

# The Founding Fathers and Slavery

Even though the issue of slavery is often raised as a discrediting charge against the Founding Fathers, the historical fact is that slavery was not the product of, nor was it an evil introduced by, the Founding Fathers; slavery had been introduced to America nearly two centuries before the Founders. As President of Congress Henry Laurens explained:

I abhor slavery. I was born in a country where slavery had been established by British Kings and Parliaments as well as by the laws of the country ages before my existence. . . . In former days there was no combating the prejudices of men supported by interest; the day, I hope, is approaching when, from principles of gratitude as well as justice, every man will strive to be foremost in showing his readiness to comply with the Golden Rule [“do unto others as you would have them do unto you” Matthew 7:12]. <sup>1</sup>

Prior to the time of the Founding Fathers, there had been few serious efforts to dismantle the institution of slavery. John Jay identified the point at which the change in attitude toward slavery began:

Prior to the great Revolution, the great majority . . . of our people had been so long accustomed to the practice and convenience of having slaves that very few among them even doubted the propriety and rectitude of it. <sup>2</sup>

The Revolution was the turning point in the national attitude—and it was the Founding Fathers who contributed greatly to that change. In fact, many of the Founders vigorously complained against the fact that Great Britain had forcefully imposed upon the Colonies the evil of slavery. For example, Thomas Jefferson heavily criticized that British policy:

He [King George III] 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. . . . 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 [that is, he has opposed efforts to prohibit the slave trade]. <sup>3</sup>

Benjamin Franklin, in a 1773 letter to Dean Woodward, confirmed that whenever the Americans had attempted to end slavery, the British government had indeed thwarted those attempts. Franklin explained that . . .

. . . a disposition to abolish slavery prevails in North America, that many of Pennsylvanians have set their slaves at liberty, and that even the Virginia Assembly have petitioned the King for permission to make a law for preventing the importation of more into that colony. This request, however, will probably not be granted as their former laws of that kind have always been repealed. <sup>4</sup>

Further confirmation that even the Virginia Founders were not responsible for slavery, but actually tried to dismantle the institution, was provided by John Quincy Adams (known as the “hell-hound of abolition” for his extensive efforts against that evil). Adams explained:

The inconsistency of the institution of domestic slavery with the principles of the Declaration of Independence was seen and lamented by all the southern patriots of the Revolution; by no one with deeper and more unalterable conviction than by the author of the Declaration himself [Jefferson]. No charge of insincerity or hypocrisy can be fairly laid to their charge.

Never from their lips was heard one syllable of attempt to justify the institution of slavery. They universally considered it as a reproach fastened upon them by the unnatural step-mother country [Great Britain] and they saw that before the principles of the Declaration of Independence, slavery, in common with every other mode of oppression, was destined sooner or later to be banished from the earth. Such was the undoubting conviction of Jefferson to his dying day. In the Memoir of His Life, written at the age of seventy-seven, he gave to his countrymen the solemn and emphatic warning that the day was not distant when they must hear and adopt the general emancipation of their slaves. <sup>5</sup>

While Jefferson himself had introduced a bill designed to end slavery, <sup>6</sup> not all of the southern Founders were opposed to slavery. According to the testimony of Virginians James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, it was the Founders from North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia who most strongly favored slavery. <sup>7</sup>

Yet, despite the support for slavery in those States, the clear majority of the Founders opposed this evil. For instance, when some of the southern pro-slavery advocates invoked the Bible in support of slavery, Elias Boudinot, President of the Continental Congress, responded:

[E]ven the sacred Scriptures had been quoted to justify this iniquitous traffic. It is true that the Egyptians held the Israelites in bondage for four hundred years, . . . but . . . gentlemen cannot forget the consequences that followed: they were delivered by a strong hand and stretched-out arm and it ought to be remembered that the Almighty Power that accomplished their deliverance is the same yesterday, today, and for ever. <sup>8</sup>

Many of the Founding Fathers who had owned slaves as British citizens released them in the years following America's separation from Great Britain (e.g., George Washington, John Dickinson, Caesar Rodney, William Livingston, George Wythe, John Randolph of Roanoke, and others). Furthermore, many of the Founders had never owned any slaves. For example, John Adams proclaimed, "[M]y opinion against it [slavery] has always been known . . . [N]ever in my life did I own a slave." <sup>9</sup>

Notice a few additional examples of the strong anti-slavery sentiments held by great numbers of the Founders:

[N]ever in my life did I own a slave. <sup>10</sup> JOHN ADAMS, SIGNER OF THE DECLARATION, ONE OF ONLY TWO SIGNERS OF THE BILL OF RIGHTS, U. S. PRESIDENT

But to the eye of reason, what can be more clear than that all men have an equal right to happiness? Nature made no other distinction than that of higher or lower degrees of power of mind and body. . . . Were the talents and virtues which Heaven has bestowed on men given merely to make them more obedient drudges? . . . No! In the judgment of heaven there is no other superiority among men than a superiority of wisdom and virtue. <sup>11</sup> SAMUEL ADAMS, SIGNER OF THE DECLARATION, "FATHER OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION"

[W]hy keep alive the question of slavery? It is admitted by all to be a great evil. <sup>12</sup> CHARLES CARROLL, SIGNER OF THE DECLARATION

As Congress is now to legislate for our extensive territory lately acquired, I pray to Heaven that they may build up the system of the government on the broad, strong, and sound principles of freedom. Curse not the inhabitants of those regions, and of the United States in general, with a permission to introduce bondage [slavery]. <sup>13</sup> JOHN DICKINSON, SIGNER OF THE CONSTITUTION; GOVERNOR OF PENNSYLVANIA

I am glad to hear that the disposition against keeping negroes grows more general in North America. Several pieces have been lately printed here against the practice, and I hope in time it will be taken into consideration and suppressed by the legislature. <sup>14</sup> BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, SIGNER OF THE DECLARATION, SIGNER OF THE CONSTITUTION, PRESIDENT OF THE PENNSYLVANIA ABOLITION SOCIETY

That mankind are all formed by the same Almighty Being, alike objects of his care, and equally designed for the enjoyment of happiness, the Christian religion teaches us to believe, and the political creed of Americans fully coincides with the position. . . . [We] earnestly entreat your serious attention to the subject of slavery – that you will be pleased to countenance the restoration of liberty to those unhappy men who alone in this land of freedom are degraded into perpetual bondage and who . . . are groaning in servile subjection. <sup>15</sup> BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, SIGNER OF THE DECLARATION, SIGNER OF THE CONSTITUTION, PRESIDENT OF THE PENNSYLVANIA ABOLITION SOCIETY

That men should pray and fight for their own freedom and yet keep others in slavery is certainly acting a very inconsistent, as well as unjust and perhaps impious, part. <sup>16</sup> JOHN JAY, PRESIDENT OF CONTINENTAL CONGRESS, ORIGINAL CHIEF JUSTICE U. S. SUPREME COURT

The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. . . . And with what execration [curse] should the statesman be loaded, who permitting one half the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other. . . . And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with His wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever. <sup>17</sup> THOMAS JEFFERSON

Christianity, by introducing into Europe the truest principles of humanity, universal benevolence, and brotherly love, had happily abolished civil slavery. Let us who profess the same religion practice its precepts . . . by agreeing to this duty. <sup>18</sup> RICHARD HENRY LEE, PRESIDENT OF CONTINENTAL CONGRESS; SIGNER OF THE DECLARATION

I have seen it observed by a great writer that Christianity, by introducing into Europe the truest principles of humanity, universal benevolence, and brotherly love, had happily abolished civil slavery. Let us, who profess the same religion practice its precepts, and by agreeing to this duty convince the world that we know and practice our truest interests, and that we pay a proper regard to the dictates of justice and humanity! <sup>19</sup> RICHARD HENRY LEE, SIGNER OF THE DECLARATION, FRAMER OF THE BILL OF RIGHTS

I hope we shall at last, and if it so please God I hope it may be during my life time, see this cursed thing [slavery] taken out. . . . For my part, whether in a public station or a private capacity, I shall always be prompt to contribute my assistance towards effecting so desirable an event. <sup>20</sup> WILLIAM LIVINGSTON, SIGNER OF THE CONSTITUTION; GOVERNOR OF NEW JERSEY

[I]t ought to be considered that national crimes can only be and frequently are punished in this world by national punishments; and that the continuance of the slave-trade, and thus giving it a national sanction and encouragement, ought to be considered as justly exposing us to the displeasure and vengeance of Him who is equally Lord of all and who views with equal eye the poor African slave and his American master. <sup>21</sup> LUTHER MARTIN, DELEGATE AT CONSTITUTION CONVENTION

As much as I value a union of all the States, I would not admit the Southern States into the Union unless they agree to the discontinuance of this disgraceful trade [slavery]. <sup>22</sup> GEORGE MASON, DELEGATE AT CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

Honored will that State be in the annals of history which shall first abolish this violation of the rights of mankind. <sup>23</sup> JOSEPH REED, REVOLUTIONARY OFFICER; GOVERNOR OF PENNSYLVANIA

Domestic slavery is repugnant to the principles of Christianity. . . . It is rebellion against the authority of a common Father. It is a practical denial of the extent and efficacy of the death of a common Savior. It is an usurpation of the prerogative of the great Sovereign of the universe who has solemnly claimed an exclusive property in the souls of men. <sup>24</sup> BENJAMIN RUSH, SIGNER OF THE DECLARATION

The commerce in African slaves has breathed its last in Pennsylvania. I shall send you a copy of our late law respecting that trade as soon as it is published. I am encouraged by the success that has finally attended the exertions of the friends of universal freedom and justice. <sup>25</sup> BENJAMIN RUSH, SIGNER OF THE DECLARATION, FOUNDER OF THE PENNSYLVANIA ABOLITION SOCIETY, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL ABOLITION MOVEMENT

Justice and humanity require it [the end of slavery]—Christianity commands it. Let every benevolent . . . pray for the glorious period when the last slave who fights for freedom shall be restored to the possession of that inestimable right. <sup>26</sup> NOAH WEBSTER, RESPONSIBLE FOR ARTICLE I, SECTION 8, OF THE CONSTITUTION

Slavery, or an absolute and unlimited power in the master over the life and fortune of the slave, is unauthorized by the common law. . . . The reasons which we sometimes see assigned for the origin and the continuance of slavery appear, when examined to the bottom, to be built upon a false foundation. In the enjoyment of their persons and of their property, the common law protects all. <sup>27</sup> JAMES WILSON, SIGNER OF THE CONSTITUTION; U. S. SUPREME COURT JUSTICE

[I]t is certainly unlawful to make inroads upon others . . . and take away their liberty by no better means than superior power. <sup>28</sup> JOHN WITHERSPOON, SIGNER OF THE DECLARATION

For many of the Founders, their feelings against slavery went beyond words. For example, in 1774, Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush founded America's first anti-slavery society; John Jay was president of a similar society in New York. In fact, when signer of the Constitution William Livingston heard of the New York society, he, as Governor of New Jersey, wrote them, offering:

I would most ardently wish to become a member of it [the society in New York] and . . . I can safely promise them that neither my tongue, nor my pen, nor purse shall be wanting to promote the abolition of what to me appears so inconsistent with humanity and Christianity. . . . May the great and the equal Father of the human race, who has expressly declared His abhorrence of oppression, and that He is no respecter of persons, succeed a design so laudably calculated to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. <sup>29</sup>

Other prominent Founding Fathers who were members of societies for ending slavery included Richard Bassett, James Madison, James Monroe, Bushrod Washington, Charles Carroll, William Few, John Marshall, Richard Stockton, Zephaniah Swift, and many more. In fact, based in part on the efforts of these Founders, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts began abolishing slavery in 1780; 30 Connecticut and Rhode Island did so in 1784; 31 Vermont in 1786; 32 New Hampshire in 1792; 33 New York in 1799; 34 and New Jersey did so in 1804. 35

Additionally, the reason that Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa all prohibited slavery was a Congressional act, authored by Constitution signer Rufus King <sup>36</sup> and signed into law by President George Washington, <sup>37</sup> which prohibited slavery in those territories. <sup>38</sup> It is not surprising that Washington would sign such a law, for it was he who had declared:

I can only say that there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it [slavery]. <sup>39</sup>

The truth is that it was the Founding Fathers who were responsible for planting and nurturing the first seeds for the recognition of black equality and for the eventual end of slavery. This was a fact made clear by Richard Allen.

Allen had been a slave in Pennsylvania but was freed after he converted his master to Christianity. Allen, a close friend of Benjamin Rush and several other Founding Fathers, went on to become the founder of the A.M.E. Church in America. In an early address "To the People of Color," he explained:

Many of the white people have been instruments in the hands of God for our good, even such as have held us in captivity, [and] are now pleading our cause with earnestness and zeal. <sup>40</sup>

While much progress was made by the Founders to end the institution of slavery, unfortunately what they began was not fully achieved until generations later. Yet, despite the strenuous effort of many Founders to recognize in practice that "all men are created equal," charges persist to the opposite. In fact, revisionists even claim that the Constitution demonstrates that the Founders considered one who was black to be only three-fifths of a person. This charge is yet another falsehood. The three-fifths clause was not a measurement of human worth; rather, it was an anti-slavery provision to limit the political power of slavery's proponents. By including only three-fifths of the total number of slaves in the congressional calculations, Southern States were actually being denied additional pro-slavery representatives in Congress.

Based on the clear records of the Constitutional Convention, two prominent professors explain the meaning of the three-fifths clause:

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It was slavery's opponents who succeeded in restricting the political power of the South by allowing them to count only three-fifths of their slave population in determining the number of congressional representatives. The three-fifths of a vote provision applied only to slaves, not to free blacks in either the North or South. <sup>42</sup> WALTER WILLIAMS

Why do revisionists so often abuse and misportray the three-fifths clause? Professor Walter Williams (himself an African-American) suggested:

Politicians, news media, college professors and leftists of other stripes are selling us lies and propaganda. To lay the groundwork for their increasingly successful attack on our

Constitution, they must demean and criticize its authors. As Senator Joe Biden demonstrated during the Clarence Thomas hearings, the framers' ideas about natural law must be trivialized or they must be seen as racists. <sup>43</sup>

While this has been only a cursory examination of the Founders and slavery, it is nonetheless sufficient to demonstrate the absurdity of the insinuation that the Founders were a collective group of racists.

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For more information on this issue see *George Washington, Thomas Jefferson & Slavery in Virginia, The Bible, Slavery, and America's Founders, Black History Issue 2003, Confronting Civil War Revisionism, and Setting the Record Straight* (Book, or DVD).

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## Endnotes

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