A PLEA AGAINST REENSLAVEMENT

BY A VOTE of 34 to 21, the Pennsylvania Assembly on March 1, 1780 passed an “Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery,” thereby giving that state the distinction of being the first in this country to pass a law for the abolition of slavery. The act for gradual abolition provided that children born of slave mothers after the passage of the law were to serve as servants until twenty-eight years of age, after which they were to be free. Blacks already held as slaves could be so retained, but were to be registered within eight months. Registration required the name of the owner, his occupation or profession, and the name of the county and township, district or ward wherein he resided, as well as the name, age, and sex of each slave.

Not satisfied with the Act of 1780, the Pennsylvania abolitionists, led by Anthony Benezet, began a campaign to abolish slavery in the state immediately and completely. But they got nowhere. In fact, the main problem facing blacks was the campaign of owners of slaves, supported by the Scotch-Irish radicals from the backcountry, to require longer terms of service from Negroes whose masters had failed to register them. Responding to this pressure, the Assembly was ready to revise the abolition law, and extend the registration period for the entire state until January, 1782. Under the new bill, Negroes who had been emancipated because of their masters’ failure to register them would be reenslaved.

The battle for strict compliance with an unmodified abolition law was led by the abolitionists, mainly the Philadelphia Quakers, but the most powerful influence in its favor were the pleas of Negroes emancipated because of their masters’ failure to register them, urging the Assembly not to reenslave them. One such plea from a black who signed himself “Cato,” was published in the Freeman’s Journal of September 21, 1780 (post-
script). Although a brief excerpt appears in Arthur Zilversmit's *The First Emancipation* (Chicago, 1967), p. 136, where the date of the paper is incorrectly given, it has never been reprinted in full.

"Cato's" communication is both a moving document, and one that should add to the material being discovered testifying to the fact that blacks were not as inarticulate in this period as they have been pictured in too many historical accounts. The Assembly responded to such pleas by prohibiting the reenslavement of any Negroes freed by the abolition law.

**MR. PRINTER**

I am a poor negro, who with myself and children have had the good fortune to get my freedom, by means of an act of assembly passed on the first of March 1780, and should now with my family be as happy a set of people as any on the face of the earth, but I am told the assembly are going to pass a law to send us all back to our masters. Why dear Mr. Printer, this would be the cruelest act that ever a set of worthy good gentlemen, could be guilty of. To make a law to hang us all, would be "merciful," when compared with this law; for many of our masters would treat us with unheard barbarity, for daring to take advantage (as we have done) of the law made in our favor. Our lot in "slavery" were hard enough to bear; but having tasted the sweets of "freedom," we should now be miserable indeed. Surely no Christian gentleman can be so cruel! I cannot believe they will pass such a law. I have read the act which made me free, and I always read it with joy—and I always dwell with particular pleasure on the following words, spoken by the assembly on the top of the said law. "We esteem it a particular 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 haved in "undeserved" bondage, and from which by the assumed authority of the kings of Great Britain, no effectual legal relief could be obtained." See it was the king of Great Britain that kept us in slavery before. Now surely, after saying so, it cannot be possible for them to make slaves of us again—nobody, but the king of England can do it—and I sincerely pray, that he may never have it in his
power. It cannot be, that the assembly will take from us the liberty they have given, because a little further they go on and say, “we conceive ourselves, at this particular period, extraordinarily called upon, by the blessings which ‘we’ have received, to make manifest the sincerity of our professions, and to give a substantial proof of our gratitude.” If after all this, ‘we,’ who by virtue of this very law (which has those very words in it which I have copied,) are now enjoying the sweets of that “substantial proof of gratitude,” I say if we should be plunged back into slavery what must we think of the meaning of all those words in the beginning of the said law, which seem to be a kind of creed respecting slavery, but what is more serious than all, what will our great Father think of such doings. But I pray that he may be pleased to turn the hearts of the honorable assembly from this cruel law; and that he will be pleased to make us poor blacks deserving of his mercies.

CATO