WASHINGTON COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA,
IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY
ANTISLAVERY MOVEMENT

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AMERICA and Europe in the last quarter of the eighteenth century were covered by a ramifying network of individuals and societies dedicated to the advancement of social reform. One of these causes was that of the abolition of the slave trade and slavery. Between the antislavery societies established in Philadelphia, New York, and other towns in America and those in London and Paris there was a constant exchange of information and encouragement. All were tied together by correspondence and by personal visits. Copies of Clarkson’s writings, for example, were sent by the London abolitionists to Philadelphia; the Philadelphians gathered some of the data which Wilberforce used in his attack on the English slave trade; and Brissot de Warville, of the French Société des Amis des Noirs, came to America with letters of introduction to the New York and Pennsylvania antislavery societies from the London organization.²

In the same way the American antislavery groups communicated with one another. For obvious reasons the Philadelphia society—officially the “Pennsylvania Society for the Relief of Free Negroes and others unlawfully held in Bondage”—was in every respect first: it considered itself and was in fact by all considered the directing head of the movement, the clearing house for the propaganda of antislavery in America. Other American societies, like those at Wilmington, Delaware, Richmond, Virginia, and Newport, Rhode Island, turned to the Philadelphia group for encouragement, advice, and assistance; and the Philadelphians did not fail to bind the outlying societies to themselves and to tie them into the

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whole fabric of the national and international antislavery movement. One of the lesser American societies which maintained such relations with the Pennsylvania Society was the Washington Society for the Relief of Free Negroes and others unlawfully held in Bondage, established at Washington, Pennsylvania, in 1789.

At the time of the passage of the act of 1780 for the gradual emancipation of slaves in Pennsylvania, slavery was fairly well rooted in the southwestern part of the state. In Washington County alone, for example, 155 slaveholders registered a total of 443 slaves in 1782. There were, of course, the usual cases of abuse of the blacks and, what made matters worse and brought them to a head, proximity to Virginia tempted masters to sell their Negroes illegally across the border, while the presence of an increasing number of free blacks in Pennsylvania was bait which drew kidnappers into the commonwealth to carry off Negroes into slavery. One of the Negroes thus seized was John, the slave of one Davis, who had become free upon the passage of the act of 1780, but had nevertheless been sent as a slave into Virginia. Subsequently he escaped and took refuge in Pennsylvania, but on May 7, 1788, he was seized and carried off again to Virginia. His case was unusual only in that it seems to have been the occasion for the formation of a society in western Pennsylvania to put an end to such violations of human rights and the laws of the commonwealth.

At any rate, three days later, on May 10, Alexander Addison, a member of the Washington County bar, sent a statement of the facts to his colleague and one-time law preceptor, David Reddick, then a member of the Supreme Executive Council at Philadelphia. Reddick turned the letter and accompanying documents over to the Pennsylvania Society;

3 The papers of the Pennsylvania Society for the Relief of Free Negroes are in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. They will be cited here simply as "Society, Minutes" or "Society, Ms. Collection." Society, Minutes, April 5, 1789, Ms. Collection, 1:248, 2:37; Elizabeth Donnan, "Agitation against the Slave Trade in Rhode Island, 1784–1790," in Persecution and Liberty: Essays in Honor of George Lincoln Burr, 481 (New York, 1931).


the Society appointed a committee; and the committee drafted a petition to the Council to take such steps as were necessary to "Restore this much Injured Person to his Freedom . . . Procure the Offenders to be Delivered up to the Insulted Laws of Pennsylvania afford an Examable to Deter Similar Outrages in future and Exibit a Renewed Instance of that Tenderness to the Just Claims of Humanity which has so much Distinguished the Laws & Counsils of Pensilvania."

In the confusion attending the change-over from government under the Articles of Confederation to government under the Constitution, with the consequent uncertainty concerning extradition and the rights and obligations of the states to one another, no action was taken in the case of John Davis. Meanwhile, however, certain citizens of Washington County, aroused by this case "and stimulated & directed by the example of the Pennsylvania Society," organized on February 7, 1789, the Washington Society for the Relief of Free Negroes and others unlawfully held in Bondage. The preamble of its constitution, quoting Romans 3:29 and Terence's *Homo sum. Humani nihil a me alienum futo*, set out its authors' motives: freedom and humanity, the laws of God and their country impelled them to this course. The provisions of the constitution were not remarkable, except that the requirements for membership were less strict than in the Pennsylvania Society. The Philadelphia people admitted no man who owned a slave, but the Washington Society required only "a known good character" and a reputation for having "the objects of the Association sincerely at heart." In addition, every member was expected "to inform the Society of all such negroes, or other persons, as he may know or suspect to be unlawfully detained in servitude."

This constitution was signed by eleven persons, who proceeded at once to elect officers. Those chosen were Thomas Scott, president; David Reddick, vice president; Alexander Addison, secretary; Absalom Baird, treasurer; and Addison and David Bradford, counsellors. Other members were John Hoge, Andrew Swearingen, William Wallace, Samuel Clarke, Amos Gregg, and James McCluney. Of these eleven it has been possible to learn something of all but Gregg. Five were Federalists and

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6 Society, Acting Committee, Minutes, 1784–88, 6mo. 4, 18, 1788.
7 The constitution was printed three consecutive weeks in the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, February 14, 21, 28, 1789. The copy sent to the Pennsylvania Society is preserved in its Ms. Collection, 1:244.
three were Democrats. Scott, Reddick, Addison, and Bradford were lawyers; Baird had been a surgeon in the Revolutionary army; Hoge, who laid out the town of Washington with his brother, and Swearingen and Wallace were large landowners; Clarke was a merchant and McCluney was listed in 1796 as a storekeeper. Most were thus prominent local citizens and all but two or possibly three of the eleven members of the Society held or were to hold county, state, or federal office. There seem to be no grounds to believe that they supported the cause of anti-slavery from other than religious convictions or liberal principles or both.

President Scott wrote immediately to the Pennsylvania Society to inform it of the formation of a new group dedicated to the cause of humanity and the enforcement of the laws of nature and of Pennsylvania and to request to share in the experience and information of the older and larger group. The latter society, thinking “that the publication of such an important declaration against Slavery, would be of service to our common cause, & not disagreeable to the authors,” directed that the constitution be sent to the papers for publication, ordered that a letter of greeting be sent to the Washington Society and directed that a dozen copies each of Clarkson’s Essay on the Impolicy of the Slave Trade, Warville’s Oration on the establishment of an antislavery society in France, and the constitution of the Pennsylvania Society be dispatched to Washington. Thus rejoicing in “the progress of humanity & Justice in a distant part of Pennsylvania,” the Philadelphia reformers welcomed a new star into the antislavery constellation.

This cordial welcome did not blind the Washington people to certain definite and immediate problems. In the first place, the case of John Davis remained unsettled. This prosecution, which the members of the Washington Society had initiated and by which, indeed, the Society itself had been called into being, must be carried to a successful conclusion if the Society was to be well and respectably established in its own community. The kidnappers had been indicted, thanks to the initiative of


10 Society, Minutes, 4 mo. 20, 1789, Letter Book, 2:11–14. Scott’s letter was printed in the Pittsburgh Gazette, May 16, 1789, as from the Philadelphia papers of April 30.
certain persons in Washington; but as the defendants had escaped with John to Virginia, the Washington people were dependent on the Pennsylvania Society at Philadelphia to present their plea to the governor to secure the return of the criminals to Pennsylvania. For more than two years the matter dragged on; no better suggestion seems to have been made by the Philadelphia group than that John should be encouraged to escape and return to the protection of the Pennsylvania courts. So foolish and helpless a proposal moved the Washington Society, through Addison, to an unmistakable rebuke. This induced the Pennsylvania Society to act: in 1791, accordingly, when the establishment of the new state and federal constitutions promised success, the Society presented a memorial setting forth the facts, asserting "that a Crime of deeper dye is not to be found in the Criminal Code of this State, than that of taking a Freeman, & carrying off with intent to sell him, & actually selling him as a Slave," and calling for the return of the Negro and of his kidnappers. Governor Mifflin accordingly did request the return of the kidnappers and their victim, but the governor of Virginia, to whom the request was put, raised objections; the federal government, though notified of the facts, was powerless; the case dragged on into 1792 and eventually came to nothing.

This initial failure was doubtless reflected in the membership rolls of the Society. The second problem before the Washington people was to increase their numbers. Not only were eleven men too few to carry on the work of antislavery in southwestern Pennsylvania, however extensive their contacts and high their zeal; but some of these eleven even began soon to fall away. The unpopularity of the cause cooled the ardor of some members and made prospective members stand aloof. "We have the prejudice of the people, the Disapprobation of the magistrates fals records and corrupt officers to contend with," one of the western antislavery workers wrote to James Pemberton, president of the Pennsylvania Society. A second cause of discouragement seems to have arisen from the difficulty, if not impossibility, of fitting the freed Negro for his freedom. In a kind of report to the Pennsylvania Society, written on December 6, 1790, Addison wrote in unmistakable terms:

11 Society, Minutes, 4mo. 30, 5mo. 30, 7mo. 4, 1791.
13 Society, Ms. Collection, 2:173.
With the best intentions, and in pursuit of the most laudable object, we seem to produce only practical mischief. Removing the fear of a master, the only restraint of which their debased and untutored minds were conscious, without being able to fix upon them the check of honour, the Laws or Religion; we loose them to unprincipled licentiousness, idleness and every concomitant vice. . . . We in freeing these unfortunate men from their human masters, seem to deliver them up to the control of Satan and their own Lusts, and make them more the children of Hell, than before they were of misery.

Such an opinion as this was probably not well received by the Quaker-dominated Pennsylvania Society, which had just instituted a program for the improvement of the Negroes. This opinion probably explains as well the reluctance of several Friends in near-by Fayette County to join the Washington Society. Although moved with a genuine concern for the Negroes, Samuel Larkson, James Crawford, Nathan Heald, and John Townsend only hesistantly and tentatively joined in the Society's work. These men served the cause of antislavery well, but they insisted on working in their own way, corresponding directly with James Pemberton and the Philadelphia people; and the Washington Society did not as a result receive the additional strength which the association of western Pennsylvania Friends would have given it.

The failure of the Pennsylvania Society in the John Davis case seems to have discouraged the Washington Society somewhat; while the absence of Friends from the direction of the latter group meant the lack of one bridge of cordial communication between the two groups. Nonetheless, the Philadelphia people maintained a solicitous, if formal, interest in the western group, offering it advice and encouragement as they could. On several occasions, for example, antislavery literature was sent up-state: in December, 1789, James Pemberton sent an assortment of seventeen titles, most of them, as he explained, part of a shipment just received from London; and a year later another packet of pamphlets from London and Paris was dispatched to Washington.\(^\text{15}\) Again, the Philadelphians warned the westerners that the increasing migrations to Kentucky would be accompanied by an increase in the number of slaves and by the practice of carrying off Negroes by violence.\(^\text{16}\) Finally, the Pennsylvania Society sought the concurrence of the Washington Society in its address to Congress in 1790. On October 25 of that year James Pemberton, on behalf of the Philadelphia group, sent to all the antislavery societies in the

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country a circular letter suggesting that they send to it to be laid before Congress memorials that Congress use what powers it had to alleviate the horrors of the slave trade, and that, for the sake of lending weight to the cause, the memorials be phrased in something the same manner. The Washington Society forwarded such a memorial, although Addison expressed the Society's feeling that it was not within the power of Congress to act on the trade, that the Washington people did not know really what evils existed, and that they were not proper persons to make such an appeal. 17

The Philadelphia reformers also maintained contacts with the Fayette County Quakers. Heald and Larkson thought they detected a flaw in the manner of recording slaves under the terms of the fifth article of the act of 1780 and wrote to Philadelphia to inquire whether every expression of the law must be complied with. They were not a little disappointed to receive James Pemberton's opinion that minor variations from the expressed form were probably valid. They sent to Philadelphia to serve the purposes of the Pennsylvania Society the information that probably upwards of a hundred Negroes had been taken or sent to Kentucky or New Orleans between 1788 and 1790. Finally, lamenting that "there is much more to do which seems hardly likely to be Done as we have got so weak," these western Pennsylvania Quakers expressed the hope that the Washington Society might in some way be assimilated with the Pennsylvania Society, that it might share the respectability and energy which the act of incorporation had given to the latter group. 18

The two Societies corresponded less frequently after 1790. An exception was a long letter from Addison, now judge of Washington County, to James Pemberton, dated January 1, 1793, which suggested that an address be presented to the legislature on behalf of a law to protect negro slaves or servants from masters who abused them or failed to provide for them. The slave or servant, he suggested, ought to be empowered to institute suit against the master. If the master was adjudged by a jury to have been abusive or negligent, the slave or servant was to be sold to another, the slave or servant indicating the person to whom he wished his person or time transferred. Such a law, Addison felt, was simply the next logical step in a course which humanity pointed to and reason and experience approved. If any should raise the objection that such a law would

violate the right of property, he would reply that this right in men ought never to have existed, that it ought not be tolerated but destroyed, and that, for his part, he considered “slaveholders as a trading corporation who from false principles, frauds, and misconduct have brought confusion into their affairs, and distress on the community.” They were, therefore, no longer to be trusted with the complete management of their own property. “The voice of Pennsylvania has already stampt a strong sanction on this idea.”

The Pennsylvania Society formally acknowledged receipt of the letter. James Pemberton, however, was reluctant to press for new laws: the Society’s view was now “rather in favor of endeavouring to obtain for the much injured Blacks the rights to which the Constitution has declared all men in the State are unexceptionably intituled . . . .”

When Judge Addison wrote this letter on New Year’s Day, 1793, the Washington Society was moribund. At the end of the year, at the request of the New York antislavery society, it appointed a delegate to the general meeting of abolition societies to be held at Philadelphia in January, 1794; and the next year it appointed three of its members for the same purpose. These acts seem to have been its last. Thus unceremoniously the Society perished and passed out of the antislavery movement, so completely, indeed, that when a new antislavery movement was launched in Washington County in 1824, not even the memory of it seems to have survived. Distance from Philadelphia, inadequate membership, the absence of Friends from its councils all affected it adversely. Nonetheless, poor and ineffective though it seems to have been, in the few years that it existed—it cannot be said to have flourished—the Washington Society for the Relief of Free Negroes and others unlawfully held in Bondage did secure the release of some blacks entitled to freedom, did supply information for the propaganda of antislavery, and did constitute one of the lesser stars in that galaxy of social reform which was one of the distinguishing characteristics of the late eighteenth century in Europe and America.

20 Society, Minutes, 4mo. 1, 1793, Letter Book, 2:103–104.