

## NEW JERSEY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

But no cry of *necessity* can justify an act of treason or guilt; no fear of danger can excuse the commission of evil; no exigency of a state can acquit a subversion of its LIBERTIES by those who have sworn to maintain them. Should the plea of necessity be admitted, there would be an end to freedom, and no potentate, however tyrannical or unconstitutional his acts, could be deposed, or arraigned at the bar of justice.

For the *preservation* of liberty, it is necessary that those delegated to protect it should not only be acquainted with its *principles*, and be possessed or *probity*, but also of *strength* to repel the attacks of its *foes*, of *wisdom* to discard and confute the arguments of *subtlety* or *error*, when employed for its destruction.

It would afford an unhappy patient, in the agonies of death, no consolation to inform him that the fatal potion which occasioned his dissolution was ministered by inattention or ignorance, and not by wickedness. The effect to him would be the same; and it must add to his unhappiness to reflect that he hath lost his life by *thoughtlessly* entrusting it with a person of negligence or unskillfulness in his profession.

That the *life* and *vigor* of our *body politic* may be *preserved*, it concerns us to be extremely *attentive* to *whose care* we *entrust* it.

The preceding observations will tend to assist us in our judgment, at the ensuing election, of the ability of those who shall offer themselves for this trust.

*Yearly*, at least, wisdom calls upon us to *advert* to the *original state* of *floridity* and *health* of *this body*, and to *compare* it with its *present appearance*, and if we perceive its constitution *impaired*, as its malady can only be attributed to a defect of conduct in those to whose management it was committed, we should *immediately* employ that most *sovereign remedy* within our power, — *a change of our servants*.

A FREEMAN.

### 8 “A Whig” Opposes the Manumission of Slaves

[*New-Jersey Gazette*, October 4, 1780.]

As opponents of slavery stepped up their campaign to eradicate the evils of human bondage, they encountered increased resistance from those who feared the possible negative repercussions of abolition on society. Admitting the ideological and moral arguments against slavery, most of those who opposed antislavery activities based their opposition on pragmatic considerations. Abolition (destruction of the institution of slavery) or manumission (liberation of individual slaves) would create dissension and unrest at a time when unity was required to achieve independence. The servile labor force on the home front had to be continued while freemen were off doing battle with the British. Slaves were property and could not be taken from their owners without compensation.

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Blacks were not prepared for freedom and would become a burden to society. Africans were better off as slaves than many poor whites were as free citizens. Attacks on the institution of slavery by northern states would alienate the southern states and thus undermine national solidarity. And underlying every argument was the apprehension, if not fear, of what might result if 12 percent of the New Jersey population who were members of the Negro race became first class citizens in a previously white-dominated society. It was these practical considerations that prompted "A Whig," himself no defender of slavery, to take up the pen to counter what he considered to be the impractical, even visionary, objectives of the abolitionists.

[October 4, 1780]

Mr. Collins,<sup>1</sup>

To think what we please and to speak what we think, is an essential right of a freeman; and as it is the privilege, so it is the duty of every honest man in this land of liberty to examine all questions of a public nature, touching the welfare and happiness of the government under which he lives. In this light we may view a late publication in your paper, signed with the name of the author, on the subject of manumitting slaves.<sup>2</sup> The gentleman's design reaches farther, and appears to be more comprehensively beneficial to this class of men<sup>3</sup> than the late law in Pennsylvania,<sup>4</sup> but how far it may be consistent with *sound policy*, and the present situation of our affairs, will, in my poor opinion, bear some discussion. In this view I mean chiefly to take up the argument; in the course of which I shall address my reasonings to him as an inhabitant of this state, and a citizen of the United States in general.

The knowledge of human nature is a science at once the most useful and difficult, as it is that which must help us to direct and adopt the spirit of the laws by which men are to be governed. A strict moralist may lay down rules for the conduct of human life, and flatter himself into a belief that because they are the most just they are practicable; but in most cases an attempt of this nature would only serve to convince him of his errors, and the futility of his opinion. The business of the closet is one thing, that of persuading or convincing mankind very different. . . .

I hope no one will do me the injustice to think I am an advocate for slavery; my design in what I have as yet said is only to shew the fancifulness and enthusiastick turn of the argument made use of in the performance in question, which seems calculated rather to work on the imaginations than the good sense and sound judgment of the public, whilst other obvious reasons of irrefragable force with respect to the justice of the measure might have been substituted in their place.

I think, though it may be right and highly praiseworthy to set free the children of slaves to be born after a certain time, there are many weighty reasons of policy against freeing the present race of slaves at this crisis.

1. That at this time when many parts of the state in the neighbourhood of the enemy are laid waste and rendered desolate by the ravages of that army, and many families driven from their lands depend in a great measure on the labour of their slaves for a livelihood, it would be unreasonable to deprive them of their only support.

2. That as all slaves are in reality as much the property of their masters as the

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gold and silver for which they were bought, or may be sold, according to every idea of law and custom prevailing among us, they cannot be deprived of them without being paid the value, which will be a new and heavy tax upon the publick.

3. That there will be a considerable number of superannuated, diseased, and vagabond slaves, to be maintained at the publick cost, which will also be a heavy tax.

4. That the quantity of labour will be considerably lessened at a time when every nerve should be strained to furnish money and supplies for the maintenance of the army, on which our own liberty and property depends.

5. Because they are unfit for good commonwealth's men from their having all the habits of servitude deep rooted in their minds.

6. Because they are treated with a humanity unknown in other parts of the world, and are better off than the generality of white poor, who are obliged, those who have families, from their necessities to work harder than the slaves in general in this state.

But what shall we say when we consider the writer as a *citizen of the United States*, to the interest of all which some attention and duty are owing. What will an inhabitant of Georgia or the Carolinas think of these examples in the more northern parts of the American Republick at this distressing and critical time, when his very existence as a man, and that of his family and friends, depends on the obedience of the slaves, who are so much more numerous than the white inhabitants? The evils consequent upon so large a body of slaves, idle, ignorant, and helpless as they are in those countries, being liberated, or even possessed of the spirit of disobedience, would now be irremediable. Will the people of those states, deprived of the labour of their slaves, be able to furnish their respective quotas of the taxes towards sinking the present money, and the farther important purposes of carrying on the war? I cannot but imagine that if the writer were now in this predicament struggling with losses and misfortunes, the actual suffering of which would add a poignancy and weight to reasons of policy, he would find them operate in such manner as to induce him to change his opinion, which, if it becomes a measure of government, will, in my opinion, be attended with consequences pernicious if not fatal to the common cause.

I have heard within these few days that there is a probability of the law in Pennsylvania, for freeing the children of the present generation of slaves, being altered, if not repealed, on the ground of inexpediency.

A WHIG

1. Isaac Collins, publisher of the *Gazette*.
2. The essay by John Cooper which appeared in the September 20, 1780, issue of the paper (see Doc. 6).
3. Slaves.
4. Pennsylvania became the first state to provide for the abolition of slavery when its legislature passed an "Act for the gradual Abolition of Slavery" on March 1, 1780. The statute stipulated that children born in the state after March 1 were to be free citizens except that those born of slave women were to be servants until age twenty-eight.