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THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY IN
PENNSYLVANIA.*

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Nowhere can the early history of the abolition of American slavery be studied to better advantage than in Pennsylvania. There appeared the first formal protest ever made against slave-holding in North America. There arose the first organized agitation against it. In Pennsylvania was founded the first and greatest of the abolition societies. In Pennsylvania was passed the first law to bring slavery to an end.

Negroes were brought into the colony by the earliest settlers. Cornelis Bom, the Dutch baker of Philadelphia, writes about them in 1684; Isaac Norris and Jonathan Dickinson both refer to them; from time to time William Penn speaks of them himself. Hardly had they been introduced, however, when opposition to slave-holding developed. This opposition arose among the Quakers, and had begun before Pennsylvania was founded. In 1671 George Fox, travelling in the West Indies, advised

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Friends to treat their negroes kindly, and to set them free after a certain time of servitude. Four years later William Edmundson asked how it was possible to reconcile with Christ's teaching the practice of holding slaves without hope or expectation of freedom.

Nevertheless there is no doubt that at first the Quakers were the principal slave-holders in Pennsylvania, and probably owned more negroes than any other people in the colony. But after a while some of them began to be troubled by conscientious scruples. In 1688 Pastorius and three associates, all of them German Quakers who had recently come to Pennsylvania and settled at Germantown, issued a memorable protest. In words of surpassing nobleness and simplicity they stated the reasons why they were against slavery and the traffic in men's bodies. Would the masters wish so to be treated? Was it possible for this to be in accordance with Christianity? What would the people of Europe think when they learned that in Pennsylvania men were dealt with like cattle? They desired to be informed whether Christian people could do such things. This was the first formal protest against slavery in any of the English colonies.

A little later, in 1693, George Keith and the Quakers who followed him published *An Exhortation & Caution To Friends Concerning buying or keeping of Negroes*, in which they declared that slavery was contrary to Christianity, and that masters ought to give their negroes freedom after some reasonable time. It is said that this was the first protest against slavery printed in North America.

For some time these protests seemed to have little effect, but after a while the results were seen. In 1693 the Yearly Meeting at Philadelphia advised against the importation of negroes, and urged Friends not to buy slaves unless they intended afterward to set them free. In 1712 the Meeting sought counsel from the Yearly Meeting at London about the importation of negroes.

The answer was that there might come a day when it would be found dangerous to have brought negroes into the country. The Meetings in Pennsylvania then advised against it, and the records show that by 1740 among Friends such importation had ceased.

Many people, especially the Friends, now desired to keep negroes out of the colony as far as possible. This they sought to accomplish by imposing a duty upon negroes imported. By a law of 1700 the duty was made twenty shillings. In 1712 it was raised to twenty pounds. The amount varied from time to time, numerous laws being passed until the outbreak of the Revolution.

In general they accomplished little because of the interference of the English government. Whenever the legislature made the duty high, the authorities in England immediately annulled the law, since they had no idea of allowing colonial assemblies to interfere with the slave-trade, then carried on by the government's protégé, the Royal African Company.

Accordingly negroes continued to be brought into Pennsylvania, but the opposition of Friends toward slavery gradually became more intense. Some of them resolved not only to oppose the importation of slaves but to try to bring slave-holding within the colony to an end. During the earlier years of the eighteenth century these feelings were not shared by all members of the Society, and there is evidence that many of them had no sympathy with the agitation. Isaac Norris writes of a Meeting that was well attended and comfortable. All would have gone well, he says, except that some Friends of Chester warmly urged the question of negroes. But he adds that matters were so managed that the affair was hushed up. In 1738, after Benjamin Lay had published his abolitionist book, *All Slave-Keepers—Apostates*, the Friends of Philadelphia inserted an advertisement in the *American Weekly Mercury* denouncing it. Not a few desired to keep the whole subject out of mind.

It proved impossible to do this. There now appeared a band of militant reformers, very much like Garrison and his comrades a century later, who demanded the entire and immediate abolition of slavery. The first of these was William Southbe, who in 1712 petitioned the provincial legislature to set free all the slaves. The Assembly replied that this was neither just nor convenient. Southbe was followed by Ralph Sandiford, who published in 1729 his *Mystery of Iniquity*, an impassioned protest against slavery. He had aroused such hostility that threats of violence were made against him if he circulated this book, yet he distributed it wherever he felt that it would be of use. One of the early entries in *Benjamin Franklin's Account Book* is "Ralph Sandiford Cr for Cash receiv'd of Benja Lay for 50 of his Books which he intends to give away . . . 10" (shillings). The work was carried on by this same Benjamin Lay, earnest but eccentric, who for years did all sorts of odd things in Philadelphia to arouse pity for negro bondmen.

It is not easy to say how much good this agitation did. It certainly aroused hostility for the time, but it kept the matter before the public, so that gradually some progress was made, and some negroes were set free.

The first case of manumission seems to have been when Lydia Wade of Chester County gave freedom to her slaves in 1701; though the first will of William Penn, made in the same year, says, "I give to . . . my blacks their freedom as is under my hand already" . . . , this to take effect after his death. It is known, however, that this will was superseded by another in which he did not mention his slaves. In 1717 the records of Christ Church show that a free negress was baptized there.

The freeing of slaves was probably checked by a law passed in 1725-6. "Whereas 'tis found by experience that free negroes are an idle, slothful people and often prove burdensome to the neighborhood and afford ill examples to other negroes," it was ordained that no

master should free his slaves without giving security of thirty pounds that he would see that the free negro did not become a charge to the community. William Rawle, president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, afterwards said, "Our Ancestors . . . for a long time deemed it policy to obstruct the Emancipation of Slaves and affected to consider a free Negro as a useless if not a dangerous being" . . . It should be remarked, however, that Peter Kalm, writing in 1748, declares that, "these free Negroes become very lazy and indolent afterwards."

In spite of this law the liberation of negroes was continued. In 1731 John Baldwin of Chester freed his negroes by will, and two years later Ralph Sandiford made all his slaves free. In 1742 Judge Langhorne freed more than thirty negroes; in 1746 Samuel Blunson manumitted his slaves at Columbia; while about the same time John Harris, the founder of Harrisburg, gave liberty to the faithful negro Hercules, who had saved his life from the Indians.

It was among the Friends, however, that the work was going forward most rapidly. They had already ceased importing slaves, and most of them no longer bought negroes; but now strenuous efforts were made to have Friends free the negroes they already possessed. It was not easy to get them to do this. Many believed that in not buying more slaves, and in treating well those whom they had, they were fulfilling all possible obligations. But some would not have it so. As Anthony Benezet said at a later time, "Perhaps thou wilt say, 'I do not buy any negroes: I only use those left me by my father.' But is it enough to satisfy your own conscience?"

In the Friends' Meetings, where the subject was now discussed more and more, the members determined to frown upon any further purchases of negroes, and in 1758 they took the all important step of advising that Friends should manumit their slaves. They resolved that this advice should be heeded, moreover, since it

was agreed that those Friends who persisted in owning negroes should not be allowed to participate in the Meetings. From this time on the old records frequently refer to slavery. In 1763 the *Chester Quarterly Meeting Minutes* report, "we are not quite clear of dealing in Negro's, but care is taken mostly to discourage it." Three years later they add, "clear of importing or purchasing Negro's."

To carry out this work visiting committees were appointed to go to slave-holders and persuade them to set their negroes free. These committees are as remarkable as anything in the history of slavery. Self-sacrificing people who had freed their own slaves, abandoned their interests and set out to persuade others to give negroes the freedom thought to be due them. In southeastern Pennsylvania there still remain old diaries, almost untouched for a century and a half, which bear witness of characters odd and heroic; which contain the record of men and women, sincere, brave and unconquerable, who united a crusader's zeal with the quiet mysticism of the dreamer. They undertook to persuade a whole population to give up its slaves. The most notable of them was John Woolman, but nowhere can the work be studied better than in the diary of James Moon, his fellow worker and apostle.

There is no doubt that the task was a difficult one. Again and again the writers speak of obstacles which they had to overcome. There were some owners whom they could not convince. A report about George Ragan in the *Abingdon Monthly Meeting Minutes* for 1761 says, "as to his Buying and selling a Negro, he saith he Cannot see the Evil thereof, & therefore cannot make any satisfaction, and as he has been much Laboured with by this mg to bring him to a sight of his Error, This mg therefore agreeable to a minute of our Yearly Mg can do no Less than so far Testify agst him . . . as not to Receive his Collections, neither is he to sit in our mgs for Discipline until he can see his Error." Some acknowledged

that slavery was wrong, and declared that they would never buy negroes again, but said that they must keep those whom they had. Some dismissed the visitors with obloquy and anger. But in the face of opposition, personal hostility, and many unpleasant happenings the visits were repeated and the arguments were continued until as a rule the reluctant masters yielded. If ever Christian work was carried on in the spirit of Christ it was when John Woolman, Isaac Jackson, James Moon, and their comrades put an end to slavery among the Friends of Pennsylvania.

The completion of this work was largely owing to the firmness with which the Monthly Meetings imposed the penalties which had been denounced. In 1761 the Chester Quarterly Meeting dealt with a Friend for having bought and sold a slave. In 1774 the Philadelphia Meeting resolved that Friends who held negroes beyond the age at which white apprentices were discharged, should be treated as disorderly persons. The work of abolition among the Quakers was practically completed in 1776, when the resolution passed that those who persisted in holding slaves should be disowned. Since in Meetings questions were rarely decided except by almost unanimous vote, it may be seen that the practice was nearly extinct. This was almost absolutely so by 1780. "No Slaves among us and such of their Offspring as are under our Care are generally pretty well provided for," say the *Records of Warrington Meeting* in 1788.

This wholesale private abolition of slavery by the Friends of Pennsylvania is one of those occurrences over which the historian may well linger. Adam Smith, who published his *Wealth of Nations* about this time, asserted that the Quakers had given freedom to their slaves because it did not pay to keep them; and this was substantially repeated by a Pennsylvania scholar some years ago. It might indeed seem that this is so, and that slavery in Pennsylvania was unprofitable. In a certain sense this

slavery was not profitable. There never arose in the colony any plantation system; there were no rice-swamps or cotton-fields with their troops of slaves, such as might be found in Virginia or South Carolina. But in Pennsylvania throughout the colonial period there was always a scarcity of domestic servants and farm-hands, and it was in just such occupations that the slaves there were employed. In this work their labor was always profitable, because it was very difficult to keep white servants, and because there were never as many such servants as were needed. Therefore the setting free of negroes did involve a distinct sacrifice. And this sacrifice was not forced through by any violent hostility, nor was it caused by a revolution. It was a result attained for the most part by calm, steady persuasion, and a desire to obey the dictates of conscience unflinchingly. Certainly there are few more striking examples of the triumph of principle and ideal righteousness over self-interest. It is doubtful whether any people but the Friends were capable of such conduct at the time.

All the while manumission had been going on more slowly among the other people of the colony. A great impetus was given by the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, when the men and women of Pennsylvania were stirred deeply by their struggle for freedom and independence. At the beginning of the war some of the citizens of Philadelphia petitioned the Legislature to pass a law making manumission easier. Many now began to believe that all negroes ought to be free. According to an old manuscript a slave at this time was set free because "all mankind have an Equal Natural & Just right to Liberty." By 1778 there was a widespread sentiment favoring legislative abolition. In 1779 a bill was drafted, but it took some time to get it through. Public feeling became thoroughly aroused. Petitions were sent to the Legislature, and several letters were published in the *Pennsylvania Packet*. Anthony Benezet,

a well known abolitionist, visited every member of the Legislature. At last, on March 1, 1780, the bill was enacted into a law. Pennsylvania was the first of all the States to pass a law for the abolition of slavery.

It was an "Act for the gradual Abolition of Slavery." It provided that those negroes already owned might be retained as slaves, provided that their masters registered them before November first. Otherwise they should be free. In the future no child born in Pennsylvania should be a slave. If after the passing of the act children were born of slave mothers they could only be held as servants, and until they were twenty-eight years old. Moreover the statute of 1780 abolished substantially all of the discriminations to which negroes had been subjected in colonial days. By a law passed in 1700 negroes were not to be tried in the ordinary courts but in special courts for them only. Because of this negroes had no jury trial between 1700 and 1780. By the same law their punishments were made somewhat different and somewhat heavier. This was now brought to an end. In 1726 intermarriage with white people was forbidden in the strongest possible manner. By the same act negroes were not allowed to meet together, and were subjected to a number of minor restrictions. All of these regulations affected free negroes as well as slaves. By the act of 1780 they were swept aside. Negroes were now put nearly upon a plane of equality with white persons.

In the eyes of those who desired the destruction of slavery the act of 1780 had two great faults: first, it was easily evaded; and, second, it was an act for gradual abolition only.

It was soon found possible to evade the act. Some Pennsylvanians openly kept up the slave-trade. As late as 1796 a German traveller declared, "great ships full of slaves frequently come over from Africa, especially to Philadelphia." Moreover some masters separated families and sold slaves out of the State, or sold the children

of slaves into other States, where these children remained slaves instead of becoming free when twenty-eight. Some even sent their pregnant female slaves south of the line in order that the offspring might be born in bondage.

These practices were soon attacked, and the Friends and the abolitionists spared no effort to get a new law enacted. Accordingly in 1788 the Legislature passed an act to enforce and explain the previous one. The births of negro children must now be registered; husband and wife were not to be separated without their consent; pregnant female slaves were not to be sent out of the State; and the slave-trade was forbidden under penalty of one thousand pounds.

The abolitionists felt, however, that the greatest objection to the act of 1788 was that it abolished slavery gradually, not outright and at once. Under this act there might be slavery in the commonwealth until the last slave had died or had been manumitted by his master. The Quakers and the abolitionists, forgetful of the fact that hitherto the destruction of slavery had been a very gradual process, extending through more than a century, demanded that the Legislature set free every slave immediately. This they sought to procure in two ways: they attacked slavery in the courts; and they besought the Legislature to pass a new act.

First they attacked the system in the courts. The declaration of rights in the State constitution of 1790 said that all men were born equally free and independent, and that they had an inalienable right to life and liberty. On this ground in 1792 a committee of the House of Representatives expressed an opinion that slavery was not only unlawful in itself, but repugnant to the State constitution. Seizing upon this point the abolitionists resolved to make a test. Therefore on a writ *de homine replegiando* they sued a master because he was in possession of a negro woman. This was the once famous case of *Negro Flora v. Joseph Graisberry*. Coming before

the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in 1795, it was not settled there, but was sent up to what was at that time the ultimate judicial authority in the State, the High Court of Errors and Appeals. The records of the case have been lost, but according to a notice in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* for February 3, 1802, this august tribunal at last decided that slavery had legally existed in Pennsylvania before the adoption of the constitution, and that it had not been abolished thereby.

Failing thus to destroy slavery, the abolitionists made renewed efforts to get the Legislature to bring it to an end. In 1793 the Friends petitioned the State Senate for complete abolition, and in 1799 they made an earnest appeal. About the same time citizens of Philadelphia petitioned, and curiously enough the negroes sent up a memorial asking that their brethren be set free, and offering to help pay the masters dispossessed. From this time on great numbers of petitions came to the Legislature, mostly from abolitionists and Friends. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society memorialized the Legislature year after year. At one time it seemed that something might be done. Many leading men took up the cause, and in 1811 Governor Snyder in his message referred to the galling yoke of slavery and the stain of it upon the commonwealth.

Yet in the end it was seen that the majority of the people of Pennsylvania believed that enough had been done, and desired that what little slavery remained should be extinguished by the working of the laws already in existence. It was found, then, impossible to get the Legislature to pass an act for immediate abolition. Frequently a bill was introduced for this purpose, but its supporters could never get it through. Sometimes it would pass the House and be lost in the Senate; sometimes it was introduced in the Senate, but lost in the House. The abolitionists did not lose heart, but after 1821 it was generally realized that the legislators would do nothing.

Meanwhile in order to do more effective work the opponents of slavery had built up an organization. In 1773 an Indian woman in Philadelphia asserted that she and her children were free. Israel Pemberton and other citizens became interested and fought for her freedom in the courts. She was presently adjudged a slave and taken away by her master, but the incident had made such a deep impression that an organization was formed to prevent such things in the future. Such was the origin of the first abolition society in the United States.

The Society was instituted in 1775, but did not really accomplish anything until its reorganization in 1784. After that time its work was effective and unceasing. Although the Society was new, its work was not very different from that which had been done previously. Most of its members were Friends who had long been opposing slavery. They were simply trying to gain strength by acting together. The official title of the body was "The Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, and for Improving the Condition of the African Race."

It carried on now some of the most aggressive work against slavery that had ever been seen in Pennsylvania. It was the Society which took a leading part in petitioning the Legislature to abolish slavery, and in trying to get the courts to declare slavery illegal. When it succeeded with neither courts nor Legislature, it tried to deal with individuals. Some it would persuade to set negroes free; others it would compel to do so.

In persuading owners to manumit their negroes the abolitionists encountered fewer obstacles than previously, since the value of slaves was less, and there was very generally a sentiment against holding them. Negroes now gained their freedom in a variety of ways. Sometimes they saved enough money to purchase their liberty. Some were freed by their masters on condition that they

should bind themselves to serve the masters for a certain number of years. An old record runs, "I, John Lettour from motives of benevolence and humanity . . . do . . . set free . . . my Negro Girl Agathe Aged about Seventeen Years. On Condition . . . that she . . . bind herself by Indenture to serve me . . . Six years." Sometimes philanthropists would help negroes to raise their purchase money. Among the items in an old manuscript in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania are the following: "John Head agrees to give him Twenty Shillings & not to be Repaid . . . John Benezet twenty Shillings . . . Christopher Marshall 7/6 . . . If he can raise with my Donation enough to free him I agree to give him three pounds & not otherwise I promise Saml Emlen jur . . . Joseph Pemberton by his Desire . . . £3." Sometimes one negro bought freedom for another. In 1787 negro Samson purchased his wife and children for ninety-nine pounds. There were not a few owners, however, who asked no money. In 1791 Caspar Wistar bought a slave for sixty pounds "to extricate him from that degraded Situation." Some set free their slaves by testament. Whenever this work could be furthered, whether by raising money to meet the master's demand, or by persuading him to set his negro free, the members of the Abolition Society spared no effort.

In the service of what they believed was so righteous a cause the abolitionists adopted more questionable methods. It was found after a while that the act of 1780 involved a great many intricacies and fine distinctions, and that compliance with it was so difficult that a master doing his best to obey the law might be at fault upon a technicality. For example the law required all slaves to be registered. After a while the courts decided that the record had to be made in certain form, and that where the slave had not been so recorded, he was legally free. It then appeared that a great many law-abiding men had not registered their negroes in the way approved, and

were liable to the loss of the negroes whenever this fact was discovered. To find such cases and to take advantage of technicalities the members of the Society spared no pains. They were unwearied in searching for careless records, and they employed the best lawyers to prosecute the cases.

Because of all these things, then, slavery in Pennsylvania declined rapidly. In 1780 it is probable that there were in the State about 10,000 negroes, of whom nearly 6,000 were already free. In 1790 the census of the Federal government showed that there were 3,737. According to later censuses there were 1,706 slaves in 1800; 795 in 1810; 211 in 1820; 67 in 1830; and in 1840, 64. After this time the enumerators do not record any, but it is said that James Clark of Donegal Township in Lancaster County held a slave as late as 1860. Long before this time the system had really passed away.

So in the history of her slavery Pennsylvania is seen to have been fortunate. Realizing at an early time the iniquity of slave-holding, her people strove so far as they could to check the importation of negroes. Then while others temporized and lamented, they acted, and brought slavery to an end. As they had opposed it quietly, so they abolished it without any violence or sudden transition. Upon the life of this commonwealth slavery was never able to make any lasting impression.