

George Mason's Views on Slavery

Taken from Gunston Hall: Home of George Mason

http://www.gunstonhall.org/georgemason/slavery/views_on_slavery.html

Background Information

George Mason (1725-1792) is perhaps best recognized as the principle author of the Virginia Declaration of Rights written in 1776. Among his peers, he was a respected member of the gentry class. Though not a lawyer, he had an expansive knowledge of Virginia land law and English constitutional law. Possibly the second largest slave owner in Fairfax County (after George Washington), Mason's views on slavery are revealed in his writings. He intensely disliked and disapproved of the institution and argued against it.

Outspoken in his sentiments from 1765 until the end of his life, George Mason was consistent in his arguments and ominous in his warnings. At the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787 he said:

Although opposed to slavery, Mason remained a slave owner until the end of his life. His lengthy will, which named 36 slaves individually, manumitted none of them.[3] George Mason clearly presents us with a paradox: Why did this prominent gentry slave owner argue in the public forum against the institution of slavery, yet free none of his own slaves? The following excerpts from his writings help to explore George Mason's attitude:

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1765: The Policy of encouraging the Importation of free People & discouraging that of Slaves has never been duly considered in this Colony, or we shou'd not at this Day see one Half of our best Lands in most Parts of the Country remain unsettled [sic], & the other cultivated with Slaves; not to mention the ill Effect such a Practice has upon the Morals & Manners of our People: one of the first Signs of the Decay, & perhaps the primary Cause of the Destruction of the most flourishing Government that ever existed was the Introduction of great Numbers of Slaves - an Evil very pathetically described by the Roman Historians - but 'tis not the present Intention to expose our Weakness by examining this Subject too freely.[4]

1773: [Slavery is] that slow Poison, which is daily contaminating the Minds & Morals of our People. Every Gentlemen [sic] here is born a petty Tyrant. Practiced in Acts of Despotism & Cruelty, we become callous to the Dictates of Humanity, & all the finer feelings of the Soul. Taught to regard a part of our own Species in the most abject & contemptible Degree below us, we lose that Idea of the Dignity of Man, which the Hand of Nature had implanted in us, for great & useful purposes. Habituated from our Infancy to trample upon the Rights of Human Nature, every generous, every liberal Sentiment, if not extinguished, is enfeebled in our Minds. And in such an infernal School are to be educated our future Legislators & Rulers. The Laws of impartial Providence may even by such Means as these, avenge upon our Posterity the Injury done a set of Wretches, whom our Injustice hath debased almost to a Level with the Brute Creation. These Remarks may be thought Foreign to the design of the annexed Extracts - They

were extorted by a kind of irresistible, perhaps an Enthusiastick Impulse; and the author of them conscious of his own good Intentions, cares not whom they please or offend.[5]

1787: *This infernal traffic [sic] originated in the avarice of British Merchants. The British Govt. 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 & manufactures. The poor despise labor when performed by slaves. They prevent the immigration of Whites, who really enrich & 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 can not [sic] 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....[It is] essential in every point of view that the Genl. Govt. should have power to prevent the increase of slavery.*[6]

1788: *The augmentation of slaves weakens the states; and such a trade is diabolical in itself, and disgraceful to mankind. Yet by this constitution it is continued for twenty years, As much as I value an [sic] union of all the states, I would not admit the southern states into the union, unless they agreed to the discontinuance of this disgraceful trade, because it would bring weakness and not strength to the union. And though this infamous traffic be continued, we have no security for the property of that kind which we have already. There is no clause in this constitution to secure it; for they may lay such a tax as will amount to manumission. And should the government be amended, still this detestable kind of commerce cannot be discontinued till after the expiration of twenty years. For the fifth article [of the Constitution], which provides for amendments, expressly excepts this clause. I have ever looked upon this as a most disgraceful thing to America. I cannot express my detestation of it. Yet they have not secured us the property of the slaves we have already. So that "they have done what they ought not to have done, and left undone what they ought to have done."*[7]

1792: *[Notes of Thomas Jefferson's conversation with George Mason:] The const[itutio]n as agreed to till a fortnight before the convention rose was such a one as [Mason] w[oul]d have set his hand & heart to....With respect to the import[atio]n of slaves it was left to Congress. This disturbed the 2 Southernmost states who knew that Congress would immediately suppress the import[atio]n of slaves. Those 2 states therefore struck up a bargain with the 3 N. Engl[an]d states, if they would join to admit slaves for some years, the 2 Southernmost states w[oul]d join in changing the clause which required 2/3 of the legislature in any vote. It was done. These articles were changed accordingly, & from that moment the two S[outhern]. states and the 3 Northern ones joined Pen[nsylvania]. Jers[ey]. & Del[aware]. & made the majority 8. to 3. against us instead of 8. to 3. for us as it had been thro' the whole convention. Under this coalition the great principles of the Const[itutio]n were changed in the last days of the Convention.*[8]