

## NEW JERSEY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

But to conclude; we may expect that our negro-masters in general, like drowning men, will catch at every twig, at every shadow, to prolong, if possible, their reign over their black subjects. And in this point of light we may view those, who, ashamed to object generally against emancipating our slaves, have recourse to the plea of its being at present inexpedient. A wretched plea indeed! How can it be inexpedient to embrace the earliest opportunity to do justice? We have heretofore thrown the blame of the slave-trade, and our holding our negroes in bondage, upon the King and Parliament of Great-Britain.<sup>2</sup> But this pretext will serve us no longer. We are now at liberty to do them justice — to do to them as we would they should do to us were we in their situation. And if we withhold from them this justice, not only the stigma, but the iniquity must forever rest upon our own heads.

If our author has anything further to say upon the above subject, let him give us his name, or be treated with silent contempt; let him come forth from his lurking hole that we may be able to judge of the colour of his skin — that every true whig may have the pleasure of pointing at him when-ever he sees him pass, and of saying, There goes the wretch, who, even in this land of liberty, has the effrontery to vindicate tyranny.

A FRIEND TO JUSTICE.

1. Isaac Collins, publisher of the *Gazette*.

2. On several occasions in the eighteenth century the British government disallowed colonial laws which would have abolished the international traffic in slaves in America. Thomas Jefferson tried in vain to insert a paragraph in the Declaration of Independence blaming George III for the slave trade. In truth the argument is specious: regardless of the laws on the books, Americans were not forced to import or purchase black Africans and enslave them.

### 10 “Homo Sum” Advocates Gradual Emancipation Rather than Immediate Abolition

[*New-Jersey Gazette*, March 21, 1781.]

Even among the most vigorous opponents of slavery, only a few dared propose an immediate abolition of the iniquitous institution (see Doc. 6). Most favored a gradualist approach to black liberation. However, many citizens believed otherwise and thus opposed the antislavery movement because of the dire consequences that would supposedly result if the 10-12 percent of the population in slavery were suddenly given their freedom (see Doc. 8). In the essay below, “Homo Sum” sought to allay such apprehensions by assuring the public that those who had recently petitioned the legislature to abolish slavery

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desired gradual emancipation rather than outright abolition. His reassurances were to little effect, for the legislature did not seriously debate the issue for years to come and did not enact an abolition law until 1804. Apparently freedom was not a pressing matter to those who were already free citizens.

[March 21, 1781]

Mr. Printer,

I observed some time ago two pieces in your paper concerning the freedom of Negroes, tending to discourage a proposed law for their manumission. The first fully admits the injustice of slavery; the second admits it too, but with some reluctance, (as I have not the papers by me, I write, under correction, by memory) and hints that the iniquity is so very old, and very common, that in short it is *almost* no iniquity at all. Both however heartily concur in opinion, that a law for that purpose would be highly inexpedient at the present time.<sup>1</sup> As all their arguments are founded on a supposition that a total and immediate abolition of slavery is intended; should the fact appear to be quite otherwise, their reasonings will lose all their weight, and of course ought likewise to lose their effect. I had the honour to sign a petition, as did most of my neighbours, to the Legislature for the freedom of the Negroes; and I can assure those gentlemen, that an immediate and indiscriminate liberation was neither expressed in, nor intended by the petition; and we fully confided, as we ought to do, in the wisdom of that Honourable Body, that they would enact a law upon similar principles with the one then in force in the neighbouring state of Pennsylvania.<sup>2</sup> We wished indeed it might retrospect as far as the Declaration of Independence, that we might convince the world in general, and even our enemies, that it was not a partial, interested freedom we meant to assert and maintain, but that as soon as we had cast off for ever our shackles and pressures, which had too long borne down and obscured every generous motive of action, and found ourselves free to act agreeable to the dignity of human nature, our conduct should declare that we considered liberty as inherent and unalienable; and as far as our influence should extend, we would communicate it to *all* our fellow men. The freedom of those unhappy black people, induced in so very gradual a manner as it is in Pennsylvania, must remove every reasonable apprehension of danger to the state, or private loss to individuals. But should some inconveniences and embarrassments arise to the public, it is no more than we have a right to expect, as a punishment for our past oppression of them. The danger we have been in of losing our *own* liberty, may be a wise dispensation of Providence to awaken in us a juster sense of *theirs*. The national calamity of war, we cannot doubt, is sent as a punishment for national sins; because only in this life can states and kingdoms be punished: And it behooves us seriously to consider whether the just and merciful maker and father of all mankind is not now contending with us for the insult offered to his image and the workmanship of his hands, in depriving our fellow men of that liberty with which Christ has made them free, and insolently and impiously arrogating this privilege, as peculiar to ourselves alone, for no better reason but because our skins are white, when it has pleased the all-wise God to make the greater part of mankind of a different complexion.

As to the loss of private property upon this plan — to every good man it must appear very inconsiderable. But were it even greater than proposed, the heartfelt satisfaction and inward peace which are evermore the concomitants of conscious

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rectitude and justice, and the approving and *prospering* smiles of that God who alone *giveth increase*, will finally much better supply deficiencies than all the sneaking carnal prudence and interested wisdom in the world. The just man's children, says the good man when old, I never saw beg their bread. But, say these writers, like Felix<sup>3</sup> of old, *at a more convenient season we will hear you*. According to the forementioned plan, four or five and twenty long years must elapse before it has any effect, and as much more before it has a general effect; therefore there is not a moment to be lost in beginning it. Let us only place ourselves in *their* situation; or let but a good man and a conscientious patriot who finds himself wrong, and in spite of a supposed interest, wishes to be right, consider his *own* situation, and he would without hesitation pronounce—NOW IS THE TIME. Tolerando miseris succurrere disco, — by suffering myself I learn to succour the miserable, — was a Latin maxim I got by heart when a boy at school, but I never felt the force of it so sensibly as since the present troubles of my country began. I am an old man, and have had Negroes ever since I had property of my own, (it is true I treated them with humanity and kindness, as is generally the case in this part of the world) yet I never doubted they were chattel property as much as my horses and cattle, till my neighbour called upon me with the petition, of which the enclosed is a copy. The proposal at that time was entirely new to me; and interest condemned it before I heard it read. In obedience to the first mercenary impulse I declined signing it, with the most plausible evasion I could find, to save my credit; I avoided as much as possible talking upon the subject then, yet I could not get rid of the impression it made, and in a round-about manner (I acknowledge it with shame) I procured a copy, which I perused with leisure and seriousness; the result was, I cheerfully signed the petition soon after, and as I am informed it has been presented some considerable time ago to the Legislature, I presume, Mr. Printer, there would be no impropriety in printing it; perhaps it may carry the same conviction with it to others that it did to me: For I am convinced it is from want of thought and consideration alone that good men can oppose the measure.

However, the publication of that, or the scrawl that incloses it, is submitted to your better discretion. Happen as it may, I shall rest the better contented for having made an honest well meant attempt, altho' it should be judged an improper one.

HOMO SUM<sup>4</sup>

*The following is a Copy of the above mentioned Petition.<sup>5</sup>*

To the Honourable the Representatives of the Freemen of the state of New-Jersey  
in Legislative-Council and General Assembly convened.

The Petition of sundry Freeholders and Inhabitants of the county of —  
Humbly sheweth,

That your petitioners, inspired by that love of liberty which dilates and purifies the heart, and is abhorrent of slavery where-ever it is found, beg leave humbly to represent the distress they feel for their fellow men amongst them, doomed to hereditary and perpetual bondage.

Your petitioners are humbly of opinion, that the God of human nature, however he, in his wisdom, may think proper to diversify his own image in external appearance, yet whenever he breathes into it the rational and ever living soul, he likewise bestows every thing that is essential to the dignity of man; — the blessing of

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reason would otherwise be its curse. But should the conduct of sovereign wisdom be in any instance inexplicable to us, he has laid down a rule directory of our conduct; of perpetual obligation; too plain to be doubted; too positive to be evaded; — *To do to others as we would they should do unto us.*

That, in a political view, there appears an inconsistency between our principles of liberty and our conduct in this particular: And that Providence, who protects the inhabitants of the world, and hath hitherto, by its manifest interposition, supported us under pressures that otherwise might have sunk us into the depths of slavery, may still longer delay the completion of our hopes, however happy our prospects, while we thus contravene his benevolent purposes to mankind in general: For with little propriety can we expect or ask for those blessings for ourselves, which, though able, we are unwilling to bestow on others.

That we feel a degree of mortification that the state of New-Jersey, which has ever distinguished itself amongst the foremost in the union, for its animated exertions in favor of freedom, should be preceded by any other state in acts of liberality and disinterestedness; at the same time that we venerate the justice and magnanimity of the state of Pennsylvania in this instance.

That your petitioners are fully assured that arguments in favour of liberty are unnecessary with the *free* Representatives of a *free* People; and therefore beg you to consider, what we have said as an apology for the urgency with which we would press, and the earnestness with which we expect the total abolition of slavery amongst us: In such manner as you in your wisdom shall think most consistent with the safety of the state, and the happiness of those who are to be emancipated by it: That from the influence of your example, the mild sunshine of freedom may pervade and illumine every part of the continent, and brighten and animate every countenance of every different shade of complexion.

And your Petitioners shall continue to pray.

1. It is not known which specific essays the author has in mind, but inexpediency was an argument raised by "A Whig" (see Doc. 8).

2. The Pennsylvania abolition law of March 1780. See Doc. 8, note 4.

3. Roman governor of Judea (52-60 A.D.) under whose administration Paul was imprisoned for his religious teachings. Felix kept Paul in prison for two years hoping that he would buy his freedom.

4. Literally, I am a man; figuratively, a member of the human race.

5. Neither the date nor the origin of the petition is known. However, it was probably one of three memorials (one from Hunterdon and two from Morris County) presented to the assembly on September 18, 1780, "praying that a Law may be passed for the Abolition of Slavery." Because of the impending general elections, the petitions were referred to the next legislature. Sentiment in the new house was decidedly antagonistic to abolition. The legislators agreed by the narrowest of margins, 14-13, with Speaker Josiah Hornblower of Essex casting the tie-breaking vote, to the usually perfunctory second reading of the petitions. Then, one week later, upon a motion by Benjamin Van Cleve of Hunterdon with a second from Edward Bunn of Somerset, both of whom were opposed to abolition, the assemblymen voted by the overwhelming margin of 20-8 to file the petitions. There the matter ended; the representatives of the people were

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unwilling even to debate the momentous question of slavery versus freedom. *Votes and Proceedings, September 13-October 7, 1780* (Trenton, 1780), p. 262; *Ibid.*, *November 4-November 10, 1780*, pp. 20-21; *Ibid.*, *November 11-November 17, 1780*, p. 27.

### 11 The Reverend John Witherspoon on the Relationship Between Religion and Civil Society

[*Works of John Witherspoon*, 5:264-70.]

The revolutionary war had a deleterious effect upon the state of religion in New Jersey. Rival armies destroyed or severely damaged many churches by utilizing the commodious structures as hospitals, stables, or barracks. Clerics and communicants alike neglected or abandoned theological activities to attend to the more immediate problems of the world. And the righteous, crusade-like atmosphere that prevailed in 1775-1776, along with the so-called "Puritan ethic" that had steeled the citizenry for the austerity and self-sacrifice of the pre-revolutionary protest movement, gave way during the war to a general moral laxity marked by corruption, extravagance, acquisitiveness, and debauchery. After the war the churches were rebuilt and the spirit of religion once again moved men. But the postwar religious revival was as much political as it was spiritual. Whatever their sectarian differences, Jerseymen shared the belief that morality and virtue were essential in a republican society. To men like the Reverend John Witherspoon, the church was the institution best able to counter the current licentiousness and promote the kind of conduct and thinking that would lead to the salvation of the experiment in independence and self-government. In a thanksgiving sermon occasioned by the signing of the Treaty of Paris ending the war, the Presbyterian clergyman and college president eloquently described the secular function of religion in the new republic.

[April 1783]

... it is our duty to testify our gratitude to God, by usefulness in our several stations; or in other words, by a concern for the glory of God, the public interest of religion, and the good of others. This is the duty of every person, even of the lowest station, at all times. Even the meanest and most unconnected hath still some small bounds within which his influence and example may be useful. But it is especially the duty of those who are distinguished from others by their talents, by their station, or by office and authority. I shall at present consider it chiefly as the duty of two sorts of persons, ministers and magistrates, those who have the direction of religious societies, and those who are vested with civil authority. As to the first of these, they