Pennsylvania Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery March 1, 1780

An ACT for the gradual abolition of Slavery.

When we contemplate our abhorrence of that condition to which the arms and tyranny of Great-Britain were exerted to reduce us; when we look back on the variety of dangers to which we have been exposed, and how miraculously our wants in many instances have been supplied, and our deliverances wrought, when even hope and human fortitude have become unequal to the conflict; we are unavoidably led to a serious and grateful sense of the manifold blessings which we have undeservedly received from the hand of that Being from whom every good and perfect gift cometh. Impressed with these ideas, we conceive that it is our duty, and we rejoice that it is in our power, to extend a portion of that freedom to others, which hath been extended to us; and a release from that state of thraldom, to which we ourselves were tyrannically doomed, and from which we have now every prospect of being delivered. It is not for us to inquire, why, in the creation of mankind, the inhabitants of the several parts of the earth were distinguished by a difference in feature or complexion. It is sufficient to know, that all are the work of an Almighty Hand. We find in the distribution of the human species, that the most fertile, as well as the most barren parts of the earth, are inhabited by men of complexion different from ours, and from each other, from whence we may reasonably, as well as religiously infer, that He who placed them in their various situations, hath extended equally His care and protection to all, and that it becometh not us to counteract His mercies. We esteem it a peculiar blessing granted to us, that we are enabled this day, to add one more step to universal civilization, by removing as much as possible, the sorrows of those who have lived in undeserved bondage, and from which, by the assumed authority of the Kings of Britain, no effectual legal relief, could be obtained. Weaned by a long course of experience, from those narrow prejudices and partialities we had imbibed, we find our hearts enlarged with kindness and benevolence, towards men of all conditions and nations; and we conceive ourselves at this particular period extraordinarily called upon, by the blessings which we have received, to manifest the sincerity of our profession, and to give a substantial proof of our gratitude.

And whereas the condition of those persons who have heretofore been denominated Negroe and Mulatto slaves, has been attended with circumstances, which not only deprived them of the common blessings that they were by nature entitled to, but has cast them into the deepest afflictions, by an unnatural separation and sale of husband and wife from each other, and from their children; an injury the greatness of which, can only be conceived, by supposing, that we were in the same unhappy case. In justice therefore, to persons so unhappily circumstanced, and who, having no prospect before them, whereon they may rest their sorrows and their hopes, have

no reasonable inducement, to render that service to society, which they otherwise might; and also, in grateful commemoration of our own happy deliverance, from that state of unconditional submission, to which we were doomed by the tyranny of Britain.

Be it enacted, and it is hereby enacted, by the Representatives of the Freemen of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, in General Assembly met, and by the authority of the same That all persons, as well Negroes and Mulattos as others, who shall be born within this State, from and after the passing of this Act, shall not be deemed and considered as servants for life or slaves; and that all servitude for life, or slavery of children, in consequence of the slavery of their mothers, in the case of all children born within this State, from and after the passing of this Act as aforesaid, shall be, and hereby is utterly taken away, extinguished and for ever abolished.

Provided always, and be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, That every Negroe and Mulatto child born within this State, after the passing of this Act as aforesaid, who would, in case this Act had not been made, have been born a servant for years, or life or a slave, shall be deemed to be and shall be by virtue of this Act, the servant of such person or his or her assigns, who would in such case have been intitled to the service of such child, until such child shall attain unto the age of twenty eight years, in the manner and on the conditions whereon servants bound by indenture for four years, are or may be retained and holden; and shall be liable to like correction and punishment, and intitled to like relief in case he or she be evily treated by his or her master or mistress, and to like freedom dues[1] and other privileges as servants bound by indenture for four years, are or may be intitled, unless the person to whom the service of any such child shall belong, shall abandon his or her claim to the same, in which case the Overseers of the Poor of the city, township or district respectively, where such child shall be so abandoned, shall by indenture bind out every child so abandoned, as an apprentice for a time not exceeding the age herein before limited, for the service of such children. . . .

1. The customary payment to an indentured servant at the end of the indenture. This often included two suits of clothing, a cash payment, and allotment of food, and sometimes land.

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