

On Slavery

George Washington



OVERVIEW

Like many estate owners of the day, George Washington was a slaveholder. His 1786 letter to Robert Morris gives his views on the freeing of slaves.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- What do you think compelled members of the Society of Quakers, a religious organization, to attempt the liberation of slaves?
 - How might Washington's words be construed as hypocritical?
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Dear Sir: I give you the trouble of this letter at the instance of Mr. Dalby of Alexandria; who is called to Philadelphia to attend what he conceives to be a vexatious lawsuit respecting a slave of his, whom a Society of Quakers in the city (formed for such purposes) have attempted to liberate. . . . And if the practice of this Society of which Mr. Dalby speaks, is not discountenanced, none of those whose *misfortune* it is to have slaves as attendants, will visit the City if they can possibly avoid it; because by so doing they hazard their property; or they must be at the expence (and this will not always succeed) of providing servants of another description for the trip.

I hope it will not be conceived from these observations, that it is my wish to hold the unhappy people, who are the subject of this letter, in slavery. 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; but there is only one proper and effectual mode by which it can be accomplished and that is by Legislative authority; and this, as far as my suffrage will go, shall never be wanting. But when slaves who are happy and contented with their present masters, are tampered with and seduced to leave; when a conduct of this sort begets discontent on one side and resentment on the other, and when it happens to fall on a man, whose purse will not measure with that of the Society, and he loses [sic] his property for want of means to defend it; it is oppression in the latter case, and not humanity in any, because it introduces more evils than it can cure.