

Considering Eighteenth Century Slavery through George Washington's Evolution as Slave Master

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Background Information

Upon commencement of this set of lessons, my sixth grade humanities students will have already read Julius Lester's *To Be a Slave*, a collection of first-person narratives of former slaves accompanied by Lester's commentary. They will have written an essay analyzing either Lester's biases or the format of the book. They will have already studied and debated contemporary issues such as reparations, affirmative action, and the teaching of Ebonics. They will have a general knowledge of George Washington's role in the American Revolution and of his life up through his presidency.

Objectives

- 1.) Students will better understand the complexities surrounding the issue of slavery during George Washington's lifetime.
- 2.) Students will be informed (beyond our contemporary mindset) about Colonial life and the differences between the North and the South, especially regarding slavery.
- 3.) Students will better understand reasons behind George Washington's actions he took and neglected to take regarding slavery.
- 4.) Students will take a stand on the contemporary controversy surrounding the naming of schools after figures such as George Washington.

Essential Questions

- 1.) What if George Washington freed his slaves before he died?
- 2.) What factors prevented him from freeing them? Are these reasons acceptable?
- 3.) How does the fact that he owned slaves affect his role/reputation/importance in our cultural history and national identity?
- 4.) What purpose does eliminating the myth of George Washington serve?
- 5.) Do we need national heroes? If so, why? What are the qualities they should possess? Are heroes necessarily leaders, and vice versa? Are they allowed to be flawed?
- 6.) Is there danger in history books, media, and leaders promoting American exceptionalism?

Resources

- 1.) Primary Source Document: Excerpts from George Washington's Last Will and Testament that frees his slaves (1799)
- 2.) Primary Source Documents: Correspondence between George Washington and Lafayette on matters of slavery and emancipation (1786)
- 3.) Primary Source Document: Ben Franklin's "An Address to the Public concerning Slavery" (1789)
- 4.) Primary Source Document: Census of Slaves at Mount Vernon (1799)
- 5.) Primary Source Document: Washington's letter to Robert Morris (1786)
- 6.) Primary source Document: Venture Smith story (1798)

- 7.) Kevin Sack's 12 November 1997 New York Times article: "Blacks Strip Slaveholder' Names Off Schools"
- 8.) Copies of Edward Savage's "Washington Family" portrait, both the original and altered (slave omitted) versions
- 9.) Copies of "Washington as Gentleman Planter" portraits by Currier and Stearns
- 10.) Copy of Phillis Wheatley poem "To His Excellency General Washington" (1776), the transcripts of the correspondence surrounding this poem, and William J. Kenney's commentary from: "The Poet and the General: Phillis Wheatley and George Washington." The Faculty Forum. Volume 9, No. 5: January, 1998.
- 11.) Three-pages of factoids from Bill Martin's talk (2005)
- 12.) Frank Grizzard's chapter on slavery from *George! A guide to All Things Washington*
- 13.) *George Washington Biography Lesson* book from Mount Vernon
- 14.) Dorothy Twohig's "That Species of Property": Washington's Role in the Controversy over Slavery

Activity #1: Using quills and ink, students will copy parts of the excerpts from George Washington's Last Will and Testament that frees his slaves.

Discussion Questions

Washington has received a lot of credit for freeing his slaves. Would he have freed his slaves if he had had any children? Or was it a true philosophical decision? In other words, he could have freed the slaves because there was no longer any use for them after Martha's death, not because he decided slavery was morally wrong. Should he have freed them before he died?

Activity #2: Combining the paintings of Savage, Currier, Stearns, and Bill Martin's factoids along with other factoids and visuals that I will share, students will write a diary entry of a day in the life of a Colonialist and share it with the class.

Activity #3:

- a. Read the Venture Smith story.
- b. Read the excerpts from Washington's will. Discuss whether this act was heroic or not. Why not free slaves before death?
- c. Using the Primary Source Document, "Census of Slaves at Mount Vernon" (1799) students, in small groups, will create charts listing the following information: number of males slaves; female slaves; children; slaves belonging to GW; dower slaves, trade or skilled laborers, farms.
- d. Students will look for evidence that GW recognized slave marriages (even though laws of 18th century Virginia did not). Identify slave unions where one spouse belonged to GW and the spouse was a dower slave. Discuss what happened when GW freed his slaves and the dower slaves remained enslaved at Mount Vernon. Write a letter from the point of view of one of these family members about your feelings affected by this change in your lives. (b, c, d are adopted from the *George Washington Biography Lesson* book from Mount Vernon)

Activity #4:

- a. Read Washington's letter to Robert Morris.
- b. Read Ben Franklin's "An Address to the Public Concerning Slavery."
- c. Read the correspondence between George Washington and Lafayette.

Discussion Questions

Lafayette, Franklin, and Washington (to a degree) agree that slavery needs to be abolished. Compare and contrast the conditions, approaches, and circumstances each man puts forth towards reaching this end. Is one more convincing than the others? Are Washington's words sincere? Why? Why not? What factors contribute to Franklin and Washington's different views on slavery? What do you think about Lafayette's "Wild Scheme?"

Activity #5

- a. Read and discuss the meaning, tone, syntax, diction of Wheatley's poem, the transcripts of the correspondence surrounding this poem, and William J. Kenney's commentary. (Prior to reading the poem, students will know the general outline of Wheatley's life story)
- b. Discuss the irony of a former slave addressing a celebration of liberty to a slave owner. Contemplate on what role she may have played in raising the consciousness of George Washington's position on slavery.
- c. Is the poem as historically significant as Kenney suggests?
- d. Discuss the tragic turn Wheatley's life took once she earns her freedom. Why do you think her life took this turn? What infrastructure or safety net wasn't in place for slaves transitioning from bondage to freedom?

Activity #6

- a. Read Kevin Sack's New York Times article "Blacks Strip Slaveholders' Names Off Schools."
- b. Debate this practice. Support your points with historical evidence.

“To Redeem My Family”

Venture Smith Frees Himself and his Family (1798)

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6536.html>

Free labor provided possibilities for emancipation for some enslaved people. The most industrious and the most skilled of the enslaved could take greater advantage of these opportunities. Venture Smith had been born in the 1720s, the son of a West African prince who named him Broteer Furro. Slave traders captured him at the age of six, spirited him away to the coast, and transported him to a life of enslavement in Long Island and eastern Connecticut. After several changes of ownership, he was able to purchase his freedom by his labors at the age of 31. Those labors, along with his entrepreneurial activities such as fishing, working on a whaler, and agricultural activities, made possible the purchase of his son, daughter, and wife's liberty. Near the end of the 18th century he related his life history to Elisha Niles, a schoolteacher and Revolutionary war veteran. Published in 1798, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America, Related by Himself* recounted his successful negotiation of the slavery economy and recognition of free labor as the key to a free identity.

I was born at Dukandarra, in Guinea, about the year 1729. My father's name was Saungm Furro, Prince of the Tribe of Dukandarra. My father had three wives. Polygamy was not uncommon in that country, especially among the rich, as every man was allowed to keep as many wives as he could maintain. By his first wife he had three children. The eldest of them was myself, named by my father, Broteer. The other two were named Cundazo and Soozaduka. My father had two children by his second wife, and one by his third. I descended from a very large, tall and stout race of beings, much larger than the generality of people in other parts of the globe, being commonly considerable above six feet in height, and every way well proportioned. ...

On a certain time I and other prisoners were put on board a canoe, under our master, and rowed away to a vessel belonging to Rhode-Island, commanded by capt. Collingwood, and the mate Thomas Mumford. While we were going to the vessel, our master told us all to appear to the best possible advantage for sale. I was bought on board by one Robertson Mumford, steward of said vessel, for four gallons of rum, and a piece of calico, and called VENTURE, on account of his having purchased me with his own private venture. Thus I came by my name. All the slaves that were bought for that vessel's cargo, were two hundred and sixty.

After all the business was ended on the coast of Africa, the ship sailed from thence to Barbadoes. After an ordinary passage, except great mortality by the small pox, which broke out on board, we arrived at the island of Barbadoes: but when we reached it, there were found out of the two hundred and sixty that sailed from Africa, not more than two hundred alive. These were all sold, except myself and three more, to the planters there.

The vessel then sailed for Rhode-Island, and arrived there after a comfortable passage. Here my master sent me to live with one of his sisters, until he could carry me to Fisher's Island, the place of his residence. I had then completed my eighth year. After staying with his sister some time I

was taken to my master's place to live....

The first of the time of living at my master's own place, I was pretty much employed in the house at carding wool and other household business. In this situation I continued for some years, after which my master put me to work out of doors. After many proofs of my faithfulness and honesty, my master began to put great confidence in me. My behavior to him had as yet been submissive and obedient. I then began to have hard tasks imposed on me. Some of these were to pound four bushels of ears of corn every night in a barrel for the poultry, or be rigorously punished. At other seasons of the year I had to card wool until a very late hour. These tasks I had to perform when I was about nine years old. Some time after I had another difficulty and oppression which was greater than any I had ever experienced since I came into this country. This was to serve two masters. James Mumford, my master's son, when his father had gone from home in the morning, and given me a stint to perform that day, would order me to do this and that business different from what my master directed me. One day in particular, the authority which my master's son had set up, had like to have produced melancholy effects. For my master having set me off my business to perform that day and then left me to perform it, his son came up to me in the course of the day, big with authority, and commanded me very arrogantly to quit my present business and go directly about what he should order me. I replied to him that my master had given me so much to perform that day, and that I must therefore faithfully complete it in that time. He then broke out into a great rage, snatched a pitchfork and went to lay me over the head therewith; but I as soon got another and defended myself with it, or otherwise he might have murdered me in his outrage. He immediately called some people who were within hearing at work for him, and ordered them to take his hair rope and come and bind me with it. They all tried to bind me but in vain, tho' there were three assistants in number. My upstart master then desisted, put his pocket handkerchief before his eyes and went home with a design to tell his mother of the struggle with young VENTURE. He told her that their young VENTURE had become so stubborn that he could not controul him, and asked her what he should do with him. In the mean time I recovered my temper, voluntarily caused myself to be bound by the same men who tried in vain before, and carried before my young master, that he might do what he pleased with me. He took me to a gallows made for the purpose of hanging cattle on, and suspended me on it. Afterwards he ordered one of his hands to go to the peach orchard and cut him three dozen of whips to punish me with. These were brought to him, and that was all that was done with them, as I was released and went to work after hanging on the gallows about an hour.

After I had lived with my master thirteen years, being then about twenty two years old, I married Meg, a slave of his who was about my age. My master owned a certain Irishman, named Heddy, who about that time formed a plan of secretly leaving his master. After he had long had this plan in meditation he suggested it to me. At first I cast a deaf ear to it, and rebuked Heddy for harboring in his mind such a rash undertaking. But after he had persuaded and much enchanted me with the prospect of gaining my freedom by such a method, I at length agreed to accompany him. Heddy next inveigled two of his fellow servants to accompany us. The place to which we designed to go was the Mississippi. Our next business was to lay in a sufficient store of provisions for our voyage. We privately collected out of our master's store, six great old cheeses, two firkins of butter, and one whole batch of new bread. When we had gathered all our own clothes and some more, we took them all about midnight, and went to the water side. We stole our master's boat, embarked, and then directed our course for the Mississippi river.

We mutually confederated not to betray or desert one another on pain of death. We first steered our course for Montauk point, the east end of Long-Island. After our arrival there we landed, and

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Heddy and I made an incursion into the island after fresh water, while our two comrades were left at a little distance from the boat, employed at cooking. When Heddy and I had sought some time for water, he returned to our companions, and I continued on looking for my object. When Heddy had performed his business with our companions who were engaged in cooking, he went directly to the boat, stole all the clothes in it, and then travelled away for East-Hampton, as I was informed. I returned to my fellows not long after. They informed me that our clothes were stolen, but could not determine who was the thief, yet they suspected Heddy as he was missing. After reproving my two comrades for not taking care of our things which were in the boat, I advertised Heddy and sent two men in search of him. They pursued and overtook him at Southampton and returned him to the boat. I then thought it might afford some chance for my freedom, or at least a palliation for my running away, to return Heddy immediately to his master, and inform him that I was induced to go away by Heddy's address. Accordingly I set off with him and the rest of my companions for our master's, and arrived there without any difficulty. I informed my master that Heddy was the ringleader of our revolt, and that he had used us ill. He immediately put Heddy into custody, and myself and companions were well received and went to work as usual.

Not a long time passed after that, before Heddy was sent by my master to New-London gaol. At the close of that year I was sold to a Thomas Stanton, and had to be separated from my wife and one daughter, who was about one month old. He resided at Stonington-point. To this place I brought with me from my late master's, two johannes, three old Spanish dollars, and two thousand of coppers, besides five pounds of my wife's money. This money I got by cleaning gentlemen's shoes and drawing boots, by catching musk-rats and minks, raising potatoes and carrots, &c. and by fishing in the night, and at odd spells.

All this money amounting to near twenty-one pounds York currency, my master's brother, Robert Stanton, hired of me, for which he gave me his note. About one year and a half after that time, my master purchased my wife and her child, for seven hundred pounds old tenor. One time my master sent me two miles after a barrel of molasses, and ordered me to carry it on my shoulders. I made out to carry it all the way to my master's house. When I lived with Captain George Mumford, only to try my strength, I took up on my knees a tierce of salt containing seven bushels, and carried it two or three rods. Of this fact there are several eye witnesses now living.

Towards the close of the time that I resided with this master, I had a falling out with my mistress. This happened one time when my master was gone to Long-Island a gunning. At first the quarrel began between my wife and her mistress. I was then at work in the barn, and hearing a racket in the house, induced me to run there and see what had broken out. When I entered the house, I found my mistress in a violent passion with my wife, for what she informed me was a mere trifle; such a small affair that I forbear to put my mistress to the shame of having it known. I earnestly requested my wife to beg pardon of her mistress for the sake of peace, even if she had given no just occasion for offence. But whilst I was thus saying my mistress turned the blows which she was repeating on my wife to me. She took down her horse-whip, and while she was glutting her fury with it, I reached out my great black hand, raised it up and received the blows of the whip on it which were designed for my head. Then I immediately committed the whip to the devouring fire.

When my master returned from the island, his wife told him of the affair, but for the present he seemed to take no notice of it, and mentioned not a word about it to me. Some days after his return, in the morning as I was putting on a log in the fire-place, not suspecting harm from any one, I received a most violent stroke on the crown of my head with a club two feet long and as

large round as a chair-post. This blow very badly wounded my head, and the scar of it remains to this day. The first blow made me have my wits about me you may suppose, for as soon as he went to renew it, I snatched the club out of his hands and dragged him out of the door. He then sent for his brother to come and assist him, but I presently left my master, took the club he wounded me with, carried it to a neighboring Justice of the Peace, and complained of my master. He finally advised me to return to my master, and live contented with him till he abused me again, and then complain. I consented to do accordingly. But before I set out for my master's, up he come and his brother Robert after me. The Justice improved this convenient opportunity to caution my master. He asked him for what he treated his slave thus hastily and unjustly, and told him what would be the consequence if he continued the same treatment towards me. After the Justice had ended his discourse with my master, he and his brother set out with me for home, one before and the other behind me.

When they had come to a bye place, they both dismounted their respective horses, and fell to beating me with great violence. I became enraged at this and immediately turned them both under me, laid one of them across the other, and stamped both with my feet what I would.

This occasioned my master's brother to advise him to put me off. A short time after this I was taken by a constable and two men. They carried me to a blacksmith's shop and had me hand-cuffed. When I returned home my mistress enquired much of her waiters, whether VENTURE was hand-cuffed. When she was informed that I was, she appeared to be very contented and was much transported with the news. In the midst of this content and joy, I presented myself before my mistress, shewed her my hand-cuffs, and gave her thanks for my gold rings. For this my master commanded a negro of his to fetch him a large ox chain. This my master locked on my legs with two padlocks. I continued to wear the chain peaceably for two or three days, when my master asked me with contemptuous hard names whether I had not better be freed from my chains and go to work. I answered him, No. Well then, said he, I will send you to the West-Indies or banish you, for I am resolved not to keep you. I answered him I crossed the waters to come here, and I am willing to cross them to return. For a day or two after this not any one said much to me, until one Hempsted Miner, of Stonington, asked me if I would live with him. I answered him that I would. He then requested me to make myself discontented and to appear as unreconciled to my master as I could before that he bargained with him for me; and that in return he would give me a good chance to gain my freedom when I came to live with him. I did as he requested me. Not long after Hempsted Miner purchased me of my master for fifty-six pounds lawful. He took the chain and padlocks from off me immediately after.

It may here be remembered, that I related a few pages back, that I hired out a sum of money to Mr. Robert Stanton, and took his note for it. In the fray between my master Stanton and myself, he broke open my chest containing his brother's note to me, and destroyed it. Immediately after my present master bought me, he determined to sell me at Hartford. As soon as I became apprized of it, I bethought myself that I would secure a certain sum of money which lay by me, safer than to hire it out to a Stanton. Accordingly I buried it in the earth, a little distance from Thomas Stanton's, in the road over which he passed daily. A short time after my master carried me to Hartford, and first proposed to sell me to one William Hooker of that place. Hooker asked whether I would go to the German Flats with him. I answered, No. He said I should, if not by fair means I should by foul. If you will go by no other measures, I will tie you down in my sleigh. I replied to him, that if he carried me in that manner, no person would purchase me, for it would be thought that he had a murderer for sale. After this he tried no more, and said he would not have me as a gift.

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My master next offered me to Daniel Edwards, Esq. of Hartford, for sale. But not purchasing me, my master pawned me to him for ten pounds, and returned to Stonington. After some trial of my honesty, Mr. Edwards placed considerable trust and confidence in me. He put me to serve as his cup-bearer and waiter. When there was company at his house, he would send me into his cellar and other parts of his house to fetch wine and other articles occasionally for them. When I had been with him some time, he asked me why my master wished to part with such an honest negro, and why he did not keep me himself. I replied that I could not give him the reason, unless it was to convert me into cash, and speculate with me as with other commodities. I hope that he can never justly say it was on account of my ill conduct that he did not keep me himself. Mr. Edwards told me that he should be very willing to keep me himself, and that he would never let me go from him to live, if it was not unreasonable and inconvenient for me to be parted from my wife and children; therefore he would furnish me with a horse to return to Stonington, if I had a mind for it. As Miner did not appear to redeem me I went, and called at my old master Stanton's first to see my wife, who was then owned by him. As my old master appeared much ruffled at my being there, I left my wife before I had spent any considerable time with her, and went to Colonel O. Smith's. Miner had not as yet wholly settled with Stanton for me, and had before my return from Hartford given Col. Smith a bill of sale of me. These men once met to determine which of them should hold me, and upon my expressing a desire to be owned by Col. Smith, and upon my master's settling the remainder of the money which was due to Stanton for me, it was agreed that I should live with Col. Smith. This was the third time of my being sold, and I was then thirty-one years old. As I never had an opportunity of redeeming myself whilst I was owned by Miner, though he promised to give me a chance, I was then very ambitious of obtaining it. I asked my master one time if he would consent to have me purchase my freedom. He replied that he would. I was then very happy, knowing that I was at that time able to pay part of the purchase money, by means of the money which I some time since buried. This I took out of the earth and tendered to my master, having previously engaged a free negro man to take his security for it, as I was the property of my master, and therefore could not safely take his obligation myself. What was wanting in redeeming myself, my master agreed to wait on me for, until I could procure it for him. I still continued to work for Col. Smith. There was continually some interest accruing on my master's note to my friend the free negro man above named, which I received, and with some besides which I got by fishing, I laid out in land adjoining my old master Stanton's. By cultivating this land with the greatest diligence and economy, at times when my master did not require my labor, in two years I laid up ten pounds. This my friend tendered my master for myself, and received his note for it.

Being encouraged by the success which I had met in redeeming myself, I again solicited my master for a further chance of completing it. The chance for which I solicited him was that of going out to work the ensuing winter. He agreed to this on condition that I would give him one quarter of my earnings. On these terms I worked the following winter, and earned four pounds sixteen shillings, one quarter of which went to my master for the privilege, and the rest was paid him on my own account. This added to the other payments made up forty four pounds, eight shillings, which I had paid on my own account. I was then about thirty five years old.

The next summer I again desired he would give me a chance of going out to work. But he refused and answered that he must have my labor this summer, as he did not have it the past winter. I replied that I considered it as hard that I could not have a chance to work out when the season became advantageous, and that I must only be permitted to hire myself out in the poorest season of the year. He asked me after this what I would give him for the privilege per month. I replied

that I would leave it wholly with his own generosity to determine what I should return him a month. Well then, said he, if so two pounds a month. I answered him that if that was the least he would take I would be contented.

Accordingly I hired myself out at Fisher's Island, and earned twenty pounds; thirteen pounds six shillings of which my master drew for the privilege, and the remainder I paid him for my freedom. This made fifty-one pounds two shillings which I paid him. In October following I went and wrought six months at Long Island. In that six month's time I cut and corded four hundred cords of wood, besides threshing out seventy-five bushels of grain, and received of my wages down only twenty pounds, which left remaining a larger sum. Whilst I was out that time, I took up on my wages only one pair of shoes. At night I lay on the hearth, with one coverlet over and another under me. I returned to my master and gave him what I received of my six months labor. This left only thirteen pounds eighteen shillings to make up the full sum for my redemption. My master liberated me, saying that I might pay what was behind if I could ever make it convenient, otherwise it would be well. The amount of the money which I had paid my master towards redeeming my time, was seventy-one pounds two shillings. The reason of my master for asking such an unreasonable price, was he said, to secure himself in case I should ever come to want. Being thirty-six years old, I left Col. Smith once for all. I had already been sold three different times, made considerable money with seemingly nothing to derive it from, been cheated out of a large sum of money, lost much by misfortunes, and paid an enormous sum for my freedom.

Source: *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America, Related by Himself* [New London, [CT]: Printed by C. Holt, at The Bee-Office, 1798]. 5–24.

Washington's Letter to Robert Morris (1786)

Dr 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, 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.

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An Address to the Public Concerning Slavery

Benjamin Franklin

November 9, 1789

It is with peculiar satisfaction we assure the friends of humanity, that, in prosecuting the design of our association, our endeavours have proved successful, far beyond our most sanguine expectations.

Encouraged by this success, and by the daily progress of that luminous and benign spirit of liberty, which is diffusing itself throughout the world, and humbly hoping for the continuance of the divine blessing on our labours, we have ventured to make an important addition to our original plan, and do, therefore, earnestly solicit the support and assistance of all who can feel the tender emotions of sympathy and compassion, or relish the exalted pleasure of beneficence.

Slavery is such an atrocious debasement of human nature, that its very extirpation, if not performed with solicitous care, may sometimes open a source of serious evils.

The unhappy man, who has long been treated as a brute animal, too frequently sinks beneath the common standard of the human species. The galling chains, that bind his body, do also fetter his intellectual faculties, and impair the social affections of his heart. Accustomed to move like a mere machine, by the will of a master, reflection is suspended; he has not the power of choice; and reason and conscience have but little influence over his conduct, because he is chiefly governed by the passion of fear. He is poor and friendless—perhaps worn out by extreme labour, age, and disease.

Under such circumstances, freedom may often prove a misfortune to himself, and prejudicial to society.

Attention to emancipated black people, it is therefore to be hoped, will become a branch of our national police; but, as far as we contribute to promote this emancipation, so far that attention is evidently a serious duty incumbent on us, and which we mean to discharge to the best of our judgment and abilities.

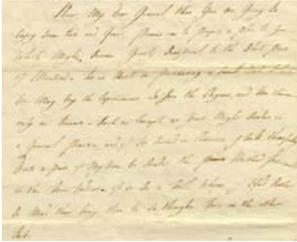
To instruct, to advise, to qualify those, who have been restored to freedom, for the exercise and enjoyment of civil liberty, to promote in them habits of industry, to furnish them with employments suited to their age, sex, talents, and other circumstances, and to procure their children an education calculated for their future situation in life; these are the great outlines of the annexed plan, which we have adopted, and which we conceive will essentially promote the public good, and the happiness of these our hitherto too much neglected fellow-creatures.

A plan so extensive cannot be carried into execution without considerable pecuniary resources, beyond the present ordinary funds of the society. We hope much from the generosity of enlightened and benevolent freemen, and will gratefully receive any donations or subscriptions for this purpose, which may be made to our treasurer, James Starr, or to James Pemberton, chairman of our committee of correspondence.

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Excerpts of Correspondence between George Washington and Marquis de LaFayette

Lafayette to Washington, Cádiz, February 5, 1783



Now, my dear General, that you are going to enjoy some ease and quiet, permit me to propose a plan to you which might become greatly beneficial to the Black Part of Mankind. Let us unite in purchasing a small estate where we may try the experiment to free the Negroes, and use them only as tenants—such an example as yours might render it a general practice, and if we succeed in America, I will cheerfully devote a part of my time to render the method fashionable in the West Indies. If it be a wild scheme, I had rather be mad that way, than to be thought wise on the other tack.

George Washington to Lafayette, Headquarters Newburgh, April 5, 1783

The scheme, my dear Marquis, which you propose as a precedent, to encourage the emancipation of the black people of the Country from that state of Bondage in which, they are held, is a striking evidence of the benevolence of your Heart. I shall be happy to join you in so laudable a work; but will defer going into a detail of the business, till I have the pleasure of seeing you.

Lafayette to Washington, Paris, February 6, 1786

Another secret I entrust to you, my dear General, is that I have purchased for a hundred and twenty five thousand French livres a plantation in the Colony of Cayenne and am going to free my Negroes in order to make that experiment which you know is my hobby horse.

Washington to Lafayette, Mount Vernon, May 10, 1786

The benevolence of your heart my dear Marquis is so conspicuous upon all occasions, that I never wonder at any fresh proofs of it; but your late purchase of an Estate in the Colony of Cayenne with a view of emancipating the slaves on it, is a generous and noble proof of your humanity. Would to God a like spirit would diffuse itself generally into the minds of the people of this country, but I despair of seeing it. Some petitions were presented to the Assembly, at its last Session, for the abolition of slavery, but they could scarcely obtain a reading. To set them afloat at once would, I really believe, be productive of much inconvenience and mischief; but by degrees it certainly might, and assuredly ought to be effected; and that too by Legislative authority.

To His Excellency General Washington

by Phillis Wheatley (1776)

Celestial choir! enthron'd in realms of light,
Columbia's scenes of glorious toil I write.
While freedom's cause her anxious breast alarms,
She flashes dreadful in refulgent arms.
See mother earth her offspring's fate bemoan,
And nation's gaze at scenes before unknown!
See the bright beams of heaven's revolving light
Involved in sorrows and the veil of night!
The goddess comes, she moves divinely fair,
Olive and laurel binds her golden hair:
Wherever shines this native of the skies,
Unnumber'd charms and recent graces rise.
Muse! bow propitious while my pen relates
How pour her armies through a thousand gates,
As when Eolus heaven's fair face deforms,
Enwrapp'd in tempest and a night of storms;
Astonish'd ocean feels the wild uproar,
The refulgent surges beat the sounding short;
Or thick as leaves in Autumn's golden reign,
Such, and so many, moves the warrior's train.

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In bright array they seek the work of war,
Where high unfurl'd the ensign waves in air.
Shall I to Washington their praise recite?
Enough thou know'st them in the fields of fight.
Thee first in place and honours, we demand
The grace and glory of thy martial band.
Fam'd for thy valour, for thy virtues more,
Hear every tongue thy guardian aid implore!
One century scarce perform'd its destined round,
When Gallic powers Columbia's fury found;
And so may you, whoever dares disgrace
The land of freedom's heaven-defended race!
Fix'd are the eyes of nations on the scales,
For in their hopes Columbia's arms prevails.
Anon Britannia droops the pensive head,
While round increase the rising hills of dead.
Ah! cruel blindness to Columbia's state!
Lament thy thirst of boundless power too late.
Proceed great chief, with virtue on thy side,
Thy ev'ry action let the goddess guide.
A crown, a mansion, and a thorns that shine,
With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! be thine

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Correspondence Between Phillis Wheatley and George Washington

(From: William, Kenny J. "The Poet and the General: Phillis Wheatley and George Washington." The Faculty Forum. Volume 9, No. 5: January, 1998.)

Phillis Wheatley to George Washington, October 26, 1775

"Sir: I have taken the freedom to address your Excellency in the enclosed poem, and entreat your acceptance, though I am not insensible of its inaccuracies. Your being appointed by the Grand Continental Congress to be Generalissimo of the Armies of North America, together with the fame of your virtue, excite sensations not easy to suppress. Your generosity, therefore, I presume, will pardon the attempt. Wishing your Excellency all possible success in the great cause you are so generously engaged in."

“Several months later, Washington's first mention of Phillis Wheatley apparently came as an afterthought in a long letter dated February 20, 1776, and written from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Joseph Reed, his one-time military secretary, who had returned to his home in Pennsylvania. Throughout the letter Washington seems worried about his own image and reveals a general sense of insecurity. While he is concerned about his men and their lack of supplies, there is an extended commentary on Great Britain as the enslavers of the colonies. Then after a recitation of many inconsequential matters such as the vagaries of the weather, he alludes to Phillis Wheatley:”

"I recollect nothing else worth giving you the trouble of, unless you can be amused by reading a letter and a poem addressed to me by Mrs. or Miss Phillis Wheatley. In searching over a parcel of papers the other day, in order to destroy such as were useless, I brought it to light again: at first with a view of doing justice to her great poetical genius, I had a great mind to publish the poem, but not knowing whether it might not be considered rather as a mark of my own vanity than as a compliment to her, I laid it aside, till I came across it again in the manner just mentioned. . . ."

“Shortly after his letter to Reed, Washington wrote to ‘Miss Phillis’ in a letter dated February 28, 1776. He thanked her for the flattering poem and concluded: ***If you should ever come to Cambridge, or near headquarters, I shall be happy to see a person so favored by the muses, and to whom Nature has been so liberal and beneficent in her disposition.*** The following month the young poet did indeed visit the general. Her visit preceded by a few days the British evacuation of Boston; and in view of conditions that must have been prevailing at the time, it is interesting that a general had time to entertain a poet.

Just as Washington had indicated to Reed that publication of the poem might suggest unwarranted vanity so also had he made substantially the same point in his letter to

Wheatley. On the other hand, Thomas Paine did not share Washington's reluctance about making the poem public. There was a war to be fought, and Paine obviously considered the ode to be an important testimony. Certainly, he apparently thought, it might help to create an aura of trust for Washington. Thus, as editor of *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, Paine included Wheatley's poem in the April (1776) issue of the journal.

'To His Excellency George Washington' came at a defining moment in American literary history and in the military leader's career. It also marked an important shift in Wheatley's work because on numerous occasions, in earlier poems, she had exhibited her faith in the British political system. Thus, before much of the patriotic and nationalistic verse had been written in the colonies, Phillis Wheatley not only had commemorated the greatness of the coming nation but also had praised the man who was to become known as "the Father" of the new country."

Blacks Strip Slaveholders' Names Off Schools

The New York Times, 12 November 1997

By Kevin Sack

NEW ORLEANS--By the reckoning of John Riley, the historian at Mount Vernon, there are about 450 schools in the United States named for George Washington.

Now there is one fewer. Following a policy that prohibits school names honoring "former slave owners or others who did not respect equal opportunity for all," the Orleans Parish School Board voted unanimously on Oct. 27 to change the name of George Washington Elementary to Dr. Charles Richard Drew Elementary.

The new name pays tribute to a black surgeon who lived from 1904 to 1950 and is known for developing methods to preserve blood plasma and for protesting the United States Army's practice of segregating donated blood by race.

The renaming of the 74-year-old school in the city's Bywater neighborhood, the 22d name change in New Orleans in five years, is the latest milestone in a concerted effort by blacks across the South to assert their vision of a biracial history that has traditionally been defined only by whites.

Since the school board's policy was adopted in December 1992, New Orleans schools have purged the names of Confederate generals, slave-owning governors and even the black founder of an orphanage who like Washington, happened to own slaves. A school once named for Robert E. Lee, for instance, is now named for Ronald McNair, the black

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astronaut killed in the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger in 1986.

But never before, either here or apparently elsewhere in the country, has a school shed the name of a figure as central to the national identity as Washington. And that has raised questions about whether efforts to broaden history, if taken too far, may sometimes distort it as well.

Opponents of the decision, and there have not been many in this city in which blacks are in the majority, argue that it does not account for the totality of Washington's achievements or the school district where 91 percent of the students are black, and where the school board is controlled by a 5-to-2 black majority, the decision underscores the maxim that history is written by those with the power.

"Why should African-Americans want their kids to pay respect or pay homage to someone who enslaved their ancestors?" asked Carl Galmon, a longtime civil rights leader in New Orleans who has led the campaign to change school names. "This was the most degrading thing that ever happened in North America, and Washington was a part of it. To African-Americans, George Washington has about as much meaning as David Duke."

Those on the other side of the debate contend that by the standards of the day, Washington was moderate on slavery, pointing out that he provided for the emancipation of his slaves after his death.

"What I find objectionable," said William B. Gwyn, a retired professor of political science at Tulane University here, "is the rather unhistorical approach to changing these names, that anyone who ever owned slaves is to be dishonored by the New Orleans school board without looking at the circumstances with which the slaves were held. The fact is that with Washington, he opposed the institution and ultimately freed his slaves. "

Although Washington inherited his first 10 slaves at the age of 11 and died with 316 slaves on his Virginia plantation, his private letters make it clear that he favored a gradual abolition of slavery--"by slow, sure and imperceptible degrees," Washington wrote in 1786.

As President, however, Washington never proposed emancipation. "I think that, to him, union came first," said Mr. Riley, the historian, "and if making a public stand on slavery as President of the United States was going to fracture that union, he was going to keep his mouth shut."

When Washington died in 1799, his will called for the 125 slaves that he owned outright to be freed upon the death of his wife. The rest of the slaves at Mount Vernon belonged

to Martha Washington before her marriage to Washington or were the children of unions between the two sets of slaves, Mr. Riley said. She emancipated her husband's 125 slaves about a year after his death.

The notion that any slave owner could be moderate on the issue of slavery strikes some blacks in New Orleans as ludicrous. "It's a huge thing to be owned by somebody, no matter how much they may have accomplished in other areas," said Jeremiah Blount, a black fifth-grade teacher at the newly named Drew Elementary School. "And now we're teaching kids who are descendants of the people who would have been his property."

By Mr. Galmon's count, 49 of the 121 schools in Orleans Parish were named for slave owners at the time the school board policy took effect five years ago. While the policy states that the school board opposes retaining such names, it leaves it to school communities to initiate the name-change process.

The process at Washington, where 98 percent of the 702 students are black, was typical. When a new principal, Lee Caston, arrived in 1996, he learned of the school board policy and raised the issue at a faculty meeting. A committee of faculty and staff members was formed and decided that the policy left them little choice but to change the school's name, a decision that Mr. Caston believes is supported in the community.

With the help of students and parents, choices for a new name were studied and narrowed to three: Charles Drew, Bywater and St. Claude, the name of the avenue that runs by the school. Parents and staff members were then polled and 52 percent voted to change the name to Drew (in secondary schools, students also are allowed to vote). The majority vote forwarded the recommendation to the school board, which approved the new name.

Both Mr. Caston, the principal, and Linda J. Stelly, an associate superintendent of the Orleans Parish schools, said there was virtually no opposition to removing Washington's name from the three-story brown brick school. Ms. Stelly said the school board thought it was important to be consistent about its policy, which makes no allowances for slave owners, regardless of their historical stature.

At Drew Elementary, where the words Washington School are etched into the stone facade, students and staff members are struggling to get comfortable with their new identity. Receptionists still catch themselves answering the telephones "Washington Elementary." First graders at morning assembly have not quite learned to substitute Charles Drew for Washington in the school song.

Mr. Caston has planned additional change to reinforce the transition. The school colors, former white and blue, will be changed to red and blue, symbolic, he said, of the oxygenated and deoxygenated blood associated with Charles Drew.

Considering Eighteenth Century Slavery
through
George Washington's Evolution as Slave Master

Brenda Ajbour

NEH Institute

George Washington & His Legacy: Myths, Symbols & Reality

Boston University

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