

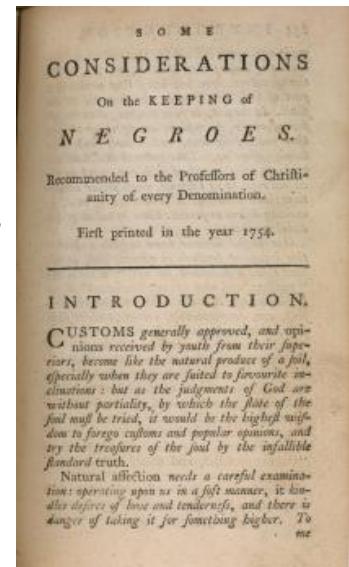
Anti-Slavery before the Revolutionary War

by Sylvia R. Frey

Anti-slavery is almost as old as slavery itself. Indeed it could easily be argued that the first enslaved person who jumped overboard or led an on-ship rebellion on the Middle Passage launched the anti-slavery movement. The modern intellectual anti-slavery movement emerged as two distinct but overlapping currents, one religious, the other secular. Religious ideas were the chief wellspring of anti-slavery thought. The earliest protest on record is the 1688 Germantown petition signed by four German Quakers and Mennonites. Citing Matthew 7:12, the petitioners set out one of the resonant themes of religious anti-slavery: “Is there any that would be . . . sold or made a slave for all the time of his life? . . . There is a saying, that we shall do to all men as we will be done ourselves.” When the Quaker meeting took no action, George Keith took a much sterner line. In *An Exhortation and Caution to Friends Buying and Selling Negroes* (1693), Keith reminded his fellow Quakers that slavery was contrary to the principles and practices of their faith, and in spectacularly bold terms, he invoked the language of divine vengeance: “He that stealeth a Man and selleth him, if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to Death” (Exodus 21).

One of the first published anti-slavery pamphlets in America (*The Selling of Joseph*, 1701) was written by the New England Puritan Samuel Sewall, whose biblically based arguments refuted the pro-slavery justifications constructed by the Greeks and Romans and developed by Aristotle. “God hath given the Earth [and all its commodities] unto the Sons of Adam, and hath made of One Blood all Nations of Men,” Sewall wrote. *The Selling of Joseph* was reprinted in Philadelphia in 1737 by the British-born Quaker Benjamin Lay. Lay’s book *All Slave-keepers that Keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates*, was published by Benjamin Franklin, whose anti-slavery rationale leaned more heavily on secular arguments. This publication of a tract in the religious tradition of anti-slavery by a more secular-minded proponent may have forged the first link between these two traditions.

Described by John Greenleaf Whittier as “the irrepressible prophet” who “troubled the Israel of slaveholding Quakerism, clinging like a rough chestnut-burr to the skirts of its respectability,” the four-foot-seven-inch-tall Lay was given to histrionics, on one occasion piercing a bladder filled with pokeweed juice concealed within the covers of a book while shouting to the astonished Quaker meeting, “Thus shall God shed the blood of those who enslave their fellow-creatures.” Both Lay and the humble, self-effacing John Woolman were present at the 1758 Yearly Meeting of Friends in Philadelphia that unanimously adopted a resolution against slavery. But it was the combination of Woolman and the French-born schoolmaster and Quaker Anthony Benezet that jolted the yearly meeting into taking an official position



Title page of John Woolman’s 1754 anti-slavery treatise “Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes,” published in *The Works of John Woolman in Two Parts* (Philadelphia: Joseph Crukshank, 1774). (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

against slavery and eventually disowning Friends who refused to comply.

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Woolman's powerful essays *Some Considerations of the Keeping of Negroes* (1754) and *Considerations on Keeping Negroes* (1762) and Benezet's *Epistle of Caution and Advice Concerning the Buying and Keeping of Slaves* (1754) and *Some Historical Account of Guinea* (1772) occasionally pass over the line separating religious anti-slavery and the secular anti-slavery that has generally been viewed as embracing a broader narrative receptive to international influences. Woolman, for example, argued vaguely that Africans also enjoyed the "natural right of freedom," while Benezet quoted directly from the French philosopher Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* (1748). Through their correspondence with the British abolitionist Granville Sharp and with John Wesley, the father of Methodism, Woolman and Benezet also helped to build the strength of the growing international anti-slavery movement. After reading Benezet's work, Wesley wrote in his journal, "I read a very different book, published by an honest Quaker, on that execrable sum of all villanies, commonly called the Slave-trade." That Wesley absorbed aspects of American anti-slavery thought is clearly reflected in *Thoughts upon Slavery* (1774), a passionate tract that also reflects the mutually reinforcing links between secular and religious anti-slavery. For example, though he was a clergyman, Wesley sometimes wrote about anti-slavery in terms of rights and liberties: "Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air; and no human law can deprive him of that right which he derives from the law of nature."

The redefinition and expansion of anti-slavery proceeded in fits and starts through the 1760s. Benjamin Franklin and Adam Smith added another brick to the emerging intellectual structure of anti-slavery thought by depicting slavery as an outmoded form of labor destined for oblivion in a free-market world. Franklin's *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind* (1751) questions slavery on practical rather than moral grounds, especially for its impact on white society: "white children become proud, disgusted with Labour, and being educated in Idleness, are rendered unfit to get a living by Industry." Under the influence of his friend Anthony Benezet, Franklin's anti-slavery conscience gradually evolved by the 1770s. But it was the intriguingly strange James Otis whose intellectual originality brought the secular anti-slavery argument into sharper focus. In one of the first colonial attacks on slavery, *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved* (1764), Otis deliberately grounded his objections to slavery in natural rights: "The colonists are by the law of nature free born, as indeed all men are, white or black."

Slavery came to the fore as an issue during the Stamp Act crisis as American colonists sought to distinguish themselves from Britain by employing the metaphor of slavery to describe political enslavement. The purpose was to enlist sympathy for colonial sufferings caused by British policies. But the trope opened up questions of liberty and freedom, and forced a rethinking of fundamental political concepts of slavery and freedom. The inconsistency, not to say hypocrisy, of slaveowners' complaints of being enslaved by King and Parliament was not lost on enslaved people. In their 1773 petition to the Massachusetts assembly, Peter Bestes, Sambo Freeman, Felix Holbrook, and Chester Joie seized upon the absurdity: "The efforts made by the legislative [*sic*] of this province in their last sessions to free themselves from slavery, gave us, who are in that deplorable state, a high degree of satisfaction." The convergence of spiritual and secular liberation is powerfully present in the petitions of northern blacks, in sermons, and in essays by black intellectuals like Jupiter Hammon and Prince Hall, in the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, and in the judicial pleadings of Elizabeth [Mum Bett] Freeman and Quock Walker. Enslaved men and women persistently asked nagging questions: "How can the master be said to Beare my Borden when he Beares me down with the . . . chanes of slavery?"; "Is it consistent with the present claims of the United States to hold so many thousands of the race of Adam, our common father, in perpetual slavery?" In combining Christian morality and Anglo-American notions of right, black anti-slavery men and

women constructed a compelling moral vision with a unique transforming potential. Their stress on the natural right of enslaved people to freedom as a fundamental human right universalized the revolutionary principles of liberty and equality: “We have in common with all other men a naturel [*sic*] right to our freedoms.”

Concluding perhaps that the anti-slavery movement was long on rhetoric and short on action, enslaved people of the plantation colonies attempted to seize freedom forcibly by fleeing to British armies, not in the manner of loyalists, but as revolutionaries eager to join the battle that they believed was meant to end the institution of slavery. Slave uprisings in the South during the Revolutionary period, coinciding as they did with an escalating international anti-slavery movement, raised a threat that was at once internal and external. The uprisings marked a political turning point in the Revolutionary War and in the anti-slavery movement. Beginning in 1779 the South became the main theater of war and the seat of much of the war’s irregular and guerrilla warfare. No other region of the country suffered so much economic destruction or took so long to heal the scars of war. The war in the southern theater quickly degenerated into a civil war of unsurpassed brutality that pitted brother against brother, broke up households, divided families, produced massive destruction of the plantation economy and the slave labor system upon which it rested, and contributed in the postwar period to the emergence of a defensive counter-movement that formed the basis for the construction of the mythic image of the South that would emerge full-blown in the antebellum period.

Prior to the Revolution there had been no organized pro-slavery thought, no pro-slavery literature beyond scattered individual writing. But in the aftermath of that war white southerners began to redefine themselves in relation to black southerners and to elaborate a defense of slavery that was partly an ideological response to anti-slavery argument. Anti-slavery assaults during and after the war led to the development of the first pro-slavery theorizing in popular petitions, political debates in state assemblies, and pro-slavery writings. Scriptural sanctions from Genesis to Revelations were invoked to prove that slavery was part of God’s design. With the development of secular anti-slavery, with its emphasis on natural-rights arguments, pro-slavery spokesmen shifted their defense to republican ideology and forged out of its ambiguities the weapons that were to become the mainstay of southern pro-slavery arguments, the contours of which became visible as early as the 1780s.

The first line of defense was the primacy of property rights. Above all in the South, “property” meant slaves, which slaveowners equated with “liberty,” a concept that they, in turn, translated as the freedom to own human beings. We can hear echoes of this analysis in the petitions of eight Virginia counties demanding the repeal of the private emancipation act of 1782 and the rejection of Methodist emancipation proposals: Through the agonies of war, the petitioners intoned, Virginians had “sealed with our blood, a Title to the full, free, and absolute enjoyment of every species of our property, whensoever, or howsoever legally acquired.” Heightened slave rebelliousness during the war years had revived latent white fears of slave uprisings. Acutely conscious of their own vulnerability, the petitioners drew on another element of republican ideology, the right of self-preservation. In a virtual catalogue of emancipation horrors, the Virginians listed the inevitable outcomes: “Want, poverty, Distress to the free citizen, neglect, famine and death to the black infant . . . the horrors of all the rapes, murders, and outrages, which a vast multitude of unprincipled un-propertyed, revengeful, and remorseless banditti are capable of perpetrating.”

The search for a social theory to protect slaveholders’ rights received its most coherent expression in South Carolina in the 1790s during debates over state representation. Writing under the pseudonym of “Americanus,” Timothy Ford made the explicit argument that the right to property is a natural right and equated it with the right to life. The end and purpose of civil society were to protect property. Ford and

Henry William DeSaussure were among the first pro-slavery intellectuals to publicly reject the prevailing definition of equality and to identify planter interest with an expressly non-egalitarian conception of the polity. Nature itself has “instituted almost every gradation, from the confines of inferior animals to the state of superior creation.” The “unavoidable conclusion is that inequality of condition is one of nature’s laws.” Writing under the pseudonym “Phocian,” DeSaussure argued that equality as a natural condition would lead inevitably to emancipation and that “inevitable ruin would follow both to the whites and blacks, and this fine country would be deluged with blood, and desolated by fire and sword.” In locating slavery within a network of unequal relations, Ford and DeSaussure were able to defend it as a positive good and argue for its necessity for freedom and independence. Ford’s argument that, “The constant example of slavery stimulates a free man to avoid being confounded with the blacks: and seeing that in every instance of depression he is brought nearer to a par with them his efforts must invariably force him toward the opposite point,” is but a short step away from the insistence of antebellum pro-slavery intellectuals that slavery was the guarantor of yeoman independence.

The power of the national identity notwithstanding, the South’s emerging regional identity was shaped by the memory of the Revolutionary experience and by the region’s increasingly distinctive culture. After the Revolution, white southerners perhaps for the first time began to define themselves regionally in relationship to the North. Although they did not explicitly define themselves as “Southerners,” a vague sense of separation is implicit in postwar southern writing—in, for example, Ford’s division of society into “the holders of slaves and those who have none.” This sense of separation took on more concrete expression in the Northwest Ordinance, which established a geographical and ideological border at the Ohio River. These divisions between “holders of slaves and those who had none” would deepen in the nineteenth century, and eventually lead southerners and northerners to take up arms against one another.

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