phrase "separation of church and state" is not found in the Constitution, using the context of this letter, do you believe Jefferson's intention was to claim of a "wall of separation" to extend in both directions? (ie. is it necessary for the state to stay out of religion, religion to stay out of politics, or both?) Please support your answer.
7. Since Jefferson was overseas during the writing of the Constitution, should his words on this "wall of separation" carry legal weight as support for later Supreme Court decisions?