Rhode Island Gradual Abolition Law, February 1784

An ACT authorizing the manumission of Negroes, Mulattos and others, and for the gradual abolition of slavery.

Whereas all men are entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and the holding mankind in a state of slavery, as private property, which has gradually obtained by unrestrained custom and the permission of the laws, is repugnant to this principle, and subversive of the happiness of mankind, the great end of all civil government:

Be it therefore enacted by this General Assembly, and by the authority thereof it is enacted, That no person or persons, whether Negroes, Mulattos or others, who shall be born within the limits of this State, on or after the first day of March, A.D. 1784, shall be deemed or considered as servants for life, or slaves; and that all servitude for life, or slavery of children, to be born as aforesaid, in consequence of the condition of their mothers, be and the same is hereby taken away, extinguished and forever abolished.

And whereas humanity requires, that children declared free as aforesaid remain with their mothers a convenient time from and after their birth; to enable therefore those who claim the services of such mothers to maintain and support such children in a becoming manner, *It is further enacted by the authority aforesaid*, That such support and maintenance be at the expence of the respective towns where those reside and are settled: *Provided however*, That the respective Town-Councils may bind out such children as apprentices, or otherwise provide for their support and maintenance, at any time after they arrive to the age of one year, and before they arrive to their respective ages of twenty-one, if males, and eighteen, if females.

And whereas it is the earnest desire of this Assembly, that such children be educated in the principles of morality and religion, and instructed in reading, writing and arithmetic: *Be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid*, That due and adequate satisfaction be made as aforesaid for such education and instruction. And for ascertaining the allowance for such support, maintenance, education and instruction, the respective Town-Councils are hereby required to adjust and settle the accounts in this behalf from time to time, as the same shall be exhibited to them: Which settlement so made shall be final; and the respective towns by virtue thereof shall become liable to pay the sums therein specified and allowed.

And be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, That all persons held in servitude or slavery, who shall be hereafter emancipated by those who claim them, shall be supported as other paupers, and not at the separate expence of the claimants, if they become chargeable; provided they shall be between the ages of twenty and forty years, and are of sound body and mind; which shall be judged of and determined by the Town-Councils aforesaid.

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski, ed., *A Necessary Evil?*, Constitutional Heritage Series, Vol. II (Madison House, Madison, Wis. 1995), 28–29.