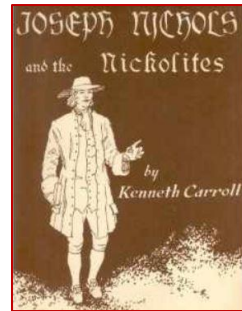


The Nicholites

An Abolitionist Society in 18th Century Southern Delaware



Born around 1730 near Dover, Joseph Nichols was a farmer known for his “frolicking and merriment,” engaging in such things as “dancing, fiddling, and attendance at fairs.” While attending a *frolic* sometime around 1760, a close friend suddenly became ill and died. This compelled Nichols to examine his life and started him on a religious journey that led to the formation of the Nicholites, or followers of “Nichols’ Light.”

The movement flourished during the 1760 and 1770s, expanding across Delmarva and into North Carolina. Though never large in number, there were Nicholite congregations near Seaford and Federalsburg.

The Nicholite faith was governed by a very strict set of rules that regulated nearly all aspects of their lives, from who to marry to how they conducted business. But, it was their beliefs about the evils of slavery that set them apart.

Like many religious groups, the Nicholites were opposed to any practice that led to the sin of Pride. For this reason, their members were required to wear plain, undecorated clothing. However, the Nicholites took this practice a step further by connecting the wearing of decorated clothing to the practice of slavery. (See “Query 8” on page 3)

At that time fabric dyes were produced on plantations in the southern and Caribbean colonies. Because buying cloth colored with these dyes supported the plantation owners, the Nicholites wouldn’t wear any clothing made of dyed cloth.

What would undyed clothing look like?

Secondary

Based on *Joseph Nichols and the Nicholites*,
1962, Kenneth Lane
Carroll

The Nicholites, who like the Quakers referred to themselves as “Friends,” welcomed free and enslaved Blacks into their congregations, or “Meetings.” Here is one of the tenets of the Nicholite faith:

Are Friends careful to bear a faithful testimony against Slavery in its various branches, and provide in a suitable manner for those in their families that have had their freedom secured to them; are they instructed in useful learning, and is the welfare of such as have been set free attended to and the necessities of them relieved?

What do you think this passage is telling the Nicholite followers to do for freed slaves?

Following the doctrines of the Nicholites was not easy, and not always supported by law. Manumission, or the freeing of slaves, was illegal in Maryland. William Dawson and William Harris, who lived near Federalsburg, decided to free their slaves, but authorities in Cambridge said that the law didn’t allow it. Instead, the two were advised to “try the slaves with ‘freedom’ only for a time and then, after Dawson and Harris saw their folly, they might take the slaves back into service.”

Why would the Maryland Colony forbid the freeing of slaves?

What do think the advice given to Mr. Dawson and Mr. Harris says about the attitudes of the authorities? Remember that this was more than 200 years ago.

Are there any laws today that hinder segments of our population from becoming successful? What laws do we need to assure the success of everyone in our country?

The Nicholites were very strict in their beliefs, so much so that their numbers started to dwindle and they joined with the Quakers in the early 1800s. But their beliefs raise some interesting questions for today:

Do you, as a consumer, bear any responsibility for the exploitation of workers who make the products you buy? Explain your response.

We are now aware that many human activities are adversely affecting our planet. What sacrifices would you (should you) be willing to make to assure a clean and safe environment for your great-great-grandchildren?

Ten Queries of the Society of the Nicholites

(Punctuation and spelling are from the text)

1. Are all Friends meetings, for worship and discipline duly and timely attended, and are Friends preserved from sleeping or needless going in and out of meeting, or any other uncomely behavior therein?
2. Are Friends careful to avoid the occasion of any discord among them; and if any arise, is speedy endeavors used to end them; is talebearing backbiting and evil reports discouraged, and care taken not to speak that in absence of any that may tend only to expose them?
3. Are Friends careful to bring up those who are under their immediate direction, to the due attendance of our meetings, to plainness of speech, behaviour and apparel, and in frequently reading the scriptures and other useful books, and restrain them from reading pernicious books and from frequenting the company of those that are of a disorderly behaviour, and from the corrupt conversation of the world?
4. Are Friends careful to be at a word in all their traffic, and give good weight and measure, and avoid that evil practice of multiplying words to set the stuff to sale?
5. Are Friends careful to settle their accounts annually, or as often as need may require, so as to give their creditors no cause to blame them; and careful in their engagements and faithful to perform them; are the necessities of the poor duly inspected and they assisted agreeably to their circumstances?
6. Are Friends careful in the use of spiritous liquors to only make the needful use of them, and when their business takes them out among other people, are they careful to avoid light and needless discourse and not to be drawn away with the evil of the wicked?
7. Are Friends striving against the uncomely practice of laughter, when speaking about religious matters?
8. Are Friends careful to keep from making or buying any dyed, striped, flowered, corded or mixed stuff, and from all needless cuts and fashions, and bear a faithful testimony against the pernicious sin of pride?
9. Are Friends careful to bear a faithful testimony against Slavery in its various branches, and provide in a suitable manner for those in their families that have had their freedom secured to them; are they instructed in useful learning, and is the welfare of such as have been set free attended to and the necessities of them relieved?
10. Is care taken to deal regular with offenders in the spirit of meekness and wisdom, without partiality or unnecessary delay?