

Module 03: A Revolution for Whom?

Evidence 6: Petition From Amelia County, Virginia

A

Introduction

Although Pennsylvanians had begun the gradual abolition of slavery in 1780, few Americans followed their lead. Virginia did, in 1782, pass a private manumission law that allowed individual masters to liberate their slaves, and the next year Virginia set free any slave who had served in the American army during the Revolution. Even these steps were controversial, however. When Methodists began to discuss a gradual emancipation act similar to Pennsylvania's, they touched off a flurry of petitions, such as the one below, signed by 22 residents of Amelia County, Virginia.

Questions to Consider

- According to the authors, what led them to submit their petition?
- What did the authors of the petition seek from the General Assembly? What did they fear might happen if their wishes were ignored?
- How did the authors link their cause to the American Revolution?
- How did they characterize slavery?

Document

[Petition from Amelia County, Virginia, November 10, 1785:]

To the honourable the General Assembly of Virginia, the Remonstrance and Petition of the Free Inhabitants of Amelia County.

Gentlemen,

When the British Parliament usurped a Right to dispose of our Property without our Consent, we dissolved the Union with our Parent Country, and established a Constitution and Form of Government of our own, that our Property might be secure, in Future. In Order to effect this we risked our Lives and Fortunes, and waded through Seas of Blood. By the favourable Interposition of Providence our Attempt was crowned with Success. We were put in the Possession of. our Rights of Liberty and Property: And these

Rights as well secured, as they can be by any human Constitution or Form of Government. But notwithstanding this, we understand a very subtle and daring Attempt is made to dispossess us of a very important Part of our Property. An Attempt set on Foot, we are informed, by the Enemies of our Country, Tools of the British Administration, and supported by certain Men among us of considerable Weight, To WREST FROM US OUR SLAVES, by an Act of the Legislature for a general Emancipation of them. An Attempt unsupported by Scripture or sound Policy.

It is unsupported by Scripture. For we find that under the Old Testament Dispensation, Slavery was permitted by the Deity himself. Thus, Leviticus Ch. 25. Ver. 44, 45, 46. "Both thy Bond Men and Bond Maids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the Heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy Bond Men and Bond Maids. Moreover, of the Children of the Strangers that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their Families that are with you, which they beget in your Land, and they shall be your Possession, and ye shall take them as an Inheritance, for your Children after you, to inherit them for a Possession; they shall be your Bond-men forever." This Permission to buy and inherit Bond-men and Bond-maids, we have Reason to conclude, continued through all the Revolutions of the Jewish Government, down to the Advent of our Lord. And we do not find, that either he or his Apostles abridged it. The Freedom promised to his Followers, is a Freedom from the Bondage of Sin and Satan, and from the Dominion of Mens Lusts and Passions; but as to their Outward Condition, whatever that was before they embraced the Religion of Jesus, whether Bond or Free, it remained the same afterwards. This St. Paul expressly asserts I Cor. Chap. 7. Ver. 20. where he is speaking directly to this very Point, 'Let every Man abide in the same Calling, wherein he is called'; and Ver. 24. 'Let every Man wherein he is called, therein abide with God.' Thus it is evident the said Attempt is unsupported by Scripture.

It is also exceedingly impolitic. For it involves in it, and is productive of Want, Poverty, Distress, and Ruin to the Free Citizen; Neglect, Famine and Death to the black Infant and superannuated Parent; The Horrors of all the Rapes, Murders, and Outrages, which a vast Multitude of unprincipled, unpropertied, revengeful, and remorseless Banditti are capable of perpetrating; inevitable Bankruptcy to the Revenue, and consequently Breach of public Faith, and Loss of Credit with foreign Nations; and, lastly,

sure and final Ruin to this now flourishing free and happy Country.

We therefore, your Petitioners and Remonstrants, do solemnly adjure and humbly pray you that you will discountenance and utterly reject every Motion and Proposal for emancipating our Slaves; that as the Act lately made, empowering the Owners of Slaves to liberate them, hath produced, and is still productive of, very bad Effects, you will immediately and totally repeal it; and that as many of the Slaves, liberated by that Act, have been guilty of Thefts and Outrages, Insolences and Violences, destructive to the Peace, Safety, and Happiness of Society, you will make effectual Provision for the due Government of them.

And your Petitioners shall ever pray, etc. etc.

Source:

Legislative Petitions, 1784-1785. Richmond, Virginia State Library.