LIBERTY OR PROPERTY?
THE METHODISTS PETITION FOR
EMANCIPATION IN VIRGINIA, 1785

by Richard K. MacMaster

Virginia Methodists petitioned their General Assembly for the emancipation of all the slaves in the state in 1785, but their representatives at Richmond voted unanimously to reject all these petitions. This effort was the high-water mark of the evangelical crusade against slavery in Virginia. Its failure had broad implications for Baptist, Presbyterian, and Quaker abolition movements, as well as for future Methodist efforts. The debate over the Methodist petitions also raised fundamental points about the nature of American liberty and the meaning of the American Revolution, since the petitioners relied on “the unalienable rights of mankind” and “every principle of the Revolution” to justify their claim for a general emancipation act.

The original petitions, carried in the saddlebags of Methodist circuit-riders to every corner of the state, and the counter-petitions prepared by pro-slavery Virginians to answer them have been preserved in the Virginia State Library in Richmond. Both petitions and counter-petitions provide a valuable insight into the discussion of the slavery issue among Virginians and the arguments used on both sides of the question.

Evangelical critics of slavery frequently used arguments drawn from the Declaration of Independence and the Bills of Rights embodied in the new state constitutions. Their own anti-slavery position was grounded on the moral evil of slavery. They often saw slavery as the great national sin and urged Americans to repent of it while there was time. Some of them saw the war itself as a punishment for slavery. The Reverend Samuel Hopkins of Newport, Rhode Island, warned Americans in 1776 that slavery was “a sin which God is now testifying against in the calamities he has brought upon us.”

The Reverend William Gordon of Roxbury, Massachusetts, urged Americans to cast out “the accursed thing,” if they looked for deliverance from their enemies. “Is it not an


2 Samuel Hopkins, A Dialogue on the Slavery of the Africans (Norwich, Conn., 1776), p. 3.
iniquity which separates us from our God, that we continue to hold in bondage the Africans?” Gordon asked, “Is not this the crying sin of America?” The Reverend Elhanan Winchester warned Virginians against slavery, as one of the “abominations which greatly prevail in this country, and which threaten it with ruin and desolation, unless repentence and reformation prevent.” Many other evangelical abolitionists interpreted the crisis between England and her American Colonies as a retribution for the sin of slavery. These anti-slavery preachers sought to turn the crisis to good advantage, in bringing about a reform of morals.

Some of the early Methodist preachers shared these attitudes. The Reverend Thomas Rankin rode to the chapel at the forks of Gunpowder Falls in Baltimore County, Maryland, on July 20, 1775 and preached to a large congregation. “This being the day set apart for a general fast by the Congress, throughout all the British Provinces, all the serious part of the inhabitants paid a particular attention to the same. I endeavoured to open up and enforce the cause of all our misery. I told them that the sins of Great Britain and her colonies had long called aloud for vengeance and in a peculiar manner the dreadful sin of buying and selling the souls and bodies of the poor Africans...”

Rankin saw the contradiction between slavery and the natural right of all men to liberty. In October 1775, he referred to conversations with different members of the Continental Congress. “I could not help telling many of them what a farce it was for them to contend for liberty when they themselves kept some hundreds of thousands of poor blacks in most cruel bondage.” Other foes of slavery approached their neighbors with similar arguments. In 1776 the Reverend Samuel Hopkins published A Dialogue Concerning the Slavery of the Africans and dedicated it to the members of the Continental Congress. He pointed out to them the “inconsistence of promoting the slavery of the Africans, at the same time we are asserting our own civil liberty,” and of “holding so many thousands of blacks in slavery, who have an equal right to freedom with ourselves.” The Reverend William Gordon quoted the opening lines of the Virginia Declaration of Rights and of the Declaration of Independence as reason enough to “apply earnestly and heartily to the extirpation of slavery from among ourselves.”

---

3 The Independent Chronicle (Boston, Mass.), November 28, 1776.
5 “The Diary of Reverend Thomas Rankin, One of the helpers of John Wesley,” Typescript copy, Department of Archives and History, Lake Junaluska, N. C. p. 107.
6 Rankin, “Diary,” p. 112.
7 Hopkins, Dialogue, p. 3.
8 The Independent Chronicle (Boston, Mass.), October 3, 1776.
The argument from the natural right of all men to liberty had long been a part of the anti-slavery arsenal. In 1774 John Wesley asked in his *Thoughts on Slavery*, “Where is the justice of inflicting the severest evils on those who have done us no wrong? . . . depriving them of liberty itself, to which an Angolan has the same natural right as an Englishman, and on which he sets as high a value?”

From simply applying the general arguments for liberty that were on every tongue in 1776 to the particular case of the slaves, evangelicals began to interpret the Declaration of Independence as an anti-slavery document and the American Revolution as a struggle for the freedom of the slaves.

The Quaker abolitionist, Robert Pleasants of Henrico County, Virginia, gave a similar interpretation of the American Revolution in a letter to George Washington: “Remember the cause for which thou wert called to the command of the Army was the cause of liberty, and the rights of mankind. How strange then must it appear to impartial thinking men, to be informed, that many who were warm advocates of that cause during the war, are now sitting down in a state of ease, dissipation and extravagance, on the labour of Slaves.”

Many anti-slavery leaders felt that the work of the American Revolution would be incomplete, until the shackles had fallen from the last American slave. David Cooper, a New Jersey abolitionist, made this point in a pamphlet published in 1783. Hopkins argued in a newspaper essay that the war had been fought for liberty, and could not be justified so long as slavery lasted.

The statements on slavery issued by the Methodist Conference are examples of this development. In 1780 the Conference acknowledged “that slavery is contrary to the laws of God, man, and nature, and hurtful to society, contrary to the dictates of conscience and pure religion, and doing that which we would not others do to us and ours.” At the Christmas Conference in 1784, it was agreed that “we view it as contrary to the golden law of God on which hang all the law and the prophets, and the unalienable rights of mankind, as well as every principle of the revolution” to hold slaves.

---


12 Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church (New York, 1813), p. 256.
In 1784 abolitionists in Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maryland, and Delaware, and other parts of the country began to concert their efforts for an attack on slavery and the slave-trade in the state legislatures.

Enoch Story of Philadelphia published the first American edition of Wesley's *Thoughts on Slavery* in 1784. He inserted a brief foreword by an unknown hand. It read:

> The justness of the cause contended for in the following pages, is such (it may be presumed) that there needs no apology for the reprinting it, especially at this day, when Liberty is the common topic, and when judicious, unprejudiced, and well minded people, of all ranks, do manifest their disapprobation of SLAVERY.

We can with pleasure inform the Reader, that in this, as well as in several other States, laws are enacted for its gradual abolishment, and that some Northern States have it now under consideration.

May He that governs all things, so influence the minds of those that read, that they may be enabled to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with GOD.\(^\text{13}\)

Methodist testimony against slavery grew apace during the years of the American Revolution. Freeborn Garretson and Thomas Rankin were among its more outspoken critics in 1775, but they were soon joined by other preachers who saw the slave system as inherently sinful. During his stay in Delaware in 1779, Francis Asbury wrestled with the problem: "I have lately been impressed with a deep concern, for bringing about the freedom of slaves in America, and feel resolved to do what I can to promote it." In the Conference at Baltimore on April 24, 1780, Asbury secured the adoption of a requirement that preachers give promises to set their slaves free and a brief statement disapproving slavery. Dorsey Gough drew up a deed of manumission for forty-five slaves on the following day, William Lynch manumitted seven slaves on May 9, 1780, and other Maryland Methodists followed their example.\(^\text{14}\)

Virginia law did not permit manumission of slaves until 1782, when a group of Quakers led by Edward Stabler of Petersburg were able to secure the passage of a manumission act by the Virginia Assembly. Until this law was promulgated, anti-slavery statements could have little meaning for Virginia Methodists. With the Christmas Conference in 1784, Bishop Asbury and other leaders hoped

\(^\text{13}\) A unique copy of this edition is owned by the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference Historical Society. The writer is indebted to the Rev. Frederick E. Maser for this citation.

that Methodists in Virginia could be led to take advantage of the new manumission law.\textsuperscript{15}

Bishop Thomas Coke, a vigorous opponent of slavery, took the leading part in the struggle to secure voluntary deeds of manumission from Methodist slave-owners in Virginia. His journals indicate his success in convincing some Virginians to emancipate their slaves, while others became openly hostile to Bishop Coke and his anti-slavery preaching. Edward Dromgoole was requested by Bishops Asbury and Coke to ride the Brunswick Circuit in the Spring of 1785. He recalled later: "The state of religion was brought very low in our circuit during 1785 and 1786. Some prejudices arose on account of the new minutes that were made, and new terms of communion proposed, to those who had been long in our membership, chiefly with respect to holding Slaves." In a letter to Dromgoole, the Reverend Devereux Jarratt thought the new rules against slave-holding precipitous and counter-productive, "for Virginians may be led, but not drove." \textsuperscript{16}

When the Christmas Conference took a strong stand on slavery, the members anticipated many of the difficulties that subsequently arose. By the end of April 1785, when Bishop Asbury arrived at William Mason's in Brunswick County, Virginia, he "found the minds of the people greatly agitated with our rules against slavery, and a proposed petition to the general assembly for the emancipation of the blacks." \textsuperscript{17} The petition was almost certainly drawn up by Bishop Thomas Coke. His journals make this inference several times. It was addressed to the Honourable the General Assembly of the State of Virginia.

\begin{quote}
The Petition of the underwritten Electors of the said State humbly Sheweth

That Your Petitioners are Clearly & fully Persuaded that LIBERTY is the Birthright of Mankind—The Right of every Rational creature without Exception who has not forfeited that Right to the Laws of his Country.

That the Body of Negroes have been robbed of that Right without any such forfeiture and therefore ought in Justice to have their Right restored:

That the Glorious and ever Memorable Revolution can be Justified
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} Legislative Petitions, Miscellaneous, May 29, 1782, Archives Division, Virginia State Library, Richmond, Va. The N. Y. Historical Society Library has an engrossed copy of the same petition, presented to Edward Stabler when the bill passed on June 14, 1782. William Waller Hening, \textit{Virginia Statutes at Large} (Richmond, 1812) vol. XI, pp. 39-40.


on no other Principles; But what do plead with still greater force for the Emancipation of our Slaves in proportion as the oppression exercised over them exceeds the oppression formerly exercised over these States by Great Britain:

That the Objection “We treat them well” is not of Sufficient force, as the kindest treatment of them can be no Equivalent for the Loss of Liberty:

That the Objection “Many of them were prisoners of war when originally purchased” is utterly invalid, for no right of Conquest can subject any man to perpetual Slavery, much less his Posterity:

That the riches and Strength of every country consist in the number of its Inhabitants who are interested in the support of its Government; and therefore to Bind the vast body of Negroes to the State by the Powerful ties of Interest will be the greatest Policy:

That the argument drawn from the Difference of hair, features, and Colour are so beneath the Man of Sense much more the Christian, that we would insult the Honourable the Assembly by enlarging upon them:

That the fear of the enormities that the negroes may commit, will be groundless, at least if the Emancipation be Gradual, as the activity of the Magistrates and the provision of Houses of correction, where occasion may require, will Easily suppress the gross flagrant Idleness of either whites or blacks: But, Above All,

That deep debasement of Spirit, which is the Necessary Consequence of Slavery utterly incapacitates the human mind (except in a few instances) for the reception of the Noble and Enlarged principles of the Gospel; And therefore to encourage it, or to allow of it, we Apprehend to be most opposite to that Catholic spirit of Christianity; which desires the Establishment of the Kingdom of Christ over all the world, And produces in the Conduct every action consonant to that desire;

That of consequence Justice, Mercy, and truth, every virtue that can adorn the Man or the Christian, the Interest of the State, and the Welfare of Mankind, do unanswerably,—uncontrovertably plead for the removal of this grand Abomination: And therefore;

That we humbly intreat the Honourable the Assembly, As their superior wisdom may dictate to them, to pursue the most prudential, but Effectual method, for the immediate or Gradual Extirpation of Slavery and Your Petitioners as in duty bound shall ever pray &c.

The petitions are endorsed on the reverse, apparently in the same hand, “The like manner of compassion from God shall be given unto thee,” “O cast not out my humble prayer,” “The memory of the just shall be had in everlasting remembrance,” “Speak good words and comfortable,” and, in another hand, “Petition for Justice Mercy and truth agreeable to our Glorious Constitution.”

Petitions with identical wording were carried all over Virginia in the saddlebags of Methodist preachers. One petition began its travels in Hampshire County (modern West Virginia), where John Jeremiah Jacob was its first signer, then circulated in the Shenan-
doah Valley in Shenandoah and Rockingham Counties. Another petition acquired signatures in a long arc from Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County, through the upper reaches of Hanover and Louisa, down into Amherst County. Another petition was carried from the city of Alexandria up the Potomac into Berkeley County (modern West Virginia). Still another began in Leesburg and added signatures in Loudoun, Fauquier, and Prince William Counties. The majority of the petitions circulated in the counties south of the James River, primarily in Brunswick and Mecklenburg, Greensville, Halifax, and Amelia.

The signers of these petitions include a substantial number of large slave-holders, although in some areas, such as the Shenandoah Valley, none of the signers actually owned slaves.18

While these petitions were in circulation, Bishop Asbury and Bishop Coke traveled to Mount Vernon to invite George Washington to add his name to the list of petitioners. Arrangements for their interview with Washington were made by General Daniel Roberdeau of Alexandria, Virginia, one of the very few Virginians of any real prominence who signed one of the petitions.

General Daniel Roberdeau lived in Philadelphia until 1784, when he moved to Alexandria. An active “New Light” Presbyterian and a personal friend of the Reverend George Whitefield, Roberdeau had often proved himself a true friend of the early American Methodists. Bishop Asbury first met Roberdeau in 1772, when he and Richard Boardman and Captain Thomas Webb dined with him. Asbury observed that Daniel Roberdeau “cannot keep Negroes for conscience’ sake; and this was a topic of our conversation.” Roberdeau had inherited substantial estates on the Island of St. Christopher in the West Indies, which he felt obliged to sell in 1770 “as I dare not purchase negroes or ever leave the Temptation in the way of my Children.” Roberdeau was influential in Pennsylvania politics, acting as something of a tribune of the people, and served as a delegate from Pennsylvania to the Continental Congress.19

Besides the Mount Vernon conference, Roberdeau arranged a meeting between Bishop Asbury and the Reverend Samuel Stanhope Smith, President of Hampden-Sydney College, when the con-

18 The original petitions are filed chronologically among the General Assembly, Religious Petitions, Archives Division, Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia. Fragmentary tax returns for 1785 in Virginia make it possible to identify signers of the petitions in certain counties as slaveowners and non-slaveowners, but are too incomplete to permit accurate estimates of the number of slave holders who signed the petitions.

versation again "turned upon slavery, the difficulties attending emancipation, and the resentment some of the members of the Virginia legislature expressed against those who favoured a general abolition." General Daniel Roberdeau, a convinced abolitionist, would seem to be one of the major figures in the anti-slavery movement in Virginia. 20

Bishop Asbury and Bishop Coke met with Washington on May 26, 1785, and dined with him. After dinner, they presented their petition for the emancipation of the Negroes, and invited him to sign it. "He informed us that he was of our sentiments, and had signified his thoughts on the subject to most of the great men of the State," Bishop Coke recalled. Washington declined to add his name to their petition, but promised them "if the Assembly took it into consideration, (he) would signify his sentiments to the Assembly by a letter." 21

Washington did not altogether approve of petitioning the Assembly for the abolition of slavery. He commented on the Methodist petitions in a letter to Lafayette in 1786: "To set them afloat at once would, I really believe, be productive of much inconvenience and mischief; but by degrees it certainly might, and assuredly ought to be effected; and that too by Legislative authority." In a letter to Robert Morris, Washington expressed his disapproval of anti-slavery societies, although he hoped that slavery would be eventually abolished by legislative proceedings. He apparently had faith in the ability of the Assembly to devise and adopt some plan for a gradual, compensated emancipation. 22

While the Methodist petitions circulated throughout the Old Dominion, counter-petitions began to appear in Amelia, Halifax,
Mecklenburg, and Pittsylvania Counties. These petitions were also identical in form. They declared:

When the British Parliament usurped a Right to dispose of our Property without our Consent, we dissolved the Union with our Parent Country, and established a Constitution and Form of Government of our own, that our Property might be secure in Future. In Order to effect this we risked our Lives and Fortunes, and waded through Seas of Blood. By the favourable Interposition of Providence our Attempt was crowned with Success. We were put in the Possession of our Rights of Liberty and Property: And these Rights as well secured, as they can be by any human Constitution or Form of Government. But notwithstanding this, we understand a very subtle and daring attempt is made to dispossess us of a very important Part of our Property. An Attempt set on Foot, we are informed, by the Enemies of our Country, Tools of the British Administration, and supported by certain Men among us of considerable Weight, To wrest from us our Slaves, by an Act of the Legislature for a general Emancipation.

These petitioners not only asked that the proposed abolition of slavery be rejected, but they also demanded the repeal of an act passed in 1782 to authorize private manumissions.  

The Principal argument of the counter-petition is a direct contradiction of the interpretation of the American Revolution that is central to the Methodist petition for emancipation. These Virginians flatly denied “That the Glorious & ever Memorable Revolution can be Justified on no other Principles; But what do plead with still greater force for the Emancipation of our Slaves.” In their view, the war was fought primarily for the security of property. The central issue of the American Revolution was not “the cause of liberty, and the rights of mankind,” but the attempt of the British Parliament to impose taxes without the consent of the Colonists.

The counter-petitions also presented a religious defense of slavery. They argued that slavery was authorized by the Old Testament, and that neither Jesus Christ nor his Apostles attacked slavery. “The Freedom promised to his Followers is a Freedom from the Bondage of Sin & Satan, and from the Dominion of Mens Lusts & Passions; but as to their Outward Condition, whatever that was before they embraced the Religion of Jesus, whether Bond or Free, it remained the same afterwards.”

These petitioners further alleged that the manumission of slaves “is productive of Want, Poverty, Distress, and Ruin to the Free Citizen; Neglect, Famine & Death to the black Infant & Superannuated Parent; the Horrors of all the Rapes, Murders, and Out-

---

rages, which a vast Multitude of unprincipled, unpropertied, re-
vengeful, and remorseless Banditti are capable of perpetrating;
inevitable Bankruptcy to the Revenue, and consequently Breach
of Public Faith, and Loss of Credit with foreign Nations; and,
lastly, sure and final Ruin to this now flourishing free and happy
Country.”

The animosity towards a free Black population expressed in
these counter-petitions was a constant factor in every discussion
of emancipation measures. The Old Dominion would be overrun
with a “remorseless Banditti” committing “Rapes, Murders, and
Outrages.” Free Blacks would impoverish their neighbors, and
bring about the final ruin of the state. Individual slave-holders
might take advantage of the manumission laws to rid themselves
of the unwanted child or the slave too old to work. Free Blacks
would presumably be too improvident to care for their own children
and aged relatives. Hostility towards a free Black population
prompted further attacks on the manumission act, culminating in
an attempt to require emancipated slaves to leave Virginia. The
racial motives for preserving the institution of slavery undoubtedly
swayed many Virginians.

When the Methodist petitions were presented to the Virginia
House of Delegates on November 8, 1785, they were ordered to lie
on the table for future consideration. Two days later, the House
sat as a Committee of the Whole to debate these petitions and the
counter-petitions. James Madison, a member of the House of Dele-
gates, wrote to George Washington:

The pulse of the House of Delegates was felt on Thursday with
regard to a general manumission, by a petition presented on that
subject. It was rejected without dissent, but not without an avowed
patronage of its principle by sundry respectable members. A motion
was made to throw it under the table, which was treated with as
much indignation on one side as the petition itself was on the other.24

Madison and other members of the House spoke in favor of the
abolition of slavery, but not a single member cast his vote in favor
of authorizing the Committee on Propositions and Grievances to
draw up legislation for that purpose. In a letter to Jefferson, Madison
added that the Methodist petitions, while not thrown under the
table, “were treated with all the indignity short of it.” 25

The petitions for a repeal of the law authorizing individuals to
manumit their slaves were discussed at length in the House of

24 James Madison to George Washington, November 11, 1785, Letters and Other
25 James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, January 22, 1786, Julian P. Boyd, ed.,
Delegates on December 14, 1785. Speaker Benjamin Harrison broke a tie by voting in favor of a resolution that would authorize the committee to draw up legislation to repeal the act of 1782. On December 24, 1785 this bill was defeated by a narrow margin. Carter Braxton called it up again on January 17, 1786, in the form of an amendment, but it failed by another slim margin. On January 1, 1788 the Virginia Assembly debated a further modification of the existing manumission law. This proposal would require all free Blacks to leave the State within a specified time. It failed to pass, but again had the support of nearly half the members of the House of Delegates. The possibility of abolition by legislative action grew more and more remote after 1785. "The laws have declared them property," observed the Reverend John Leland, and it would be unconstitutional "for government to take away the property of individuals." Leland calculated that it would cost the Commonwealth of Virginia at least $8,307,690 to purchase and liberate all the slaves in the state. This staggering sum could never be raised by taxation. Leland acknowledged all of the arguments for continuing the Blacks in slavery, but concluded:

If we were slaves in Africa, how should we reprobate such reasoning as would rob us of our liberty. It is a question, whether men had not better lose all their property, than deprive an individual of his birth right blessing, freedom. If a political system is such, that common justice cannot be administered without innovation, the sooner such a system is destroyed the better for the people.

Leland put the issue of liberty and property as frankly as any writer of his day. Despite the strained interpretations of the Declaration of Independence and the state constitutions made by antislavery leaders, the American Revolution had not been fought to liberate the slaves or put the property-rights of American citizens in jeopardy. One of the most plausible arguments offered by antislavery spokesmen depended on a falsification of history. If evangelical abolitionists wanted to invade the sanctity of private property, they would have to overturn the political system that many of them had been at pains to erect. Even John Leland did not feel himself called to preach sedition in order to deliver the captives from slavery. He drew up a resolution for the Baptist General Committee at their meeting in Richmond in 1790 that left the

---

28 John Leland, *The Virginia Chronicle: with judicious and critical remarks under XXIV heads* (Fredericksburg, Va., 1790), pp. 11-12.
question of abolition to the decision of the several state legislatures. 29

Evangelical abolitionists continued to preach against slavery and encourage individuals to free their slaves. Many Virginia Methodists joined with other men of good will in anti-slavery societies, which were founded primarily to promote manumission of individual slaves and protect the rights of free Negroes. Their failure to achieve more on a broader front is often considered a facile compromise with human weakness. The inability of anti-slavery evangelicals to convince the churches of the moral evil of slavery, and the unwillingness of the churches to attempt to influence the state government of civil society, was itself a compromise. The same compromise was written into the very fabric of American society and found expression in the charters of liberty on which the new republic had its base.

29 Minutes of the Baptist General Committee (Richmond, 1790), pp. 5-7.