

Emancipation Documents from the Revolutionary Era

Questions to Consider

1. What do these documents reveal about the various meanings of freedom?
2. To what extent does the proposed gradualism at the end of both Hall's petition and the Pennsylvania Act undermine the use of religious rhetoric in the earlier portions of the documents?
3. To what extent, if any, is liberty that is based on the religious principles similar or different than liberty based in natural rights principles?

A Proposal to Free the Slaves, Fredericksburg, Va., June 9, 1775 (Author Unknown)

. . . To proclaim instant Freedom to all [indentured] Servants that will join in the Defence of America, is a Measure to be handled with great Delicacy, as so great, so immediate a Sacrifice of Property, may possibly draw off many of the Americans themselves from the common Cause.

But is not such a Measure absolutely necessary? And might not a proper Equivalent be made to the Masters, out of the Large Sums of Money which at all Events must be struck, in the present Emergency?

If America should neglect to do this, will not Great Britain engage these Servants to espouse her Interest, by proclaiming Freedom to them, without giving any Equivalent to the Masters? To give Freedom to the Slaves is a more dangerous, but equally necessary Measure.

Is it not incompatible with the glorious Struggle America is making for her own Liberty, to hold in absolute Slavery a Number of Wretches, who will be urged by Despair on one Side, and the most flattering Promises on the other, to become the most inveterate Enemies to their present Masters?

If the Inhabitants of Quebec should assist Great Britain, would not true Wisdom dictate to the other Colonies, to lead their Slaves to the Conquest of that Country, and to bestow that and Liberty upon them as a Reward for their Bravery and Fidelity?

Might not a considerable Quit Rent reserved upon their Lands, and a moderate Tax upon their Labours, stipulated beforehand, in a Course of Years, sink the Money struck, and refund to the Colonies the Price of the Slaves now paid to their Masters for their Freedom?

Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant, Plan to Free the Slaves, August 1776

At this Time of general Danger, when every one is anxiously considering by what Means our Liberties may be preserved, I hope to be at least forgiven, if I attempt to suggest a Hint which, perhaps, by wiser Heads, may be improved to publick Advantage.

The Calling out our Militia in such Numbers for the Defence of our Country is attended with this Difficulty among others, that the Slaves left at home excite an Alarm for the Safety of their Families; an Alarm which, on such Occasions, is industriously increased by designing Men, who make it their Business to obstruct every Measure which is taken for the publick Good.

I would therefore desire that it may be considered whether a Method might not be devised for employing those Slaves as Soldiers in the publick Service.

Suppose the Congress to enlist under proper Officers a Number of Slaves within a certain Age sufficient to form a Battalion, paying their Masters according to a certain Rate (say fifty Pounds a piece) and as a farther Compensation for their additional Value let the Master be exempted from bearing Arms. Many Slaves would willingly enlist and I suppose a great many Masters would be glad to purchase an Exemption from bearing Arms upon these Terms.

Let every one of these Slaves become free as soon as by Stoppages from his Pay or otherwise he can reimburse the Money advanced for his Purchase and as a Security to the Publick let the Survivors be answerable for the Deficiencies of such as may die in the Service. This will not be heavier upon the Survivor than if each Individual was bound to make good the full Amount of his real Value.

Let these People, during the Time of their Redemption, be on their good Behaviour. Let every great Offence or gross Misconduct be punished by reducing them back to Slavery.

Other Regulations may be found necessary. I shall only add that if Peace should be restored before these people had redeemed themselves, they might be set to labour on some publick Works until they had made Satisfaction. Or also possibly it might be as well, instead of the Plan of their redeeming themselves by Stoppages, to enlist them at Once for 7 or 10 Years at 30/ a Month, instead of 50/.1

There are two or three Objections to this Scheme which deserve to be considered.

1. It may be said that these People will want Courage. Slaves generally are Cowards: but set Liberty before their Eyes as the Reward of their Valour and I believe we should find them sufficiently brave. Neither the Hue of their Complexion nor the Blood of Africk have any Connection with Cowardice. It is their Condition as Slaves that stifles every noble Exertion. Change their Conditions and You will change their Tempers. If any one has further doubts upon this subject, let him consider the free Negroes of Jamaica who purchased their Freedom by Arms, or the Case of the brave Caribbs.2

2. The Danger of putting Arms into such Hands may be objected. This can only be obviated by restricting their Numbers, so as not to suffer them to bear any large Proportion to the whites. When at length they had wrought out their own Freedom they would have the same Interest with the Rest of the Community in quelling Insurrections.

3. Some may be narrow enough to enquire what is to become of those People when they are free and discharged? I answer, let them have Land, let them form a Settlement of Blacks if they will. There is Room enough on this Continent for them and us too.

If this Experiment should be thought worth trying and should answer any valuable Purpose I shall rejoice to have furnished these Hints; if otherwise I am content.

Prince Hall, A Petition to the Mass. Legislature, 13 January 1777

To the Honorable Counsel & House of Representatives for the State of Massachusetts Bay in General Court assembled, Jan. 13, 1777.

The petition of A Great Number of Blackes detained in a State of slavery in the bowels of a free & Christian County Humbly sheweth that your Petitioners apprehend that they have in Common with all other men a Natural and Unalienable Right to that freedom which the Grat Parent of the Universe that Bestowed equally on all menkind and which they have Never forfeited by any Compact or agreement whatever—but that wher Unjustly Dragged by

the hand of cruel Power and their Derest friends and sum of them Even torn from the Embraces of their tender Parents—from A populous Pleasant and Plentiful country and in violation of Laws of Nature and of Nations and in Defiance of all the tender feelings of humanity Brough here Either to Be sold like Beast of burthen & Like them Condemned to Slavery for Life—Among A People Professing the mild Religion of Jesus A people Not Insensible of the Secrets of Rational Being Nor without spirit to Resent the unjust endeavors of others to Reduce them to a state of Bondage and Subjugation your hononuer Need not to be informed that A Live of Slavery Like that of your petitioners Deprived of Every social privilege of Every thing Requisite and render Life Tolable is far worse that Nonexistence.

(In imitat)ion of the Lawdable Example of the Good People of these States your petitioners have Long and Patiently waited the Event of petition after petition. By them presented tot the Legislative Body of this state and cannot but with Grief Reflect that their Success hath been but too similar they Cannot but express their Astonishment that It have Never Bin Considered that Every Principle from which America has Acted in the Course of their unhappy Difficulties with Great Briton Pleads Stronger than A thousand arguments in favors of your petitioners they therfor humble Beseech your honours to give this petition its due weight and consideration & cause an act of the legislature to be past Wherby they may be Restored to the Enjoyments of that which is the Natural right of all men—and their Children who wher Born in this Land of Liberty may not be held as Slaves after they arrive at the age of twenty one years so may the Inhabitance of this States No longer chargeable with the inconstancy of acting themselves that part which they condemn and oppose in others Be prospered in their present Glorious struggle for Liberty and have those Blessings to them, &c.

Pennsylvania Act for Gradual Abolition of Slavery, 1 March 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 evilly treated by his or her master or mistress, and to like freedom dues¹ 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. . . .

Virginia Manumission Law, May 1782

An Act to authorize the manumission of slaves.

I. WHEREAS application hath been made to this present general assembly, that those persons who are disposed to emancipate their slaves may be empowered so to do, and the same hath been judged expedient under certain restrictions: Be it therefore enacted, That it shall hereafter be lawful for any person, by his or her last will and testament, or by any other instrument in writing, under his or her hand and seal, attested and proved in the county

court by two witnesses, or acknowledged by the party in the court of the county where he or she resides, to emancipate and set free, his or her slaves, or any of them, who shall thereupon be entirely and fully discharged from the performance of any contract entered into during servitude, and enjoy as full freedom as if they had been particularly named and freed by this act. . . .