



FRANKLIN'S PRINTING PRESS

Horace Greeley, *The Great Industries of the United States*
(Hartford, Conn., 1872), 61.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S VIEW OF THE NEGRO AND SLAVERY

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IN 1789, less than a year before Benjamin Franklin died, he answered a letter from Quaker abolitionist John Wright. Franklin wished him success in his endeavors to obtain the abolition of the slave trade but presumed to suggest that the "first sowing of the good seed" of Negro freedom was not with the Quaker Yearly Meeting of 1758 as Wright had suggested. Franklin explained:

About the year 1728, or 1729, I myself printed a book for Ralph Sandiford . . . against keeping Negroes in slavery; two editions of which he distributed gratis. And about the year 1736, I printed another book on the same subject for Benjamin Lay. . . . By these instances it appears that the seed was indeed sown in the good ground of your profession¹

In publishing these antislavery volumes Franklin may have indeed helped plant the seeds of abolitionism. In an attack against slavery, Sandiford employed Biblical myth and teaching to show that slavery and the slave trade were contrary to God's will. Benjamin Lay echoed similar sentiments, basing his argument on Biblical references as well as observations by Christian writers like Thomas More, Thomas a Kempis, and John Milton, all of whom had been critical of slavery. Widely distributed, particularly among the Quakers, these books aroused fierce opposition at times but gradually made a few converts.²

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¹Benjamin Franklin to John Wright, November 4, 1789, Albert H. Smyth, ed., *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1905-1907), X, 62.

²Benjamin Lay, *All Slave Keepers that Keep the Innocent in Bondage* (Philadelphia, 1737), Early American Imprints, Evans 4149; Ralph Sandiford, *A Brief Examination into the Practice of the Time* (Philadelphia, 1729), Early American Imprints, Evans 3212; Edwin R. Turner, "The First Abolition Society in the United States," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XXXVI (January, 1912), 92.

In 1789 Benjamin Franklin claimed to have been an early champion of Negro freedom. Eighty-three years old and president of an abolition society, Franklin can perhaps be understood, if not forgiven, for making such a self-congratulatory suggestion. In reality, when Franklin published the works of Sandiford and Lay, he was hardly a budding abolitionist. The Franklin of the 1730s was quite different from the Franklin of the 1780s.

Benjamin Franklin's attitude toward Negroes and slavery is a major concern of this paper. A second point involves the inconsistency of Franklin's humanitarian sentiment on the one hand and his practical thought and action on the other. To the historian, the paradoxes of Franklin's career are challenging and perplexing. "Mr. Doubleface," as he has been called, could preach about good works and strict morality and yet father illegitimate offspring. He could serve as a trustee for a humanitarian society to educate Pennsylvania Germans but proclaim alarm at the "Palatinate Boors" who threatened to make America a country of aliens. Toward the Negro, he could show justice and universal brotherhood as well as more practical and immediate considerations.³

When Franklin printed his first antislavery publication for Ralph Sandiford, he was still a young man. His fame as a scientist, inventor, statesman, diplomat, philanthropist, and philosopher lay in the future. In 1729 he was just settling down with his partner in a printing firm in Philadelphia, a business he devoted most of his attention to until 1748.

In 1750 the Negro population was a mere 8 percent in Pennsylvania, as compared to 60 percent in South Carolina. Negro slavery was simply not a pressing problem in the first half of the eighteenth century for Pennsylvanians, nor was it a noticeable concern for Benjamin Franklin. In the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, *Poor Richard's Almanack*, and numerous letters and pamphlets, Franklin wrote with wit and intelligence on everything from politics and moral philosophy to homely housekeeping ideas and advice on the selection of a mistress. He seemed to have a passionate interest in all that surrounded him; nevertheless, before 1750 he wrote virtually nothing about Negroes or slavery. Franklin, like most Pennsylvanians, was too busy making a living in the new land and bringing civilization to the wilderness to look seriously at the peculiar insti-

³Alfred O. Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin: Philosopher and Man* (Philadelphia, 1965), 58-61, 208, 415; Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1938), 218.

tution that was becoming entrenched in American life.⁴

Although he printed abolitionist literature, Franklin participated in the slave trade. He sold Negro slaves for other owners and bought them from time to time as an investment. He planned to resell them through advertisements in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. Advertisements such as the following appeared in the *Gazette* as late as 1743:

To be sold: A likely Negro wench about fifteen years old and talks English. Inquire of the printer hereof. A breeding Negro woman about twenty years of age. Can do any household work.⁵

A Negro Man twenty-two Years of Age, of uncommon Strength and Activity, . . . and is very faithful in Employment: Any Person that wants such a one, may see him by inquiring of the Printer hereof.⁶

Franklin also kept slaves for domestic use. Although the first mention of personal slaves in Franklin's correspondence appears in 1750, he probably had acquired them a number of years earlier. In 1750 Franklin wrote his mother, Abiah Franklin, "I still keep those Servants but the Man [Peter] not in my own House." The Negro man's wife, Jemima, was employed as a houseservant in Franklin's home. But Franklin's experience with Negro servants was not happy; and as a practical minded master, he considered "to sell them both at the first good Opportunity; for we do not like Negro Servants. We got again half what we lost."⁷ Franklin's cavalier participation in the institution of Negro slavery in his early years suggests that his willingness to print the antislavery tracts for Sandiford and Lay may have had as much to do with prospects of a profitable business transaction as with abolitionist sympathies.

In 1751 Franklin composed an essay, *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind*, that was distributed widely in both the colonies and in Europe. It contained the first elaboration of

⁴Edwin R. Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania* (Washington, 1911), 1-17; Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black* (Chapel Hill, 1968), 102-103.

⁵Advertisements in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 11-18, 1731, May 4-11, 1732, May 16-23, 1734, quoted in Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, 128-129.

⁶Advertisement in *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 10, 1743, in Leonard W. Labaree, ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, 1959), II, 389-390.

⁷Benjamin Franklin to Abiah Franklin, April 12, 1750, in Labaree, *Papers*, III, 474.

Franklin's view of the Negro and the first indication of antislavery sentiment. Slavery was attacked from an economic standpoint. "The Labour of Slaves can never be so cheap here," he wrote, "as the Labour of working Men is in Britain. Anyone may compute it." Although anyone may have computed it, Franklin was one of the first to submit slavery to a bookkeeping analysis:

Reckon then the Interest of the first Purchase of a Slave, . . .
 . . . Expences in his sickness and Loss of Time, . . .
 Expence of a Driver to keep him at Work, and his Pilfering
 from Time to Time, almost every Slave being *by Nature* a
 Thief, and . . . you will see that Labour is much cheaper
 there [in England] than it ever can be by Negroes here.⁸

Another objection to Negro slavery presented in the essay was rooted in racial attitudes. Franklin demonstrated that the American continent was, of all regions on the globe, the most conducive to the increase of mankind. However, he pointed out, the introduction of slaves would decrease the white population of the country. "The Whites who have Slaves, not labouring are enfeebled, and therefore not so generally prolific," he wrote. "Slaves also pejorate the Families that use them; the white Children become proud, disgusted with labour, and being educated in Idleness, are rendered unfit to get a Living by Industry."⁹

This concern that slavery might threaten the white population was not new with Franklin. Even Benjamin Lay, despite his moral objection to slavery, observed in the volume Franklin had printed, "As many Negro Men as there are among us, so many Places are . . . taken up of Men that might make Husbands for our Daughters." Lay could not conceive of the Negro's assimilation into white society.¹⁰

Like other colonials, Franklin viewed the Negro as racially inferior.¹¹ In his economic argument against slavery, he stated that the

⁸Franklin, *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind* (Boston, 1755), in Labaree, *Papers*, IV, 229-230.

⁹*Ibid.*, 231.

¹⁰Lay, *All Slave Keepers*, 202.

¹¹Milton Cantor, "The Image of the Negro in Colonial Literature," *New England Quarterly Review*, XXXVI (September, 1969), 452-455; Jordan, *White Over Black*, 195-196.

Negro was "by Nature" a thief. In the last paragraph of the *Observations* Franklin's racial preference was even more openly proclaimed. "While we are . . . making this Side of our Globe reflect a brighter Light," he wrote, "Why should we in the sight of Superior Beings, darken its People? Why increase the Sons of Africa . . .?" Although Franklin concluded the essay with a halfhearted apology for his racial bias, excusing it as "only natural to Mankind," the general attitude of the essay was altered only slightly.¹² His concern was for the welfare of English whites; blacks were dealt with as an inferior and intruding element. The economic computations regarding slavery were original and impressive, but the essay was clearly not inspired by a humanitarian concern for Negroes. An economic and racial concern for white people motivated Franklin.

The argument against slavery on the grounds that it effected the white population continued to appear in Franklin's writings for the next ten years. Faced with the French and Indian threat in the mid 1750s, several colonies recruited white indentured servants to strengthen the King's armed forces. Franklin voiced his objection to this practice in 1756 before the Pennsylvania Assembly. Speaking as a member, he argued that if such recruitment continued, "The People will be driven to the Necessity of providing themselves with Negro Slaves." In a familiar argument, he concluded that "the Growth of the Country by Increase of white Inhabitants will be prevented," and "the Province weakened rather than strengthened (as every Slave may be reckoned a domestick Enemy)."¹³

Franklin continued to hold slaves into the 1760s. His mind to sell Peter and Jemima at the first opportunity had changed. He and his wife, Deborah, became quite attached to their Negro slaves and treated them generously. Franklin took Peter with him to London and frequently wrote his wife concerning the slave's good behavior. "He has a few Faults as most of them, and I see with only one Eye, and hear with only one Ear; so we rub on pretty comfortably," Franklin wrote on one occasion. What became of his personal slaves is not known. References to them in the Franklin papers disappeared after 1760. They were probably set free or died in his care because

¹²Franklin, *Observations*, in Labaree, *Papers*, IV, 229, 234.

¹³Franklin, Statement before the Pennsylvania Assembly, February 11, 1756, in Labaree, *Papers*, VI, 398. See also Franklin to Richard Jackson, February 11, 1764, *ibid.*, XI, 76.

Franklin's will of 1757 provided for their freedom in the event of his decease.¹⁴

Franklin's mellowing attitude toward his slaves was no doubt a reflection of his broadening contacts with abolitionists and humanitarians in Pennsylvania and London. His connection with Britain's most respected philanthropic society, the Associates of Dr. Bray, began in 1757 when Franklin received an inquiry from John Waring of the Associates. Waring asked for advice and assistance in establishing a program to teach black children to read and to instruct them in the "Principles of Christian Morality."¹⁵

The design of Bray's Associates was not abolitionist in nature. The principal object was to inculcate Christian behavior, a task which did not intend to undermine the institution of slavery in any way. Far from inciting the slaves to revolt, the program would "have a very good effect" on their morals and "make them more faithful and honest in their Master's Service," a view John Waring put forth.¹⁶ In responding, Franklin explained that many slaveholders would view the acquisition of knowledge by slaves as "both useless and dangerous" and would be disgusted by the prospect of racial mixing in the schools. However, Franklin believed a "separate School for

¹⁴Benjamin Franklin to Deborah Franklin, January, n.d., February 19, 1758, March 28, June 27, 1760, in Labaree, *Papers*, VII, 369-70; IX, 38, 174-175; Franklin's Will of April 28, 1757, *ibid.*, VIII, 203.

¹⁵John Waring to Franklin, January 25, 1757, in Labaree, *Papers*, VII, 100-101; Richard I. Shelling, "Benjamin Franklin and the Dr. Bray Associates," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LXIII (July, 1939), 282-293. See also Edgar L. Pennington, "Thomas Bray's Associates and their Work Among the Negroes," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, XLVIII (October, 1938), 311-403.

¹⁶Waring to Franklin, January 25, 1757, in Labaree, *Papers*, VII, 101.

Blacks" would be feasible and desirable.¹⁷

Thus Franklin helped establish the humanitarian program of the Associates in the colonies. While serving as colonial agent in London, Franklin was elected to membership in the Associates and was eventually selected chairman, a position in which he served actively for several years. Through his association with this purely philanthropic enterprise, Franklin's respect for Negroes grew, and he contributed to improving the welfare of the black race in America.¹⁸

In 1763 Franklin visited one of the Negro schools in Philadelphia that he had helped establish. He reported on his findings in an enthusiastic letter to the secretary of Bray's Associates, John Waring. Of particular note was Franklin's discussion of the Negro's mental capacity. "I was on the whole much pleas'd," he wrote, "and from what I then saw, have conceiv'd a higher Opinion of the natural Capacities of the black Race than I had ever before entertained." The apprehension of Negro children "seems as quick, their Memory as strong, and their Docility in every Respect equal to that of white Children."¹⁹ Franklin did not elaborate on the nature of his former prejudices, but he clearly implied that his view of the Negro had been changed by the experience. Perhaps it is not surprising that a man so attentive to natural phenomena as Franklin would be convinced when presented with empirical evidence of Negro educability. He did not consult philosophy or anthropological theory. He simply observed Negroes performing in an educational setting and concluded, as he wrote the Marquis de Condorcet several years later, "they are not deficient in natural understanding, but they have not the advantage of education."²⁰ The conclusion that the intellectual capacity of a Negro was fully equal to that of a white person was one of the first observations of this kind by a distinguished American.²¹

¹⁷Franklin to Waring, January 3, 1758, in Labaree, *Papers*, VII, 356.

¹⁸Shelling, "Benjamin Franklin," 282-83, 292.

¹⁹Franklin to Waring, December 12, 1763, in Labaree, *Papers*, X, 395-396.

²⁰Franklin to Condorcet, March 20, 1774, in Smyth, *Writings*, VI, 222.

²¹Labaree, *Papers*, X, 396n.

Franklin's new regard for the Negro was expressed in various writings after his experience in 1763. In the *Narrative of the Late Massacres of Lancaster County* (1764), Franklin wrote a moving account of the barbarous slaying of a peaceful band of Indians in Pennsylvania.²² A master of sarcasm, he enhanced his case against the "Christian white Savages of Peckstang and Donegall" by citing examples of brotherhood and justice practiced by so-called barbarians and pagans. Franklin concluded that the Indians would have been safer among the black Africans "where at least one manly Soul would have been found, with Sense, Spirit, and Humanity enough, to stand in their Defence."²³

A changed outlook is also reflected in the 1769 edition of the *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind*. The last paragraph, which had so boldly proclaimed a preference for the white race, is omitted completely in the new edition. In the *Observations* of 1769 the statement that every slave is a thief "by Nature" is revised to suggest that he is a thief "from the nature of slavery."²⁴ Here Franklin acknowledges that the Negro is a man as other men, not inferior by nature, but because of the nature of slavery.

In the 1770s Franklin corresponded frequently with abolitionists in England and America. In 1773 he wrote Quaker abolitionist Anthony Benezet that he had "commenced an acquaintance" with Granville Sharpe with a hope to "act in concert in the affair of slavery."²⁵ Sharpe was a London philanthropist and pamphleteer who had just won an important victory in the struggle for the emancipation of slaves by securing the freedom of James Sommersett. A year earlier when many Englishmen were congratulating themselves for Sharpe's victory, Franklin had lashed out boldly in the London *Chronicle* against "the Hypocrisy of this country which encourages a detestable commerce by laws for promoting the

²²For a comparison of Franklin's attitude toward the Indians and his view of the Negro see Julian P. Boyd, "Dr. Franklin: Friend of the Indian," *Journal of the Franklin Institute* (October, 1942), 318-321. Boyd calls Franklin a friend of the Indians but notes that he never became as active on their behalf as he did on behalf of the Negro. "Franklin respected the Indians and was content to let them live their own life."

²³Franklin, *Narrative of the Late Massacres of Lancaster County*, January, 1764, in Labaree, *Papers*, XI, 56, 66.

²⁴Labaree, *Papers*, IV, 229n, 234n.

²⁵Franklin to Anthony Benezet, February 10, 1773, in Smyth, *Writings*, VI, 9.

Guinea trade: while it piqued itself on its virtue, love of liberty, and the equity of its courts, in setting free a single Negro."²⁶

When Pennsylvania raised the duty on the importation of Negroes in 1773 from ten to twenty pounds, Franklin expressed his satisfaction in a letter to Benezet, "There is reason to hope that our colonies may in time get clear of a practice that disgraces them, and without producing any equivalent benefit, is dangerous to their very existence."²⁷ Back in the colonies in 1775 and a member of the Continental Congress, Franklin expressed opposition to slavery and to allowing some states to treat slaves as property, especially where tax calculations were concerned.²⁸

One might have suspected from his enlightened comments on the nature of Negro slavery and his correspondence with abolitionist leaders, that Franklin had been transformed since the 1750s into a champion of the antislavery cause. However, this was not the case. Franklin was a practical man as well as a humanitarian. Although by no means an advocate of slavery in these years, Franklin did not become an outspoken leader on behalf of its abolition. He rubbed shoulders with philanthropists and antislavery leaders, but men like Anthony Benezet, Benjamin Rush, John Woolman, and Granville Sharpe were the driving force of the movement. Franklin's reflections on Negro slavery until the last few years of his life frequently betrayed practical acceptance of the institution as well as humanitarian disgust.

Between 1757 and 1785 Franklin spent less than three years in America. Most of the time he was either in London serving as agent for various colonies or in France as an American diplomatic representative. Because he was away from the colonies for long periods, it may have been easy for him to lose sight of the ugly realities of slavery. More important, Franklin often had to defend the American colonies as a whole. Since slavery was part of colonial life, it too had to be defended.

As a well-known colonial citizen living abroad, Franklin was occasionally sought out for information about America. *Some Observations on North America*, published in Germany, is an example of

²⁶Reported in a letter, Franklin to Benezet, August 22, 1772, in Smyth, *Writings*, V, 274.

²⁷Franklin to Benezet, July 14, 1773, in Smyth, *Writings*, VI, 102.

²⁸Lewis J. Carey, *Franklin's Economic Views* (Garden City, 1928), 76. Carey's discussion of Franklin's view of Negro slavery does not highlight any inconsistencies.

Franklin's willingness to satisfy European interest in the new world; it also indicates Franklin's willingness to lay aside, at least for a moment, his abolitionist sympathies. Gottfried Achenwall, a professor of jurisprudence at the University of Gottingen, conducted oral interviews with Franklin in the spring of 1767 and later published Franklin's reflections in German. Franklin told Achenwall why there were so few blacks in the Northern colonies: "In Pennsylvania, on principle they were prevented coming as much as possible, partly because there was no such hard work as they were fitted for in raising tobacco, rice, and indigo."²⁹ Franklin did not mention that Pennsylvania residents wanted to exclude inferior sorts and prevent them from darkening the land but neither did he suggest that blacks were excluded partly because of the moral objections to slavery. Had Franklin been a crusading abolitionist, no doubt he would have made some mention of this fact.

Franklin's discussion of the Negro's legal position raises further question about his commitment to the antislavery cause. "These Negro slaves enjoy, as subjects of the state, in all the colonies, the protection of the laws as much as the free inhabitants," he told his German interviewer. "A colonist, even if he is the owner, who kills a black man, is also sentenced to death The Negro slaves have all, in short, the general rights of humanity, except freedom and property, neither of which they possess."³⁰ The difficulties with these observations are abundant. In 1767 the Negro slave's position under the law can in no meaningful sense be described as equal to that of white people, particularly if "all the colonies" are considered. Even if the law had been so enlightened, the practice of the law was certainly something else. In South Carolina at this time, slaves committing felonies were tried in specially constituted courts which typically consisted of "a justice of the peace and two (other) slave-owners."³¹ Even in Pennsylvania, where since 1690 a white man was legally liable to the death penalty if he killed a black man, the law was rarely observed. But the law itself was not the same for white

²⁹Gottfried Achenwall, ed., *Some Observations on North America* (from oral information by Dr. Franklin), 1767, in Labaree, *Papers*, XIII, 355.

³⁰*Ibid.* Although Achenwall may not have reported Franklin's words fully or correctly in all cases, on the question of legal complexities it would seem that the Gottingen law professor would have been able to identify any distinctions Franklin might have made.

³¹Jordan, *White Over Black*, 85, 100, 106, 367.

and black in all the colonies. Not until 1774, for example, did North Carolina make murder of a slave an offense equal to murder of a white man.³² Franklin himself recognized the differences among the colonies in his later writings, but in 1767 he was apparently not interested in impressing his host with the complexities and barbarities of Negro slavery. It appears that Franklin was trying to create for the German the image of an enlightened America capable of humanity and justice in spite of slavery.

As the conflict between the colonies and Britain intensified from 1765 to 1775, Franklin and other Americans abroad had to defend the justice of colonial claims. It is not altogether surprising that slavery would be part of this discussion. In 1769 the English abolitionist Granville Sharpe published an attack on the practice of slavery in the colonies. He concluded that Americans had so little regard for liberty, treating their slaves without scruple, that they were unworthy of the liberty they were demanding from England. Franklin answered Sharpe's conclusion in an essay entitled, "A Conversation Between an Englishman, a Scotchman, and an American, on the Subject of Slavery."³³

Franklin set out to correct the notion that all Americans were slaveholders. "There is not one Family in a Hundred that has a Slave in it," he pointed out. "Many Thousands there abhor the Slave Trade as much as Mr. Sharpe Supposing it then with that Gentleman, a Crime to keep a Slave, can it be right to stigmatize us all with that Crime?" This was the logical and sensible response, and Franklin made it well: Do not characterize the whole by the actions of a few. But Franklin did not stop here. He appeared unwilling to suppose that it was necessarily "a Crime to keep a Slave." Those who did in America, he insisted, were not all tyrants and oppressors. "Many treat their Slaves with great Humanity, and provide full as well for them in Sickness and in Health"³⁴

³²Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania*, 36, 113.

³³Franklin, "A Conversation Between an Englishman, a Scotchman, and an American, on the Subject of Slavery," London *Public Advertiser*, January 30, 1770, reprinted in an article by Varner W. Crane, "Benjamin Franklin on Slavery and American Liberties," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LXII (January, 1938), 1-11.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 5-6.

Franklin responded similarly to Sharpe's suggestion that the harsh slave laws cast doubt on the general humanity of Americans. Where the laws were severe, Franklin observed, they were so in proportion to the greater "Ignorance or Wickedness" of the people to be governed. "The Majority of Negroes," he wrote, "are of plotting Disposition, dark, sullen, malicious, revengeful and cruel in the highest Degree." Franklin makes no suggestion here that they were this way because of slavery. "If mild Laws could govern such People," he concluded, "why don't you keep and govern them by your own mild Laws at home."³⁵

The "Conversation" is, no doubt, "one of the least admirable of Franklin's propaganda pieces."³⁶ But it probably represents the real Franklin as much as the enlightened edition of the *Observations* that appeared in 1769. In one year Franklin could proclaim that the condition of slavery debased the Negro; in the very next, he could suggest that the harsh slave laws were justified because the majority of Negroes were ignorant or wicked. The contradiction, no doubt, has something to do with the purposes at hand. The first document is a scientific, philosophical statement written for humanitarian friends; the second is an impassioned defense of American character meant for foreign eyes. Although Franklin may have deplored slavery, the reality of the moment determined his immediate reaction to the institution.

Returning to America after the American Revolution, Franklin, though eighty years old, began his most active and sympathetic association with the abolitionist movement. No longer in a position where he was forced to excuse the evils of American society, he could join a crusade to eliminate them. In 1787 he was elected president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, thus lending his immense prestige to an important effort on behalf of the American Negro.

In the last year of his life, Franklin had a hand in the publication of four antislavery documents. *An Address to the Public*, issued by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in November, 1789, and signed by Franklin, was an impassioned appeal for the emancipation of slaves, employment for freed Negroes, and the education of their children. *A Plan for Improving the Condition of the Free Blacks*, released about the same time, was an elaborate educational proposal

³⁵*Ibid.*, 7-8.

³⁶Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin*, 208.

based on the assumption that since Negroes were not responsible for what slavery had done to them, the expense of their education was the responsibility of others.³⁷

On February 12, 1790, Franklin and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society presented a memorial to Congress entreating it to abolish the slave trade, "to restore liberty to those unhappy men, who alone, in this land of freedom, are degraded into perpetual bondage and . . . to devise means for removing this inconsistency from the character of the American people."³⁸ In the debates to which this memorial gave rise, several attempts were made to justify the slave trade and slavery. One Southerner remarked that Franklin's signature on the document only proved his senility. Representative James Jackson of Georgia, defending the interests of the South, argued that the Christian religion actually supported slavery. He warned, moreover, that bringing forward the abolitionist issue was "likely to light up the flame of civil disorder; for the people of the Southern States will resist one tyranny as soon as another."³⁹

Jackson's statement before the House of Representatives moved Franklin to pen his last public paper. Eighty-four years old and with less than a month to live, he had not yet lost his wisdom or his literary ingenuity. His letter to the editor of the *Federal Gazette*, signed "Historicus," was a clever parody of the congressional pro-slavery oratory. It was a defense of white slavery by an Algerine pirate said to have been delivered in the Divan of Algiers in 1687. The pretended African speech, comparing the American and Algerine policies by implication, proved that there was nothing to choose between them.⁴⁰

From his slave trading and slave holding days, Benjamin Franklin had come a long way. Once he had viewed the Negro as an inferior being who was justifiably held in bondage, whose presence in America only served to diminish the potential of the new world civilization. Eventually his humanitarianism and open-minded empir-

³⁷The Pennsylvania Abolition Society, *Plan for Improving the Condition of Free Blacks*, October 26, 1789, in Smyth, *Writings*, X, 127-129.

³⁸*Annals of Congress*, I Congress, 2nd session, February 12, 1790, 1199.

³⁹Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation, the Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago, 1967), 164; *Annals of Congress*, I Congress, 2nd session, February 12, 1790, 1200.

⁴⁰Franklin to editor of *Federal Gazette*, March 23, 1790, in Smyth, *Writings*, X, 87-91; Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, 775.

icism led him to understand that any Negro inferiority came not from a racial defect but from the institution of slavery. A fundamental practicality, however, prevented him from translating his new appreciation into unequivocal rhetoric and action. Thus Franklin could display sensitive humanitarianism in one situation and hard-nosed realism in another.

In the last years of his life, Franklin showed little hesitation in attacking slavery. As his connection to the Pennsylvania Abolition Society indicates, he had grown sensitive to the anomaly of slavery in a society proclaiming human rights and the dignity of man. The former slave master and diplomatic defender of all that was American, including slavery, dedicated the last few years of his life to obtaining freedom and respect for the American Negro.

