

## THE ERA OF GEORGE WASHINGTON: DOCUMENT PROJECT

Paul S Rykken July 2006  
Black River Falls High School  
Black River Falls, Wisconsin

### SOURCE

Letter from George Mason to George Washington and William Fairfax 23 December 1765

Rutland, Robert A., ed. The Papers of George Mason: 1725-1792, Volume 1 (1749-1778). Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1970.

### BACKGROUND

George Mason (1725-1792) was a prominent Virginian and neighbor of George Washington. A strong voice for individual liberties throughout his career, Mason is perhaps best remembered for his strenuous opposition to the US Constitution (a position which cost him his friendship to Washington), particularly because of his objections to the commerce and slave trade compromise and his belief that the national government was being granted too much power in the new government. Mason's uneasiness with the slave trade was apparently on his mind long before the Constitutional debates of 1787 as evidenced by the following letter he wrote to his neighbors William Fairfax and George Washington in December of 1765. The letter was written during a period of intense debate in response to the Stamp Act and other British trade restrictions of the period. Even though his commentary on the slave trade is a small portion of a rather long letter, it represents his first volley on the subject of the slave trade and slavery in general.

### DOCUMENT TEXT (EXCERPT)

Gentlemen

Gunston-Hall 23<sup>rd</sup>. Decemr. 1765

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

That the Custom of leasing Lands is more beneficial to the Community than that of settling them with Slaves is a Maxim that will hardly be denyed in any free Country; tho' it may not be attended with so much immediate Profit to the Land-holder: in Proportion as it is more useful to the Public, the Invitations from the Legislature to pursue it shou'd be stronger: -- no Means seem so natural as securing the Payment of Rents in an easy & effectual Manner: the little Trouble & Risque attending the Species of Property may be considered as an Equivalent to the greater Profit arising from the Labour of Slaves, or any other precarious & troublesome Estate.

### QUESTIONS

1. Mason was interested in westward expansion and was active in the Ohio Company as early as 1749. What debate is he anxious to promote in Virginia in 1765?
2. Why was the institution of slavery actually an impediment to greater numbers of “free people” being able to settle in Virginia?
3. According to Mason, what effect does slavery have on the “Morals & Manners” of the people? What historical example does he raise to support his assertion? In light of these sentiments, how would you explain the fact that Mason was a slave-holder?
4. Why do you think Mason does not seek to examine “this Subject (slavery and the slave trade) too freely” in 1765?
5. Which argument against slavery – moral or economic – does Mason emphasize in this letter to Washington and Fairfax?

## The Era of George Washington: Document Project

Paul S Rykken  
Black River Falls High School  
Black River Falls, Wisconsin

### SOURCE

Letter from Robert Pleasants to George Washington: 11 December 1785

<http://www.richmondfriends.org/History/RPtoGW.htm>

### BACKGROUND

George Washington owned slaves from the time he was a young man until his death in 1799. The evidence is clear, however, that for the last 25 years of his life he grappled mightily with the slavery issue and ultimately felt compelled to manumit his slaves in his will. Over the years Washington received numerous letters from various people urging him to free his slaves as an example to the rest of the country. One such letter came from Robert Pleasants (1723-1801), a Quaker abolitionist from Virginia who actively promoted manumission in Virginia during the years following the Revolutionary War. Pleasants wrote a number of letters to leaders in Virginia including Patrick Henry and George Washington. Washington received the following letter in 1785, and although no record exists of a reply from Washington to Pleasants, it is certainly plausible that a letter of this sort would have an effect on Washington's ever evolving thinking on the subject of slavery.

### DOCUMENT TEXT

Honored General

Seeing the Lord has done great things for thee, not only in covering thy head in the day of Battle but making thee instrumental in bringing about an extraordinary Revolution (a revolution which has given thee great reputation among men and calls for reverent thankfulness to him who Rules in the Kingdome of men, and declared by his Prophet that "he will not give his glory to another, or his praise to graven Images.") a strong desire attends my mind, that thou may not in any respect sully in thy private retirement, the honours thou hast acquired in the field. Remember the cause for which thou wert called to the Command of the American Army was the cause of liberty and the Rights of Mankind: How strange then must it appear to impartial thinking men, to be informed that many who were warm advocates for that noble cause during the War are now sitting down in a state of easy dissipation and extravagance in the Labour of Slaves? And more especially that those who could forego all the sweets of domestic felicity for a number of years and expose thy person to the greatest fatigue and dangers in that cause, should now withhold that estimable blessing from any who are absolutely in thy power and after the Right of Freedom is acknowledged to be the natural and unalienable Right of all Mankind.

I cannot suppose from the uncommon generosity of thy conduct in other respects that this can proceed altogether from interested motives; but rather that it is the effect of long custom, the prejudices of education towards a black skin or that some other important concerns may have heretofore diverted thy attention from a subject so noble and interesting as well to thy own Peace and reputation as the general good of that People and the community at large. But whatever may have been the cause, I sincerely wish thou may not longer delay a matter of such importance. It is a sacrifice which I fully believe the Lord is requiring of this Generation; and should we not submit to it, is there no reason to fear he will deal with us as he did with Pharaoh on a similar occasion? For as he is declared to be no respecter of persons how can we expect to do such violence to Human Nature in this enlightened age with impunity? We Read, "where much is given the more will be required" and as thou hast acquired much fame in being the successful champion of American Liberty; It seems highly probable to me that thy example and influence at this time towards a general emancipation would be as productive of real happiness to mankind as thy sword may have been: I can but wish therefore that thou may not loose the opportunity of crowning the great actions of thy life with the satisfaction of doing to others as thou would in the like situation be done by, and finally transmit to future ages a Character equally famous for thy Christian Virtues as thy worldly achievements: For notwithstanding thou art now receiving the tribute of praise from a grateful people, the time is coming when all actions will be weighed in an equal balance and undergo an impartial examination, how inconsistent then will it appear to posterity should it be recorded that the great General Washington without fee or reward had commanded the united forces of America and

at the expense of much blood and treasure been instrumental in relieving those states from tyranny and oppression yet after all had so far continued thine Evils as to keep a number of People in absolute slavery who were by nature equally entitled to freedom as himself. Remember I beseech thee that “God will not be mocked,” and is still requiring from each of us “to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly before him.”

Perhaps General Washington may think it presumptuous in my who cannot boast a particular acquaintance to address him in this manner but I hope when he considers the nature of the subject and that I can have no selfish views in offering these hints to his serious consideration that what may arise from the pleasure of hearing he had done those things which belong to his present and future happiness and the good of those over whom Providence hath placed him he will at least excuse the freedom; believe that I am with great sincerity and respect his Real Friend  
Robert Pleasants

PS. I herewith send thee a small pamphlet on the subject of slavery said to be wrote by John Dickenson which if thou hast not before seen I doubt no will afford pleasure in the perusal and am as above RP.

### QUESTIONS

1. What dramatic contradiction concerning slavery and the “noble cause” of the American Revolution does Pleasants point out in paragraph 1 of the letter?
2. From what you have learned about Washington, how do you believe he would react to Pleasants’ appeal to his honor and future reputation?
3. How does Pleasants see the role of “this generation” (the founding generation) in relation to the slavery question? What Biblical analogy does he draw to support his assertion?
4. Describe the overall tone of the Pleasants letter to Washington? What conclusions can you draw concerning the personality and beliefs of Robert Pleasants from reading this letter?
5. Assume that you are George Washington and it is 1785. How would you respond to Robert Pleasants?