American Revolution

By: Egerton, Douglas R.

The historiographical debate over how radical the American Revolution was is an old one, but the belief that the war with Britain marked a social revolution in black life was first advanced not by an apologist for the founding fathers but by Benjamin Quarles, in his magisterial *Negro in the American Revolution*. First published in 1961, Quarles's pioneering study has never been out of print; in 1996 a second edition was released to celebrate its thirty-fifth year. Written at a time when many white Americans, not all of them in the southern states, were determined to deny black Americans their basic rights, Quarles was anxious to demonstrate the black contribution to American victory in 1781. The contribution of African Americans, his argument implicitly suggests, established their right to American citizenship, both in 1776 and in 1961. Far from being absent during the struggle with Britain, black Americans "welcomed the resort to arms," Quarles argues, and "quickly caught the spirit of '76." Slaves were natural revolutionaries, he wrote, with little to lose, no farms or shops to return home to, and no emotional or familial ties to England. Nearly five thousand black Patriots fought for independence, Quarles observes—"a respectable figure particularly since so many were not free to act."

Although Quarles reluctantly concedes that three times as many black Americans found liberty in the armies of King George than with Patriot forces, he concludes that for all of its failings the Revolution marked a new beginning for black liberty in all sections of the nation. The egalitarian spirit that informed the new political order, he suggests, doomed antiquated hierarchical assumptions that allowed one man to own another. "Despite its omissions and evasions," Quarles insists, "the Declaration of Independence held a great appeal for those who considered themselves oppressed." If it did not result in the immediate end of slavery, the conflict nonetheless "accelerated movement to better the lot" of black Americans in the young Republic.

Quarles, who died at the age of ninety-two shortly after the appearance of the second edition of his seminal work, never qualified his optimistic view that "the colored people of America benefited from the irreversible commitment of the new nation to the principles of liberty and equality." Quarles's seminal work has many admirers, but few wholeheartedly endorse its optimistic view of sweeping social change. Curiously, precisely those scholars who have been the most influenced by Quarles's pioneering study are the least inclined to endorse his sanguine assumptions about the foundations of radical change. Far from dramatically reorganizing the American social structure, they argue, or even laying the groundwork for the later abolitionist crusade, the failure of the Revolutionary generation to move decisively against unfree labor made inevitable the carnage of civil war. Certainly, most modern students of the black experience in the age of the Revolution, all of them inspired in one way or another by the voluminous scholarship of Quarles, share a tendency to regard dramatic social change as a phenomenon that simply did not happen.

Most scholars concede that the early moments of the war created a climate of social insubordination and violence that American slaves used to their advantage. Even in staid Philadelphia the very real possibility of servile insurrection, combined with the incessant white rhetoric of liberty and equality, emboldened Pennsylvania slaves and gave them new hope; a Philadelphia gentlewoman discovered as much when a black man "insulted" her by refusing to yield the sidewalk and forcing her to step into the grimy street. Upon being reprimanded, the slave spat out, "Stay you d[amne]d white bitch, 'till Lord Dunmore and his black regiment come, and then we will see who is to take the wall." Across the Delaware River, Titus, a twenty-one-year-old New Jersey slave, threw down his hoe and headed south for Virginia. Three years later Titus returned to his home bearing the name Colonel Tye, a "warrior" in the British army.

Quarles briefly mentions the short, turbulent life of Colonel Tye in reviving the forgotten history of black Loyalists like him. But studies of southern blacks in the Revolutionary decades carry us far beyond the traditional bipolarity of white Patriots and black Loyalists. Especially on the southern seaboard the war was a complex triangular process. Africans and their descendants did not join either side as much as they exploited the conflict between two sets of white belligerents so as to

forge their own freedom. Quarles may hint at British duplicity toward their black allies, but the war was shaped not only by Parliament's directives but also by African American resistance. Even in Lord Dunmore's 1775 proclamation, in which the last royal governor of Virginia offered to liberate slaves who joined "His Majesty's Troops," one finds evidence of British indifference to human bondage. Dunmore's intention was neither to overthrow the system nor to make war on it; rather, the proclamation was designed to encourage the defection of useful blacks, disrupting the psychological security of whites without provoking a general rebellion.

Black privateer, in an oil painting of c. 1780; the subject has also been described as a Revolutionary War sailor. According to one estimate, some 5,000 black Americans took part in the fight for independence.

Photograph from the collection of the Newport Historical Society.

Indeed, the British disinclination to offer the promise of unqualified black freedom and equality receives ample attention in the most recent scholarship on the war. Many Philadelphia slaves simply took advantage of the white flight brought on by British occupation to alter their condition; few readily picked up a musket to fight for that distant Parliament. It did not take politically astute bondmen long to discover that too many British officers regarded them as little more than useful tools—or potential laborers—in the military struggle. The British employed their once enthusiastic recruits to cook and wash and forage for food, often regarding them simply as another form of contraband property that they gave to enlisted men in return for meritorious service. As the war dragged on, the British openly abandoned their pose as liberators and sold their black recruits to raise much-needed funds to buy supplies for soldiers.

Because Parliament acted the part of a most reluctant liberator, unfree labor survived the chaos of war. British commanders labored mightily to calm the fears of Tory planters, who were frequently driven into Patriot ranks by every tentative step toward emancipation. Nor did the British wish to encourage a destructive racial war that would devastate the economic stability of a colonial society they hoped to reconquer. No better story illustrates the heartless nature of British racism than the tragic moment when the beleaguered British garrison at Yorktown ran short of supplies. To prevent his regulars from starving, Lord Cornwallis ordered the black Virginians who had taken refuge with his troops driven from their battered earthworks. The redcoats had "set them free," recorded a disgusted Hessian officer, "and now, with fear and trembling, they had to face the reward of their cruel masters."

Of course, one does not have to depict the redcoats as zealous liberators to understand how the chaos and dislocation of war had a pronounced effect upon slavery. Britain's refusal to move decisively against unfree labor, however, is of little moment to most historians of the Revolutionary age. It was once a given that the disorder of war, together with republican ideology and economic necessity, served to set slavery on the road to extinction in every northern state by 1804. Yet even this once-safe assumption is now under assault.

Gradual Emancipation in the States

Whereas historians previously emphasized the fact that gradual emancipation took place at all, many came to underscore the halting and conservative nature of northern manumission. Even in New England, where the minuscule number of transplanted Africans and a Calvinist critique of idle white hands seemed to indicate that the blot of slavery would be quickly erased, the death of unfree labor was surprisingly hard-won. Supporters of liberty labored to include freedom clauses in every new northern constitution, but only in Vermont was slavery dislodged through organic law. Even in Rhode Island (like Massachusetts, home to a good number of Atlantic slave traders), the state constitutional convention promised only to abolish slavery when "some favourable Occasion may offer." In no state was emancipation an effortless matter.

Specialists who have examined slavery's end in Pennsylvania challenge even the conventional interpretation that bondage quickly died in the Quaker stronghold from an overabundance of evangelical reform and natural rights theory. Far from being unique, Pennsylvania's experience mirrored that of other northern states: a small but determined band of reformers—white abolitionists, petty slaveholders with little use for a fundamentally precapitalist form of labor organization, and most of all, resolute bondpeople—forced the state to disengage itself from the institution. Although slavery was hardly an antiquated system with no future in the farming regions around Philadelphia, obstinate slaves played a leading role in dismantling the system by cajoling or even tormenting their masters and mistresses to release them.

Whereas earlier historians placed the Pennsylvania Religious Society of Friends at the heart of the struggle to eliminate slavery, Quakers came to appear as at best problematic reformers. They undeniably took an early position against slavery but were often more interested in simply purging the evil of slavery from their midst than in relieving the oppression of black Pennsylvanians. Quakers like John Woolman and Anthony Benezet worked tirelessly to convince others of their belief that owning human property was inconsistent with God's teachings, but in other ways Friends harbored reactionary views toward black abilities and occupational advancement. Moreover, once the freedom of African Americans had been obtained, Quakers expressed little interest in further assisting them.

Even Pennsylvania's Abolition Act of 1780, the first of its kind in the Americas, has come under new scrutiny. Historians once hailed this act, penned even before the British defeat at Yorktown, as the epitome of Enlightenment reform, but it was in fact the most restrictive of the five gradual abolition laws enacted by northern states between 1780 and 1804. Because it consigned to twenty-eight years of labor every child born to a slave woman after 1 March 1780, the law appealed more to the pocketbooks of Pennsylvania masters than to their consciences. And by condemning to lifelong servitude all bondpeople unlucky enough to be born before that date, the act immediately freed not a single slave. Since it was possible for slaves born as late as February 1780 to live out their lives as human property, it was not surprising that Pennsylvania, the first state to pass a gradual emancipation law, still housed a small number of slaves as late as 1847, midway through the Mexican-American War.

Colonial legislators were notorious for resorting to creative borrowing when it came to drafting legislation, and Pennsylvania's pioneering emancipation act unfortunately became the model for much of the North. In Connecticut bondpeople born after 1 March 1784 would become free—but not before they provided twenty-five years of uncompensated labor to their mother's owner. Worse yet, such term requirements signified an entirely new form of servitude. Unlike traditional indentures or apprenticeships, this peculiar transition into full freedom was noncontractual and placed binding legal requirements only on black laborers. Indentured servitude for whites in the late colonial period could be onerous enough, but the decades of uncompensated service imposed by states like Pennsylvania and Connecticut required no ongoing or terminal obligation whatsoever on the part of the proprietor.

The state of New York approached manumission in even more restrictive terms. Whereas slaveholding in Pennsylvania was predominantly an urban phenomenon, east of the Hudson the farmers of the hinterland were roughly twice as likely to own slaves as their city counterparts. Not until 1799 did the state pass an act for gradual emancipation, and not until 1827—just three decades before the outbreak of the Civil War—were those bondpersons born before the end of the eighteenth century finally liberated.

The New York emancipation act had one feature peculiar to that state: Although the law, like most passed in the North in the two decades after the Peace of Paris, held slaves in servitude until the ages of twenty-eight and twenty-five—for males and females, respectively—it also allowed masters to abandon black children a year after their birth. These children were regarded as paupers and bound out to service by the overseers of the poor. But because the state of New York paid a maintenance fee of $3.50 per month for each pauper, even if the caretaker was the former master, this law allowed white

liberators to obtain a sizable return for their acts of conscience. The abandonment clause, in effect, was a hidden form of compensated abolition, and the state became the only place in the United States where masters were essentially paid to free their bondpeople. The clause, however, grew costly. Within only five years the state had paid over $20,000 for the program, and in 1804 the state assembly revoked it.

In short, if the founding fathers took a series of steps designed to bring about slavery's gradual demise, as was once widely argued, New York City, the Republic's largest slaveholding city next to Charleston, stood as a notable exception. The fact that the New York Manumission Society even allowed slave owners to become members suggests that many associates secretly wished to accomplish little more than the criticism of southern bondage. Politicians like John Jay organized a society ostensibly bent on the destruction of slavery, but typical of the group was Alexander Hamilton, who was born and raised in a Caribbean slave society and bought and sold slaves until the day of his death.

The theory that northern abolition was but a grudging and restrained process is best exemplified by New Jersey, the final state to pass a law for gradual emancipation. As in New York, abolitionists at length succeeded in passing a bill providing for gradual emancipation, but slaveholders won numerous concessions that influenced the pace and nature of its implementation. Throughout the 1790s proslavery legislators easily fought back numerous bills providing for piecemeal abolition. In fact, New Jersey lawmakers passed a 1794 bill rendering freedom lawsuits all but impossible. Even after passage of the 1804 gradual emancipation act—the last of its kind in the Revolutionary era—the future demise of bonded labor was almost imperceptible. Even then, few masters in their wills let notions of liberty decide issues of freedom for slaves born prior to 1804. Loyal service and economic change tended to weigh more heavily in New Jersey manumissions. As late as 1850, as Congress fought over the question of slavery in the territories, southern statesmen could point to the seventy-five slaves in Jersey's Monmouth County as evidence of northern hypocrisy.

Even this sluggish, propertied approach to implementing Revolutionary ideals ground to a halt at the southern border of Pennsylvania. In Delaware the state assembly actively encouraged and supported voluntary manumissions, but supporters of liberty lacked the votes to force passage of a gradual emancipation act. The best that the progressive faction could muster was a 1787 bill banning the exportation of bondpeople for sale in the Lower South. Caught between the two determined factions of abolitionists and small masters, the legislature concurrently supported two conflicting philosophies. The result was the private liberation of a majority of Delaware blacks by the end of the eighteenth century, even while some rural masters continued to hold slaves throughout the Civil War.

Revolution and Slavery: The Reality

Private manumissions and individual freedom suits were but small steps against a massive institution, and those who would depict the Revolution as a radical event must ultimately abandon political and economic theory in favor of actual numbers. The Revolution freed relatively few slaves. If egalitarian ideology and economic change served to dislodge bonded labor ever so slowly from much of the nation, it did so only in those parts of the Republic where few slaves resided. If anything, white independence from Britain only fastened slavery more securely upon the South by placing control of the plantation regime in the hands of an indigenous slaveholding elite. As the conflict with England dragged to a close, the question that troubled Georgia's Patriots was not how chattel slavery might be eradicated but how they might most expeditiously rebuild their war-torn plantation economy.

The reform spirit occasionally affecting the northern states did not hold much attraction for the slave-heavy Lower South. Lockean theory cut both ways and strengthened the chains of servitude almost as much as it severed them: John Locke argued that humans possessed a property both in themselves and in their physical possessions, which in the southern context included slaves. If the new American political order was based upon notions of mutual contract and the consent of the governed, both of which argued against the idea that one man could own another, it was equally true that gradual emancipation acts like those passed in the North could be regarded as violations of the natural property rights of masters. Because Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence at once denounced slavery as immoral and sanctioned slave property as legitimate, a political revolution advanced in the name of property rights proved a formidable impediment to compulsory emancipation.

Clearly, English theories of social contracts fit none too neatly into a slaveholding society, and white southerners struggled mightily to qualify Revolutionary thought and reserve it for themselves. The concept of race proved especially useful in explaining why some people were not endowed with such routinely enumerated rights as liberty and equality. Consequently, the age of democratic revolutions ironically marked an inauspicious turning point in American race relations. In colonial society, a world based upon hierarchy and class, servitude was a racial institution, but it had never been explained or

defended as such. The idea that blackness was itself prima facie proof of inferiority, if not of slave status, reached its apotheosis in the quarter century after independence. Although the process of legal classification based on race had been under way in the South since the interracial working-class revolt led by Nathaniel Bacon in 1676, until the rise of a universalist natural-rights ideology there had been little need to constitutionally deny the rights of citizenship to blacks.

For all the thick tomes designed to prove that the Revolutionary era witnessed both the first substantial challenge to bonded labor and an expansion of free black rights across the North, the hard evidence for radical social change is slim indeed, and modern scholars may be excused for suggesting the opposite. The separation from Great Britain may have been an opportunity for American slaveholders to begin anew; but if so, it was an opportunity lost. In 1776, the year in which Thomas Jefferson pronounced it a self-evident truth that all men were endowed with the inalienable right to liberty, fewer than 500,000 slaves lived on the English colonial mainland. By the 1790 census, despite the dislocation of war, the rise of private manumissions in Virginia and Maryland, and the passage of three gradual emancipation laws in the North, 698,000 slaves resided in the United States. If the Patriot elite honestly intended to slowly eradicate the blot of slavery, they had precious little to show for their efforts. If the promise of liberty was going to be extended to black Americans, it would be up to those in the slave quarters to seize it for themselves.

Seizing Their Liberty

Emboldened by Revolutionary theory and, in many parts of the South, by the near collapse of planter authority, black revolutionaries arose in unprecedented numbers in the two decades succeeding the conclusion of the conflict with Britain. Following the chaos of war, autonomous black regiments, countless minor slave plots, and several massive, politicized insurrections revealed a heightened black consciousness. Slave insurgents organized uprisings in Boston; in Perth Amboy, New Jersey; in Saint Andrews Parish, South Carolina; in Ulster County, New York; and in the Tar River Valley of North Carolina. But where slave rebels in Saint Domingue turned the plantation world upside down, those on the mainland only turned their wives into widows. Outside of South Carolina, which boasted a black majority, heavily armed white majorities and the inhospitable demography of the mainland militated against large-scale revolts.

Yet if Revolutionary slaves like Colonel Tye ultimately failed to force their Patriot masters to live up to the radical pretensions of the Revolution, bondpeople in other parts of the South nonetheless achieved a measure of autonomy previously unavailable to them. In the Georgia and South Carolina Lowcountry, the task system of labor organization had arisen in the decades before the Revolution. Various hypotheses have been advanced as to why planters turned from slave gangs to a task orientation, but little logic supports a single causal factor. Rather, a number of factors, especially the similarity of the system to West African cropping practices together with the African familiarity with rice cultivation, contributed to the development of the task system by the eve of the war. Because the task system provided bondpeople with a small measure of time to devote to their own gardens and handicraft industries, it allowed for a thriving informal, even underground slave economy. If the war for white independence did not evolve into a revolutionary movement for universal liberty, it did prompt a profoundly important redefinition and restructuring of slaves' concepts of freedom and economic rights.

The task system provided the catalyst for the burgeoning of the internal economies of the Lowcountry. The South Carolina planters who had flooded across the border at midcentury brought along their rice-planting operations and the task system of organizing unwaged labor. Most field hands, by working feverishly from dawn onward, managed to complete their tasks by midafternoon. Slaves were then at liberty to use their labor power to their own advantage. Men hunted, trapped, or engaged in handicraft industries such as the production of pottery; bondwomen, as they had done in West Africa, sold or traded vegetables and poultry in the nearest marketplace. Although many planters worried about the impact of this internal economy on their level of patriarchal control, they realized that such autonomous economic activities would hardly bring about the overthrow of unfree labor. Indeed, many penurious planters encouraged this informal economy, as they could then spend less on clothing for their human property. Most white businessmen also welcomed black entrepreneurship, as the enslaved vendors who dealt in fresh foodstuffs did not compete with white retailers but rather purchased the fabrics and utensils that were the preserve of white importers. Urban bondpeople who sought fresh food did so in a public market dominated by both enslaved and free African American vendors. The rural bondpeople who supplied much of that food had no need to buy it.

"Destruction of the Royal Statue in New York." This etching, from Chez Basset in Paris, late 1770s, was meant to depict the dismantling of an equestrian statue of George III in New York City on 9 July 1776; but the artist has actually shown a sculpture of a man standing and holding a scroll or baton. The men pulling it down seem to be mostly slaves.

Library of Congress.

The wartime disruption of the Lowcountry economy together with the military obligations of the master class and the rise in runaways to the British lines accelerated black economic autonomy in the Lower South. White absenteeism and the concomitant rise of slave drivers encouraged the growing independence of bondpeople and augmented the bargaining process between masters and drivers over work rhythms and routines. As impoverished planters sought to rebuild their war-torn plantation economies, they willingly accepted the re-creation of both the formal and informal slave economies that had been severely disordered by the Revolutionary War, precisely because they realized that they could strengthen slavery even while allowing blacks greater autonomy within it.

And while planter legislators struggled in vain to limit the economic independence of slaves, other forces worked to restore their spirits. Just as the war with Great Britain diminished patriarchal control, planter authority quickly came under fire from another quarter: the black pulpit. If the Revolution failed to end unwaged labor in most parts of the Republic, a growing number of independent black churches nonetheless challenged the rising tide of white racism in the immediate aftermath of the war.

The high-water mark of black religiosity was reached in one of the most dramatic confrontations in early American church history. For a time, black Philadelphians worshipped with the aged patriot elite at Saint George's Methodist Episcopal Church. But in 1792, after freed congregants contributed money and muscle to the expansion of their church, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were rudely yanked to their feet during prayers when they neglected to sit in a segregated section of the newly built gallery. Faced with the grim realization that a truly harmonious society was impossible even in a house of worship, blacks resolved to form a separate black church. Within two years Allen had founded what would become the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. No better evidence exists that the Revolution had failed to bring about a more equitable society than the black exodus from white churches.

Like the Revolutionary ideology that fueled sporadic black rebellions at the war's end, African American churches helped create a new climate of black insubordination. Even in rural New Jersey, slaves and freedpersons continued to find collective expression through religion despite the fact that white-controlled churches refused to promote potential and qualified black ministers. Because the rise of Richard Allen's AME Church provided the black community with a foundation upon which to build, the independent black church movement took hold throughout northern New Jersey just as the first generation born after the emancipation act of 1804 came of age.

Independent churches began to bloom, in spite of periodic repression, even across the South—especially in urban areas, where free blacks enjoyed the relative freedom to construct new bastions of cultural sovereignty. Even as masters in the Lower South sought to purchase new Africans and restore order in the countryside, slaves and freedpeople, inspired by Richard Allen, moved to erect religious defenses against the dehumanizing effects of servitude. Their efforts to respond with integrity within the narrowly delimited options open to them led to the creation of Afro-Christianity, a black version of Christian theology whose vision was far from identical with the Christian goals of white Americans. These black-run institutions provided both slaves and freedpeople with the psychological and moral wherewithal necessary to withstand slavery. In short,

independent black churches offered the most eloquent response to the conservative failures of the American Revolution.

Such examples of increasing black confidence and cultural autonomy were a genuine cause for white alarm. Yet most black ministers were pragmatists who believed that their primary responsibility was to protect the fragile black community and preserve a sense of hope for the future. North and South, white authorities routinely harassed black congregants and even closed black churches; such concerns often forced black ministers to surrender the principle of political leadership by negotiating with white protectors in hopes of keeping their churches open.

In an attempt to placate white society, black preachers urged their congregations to observe white standards of respectability and "one's proper place in society." Black leaders were painfully aware that flamboyant dress, unseemly gaiety, and raucous behavior might be used by malevolent whites to support the fiction that blacks were undeserving of freedom and equal rights. Their pleas often went unheeded. Indeed, northern blacks turned to African culture to forge weapons of survival that were almost as significant as black churches. The language and clothing of freedpeople both reinforced continuities with an African past and reflected a disdain for the dominant white society. Rejecting demands for acculturation, many urban blacks spurned wholesale assimilation in favor of creative adaptation to an often hostile world.

Perhaps the last words on the alleged radicalism of the American Revolution should go to an unnamed black rebel who in 1800 told a Virginia court that risking his life in the name of liberty was justified by the precedent established by the founding fathers. "I have nothing more to offer than what General Washington would have had to offer, had he been taken by the British and put to trial," the young bondman patiently explained. "I have adventured my life in endeavouring to obtain the liberty of my countrymen, and am a willing sacrifice in their cause." Upon hearing this declaration, white Americans promptly sentenced him to swing.

See also African Methodist Episcopal Church; Allen, Richard; Benezet, Anthony; Black Church; Black Loyalists; Civil Rights; Clothing; Colonel Tye; Declaration of Independence; Gradual Emancipation; Hamilton, Alexander, and African Americans; Historiography of Early Black Life; Jay, John, on African Americans; Jones, Absalom; Language; Laws and Legislation; Manumission Societies; Massachusetts; Military; Murray, John (Lord Dunmore); New Jersey; New York Manumission Society; Race, Theories of; Resistance; Riots and Rebellions; and Society of Friends (Quakers) and African Americans.

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Jefferson, Thomas, On African Americans and Slavery

By: Egerton, Douglas R.

The earliest memory of Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826)

was of being carried on a pillow by a slave; when he died in 1826, he was buried in a coffin built by an enslaved carpenter. More than any other member of the founding generation, Jefferson exemplified the inconsistent outlook and behavior of the post-Revolutionary Republic. He consistently and eloquently professed to despise slavery, yet the only bondpeople he freed were related to him, and while many contemporaries regarded Jefferson as a disciple of the Enlightenment, his comments on Africans and their descendants were founded upon his labor needs, not on rational observation, and were reactionary even by eighteenth-century standards.

Like many of his generation, Jefferson was adept at shifting the blame for slavery onto others. In his most celebrated formulation, put forth in the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson held Britain and King George III responsible for both the slave trade and the creation of unfree labor in Virginia, as if eager Chesapeake planters had played no role in the purchase of captured Africans. As a young politician, Jefferson insisted that ending slavery was the task of senior statesmen, but even after retiring from the presidency, when he had nothing left to lose beyond his reputation among Virginia planters, he rebuffed his friend and neighbor Edward Coles's request to endorse a plan to take slaves west and liberate them. Jefferson now insisted that it was the duty of "the younger generation" to advance "the hour of emancipation." By 1820 he claimed that he had "ceased to think" about black liberation, as it was "not to be the work of my day."
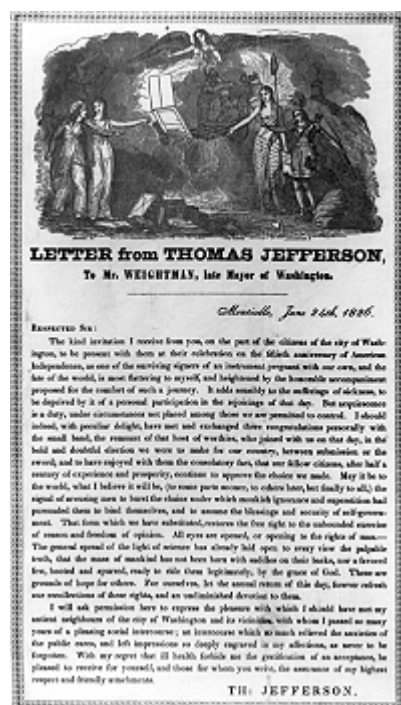
Jefferson's letter to Weightman of 24 June 1826, as the fiftieth anniversary of independence approached. Illustrating this broadside is an allegory: Liberty, personified as a woman, displays the art of printing to figures representing the four continents. In the letter, Jefferson extolled the "rights of man," though his own views on slavery were notoriously conflicted. Ten days after writing it, he died.

Library of Congress.

Public Actions and Statements on Slavery

Jefferson did have his antislavery moments, but they were invariably modest for a professed revolutionary, and they diminished in frequency as he grew older and more politically successful. As a new member of Virginia's House of Burgesses in 1769, Jefferson crafted a bill that would have allowed for private manumissions. Being a freshman legislator, he approached Richard Bland, a respected member of the House, to submit the act, then seconding the motion. Angry planters denounced Bland as "an enemy" of Virginia, and the bill failed. From that debacle Jefferson drew the lesson that if he desired a career in politics, he would have to take care never to get too far in front of public opinion.

Typical of Jefferson's conflicted views regarding slavery were his ruminations on Africans and unwaged labor in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Drafted first in 1781 and revised several times before being published in France, the book included a proposed amendment to the Virginia constitution for gradual emancipation and mandatory colonization for the former bondpeople. The plan called for all slaves born after 31 December 1800 to be "declared free"; the stipulation, however, was that these children, after being trained as apprentices, would be forced to leave the state upon reaching maturity, meaning that freed adolescents would be forever separated from their yetenslaved parents. Unlike the Virginia lawyer and jurist St. George Tucker's realistic 1796 *Dissertation on Slavery*, which proposed to gradually transform Virginia's bond workers into a free but politically powerless class of agricultural proletarians, Jefferson's plan of compulsory colonization would remove Virginia's labor force entirely; Jefferson's planter brethren would never support a plan that eliminated the state's working class. Duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, the French social reformer and critic, observed that Jefferson added "so many conditions to [emancipation] to render it practicable, that it is thus reduced to the impossible."

Such ambiguity was also found in the act that Jefferson's modern defenders regard as his crowning achievement of antislavery activism: as a member of Congress in 1783, Jefferson proposed a "Plan of Government for the Western Territory," which formed the basis for the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. The bill banned unfree labor in the entire western region, south as well as north of the Ohio River; but the proposed ban would not take effect until 1800. Slaves already worked the land in what would become Tennessee and Kentucky, and Jefferson's plan gave southern planters well over a decade to settle the West and lobby Congress to repeal the prohibition. The clause banning slavery failed; with one exception, every southern congressional delegate voted to reject the statute, which failed by a single vote. The compromise reached in 1787 banned slavery only in the region north of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi. After obtaining the Louisiana Territory in 1803, Jefferson, then president, did nothing to prohibit slavery in the region, and the purchase treaty with France, negotiated in part by his protégé James Monroe, explicitly recognized the security of French and Spanish slave property in the region.

If Jefferson was resolute on any point, it was regarding his fear that slave rebelliousness in the Caribbean might spread to the southern mainland. He was particularly concerned that "black crews and missionaries" from the French colony of Saint Domingue (modern Haiti) could spread word to Virginia of the uprising there under the former slave Toussaint Louverture. When Napoleon Bonaparte, by then the ruler in France, inquired as to what the American position would be should he attempt to reenslave the Haitian people, President Jefferson assured a French diplomat that "nothing would be more simple than to furnish your army and your fleet with everything and to starve out Toussaint." When the French invasion proved disastrous, the Virginia congressman John W. Eppes, Jefferson's son-in-law, pledged "the Treasury of the United States, that the Negro government should be destroyed," lest the contagion of liberty "bring immediate and horrible destruction on the fairest portion of America."

Late in life Jefferson abandoned even his habit of procrastination on slavery, particularly in response to the Missouri debates, which began in 1819 when the New York congressman James Tallmadge drafted an amendment to the Missouri statehood bill prohibiting slavery there. Although the crisis over the frontier prompted several Virginia legislators, including Jefferson's other son-in-law, Thomas Mann Randolph, to renew calls for gradual emancipation combined with removal to Haiti or Africa, the former president instead abandoned his previous desire to restrict slavery from the West. Jefferson instead began to champion the western spread of unfree labor on the grounds that the dispersal of slavery would result in its eventual extinction. "Diffusion over a greater surface would make [the slaves] individually happier," he insisted, "and proportionally facilitate the accomplishment of their emancipation, by dividing the burden on a greater number of coadjutors." Although James Madison also embraced diffusion theory, when the Marquis de Lafayette, the great French comrade-in-arms of America's Revolution, heard this news, he regarded it as sad evidence that his old friend Jefferson had lost his once brilliant

mind.

Jefferson and Slavery at Monticello

As indicated by John W. Eppes's incendiary rhetoric and the southern vote on territorial restriction in 1783, the slaveholding South was determined to maintain its bonded laborers. As most of Jefferson's biographers have observed, the president lacked both the constitutional power and the political clout to move decisively against slavery in the Republic; but decisions made on his hilltop plantation of Monticello were quite a different matter, and there Jefferson was equally cautious. During the course of his long life, Jefferson freed only three slaves, or approximately 2 percent of his total bond population. Upon his death, he freed five others through his will; all of those liberated were Hemings family members who were connected to Jefferson by kinship or marriage.

Although born into Virginia's planter aristocracy, Jefferson began his acquisition of slaves slowly. Under his father's will, he inherited 22 slaves; his father-in-law's death brought in another 135, together with a sizable debt. By the time he resigned as secretary of state in December 1793, he calculated that 154 black men and women belonging to him worked his several estates. Reliable testimony indicates that Jefferson was a decent master, and no story survives to suggest that he ever personally whipped one of his slaves. On several occasions he allowed an overseer to do so, but it was far more typical of the controlled (and controlling) Jefferson to sell recalcitrant bondpeople away from their Monticello families, which also effectively served as a warning to other young slaves not to defy their master.

Jefferson also sold or gave away slaves for reasons of family and friendship. When his daughter Martha married Thomas Mann Randolph in 1790, Jefferson presented them with a wedding gift of one thousand acres and twenty-five "Negroes little and big." Four years later Jefferson sold Thenia Hemings, his deceased wife's half sister, to James Monroe, who had recently begun construction of his own modest home near Monticello. Jefferson's biographers insist that he tried not to shatter black families through sale. If true, it nonetheless remains a fact that his former slaves' new owners were under no legal obligation to maintain families. Jefferson's sale of Thenia may have been conducted to unite a wife and husband, or he may simply have sold the young slave already with several children as a "breeding woman," as Jefferson once put it, to help his young protégé establish a plantation.

Jefferson's Racial Theories

Jefferson consistently averred that he wished to see slavery disappear, but moral pronouncements aside, his behavior indicated that early on he learned to live with his inconsistencies. To assuage his embattled conscience, Jefferson tried to convince himself that as tragic as slavery was, it was preferable to the release of bonded workers into the harsh world of freedom for which they were allegedly unprepared. "Never yet," he wrote, "could I find a black [who] had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture." Refusing to concede that his overworked unpaid laborers had little opportunity to hone their artistic or intellectual skills, Jefferson precipitated a vicious circle of illogic. The supposed inferiority of blacks was used to justify their enslavement, yet the resulting inability of the weary laborers to comprehend "the investigations of Euclid" was in turn used to prove that they were indeed inferior. No amount of evidence could dissuade Jefferson on this point. When the black mathematician Benjamin Banneker sought to provide Jefferson with irrefutable proof of black genius, the Virginian suspected that he had been assisted by a white scientist and assured a correspondent that Banneker had "a mind of very common stature indeed."

Although Jefferson frequently argued that Native Americans might be assimilated into Euro-American society by altering their culture, he stubbornly refused to apply the same environmental principles to Africans and their descendants. When it came to African Americans, Jefferson recognized only one method for moving up in the "rank in the scale of beings [mandated by] their Creator": the body itself had to be transformed. When a young correspondent challenged him to explain how blacks might advance in society, Jefferson turned to mathematics. He concluded that when a "quarteroon" and a Caucasian produced children, "their offspring … having less than 1/4 pure negro blood, to wit 1/8 only, is no longer a mulatto." This "third" introduction of white genes "clears the blood"; that is, octoroons, being seven-eighths Caucasian, were effectively purged of African blood and thus had an improved biological ranking. Should this child "be emancipated," Jefferson reasoned, "he becomes a free *white* man, and a citizen of the United States to all intents and purposes."

Although typically regarded as a disciple of the Enlightenment, Jefferson was not only out of step with prevailing scientific trends of the late eighteenth century but also foreshadowed the scientific racism of the late nineteenth century. Nor were his calculations mere speculation: Jefferson applied his unusual blood test to his mixed-race kinsmen, the Hemings family, six of whom were the quadroon offspring of his father-in-law, John Wayles, and Betty Hemings, an enslaved mulatto. Only two of

Betty's quadroon children were freed by their brother-in-law; the suicide of one of them, James, evidently convinced Jefferson that they were as yet too low on the human scale to make their way as free citizens.

Altogether different was the treatment accorded to the six octoroon children born to Betty's daughter Sally, Jefferson's sister-in-law and almost certainly his "plantation wife" following the death of his white wife, Martha Wayles Skelton. In a curious example of Jefferson's racialist theories transformed into practice, of Sally's four children who lived to maturity, all were freed, and three passed into the white community; one of them, Madison Hemings, later adopted the surname of Jefferson. Sally Hemings remained a bondwoman until after her master's death, and it fell to Jefferson's daughter Martha Randolph, Hemings's new owner, to free her enslaved aunt. The 1830 census indicated that the household of her son Eston Hemings included a free "white female" between the ages of "50 & 60"; this was almost certainly Sally. Madison Hemings later recalled that he and Eston "rented a house and took mother to live with us, until her death" in 1835.

By stubbornly insisting that the problem of slavery in Virginia defied solution, Jefferson was able to then deny any personal responsibility in the quandary, despite his personal involvement in the institution on his hilltop. "We have the wolf by the ear," he wrote in 1820, "and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go." By 1804, however, every state north of Maryland had either freed its bond population outright or had laid out a course of gradual emancipation. While Virginia had a far larger slave population than did New York, statesmen like St. George Tucker thought wise leadership could resolve the dilemma of slavery, whereas Jefferson stubbornly "avoided every possible act or manifestation on that subject." His private behavior was no more pronounced. George Washington freed his slaves in his will, and Jefferson's distant cousin John Randolph, of Roanoke, not only did likewise but even set aside money for the purchase of land for them. Jefferson's enormous debts may have precluded him from doing the same, but the paltry number of slaves he manumitted during his lifetime suggests he had no intentions of doing so under any circumstances.

See also Banneker, Benjamin; Declaration of Independence; Gradual Emancipation; Haitian Revolution; Hemings, Sally; Lafayette, Marquis de, and African Americans; Madison, James, and African Americans; Missouri Compromise; Monroe, James, and African Americans; Race, Theories of; Stereotypes of African Americans; Toussaint Louverture; Virginia; and Washington, George, and African Americans.

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