

Meetings for Learning – Resources – History and Testimonies

Anthony Benezet (1713-1784)



Early life

Anthony Benezet was born in St Quentin, France. His parents were Huguenots (French Protestants) and suffered persecution because of their religion. They fled from France to Rotterdam in 1715, and within a few months they moved to London.

Pennsylvania had been established by William Penn in the 1680's as a place of religious Liberty for those of all religions and of none, and for this reason it appealed to the Benezet family. While the family seem to have prospered in England, they emigrated to Philadelphia in 1731. Benezet said his father wished 'to get out of the way of all hierarchy'.¹ They probably became Quakers in England. Benezet was aged 18 when he arrived in Philadelphia. In 1736, when he was aged 23, he married Joyce Marriott (aged 22). She was from Burlington, New Jersey, and had been a recognised Quaker Minister since 1731.

He started buying and selling goods, but he did not like the work, because like his great friend John Woolman, he thought it was too much involved with

material things and the snares of worldly ways. Eventually he found work as a teacher in 1739. He thought that teaching was a very useful occupation, through which young people's lives might be influenced positively. He also did some proof reading in Christopher Sower's printing and newspaper office. He later worked in a number of different schools, teaching both girls and boys, as well as black children and black adults. The teaching provided a basic income for him. However his great work in life was as a campaigner against slavery.

Working against slavery

Anthony Benezet worked against slavery in two main ways. Firstly, he conducted a literature campaign. He researched and wrote and published pamphlets and books against slavery, and encouraged others to do so. He got these books and pamphlets published and republished, often at his own expense, and he distributed both his own works, and the works of others widely.

Secondly, he got in contact with anyone who might work against the slave trade and slavery, including people who had political influence, and he asked them to work to influence politicians to change the laws. He had numerous contacts and correspondents, and he encouraged these people to network and lobby against slavery. Benezet's motivation to labour on behalf of oppressed people may have come from his family's experience of persecution. 'One of my uncles was hung by these intolerants, my aunt was put in a convent, two of my cousins died at the galleys, and my fugitive father was hung in effigy for explaining the gospel differently from the priests, and was ruined by the confiscation of his property', he once said.ⁱⁱ

Benezet greatly valued his liberty in Pennsylvania, and he knew from family experience that persecution was wrong and brutal. He saw every other human being as his equal, and he could not be silent in the face of the oppression and persecution of his fellow human beings who were enslaved.

Benezet's influence

Benezet influenced and befriended others through his writings, particularly John Wesley, Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp. John Wesley was the founder of Methodism, and he was inspired by Benezet's *Historical Account of Guinea* to take a position against slavery, and to publish a pamphlet *Thoughts on Slavery* in 1774. Thomas Clarkson also read Benezet's *Historical account of Guinea*, and it provided him with all the information he needed to win a prize at the University of Cambridge for the best essay on the subject: 'Is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will?' Clarkson went on to dedicate his life to the anti-slavery movement in Britain, and to the campaign for the abolition of the slave trade. He credited Benezet with producing the clearest, most comprehensive and most influential writings on slavery at that time. Granville Sharp was an English lawyer who defended slaves in court cases. He found Benezet's writings useful for his legal work, and they began a correspondence. Sharp became one of Benezet's European abolitionist network, an informal group of people who co-operated to influence people and governments against slavery and the slave trade.

Benezet wrote to anyone whom he thought may be helpful to the cause, ranging from Queen Charlotte of Great Britain, to his former schoolchildren. He seems to have asked for names and details of potentially useful contacts from any Quakers who were travelling in the Ministry. Joseph Oxley, a merchant from Norwich, who travelled in the Ministry in America, gave Benezet the names of John and Henty Gurney. They were brothers who opened a bank in partnership in Norwich. (John's daughter Elizabeth Fry was later involved in prison reform, and is featured on the English £5 note). Benezet wrote to them in 1772, that he had a great concern for slavery and he enclosed some literature on the subject. He wondered how people professing Christianity could be 'innocent and yet silent spectators of this mighty infringement of every humane and sacred right?' He suggested that all who are

concerned for the civil and religious welfare of their country must give serious consideration to this matter, and ‘avert the judgement which this evil will bring upon every people who are defiled therewith’. He gave the example that black people’s evidence was not accepted in court, and that it was not uncommon to hear of black people ‘wantonly, passionately or cruelly murdered, with no legal notice being taken of it’. He then suggests that if some extracts of the publications enclosed could be ‘periodically published in some of your publick prints’, it would bring the matter to the notice of ‘those in whose power it is to procure a remedy’. He suggested that the Gurneys in England would not ‘be under the fear we are in, of saying that which may be construed as making the negroes acquainted with their own strength, and terrifying the people.’ⁱⁱⁱ

Another travelling minister, Samuel Neale from Dublin, gave Benezet the name of Richard Shackleton, of Ballytore, Ireland. Benezet wrote a similar sort of letter. He briefly mentioned the woeful effects of slavery on the oppressors, ‘in corrupting their morals, and hardening their hearts to that degree, that they and their offspring become alienated from God, estranged from all good, and are hastening to a state of greater, far greater, and more deeply corrupt barbarity, than that from which our progenitors emerged before their acquaintance with Christianity’. Again he asks ‘can we be both silent and innocent spectators? Ought we not, jointly or separately, to bring this matter before the King and Parliament?’ He emphasized that the slave trade takes place ‘under the sanction of laws made by our representatives in Parliament.’ Benezet mentions that he was given encouragement by Samuel Neale, who ‘tells me thou art closely connected with a person of judgement and weight in the English Parliament, who may be a good instrument in forwarding an enquiry into this potent evil.’ (This referred to Edmund Burke, MP, who was educated at Shackleton’s school in Ballytore) Finally, Benezet asks for a few lines in answer, and to establish a correspondence.^{iv} Benezet hoped to persuade Shackleton to influence Burke to speak against the slave trade in Parliament.

Benezet wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Secker, in the 1760's, to try to get the Established Church to speak out against the slave trade. After some friendly greetings, Benezet wrote of the cruelty and oppression of the slave trade. He enclosed some pamphlets with his letter, which 'set forth the great inhumanity and wickedness which this trade gives life to, whereby hundreds of thousands of our fellow creatures, equally with us the subjects of Christ's redeeming grace, and as free as we are by nature, are kept under the worst oppression, and many of them yearly brought to an untimely end.' He expressed surprise that this evil had been supported by government and by law. He suggested that it must be that 'many worthy men of power, both of the laity and the clergy, have been unacquainted with the horrible wickedness with which the trade is carried on'.^v He cleverly did not blame the archbishop and those in power, but suggested they mustn't have known about it. However, he states the clergy and lawmakers' responsibility as Christians quite clearly, and sends the Bishop enough literature to have him fully informed on the subject, so that he can have no further excuse. He emphasises that these slaves are equally children of God and human beings like every other.

As well as the many letters to people who might influence governments and Churches against slavery, Benezet also wrote very important, well researched, comprehensive accounts of slavery and the slave trade. He compiled information and dispersed it as widely as possible, on the barbarity of slavery, the development of the slave trade, and the absolute immorality of enslavement of other human beings. A modern edition of his writings was published in 2013.

Questions for small group discussion or worship sharing or journaling:

- Is it possible to be Christian or religious and stay 'silent spectators' on infringements on human rights today? Is there some aspect of human rights that particularly concerns you?
- Benezet compiled information, wrote pamphlets and distributed them widely to influence people to improve society. How do we communicate

our messages for social justice today? How effective are our methods?

- Benezet tried to influence governments himself and through others. Is such political activity worthwhile today? Why, or why not?

Further reading:

George S Brookes, *Friend Anthony Benezet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1937)

Irv. A Brendlinger, *To be Silent Would be Criminal, The Anti-Slavery Influence and Writings of Anthony Benezet* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2007)

David L Crosby (Editor), *The Complete Anti-Slavery Writings of Anthony Benezet, 1754-1783* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013)

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References

ⁱ George S. Brookes, *Friend Anthony Benezet*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1937, p. 456. All references are from this source.

ⁱⁱ Brookes, p. 453

ⁱⁱⁱ Brookes, pp. 283-287

^{iv} Brookes, pp. 293-296

^v Brookes, pp. 273-274