

## **Official Anti-Slavery Addresses and Legislation of America's Founding Fathers**

### **Thomas Jefferson on Slavery**

#### **“The Abolition of Slavery, the Great Object of Desire in these Colonies”**

In regard to the issue of slavery at the time of the founding of this nation, the question arises: If the founding fathers were against slavery as a great moral evil, why didn't they free the slaves?

Prior to the revolution, some of the colonial legislatures had attempted to prevent further importation through duties and prohibitions, but interference by the British government prevented them from doing so. Jefferson's sentiments and those of other colonists on the slavery issue are noted in his famous 1774 *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* (set forth in some Resolutions intended for the inspection of the present Delegates of the people of Virginia, now in Convention). It outlines the grievances of the colonies against England, as excerpted below:

*...The abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in those colonies, where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state. But previous to the enfranchisement of the slaves we have, it is necessary to exclude all further importations from Africa; yet our repeated attempts to effect this by prohibitions, and by imposing duties which might amount to a prohibition, have been hitherto defeated by his Majesty's negative: Thus preferring the immediate advantages of a few African corfairs (slaves) to the lasting interests of the American states, and to the rights of human nature deeply wounded by this infamous practice...*

#### **Initiation of Congressional Bill Against Slavery**

After the declaration of Independence, Jefferson was free to initiate a bill in Congress, which he did in 1779, proposing an initial attempt to deal with the slavery issue. In his autobiography, he wrote the following account of it:

The bill on the subject of slaves was a mere digest of the existing laws respecting them, without any intimation of the plan for a future and general emancipation. It was thought better that this should be kept back, and attempted only by way of amendment, however the bill should be brought on. The principles of the amendment however were agreed on, that is to say, the freedom of all born after a certain day, and deportation at a proper age. But it was found that the public mind would not yet bear the proposition, nor will it bear it even at this day. Yet the day is not distant when it must bear and adopt it, or worse will follow...

Jefferson could foresee the tremendous evil that would befall this country if the young nation did not eradicate this “infamous practice,” which deeply wounded human beings. He said that “commerce between master and slave is despotism,” and gave this warning:

It is still in our power to direct the process of emancipation and deportation peaceably and in such slow degree as that the evil will wear off insensibly and their place be *pari passu*\* filled with free white laborers. If on the contrary it is left to force itself on, human nature must shudder at the prospect held up...  
Commerce between master and slave is despotism.

### **Jefferson’s Anti-Slavery Clause (28<sup>th</sup>) in The Declaration of Independence**

Jefferson’s anti-slavery clause was struck out by Congress, due to the fact that some southern states would have dropped out of the 13 original states needed to pass the Declaration. The original hand-written final draught of the of the Declaration of Independence contained the following 28<sup>th</sup> Clause:

He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the approbrium of INFIDEL powers is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN King of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce. And that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people on whom he also obtruded them; thus paying off former crimes committed against the LIBERTIES of one people with crimes which he urges them to commit against the LIVES of another.

Unfortunately, Jefferson’s admonitions as to what would befall this nation if the slavery issue was not fully resolved, became the reality of a tragic civil war within a century. Abraham Lincoln was God’s instrument, raised up to totally eradicate this great moral evil from American soil. This he did with his Emancipation Proclamation, an immortal document, setting the slaves free on a permanent basis in 1863.

### **George Mason on Slavery**

**“Every Master of Slaves is Born a Petty Tyrant”**

George Mason took an active part in the Constitutional Convention of 1787, which met in Philadelphia. Among other issues, he spoke strongly regarding slavery, believing that Congress should be given the control of slavery. James Madison wrote the following report concerning Mason's speech on slavery:

This infernal traffic originated in the avarice of British merchants. The British government constantly checked the attempts of Virginia to put a stop to it. The present question concerns not the importing States alone, but the whole Union...Slavery discourages arts and manufactures. The poor despise labor when performed by slaves. They prevent the emigration of whites, who really enrich and strengthen a country. They produce the most pernicious effect on manners. Every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant. They bring the judgment of Heaven on a country. As nations cannot be rewarded or punished in the next world, they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes effects, Providence punishes national sins by national calamities. He (George Mason) lamented that some of our eastern brethren had, from a lust of gain, embarked in this nefarious traffic....He held it essential in every point of view, that the General Government should have power to prevent the increase of slavery.

Shortly before his death, he told Thomas Jefferson that,

the Constitution as agreed to for a fortnight before the convention rose was such a one as he would have set his hand and heart to...With respect to the importation of slaves, it was left to Congress. This disturbed the two southernmost states, who knew that Congress would immediately suppress the importation of slaves...

"Under the coalition, the great principles of the Constitution were changed in the last days of the Convention," wrote George Mason. This founding father rejected the Constitution, refusing to put his signature to the document chiefly due to its exclusion of his views on slavery.

(Excerpted from, *The Christian Heritage of our Nation – U.S. Presidents and Their Churches* © copyright 1999 by Catherine Millard).

\*slowly but surely