REFORM AND REVOLUTION: THE MOVEMENT AGAINST SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE IN REVOLUTIONARY PENNSYLVANIA

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The debates between Great Britain and its American provinces, culminating in independence and the establishment of the new United States of America, fed reform impulses that profoundly affected both slavery and the slave trade. While it is true that most blacks came out of the revolutionary era occupying the same status as before — that of slaves — the weakening of slavery in the region north of the Chesapeake represented a significant gain. The survival of slavery in the states south of the Mason-Dixon line and the reopening of the slave trade in South Carolina and Georgia in the 1790s should not blind us to the progress toward abolition achieved in the northern states. Between 1780 and 1804 every northern state began the process of eliminating the institution of slavery. This was accompanied by enactments that curtailed the foreign slave trade.¹ Thus it was in the last quarter of the eighteenth century that the sectional division over slavery, later to be so critical in shaping national development, first became apparent.

In no colony or state was the antislavery impulse as powerful or as productive as in Pennsylvania. Culminating in an inspired drive to end slavery and the slave trade, Pennsylvania had long been the scene of a vigorous movement against both institutions. Within six years of the establishment of the colony, a group of Germantown residents had declared that Negroes "ought to be delivered out of ye hands of ye robbers, and set free." In his published essay of 1693, George Keith had urged members of the Society of Friends who owned blacks to set them at liberty once the master was repaid in labor for the cost of purchase. Both Ralph Sandiford and Benjamin Lay condemned per-

¹ For general discussions of the progress of abolition in the North see Arthur Zilversmit, The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North (Chicago, 1967), and Edgar J. McManus, Black Bondage in the North (Syracuse, 1973), 160-79.

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petual human bondage as well as the slave trade in their published tracts.4

The Society of Friends spearheaded the drive against slavery and the slave trade. With few exceptions the earliest American protests against these institutions were composed by Friends, most of whom were residents of the Pennsylvania area.3 First working within the Yearly Meeting to end participation by Friends in the slave trade, Quakers went on to try to limit the purchasing of slaves brought in by others. Then came an effort near the middle of the eighteenth century to discourage slave holding among Friends. This latter effort, like previous aspects of the movement, did not result immediately in success. Rather, the drive to end slavery in Pennsylvania extended over several decades, not finally winning legislative support until 1780. And for many years thereafter blacks continued to be held as slaves in Pennsylvania.

Still, it is clear that attacks on slavery and the slave trade increased in tempo after 1750. Religious considerations advanced since the time of the Germantown Protest in 1688 were now combined with natural-rights arguments that gained additional strength from their application by Americans to the emerging conflict with the English. Not unexpectedly, Quakers provided the leadership in the final abolitionist surge which triumphed in the manumission of their own Negroes, the abolition of slavery in Pennsylvania, and the termination of the Negro slave trade. The Society's influence in these matters, both at home and abroad, was important.4

At the Yearly Meeting of 1758 — the same session which determined that Friends who continued to buy, sell, or keep Negroes

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2 Minutes of Philadelphia and Burlington Yearly Meeting (1681-1746), 19-20, Department of Records, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 302 Arch St., Philadelphia (hereafter cited as PYM); George Keith, An Exhortation & Caution to Friends Concerning Buying or Keeping of Negroes, reprinted as "The First Printed Protest Against Slavery in America," in the Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 13 (1889): 265-70; Ralph Sandiford, A Brief Examination of the Practice of the Times (Phila., 1729), 27-28; and Benjamin Lay, All Slave-keepers that keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates . . . (Phila., 1737), 23.

3 See Thomas E. Drake, Quakers and Slavery in America (New Haven, 1950).

might be disciplined — it was suggested that Quakers who held slaves should “sett them at Liberty, making a Christian Provision for them according to their Ages.” The Yearly Meeting went further; in order that Friends might be “generally excited to the practice of this Advice,” a committee was appointed to call on those who kept slaves. Approved as members of the committee were John Woolman, John Churchman, John Sykes, John Scarborough, and Daniel Stanton, while “Elders” and other “Faithful Friends” in each Quarterly Meeting were directed to accompany and assist them. Though many Friends continued in later years to buy and sell Negroes, the Yearly Meeting of 1758 marks the beginning of the final phase of the Quaker movement against the slave trade and slavery.

Exactly what the committee appointed in 1758 was to do is not made clear in the minute adopted by the Yearly Meeting; evidently committeemen were to encourage Friends to consider their motives in holding slaves and, in this way, raise the issue whether enslaved blacks should be granted their freedom. John Woolman worked diligently as a committee member and recorded in his journal that his task was to conduct a “close enquiry . . . in regard to the righteousness of their motives who detained Negroes in their service that impartial justice might be administered throughout.” Within a matter of weeks of his appointment, Woolman, in company with Stanton and Scarborough, was visiting “Friends who had slaves.” It soon became apparent, however, that if the aim was to remove the blight of slavery, such a goal would not be easily achieved. After several journeys to call on Quakers who kept slaves, Woolman wrote that “Some whose hearts were rightly Exercised about them [Negroes] appear’d to be glad of our visit, and in some places our way was more difficult . . . .” Not easily discouraged, he persisted in his efforts. Early in 1759 he visited “Some of the more active members in our Society at Philada. who had Slaves,” and the following summer he continued the work, going alone to the homes of slave-owners because he had not the “Oportunity of the Company of Such who were nam’d on the minutes of the Yearly Meeting.”

The Yearly Meeting, perhaps less optimistic than Woolman and more cognizant of the obstacles confronting a full-scale abolitionist

5 Minutes of PYM (1747-79), 121.
policy, reported in 1760 with evident satisfaction that the attempt to
discourage the practice of making slaves of Negroes "hath been visibly
blessed with Success." There was, of course, still much work to be
done, but the Yearly Meeting believed that if the issue were carefully
and honestly pursued, "the Society will, in Time," end slavery among
Friends. Members were urged to "continue in the Love which beareth
long, and is kind, to labour with such, as having Membership with us,
in any Manner, by buying, selling or keeping them [Negroes], counte-
nance the [slave] Trade." 8

The London Yearly Meeting gradually had veered in the direc-
tion of opposing enslavement of Negroes, and its epistles on this topic
no doubt lent support to the Philadelphia Meeting. In a widely cir-
culated epistle of 1758 the London Meeting had declared that it did
"fervently warn all in Profession with us, that they be careful to avoid
being any way concerned, in reaping the unrighteous Profits arising
from that iniquitous Practice of dealing in Negroes and other Slaves
. . . . We therefore can do no less than, with the greatest Earnestness,
impress it upon Friends every where, that they endeavor to keep
their Hands clear of this unrighteous Gain of Oppression." Friends in
Pennsylvania noted with approval the assistance given by the London
Yearly Meeting and thanked Friends in England for their now un-
equivocal stand.9

Four years after its creation in 1758, the committee appointed to
pursue abolition among Friends requested that it be disbanded and its
members discharged. This was done, although the Yearly Meeting by
no means considered the work of freeing slaves complete. Friends
were asked to continue the "necessary Care in this matter which is
generally agreed upon to be of great importance." In 1765 the Yearly
Meeting repeated this advice — that individual Friends labor to the
end that slaves might be freed. Referring to the freeing of slaves as
"Righteous Work," Negroes were termed a people "who by an un-
warrentable Custom, are unjustly deprived of the common Privileges
of Mankind." 10

8 Minutes of PYM (1747-79), 148.
9 Ibid., 174-75; The Epistle from the Yearly Meeting, Held in London,
by Adjournments, from the 15th Day of the Fifth Month 1758, to
the 20th of the same inclusive, Friends Falls Monthly Meeting Papers
(1696-1763), No. 213, Gilbert Cope Collection, Historical Society of
Pennsylvania (hereafter cited as HSP). There had been occasions, earlier
in the century, when the London Meeting was much more cautious in the
position which it took regarding slavery and the slave trade. See
Minutes of PYM (1681-1746), 147-48, 163.
10 Minutes of PYM (1747-79), 172-73, 218.
Chester Quarterly Meeting, rejoicing that at last Friends seemed to be waking to the fundamental issue of enslaving blacks, entered into the movement with vigor and a sense of purpose. That meeting remarked in 1767 on the inconsistency of Friends who owned slaves and who said they were used well “& yet kept in perpetual Bondage without any hopes of Liberty.” Besides encouraging Quakers to treat their slaves kindly, Chester Quarterly asked that “further justice be done them,” that is, that Negroes be released from slavery. Members of Chester Quarterly visited Friends who kept Negroes in 1769 with “some good effects, There being a prospect of friends getting [sic] more clear of the Practice of keeping them as slaves.”

Various methods were used when freeing Negroes. Later on, manumission was most common, but in the 1760s, before the movement to liberate blacks gained a wide following, many worked out other arrangements. Benjamin Mifflin allowed his Negro man Cuff to purchase his freedom for £60 “if he can raise the Money having Repeatedly refused from Others Seventy Five Pounds & Upwards for him.” Cuff eventually attained his freedom, after receiving the necessary sum from “Sundry well disposed people,” including contributions of £32 raised by John Pemberton, £3 from John Mifflin, and £2 from Mary Ashmead.

Despite handicaps, some freed Negroes confirmed the faith placed in them by abolitionists, earning for themselves respectable positions in society. R. Wood described the rise of one Negro who had gained his freedom about 1770. “When I was up at thy House,” Wood wrote to John Parish many years later:

I promised to write to thee concerning a negro case we was talking about — Should have wrote some time back but could not get an opportunity to see & converse with him untill last first day. I had a few minutes with him & inquired concerning his emigration, freedom, purchase of his wife & children &c. His name is Sampson — was imported from Guinea as he suppose at the age of thirteen or fourteen years, was sold at Barbadoes, from thence to Philadelphia, from there to Cape May, & then moved up to Cumberland County where he now resides. He informed me he was upwards of thirty years old when his master freed him, he has since that period purchased his wife & two children, gave ninety nine pounds for them — since he has purchased his wife & children as above, he had six more & two at one birth. They have brought up their children reputedly. He has bought seven or eight acres of pretty good land, has built a comfortable home.

11 Minutes of Chester Quarterly Meeting (1683-1767), p. 400, contained in two different volumes, one paged, the other unpaged, 1768-1812 unpaged, Oct. 8, 1768, Oct. 14, 1769, PYM (hereafter cited as Chester QM). For Chester Quarterly’s leadership in early antislavery efforts see Wax, 156.

12 Certificate signed by John Ashmead, Dec. 5, 1769, and Manumission Certificate signed by John Mifflin, n.d., both in Manumissions File, Miscellaneous Collection, HSP.
House on it. I suppose the House & Land cost him one hundred & fifty pounds. He informed me he was clear of debt — has a Horse, Cattle, Farmers utensials [sic] & all necessary household furniture.13

Hoping to induce more manumissions, residents of Chester County in 1769 proposed a program to finance the care and support of freed Negroes. They acknowledged their acquaintance with the laws of the province concerning slaves and free Negroes but believed that in some instances the laws were inadequate.14 There was, for example, the case “where Masters of aged and infirm Slaves become insolvent, and not able to maintain them, or die poor, such Slaves must necessarily become burdensome to others.” These citizens of Chester also believed that a burden could be placed on the public when Negroes were freed and the required security paid, for, they asserted, “such Sum will not support them any long Time in old Age, or under such Infirmitities as disable them from Labour . . . .” The solution to these miscarriages was a “proper Fund,” which, incidentally, “would also remove a Difficulty concerning their Maintenance in old Age, &c. from the Minds of such as are inclined to set their Slaves free.” In place of the £30 security required by the act of 1726, it was suggested that a smaller sum, not specified, could be paid “by the Masters of such Slaves as shall be set free at a suitable Age.” In addition, a small yearly tax would be placed on free Negroes and slaves “and the Money put to Interest under the Care of the County-Commissioners, or any others that may be thought most proper.” If this program were adopted, it was said, then “it seems probable . . . that such a Stock would in a Short Time be sufficient to support all the necessitous Negroes belonging to this Province, that are not otherwise provided for.” While legislative support for this program was found wanting, the proposal anticipated the progress that would be achieved within the next few years.15

Both slavery and the slave trade were crumbling in the years just prior to the American Revolution, even though serious obstacles had yet to be overcome before the Negro would cease to be a chattel. Although the number of Negroes imported into Pennsylvania was small and was growing even smaller, the concept of the Negro as

property was still current and was made manifest in the domestic
deal. Indeed, "agents from the Southern Provinces" were said to be
employed in roaming the province and the city of Philadelphia, pur-
chasing all available able-bodied slaves. To make their presence known,
these agents had given out public advertisements announcing their en-
terprise.\textsuperscript{16} For reformers, therefore, the cause of abolition seemed
frustrated by countless difficulties — inertia, self-interest, and a whole
way of thinking about the place of the black man in a white man's
civilization. Only occasionally given to outright pessimism, Anthony
Benezet wrote in 1773 that the achievement of justice for the Negro
was complicated by "the fear of displeasing the great ones of the earth,
on the one hand, and on the other suffering a selfish disposition, the
desire of ease, and a want of feeling for the miseries of our fellow
men . . . ." \textsuperscript{17} Another observer, although encouraged by seemingly
hopeful signs, commented on the same barriers to achieving abolition
among Friends in Pennsylvania:

there seems an Awaking from the Lethargy ye People have been in respg their
keep ye Slaves in Bonde it may continue & increase so yt some Stop may be
put to this grievous Oppression, & for frds. in particular I fervently desire they
may be enabled to take such Steps as Truth will own tods cleansg the Camp
from this Lepresy. It seems to me doubtful whether the [practice?] of settg them
Free will fully Ans. the End, the Diff. all [unreadable] it & reasonable Ob-
jections to doing it undr many Circumstances shd be duly consid. & will necessari-
ly have so much weight, that where self Int. or [unreadable] Love of Gain is
thrown with them into the Scale I fear that any Conclusions of that kind will be
attend. only by a few of honest hearted Individuals, yet as it is wt. certainly must
be done if we live by the Golden Rule of dog, as we wd. be done unto . . .
but it seems [unreadable] in my mind that the 1st Step which it is practicable
immy. to take, & which will if obsd. be at pes. [present?]: the most effectual

\textsuperscript{16} Anthony Benezet to Granville Sharp, Apr. 1, 1773, Granville Sharp Received
In an earlier communication to Sharpe, Benezet had written that "House
Negroes, Born in this Province, being often, when under the displeasure
of their owners, to be Sold cheaper here, than from on board the Guinea
Ships, for which purpose the Southern people have one or more Agents,
who are frequently advertising they are ready to buy all Negroes, who are
proposed for Sale, if but able to work, their other qualities they are not
concerned about . . . .", Feb. 18, 1773, ibid. Notices appeared frequently
in local newspapers in 1772 and 1773 requesting Negro slaves, and it was
to these that Benezet apparently was referring. William Ibison, a broker,
for example, announced that he wanted "a parcel of young NEGROE
MEN, provided they are hearty and sound, all other faults will be no
objection." Another advertisement stated a need for several Negroes,
"Boys, Girls, Men and Women, from 12 to 25 years old." Still another
notice asked for "A FEW hearty young NEGROE MEN, who have been
used to Country work, and are sober and industrious." See Pennsylvania
Gazette, Sept. 23, 1772, Apr. 21, Oct. 20, 1773.

\textsuperscript{17} Benezet to Granville Sharp, Feb. 18, 1773, Granville Sharp Received Letter
Book.
Ban is to prohibit any undr. our Name from buyg any more Slaves wn. impd. or Such as are born in ye Country, this is now a rule pretty well obsd. here ...

Quaker failure to manumit slaves was not always the result of failing to perceive “the Truth” but, rather, was due to special, often uncontrollable, circumstances. Benezet believed that Friend Samuel Nottingham was “rather to be pitied than blamed” for his inability to free his slaves. Apparently married to a non-Quaker, or to a Quaker who refused to free her slaves, Nottingham was unable to comply with the Society’s recommendations. Benezet wrote that he had “often con-

fcrered with him on the subject of his or rather his wife’s negroes; the many rubs he has received on that account in these parts, Even in public meetings I apprehend makes him more shy of spending as much time amongst us as he otherwise would.” Inhabitants of Philadelphia stated in 1776 that while “setting Negroes at Liberty” was a “humane and commendable” practice, it was inhibited by the high security re-

quired by the colony’s laws.

Speculation and discussion about the Negro’s ultimate fate con-
tinued among both serious-minded abolitionists and more disinterested observers. No more than a few, however, thought the matter through carefully enough to formulate a complete program. Signing himself “Anti-slavetrader,” one writer in 1768 proposed a final solution of the Negro question, but only after taking his fellow citizens to task for having countenanced the slave trade. “The flame [of liberty] has spread far north and south, and every breast now pants for Liberty,” he exclaimed. Man was by nature free and was bound by no laws that lacked his consent; fundamental liberties were as valuable to a man as his life, and the latter would surely be risked in defense of the former. But over the land there stalked a specter, and “with ratling chains, and thund’ring voice he cries aloud — ’tis false, ye hypocrites, ’tis false; ye’re all my creatures, and my name is Slavery.” How could Americans avoid the charge of base hypocrisy, asked “Anti-slave-

trader”:

Let every government on the continent, and in the islands, absolutely prohibit the importation of slaves; let a joint petition go home to his Majesty, to grant some of the ceded lands to the southward, for a Negro colony; and let every black that shall henceforth be born amongst us, be deemed free, and sent thither at a suitable age, at the expense of government. — One step further would be to

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18 Unsigned letter to Edward Stabler, Phila., May 7, 1767, Cox, Parrish, Wharton Papers, 12, HSP.
19 Benezet to Moses Brown, May 5, 1774 (copy), Letters of Anthony Benezet, Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library (hereafter cited as HCL); Pa. Archives, 8: 7452.
emancipate the whole race, restoring *that* liberty we have so long unjustly detained from them; and transport them to a land, where, under proper regulations, they might become a useful and valuable colony to Great-Britain . . . .

Directing his attention primarily to the slave trade in 1773, Benezet, nevertheless, was formulating ideas about the eventual disposition of the Negro. He was attracted to the area — "that vast extent of country" — between the Allegheny Mountains and the Mississippi River, where he believed many Negroes could be settled among the white people. Demonstrating his understanding of the problem, he asserted that:

whenever a manumission of the bulk of the Negroes takes place, the thought of settling them in a body, by themselves, will be found as impossible, as it would be dangerous both to black & whites . . . . The only rational, safe & just expedient both natural & religious would, I think, be that they be mixed amongst the whites, & by giving them a property amongst us, make them parties & interested in our welfare & security.

In 1774 Bucks Quarterly Meeting asked the Yearly Meeting to clarify its position on freeing slaves, particularly in the case where a member "shall dispose of, or part with a Negro Slave by giving him or her to another Person without any other Consideration, but clearing their Estates of any future Incumbrance, the Negro remaining in the State of Slavery the same as before." Many Friends were consulted and a "solid Conference" was held before preparing a report on the subject that would accurately convey the feelings of the majority. A committee report, accepted by the Yearly Meeting and recommended to the several Quarterly and Monthly meetings, stated that when Friends gave away, or transferred, slaves solely to clear their estates of incumbrances, or acted in such a manner as to continue their bondage, then they were to be admonished and testified against. The report adopted by the Yearly Meeting stated that Friends who acquired such blacks:

ought to be speedily treated with in the spirit of true Love & Wisdom, and the Inquity of their Conduct laid before them; and if after this Christian Labour, they cannot be brought to such a Sense of their Injustice as to do every Thing which the Monthly Meeting shall judge to be reasonable and necessary for the restoring such Slave to his or her natural and just right to Liberty, and condemn their Deviation from the Law or Righteousness and Equity to the Satisfaction of the said Meeting, that such Member be testify'd against, as other Transgressors are by the Rules of our Discipline for other immoral, unjust & reproachful Conduct.

21 Benezet to John Pothergill, Apr. 28, 1773 (copy), Letters of Anthony Benezet.
The same report went on to call attention to the large number of Negroes still held as slaves by Quakers, urging "a Speedy & close Labour" with these members in an effort to end slaveholding among Friends. The genesis of a new policy was bound up in the statement that when members refused to free their slaves they should no longer "be employed in the Service of Truth" — that is, they were made subject to disownment by the Society.\(^23\)

The Yearly Meeting had now endorsed a policy calling for the abolition of slavery within the ranks of the Society. Taking heart from this official pronouncement, Quaker abolitionists turned to their task with increased vitality. Committees were formed at the level of the Quarterly and Monthly meetings and immediately began pushing for the freeing of all slaves. There had been many manumissions before 1775, but the rate at which Negroes were freed subsequently entirely overshadowed the manumissions of the previous period. Persistent, yet understanding, Quaker abolitionists met with a good deal of success.

The first manumissions recorded in the Abington Monthly Meeting Manumission Book are dated March 7, 1775; Sara Titus of Bybury and Isaac Bolton of Southampton are listed as having manumitted a Negro man and a Negro woman respectively. Between that date and the end of 1777, twenty-six separate manumissions are recorded by Abington officials. It is significant that approximately one-half of these manumitted blacks were children rather than adult Negroes. Consequently, they did not immediately receive their freedom; males continued to serve, usually until age twenty-one and females until age eighteen. Thus on April 30, 1776, the Boltons of Southampton agreed to manumit two Negro children, a boy and a girl, though neither would actually be free until December 1793, when the girl reached the age of eighteen. The boy, who was to serve until age twenty-one, would be freed in December 1794. One or two of the manumissions recorded in the Abington Manumission Book related to Negroes freed some years earlier. For example, Thomas Townsend stated that his Negro man had been freed fourteen years before (in 1763) — this because he had grounds for believing the manumission papers lost.\(^24\)

Reviewing the work that had been done in 1775, the Yearly Meeting concluded that a "considerable Number" of Negroes received their

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 314-15.
\(^{24}\) Abington Monthly Meeting Manumission Record, 6, 20-22, HCL.
liberty as a result of Friends' labors. Rather than resting on their successes, however, the consensus was that "Friends manifest a Concern for further proceeding in this weighty Service . . . ." The year 1776 was one of the most active for Quaker abolitionists; working through committees and employing persuasion, they called on their brethren who yet held slaves. When the returns were in and the accomplishments, as well as the reversals, known, the task awaiting Quaker abolitionists came more sharply into focus.

In its report of August 3, 1776, presented to the Yearly Meeting late the next month, Philadelphia Quarterly Meeting stated that in visits with those who held slaves it had found "many who are possess'd of these poor Captives, manifesting a commendable Willingness to comply with the Advice, & Judgement of the Yearly Meeting." Of these, enough were sufficiently in sympathy with the Quaker program to put their hands to written instruments guaranteeing the freedom of 116 slaves — "being Blacks, & Mulattos of various Ages." There was the suggestion, however, that a sizeable number were children who would continue to serve until reaching the ages of twenty-one for males and eighteen for females. Besides the 116 slaves, a note appended to Philadelphia's report stated that an additional nine slaves were granted their freedom between August 3 and September 23, 1776 — making for a grand total of 125 Negroes freed. For all of these, manumissions were carefully recorded so that the future security of the Negroes would be guaranteed.26

This, in the eyes of the Quakers, was a commendable record, and Philadelphia Quarterly seemed to submit it with pride and satisfaction. Successes, however, were balanced against the failures and the extent of the task still to be performed. The report continued by saying that some Friends had not responded to their urgings:

among whom there are some whom we have still hopes, by a Repition [sic] of Endeavours may be prevailed with to release them [slaves]; but there are others who notwithstanding our repeated Labour continue to with-hold from their just, & natural Right to Liberty, and we have not at present a Prospect that our further Visits will be acceptable, or useful to them, tho most of them acknowledge themselves to be convinced of the Injustice of the Practice of dealing in Slaves, and that Friends Testimony Agst. it is well founded, yet advance many weak Excuses for detaining those they have of them in Bondage.27

Bucks Quarterly Meeting, while stating that some Friends had been prevailed upon to free their Negroes and had actually done so,  

25 Minutes of PYM (1747-79), 330.  
26 Ibid., 344-46.  
27 Ibid.
closed its summary report by specifying Quaker objections to freeing slaves — what Philadelphia Quarterly had termed the "weak Excuses." It was recognized that masters who refused to free old and infirm Negroes were perhaps exhibiting thoughtful discretion, for, they asked, would it not be unkind to turn slaves out to fend for themselves in their old age. On the other hand, motives of some Friends appeared to be from "Views of temporal Gain, & Self Interest." What other conclusion could be drawn, they queried, when the slaves were obviously capable of supporting themselves as free men.28

Members of Chester Quarterly Meeting, referring to the advice of the Yearly Meeting, had in January 1776 appointed a committee to labor against the keeping of Negroes in bondage. Three months later, however, the committee announced it had "not done much therin since last Meeting." At the last quarterly meeting in 1776 the committee could report some work done and some slight progress. Certain Friends had set their slaves at liberty and others, owners of young Negroes, had signed manumissions freeing them when they should reach legal age. But, like the committees of both Bucks Quarterly and Philadelphia Quarterly, the committee from Chester saw considerable cause for restraining its optimism. Diverse Friends were said to keep their Negroes in bondage for reasons the committee thought were best described as "with views of Temporal gain" and who, moreover, disputed the right of their fellow Quakers to interfere in their private lives. To these adamant Friends the committee members believed they had "discharged their duty." Others raised the question of the dangers that would incur to their estate should the slaves they set free "not take due care to provide for themselves and families." A further problem was the length of service which could reasonably be expected from children who were to be freed at a later date; some slaveowners, according to the Chester committee, were in favor of keeping them in bondage to age twenty-four, others to age twenty-five, "and some even to Twenty Eight Years." Perhaps most reprehensible to the committeeemen was the insistence of some Friends on "their slaves paying them large Sums of money to indemnify their Estates from supposed future incumbrance, which has been required even of some who have been kept Slaves to an advanced Age." 29

The labors of the committee representing Bucks Quarterly Meeting illustrates the methods used by Friends when pursuing their

28 Ibid.
29 Minutes of Chester QM, 1768-1812, unpaged, Jan. 13, Apr. 12, Oct. 12, 1776.
abolitionist goal and also indicates the degree of success attained. The Bucks Quarterly committee first met on March 7, 1776, and continued to meet and labor with Friends until February 19, 1785. During this time committee members visited at least twenty-six different slaveholders, and their efforts brought the manumission of no fewer than fifty-two slaves.10

At its first meeting, held at Middletown Meeting House, the committee conferred on the “Weighty Subject” of slavekeeping and determined to carry forward the “good Work” that had been initiated. Before adjourning it was proposed and agreed that “Friends should procure a particular & Distinct Account of the Names of the Masters & of their Disposition in this Respect The Negroes Names and their Ages, & Whether they can Read or Write, what they are Capable of & what their Masters are Willing to do.” Convening again the next day (March 8), the committee set instantly about its work. The committee was meeting at the home of Joshua Richardson who, appropriately enough, on that very day prepared written instruments freeing his two Negro slaves. That done, he and the others began calling on Quakers in the vicinity.31

Jonathan Willets, owner of seven Negro slaves — a man, a woman, and five children — was approached by the committee and, apparently, gave indications of abiding by its suggestions. “Jonathan Seemed pretty well Disposed,” wrote one member, “& has friends Advice under Consideration.” At the next residence, that of Joseph Thornton, little was gained by way of freeing five slaves, neither Thornton nor his wife being “Willing to Set them at Liberty.” Not easily discouraged, it was decided that additional visits to that particular family would be necessary in the future. The next Friend appealed to complied without hesitation, immediately signing instruments setting his two Negro men at liberty. Perhaps in this case, however, there was little to recommend doing otherwise, for one of the men was “about 100,” the other near 52.32

And so it went. Doggedly seeking an end to human bondage, these Quaker abolitionists returned again and again to the homes of Friends who hesitated in freeing their Negroes. Elizabeth Warden was visited twelve times in an effort to convince her that the Truth.

30 An Account of Negroes Set Free, Kept by James Moon of Woodbourne Son of Roger Moon who came from England, Roberts Collection, HCL. (typewritten copy).
31 Ibid., 1-2.
32 Ibid. 2.
would be served better if her slaves were released. On the first two visits she replied that she would ponder the issue for a time before acting. Thus heartened, the committee arranged for a third call, which resulted in the freeing of one slave, an old woman aged sixty-nine years. Two visits later she agreed to free five more slaves, this being on November 12, 1777. On the tenth visit, and after stating that no more slaves would be given their freedom, Elizabeth Warden released five more slaves from bondage. The last of her twelve slaves was freed on September 7, 1781. In this quiet and undemonstrative way were Friends abolishing slavery in Pennsylvania. Of course, Quaker persuasion and persistence were not always sufficient; sometimes Friends were disowned for continuing to hold Negroes. Friends tried on several occasions, for example, to convince Sarah Growden to free her three Negro slaves. She agreed to release them upon her death, but was not inclined to set them free while she lived. On October 10, 1781, Falls Monthly Meeting prepared a testimony disowning her.33

In the meantime, as Friends, spurred on by the traveling committees, moved to free their slaves, there were other significant anti-slavery developments in the colony. In March 1775 an essay written by Thomas Paine attacking both the slave trade and slavery appeared in the Pennsylvania Journal. There was little that was original in the essay, although it did mark the entry into the abolition movement of a powerful pamphleteer. Among other things, Paine raised the question of Americans demanding liberty from their British oppressors while simultaneously withholding liberty from Negro slaves: “With that [what?] consistency, or decency they [Americans] complain so loudly of attempts to enslave them while they hold so many hundred thousands in slavery; and annually enslave many thousands more, without any pretence of authority, or claim upon them.”34

One month later, in April, a group of Philadelphians met at the Sun Tavern and formed “The Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage,” the forerunner of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, organized some years later. In 1773 an Indian woman and her children were taken from New Jersey to be sent for sale in Virginia or South Carolina. Her master was detained in Philadelphia and the woman, taking advantage of the favorable circumstances in which she found herself, sued for her freedom. The mayor of

33 Ibid.; Testimony against Sarah Growden, 3rd day of 10th mo. 1781, Friends Falls Monthly Meeting Papers (1763-76), No. 823, Cope Collection, HSP.
Philadelphia judged that her claim for freedom might have some validity and so kept the family in the city workhouse in order that the case could undergo a strict examination. Others became interested, including the Quaker leader Israel Pemberton, and gave their assistance in seeking freedom for the Indian woman. The matter was not finally settled until two years later, when it was decided the woman was a slave. The impression made by this particular incident, however, and the desire to see that justice would be done should similar cases arise in the future, led to the formation of "The Society for the Relief of Free Negroes." 35

Other cases soon were brought to the attention of the Relief Society, and a just solution was in each instance pursued. However, as one commentator put it in what was clearly an understatement, "the political disturbances interrupted for a time the progress of the institution." The American Revolution brought a cessation of the formal activities of the Relief Society, even though the ideal for which it worked — freedom for the enslaved — was carried forward. "It is . . . well known," wrote the same observer, "that certain members of the society even in this deranged situation of their affairs steadily employed themselves in the propagation of their Principles." 36

Manumission of slaves continued, and, at times, was the result of rather remarkable circumstances. Joshua Fisher, to cite an extreme example, wrote to friends in 1778 expressing regret over having bought and held Negroes, and over having sold them. He desired to make up for this by repurchasing and manumitting all those or their children he could locate. He purchased and manumitted five of the Negroes in 1776, two in 1777, and one in 1785. 37 Complementing this activity and contributing to the ranks of free Negroes was the social and political upheaval that was a part of American life in the period from 1776 to 1783. Many Negroes, legally slaves, found the unsettled conditions conducive to snapping the bonds which had heretofore held them in a state of slavery. 38

36 Coxe to David Barclay, Mar. 6, 1787, Pa. Abolition Soc., 1 (1748-89) : 59.
37 Statement respecting Slaves owned by Joshua Fisher, their repurchase and Manumission, taken from the original Papers by Thomas Gilpin, Philadelphia, May 15, 1845, note between pp. 244-45, in Hannah Logan Smith, Memorials and Reminiscences in Private Life (1839), Thomas Gilpin Papers, HSP.
38 See, for example, William A. Atlee to Elias Boudinot, Mar. 26, 1778, Hampton L. Carson Collection, HSP.
Although the formal activities of the Relief Society were curtailed almost entirely, the ideology of revolution, encompassing the rights of man, brought the question of Negro slavery more obtrusively before the public. Tench Coxe described the relationship of the American Revolution and the enslavement of the Negro in these words: "the free, sincere & earnest discussions of the natural rights of mankind which frequently took place during the war brought them [the slaves] more immediately into public view, & the friends of the revolution uniformly maintaining that the blessings of freedom were the rightful inheritance of the whole human species . . . ." 39

The matter was discussed and debated by the citizenry of Pennsylvania, and the council took the lead in the drive to end slavery. In 1778 the council submitted to the assembly a bill which provided for manumitting infant Negroes "born of Slaves, by which the gradual Abolition of Servitude for life would be obtained, in an easy mode."

"It is not proposed," the council continued in addressing the assembly:

that the present Slaves, most of whom are scarcely competent of freedom should be meddled with, but all importation must be forbid if the Idea be adopted. This or some better scheme would tend to abrogate Slavery, the approbium of America, from among us, and no period seems more happy for the attempt than the present, as the number of such unhappy characters, ever few in Pennsylvania, has been much reduced by the practices & plunder of our late invaders. In divesting the State of Slaves you will equally serve the cause of humanity & policy, & offer to God one of the most proper & best returns of Gratitude for his great deliverance of us & our posterity from Thraldom. You will also set yr character for Justice & Benevolence in a true point of view to all Europe, who are astonished to see a people eager for Liberty holding Negroes in Bondage. 40

Not prepared to legislate the abolition of slavery, even in the moderate form suggested by the council, the assembly did agree that the importation of Negroes should be discouraged. In 1776, when the old colonial form of government came to an end in Pennsylvania, no provision was made immediately for the continuation and perpetuation of prior laws. One of the laws no longer enforced was the Negro duty act of 1773, which had levied an impost of £20 on every Negro and mulatto slave brought into Pennsylvania. 41 Those who benefited from nonenforcement were largely individual slave-holders moving into the state. Nevertheless, the assembly on September 7, 1778, passed a law appointing a collector whose task it was to collect the duty on slaves

41 Duties on Negroes are discussed in Darold D. Wax, "Negro Import Duties in Colonial Pennsylvania," PMHB 97 (1973) : 22-44; see especially pp. 43-44.
entered after July 4, 1776, and to continue to assess the impost on
slaves brought in subsequently.\textsuperscript{42}

Antislavery feeling was not diminishing, and the effort to induce
legislative abolition was not lessened. Undaunted by the rebuke of one
year earlier, the council in February 1779 again recommended that
the assembly provide legislation looking toward the abolition of
slavery. In its message the council referred to "a plan for the gradual
abolition of Slavery," remarking that to the state which first removed
the blight of slavery would go enduring recognition in the annals of
history: "Honored will that State be in the Annals of History, which
shall first abolish this violation of the rights of mankind, & the
memories of those will be held in grateful and everlasting remem-
brance, who shall pass the Law to restore & establish the rights of
Human nature in Pennsylvania." Council members drew up in the
form of a law a plan for gradual abolition which they intended to com-
municate to the assembly in "a few days." \textsuperscript{43}

Considerable excitement and public discussion of the proposal
followed; a number of petitions were placed before the assembly and
the \textit{Pennsylvania Packet} printed several letters written by interested
observers. But when the decisive vote was taken in the assembly that
body rejected the gradual abolition program by a vote of 29 to 21.\textsuperscript{44}

At the next legislative session a bill for gradual abolition was
once again proposed and publicly debated. Late in 1779 an exchange
was touched off in the pages of the \textit{Pennsylvania Gazette} when that
paper published the text of the bill. "A Whig Freeholder" read the
provisions of the bill "with great pleasure and satisfaction," — even
though he thought the bill defective in one important particular: "no
person coming to reside in this State, after the time for entering the
names of the slaves now in this State, shall be expired, can bring with
him his slaves to serve him as such . . . ." This Whig seems to have
been interested in the future development of his state and believed
that prospective immigrants, if discriminated against, would bypass
Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{45} Less impressed with the proposed law, because it

\textsuperscript{42} Pa. Statutes, 9: 274-75.

\textsuperscript{43} Colonial Records of Pennsylvania, 11: 688. The sparring that ensued between
the council and the assembly over the issue of abolition is treated in
Robert L. Brunhouse, The Counter-Revolution in Pennsylvania, 1776-
1790 (Harrisburg, 1942), 80-81.

\textsuperscript{44} Edward R. Turner, "The Abolition of Slavery in Pennsylvania," \textit{PMHB}
36 (1912): 136-37; Martha B. Clark, "Lancaster County's Relation to
Slavery," \textit{Historical Papers and Addresses}, Lancaster County Historical

\textsuperscript{45} Pennsylvania Gazette, Dec. 29, 1779, Jan. 26, 1780.
did not go far enough, was "Phileleutheros." Freedom, he asserted, would be a reality only after children born subsequent to the bill's passage had reached the age of twenty-eight years:

now if any reasonable man can think that entirely neglecting the unhappy persons, both young and aged, who are now held as slaves, and setting innocent children not yet in being, at liberty, at so late a time as twenty-eight years of age, is an offering without blemish, I will leave the world to judge! I would not, however, be thought to depreciate the virtuous designs of the House as manifested in the bill; but would beg them to consider that, though it is much, it is not all that is their power to do; and doing things by halves is a way now generally reprobated. 46

Being thoroughly aired and having won extensive support, the assembly, now voting 34 to 21 in favor, on March 1, 1780, passed an "Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery." 47

Comparing the condition of the Negro slave with the former status of the American colonies — crushed under the oppressive arm of British tyranny — and mindful of the universality of the rights of man, the Pennsylvania assemblymen proclaimed in eloquent language the provisions for gradual abolition. "We esteem it a peculiar blessing granted to us," they declared:

that we are enabled this day to add one more step to universal civilization by removing as much as possible the sorrows of those who have lived in undeserved bondage, and from which by the assumed authority of the Kings of Britain, no effectual relief would be obtained. Weaned by a long course of experiences from those narrow prejudices and partialities we had imbibed, we find our hearts enlarged with kindness and benevolence towards men of all conditions and nations, and we conceive ourselves at this particular period extraordinarily called upon, by the blessings which we have received, to manifest the sincerity of our profession and to give substantial proof of our gratitude.

Slavery had deprived Negroes of the common blessings to which all men were entitled and had cast them into the "deepest afflictions by an unnatural separation and sale of husband and wife from each other, and from their children . . . ." 48

The act for gradual abolition provided that Negroes already held as slaves could be so retained, although they were to be registered within eight months. Registration required the name of the owner, his occupation or profession, and the name of the county and township, district, or ward wherein he resided, as well as the name, age, and sex of each slave. Children born of slave mothers could be held as servants until reaching the age of twenty-eight, at which time they were to be

46 Ibid., Feb. 2, 1780.
freed. Slaves brought into Pennsylvania from other areas were to be held no longer than seven years, unless they "were at the commencement of such servitude or apprenticeship under the age of twenty-one years." In that event they could be enslaved until reaching the age of twenty-eight, "but no longer." Section XIV declared null and void earlier laws discriminating against Negroes and, to lend force to the new status of the former slaves and to make explicit the termination of the period when Negroes were considered perpetual chattels, also repealed the duty acts of 1761 and 1773. Though not without defects, as time would show, the act for gradual abolition gave to Pennsylvania the distinction of being the first state to pass a law for the abolition of slavery.49

Whatever its shortcomings from the point of view of reformers, the act of 1780 was nevertheless a victory for the abolitionists and a milestone in the Pennsylvania antislavery movement. Not yet satisfied, however, the abolitionists, Anthony Benezet among them, redoubled their efforts to abolish slaveholding completely. For the less rabid abolitionist, the lukewarm and the semi-indifferent, the law of 1780, for a time at least, seemed adequate. Even some Quakers moved now with more caution and greater circumspection. Benezet reported in 1783 that he had an essay on the "state & grievous Effect of Slavery" before the committee of the Meeting for Sufferings for more than six months and that it had not yet received the committee's affirmation. This led him to remark that he generally met "with difficulty" in matters he proposed and to conclude that it was perhaps "best to check my natural activity & vehemence." 50 At precisely that moment, as an indication of his "activity & vehemence," Benezet was pressing for the creation of a Quaker committee which would afford assistance to black people who were under special suffering. He disliked the common occurrence of Negroes being shipped from Pennsylvania for sale in other areas and found particularly worthy of attention those Negroes who were "suddenly forced on board vessels" and carried out of the state as slaves. Despite his setbacks and impatience with fellow Friends, Benezet wrote, also in 1783, that "the case of the oppressed Blacks becomes rather more & more weighty with us [Quakers] . . . ." 51

A note often struck in the revolutionary era was the inconsistency

49 Ibid., 68-73.
50 Benezet to George Dillwyn, 1783, Letters of Anthony Benezet.
of Americans when demanding their own liberty from the English while simultaneously condoning and even encouraging the institution of slavery. The existence of Negro slavery seemed to make hypocrites of Americans. The duality of American thought on the subject of human liberty and freedom had been frequently pointed up in Pennsylvania and had been cited in the act for gradual abolition passed in 1780. It was referred to again in a pamphlet published in 1783 by David Cooper of Trenton, New Jersey. Titled A Serious Address to the Rulers of America, on the Inconsistency of their Conduct respecting Slavery: Forming a Contrast Between the Encroachments of England on American Liberty and American Injustice in Tolerating Slavery, the pamphlet was well received in Philadelphia, especially among the abolitionists. Cooper supported his argument with quotations from the Declaration of Independence and the Pennsylvania Declaration of Rights of 1776, and his major theme — the inconsistency of proclaiming liberty and equality for all men while also perpetuating slavery — was phrased over and over again. "Ye rulers of America beware," he wrote:

Let it appear to future ages, from the records of this day, that you not only professed to be advocates for freedom, but really were inspired by the love of mankind, and wished to secure the invaluable blessing to all; that as you disdained to submit to the unlimited control of others, you equally abhorred the crying crime of holding your fellow-men, as much entitled to freedom as yourselves, the subjects of your undisputed will and pleasure.

George Miller, a Quaker resident of Bucks County, echoed these sentiments in 1784 when writing to Benjamin Rush. Miller termed the enslavement of Africans "worse than Egyptian bondage," and the labor of slaves "the most barbarous arbitrary tyranny that perhaps was Ever Exercised on Mankind." Having written to signify his approval of both Rush's antislavery pamphlet (published in 1773) and a more recent essay on the harmful effects of using spirituous liquors, Miller urged Rush to continue "to Exert thy Endeavours [sic] for the good of thy fellow Creatures, and Improve the Talents bestowed on thee." One year later, in 1785, Thomas Purvin of Philadelphia also expressed agreement with the antislavery work carried on by Rush and others. Purvin was pleased with the situation in Pennsylvania, for in discussing slaveholding there he referred to its "present perfection,"

52 James Pemberton to John Pemberton, July 19, 1783, ibid., 73.
53 David Cooper, A Serious Address to the Rulers of America . . . (Trenton, 1783), 5.
54 George Miller to Benjamin Rush, Nov. 27, 1784, Correspondence of Dr. Benjamin Rush, LCP, 43 (1753-1812) : 103.
notably among Friends. What concerned Purvin was the use of slave-grown products in Pennsylvania, for this only served to perpetuate slavery in other areas:

Inform us my friend [he wrote to Rush] that an unremoved load of guilt still remains at our Door, and while we express ourselves clear of Slave holding, how consistent our Conduct would be could we but cease from those defiled baits of aluring Interest; then might we with well grounded assurance hope from the forcible voice of example when we remonstrate to Congress or others in power on behalf of this oppressed Race that our honest endeavour would more effectually contribute towards arousing [sic] the Nations to a more thoughtfull consideration of this deeply interesting subject; every part of our conduct would then so harmonize that I firmly believe we should much sooner arrive at the desired end of our labours.\textsuperscript{55}

Purvin’s perspective was a broad one which saw slavery and the slave trade as international phenomena necessitating cooperation on a wide front.

Others in Pennsylvania shared this same view. Their own state might have first priority, but their antislavery posture was more than merely local in its concern. It was this broad conception of the slave trade which prompted John Pemberton’s remarks in a letter written in 1783 from Liverpool, England.

Love to my Ffrinds [sic] Anth. o & Joyce Benezet, tell him I have been much grived to Observe so many Vessels fiting out from this port for the Coast of Africa to carry on the Diabolical trade of enslaving Mankind, the great profit made last year, has engaged many this year, to send vessels but hope, as ffrds Adress or Petition was so favorably Received by Parliament, that in time some Cheque will be put to it.\textsuperscript{56}

Discussion of the slave trade among English Quakers sometimes stemmed directly from the pressures applied by Pennsylvania Friends. William Dillwyn stated in 1783 that the subject of the slave trade was taken up by the London Meeting in consequence of an epistle sent by the Meeting for Sufferings in Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{57} On the New World side of the Atlantic the constant agitation of Pennsylvania Quakers for an end to the slave trade was no less evident. The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1783 addressed a petition to the Confederation Congress asking for abolition of the slave trade. Signed by 535 members, the communication noted that with the coming of peace there were signs of revival of the African slave trade. The petitioners stated that they “therefore earnestly Solicit your Christian interposition to discourage,
& prevent so obvious an evil, in such manner as under the Influence of Divine Wisdom you shall Meet." 58

The peace which settled over America in 1783 led also to the revival of "The Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage," whose formal work, it will be recalled, had been interrupted by the American Revolution. Credit for reorganizing the society, apparently not without its difficulties, went to that staunch antislaveryite, Anthony Benezet. A contemporary described the re-forming of the society in these words:

On the return of peace attempts were made to revive the Society, but not with so much Success as was to be desired (tho its objects were stiled dear to many) until the venerable patron of this plan the late Anthony Benezet, discovered two melancholy instances of black men illegally held in bondage, who dispirited by fruitless applications to a number of individuals for their assistance in support of their rights, put an end to their miserable lives. Deeply affected by events so lamentable and Shocking they made another more successful attempt to restore the institution, & it again took order in the beginning of 1784 — altho the numbers were at first inconsiderable . . . .59

By his will dated April 13, 1784, less than a month before his death on May 3 at the age of seventy-one and while the society was still in the process of reorganizing, Benezet left in trust to James Starr and Thomas Harrison fifty pounds to be used by the society. The sum was to assist in "the relief of such black people & others who apprehend themselves illegally detained in slavery to enable them to employ Lawyers & to appear in their behalf in Law & in all other cases afford just relief to those oppressed people." 60 Between 1784, when the society was reorganized, and March 6, 1787, "upwards of one hundred persons" were "restored to their liberty" as a result of its activities.61

With an increasing membership and a widening sphere of interest, the society on April 23, 1787, again reorganized and adopted a formal constitution. Now officially known as "The Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the Relief of Free Negroes unlawfully held in Bondage, and for Improving the Condition of the Colored Race," the preamble of the new constitution stated both the organization's concern and ambitions:

It having pleased the Creator of the world, to make of one flesh all the children

60 Extract from the Codicil of the Will of Anthony Benezet, Apr. 13, 1784, ibid., 57.
61 Coxe to David Barclay, Mar. 6, 1787, ibid., 59.
of men — it becomes them to consult and promote each other's happiness, as members of the same family, however diversified they may be, by color, situation, religion, or different states of society. It is more especially the duty of those persons, who profess to maintain for themselves the rights of human nature, and who acknowledge the obligations of Christianity, to use such means as are in their power, to extend the blessings of freedom to every part of the human race; and in a more particular manner, to such of their fellow-creatures as are entitled to freedom by the laws and constitutions of any of the United States, and who, notwithstanding, are detained in bondage, by fraud or violence — from a full conviction of the truth and obligation of these principles — from a desire to diffuse them, wherever the miseries and vices of slavery exist, and in humble confidence of the favour and support of the Father of Mankind, the subscribers have associated themselves . . .

The reformed society was governed by a president, two vice-presidents, two secretaries, a treasurer, four counselors, an electing committee of twelve, and an acting committee of six. Benjamin Franklin was elected president, James Pemberton and Jonathan Penrose served as vice-presidents, and Benjamin Rush and Tench Coxe were elected secretaries. The function of the counselors, according to Article V, was to explain the laws and constitutions of the various states as they related to the emancipation of slaves "and to urge their claims to freedom, when legal, before such persons or courts as are authorized to decide upon them." Funds for carrying on these activities were derived from an annual assessment on each member of ten shillings, payable in quarterly installments. The entire membership was to meet quarterly on the first Monday of the months of January, April, July, and October, "at such place as shall be agreed to by a majority of the society." In the interims the acting committee of six was authorized to transact the society's business. Membership was by election, although Article X specifically excluded all persons who held slaves. Moreover, foreigners and persons who did not reside in the state could be elected corresponding members of the society without being subject to any annual payment and could attend meetings of the society during their residence in the state. Some years later, when the society was incorporated by the state legislature, it boasted members in New Jersey, New York, Delaware, Maryland, Rhode Island, Virginia, Massachusetts, Great Britain, and France.

Reorganized and refurbished, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society was now prepared to lend its support to any and all antislavery movements. In June 1787 the society memorialized the constitutional convention assembled in Philadelphia, praying that the convention would

62 Pennsylvania Gazette, May 23, 1787.
place the suppression of the African slave trade on its agenda. To strengthen its request, reference was made to the earlier act (1774) of the Continental Congress which prohibited the importation of slaves into the colonies, an act which had not been enforced.\footnote{Memorial of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and the relief of free Negroes unlawfully held in bondage to the honorable Convention of the U.S. of America now assembled in Philadelphia, June 2, 1787, Pa. Abolition Soc., 1 (1748-89) : 83.} The impact of this particular memorial cannot be precisely measured, although the society believed that the antislavery tradition in Pennsylvania had much to do with the clause in the federal Constitution relating to the slave trade. After reviewing that tradition, an official letter written later in 1787 stated that “from this public testimony of the iniquity of the Slave trade given by the state of Pennsylvania, we have reason to believe sprang in a great degree those principles in the late federal Convention which induced the Southern states to commit to the proposed Government of the United States the power of putting a stop to the importation of Slaves at the end of one & twenty years . . .” \footnote{Copy of a “letter to the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in London,” Oct. 20, 1787, Pa. Abolition Soc., Minutes (1787-1800), 17-21, HSP.}

During the summer of 1787 Philadelphia was used by “two young Men from Lancashire or Yorkshire” in England as a port for fitting out their vessel for the African slave trade.\footnote{James Pennington to W. Dillwyn, May 9, 1788, James Pennington File, Dreer Collection, HSP.} This raised a new issue for Pennsylvania reformers: though local merchants were no longer participating in the slave trade by bringing slaves into Pennsylvania, should the city and the state condone the practice of preparing vessels for the Negro trade even if the slaves were sold at other places? The Abolition Society’s answer to this question was an emphatic no, and it set about correcting this abuse at once. At its quarterly meeting held on October 1, 1787, it was resolved that “a Committee be appointed to devise a plan to render the fitting out of vessels from the port of Philad.a for the African Trade, impracticable, either by the aid of Government or by such other means as they shall see proper to recommend . . ..” \footnote{Pa. Abolition Soc., Minutes (1787-1800), 13.}

The committee reported at the January meeting in 1788 that it would be expedient to apply to the assembly for a supplementary law to the Act for Gradual Abolition. A resolution passed unanimously at
this same meeting stated that "a Committee be appointed to prepare a Petition to the Legislature of Pennsylvania to be presented at their next Session praying them to make such additions to the Law passed in March 1780 for the gradual abolition of Slavery as shall more effectually put a stop to the African Slave trade being carried on directly or indirectly in the State of Pennsylvania, & for other purposes of humanity & justice to the oppressed Africans." The form which the petition was to take received approval at a meeting later that month, and 100 copies were ordered circulated around the city and state.  

In the petition citizens referred to the "Salutary effects" of the abolition law of 1780 but then went on to point out that room for improvement existed. They found themselves called upon:

to suggest to the General Assembly that vessels have been publicly equipt in this Port for the Slave Trade, and that several other practices have taken place which they conceive to be inconsistent with the spirit of the Law abovementioned; and that these, and other circumstances relating to the afflicted Africans, do, in the opinion of your Petitioners, require the further interposition of the Legislature.

Petitioners asked that the assembly take the subject under consideration and "make such additions to the said Law as shall effectually put a stop to the Slave Trade being carried on directly or indirectly in the Commonwealth and to answer other purposes of benevolence and justice to an oppressed part of the human species."  

Given a warm reception, the petition called attention to what abolitionists and others believed were shortcomings in the existing legislation. The law of 1780 provided for gradual abolition and failed to satisfy many people. No means existed, for example, of ascertaining the ages of Negro children born of slave mothers; they were not registered and might be held as slaves beyond the age of twenty-eight years. Pregnant female slaves might be sent out of the state to give birth to their children, thereby escaping the provisions of the law. In addition, there were real uncertainties as to how the law ought to be construed under certain circumstances. One official, for instance, was unsure how the act applied to "Slaves or Servants under the Age of 28 years, and omitted to be entered [registered]. Whether they are to be considered as immediately Free, or as Servants, until they attain

68 Ibid., 21-22, 26-27.
69 Petition of the Citizens of Pennsylvania to the General Assembly, 1788, Manuscript Collection, HSP. The text of this petition is printed in FMHB 15 (1891): 372-73.
the Age of 28 years." 70

On March 29, 1788, the legislature passed "An Act to Explain and Amend an Act Entitled 'An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery,'" which effectively remedied some of the weaknesses of the earlier law. 71 Every slave brought into Pennsylvania by persons inhabiting or residing there was "immediately considered, deemed and taken to be free to all intents and purposes." Slaves were not to be removed out of the state with the design of changing their place or abode of residence; specifically, a pregnant female slave was not to be taken from the state until after delivery of her child with the intent of then reentering the state. Registration of all slave children born after March 1, 1780, was also required, while the unborn were to be registered within six months of their birth. Any person who should by force or violence take any Negro or mulatto out of the state for purposes of sale in some other area was liable, upon conviction, to a fine of £100 and was to be "confined at hard labor for any time not less than six months nor more than twelve months and until the costs of prosecution shall be paid."

The Negro slave trade, for a century a part of Pennsylvania's commercial history, was prohibited by law and violators saddled with stringent penalties. "And whereas it has been represented to this house," the assembly stated:

that vessels have been fitted out and equipped in this port for the iniquitous purpose of receiving and transporting the natives of Africa to places where they are held in bondage and it is just and proper to discourage as far as it is practicable such proceedings in future; . . . That if any person or persons shall build, fit, equip, man or otherwise prepare any ship or other vessel within any port of this state, or shall cause any ship or other vessel to sail from any port of this state for the purpose of carrying on a trade or traffic in slaves, to, from or between Europe, Asia, Africa or America, or any place or countries whatever, or of transporting slaves to or from one port or place to another in any part or parts of the world, such ship or vessel, her tackle, furniture, apparel and other appurtenances shall be forfeited to the commonwealth . . . and moreover all and every person and persons so building, fitting out, manning, equipping or otherwise preparing or sending any ship or vessel knowing [sic] or intending that the same shall be employed in such trade or business contrary to the true intent and meaning of this act, or anywise aiding or abetting therein shall severally forfeit and pay the sum of one thousand pounds . . . .72

Little time elapsed before the Act of 1788 was put to use, for as early as May 1788 one observer noted that it had already "taken effect in prevent[ing] the refitting of a Ship for the infamous trade

70 Hilary Baker, Jr., to Secretary Matlock, Jan. 29, 1781, in Pa. Archives, 1st ser., 8: 720.
72 Ibid., 54-55.
to Africa which was equipt here last summer by two young Men from Lancashire or Yorkshire and having completed the Voyage was returning to prosecute another but has taken refuge in the Delaware state . . . .” Other portions of the new act were equally well enforced, perhaps the more so because the Pennsylvania Abolition Society appointed itself watchdog and policeman. In the letter quoted above, the same writer remarked that:

A Frenchman from Hispaniola who has resided here more than six months said to be a Marquis was preparing to return and taken his passage when his slaves claiming the benefit of the law are like to obtain their freedom to his great mortification and the Acting committee of the Society keep a street watch on such and other occasions that the law may have its due effect.73

The Pennsylvania Abolition Society could maintain a vigil to ensure that the provisions of the act of 1788 were stringently enforced, but it was also limited by the legal boundaries of that statute, as well as of the law of 1780. Only time, therefore, would bring an end to slavery in Pennsylvania, for the gradualism provided for in the act of 1780 was not altered. Slightly over 3,700 slaves were living in the state in 1790; ten years later there were 1,706 slaves, a figure which by 1810 was reduced to 795. It was not until the federal census of 1850 that it was reported that no slaves were living within the confines of Pennsylvania.74

Nearly a century, beginning with the efforts of the Quakers in the 1750s, had been required to end slavery and the slave trade in Pennsylvania. Even so, Pennsylvania had been in the vanguard of the antislavery movement. The movement there, discernible in the late seventeenth century, had gained greater strength from the increasing agitation of the Quakers and had been climaxed by the momentum provided by the American Revolution. The abolition of slavery and the slave trade in Pennsylvania is hardly testimony to what might be termed the radical nature of the Revolution. It would seem, however, to support an interpretation holding that some men can distinguish between good and evil, that the conscience of society can be appealed to, and that decent men, providing leadership and a sense of direction, can make a difference in the affairs of mankind.

73 James Pennington to W. Dillwyn, May 9, 1788, James Pennington File.