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The Historical Background for the Antebellum Slavery Debates, 1776–1865

The introduction to this volume has shown how the abolitionist crusade of 1830–65 grew out of an earlier antislavery movement that was largely religious in origin and character, and lacked the aggressive, demanding resolve of William Lloyd Garrison, Lydia Maria Child, Frederick Douglass, and Wendell Phillips. The documents that follow include representative texts from this antislavery debate during the year 1700, when Judge Samuel Sewall penned *The Selling of Joseph*, an antislavery pamphlet that criticized American chattel slavery by invoking biblical precedents. The final documents included here are Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence (1776) and Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" (1852), a critique of Jefferson's assertion that "all men are created equal" in the context of chattel slavery for African-Americans.

The antebellum slavery debates intensified early in the nineteenth century, particularly following the formation of the New England Antislavery Society in 1831 and the American Antislavery Society in 1833. The publication of David Walker's *Appeal* in 1830 and the commencement of William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* on January 1, 1831, marked a new era in abolitionist rhetoric and thought. The early antislavery advocates had generally argued for "gradualism," a deliberate evolutionary change in American society that would require the prohibition of the importation of slaves but would allow the gradual abolition of slavery through attrition and even colonization. In the eighteenth century, the religious and moral arguments that were mounted against slavery used scriptural texts to counter the biblical precedents of the Old Testament which proslavery advocates had used to support the institution. Garrisonians called for immediate and unconditional emancipation of the slaves, with no compensation for the slaveowners.

The moral and religious arguments were advanced well before the abolitionist crusade of the 1830s, but these pioneering voices were often, like John the Baptist's, "voices crying in the wilderness," speaking out in a society that was either opposed to any form of emancipation or simply indifferent to the moral ramifications of the issue. Prior to 1776, when Jefferson's Declaration of Independence argued the equality of mankind, a natural rights principle that grew out of Enlightenment doctrine, the eighteenth-century antislavery arguments were primarily developed out of scriptural texts or religious doctrine. The Enlightenment had effectively challenged the monarchies of Europe with a radically new view of humanity that disabled essentialist arguments concerning the nature of man, and these natural-rights views were fused with antislavery biblical reasoning to advance an early argument for emancipation. Ironically, it was this very

biblical precedent, particularly the Old Testament practice of enslaving captured enemies and the polygamous practice of holding female slaves during the Age of the Patriarchs (Genesis), that gave nineteenth-century proslavery advocates examples from Scripture to use against the abolitionists who demanded an immediate end to chattel slavery in the United States. The charter documents of the new nation set individual freedoms and human rights as the highest priority; biblical precedent included not only Christ's humane teachings but also the Old Testament slavery precedents and St. Paul's letter to Philemon, in which certain forms of slavery are clearly condoned. Moreover, several prominent founding fathers who were architects of the new government and authors of these charter documents, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, were themselves slaveholders, creating an inconsistency between theory and practice that plagued the nineteenth-century Congress as well as the framers of the Constitution.

For example, at the age of eleven, George Washington inherited ten slaves when his father died. Until the Revolutionary War, Washington really did not question slavery; there is no record of his having protested its existence or having written anything in opposition to it. He continued to hold slaves at Mount Vernon after his inauguration as president of the United States, and Martha Washington's dowry included slaves. Like most Southern plantation owners, Washington needed slave labor to develop his landholdings. When he was only nineteen years old, he already owned over fourteen hundred acres of Virginia farmland west of the Blue Ridge Mountains, having received much of this land in lieu of payment for his services as a land surveyor. Washington was paternalistic toward his slaves. He often referred to them as "my family" and considered Mount Vernon, his palatial Potomac estate, as their home. He even saw to their health maintenance and the care of their teeth, not because this was "good business" and would protect the investment in his property, but because he considered himself the patriarch of a large plantation family. It is significant that Washington did not participate in the selling of slaves, although he did purchase slaves for his estate. After the Revolution, Washington came to hate slavery and wrote, "it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted by the Legislature by which slavery in this Country may be abolished by slow, sure, and imperceptible degrees."

This "gradualist" approach to the termination of slavery was prominent in the tracts produced in the eighteenth century. The antislavery writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries included here used moral suasion and the Bible in different ways, but primarily to establish a moral position against the inhumanity of slavery as a societal institution. For example, Samuel Sewall argues that "manstealing" is morally wrong, a violation of God's ordinances, and he cites Exodus 21.16, which reads, "He that Stealeth a man and Selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to Death."

Similarly, Cotton Mather argues the Christian value of the African, his capacity for salvation, and the urgency for slaveholders to redeem themselves by Christianizing their slaves. "Who can tell but that this Poor Creature may belong to the Election of God! Who can tell but that God may have sent this

Poor Creature into my hands, so that one of the Elect may by my means be called; by my Instruction be made wise unto Salvation! The Glorious God will put an unspeakable glory upon me, if it may be so! The Consideration that would move you, to Teach your Negroes the Truths of the Glorious Gospel, as far as you can, and bring them, if it may be, to live according to those Truths, a Sober, and a Godly life. . . .” The Mathers owned slaves in Massachusetts before the new state outlawed slavery in 1783; Cotton Mather here essentially argues that Christian slaves would make better slaves for their having been introduced to the principles of the Christian faith.

In 1754, the Quaker John Woolman returned to the religious argument for the humane treatment of Africans, and writing some fifty years after Sewall and Mather, he argued for the emancipation of slaves if not for the equality of blacks and whites. “Why should it seem right to honest Men to make Advantage by these People [Africans] more than by others? Others enjoy Freedom, receive wages, equal to their work, at, or near such Time as they have discharged these equitable Obligations they are under to those who educated them. These have made no Contract to serve; been more expensive in raising up than others, and many of them appear as likely to make a right use of freedom as other People; which Way then can an honest man withhold from them that Liberty, which is the free Gift of the Most High to His rational creatures?” Woolman argues the humanity of the African, a conventional eighteenth-century Enlightenment doctrine which was challenged in the early nineteenth century by scientific and pseudoscientific theories about the natural inferiority of the black race. Woolman concludes: “Negroes are our fellow creatures, and their present condition amongst us requires our serious Consideration. We know not the time when those Scales, in which Mountains are weighed, may turn. The Parent of Mankind is gracious; His Care is over the smallest Creatures; and Multitudes of Men escape not this.”

Thomas Jefferson, like John Woolman, was troubled greatly by the obvious inhumanity of chattel slavery. However, Jefferson was also a product of his times, and, like George Washington, owned a large Virginia plantation which required labor to maintain. His *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1782) reveal that he was deeply divided over the slavery issue. On the one hand, he argued that slavery was wrong and that emancipation should be gradually adopted in the United States. Although he did not emancipate any of his own slaves until after his death, when some of his slaves were manumitted by the terms of his will, and although he is now known to have sired a child by a female slave, Sally Hemings, his argument in the *Notes on the State of Virginia* reflects an ambivalence toward the institution because of its inhuman practices. Still, Jefferson also outlines the racial differences between blacks and whites in *Notes*, and he concludes that these differences are immutable and eternal. Jefferson’s recapitulation of contemporary race theory arguments is not unusual. Henri Grégoire, a French scientist, countered Jefferson’s essentialist position in 1808, in his *On the Cultural Achievement of Negroes*. The British anthropologist James Cowles Pritchard (1788–1848) articulated widely influential views on race classification,

by which a hierarchy of races was established, and in Germany, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1742–1840) argued that there were five basic racial types, placing the Anglo-Saxon at the pinnacle of the polygenic chain, and the African at the bottom.

This development was, in retrospect, extremely important in establishing the European conception of the African. The eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment had embraced theories of race that stressed the unity of humanity, while recognizing that there were vast differences between specific persons, including racial differences, but it considered these differences to be variations or mutations on a common origin, and all humans were regarded to be developing progressively. Until the late eighteenth century, it was not difficult to establish the “humanity” of the African, even if it was problematic to establish his equality with the European. But with the rise of scientific reasoning and “race classification,” and the methodology of nineteenth-century researchers like Samuel Morton, J. B. Turner, Josiah Nott, George R. Gliddon, J. H. Van Evrie, and O. S. Fowler, serious challenges to the notion that “all men are created equal” were authoritatively advanced. A hierarchy of races was established not only in the scientific literature, but also in the popular cultural assumptions about race. Politically and socially, these perceived differences stripped the African of his freedom in chattel slavery, and among free blacks, of his right to vote and, in some instances, to own property, which was a precondition for enjoying the franchise. The historical debates about the “rightness” and “wrongness” of slavery would continue until the Civil War and the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery forever. However, the debates concerning the biological, social, and political equality of the African in America continued during Reconstruction and into the late nineteenth century, in such literary works as Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894), and into the twentieth century in such studies as Herrnstein and Murray’s *The Bell Curve* (1993).

Several information sources follow this introduction. First, there is a summary of the “Civil Condition of the Enslaved,” found in *Stroud’s Compendium*. Second, United States Census figures from 1790 to 1860, slave and free, are provided. Third, from the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute of Harvard University, Atlantic Slave Trade Project, is a summary of the number of slave voyages taken to the Americas between 1595 and 1867, a time frame in which there were a total of 26,807 known voyages. These data were compiled as of April 23, 1997. Readers should note that census statistics even today are inexact and, in some densely populated areas, rely heavily on estimates and projections. The census, taken every decade since the first United States Census was established in 1790, provides reliable but inexact data concerning the slave population. More exact data was obtained by the Atlantic Slave Trade Project concerning the number of transatlantic slavery voyages and the number of chattel slaves transported on each voyage, because the “cargo” was considered chattel or property of owners and investors, so that “bills of lading” and “inventory records” were meticulously kept to account for the sale of the cargo at the end of the voyage. Commercial accountability, in short, inadvertently provides the modern reader with more

than rough estimates about the extent and brutality of the transatlantic slave trade and its infamous “Middle Passage.” These are a few of the many statistical information sources now available, both in libraries and on-line, concerning the almost three centuries of slavery in North America. Readers are urged to make an on-line “Google” search using the keywords “slavery” and “middle passage” to obtain further information about this important phase of the history of slavery in the United States. Also, the Library of Congress web page provides sources for population data concerning slavery (www.loc.gov). The three sources contained here provide an overview of the three centuries of slavery in the Americas, with a focus on the United States, 1621–1865.

Stroud’s Compendium of the Laws of Slavery

Number of Americans Enslaved

The increase of the slave population in these United States, for the fifty years ending in 1830, has been as follows:

<i>Census of</i>	<i>Slaves</i>	<i>Total Population</i>
1790	697,697	3,929,827
1800	896,849	5,305,925
1810	1,191,364	7,289,314
1820	1,538,064	9,638,181
1830	2,010,436	12,856,407
1860	3,954,000 +	31,513,000 +

Hence, it appears that, according to the ratio of increase between 1820 and 1830, there must have been in 1835, not less than 2,245,144 slaves in these United States.

CIVIL CONDITION OF THE ENSLAVED

1. The master may determine the kind, and degree, and time of labor, to which the slave shall be subjected.
2. The master may supply the slave with such food and clothing only, both as to quantity and quality, as he may think proper.
3. The master may, at his discretion, inflict any punishment upon the person of his slave.
4. Slaves have no legal right to any property in things real or personal; but whatever they may acquire, belongs in point of law to their masters.
5. The slave, being personal chattel, is at all times liable to be sold absolutely, or mortgaged, or leased, at the will of his master.
6. He may also be sold by process of law, for the satisfaction of the debts of a living, or the debts and bequests of a deceased master, at the suit of creditors of legatees.

7. A slave cannot be a party before a judicial tribunal, in any species of action, against his master, no matter how atrocious may have been the injury received from him.
8. Slaves cannot redeem themselves, nor obtain a change of masters, though cruel treatment may have rendered such change necessary for their personal safety.
9. Slaves can make no contracts.
10. Slavery is hereditary and perpetual.
11. The benefits of education are withheld from slaves.
12. The means of moral and religious instruction are not granted to the slave; on the contrary, the efforts of the humane and charitable to supply these wants are discountenanced by law.
13. Submission is required of the slave, not to the will of his master only, but to that of all other white persons.
14. The penal codes of the slaveholding states bear much more severely upon slaves than upon white persons.
15. Slaves are prosecuted and tried upon criminal accusations, in a manner inconsistent with the rights of *humanity*.

Source Note: Stroud's Compendium of the Laws of Slavery (Boston, 1843).

Population Statistics from the U.S. Census for 1790–1860

<i>Census Year</i>	<i>Number of Slaves</i>	<i>Total Population</i>
1790	694,207	3,893,874
1800	887,612	5,084,912
1810	1,130,781	6,807,786
1820	1,529,012	10,037,323
1830	1,987,428	12,785,928
1840	2,482,546	16,987,946
1850	3,200,600	23,054,152
1860	3,950,546	31,183,582

The discrepancies between these official United States Census figures, which were taken from the Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, and those provided by George Stroud's *Compendium* may, in part, be reconciled by applying a uniform standard for counting citizens. In 1790, for example, the African slaves were counted as three-fifths of a person for the purpose of inflating the population figures for the slaveholding South, even though these persons were not allowed to vote or hold political office or own property. Even allowing for these differences in methods of computation, the ratio of non-slave to slave population for any given decade is remarkably similar in the two tables. The editor recommends that readers who wish further information consult the web site for the Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.

Summary from *The Atlantic Slave Trade Project*

*Summary of the information contained in the consolidated data
as of 23 April 1997*

<i>Type of information</i>	<i>Number of voyages for which information is known</i>
Places of ship's departure	19,899
Places of trade on the African coast	14,904
[Only intended places of trade reported]	[4,079]
Total voyages indicating African places of trade	18,983
Places of trade in the Americas	18,259
Places of trade in both Africa and the Americas	13,803
Numbers of Africans embarked on Coast	8,550
Average number [of slaves] per slave ship [embarkation]	330
Average number of slaves per slave ship [disembarkation]	284
At least one owner known	16,177

Notes: Number of voyages carrying slaves in the data-set (1595–1867): 26,807. Of the 11 million slaves transported to the New World following Sir John Hawkins's first transatlantic slave voyage in 1567, over half were carried by English slavetraders.

Source Note: Atlantic Slave Trade Project, W. E. B. Du Bois Center for African-American Studies, Harvard University, 1997.

The European Origins of American Slavery

by Arthur Kinney

One of the most tragic legacies of the Renaissance was the reinstatement of the slave trade. Gomes Eannes de Zurana, a member of the court of Portugal, attached to the king's brother, the famed Prince Henry the Navigator who has been given credit for the compass, is one of our earliest witnesses. He noted the arrival of a half-dozen hundred-ton caravels on the southwest point of the Algarve in Portugal. It was "very early in the morning" of August 8, 1444, when he saw the ships unloading a cargo of African slaves. They were placed in a large field, "a marvellous sight," according to an observer, "for, amongst them were some white enough, fair enough, and well-proportioned; others were less white, like mulattoes; others again were black as Ethiops, and so ugly, both in features and in body, as almost to appear . . . the images of a lower hemisphere." But Gomes thought differently. "What heart could be so hard," he notes in his chronicle,

as not to be pierced with their faces bathed in tears, looking one upon another. Others stood groaning very dolorously, looking up to the height of heaven, fixing their eyes upon it, crying out loudly, as if asking help from the Father of nature;

others struck their faces with the palms of their hands, throwing themselves at full length upon the ground; while others made lamentations in the manner of a dirge, after the customs of their country. . . . But to increase their sufferings still more, there now arrived those who had charge of the division of the captives, and . . . then was it needful to part fathers from sons, husbands from wives, brothers from brothers. No respect was shown to either friends or relations, but each fell where his lot took him.

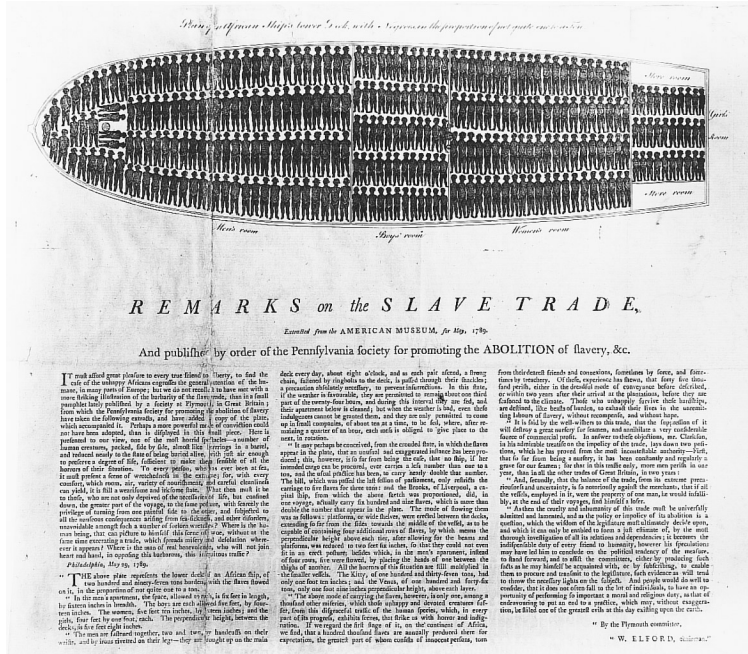
Gomes prayed to Fortune, but Prince Henry, standing by, watched impassively, claimed his “royal fifth,” forty-six of the slaves there, and gave thanks to his God for allowing him to save their souls for the Lord.

The slaves had been captured on an expedition through what is now the modern state of Sahara, or the northern part of Mauritania, led by Lancarote de Freitas, who had been brought up in the household of Prince Henry and had formerly been a collector of taxes. The practice of seizing slaves, or *razzias*, the practice of man-stealing, had long been carried out by Muslims and Christians in Spain and in Africa, but de Freitas’s was the first serious commercial venture sponsored in West Africa by Prince Henry. The merchants at Lisbon who had initiated the voyage had hoped for gold, but Prince Henry thought slaves just as good: the money he received from their sale could finance further expeditions, including those of pure discovery.

The demand for African slaves likewise grew in Spain. In 1462, Diogo Valarinho, a Portuguese merchant, was given permission to sell slaves in Seville, most of them from the river Senegal and Sierra Leone. By 1475, there were enough black slaves in Spain to require a special magistrate for them. The trade was not popular with all the Portuguese, who preferred black labor to drain their marshes and work their plantations of sugar, but the king of Portugal found such trade in Spain lucrative. One Czech traveler, Vaclav Sasek, noted in 1466 that the king of Portugal was, in fact, making more money selling slaves to foreigners “than from all the taxes levied on the entire kingdom.”

An even more infamous slave dealer was the Englishman John Hawkins, who established a famous trade triangle by taking slaves to the New World in exchange for gold, for “hides, ginger, sugars, and some quantity of pearls,” and then bringing these goods back to England. In his first voyage, his speculation was supported by his father-in-law, Benjamin Gonson, treasurer of the navy; Sir Thomas Lodge, who was lord mayor of London and a governor of the Russia Company as well as a trader to Morocco, North Africa, and Holland; and Sir William Winter, master of the naval ordinance; among others, Queen Elizabeth herself gave the voyage her blessing.

Hawkins sailed with three ships, leaving England in 1562. He picked up a pilot at the Canary Islands and then in Sierra Leone he captured at least 300 blacks “by the sword, and partly by other means.” In fact, however, he raided six Portuguese slaveboats. Hawkins then sailed across the Atlantic to Isabela, Puerto de la Plata, and Monte Cristi on the north side of Hispaniola, where he sold the slaves for rich hides, spices, and pearls. Illegally, he sent such smuggled



“Remarks on the Slave Trade,” showing a slave ship cross-section, by permission of Georgia Barnhill, Mellon Curator of Graphic Arts, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.

goods to Spain for sale, returning to England in 1563, after nine months at sea, his friend making “a good profit.” In 1564, he set sail again, with more of England’s nobility as his backers. Again he went to the river of Sierra Leone and on the land “to take inhabitants . . . burning and spoiling their towns.” With four hundred African captives, he again crossed the Atlantic, this time to ports along the Venezuelan coast. Again he bought rare goods with the currency of slaves. He returned to England by way of Florida, “with great profits to the venturers of the said voyage, as also to the same realm, in bringing home both gold, silver, pearls and other jewels” worth 50,000 ducats in gold, according to the Spanish ambassador in London. This time Queen Elizabeth had less pretense: even as Hawkins boasted he made a 60 percent profit, the Queen knighted him. In response, the slave trader took for his crest the image of a black female African. Hawkins’s shamelessness was identical, except, perhaps, in degree, to the English court of the Renaissance and to the Queen “of glorious memory” herself.

Source Note: The script of this “Renaissance Moment” was broadcast on NPR’s “Morning Edition,” hosted on WFCR by Bob Paquette, on February 6, 2002, in acknowledgment of Black History Month, by Arthur F. Kinney.

SAMUEL SEWALL (1632–1730) AND JOHN SAFFIN (1632–1710)

Samuel Sewall and John Saffin engaged in one of the earliest “slavery debates” framed in the Americas. Sewall was a Massachusetts judge, and he was also an outspoken opponent of slavery as an institution. He was not only one of the Massachusetts Bay Colony’s most distinguished jurists and lawyers; he was also a successful merchant and an early American political figure. His prominence was also controversial: in 1692, he participated actively in the Salem Witchcraft trials that sent the accused to the gallows. However, in 1696, Sewall had the courage to recant his actions in a public confession while his colleagues and fellow jurists remained silent. The following excerpts are from his tract, *The Selling of Joseph*, which was published on June 12, 1700, and stands as one of the first antislavery pamphlets printed in America. (A Quaker document protesting the slave trade had appeared as early as 1687; however, Sewall’s tract opposes not only the horrors of the slave trade but the injustices of the institution itself, and is one of the very earliest objections to the “peculiar institution.”)

The full text of *The Selling of Joseph* shows clearly that Sewall condemned chattel slavery; however, it also reveals a writer who was familiar with contemporary race theory and who accepted the inherent inferiority of the African to the white. Modern readers should consider what Sewall meant when he regarded the African in America as a type of “extravasat Blood,” or a separate biological group within the “Body Politick.” But he sets out the arguments not only about slavery as an institution, but also concerning full racial equality, that would be debated throughout the nineteenth century.

John Saffin was Samuel Sewall’s contemporary, and a vocal critic of Sewall’s position on slavery. He was a successful merchant, a slave dealer and slave trader, and, in 1701, at the time of his writing a response to Sewall’s pamphlet, he was a member of the same judicial court as Sewall. Sewall condemned Saffin privately, and Saffin replied publicly to Sewall in *A Brief Candid Answer to a Late Printed Sheet Entitled, The Selling of Joseph* (1701). Saffin’s document is one of the earliest defenses of the institution on record. It had been lost until George H. Moore (1823–92) discovered a copy and published it in an appendix to his *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts* (1866). The most comprehensive account of the controversy between Sewall and Saffin is Lawrence W. Towner’s “The Sewall-Saffin Dialogue on Slavery” (see “Suggestions for Further Reading” at the end of this headnote). See also Louis Ruchames, *Racial Thought in America from the Puritans to Abraham Lincoln*.

According to Larry Tise, John Saffin, who owned slaves and was a trader himself, was very annoyed by Sewall’s accusations that he was, in the biblical sense of the term, a “manstealer,” so he developed some twenty arguments in defense of slavery, all of which were used, with a dozen or so others, to defend the institution right up to the time of the Civil War.

After upholding his right of ownership of the slave in question, Saffin appealed directly to Biblical sanction, and the example set by the Hebrew patriarchs. Since Abraham owned slaves, “our Imitation of him in his Moral Action, is as warrantable as that of adopting his Faith.” Not choosing to argue that “Blackamores are of the Posterity of Cham, and therefore under the Curse of Slavery,” Saffin held that “any lawful Captives of Other Heathen Nations may be made Bond men.” But “Tis unlawful,” he admitted, “for Christians to Buy and Sell one another for slaves.” [p. 17]

In other words, ownership of human beings is only sanctioned by God in the Old Testament when those humans are heathen and therefore inferior. This traditional argument was used regularly in the six decades before the Civil War, and it was coupled with another proslavery argument, that the transportation of the heathen Africans to the Americas afforded them the opportunity to become “civilized Christians,” which they would not have had by remaining in Africa. Tise continues,

Saffin then turned to the rights of man and challenged Sewall’s notion that the sons of Adam “have equal right to Liberty, and all other Comforts of Life.” By no means an equalitarian, Saffin argued that God had intentionally set “different Orders and Degrees of Men in the World,” and that any push toward equality would be “to invert the Order that God had set.” Phrasing a statement that was repeated endlessly in the proslavery literature on the eve of the Civil War, Saffin wrote that God had ordained “some to be High and Honourable, some to be Low and despicable; some to be Monarchs, Kings, Princes, and Governours, Masters and Commanders, others to be Subjects, and to be Commanded; Servants of sundry sorts and degrees, bound to obey; yea, some to be born Slaves, and so to remain during their lives.” [p. 17]

Besides upholding slavery as a blameless and natural social institution, Saffin used cynically and unnecessarily cruel phrasing that is degrading to the African. The poem that appears at the end of Saffin’s excerpt is an example of this writing and has been included for that reason.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Ruchames, Louis. *Racial Thought in America from the Puritans to Abraham Lincoln*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1964.
- Tise, Larry. *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701–1840*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987.
- Towner, Lawrence W. “The Sewall-Saffin Dialogue on Slavery.” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3:21 (Jan. 1964): 40–52.
- Von Frank, Albert J. “John Saffin: Slavery and Racism in Colonial Massachusetts.” *Early American Literature* 29 (1962): 254–73.
- Winslow, Ola E. *Samuel Sewall: A Life*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1963.

The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial

by Samuel Sewall

Forasmuch as LIBERTY is in real value next unto LIFE: None ought to part with it themselves, or deprive others of it, but upon most mature Consideration.

The Numerousness of Slaves at this day in the Province, and the Uneasiness of them under their Slavery, hath put many upon thinking whether the Foundation of it be firmly and well laid; so as to sustain the Vast Weight that is built upon it. It is most certain that all Men, as they are the Sons of *Adam*, are Coheirs; and have equal Right unto Liberty, and all their outward Comforts of Life. God hath given the Earth [with all its Commodities] unto the Sons of *Adam*, *Psal.* 115.16. And hath made of One Blood, all Nations of Men, for to dwell on all the faces of the Earth, and hath determined the Times before appointed and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord. Forasmuch then as we are the Offspring of God, *Acts* 17.26, 27, 29. Now, although the title given by the last ADAM, doth infinitely better Men's Estates, respecting GOD and themselves; and grants them a most beneficial and inviolable Lease under the Broad Seal of Heaven, who were before only Tenants at Will; Yet through the Indulgence of GOD to our First Parents after the Fall, the outward Estate of all and every of their Children, remains the same, as to one another. So that Originally, and Naturally, there is no such thing as Slavery. *Joseph* was rightfully no more a Slave to his Brethren, than they were to him; and they had no more Authority to Sell him, than they had to Slay him. And if they had nothing to do to Sell him, the *Isbmaelites* bargaining with them, and paying down Twenty pieces of Silver, could not make a Title. Neither could *Potiphar* have any better Interest in him than the *Isbmaelites* had. *Gen.* 37.20, 27, 28. . . .

And seeing GOD hath said, *He that Stealeth a man and Selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to Death.* *Exod.* 21.16. This Law being of Everlasting Equity, when Man Stealing is ranked amongst the most atrocious of the Capital Crimes: What louder Cry can there be made of that Celebrated Warning, *Caveat Emptor?*

And all things considered, it would conduce more to the Welfare of the Province, to have Slaves for Life. Few can endure to hear of a Negro's being made free; and, indeed, they can seldom use their freedom well; yet, their continual aspiring after their forbidden Liberty, renders them Unwilling Servants. And there is such disparity in their Conditions, Colour & Hair, that they can never embody with us, and grow up into orderly Families, to the Peopling of the Land still remain in our Body Politick as a kind of extravasat Blood.

Moreover, it is too well known what Temptations Masters are under, to connive at the Fornication of their Slaves; lest they should be obligated to find them Wives, or pay their Fines.

It is likewise most lamentable to think, how in taking Negroes out of *Africa*, and Selling of them here, That which GOD ha's joined together men do boldly render asunder; Men from their Country, Husbands from their Wives, Parents from their Children. How horrible is the Uncleanness, Mortality, if not Murder,

that the ships are guilty of that bring great Crouds of the miserable men, and women. Methinks, when we are bemoaning the barbarous usage of our Friends and Kinsfolk in *Africa*: it might not be unreasonable to enquire whether we are not culpable in forcing the *Africans* to become Slaves amongst our selves. . . .

Obj. 1. *These Blackamores are of the Posterity of Cham, and therefore are under the Curse of Slavery. Gen. 9.25, 26, 27.*

Answ. Of all Offices, one would not beg this, *viz.* Uncalled for, to be Executioner of the Vindictive Wrath of God; the extent and duration of which is to us uncertain. If this ever was a Commission; How do we know but that it is long since out of Date? Many have found it to their Cost, that a Prophetical Denunciation of Judgment against a Person or People, would not warrant them to inflict that Evil. If it would, *Hazel* might justify himself in all he did against his Master and the *Israelites*, from 2 *Kings* 8.10, 12. . . .

But it is possible that by cursory reading, this Text may have been mistaken. For *Canaan* is the person Cursed three times over, without the mentioning of *Cham*. Good expositors suppose the Curse entailed on him, and that this Prophecie was accomplished in the Extirpation of the *Canaanites*. . . .

Obj. 2. *The Nigers are brought out of Pagan Country, into places where the Gospel is Preached.*

Answ. Evil must not be done, that good may come of it. The extraordinary and comprehensive Benefit accruing to the Church of God, and to *Joseph* personally, did not rectify his brethren's Sale of him. . . .

Obj. 3. *The Africans have Wars one with another; Our ships bring lawful Captives taken in those Wars.*

Answ. For ought is known, their Wars are much such as were between *Jacob's* Sons and their Brother *Joseph*. An Unlawful War can't make lawful Captives. And by Receiving, we are in danger to promote, and partake in their Barbarous Cruelties. *Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even to them: for this is the Law and the Prophets. Matt. 7.12.* . . .

Obj. 4. *Abraham had Servants bought with his Money, and born in his House.*

Answ. Until the Circumstance of *Abraham's* purchase be recorded, no Argument can be drawn from it. In the mean time, Charity obliges us to conclude that he knew it was lawful and good. . . .

It is Observable that the Israelites were strictly forbidden the buying or selling of one another for Slaves. Levit. 25.39, 56. Jer. 34.8 . . . 22. And GOD gauged His Blessing in lieu of any loss they might conceit they suffered thereby. Deut. 15.18. And since the partition Wall is broken down, inordinate Self love should likewise be demolished. GOD expects that Christians should be of a more Ingenuous and benign frame of spirit. Christians should carry it to all the World, as the Israelites were to carry it towards another. And for men obstinately to persist in holding their Neighbors and Brethren under the Rigor of perpetual Bondage, seems to be no proper way of gaining Assurance that God ha's given them Spiritual Freedom. . . .

Source Note: Louis Ruchames, Racial Thought in America from the Puritans to Abraham Lincoln (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1964), with permission of Bruce

Wilcox, Director. Originally printed by Bartholomew Green and John Allen, June 24, 1700.

A Brief, Candid Answer to a Late Printed Sheet, Entitled, The Selling of Joseph
by John Saffin

That Honourable and Learned Gentleman, the Author of a Sheet, Entitled, *The Selling of Joseph, A Memorial*, seems from thence to draw this conclusion, that because the Sons of *Jacob* did very ill in selling their Brother *Joseph* to the *Ishmaelites*, who were Heathens, therefore it is utterly unlawful to Buy and Sell Negroes, though among Christians; which Conclusion I presume is not well drawn from the Premises, nor is the case parallel; for it was unlawful for the *Israelites* to sell their Brethren upon any account, or pretence whatsoever during life. But it was not unlawful for the Seed of *Abraham* to have Bond men, and Bond women either born in their House, or bought with their Money, as it written of *Abraham*, *Gen.* 14.14 & 21.10 & *Exod.* 21.16 & *Levit.* 25.44, 45, 46. After the giving of the Law: And in *Josh.* 9.23. That famous Example of the Gibeonites is a sufficient proof where there [is] no other. . . .

So God hath set different Orders and Degrees of Men in the World, both in Church and Common weal. Now, if this Position of parity should be true, it would then follow that the ordinary Course of Divine Providence of God in the World should be wrong, and unjust (which we must not dare to think, much less to affirm) and all the sacred Rule, Precepts and Commands of the Almighty which he hath given the Son of Men to observe and keep in their respective Places, Orders and Degrees, would be to no purpose; which unaccountably derogate from the Divine Wisdom of most High, who hath made nothing in vain, but hath Holy Ends in all his Dispensation to the Children of men. . . .

Our Author doth further proceed to answer some Objections of his own framing, which he supposes some might raise.

Object. 1. *That these Blackamores are of the Posterity of Cham and therefore under the Curse of Slavery. Gen.* 9.25, 26, 27. The which the Gentleman seems to deny, saying, *they were the Seed of the Canaan that were Cursed.*

Answ. Whether they were so or not, we shall not dispute: this may suffice, that not only the seed of *Cham* or *Canaan*, but any lawful Captives of other Heathen Nations may be made Bond men as hath been proved. . . .

Obj. 2. *That the Negroes are brought out of Pagan Countreys into places where the Gospel is Preached.* To which he Replies, *that we must not doe Evil that good may come of it.*

Answ. To which we answer, That it is no Evil thing to bring them out of their own Heathenish Country, where they may have the Knowledge of the True God, be Converted and Eternally saved. . . .

Obj. 3. *The Africans have Wars one with another*, our Ships bring lawful Captives taken in those Wars.

To which our Author answers Conjecturally, and Doubtfully, *for ought we know*, that may or may not be; which is insignificant and proves nothing. He

also compares the Negroes with another, with the Wars between *Joseph* and his Brethren. But where doth he read of any such War? . . .

By all which it doth evidently appear both by Scripture and Reason, the practice of the People of God in all Ages, both before and after the giving of the Law, and in the times of the Gospel, that there were Bond men, Women and Children commonly kept by holy and good men, and improved in Service: and therefore by the Command of God, *Lev.* 25.44, and their venerable Example, we may keep Bond men, and use them in our Service still; yet with all candour, moderation and Christian prudence, according to their state and condition consonant to the Word of God. . . .

THE NEGROES CHARACTER.

*Cowardly and cruel are those Blacks Innate,
Prone to Revenge, Imp of inveterate hate.
He that exasperates them, soon espies
Mischief and murder in their very eyes.
Libidinous, Deceitful, False and Rude,
The Spume Issue of the Ingratitude.
The Premeses consider'd, all may tell,
How near good Joseph they are parallel. . . .*

Source Note: Louis Ruchames, *Racial Thought in America from the Puritans to Abraham Lincoln* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1964), with permission of Bruce Wilcox, Director.

JOHN WOOLMAN (1720–1772)

John Woolman was born in Burlington County, New Jersey, near Mount Holly, a settlement of Quakers. Because Woolman attended school in Mount Holly, his early views were deeply influenced by Quaker doctrines of nonviolence, passive resistance, and opposition to slavery. It is significant that the first antislavery pamphlet published in America was a Quaker document, issued in 1687. Woolman rejected the Calvinist concept of “innate depravity” or “original sin” and the doctrines of “election” and “predestination,” which had characterized the Great Awakening ministry of Jonathan Edwards. Instead, Woolman’s simple theology advocated universal redemption through Christ and a belief in the “inner light” through which individual believers might come to know God. But like Quakers throughout history, Woolman found his conscience in conflict with the theocracy of New England Puritanism, and he was uncomfortable as a businessman because of the profit motive and particularly because one commodity was slaves. His *Journal* was first published in 1774, and it is a deeply sensitive and personal account of the struggles of his conscience, from the killing of a robin when he was quite young to his later distress over having drafted an indenture for the sale of a slave, a task he resolved never to repeat. The latter decision would govern

his later life, namely, that he would never again participate in the institution of slavery and that he would work to end its practice.

Woolman was essentially self-educated, and practiced surveying early in his adult life; then he became a scrivener in a lawyer's office where he was responsible for the drafting of wills, indentures, bills of sale, and other legal documents. He was an extremely popular writer because of his intensely personal style. Woolman's *Journal* was preceded by his mid-century publication, *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, in which he argued that "the Colour of a Man avails nothing, in Matters of Right and Equity." The manuscript of this book was completed by 1747, but it was not published until 1754.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Critical and analytical studies include Daniel Shea, *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), and Mason Lowance, "Biography and Autobiography in Early America," in Emory Elliott, ed., *The Columbia Literary History of the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). See also the following.

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Medeiros, Patricia M. "Three Travelers: Carver, Bartram, and Woolman." In *American Literature, 1764–1789: The Revolutionary Years*, ed. Everett Emerson. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977, 195–211.

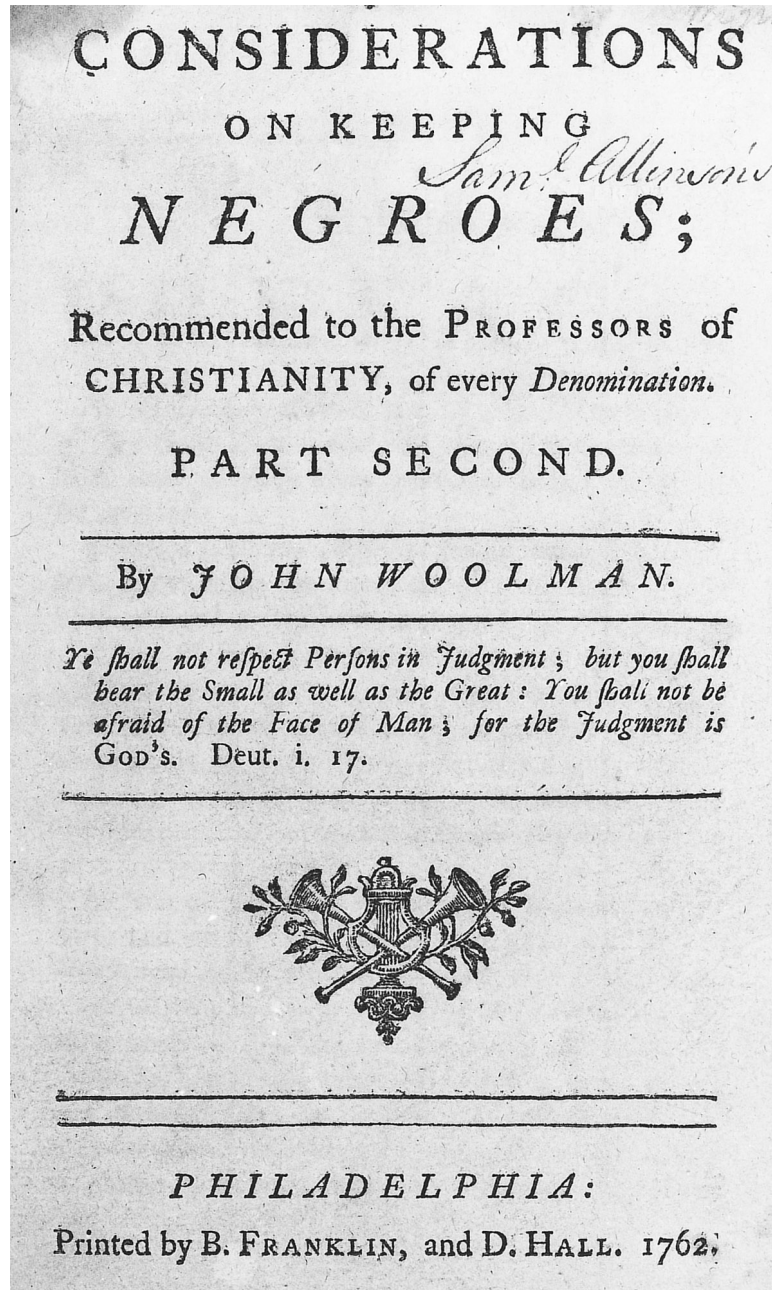
Rosenblatt, Paul. *John Woolman*. New York: Twayne, 1969.

Sox, David. *John Woolman: Quintessential Quaker, 1720–1772*. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1999.

Stewart, Margaret E. "John Woolman's 'Kindness beyond Expression': Collective Identity vs. Individualism and White Supremacy." *Early American Literature* 26 (1991): 251–75.

Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes by John Woolman

To consider mankind otherwise than Brethren, to think Favours are peculiar to one Nation, and exclude others, plainly supposes a Darkness in the Understanding: for as God's Love is universal, so where the Mind is sufficiently influenced by it, it begets a Likeness of itself, and the Heart is enlarged towards all Men. . . .



"Considerations on Keeping Negroes," the title page of John Woolman's treatise, printed by Benjamin Franklin, by permission of Georgia Barnhill, Mellon Curator of Graphic Arts, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.

Through the Force of long Custom, it appears needful to speak in Relation to Colour. Suppose a white Child, born of Parents of the meanest Sort, who died and left him an Infant, fall into the Hands of a Person, who endeavours to keep him a Slave, some men would account him an unjust Man in doing so, who yet appear easy while many Black People of honest Lives, and good Abilities, are enslaved, in a Manner more shocking than the case here supposed. This is owing chiefly to the Idea of Slavery being connected with the Black Colour, and Liberty with the White: And where false Ideas are twisted into our Minds, it is with Difficulty we get fairly disentangled. . . .

The Colour of a Man avails nothing, in Matters of Right and Equity. Consider Colour in Relation to Treaties; by such Disputes betwixt nations are sometimes settled. And should the Father of us all so dispose Things, that Treaties with black Men should sometimes be necessary, how then would it appear amongst the Princes and Ambassadors, to insist on the Prerogative of the white Colour?

The Blacks seem far from being our Kinsfolk, and did we find an agreeable Disposition and sound Understanding in some of them, which appeared as a good Foundation for a true Friendship between us, the Disgrace arising from an open Friendship with a Person of so vile a Stock, in the common Esteem, would naturally tend to hinder it. . . .

So that, in their present Situation, there is not much to engage the Friendship, or move the Affection of selfish Men: But such who live in the Spirit of true Charity, to sympathise with the Afflicted in the lowest Stations, is a Thing familiar to them. . . .

Though there were Wars and Desolations among *Negroes*, before the *Europeans* began to trade there for Slaves, yet now the Calamities are greatly increased, so many Thousands being annually brought from thence; and we, by purchasing them, with Views of self-interest, are becoming Parties with them, and accessory to that Increase.

In the present Case, relating to Home-born *Negroes*, whose Understandings and Behaviour are as good as common among other People, if we have any Claim to them as Slaves, that Claim is grounded on their being Children or Offspring of Slaves, who, in general, were made such through Means as unrighteous, and attended with more terrible Circumstance than the Case here supposed. . . .

Why should it seem right to honest Men to make Advantage by these People more than by others? Others enjoy Freedom, receive Wages, equal to their Work, at, or near, such Time as they have discharged these equitable Obligations they are under to those who educated them. These have made no Contract to serve; been no more expensive in raising up than others, and many of them appear as likely to make a right Use of Freedom as other People; which Way, then, can an honest Man withhold from them that Liberty, which is the free Gift of the Most High to his rational Creatures?

The *Negroes* who live for Plunder, and the Slave-Trade, steal poor innocent Children, invade their Neighbours' Territories, and spill much Blood to get

these Slaves: And can it be possible for an honest Man to think that, with a View to Self-interest, we may continue Slavery to the Offspring of these unhappy Sufferers, merely because they are the Children of Slaves, and not have a Share of this Guilt. . . .

Negroes are our Fellow Creatures, and their present Condition amongst us requires our serious Consideration. We know not the Time when those Scales, in which Mountains are weighed, may turn. The parent of Mankind is gracious. His Care is over his smallest Creatures; and a Multitude of Men escape not His Notice: And though many of them are trodden down, and despised, yet He remembers them; He seeth their affliction, and looketh upon the spreading increasing Exaltation of the Oppressor. . . . And wherever Gain is preferred to Equity, and wrong Things Publicly encouraged to that Degree, that Wickedness takes root, and spreads wide amongst the Inhabitants of a Country, there is real Cause for Sorrow to all such, whose love to Mankind stands on a true Principle, and wisely consider the end and Event of Things.

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