

Copy of a letter to Robert Pleasants on the Abolition of Slavery

I received with pleasure your favor of the 30th of last month, and very far from being offended I am thankful for the frankness of your remarks on the pamphlet which I published, containing a proposal for the gradual abolition of slavery. To see the beginning of so desirable an event has long been one of the warmest wishes of my heart, and whatever errors I might have been led into from an endeavor to conciliate the wishes of others, my own is by no means tied down to any particular mode by which it may be affected.

Several years had passed since the Pennsylvania law emancipating all persons born after the passing thereof had been heard of and generally known in this country. Several had also elapsed since the publication of Mr. Jefferson's notes, in which he takes notice of a Bible prepared by the committee of revisors, of which he was a member, upon the same principles. The application of the Society to the Assembly for the abolition of slavery had produced no attention. It therefore became an object with me to devise some new plan, which should calm prejudices, lay jealousy asleep, and even persuade the self interested that they, nor their children would have anything to fear from what is falsely called a de-

privation of their property. Not to notice every argument and every objection would leave room for the application of them by others; not to respect their prejudices would be to rouse them; I therefore rather to accommodate myself to prejudice (as I said page 94) than to encounter it. The great object with me was at all events to lay the foundation of extirpating the evil, leaving it to experience to decide how far it might be safe, or polite to enlarge the principles or hasten the operation: That I might gain something. I was resolved to ask the least possible grant, by which the success of my plan could be insured. Convinced that nothing short of the emancipation of all females in the first instance would effect the object; convinced also that that alone would effect it in time, I proposed that measure, in the hope that the gradual apiration of it which I endeavored to demonstrate would calm the apprehensions of the timid, and lull to sleep the fears of the avaricious. In the restrictions proposed upon the emancipated Blacks, I had an eye to the same object, as well as to the jealousies + prejudices of many of the present race. Not but what there was in one instance a degree of prejudice in my own breast, which you have noticed and commented on. I mean the prohibition of intermarriages. This is a prejudice

so prevalent in the present generation, that were I of a different opinion I would leave it to time to eradicate; until this prejudice is overcome, I am also of the opinion that it would be dangerous to extend the civic privileges of the Blacks: for their numbers and those of the whites being nearly equal if they could acquire any share in the administration of the state we should soon behold two parties formed + enlisted by nature under different Banners whose Contests would probably convulse the state. Considering therefore that Experience only could show how far it might be safe to extend the privileges of the Blacks, I thought it on that account as well as for the reasons before mentioned better to limit them within the narrowest compass than to extend them at once perhaps too far. For I was persuaded that it would be hereafter easier to enlarge them to their just extent than to attempt to limit them after they had once been enlarged. These reasons conspired to persuade me to present to the consideration of the Legislature a plan which no man who pretended to the smallest regard to the rights of humanity could object to for want of sufficient precautions against the effect of such an Experiment under the existing circumstances of our country. And I cannot help persuading myself that on a second perusal of my pamphlet

you will find less reason to condemn it. The event indeed showed that, little as I asked for, and cautious as I had been to meet the prejudices of all opposed to the abolition of Slavery I fell very far short of success. The pamphlet which addressed to the speaker in as respectful a letter as I could write was treated with ignominy by some individuals and a motion was twice made to send it and the letter back to its author. Judge then what grounds I have to hope that your petition which asks for much more than I presumed to do, will ever meet with success. My name to it I fear would prejudice rather than serve the cause. But if you think otherwise I will subscribe to it. Not that I wholly approve of it, But that I am anxious that the noble object it proposes should be affected in any way which the wisdom of the Legislature may devise. Being by no means wedded to my own opinions on the subject. Most heartily wishing to your truly laudable undertaking. I am,

St. George Tucker

Wmsburg June 29

1797