

Free Produce ^[1]

Free Produce

by [William S. Powell](#) ^[2], 2006

"Free produce" was the term applied to anything grown, manufactured, or otherwise produced by nonslave labor. The term came into use when [abolitionists](#) ^[3], particularly [Quakers](#) ^[4], agreed to avoid buying or using anything even remotely associated with slavery. Preliminary steps in this direction originated in [Wilmington, Del](#) ^[5]., in 1827 and had spread to North Carolina by 1829. One of the free produce movement's aims was to totally eliminate the demand for [slave-](#) ^[6]produced items so as to lead slave owners to abandon the use of slave labor. Several North Carolinians, notably [Charles Osborn](#) ^[7], [Nathan Hunt](#) ^[8], and [Levi Coffin](#) ^[9], supported the boycott. North Carolina proved to be a good source for free labor products. Hunt, in fact, once offered 40 bales of "free labor" cotton for sale in [Guilford County](#) ^[10]. A cotton mill in the state wove cloth by free laborers using cotton grown by whites. Various aspects of the boycott came to be widely discussed and led to dissension among Quakers-and the dismissal of at least one Quaker minister-as well as others. Some pointed out how near parties on the same general side of the boycott came to "war," not necessarily over slavery but over "the form that opposition [to slavery] should take."

In seeking goods free of association with slavery, buyers visited North Carolina to purchase from nonslaveholders. The scarcity of and increased demand for such goods and the expense of importing retail stock from abroad caused prices to rise to such a degree that even Quakers recognized how ineffective the boycott of slave labor was. Free labor advocates were never numerous enough to affect the problem they sought to address. Support dwindled to limited interest among a few Quakers and by the mid-1850s had virtually disappeared throughout the country.

References:

Thomas E. Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America* (1950).

Ruth Anna Ketring, *Charles Osborn in the Anti-Slavery Movement* (1937).

Ruth K. Nuermberger, "The Free Produce Movement: A Quaker Protest against Slavery," *Historical Papers of the Trinity College Historical Society*, series 25 (1942).

Additional Resources:

Encyclopedia of Antislavery and Abolition, Volume 1 By Peter P. Hinks, John R. McKivigan, R. Owen Williams:
http://books.google.com/books?id=_SeZrcBqt-YC&pg=PA266#v=onepage&q&f=false ^[11]

Subjects:

[Antebellum \(1820-1861\)](#) ^[12]

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[Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.](#) ^[17]

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