
David Ferris’ memoirs present an unusual first-hand account of the life and mind of an 18th century colonial businessman and Quaker minister. Ferris relates his life story, from his birth and early life as a member of a Presbyterian family in Connecticut to his reflections in old age. In between we see him leaving his studies at Yale due to his religious beliefs, joining the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), moving from Philadelphia to the “frontier” of Wilmington, DE, and ultimately becoming an outspoken proponent of the abolition of slavery. The “resistance and obedience” of the title refer to his own characterizations of his alternating periods of resisting the leadings of the spirit and becoming obedient to them. Ferris, in his best moments, exhibited a radical obedience that allowed him to submit his will to the leadings of God in all matters, including whom to marry and what items to carry in his general store in Delaware. He became a traveling minister, speaking out on spiritual and ethical matters, but only after he overcame his deep resistance to speaking in public.

This book represents a major contribution to the accessibility of primary documents from 18th century colonial America. In addition to the memoirs, eight letters written by Ferris are included, one of which is published for the first time. They are important because they not only give further insight into Ferris’ character, but several exhibit the arguments he used in trying to convince slaveholders of the error of their ways. John Woolman, a younger contemporary of Ferris, was best known for his own work as an early abolitionist but never wrote down his arguments against slavery. Although we can not be certain that Woolman and Ferris used the same arguments, these letters fill in a gap by providing one model of the anti-slavery rhetoric used by Quakers in this time period. This volume includes a scholarly introduction, a timeline, a bibliography, and materials from the 1885 edition of this work. Ferris’ writings will appeal to anyone with an interest in colonial or regional history, the history of Quakerism or abolition, or spiritual autobiography. – reviewed by Alison Lewis