

George Washington on the abolition of slavery, 1786

Introduction

Of the nine presidents who were slaveholders, only George Washington freed all his own slaves upon his death. Before the Revolution, Washington, like most white Americans, took slavery for granted. At the time of the Revolution, one-fifth of the colonies' population lived in bondage. Although most slaves were in the South, slavery was a legal institution in each of the thirteen colonies. Fourteen percent of the state of New York's population was enslaved, for example, and New York City had more slaves than any other city in the colonies except Charleston, South Carolina.

Washington gradually came to realize that slavery was immoral and contrary to the Revolutionary ideals of liberty and equality. In 1774 he endorsed a document, known as the Fairfax Resolves, which condemned the slave trade as "unnatural" and recommended that no more slaves be imported into the British colonies. Five years later, he approved a plan to grant slaves their freedom in exchange for service in the Continental Army.

Washington never spoke out publicly against slavery. But in this private letter to fellow Virginian John Mercer, dated September 9, 1786, and written at a time when he owned 250 slaves, Washington avows his dislike of the institution of slavery, an institution that violates the ideal of freedom and equality: "I never mean . . . to possess another slave by purchase; it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted by which slavery in this Country may be abolished."

Excerpt

With respect to the first. I never mean (unless some particular circumstances should compel me to it) to possess another slave by purchase; it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted by, [*inserted*: The Legislature by] which slavery in this Country may be abolished by slow, sure, & imperceptable degrees.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions.

1. In his letter to John Francis Mercer, George Washington states that he might have to "sell land or negroes" in order to discharge a debt. How does this statement help us to understand Washington's ties to Virginia's plantation culture?

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2. Create a debate in which one group presents evidence that by his letters and actions regarding slavery, George Washington dodged his moral responsibility. Another group should present evidence that Washington's actions regarding slavery were realistic in light of the times.
3. Create a role-playing situation in which students take the role of Diane Sawyer and Tom Brokaw (or other contemporary reporters) and question Washington as to why he called for a legislative end to slavery by "slow, sure and imperceptible degrees."

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Image

Mount Vernon 9th Sep 1786

Dear Sir,

Your favor of the 20th ult^o did not reach me till about the first inst. - It found me in a fever, from which I am now but sufficiently recovered to attend to business. - I mention this to shew that I had it not in my power to give an answer to your propositions sooner. -

With respect to the first. I never mean (unless some particular circumstances should compel me to it) to possess another Slave by purchase; it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted by ^{the Legislature} which Slavery in this Country may be abolished by slow, sure, & imperceptable degrees. - With respect to the 2^d, I never did, nor ever intend to purchase a military certificate; - I see no difference it makes with you (if it is one of the funds allotted for the discharge of my claim) who the purchaser

George Washington to John Francis Mercer, September 9, 1786. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC03705)

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is. - If the depreciation is 3 for 1 only, you will have it in your power whilst you are at the receipt of Custom - Richmond - where it is said the great regulator of this business (Greaves) resides, to convert them into specie at that rate. - If the difference is more, there would be no propriety, if I incline to deal in them at all, in my taking them at that exchange.

I shall rely on your promise of Two hundred pounds in five Weeks from the date of your letter. - It will enable me to pay the workmen which have been employed about this house all the Spring & Summer, (some of whom are here still). - But there are two debts which press hard upon me. One of which, if there is no other resource, I must sell land or negroes to discharge. - It is owing to Gov^r Clinton of New York, who was so obliging as to borrow, & become my security for £2500 to answer some calls of mine. - This sum was to be returned in twelve

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twelve months from the conclusion
of the Peace. - For the remains of
~~the loan~~, about eight hundred
pounds York Cy. I am now paying
an interest of Seven p^{cts} but the
high interest (the more than any other
can bear) I should not regard, if my
credit was not at stake to comply
with the conditions of the loan. - For
other debt tho' I know the persons to
whom it is due wants it, and I am
equally anxious to pay it, might
be put off a while longer. - This sum
is larger than the other

I am, Sir

Y^r most Obed. A^{ble} Serv^t

G. Washington

In^o. Jas^o. Mercer Esq^r

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Transcript

George Washington to John Francis Mercer, September 9, 1786 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC03705)

Mount Vernon 9th. Sep 1786

Dear Sir;

Your favor of the 20th. ult^o. did not reach me till about the first ins^t. – It found me in a fever, from which I am now but sufficiently recovered to attend to business. – I mention this to shew that I had it not in my power to give an answer to your propositions sooner. –

With respect to the first. I never mean (unless some particular circumstances should compel me to it) to possess another slave by purchase; it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted by [*inserted*: The Legislature by] which slavery in this Country may be abolished by slow, sure, & imperceptable degrees. – With respect to the 2^d., I never did, nor never intend to purchase a military certificate; – I see no difference it makes with you (if it is one of the funds allotted for the discharge of my claim) who the the purchaser [2] is. – If the depreciation is 3 for 1 only, you will have it in your power whilst you are at the receipt of Custom – Richmond – where it is said the great regulator of this business (Greaves) resides, to convert them into specie at that rate. – If the difference is more, there would be no propriety, if I inclined to deal in them at all, in my taking them at that exchange.

I shall rely on your promise of Two hundred pounds in five Weeks from the date of your letter. – It will enable me to pay the work men which have been employed ab^t. this house all the Spring & Summer, (some of whom are here still). – But there are two debts which press hard upon me. One of which, if there is no other resource, I must sell land or negroes to discharge. – It is owing to Gov^r. Clinton of New York, who was so obliging as to borrow, & become my security for £2500 to answer some calls of mine. – This sum was to be returned in [3] twelve months from the conclusion of the Peace. – For the remains of it [*struck*: this sum], about Eight hundred pounds y^{ork} C^y. I am now paying an interest of Seven p^tC^t.; but the high interest (tho' more than any estate can bear) I should not regard, if my credit was not at stake to comply with the conditions of the loan. – The other debt tho' I know the person to whom it is due wants it, and I am equally anxious to pay it, might be put of[*f*] a while longer. – This sum is larger than the

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other

I am, D^r Sir

Y^r. Most Obed^t. H^{ble} Ser^t

G^o: Washington

Jn^o. Franc^s. Mercer Esq^r.

[*docket*:]

Washington George.

Sep. 9. 1786