



Does “All Men Are Created Equal” Apply to Slaves?

Calls for Abolition, 1773-1783

Throughout the revolutionary era, Americans chanted “SLAVERY” as a rallying call to oppose Britain’s autocratic rule. To be taxed unfairly was SLAVERY. To have British troops police them in their cities was SLAVERY. To be threatened with trial without jury was SLAVERY. To fail to defend one’s God-given natural rights of freedom was succumbing to SLAVERY. The irony of white men who owned or tolerated the enslavement of black Africans while stridently demanding their “natural rights” as men did not escape commentators at the time. Some directly called it hypocrisy and challenged Americans to live up to their ideals as stated in the Declaration of Independence. “Can it be believed,” questioned a clergyman in 1778, “that a people contending for liberty should, at the same time, be promoting and supporting slavery?”

1773. SLAVES’ PETITION to the Massachusetts legislature to end slavery, EXCERPTS.¹

One of numerous petitions in the revolutionary era submitted by enslaved or free black men, this entreaty begins by referring to the colony’s recent efforts “to free themselves from slavery,” i.e., Massachusetts’s resistance to British taxation and autocratic rule. The petition was printed by the Boston Committee of Correspondence and distributed to towns across the colony. The assembly denied the petition, but by the end of the century Massachusetts had virtually banned slavery in the state [see 1783, p. 5].

The efforts made by the legislative 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. We expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their *fellow-men* to enslave them. We cannot but wish and hope, Sir, that you will have the same grand object — we mean civil and religious liberty — in view in your next session. The divine spirit of *freedom* seems to fire every human breast on this continent, except such as are bribed to assist in executing the execrable plan.²

WE are very sensible that it would be highly detrimental to our present masters if we were allowed to demand all that of *right* belongs to us for past services; this we disclaim. Even the *Spaniards*, who have not those sublime ideas of freedom that English men have, are conscious that they have no right to all the service of their fellow-men, we mean the *Africans*, whom they have purchased with their money. Therefore they allow them one day in a week to work for themselves, to enable them to earn money to purchase the residue of their time, which they have a right to demand in such portions as they are able to pay for (a due appraisement of their services being first made, which always stands at the purchase money.) We do not pretend to dictate to you, Sir, or to the honorable Assembly of which you are a member. We acknowledge our obligations to you for what you have already done, but as the people of

this province seem to be actuated by the principles of equity and justice, we cannot but expect your house will again take our deplorable case into serious consideration, and give us that ample relief which, *as men*, we have a natural right to. . . .

WE are willing to submit to such regulations and laws as may be made relative to us until we leave the province, which we determine to do as soon as we can from our joint labors procure money to transport ourselves to some part of the coast of *Africa*, where we propose a settlement. . . . In behalf of our fellow slaves in this province, And by order of their Committee [of Correspondence].

PETER BESTES, SAMBO FREEMAN, FELIX HOLBROOK, CHESTER JOIE

1773. SUPPORT for the slaves' petition from an anonymous white man, EXCERPTS.³

Among the numerous statements of support for abolition in Massachusetts, especially among Quakers and Congregationalists, was this anonymous letter to the legislature published in *The Massachusetts Spy* and later printed as a pamphlet.

GENTLEMEN,

HAVING seen a Petition that is intended to be laid before you in the Name of many *Slaves* living in *Boston* and other Towns in the Province, praying [petitioning] that you would be pleased to take their unhappy State and Condition under Consideration and give them such Relief as is consistent with your Wisdom, Justice, and Goodness. I am led to make a few Observations on the Subject, which I hope may not be unuseful, previous to your taking it up.

FIRST. . . . we have been for a Number of years contending and struggling for the recovery of our natural and Charter Rights, and yet never appeared to consider that we act in direct opposition thereto. . . . I always understood (I hope I am not mistaken) that no Laws could be enacted contrary to the Charter, and it is plain that at the granting it there was an Intent that all People who should *ever* inhabit within the province should enjoy the same *Liberties* and *Privileges* as if in *England*; and, by a late [recent] memorable Case determined at the highest Court of Common Law at Home, it was decreed that *no Person can be held as a Slave, otherwise than by an express Law of the Country [colony] he lives in*, and that there is any such Law in the Province of the *Massachusetts Bay* I absolutely deny. Therefore I conceive you cannot in justice to the Negroes, your own Consciences, and the Spirit and Intention of the Charter, find that they are justly and legally kept in *Bondage* or that they shall be so in future.

SECONDLY . . . the Practice of making *Slaves* here . . . is expressly against the Laws of GOD, which are of higher Obligation than those of Nations or Provinces, as is mentioned in *Exod. xxi. 16.*⁴ *Levit. &c.*

THIRDLY. It is incompatible with the Laws which CHRIST delivered concerning our Duty one to another, and which is agreeable to the Rules of Nature and Society, *To do unto others as we would they should do to us.* . . . [A]s the very Idea of *Slavery* is so detestable to every generous Mind, and as we hear daily of Town Meetings and consulting upon the Infringements that have been lately made upon our

natural and Charter Rights, and passing Resolves to that Effect, pray what can we think of ourselves when there is hardly a head of a Family but has one or more Examples of *Bondage* in his House.

New York Historical Society

TO all Gentlemen VOLUNTEERS,
who prefer LIBERTY to SLAVERY, and are hearty
Friends to the GRAND AMERICAN CAUSE; who are

A representative use of *slavery* to spur action against British rule; recruitment broadside for a Massachusetts artillery company, 1777 (detail)

³ *The Massachusetts Spy*, 28 January 1773; presented here as published in 1777 in *The Appendix: Or, Some Observations on the Expediency of the Petition of the Africans . . . lately presented to the General Assembly of this Province*, Boston, 1777. American Antiquarian Society; in *Early American Imprints*, Doc. #12651; American Antiquarian Society with Readex/NewsBank.

⁴ Exodus 21:16: "Anyone who kidnaps another and either sells him or still has him when he is caught must be put to death." [New International Version]

WHEN the Petition comes before you, I hope, as I doubt not, you will think candidly of their dejected State, and beg you would revolve in your Minds the Ideas you entertain of *Liberty*, and Protestations you daily make against *Slavery*, and then I am positive you must give your Voice for *freeing* them, without [which] you act in Opposition to your own Sentiments, a Character unbecoming your Stations.

1776. DIALOGUE on the moral duty to emancipate slaves, EXCERPTS.⁵

Rev. Samuel Hopkins, pastor of the First Congregational Church in Newport, Rhode Island, delivered a direct moral challenge to slaveholders in a published dialogue. After the revolution slaveholders were excluded from membership in Hopkins's church.

- A.** SIR, What do you think of the motion made by some among us to free all our *African* slaves? . . . For my part, I think they carry things much too far on this head [point], and if anything might be done for the freedom of our slaves, this is not a proper time to attend to it while we are in such a state of war and distress, and public affairs of much greater importance demand all our attention and the utmost exertion of the public.
- B.** . . . if the slavery in which we hold the blacks is wrong, it is a very great and public sin, and therefore a sin which God is now testifying against in the calamities he has brought upon us [and] consequently must be reformed before we can reasonably expect deliverance, or even sincerely ask for it. It would be worse than madness then to put off attention to this matter under the notion of attending to more important affairs. This is acting like the mariner who, when his leaky ship is filling with water, neglects to stop the leak or ply the pump, that he may mend his sails. . . .
- A.** . . . I think if anything be said on this subject, it should be in private, and not a word of this kind should be lisp'd in the hearing of our servants [slaves], much less ought ministers to say anything about it in public lest the blacks should all take it in their heads that they are treated hardly, and never be easy till they are set at liberty.
- B.** . . . But if by this means any of our servants should be more fully convinced of their right to liberty and the injustice done them in making them slaves, will thus be such a dreadful evil? Would you desire they should be held in ignorance that you may exercise your tyranny without opposition or trouble from any quarter? . . .

The present situation of our public affairs and our struggle for liberty, and the abundant conversation this occasions in all companies [groups of people], while the poor negroes look on and hear what an aversion we have to slavery and how much liberty is prized, they often hearing it declared publicly and in private as the voice of all that slavery is more to be dreaded than death, and we are resolved to live free or die, &c. &c. This, I say, necessarily leads them to attend [be aware of] their own wretched situation more than otherwise they could. They see themselves deprived of all liberty and property, and their children after them to the latest posterity subjected to the will of those who appear to have no feeling for their misery, and are guilty of many instances of hard-heartedness and cruelty towards them, while they think themselves very kind . . .

They see [that] the slavery the Americans dread as worse than death is lighter than a feather compared to their heavy doom, and may be called liberty and happiness when contrasted with the most abject and unutterable wretchedness to which they are subjected. And in this dark and dreadful situation, they look round and find none to help — no pity — no hope! And when they observe all this cry and struggle for liberty for ourselves and children, and see themselves and their children wholly overlooked by us, and behold the *sons of liberty* oppressing and tyrannizing over many thousands of poor blacks, who have as good a claim to liberty as themselves, they are shocked with the glaring inconsistency and wonder they themselves do not see it.

⁵ Rev. Samuel Hopkins, *A Dialogue Concerning the Slavery of the Africans; Showing It to Be the Duty and Interest of the American Colonies to Emancipate All Their African Slaves*, 1776; American Antiquarian Society; in Early American Imprints, Doc. #14804.

1776. AN ENGLISHMAN'S CONDEMNATION of American hypocrisy, EXCERPTS.⁶

A British writer and abolitionist, Thomas Day responded to a letter from a southern American planter (who had read his poem "Dying Negro") requesting Day's opinion on freedom for American slaves — whether "duty required the sacrifice" in a time when white Americans were demanding equal rights and liberty for themselves. Day published his response in 1784, after the war.

With what face, sir, can he who has never respected the rights of nature in another pretend to claim them in his own favour? How dare the inhabitants of the southern colonies speak of privileges and justice? Is money of so much more importance than life? Or have the Americans shared the dispensing power of St. Peter's successors⁷ to excuse their own observance of those rules which they impose on others? If there be an object truly ridiculous in nature, it is an American patriot signing resolutions of independence with the one hand, and with the other brandishing a whip over his affrighted slaves.

If there be an object truly ridiculous in nature, it is an American patriot signing resolutions of independence with the one hand, and with the other brandishing a whip over his affrighted slaves.

If men would be consistent, they must admit all the consequences of their own principles, and you and your countrymen are reduced to the dilemma of either acknowledging the rights of your Negroes or of surrendering your own. — If there be certain natural and universal rights as the declarations of your Congress so repeatedly affirm, I wonder how the unfortunate Africans have incurred their forfeiture [of their natural rights]. . . .

The more attentively you consider this subject, the more clearly you will perceive that every plea which can be advanced upon it⁸ is the plea of interest⁹ and tyranny combating humanity and truth. You cannot hide from yourself, that every title you can allege must be a title founded upon fraud and violence, and supported by open and avowed injustice. Can anything be clearer than that a man who is born free can never forfeit his inheritance by suffering oppression, and that it is a contradiction to urge a purchase of what no one has a right to sell? . . .

Yes, gentlemen, as you are no longer Englishmen, I hope you will please to be men, and, as such, admit the whole human species to a participation of your unalienable rights. You will not, therefore, drag a trembling wretch from his cottage and his family. You will not tear the child from the arms of his frantic mother, that they drag on a loathsome existence in misery and chains. You will not make depredations upon your unassuming neighbours and, having spread desolation over a fertile country, reduce the innocent inhabitants to servitude. To do this, you must be monsters, worse, I fear, than the House of Commons and the English Ministry.¹⁰

1778. SERMON calling for Americans to honor ideals in the Declaration, EXCERPTS.¹¹

A Presbyterian minister in New Jersey, Rev. Jacob Green minced few words in deeming as hypocrites those Americans who would not demand an end to "negro slavery" while they were fighting for their liberty from Britain.

Can it be believed that a people contending for liberty should, at the same time, be promoting and supporting slavery? What foreign nation can believe that we who so loudly complain of Britain's attempts to oppress and enslave us are, at the same time, voluntarily holding multitudes of fellow creatures in abject slavery, and that while we are abundantly declaring that we esteem liberty the greatest of all earthly

⁶ Published after the war in a broadside, *Fragment of an Original Letter on the Slavery of the Negroes, Written in the Year 1776, by Thomas Day*, Philadelphia, 1784. American Antiquarian Society; in *Early American Imprints*, Doc. #18437. [Not to be confused with the free black North Carolina craftsman named Thomas Day]

⁷ Day, a Protestant, is making a critical reference to Roman Catholic popes.

⁸ I.e., every argument that can be presented for it.

⁹ Self-interest.

¹⁰ King's officials [not referring to clergymen].

¹¹ Rev. Jacob Green, *A Sermon Delivered at Hanover (in New Jersey), April 22nd, 1778, Being the Day of Public Fasting and Prayer throughout the United States of America*, 1779. New York Public Library; in *Early American Imprints*, Doc. #16296.

blessings? . . . In our contest with Britain how much has been said and published in favor of liberty? In what horrid colors has oppression and slavery been painted by us? And is it not as great a sin for us to practice it as for Britain? *Thou that sayest a man should not steal, dost thou steal?* Is not the hard yoke of slavery felt by negroes as well as by white people? Are they not fond of liberty as well as others of the human race? Is not freedom the natural unalienable right of all?

What say the Congress in their declaration of independence? “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness: that to secure these rights governments are instituted.” Thus [declares] the Congress. If liberty is one of the natural and unalienable rights of all men, as doubtless it is — if ’tis self-evident, *i.e.*, so clear that it needs not proof — how unjust, how inhuman but actually to violate this right? Britain is attempting to violate it; we in America have a long time been in the actual violation of it.

1783. A JUDGE’S ASSERTION of the unconstitutionality of slavery, EXCERPTS.¹²

In several cases known together as the “Quock Walker Case,” the Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court declared in his remarks to the jury that slavery was incompatible with the new state constitution of 1780. While the case did not mark an immediate end of slavery in Massachusetts, the state census of 1790 listed no slaves in the state.

The defense [offered] in this case . . . is founded on the assumed proposition that slavery had been by law established in this province. . . . It is true, without investigating the right of Christians to hold Africans in perpetual servitude, that they had been considered by some of the Provinces [to be] laws as actually existing among us, but nowhere do we find it expressly established. It was a usage—a usage which took its origins from the practice of some of the European nations, and the regulations for the benefit of trade of the British government respecting its then colonies. But whatever usages formerly prevailed or slid in upon us by the example of others on the subject, they can no longer exist.

Sentiments more favorable to the natural rights of mankind, and to that innate desire for liberty which heaven, without regard to complexion or shape, has planted in the human breast — have prevailed since the glorious struggle for our rights began. And these sentiments led the framers of our constitution of government¹³ — by which the people of this commonwealth [Mass.] have solemnly bound themselves to each other — to declare — that all men are born free and equal, and that every subject [person] is entitled to liberty, and to have it guarded by the laws as well as his life and property. In short, without resorting to implication in constructing [analyzing] the constitution, slavery is in my judgment as effectively abolished as it can be by the granting of rights and privileges wholly incompatible and repugnant to its existence. The court are therefore fully of the opinion that perpetual servitude can no longer be tolerated in our government, and that liberty can only be forfeited by some criminal conduct or relinquished by personal consent or contract.

¹² John D. Cushing, “The Cushing Court and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts: More Notes on the ‘Quock Walker Case,’” *The American Journal of Legal History* 5:2 (April 1961), pp. 132-133.

¹³ Referring to the 1780 constitution of Massachusetts.