

## SLAVERY IN COLONIAL PENNSYLVANIA.

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It is almost forgotten now, but a long time ago there flourished in Pennsylvania a slavery not very different from that which existed in Maryland and other colonies nearby. The beginnings of negro servitude in this region are lost in the mist of colonial antiquity, but we know that there were negroes along the banks of the Delaware river in the days of the Dutch and the Swedes. As soon as English settlers appear, they also have them. Thus the records of Newcastle court mention them as early as 1677. In Pennsylvania they are found immediately after Penn's coming. "I have a negro servant whom I bought," says the Dutch baker of Germantown, Cornelis Bom. In 1684 Hermans Op den Graeff told in his quaint German how black men or Moors were held as slaves. Indeed Penn himself had spoken of them two years before, for when he granted a charter to the Free Society of Traders, he devoted one section of the charter to the treatment of negroes.

It may be observed that it was once believed that Penn never had any negroes, and his biographers used to try to prove that he was no slave-owner. This contention has long since been abandoned, as well it may be, since the Penn MSS. preserved in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania furnish abundant evidence to overthrow it. Penn's letters not infrequently refer to his slaves, while by the terms of the will which he made just before he left the colony for the last time, he set them all free.

Thus negroes were introduced into Pennsylvania. By 1702 they were spoken of as numerous. Many of the settlers desired to import as many as possible, but others wished to exclude them altogether. The result was that in

the period from 1700 to 1773 numerous laws were passed in the colony imposing a duty upon negroes imported. Sometimes it was two pounds, sometimes it was ten; on one occasion it was twenty. As a rule these laws accomplished nothing, especially if the duty had been made high, for the authorities of Pennsylvania had to have them approved in England. Almost always the Lords of Trade vetoed them there, since the English government was unwilling to have colonial legislatures interfere with the slave trade, then carried on by its protégé, the African Company.

What could not be effected by law, however, was accomplished by other means. The number of negroes in Pennsylvania during the colonial period was never large. There were not so many negroes in Pennsylvania as in New Jersey, and only about half as many as in New York. This was owing to two causes: the Quakers opposed slavery after a while, and the Germans turned their backs upon it from the first. In the beginning it is probable that the Friends owned more slaves than any other class in the colony, but after a time they began to be troubled by conscientious scruples. What report would it cause in Europe, said Pastorius and his associates in 1688, that in this new land the Quakers handled men as there men treated their cattle? Could Christian men do these things? In 1693 George Keith declared that the enslaving of men and their posterity to the end of the world was a great hinderance to the spreading of the Gospel. For some time most of the Quakers did not follow this advice, but gradually a great reform was made. First the Quakers stopped importing slaves; then they ceased buying them; and at last began to persuade each other to set negroes free. By 1780 this work was complete, and slave-holding among the Friends of Pennsylvania had come to an end. It may readily be seen that such an attitude on the part of a body of people, always influential, as the Quakers were, had much to do with keeping the number of negroes smaller than it might have been. Meanwhile the influence of the Germans had been equally

great. From the first they had almost nothing to do with slavery. As they came to constitute a very large portion of the population—from a third to two-fifths—their attitude was of immense and decisive importance.

It is almost impossible to obtain satisfactory information as to the number of negroes in colonial Pennsylvania. It is well known that statistics and numerical estimates made before the nineteenth century are practically worthless. The assertion of Ordericus Vitalis that William the Conqueror divided the lands of England among sixty thousand knights, is a well known instance. It has recently been proven that the actual number was probably about five thousand. Similarly there are some extraordinary estimates as to the number of negroes in Pennsylvania. In 1773 a communication to the Earl of Dartmouth declared that there were 2,000; but a few years later Smyth, the traveller, asserted that there were more than 100,000. The following figures are merely conjectures, but they are based upon a great deal of investigation, and are perhaps as near to the truth as the historian may now come. There were probably 1,000 or more negroes in Pennsylvania in 1700; about 2,500 in 1725; 6,000 about 1750; and probably 10,000 in 1780. The census taken by the Federal government in 1790 gave the number as 10,274.

The negroes imported were sometimes brought directly from Africa, but as a rule they could not stand the severe Pennsylvania winters. Peter Kalm says that the toes and fingers of negroes are frequently frozen, while Isaac Norris writing to Jonathan Dickinson in 1703, says "they're So Chilly they Can hardly Stir from the fire and Wee have Early beginning for a hard Wintr." Therefore it was found better to take them to the West Indies first, and later on bring the second generation to Pennsylvania. Many an old ledger or account book still preserved in Philadelphia shows how negroes were once brought there and exchanged for wheat, flour or lumber. The *Pennsylvania Gazette* of September 4, 1740, advertises "A PARCEL of likely Negro

Boys and Girls just arrived in the Sloop Charming Sally—to be sold—for ready Money, Flour or Wheat”——. The price of a slave was different at different times and for different negroes. Perhaps an average price would be between thirty and forty pounds.

Something must now be said about the legal aspects of this slavery. The legal origin of slavery in Pennsylvania is a subject exceedingly difficult and intricate. It is sufficient here to say that slavery is rarely instituted. Generally it grows up and develops, and is defined in law after it exists. The first negroes in Pennsylvania were doubtless bought and sold for life, but the law regarded them as servants, that is, as men held for a term of years only. Thus the earliest laws speak of all servants, all servants white and black, and so on. In short before 1700 there were no laws about slavery in Pennsylvania. The laws passed to regulate unfree men had to do with servants only. In other words slavery in Pennsylvania had its legal origin in servitude. But after 1700 it was realized that special laws must be made to regulate men held for life, and such laws were made.

Some things that the legislators might have been expected to deal with they always left unnoticed. They never stated the consequences of slave baptism. In some places it was believed that baptism would make a slave free, since it was sinful to hold a Christian in bondage; and accordingly it was considered necessary to make specific declaration that such was not the consequence. Nor was anything said about the transmission of servile status. It is true that the children of slaves were born slaves also, but no law of the colony ever laid this down. There is little doubt the community recognized the principle from the first. In 1727 Isaac Warner bequeathed to his daughter a negro woman named Sarah together with her unborn child. Furthermore the legislature never did anything to determine the status of a child when one of its parents was free and the other a slave. This is a most important matter, and must always be determined in some way wherever slavery exists. Among

the Romans the line of servile descent lay through the mother. Thus the child of a slave father and a free mother was free; the child of a free father and a slave mother was a slave by birth. In the colony of Maryland the opposite practice prevailed for a time, and there the line of servile descent lay through the father. In Pennsylvania the Roman doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* was recognized, and the condition of the child was that of the mother. One result of this was that mulattoes were divided into two classes. If the father was a negro slave and the mother a free white woman, the child was free; if the father was a white man and the mother a negress slave, the child was a slave also.

The laws passed by the colonial assembly had to do chiefly with crime and punishment, with marriage, and with restrictions upon movement and conduct. In 1700 a law was passed which caused negroes to be tried in special courts without juries. They continued to be so tried until 1780. By the same law they were punished somewhat differently and somewhat more severely than white people. In 1726 further regulations were made, the most important of which had to do with marriage. The marriage of negroes with white people was forbidden in the strongest possible manner. If a white person married a negro, he was to be fined thirty pounds, or sold as a servant for seven years. If a free negro married a white person, he was to be sold as a slave, that is for life. The clergyman who performed the marriage was to pay one hundred pounds.

There were many minor regulations to which negroes were subject. Without written permission they might not go more than ten miles away from their masters' homes, nor stay out after nine o'clock at night, nor go to tippling houses. The penalty was ten lashes upon the bare back.

Some of these regulations remained a dead letter. For example negroes were forbidden to meet together in companies of more than four. Now it is certain that in Philadelphia, particularly, great crowds of noisy negroes congregating after dark, were a nuisance throughout the colonial

period. "The Grand Inquest—do present—that Care may be taken to Suppress the unruly Negroes of this City accompanying to gether on the first Day of the weeke, and that they may not be Suffered to walk the Streets in Companys after it is Darke without their Masters Leave"—, says the report of the grand jury for 1717. In 1741 complaint is made of the "Concourse of Negroes," and the swearing, fighting and disorder of negroes and other people. In the same year complaint was made of the great numbers of negroes who sat around the court house with their milk-pails until late at night, and who committed many disorders against the good government of the city.

For the graver crimes negroes were punished with hanging, branding, or transportation; for the lesser crimes with whipping, where white men would have atoned with imprisonment or fine. If they offended their masters also they might be punished by whipping. This the master might administer himself, or he might have it given at the common whipping-post, in which case he would send an order for so and so many lashes. The story of Hodge's Cato told by Watson in his *Annals* is familiar. Cato had committed some transgression, so his master sent him to the jail with a written order for a whipping. On the way he met another negro of unimpeachable conduct, and feigning sickness, begged him to carry the message. This the good Samaritan did, and received a sound thrashing in consequence; Cato meanwhile proceeding home in penitence and peace.

Masters might punish their slaves, but they were not allowed to abuse their power. They might not torture them, nor starve them, nor kill them. "Yesterday," says the *American Weekly Mercury* for April 29, 1742, "at a Supream Court held in this City, sentence of Death was passed upon William Bullock, who was—Convicted of the Murder of his Negro Slave." Both Peter Kalm and Benjamin Franklin declare that a master who killed his slave was liable to the death penalty; though Peter Kalm says that he does not know of an instance where the sentence was carried out.

He observes, however, that a case having arisen, even the magistrates secretly advised the guilty master to leave the city, since if he remained he must certainly be put to death.

Perhaps the most frequent and troublesome offense which negroes committed was running away. There is no doubt that for the most part they were well treated, but they did run away. They did not go off as frequently as white servants, but they left their masters almost as often as the cooks and servants of nowadays. Nearly every colonial newspaper contains advertisements for runaway slaves. Full descriptions are given in order that they may be identified. Most of the negroes had had the smallpox. Some had their teeth notched. One advertiser warns his readers that the runaway is a plausible liar, and may convince him that he is a free negro. Many characteristic details are mentioned. Mona is full of flattery. Cuff Dix is fond of liquor. James chews abundance of tobacco. Stephen has a "sower" countenance; Rachel a "remarkable austere countenance." Dick is much bandy legged. Violet is pretty, lusty, and fat. The clothes which they wear are carefully described. Cato had on "two jackets, the uppermost a dark blue half thick, lined with red flannel, the other a light blue homespun flannel without lining, ozenbrigs shirt, old leather breeches, yarn stockings, old shoes, and an old beaver hat." (*Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 5, 1748.) A typical advertisement for runaways, and one very interesting on its own account, is the following: "RUN away on the 13th of *September* last from *Abraham Lincoln* of *Springfield* in the County of *Chester*, a Negro Man named *Jack*, about 30 Years of Age, low Stature, speaks little or no *English*, has a Scar by the Corner of one Eye, in the Form of a V, his Teeth notched, and the Top of one of his Fore Teeth broke: He had on when he went away an old Hat, a grey Jacket partly like a Sailor's Jacket. Whoever secures the said Negro, and brings him to his Master, or to *Mordecai Lincoln*—shall have *Twenty Shillings* Reward and reasonable Charges." (*Pennsylvania Gazette*, October 15, 1730.) It was proved recently by Governor

Pennypacker that the Lincolns here mentioned were of the family from which descended the great Abraham Lincoln.

Runaways were frequently caught by the local authorities, who put them in jail, advertised for the masters to come and get them, and kept them until the masters came, or if they did not come, perhaps set them free.

For the most part the negro slaves of Pennsylvania were treated very well. Every traveller and every observer bears witness to this. Peter Kalm declares that they had as good food as the white servants, and Hector St. John Crèvecoeur says as good as their masters. The advertisements for runaways show that they were well clothed, beyond a doubt. The old household account books contain many items about slaves' clothing. "To 1 pr Shoes for the negro — 6" (shillings), says William Penn's *Account Book* for 1690. In 1764—5 Thomas Penn spent 7/7/3 for shoes for his slaves. A bill rendered by Christian Grafford to James Steel is as follows: "Making old Holland Jeakit & breeches fit for your Negero 0.3.0 Making 2 new Jeakits & 2 pair breeches of stripped Linen for both your Negeromans 0.14.0 And also for little Negero boy 0.4.0 Making 2 pair Leather breeches, 1 for James Sanders & another for your Negroeman Zeason 0.13.0" (*Pennsylvania Magazine*, XXXIII, 121.) As slaves in Pennsylvania were usually owned by well to do people with large houses, who had moreover only a few negroes, the slaves frequently lived in the same houses with their masters. The average number held was from two to four, though some of the colonists had many more. Jonathan Dickinson of Philadelphia at one time had thirty-two.

For the most part they were employed as house servants or farm hands, though a great many were engaged in trades of various sorts. There were negro bakers, bricklayers, carpenters, and shoemakers. Sometimes they were hired. William Penn and John Wilson frequently did this. As a rule, however, they are bought. The newspapers are filled with advertisements of negroes for sale. Perhaps these notices are not so trustworthy as when advertisers are try-



ing to find their runaway slaves, and are forced to tell the truth to facilitate the identification. The following is an excellent example: For sale "A likely young Negroe Wench, who can cook and wash well, and do all Sorts of House-work; and can from Experience, be recommended both for her Honesty and Sobriety, having often been trusted with the Keys of untold Money, and Liquors of various Sorts, none of which she will taste. She is no Idler, Company-keeper or Gadder abroad. She has also a fine, hearty young Child, not quite a Year old, which is the only Reason for selling her, because her Mistress is very sickly, and can't bear the Trouble of it." (*Pennsylvania Gazette*, April 2, 1761.)

When their work was over the negro slaves of Pennsylvania seem to have had some time of their own, which they were not too tired to enjoy. As always they were fond of music and singing. Frequently advertisements in the newspapers say that a negro took his fiddle when he ran away. Isaac Norris' *Letter Book* for 1719 contains the following: "Thou Knowest Negro Peters Ingenuity In making for himself & playing on a fiddle wth out any assistance as ye thing in ym is Innocent & diverting & may keep ym from worse Employmt I have to Encourage in my Service promist him one from Engld therefore buy & bring a good Strong well made Violin wth 2 or 3 Sets of spare Gut for ye Suitable Strings get sombody of skill to Chuse & by it." Sometimes they were given holidays and allowed to go off on visits. — "our Negro woman got leave to visit her children in Bucks County," says Christopher Marshall's *Remembrancer*, and a week later, "this afternoon came home our Negro woman Dinah." When fairs were held in Philadelphia as many as a thousand negroes sometimes gathered together for carousal and barbaric rejoicing.

Many efforts were made to care for the religious welfare of the slaves. It is said that Penn had a monthly meeting established for them in 1700, and the Friends always took a keen interest in this matter. The records of old Christ

Church show that many negroes were baptized, and some were married there. When William Macclanachan visited the city about 1760, he tells us that he called on "the Rev'd Mr. Sturgeon, *Catechist to the Negroes.*" Whitefield, who did wonderful missionary work in Pennsylvania about 1740, writes, "I believe near Fifty Negroes came to give me Thanks, under God, for what has been done to their Souls—Some of them have been effectually wrought upon, and in an uncommon Manner." Sometimes a negro preacher appeared. —"this afternoon," says Christopher Marshall in 1779, "a Negro man from Cecil County maryland preachd in orchard opposite to ours. there was Sundry people. they said he spoke well for near an hour."

As to marriage there was considerable laxity, though marriages were frequently performed. There was, however, much care taken to prevent the separation of families. The old bills of sale sometimes show that husband, wife, and children were all purchased together. An advertisement in the *Pennsylvania Packet*, August 22, 1778, says, "Wanted, Four or Five Negro Men—if they have families, wives, or children, all will be purchased together."

There is a great deal of evidence to show that negro slaves in Pennsylvania were treated most kindly. When sick they were nursed and cared for. The *Penn Papers* contain many items about medical attendance for negroes. A notice in Christopher Marshall's *Remembrancer* is suggestive: —"my Dear Companion—has really her hands full, Cow to milk, breakfast to get, her Negro woman to bath, give medicine, Cap up with flannels, as she is allways Sure to be poorly when ye weather is cold, Snowy & Slabby. its then She gives her Mistriss a deal of fatigue & trouble in attending on her." When negroes were too old to work they were generally provided for. Sometimes faithful slaves were remembered in the masters' wills.

Hence it may be seen that slavery in Pennsylvania was very mild. Indeed it was too mild to be perpetuated. Whenever men and women can treat their slaves as the

people of Pennsylvania treated them, they are living in an atmosphere inconsistent with the existence of slavery. Nothing then can preserve slavery but paramount economic needs. In Pennsylvania such considerations did not exist, and slavery was doomed. In 1780 the State legislature passed an act for gradual abolition. Pennsylvania has the proud distinction of being the first of the States thus to abolish slavery.