Teaching American History Online Seminar

Jefferson: The Enslaver

October 4th, 2025

Panelists: Peter Onuf, Cara Rogers Stevens, and Jason Stevens

Reading List

- Draft of the Declaration of Independence | 1776
- *Notes on the State of Virginia*: Query XVIII | 1784
- *Notes on the State of Virginia*: Query XIV | 1784
- Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Henri Gregoire | 1809

Link to Event

READING 1: *NOTES ON THE STATE OF VIRGINIA*: QUERY XIV, THOMAS JEFFERSON | 1784

SOURCE: https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/notes-on-the-state-of-virginia-3/

In 1780, a French diplomat in Philadelphia sent a set of questions to various people in the United States. Having signed a treaty of amity and commerce with the new nation in 1778, the French sought information about their new American ally. A copy of the questions reached Jefferson and he set about answering them. He revised and rearranged the queries, gathered data, and wrote and revised his response, until it grew into a book length manuscript. Jefferson eventually published the book, Notes on the State of Virginia*, the only one he ever published. It contains some of the most famous words Jefferson wrote, outside the Declaration of Independence (1776), and some of the most infamous. The latter, included in the selection below, are Jefferson's description of the African-American slaves he knew in Virginia.*

As he did often in Notes*, Jefferson took the opportunity afforded by some factual report to comment more broadly on a topic. In this case, the report was an account of how post-independence Virginia revised its laws (Jefferson does not mention that he was the principal author of the revision). The revision aimed to make the laws republican in spirit. Therefore, they included provision for the end of slavery. Jefferson's comment was that once the slaves were free, they would need to leave Virginia. To justify this, Jefferson offered objections he termed "political . . . physical and moral" to allowing the former slaves to remain and become fellow citizens.*

Although Jefferson did raise the issue of the possible inferiority (in certain respects) of blacks as he knew them to whites, the issue was not whether the slaves or African-Americans were men; on the contrary, as in the Declaration, Jefferson refers to them several times as men. The issue was whether African-Americans were or could be fellow-citizens with those who had held them in bondage. . . .

Almost 30 years after he wrote Notes on Virginia*, Jefferson commented on his description of the slaves he had seen about him. In response to the receipt from a correspondent of a volume of "Literature of Negroes," Jefferson wrote that he wished to see the complete refutation of the doubts he had expressed about the capacities of African-Americans. "But," he added, making explicit the argument in these selections from Notes, "whatever be their degree of talent it is no measure of their rights. Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others." Human equality was greater, politically and morally, than any differences among humans.*

—David Tucker, Slavery and Its Consequences

The administration of justice and description of the laws?

. . . To emancipate all slaves born after passing the act. The bill reported by the revisors does not itself contain this proposition; but an amendment containing it was prepared, to be offered to the legislature whenever the bill should be taken up, and further directing, that they should continue with their parents to a certain age, then be brought up, at the public expence, to tillage, arts or sciences, according to their geniusses, till the females should be eighteen, and the males twenty-one years of age, when they should be colonized to such place as the circumstances of the time, should render most proper, sending them out with arms, implements of houshold and of the handicraft arts, feeds, pairs of the useful domestic animals, &c. to declare them a free and independant people, and extend to them our alliance and protection, till they shall have acquired strength; and to send vessels at the same time to other parts of

the world for an equal number of white inhabitants; to induce whom to migrate hither, proper encouragements were to be proposed.

It will probably be asked, Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the state, and thus save the expence of supplying, by importation of white settlers, the vacancies they will leave? Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.

To these objections, which are political, may be added others, which are physical and moral. The first difference which strikes us is that of colour. Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and scarf-skin, or in the scarf-skin itself; whether it proceeds from the colour of the blood, the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us. And is this difference of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races? Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race? Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form, their own judgment in favour of the whites, declared by their preference of them, as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black women over those of his own species. The circumstance of superior beauty, is thought worthy attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man? Besides those of colour, figure, and hair, there are other physical distinctions proving a difference of race. They have less hair on the face and body. They secrete less by the kidnies, and more by the glands of the skin, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odour. This greater degree of transpiration renders them more tolerant of heat, and less so of cold, than the whites. Perhaps too a difference of structure in the pulmonary apparatus, which a late ingenious experimentalist[1] has discovered to be the principal regulator of animal heat, may have disabled them from extricating, in the act of inspiration, so much of that fluid from the outer air, or obliged them in expiration, to part with more of it. They seem to require less sleep. A black, after hard labour through the day, will be induced by the slightest amusements to sit up till midnight, or later, though knowing he must be out with the first dawn of the morning.

They are at least as brave, and more adventuresome. But this may perhaps proceed from a want of forethought, which prevents their seeing a danger till it be present. When present, they do not go through it with more coolness or steadiness than the whites. They are more ardent after their female: but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation. Their griefs are transient. Those numberless afflictions, which render it doubtful whether heaven has given life to us in mercy or in wrath, are less felt, and sooner forgotten with them. In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection. To this must be ascribed their disposition to sleep when abstracted from their diversions, and unemployed in labour. An animal whose body is at rest, and who does not reflect, must be disposed to sleep of course.

[1] Adair Crawford (1748–1795), a British physician who wrote a treatise on the source of bodily heat.

Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous. It would be unfair to follow them to Africa for this investigation. We will consider them here, on the same stage with the whites, and where the facts are not apocryphal on which a judgment is to be formed. It will be right to make great allowances for the difference of condition, of education, of conversation, of the sphere in which they move. Many millions of them have been brought to, and born in America. Most of them indeed have been confined to tillage, to their own homes, and their own society: yet many have been so situated, that they might have availed themselves of the conversation of their masters; many have been brought up to the handicraft arts, and from that circumstance have always been associated with the whites. Some have been liberally educated, and all have lived in countries where the arts and sciences are cultivated to a considerable degree, and have had before their eyes samples of the best works from abroad. The Indians, with no advantages of this kind, will often carve figures on their pipes not destitute of design and merit. They will crayon out an animal, a plant, or a country, so as to prove the existence of a germ in their minds which only wants cultivation. They astonish you with strokes of the most sublime oratory; such as prove their reason and sentiment strong, their imagination glowing and elevated. But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture. In music they are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time, and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch.[2] Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved. Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. -- Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum[3] of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately;[4] but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. The heroes of the Dunciad[5] are to her, as Hercules to the author of that poem. Ignatius Sancho[6] has approached nearer to merit in composition; yet his letters do more honour to the heart than the head. They breathe the purest effusions of friendship and general philanthropy, and shew how great a degree of the latter may be compounded with strong religious zeal. He is often happy in the turn of his compliments, and his stile is easy and familiar, except when he affects a Shandean[7] fabrication of words. But his imagination is wild and extravagant, escapes incessantly from every restraint of reason and taste, and, in the course of its vagaries, leaves a tract of thought as incoherent and eccentric, as is the course of a meteor through the sky. His subjects should often have led him to a process of sober reasoning: yet we find him always substituting sentiment for demonstration. Upon the whole, though we admit him to the first place among those of his own colour who have presented themselves to the public judgment, yet when we

[2] Jefferson's note: The instrument proper to them is the banjo, which they brought hither from Africa, and which is the original of the guitar, its chords being precisely the four lower chords of the guitar.

[3] A period of sexual receptivity in female animals. Jefferson seems to use the word metaphorically to refer to a poet's receptivity to inspiration.

[4] Phyllis Wheatley "On Being Brought from Africa to America."

[5] A satirical poem by Alexander Pope (1688–1744).

[6] Charles Ignatius Sancho (1729–1780), born a slave, whose letters advocating abolition of the slave trade in 1782.

[7] A reference to *The Life and Opinions of Tristam Shandy, Gentleman*, a novel by Laurence Sterne, famous for its word play.

compare him with the writers of the race among whom he lived, and particularly with the epistolary class, in which he has taken his own stand, we are compelled to enroll him at the bottom of the column. This criticism supposes the letters published under his name to be genuine, and to have received amendment from no other hand; points which would not be of easy investigation.

The improvement of the blacks in body and mind, in the first instance of their mixture with the whites, has been observed by every one, and proves that their inferiority is not the effect merely of their condition of life. We know that among the Romans, about the Augustan age especially, the condition of their slaves was much more deplorable than that of the blacks on the continent of America. The two sexes were confined in separate apartments, because to raise a child cost the master more than to buy one. Cato,[8] for a very restricted indulgence to his slaves in this particular, took from them a certain price. But in this country the slaves multiply as fast as the free inhabitants. Their situation and manners place the commerce between the two sexes almost without restraint. -- The same Cato, on a principle of economy, always sold his sick and superannuated slaves. He gives it as a standing precept to a master visiting his farm, to sell his old oxen, old waggons, old tools, old and diseased servants, and every thing else become useless. “Vendat boves vetulos, plaustrum vetus, ferramenta vetera, servum senem, servum morbosum, & si quid aliud supersit vendat.”[9] The American slaves cannot enumerate this among the injuries and insults they receive. It was the common practice to expose in the island of AEsculapius, in the Tyber, diseased slaves, whose cure was like to become tedious. The Emperor Claudius, by an edict, gave freedom to such of them as should recover, and first declared, that if any person chose to kill rather than to expose them, it should be deemed homicide. The exposing them is a crime of which no instance has existed with us; and were it to be followed by death, it would be punished capitally. We are told of a certain Vedius Pollio, who, in the presence of Augustus, would have given a slave as food to his fish, for having broken a glass. With the Romans, the regular method of taking the evidence of their slaves was under torture. Here it has been thought better never to resort to their evidence. When a master was murdered, all his slaves, in the same house, or within hearing, were condemned to death. Here punishment falls on the guilty only, and as precise proof is required against him as against a freeman. Yet notwithstanding these and other discouraging circumstances among the Romans, their slaves were often their rarest artists. They excelled too in science, insomuch as to be usually employed as tutors to their master’s children. Epictetus, Terence, and Phaedrus, were slaves.[10] But they were of the race of whites. It is not their condition then, but nature, which has produced the distinction.

Whether further observation will or will not verify the conjecture, that nature has been less bountiful to them in the endowments of the head, I believe that in those of the heart she will be found to have done them justice. That disposition to theft with which they have been branded, must be ascribed to their situation, and not to any depravity of the moral sense. The man, in whose favour no laws of property exist, probably feels himself less bound to respect those made in favour of others. When arguing for ourselves, we lay it down as a fundamental, that laws, to be just, must give a reciprocation of right: that, without this, they are mere arbitrary rules of conduct, founded in force, and not in conscience: and it is a problem which I give to the master to solve, whether the religious precepts against the violation of

[8] Marcus Porcius Cato (234–149 BCE) was a Roman Senator and historian.

[9] Cato de re rustica. c. 2

[10] Epictetus (50–135 CE) was a philosopher; Terence (c. 195–c. 159 BCE) was a playwright; Phaedrus a first century compiler of fables and author.

property were not framed for him as well as his slave? And whether the slave may not as justifiably take a little from one, who has taken all from him, as he may slay one who would slay him? That a change in the relations in which a man is placed should change his ideas of moral right and wrong, is neither new, nor peculiar to the colour of the blacks. Homer tells us it was so 2600 years ago. . . .

> Jove fix'd it certain, that whatever day
>
> Makes man a slave, takes half his worth away.[11]

But the slaves of which Homer speaks were whites. Notwithstanding these considerations which must weaken their respect for the laws of property, we find among them numerous instances of the most rigid integrity, and as many as among their better instructed masters, of benevolence, gratitude, and unshaken fidelity.

The opinion, that they are inferior in the faculties of reason and imagination, must be hazarded with great diffidence. To justify a general conclusion, requires many observations, even where the subject may be submitted to the Anatomical knife, to Optical glasses, to analysis by fire, or by solvents. How much more then where it is a faculty, not a substance, we are examining; where it eludes the research of all the senses; where the conditions of its existence are various and variously combined; where the effects of those which are present or absent bid defiance to calculation; let me add too, as a circumstance of great tenderness, where our conclusion would degrade a whole race of men from the rank in the scale of beings which their Creator may perhaps have given them. To our reproach it must be said, that though for a century and a half we have had under our eyes the races of black and of red men, they have never yet been viewed by us as subjects of natural history. I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind. It is not against experience to suppose, that different species of the same genus, or varieties of the same species, may possess different qualifications. Will not a lover of natural history then, one who views the gradations in all the races of animals with the eye of philosophy, excuse an effort to keep those in the department of man as distinct as nature has formed them? This unfortunate difference of colour, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people. Many of their advocates, while they wish to vindicate the liberty of human nature, are anxious also to preserve its dignity and beauty. Some of these, embarrassed by the question 'What further is to be done with them?' join themselves in opposition with those who are actuated by sordid avarice only. Among the Romans emancipation required but one effort. The slave, when made free, might mix with, without staining the blood of his master. But with us a second is necessary, unknown to history. When freed, he is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture.

[11] Jefferson quotes from Alexander Pope's translation of *The Odyssey*.

READING 2: *NOTES ON THE STATE OF VIRGINIA:* QUERY XVIII, THOMAS JEFFERSON |1784
SOURCE: https://encyclopediavirginia.org/primary-documents/query-xviii-an-excerpt-from-notes-on-the-state-of-virginia-by-thomas-jefferson-1784/

In this excerpt from Notes on the State of Virginia (1784), Thomas Jefferson reflects on the nature and future of the American slave society.

The particular customs and manners that may happen to be received in that state?

It is difficult to determine on the standard by which the manners of a nation may be tried, whether catholic, or particular. It is more difficult for a native to bring to that standard the manners of his own nation, familiarized to him by habit. There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. the whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. This quality is the germ of all education in him. From his cradle to his grave he is learning to do what he sees others do. If a parent could find no motive either in his philanthropy or his self-love, for restraining the intemperance of passion towards his slave, it should always be a sufficient one that his child is present. But generally it is not sufficient. The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities. The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances. And with what execration should the statesman be loaded, who permitting one half the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots, and these into enemies, destroys the morals of the one part, and the amor patriæ of the other. For if a slave can have a country in this world, it must be any other in preference to that in which he is born to live and labour for another: in which he must lock up the faculties of his nature, contribute as far as depends on his individual endeavours to the evanishment of the human race, or entail his own miserable condition on the endless generations proceeding from him. With the morals of the people, their industry also is destroyed. For in a warm climate, no man will labour for himself who can make another labour for him. This is so true, that of the proprietors of slaves a very small proportion indeed are ever seen to labour. And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and nature means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest.—But it is impossible to be temperate and to pursue this subject through the various considerations of policy, of morals, or history natural and civil. We must be contented to hope they will force their way into every one's mind. I think a change already perceptible, since the origin of the present revolution. The spirit of the master is abating, that of the slave rising from the dust, his condition mollifying, the way I hope preparing, under the auspices of heaven, for a total emancipation, and that this is disposed, in the order of events, to be with the consent of the masters, rather than by their extirpation.

READING 3: Draft of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson | 1776
SOURCE: https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/draft-of-the-declaration-of-independence-2/

As the debate over whether the colonies should declare independence from Great Britain headed toward a climax in the summer of 1776, Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), a slaveholder, was one of four committee members appointed by the Continental Congress to draft a declaration of independence. At the suggestion of committee member John Adams (1735–1826), and with the agreement of the other members, Jefferson took up the task of writing the document. He worked on it for three weeks, in his rented room in the house of a Philadelphia bricklayer.

Many years after 1776, Jefferson wrote that he aimed to make the Declaration "an expression of the . . . common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command . . . assent." The common sense of the subject as Jefferson explained it was that humans were equal, and that therefore government existed legitimately only when those who formed government consented to its formation. In truth, in a world dominated by slavery and tyrannical government, Jefferson's plain and firm articulation of the principles of free government—supported by military victory over British forces—created, as much as expressed, what became the common sense of the matter not only for Americans, but for people all over the world. Ever after 1776, as the documents in the rest of this volume attest, the principles of the Declaration and the example of the American Revolution guided those Americans who sought to preserve free government and end bondage among men. That is why July 4, 1776 remains the most important date in American history and, indeed, one of the most important dates in human history.

In Jefferson's notes on the debate over the Declaration, he provided a brief account of how his draft was amended; he then transcribed the draft he had submitted to Congress to show how it had been changed. The text below includes Jefferson's explanatory note and underlines, as Jefferson did, the parts of the Declaration deleted by Congress. In Jefferson's original transcription, the words and phrases inserted by Congress are displayed in the margin; here they are italicized and placed within curly brackets in the body of the text. We include from Jefferson's draft the Declaration's statement of principles, Jefferson's remarks on the slave trade, and the concluding paragraph. The full text may be found here. As Jefferson's opening note indicates, after the American Revolution much work for liberty remained to be done, even in the United States.

—David Tucker, Slavery and Its Consequences

. . . He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of INFIDEL powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce. And that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die,[3] he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people on whom he also obtruded them: thus paying off former crimes committed against the LIBERTIES of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the LIVES of another. . . .

READING 4: LETTER FROM THOMAS JEFFERSON TO HENRI GREGOIRE| FEBRUARY 25, 1809
SOURCE: https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-9893

Sir

I have received the favor of your letter of Aug: 17. and with it the Volume you were so kind as to send me on the literature of negroes. be assured that no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts I have myself entertained and expressed on the grade of understanding allotted to them by nature, and to find that in this respect they are on a par with ourselves. my doubts were the result of personal observation on the limited sphere of my own State, where the opportunities for the developement of their genius were not favorable, and those of exercising it still less so. I expressed them therefore with great hesitation. but whatever be their degree of talent it is no measure of their rights. because Sr. I. Newton was superior to others in understanding he was not therefore Lord of the person or property of others. on this subject they are gaining daily in the Opinions of nations, & hopeful advances are making towards their reestablishment on an equal footing with the other colours of the human family. I pray you therefore to Accept my thanks for the many instances you have enabled me to observe of respectable intelligence in that race of men, which cannot fail to have effect in hastening the day of their relief, & to be assured of the Sentiments of high & just esteem & consideration which I tender to your self with all sincerity

Th: Jefferson