

THE TRANSITION IN THE INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY
IN REVOLUTIONARY VIRGINIA, NEW YORK, AND PENNSYLVANIA

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A THESIS

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IN REVOLUTIONARY VIRGINIA, NEW YORK, AND PENNSYLVANIA

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ABSTRACT

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Purpose

The purpose of this thesis was to consider certain aspects of and responses to the slave system in Virginia, New York, and Pennsylvania in both their pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary settings. After determining the differences or to what extent the system changed during the Revolutionary period, it has been the intent of this study to ascertain the underlying causes for these changes. Analysis of causation has been considered in the framework of the views of both the consensus and conflict historians, but particular emphasis has been given to evaluating the validity of John Franklin Jameson's thesis concerning the American Revolution as a primary factor in change.

Methods

Investigation for this thesis began with a study of general secondary works regarding slavery in Virginia, New York, and Pennsylvania. In addition, valuable information was gained from various primary sources including records of legislation, documentary materials, and personal writings and correspondence of the period.

Findings

As a result of an unprecedented wave of antislavery sentiment

that was present in Revolutionary Virginia, New York, and Pennsylvania, the system of chattel slavery in all three colonies underwent significant changes during the 1770's and 1780's.

It has been the contention of this study that to a large degree these changes were the result of an internal social upheaval accompanying the conflict with Great Britain. In other words, anti-slavery measures in the 1770's and 1780's, as Jameson maintained, were primarily products of the Revolution.

The Revolution affected slavery in Virginia, New York, and Pennsylvania in varying degrees. In none of these colonies was the immediate abolition of slavery forthcoming, a fact which qualifies somewhat the concept of the American Revolution as a social revolution. However, in New York and Pennsylvania the institution was significantly undermined, and in all three colonies the Revolutionary period marked a distinct and favorable turning point in race relations.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On July 4, 1776, members of the Continental Congress formally declared that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."¹

As these revolutionary sentiments were evolving on an inter-colonial level, many colonies adopted measures which undermined considerably the greatest of all human inequalities, the institution of chattel slavery. These measures varied somewhat from area to area, but, in general, antislavery advocates during the Revolutionary period sought to accomplish three primary goals: legalization of private manumission, suppression of the foreign slave trade, and gradual abolition of slavery. What connection did these efforts to effect antislavery reform have with the American Revolution in its broadest concept? Was it coincidental that reform in the American system of slavery accompanied a conflict which elicited a nation's commitment to honor the "unalienable rights" of every man to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"?

So-called conflict or progressive historians who subscribe to the broader concept of the American Revolution as a social revolution

¹Samuel E. Morison (ed.), Sources and Documents Illustrating the American Revolution, 1764-1788, and the Formation of the Federal Constitution (2d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), 157.

find no coincidence in reform in the American slave system occurring at the time of the struggle with Britain over home rule. In his incisive The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement, John Franklin Jameson suggested that the major impetus for anti-slavery reform during the 1770's and 1780's came from the democratic upsurge unleashed by the Revolution.²

Consensus or neo-Whig historians, however, interpret differently changes wrought in the slave system during the Revolutionary era. Emphasizing consensus and continuity in American history, these scholars reject the concept of an internal social upheaval associated with the external conflict with Great Britain. Accordingly, these historians view antislavery reform as a product of evolutionary processes rather than revolution. As one consensus historian wrote:

The danger . . . is that the historian, misled by his enthusiasm for the concept of "revolution," will posit too abrupt a set of changes, will pay too little attention to the evidences of historical continuity. . . . Indeed the points at which the supports to Jameson's thesis seem weakest--where for example he argues for sharper changes in the . . . social status of individuals than can be justified on the evidence--are precisely those points at which he overlooked or underestimated dynamic forces already present in the society of late colonial America.³

Other historians questioning the Jameson thesis have explained slavery reform in economic terms. For example, in some instances the willingness to abolish the foreign slave trade was generated

²John Franklin Jameson, The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1926), 34-36.

³Frederick B. Tolles, "The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement: A Re-Evaluation," The American Past: Conflicting Interpretations of the Great Issues, ed. Sidney Fine and Gerald S. Brown (2d ed., New York: The Macmillan Co., 1965), I, 127.

primarily, according to these historians, by the recognition that the trade was no longer profitable, not because of any humanitarian impulse emanating from a democratic revolution.⁴

The purpose of this thesis is to determine to what extent the institution of slavery changed during the Revolutionary era in three states--Virginia, New York, and Pennsylvania--and to ascertain the underlying causes for change. Analysis of causation will be considered in the framework of the views of both the consensus and conflict historians, but particular emphasis will be given to evaluating the validity of Jameson's thesis concerning the American Revolution as a primary factor in change.

⁴Edgar J. McManus, A History of Negro Slavery in New York (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1966), 194.

CHAPTER II

VIRGINIA

The institution of slavery was firmly woven into the fabric of pre-Revolutionary Virginia society. At the outset of the Revolution Virginia had approximately 200,000 slaves, twice as many as her closest southern neighbor, South Carolina.¹ In the colonial period it appears that some Virginians had moral misgivings with regard to human bondage, but a popular rationalization was that slavery had a pernicious influence on both whites and blacks, with the whites usually suffering the most. "They [slaves] blow up the pride," wrote Colonel William Byrd in 1739, "and ruin the Industry of our White People, who seeing a Rank of poor creatures below them, detest work for fear it should make them look like slaves."² Such feelings usually reflected a sense of hopelessness or frustration and rarely prompted proposals for action on behalf of the Negro slave. More often, however, the slave system was simply taken as a matter of fact. Virginians, like most other American colonials, viewed slavery not only as a natural and moral institution but as a necessary one as well.³

¹One historian approximated the slave population of other southern colonies at the beginning of the Revolution as follows: South Carolina, 100,000; Maryland, 70,000; North Carolina, 70,000; Georgia, 15,000. Jameson, American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement, 31.

²"Documents," The American Historical Review, I (October, 1895), 89.

³Matthew T. Mellon, Early American Views on Negro Slavery: From the Letters and Papers of the Founders of the Republic (New York: New American Library, 1969), 31-32.

A small religious sect known as the Society of Friends or Quakers presented the only center of organized resistance to slavery in Virginia before the Revolution. As early as 1722 Virginia Quakers had denounced both the foreign and domestic slave trade and through their Yearly Meeting had formally recorded concern over the treatment and education of slaves. The Yearly Meeting of 1768 cautioned that any Friend purchasing or selling slaves would be held for "breach of discipline," and in the early 1770's offenders were being disowned by the sect.⁴

One of Virginia's most outstanding champions of the Negro was the Quaker Warner Mifflin. At the age of fourteen, Mifflin was convinced of the injustice of slavery by a persuasive young slave on his father's plantation. This conviction led him in 1775 to free the more than one hundred slaves he had inherited in violation of statutory restrictions on manumission. The young Mifflin also used his influence in politics. In 1782 he appeared before the Virginia legislature lobbying for enactment of a private manumission law.⁵

Another individual long in the antislavery camp was Robert Pleasants, a Quaker from Henrico County. Pleasants acquired his distaste for slavery primarily from his father, who in 1771 had attempted to free his hundreds of slaves but was prohibited by the

⁴Stephen B. Weeks, Southern Quakers and Slavery (New York: Bergman Publishers, 1968), 201-205.

⁵Rayner W. Kelsey, "Warner Mifflin," Dictionary of American Biography, ed. Dumas Malone, VI (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933), 609.

legislature.⁶ Undaunted by this legislative ruling, the younger Pleasants attempted acts of manumission in violation of the law. In 1772, for example, he freed a young Negro boy and held that it was unlawful for either "myself, my heirs Exect. administrs. or assigns or any other person . . . to deprive the said Negro Boy of . . . liberty."⁷ In the capacity of chairman of the Virginia Abolition Society, Pleasants, beginning in 1774, petitioned the Virginia Assembly to act in behalf of emancipation.⁸ On several occasions he appealed to such prominent leaders as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry to support a general emancipation bill.⁹ Pleasants early pointed out the inconsistency of Virginia holding over 200,000 slaves at the same time a Revolution was being carried on to secure the "unalienable rights" of all human beings.

It appears . . . to me that it would be consistent with our interests as well as our duty [observed Pleasants] while we are contending with the Mother country respecting arbitrary measures she would impose on us, to remember to do the same justice to our . . . slaves who have an equal right to freedom with ourselves.¹⁰

⁶Mary S. Locke, Anti-Slavery in America From the Introduction of African Slaves to the Prohibition of the Slave Trade (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1965), 37.

⁷"Letters of Robert Pleasants, Merchant at Curles, 1772," The William and Mary Quarterly, 2d ser., II (October, 1922), 274-275.

⁸"Letters of Robert Pleasants, of Curles," The William and Mary Quarterly, 2d ser., I (April, 1921), 109.

⁹Robert McColley, Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1964), 158.

¹⁰Adair P. Archer, "The Quaker Attitude Towards the Revolution," The William and Mary Quarterly, 2d ser., I (July, 1921), 174-175.

But with the laws then in effect it was quixotic to think in terms of outright abolition when it was extremely difficult to carry through with an act of private manumission. For many years legislative restrictions had been placed on the master wishing to free his slave. In 1699 the first enactment restricting private manumission stipulated that the emancipator had to send his slave out of the colony within six months of emancipation or the slave might be apprehended by church wardens and sold.¹¹ The law did provide one exception to this restriction making manumission contingent upon the removal of the freed slave from the colony. If a slaveowner freed his bondsman as a reward for meritorious services, the emancipated slave was not required to leave the colony. However, this provision was rendered more restrictive in 1723 by a statute which stated that henceforth meritorious service would be adjudged by the governor and Council and not the slaveowner.¹² Following the enactment of this statute, the number of slaves privately manumitted was quite negligible.¹³

An old controversy over importing new blacks into Virginia was heightened during the years of political contention with Great

¹¹George M. Stroud, A Sketch of the Laws Relating to Slavery in the Several States of the United States of America (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Henry Longstretch, 1856), 236-237.

¹²Jeffrey R. Brackett, "The Status of the Slave, 1775-1789" Essays in the Constitutional History of the United States in the Formative Period, 1775-1789, ed. John Franklin Jameson (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1889), 280.

¹³Adele Hast, "The Legal Status of the Negro in Virginia 1705-1765," The Journal of Negro History, LIV (July, 1969), 220-221.

Britain. For many years Virginians had been alarmed over the rapidly increasing number of slaves in the colony. From 1723 down to the Revolution, Virginia laid import duties on slaves to reduce the number of Negroes coming into the colony. Partly because of royal interest in the African Company, these acts were immediately vetoed by the governor or disallowed by the King.¹⁴

In 1772 the House of Burgesses in an address to the King declared that

the importation of slaves into the colonies . . . hath long been considered as a trade of great inhumanity, and under its present encouragement, we have too much reason to fear will danger the very existence of your majesty's American dominions. . . . Deeply impressed with these sentiments, we most humbly beseech your majesty to remove all those restraints on your majesty's governors of this colony, which inhibit their assenting to such laws as might check so pernicious a commerce.¹⁵

This renewed attempt to curb the trade was, like others which preceded it, unsuccessful.

As relations between the mother country and the colonists deteriorated, there was a concerted effort on the part of the American colonists to form a non-intercourse association as an economic weapon against Great Britain. Despite the fact that the traffic in slaves was not initially considered as a possible area where the embargo might be effectively exercised, Virginia delegates gave the trade "especial prominence" and eventually forced their views on the Continental Congress.¹⁶

¹⁴William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870 (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1965), 12-14.

¹⁵Ibid., 14.

¹⁶Ibid., 43.

Numerous proposals from mass meetings in a number of Virginia counties urged adoption of such a continental association and expressed particularly a desire to prohibit the foreign slave trade. Fairfax County, for instance, declared its "most earnest wishes to see an entire stop forever put to such a wicked, cruel, and unnatural trade."¹⁷ In August, 1774, the Virginia Convention, the colony's revolutionary government, adopted the following proposal:

We will neither ourselves import, nor purchase any slave or slaves imported by any other person, after the first day of November next, either from Africa, the West Indies, or any other place.¹⁸

Historians placing considerable emphasis on the internal social reforms occurring as a result of the Revolution have, in some instances, considered these efforts to end the slave trade as evidence reinforcing their view.¹⁹ But to support this internal conflict interpretation, Virginia's efforts to end the foreign slave trade must have had their roots in a genuine antislavery movement, a condition which a number of historians have called quite cogently into question.²⁰ Though the movement to abolish the trade undoubtedly had strong moral backing, it has been suggested that perhaps the major impetus lay not so much in an aversion to slavery as in social and economic considerations. There were, for example,

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Jameson, American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement, 35-36.

²⁰Mellon, Early American Views on Slavery, 38-40.

slaveholders who objected to importation on the grounds that it cheapened the price of prime slaves. In the ten years before 1770, tide-water planters saw the value of their slaves reduced by half. By removing the foreign competition, these eastern slaveowners, who already had sufficient numbers of slaves, could obtain attractive prices from settlers farther west and in South Carolina and Georgia.²¹ Others raised objections to the foreign trade because it discouraged immigration and manufacturing. "The African trade," observed a Prince George County official in 1774, "is injurious to this Colony, obstructs the population of it by freemen, prevents manufacturers and other useful emigrants from Europe from settling amongst us."²² There also prevailed a fear of slave rebellions. If the slave population was permitted to grow more rapidly than the white, then possibilities for successful insurrections were increased.²³

When the delegates to the Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in 1774 to frame statements of grievances against Britain, the Virginia delegates had been advised by Jefferson to submit to the Congress the following resolution:

The abolition of domestick slavery is the greatest object of desire in these colonies where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state. But previous to the enfranchisement of the slaves we have, it is necessary to exclude all further importations from Africa; yet our repeated attempts to effect

²¹John David Mays, Edmund Pendleton, 1721-1803: A Biography (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), I, 266.

²²DuBois, Suppression of the African Slave-Trade, 43.

²³William S. Jenkins, Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1960), 29-30.

this by prohibitions, and by imposing duties which might amount to a prohibition, have been hitherto defeated by his majesty's negative.²⁴

Jefferson went on to condemn the King for subordinating the rights of human nature to monetary interest. The important point to note here is that evidently Jefferson's view that the "abolition of domestick slavery is the greatest object of desire in these colonies" was at variance with the majority of Virginia's delegates. His statement was read but was rejected, and a milder one was submitted to the Congress.²⁵

Efforts to prohibit the foreign slave trade in Virginia seem not to have been chiefly motivated by humanitarian concern for blacks. Although some protests rested on the grounds that the trade was "wicked, cruel, and unnatural," evidence, for the most part, appears to suggest less lofty motives.

A few southern slaveholders, such as Jefferson and Henry, looked forward to the day when slavery would be abolished, but a substantial number of Virginia planters did not share these visions. This is the opinion of one historian, Richard B. Morris, who pointed out that it was not until the British began to meddle with the institution of slavery that uncommitted Virginia planters were finally convinced to side with the forces of rebellion. When Lord Dunmore, the royal governor of Virginia, issued his proclamation promising freedom to Negro slaves joining the British cause, slaveowners who

²⁴Merrill Jenson (ed.), Tracts of the American Revolution, 1763-1776 (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 269.

²⁵Ibid., 256.

had formerly taken no stand in regard to the controversy with England decided that it was time for the colonies to act.²⁶

The purpose of Dunmore's proclamation was to "cripple" the Revolution. By and large, the governor reasoned that if rebellious planters who were considering a resort to arms were deprived of their workers, they would be considerably less enthusiastic about leaving their homes to fight the British.²⁷ Subsequent to Dunmore's call, the Virginia Committee of Safety issued a counterproclamation which asserted that Great Britain's own slaves had not been freed, that she was the "greatest stimulator" of the slave trade, and that she had prohibited Virginia's attempts to cut off the traffic. Apparently this counterproclamation was addressed in part to blacks in order to discourage them from fleeing to the British.²⁸ In December, 1775, the Virginia Convention passed a law providing banishment or execution for slaves recaptured from Dunmore, but added that blacks willingly returning to their masters would be pardoned.²⁹

Although Dunmore represented no serious threat following his defeat at Great Bridge, the unrest engendered by his proclamation was significant. Whenever the British fought on Virginia soil, there

²⁶Richard B. Morris, The American Revolution Reconsidered (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967), 74. Dunmore's proclamation applied to slaves belonging to rebel masters. Tory owned slaves would not be freed. Benjamin Quarles, The Negro in the American Revolution (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 19.

²⁷Quarles, The Negro in the American Revolution, 21.

²⁸DuBois, Suppression of the African Slave-Trade, 223.

²⁹Herbert Aptheker, The American Revolution, 1763-1783 (New York: International Publishers, 1960), 217.

were always slaves who escaped to the British. John Hope Franklin wrote that the "presence of British troops in Virginia had an unsettling effect on slavery in general."³⁰ Slaves who had no intention of reaching British lines ran away in droves. Jefferson estimated that in one year alone 30,000 slaves deserted their masters.³¹ But the British call for Negro slaves had perhaps the more significant effect of mitigating, to some extent, the harsh policy of the colonists toward Negroes. A month before Dunmore's action, John Rutledge, a South Carolina delegate, introduced in the Continental Congress a resolution prohibiting the enlistment of Negroes as soldiers. On October 18 the Congress approved this measure, and General Washington, in turn, issued orders complying with the decision.³² Yet, in the meantime, came Dunmore's call for slaves to join the British ranks. As a result, in December, Washington reversed the earlier decision, thus giving "license for their [free Negroes who had previously served in the Continental Army] being [re-] enlisted."³³ Congress approved on January 16, 1776, in a resolution stating in part that "free negroes who have served faithfully in the army . . . may be re-inlisted therein, but no others."³⁴

³⁰John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans (3d ed.; New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 134.

³¹Ibid.

³²Aptheker, The American Revolution, 221.

³³Ibid., 222.

³⁴U. S., Continental Congress, Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford and others, IV (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1906), 60.

Congressional approval was soon followed by state action. Virginia's militia law of 1777 allowed the enlistment of free Negroes and mulattoes in the state military force as "drummers, trumpeters or pioneers, or such other servile labor as they shall be directed to perform."³⁵ A few months later it was ascertained that a number of slaves were running away from their masters to enlist in the army in order to gain freedom. To prohibit this a supplementary law required that military recruiters enlist only those mulattoes or Negroes who could produce certificates of freedom issued by a justice of the peace.³⁶

Virginia law did grant a provision allowing slaveowners to send free Negroes as their substitutes in the war. It appears that some masters enlisted their slaves as substitutes, representing them to recruiters as freemen. In a number of instances when these slaves were to be discharged, their masters attempted to reenslave them.³⁷ The attention of the Virginia Assembly was directed to this matter on October 8, 1783. In addition to voting to free all slaves who had been enlisted in this manner, the assembly also ordered the Attorney General to act in behalf of any slave being held unjustly.³⁸

³⁵J. Reuben Sheeler, "The Negro on the Virginia Frontier," The Journal of Negro History, XLIII (October, 1958), 282.

³⁶Aptheker, The American Revolution, 222.

³⁷Quarles, The Negro in the American Revolution, 183.

³⁸Sheeler, "The Negro on the Virginia Frontier," The Journal of Negro History, XLIII, 286.

In some cases the assembly granted freedom to slaves for meritorious service during the war. Probably the most noted slave gaining freedom in this way was James Armistead, who had distinguished himself in the service of Marquis de Lafayette. Armistead was emancipated by a special act of the Virginia Assembly in 1786.³⁹ Slaves acquired by the state during the war as payment for wartime taxes or from confiscated Tory estates were sometimes freed but were sold for exportation as well.⁴⁰

The importance of the Revolutionary War to the Negro slave was not in the fact that he was inadvertently given limited opportunities to serve as a soldier or that in some cases he was freed for meritorious service. The real significance, as one historian noted, was that for the first time Virginians began to recognize the gap between slavery and the principles of natural and inalienable rights upon which they based their revolution.⁴¹ Jefferson thought he saw substantial progress in white dissatisfaction over slavery in Virginia following the war. He wrote that the

spirit of the master is abating . . . that of the slave rising from the dust, his condition is mollifying, the way I hope preparing under the auspices of heaven for a total emancipation, and this is disposed in the order of events to be with the

³⁹William Waller Hening (ed.), The Statutes at Large Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, XII (Richmond, Va.: [n.n.], 1823), 380-381.

⁴⁰Brackett, "The Status of the Slave," Essays, 305.

⁴¹Winthrop D. Jordan, White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812 (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), 303-304.

consent of the masters rather than by extirpation.⁴²

Examples of individual disaffection with slavery became significant during the period of the Revolution. Individual leaders of the revolution in Virginia, such as Arthur Lee, held in 1764 that the institution of slavery was "shocking to humanity and abhorrent to the Christian religion."⁴³ St. George Tucker, professor of law at William and Mary College, wrote that slavery was "incompatible with the principles of our government and that of the Revolution."⁴⁴ Patrick Henry replied in a letter to Robert Pleasants in 1773 that slavery was "as repugnant to humanity as it is inconsistent with the Bible, and destructive to liberty."⁴⁵

The individual who possibly had more to say concerning slavery than any Virginian at this time was Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was educated at William and Mary and early had come under the influence of liberal British and French thought. For his time and locale he took a most advanced stand on the issue of slavery. In his celebrated defense of a mulatto suing for freedom in 1770, Jefferson, before the General Court, insisted that under the law

⁴²James C. Ballagh, A History of Slavery in Virginia (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1902), 130.

⁴³Alice Felt Tyler, Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History from the Colonial Period to the Outbreak of the Civil War (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 466.

⁴⁴Ballagh, Slavery in Virginia, 129.

⁴⁵Henry Steele Commager and Richard B. Morris (eds.), The Spirit of 'Seventy-Six: The Story of the American Revolution As Told By Participants (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), I, 402.

of nature all men were born free.⁴⁶ About this same time he joined another member of the assembly, Richard Bland, in an attempt to extend the protection of the laws to slaves.⁴⁷ In his Notes on Virginia, Jefferson wrote that 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."⁴⁸ He warned that these habits had a harmful influence on children:

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 the worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities.⁴⁹

Such an institution also caused Jefferson grave concern over the future of the country.

Indeed [he said] I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever; that considering numbers, nature and natural means only a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events.⁵⁰

It is interesting to note that the vocal opposition of these

⁴⁶Dumas Malone, Jefferson the Virginian (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1948), 121-122.

⁴⁷James E. Pate, "Richard Bland's Inquiry Into the Rights of British Colonies," The William and Mary Quarterly, 2d ser., XI (January, 1931), 21.

⁴⁸Thomas Jefferson, The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb (Washington, D. C.: Issued under the auspices of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association of the United States, 1904), II, 225-226.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., 227.

individuals to slavery did not precede the rift with Great Britain. Of course, it is conceivable that these intelligent and influential men would have voiced their disapproval of slavery regardless of the Revolution. But the fact remains that public opposition by influential leaders in Virginia was roughly concomitant with the controversies with England and was more pronounced at this time than in any period before. At least the seeds were being sown for a profound social change, and it is, perhaps, not too much to say that it took the Revolution to stimulate this beginning.

The meeting of the Virginia Convention on May 6, 1776, served to distinguish between those who believed that "unalienable rights" applied to all men, slaves included, and those who were not bothered by or did not grasp the inconsistency. The first clause of the Declaration of Rights drawn up at this convention declared that

all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights of which they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity, namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.⁵¹

Writing late in his life, Edmund Randolph, the youngest member of this convention, recalled that the first article was a source of considerable debate among the delegates. Robert Carter Nicholas opposed it as being a "pretext of civil convulsion."⁵²

⁵¹Allan Nevins, The American States During and After the Revolution (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927), 146.

⁵²Moncure D. Conway, Omitted Chapters of History Disclosed in the Life and Papers of Edmund Randolph (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1888), 30.

Thomas Ludlow Lee, himself a member of the convention, wrote to a relative concerning the controversy:

A certain set of aristocrats--for we have such monsters here--finding that their miserable system cannot be reared on such foundations, have to this time kept us at bay on the first line, which declares all men to be born free and independent. A number of absurd or unmeaning alterations have been proposed.⁵³

Evidently the position of the "aristocrats" represented a majority view, for they succeeded in having the qualifying phrase "when they enter into a state of society" placed after "which," thus eliminating Negro rights.⁵⁴

There were, however, members of the convention who did not share this majority view. George Mason, author of this bill of rights, Thomas Jefferson, George Wythe, and others were among the minority who had not pressed their opinion concerning the first article for fear that the entire document would be defeated. Despite the setback, the issue was not dead. Jefferson and Wythe were appointed that summer to a committee to revise the laws of Virginia, and one of their objectives was to devise a plan for the gradual emancipation of slavery and to write it into law.⁵⁵

Efforts for the advantage of the Negro slave did not terminate with the close of the war in 1783. For almost two decades following

⁵³Nevins, American States, 146.

⁵⁴John Richard Alden, The South in the Revolution, 1763-1789 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 335.

⁵⁵Thomas Jefferson, The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, ed. Julian P. Boyd, II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 305, 470.

the war there existed a perceptible though limited movement which had as its goal the abolition of the institution of slavery. Those individuals and groups who wished to see an end to slavery centered their efforts around three objectives: prohibition of the foreign slave trade, legalizing of private manumissions, and a gradual abolition statute.

Since 1774 a de facto prohibition against the importation of slaves by sea had been in effect, and so when Jefferson introduced in 1778 a bill to legalize this ban, he encountered little opposition. In addition to a prohibition on the overseas importation of blacks, this new statute declared illegal importation by land as well. Individuals violating the law were to be compelled to forfeit the slaves and pay one thousand pounds for every Negro illicitly introduced.⁵⁶ There was, however, a loophole protecting bona fide settlers who moved into Virginia with their slaves. As long as these immigrants registered their slaves within one year and promised not to sell them, they were protected by law in bringing in and holding slaves.⁵⁷

Although this prohibition was a necessary first step in the direction of emancipation, there is little evidence, as pointed out earlier, to support the position that the legislature was motivated by antislavery sentiment in passing the bill. The loophole clause of the statute was expanded a few years later by a provision

⁵⁶Hening, Statutes, IX, 471.

⁵⁷Ibid., 472.

which gave immigrants more time in which to register their slaves. Apparently many settlers had come into the state with no knowledge of the registration law, and, thus, had failed to comply with it-- a failure which technically should have resulted in the loss of slaves and a fine. "The desire of the government to accommodate . . . these people," wrote Robert McColley, "demonstrates that the laws against slave importation were by no means intended to attack, or even to criticize, the holding of slaves itself."⁵⁸

There was at least some sentiment in favor of permitting any master who wanted to do so to free his slaves. Quaker agitation in this area was pronounced and had been for some time before the Revolution. Many individuals during the war provided in their wills that certain slaves be set free even though the law prohibited this. But a breakthrough as far as the assembly's rulings on these testamentary manumissions occurred in the case of the will of John Barr, a planter from Northumberland County. Barr, in addition to freeing his slave Rachel and her child, created a trust for them in land and property. A dispute arose over the will's validity, and the matter eventually came before the general assembly. In its precedent-shattering decision of 1777, the assembly ruled in favor of the slaves, but added that it was setting no "precedents except in cases where the circumstances may be precisely similar to those of the present case."⁵⁹

⁵⁸McColley, Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia, 165.

⁵⁹Hening, Statutes, IX, 320-321.

A number of similar instances arose during the Revolution. Thus, popular sentiment toward private manumission, in addition to Quaker petitions to the legislature, helps to explain the enactment in 1782 of a private manumission bill.⁶⁰ This new law permitted manumission not only by will but by any "written or sealed instrument acknowledged or proved and made a matter of record in the county court."⁶¹ The only conditions were that the master was responsible for the support of disabled slaves or those too young to support themselves.⁶²

Among questions to be asked concerning the private manumission law are the following: How revolutionary was this new law? Did it represent a real break with the past? Robert and Katherine Brown maintained in their book, Virginia 1705-1786: Democracy or Aristocracy?, that the provisions of the law were very mild and were not universally accepted. Accomack County, for example, petitioned for a repeal of the law on the grounds that freed slaves would encourage insurrection and shelter runaways.⁶³ Robert McColley also suggested that the revolutionary nature of this law is easily overestimated. He contended that before the statute was enacted there was nothing to stop a slaveowner from carrying his slave out of the

⁶⁰Ballagh, Slavery in Virginia, 120.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Robert E. and Katherine B. Brown, Virginia, 1705-1786: Democracy or Aristocracy? (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1964), 284-285.

colony and freeing him. Furthermore, Quaker agitation, McColley argued, was so powerful and influential that manumissions would have increased without this new law and the Revolution.⁶⁴

But possibly the enactment of this law provides the Jameson interpretation with its most arresting evidence. James Ballagh revealed that Virginia courts were extremely lenient with deeds of manumission, and that over the next ten years more than 10,000 slaves were freed.⁶⁵ According to Jameson, this was twice the number freed under the Massachusetts constitution and as many as were in Rhode Island and Connecticut combined when the war began.⁶⁶ Undoubtedly the freeing of some 10,000 slaves in a deeply racist society represented more progress than had occurred in any period before this. McColley's argument that private manumissions would have increased regardless of the 1782 statute and the Revolution is as difficult to substantiate as it is to refute. There did exist a strong sentiment in favor of private manumission, but except among the Quakers there is little evidence of this before the Revolution. Certainly, as McColley pointed out, the Quakers did exert a strong moral influence in Virginia, but it appears that their arguments on slavery were more tolerated than heeded. Without the impact of the Revolution, it is unlikely that private manumissions would have increased so greatly in the decade of the 1780's.

⁶⁴McColley, Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia, 162.

⁶⁵Ballagh, Slavery in Virginia, 121.

⁶⁶Jameson, American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement, 38.

The third and most radical goal, the gradual abolition of slavery in Virginia, never gained much momentum. In November, 1785, Quakers circulated in the House of Burgesses a petition calling for a general emancipation with reasonable restrictions. As a reaction, counterpetitions from Amelia, Mecklenburg, Lunenburg, Brunswick, Halifax, and other counties were issued, not only objecting to the Quaker proposal, but, in addition, demanding repeal of the 1782 law permitting private manumissions. Besides the traditional claim that the Bible sanctioned slavery, these counties based their argument on the grounds that the Revolution had been fought to protect property as well as human liberty. Two days after the Quaker petition had been presented to various legislators, it was read before the assembly and rejected without an opposing vote.⁶⁷ George Washington confessed to Lafayette that the petition could hardly obtain a hearing.⁶⁸ The assembly voted 51-50 to consider the bill rescinding the private manumission law, but the attempted repeal was defeated 52-35.⁶⁹ Speaking of the failure of the legislature to consider the gradual emancipation bill, Jefferson said that there were in the assembly "men of virtue" who favored such a law.

But they saw [stated Jefferson] that the moment of doing it with success was not yet arrived, and that an unsuccessful effort, as too often happens, would only rivet still closer the chains of bondage, and retard the moment of delivery to this oppressed

⁶⁷Browns, Virginia, 1705-1786: Democracy or Aristocracy?, 285.

⁶⁸Nevins, American States, 449.

⁶⁹Browns, Virginia, 1705-1786: Democracy or Aristocracy?, 286.

description of men.⁷⁰

The only other attempt to effect an emancipation provision never got past the planning stage. Jefferson and Wythe, it will be remembered, two members of the committee to revise the laws of Virginia, planned to write into law a provision granting gradual emancipation. Their plan would have freed slaves born after the passage of the act, given them an education in "tillage, arts, or sciences" at public expense, after which they would be colonized "to such place as the circumstances should render most proper."⁷¹ But the plan was abandoned because it was found, wrote Jefferson, "that the public mind would not yet bear the proposition."⁷²

In summation, most Virginians were rarely troubled by their consciences about slavery in the years prior to the American Revolution. To be sure, Quakers gradually felt constrained because of moral scruples to campaign in behalf of Negro freedom, but their influence in the colony at large was comparatively negligible before the Revolution. Generally speaking, Virginia was practically devoid of antislavery sentiment in the pre-Revolutionary period.

The Revolution, however, marked a brief turning point in the relations between Negroes and whites in Virginia. As the struggle with Great Britain emerged into a conflict expressed partly in terms of human liberty, a number of white Virginians began to question

⁷⁰Jefferson, Papers, X, 63.

⁷¹Jefferson, Writings, II, 191.

⁷²Jefferson, Papers, II, 472.

the propriety of holding human beings as chattel slaves. Many of those who recognized the inconsistency between slavery and the revolutionary principles of freedom and natural rights rose above considerations of convenience and economics and joined the ranks of those who wished to rid the state of slavery. During and after the Revolution these antislavery advocates sought three primary reforms: prohibition of the foreign slave trade, legalization of private manumissions, and gradual abolition of slavery. Before the war with Great Britain was over, the first two objectives had been achieved. In 1778 the Virginia legislature enacted a statute prohibiting the foreign slave trade, and four years later it legalized acts of private manumission. Though the latter provision seems to represent a break with the past and to support the Jameson thesis, efforts to prohibit the importation of slaves had at least a fifty-year history and seem to have been motivated chiefly by economic and social considerations.

Regardless of motivations, the prohibition against the foreign slave trade and the legal sanctioning of private manumission represented an important beginning for those Virginians who sought support for general emancipation. But in this most crucial objective, the gradual abolition of slavery, antislavery partisans were not to be successful. Because "the public mind would not yet bear the proposition," Jefferson and Wythe did not even introduce to the legislature a plan calling for an extremely gradual emancipation. And the Quaker attempt in 1785 to effect emancipation legislation was unanimously refused a hearing. In short, the inability of Virginians

to disregard economic self-interest and rise above racial prejudice doomed any attempt at general emancipation. In their failure to abolish the system of slavery, Virginians were led to fulfill Jefferson's prophetic statement: "If . . . it [slavery] is left to force itself on, human nature must shudder at the prospect held up."⁷³

⁷³Ibid., 473.

CHAPTER III

NEW YORK

On the eve of the American Revolution New York was probably the most important colony with slaves north of the Mason-Dixon line.¹ Census returns for the eighteenth century, for example, reveal that slaves accounted for more than 10 percent of the colony's total population, an unusually large proportion of slaves for a northern colony.² In actual numbers there were in New York approximately 25,000 slaves when the Revolution broke out.³ Historians generally concede, however, that in pre-Revolutionary New York there existed little evidence of significant antislavery agitation even though, according to one historian, slaves were treated more harshly in New York than was common in the North.⁴

The institution of slavery in pre-Revolutionary New York was, in short, a firmly entrenched non-benevolent institution. But this was

¹Dixon Ryan Fox, "The Negro Vote in Old New York," The Political Science Quarterly, XXXII (1917), 255.

²Samuel McKee, Jr., Labor in Colonial New York, 1664-1776 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 115.

³The approximate number of slaves in other northern colonies at the outset of the Revolution was as follows: New Jersey, 10,000; Pennsylvania, 6,000; Connecticut, 6,000; Massachusetts, 5,000; Rhode Island, 4,000. Jameson, American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement, 22.

⁴Nevins, American States, 446.

not to be the case by the end of the Revolutionary era, for with the progression of the Revolution there emerged a wave of antislavery agitation which seemed to sweep the state. In the wake of this spirit of reform, the institution of slavery, while not abolished, underwent important ameliorative changes. What prompted the rise of antislavery sentiment in New York? What were the basic forces motivating change? As previously pointed out, John Franklin Jameson suggested in his seminal book, The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement, that the general emergence of antislavery sentiment and legislation in the 1770's and 1780's was to a considerable degree the result of the leveling impact of the American Revolution.⁵ What validity does this general interpretation have when applied to New York? Does it adequately explain the basis for the antislavery measures enacted in the 1780's?

Before exploring the significance of emerging antislavery sentiment in Revolutionary New York and probing the important question of causation, it may be necessary to substantiate the earlier statement "that in pre-Revolutionary New York there existed little evidence of antislavery agitation," if only to show the sharp contrast with antislavery developments during the Revolution.

About the only organized antislavery activity prior to the Revolution emanated from the often unpopular religious group known as the Society of Friends. Dedicated to the doctrine of human brotherhood, members of this sect were among the first in New York

⁵Jameson, American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement, 34-36.

to express concern for the Negro slave. As early as 1717 a Flushing, Long Island, Quaker, Horsman Mullenix, voiced opposition to the practice of fellow Quakers importing and buying slaves. He maintained that local meetings should forbid their members from engaging in such activities.⁶ Proposals of a more radical nature were presented the next year when William Burling urged Long Island Friends to "recognize the sin in slavery" and to "exclude it by her discipline, and fix the judgment of Truth upon it."⁷ These men were not alone in their recognition of the injustice of slavery, for the minutes of the New York Yearly Meeting in that same year reveal that a number of Quakers were convinced "that the said practice is not right."⁸

Despite mounting moral qualms within the Society, many of New York's Quakers continued to hold, purchase, and sell slaves. However, in 1771 Friends in their annual meeting resolved that the practice of buying and selling slaves could no longer be tolerated within the Society.⁹ As an enforcement measure, untractable Quakers were to be read out of the Society.¹⁰

⁶John Cox, Jr., Quakerism in the City of New York, 1657-1930 (New York: Quinn and Boden Co., Inc., 1930), 55-56.

⁷Rufus M. Jones, The Quakers in the American Colonies (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1966), 36.

⁸Thomas E. Drake, Quakers and Slavery in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 29-30.

⁹Leo H. Hirsch, Jr., "The Negro and New York, 1783-1865," The Journal of Negro History, XVI (October, 1931), 385.

¹⁰Cox, Quakerism in the City of New York, 58.

The consciences of many Quakers were not mollified by strictures against buying or selling slaves. If it were wrong to trade in slaves, reasoned numbers of Friends, was it not equally sinful and unjust to keep them? Stimulated by this rather widespread sentiment, the Yearly Meeting in 1771 adopted freedom committees whose purpose was to visit New York Quakers and exhort them to liberate their slaves. The work of these committees was exceedingly successful, for in 1787 the Yearly Meeting recorded, "None concerned in Negroes as slaves."¹¹

While succeeding in purging themselves of the trappings of slavery, Quakers sought to effect change in the province at large. Impressed in 1784 that "mankind without distinction have equally a natural right to freedom," the Society petitioned the senate and assembly to enact a general emancipation measure. Every individual without exception, their petition declared, should "enjoy their natural and unalienable rights."¹²

While Quakers were engaged in their humanitarian campaign against slavery, other New Yorkers were involved in activities which upon first glance appear to be antislavery in nature. These activities included the practice of slave masters privately liberating their blacks and efforts to restrict the importation of slaves. Closer scrutiny, however, does not support the conclusion that these efforts were inspired by humanitarian considerations.

¹¹Drake, Quakers and Slavery, 80.

¹²Jones, Quakers in the American Colonies, 259.

To be sure, moral considerations induced some individuals to manumit their slaves. One Westchester County resident, for instance, freed his slaves "believing it to be consistent with the will of Kind Providence, who hath created all nations with one blood."¹³ Less charitable motives, however, were evidently more common. This conclusion is suggested in the wording of a 1717 amendment to an earlier law which had restricted private manumission. The restrictive act was found

by Experience to be very Inconvenient, prejudicial, and in a manner, a prohibition to Liberty, and will very much Discourage and Dishearten such Negroe, Indian or Mulatto Slaves from serveing their Masters or Mistresses truely and faithfully as they ought to doe.¹⁴

In short, manumission in many cases was an incentive to loyal service. To an extent greater than in any other colony, a large proportion of New York slaves had mastered a wide variety of highly skilled and technical labor. As a consequence of this, they were in a position not too dissimilar from free laborers in that they were able to bargain with their masters for concessions. Many blacks entered into agreements promising their owners a stipulated term of loyal service in return for freedom. Loafing, feigning illness, and forms of sabotage on the part of fractious slaves often resulted if a master refused to grant concessions. "In most cases, however," emphasized one student of New York history, "this was unnecessary, for it was generally recognized that the productivity of slaves had

¹³McManus, Negro Slavery in New York, 147.

¹⁴McKee, Labor in Colonial New York, 134.

a direct relation to the expectation of freedom."¹⁵

In view of these considerations it seems safe to conclude that instances of private manumission in the years prior to the Revolution had very little to do with humanitarian scruples. In a few cases morally troubled individuals manumitted their slaves on humanitarian grounds. Yet more often the master class recognized that liberation was the price they would have to pay for the smooth operation of the slave system.

The foregoing observations concerning private manumission are intended as a partial explanation of motivation behind the practice and not to suggest that the practice was widespread. On the contrary, the legislature sometimes rendered private manumission financially unfeasible. This was the case after a slave insurrection on Manhattan Island in 1712. In the wake of the uprising the legislature passed a slave code which, among other things, required a master upon freeing his slave to post a bond of two hundred pounds. Out of this sum, twenty pounds was to be paid to the freed slave each year.¹⁶ Ostensibly the purpose of this law was to prevent manumitted slaves from becoming a public burden. In reality, disquieted legislators viewed free Negroes as a bane. They were believed to generate unrest, undermine morale, and, in general, be the prime cause of insurrections. Such shortsighted views as to the cause of insurrection led the legislature to offer equally superficial remedies. If free

¹⁵McManus, Negro Slavery in New York, 145.

¹⁶McKee, Labor in Colonial New York, 134.

Negroes were the cause of the problem, legislators reasoned that they must make it more difficult for a Negro to become free. The upshot of these superficial post-mortems was legislation making private manumission financially prohibitive. Despite subsequent modifications of the law, the new provisions still contained pecuniary requirements too formidable for many New Yorkers.¹⁷

Neither would it appear that pre-Revolutionary efforts to restrict the introduction of slaves into New York were motivated by any moral disdain for the institution. To be sure, many in the Quaker community had for years objected to the trade on moral grounds, but their stand was the exception rather than the rule.¹⁸ Fear for their own safety caused some New Yorkers to agitate for a reduction in the influx of black slaves. Following the slave uprising of 1712, for instance, Governor William Cosby warned the legislature against the "disadvantages that attend the too great importation of negroes."¹⁹ To stem the flow of blacks into the colony, he proposed that the assembly impose duties on imported blacks.²⁰

Of course, impositions on imported slaves were also sought

¹⁷Aaron Hamlet Payne, "The Negro in New York Prior to 1860," The Howard Review, 1 (June, 1923), 27-28.

¹⁸Drake, Quakers and Slavery, 64.

¹⁹New York (State), Messages from the Governors, comprising executive communications to the Legislature and other papers relating to legislation from the organization of the first colonial assembly in 1683 to and including the year 1906, with notes, ed. Charles Z. Lincoln (Albany: J. B. Lyon Co., 1909), I, 248. Hereinafter cited as Messages.

²⁰Ibid.

for the purpose of obtaining revenue. In 1728, for example, tariffs were imposed on imported slaves for "supporting His Governor in the Colony of New York."²¹ This duty, like many others on slaves, was disallowed in 1735 because it was "greatly prejudicial to the Trade and Navigation of this Kingdom."²²

Briefly, then, the decades preceding the American Revolution in New York yield little evidence of conflict over the institution of slavery. Although the Quaker community labored in behalf of Negro freedom, their early work was primarily directed at ending Quaker slaveholding. Not until the 1780's did the Society extend its influence to the political sphere. Private manumissions and efforts to impede the flow of slaves into the colony were also relatively common. Yet these practices did not by and large reflect a concern for the welfare of blacks. Motives were more often rooted in economic and social considerations.

That the institution of slavery in New York was a firmly entrenched institution even as late as 1777 was illustrated by the unfavorable reaction of the colony's revolutionary government, the New York Provincial Congress, to a proposal instructing future legislatures to actuate gradual emancipation.²³ The fact that such a

²¹E. B. O'Callaghan (ed.), Documents Relative to the Colonial History of New York; Procured in Holland, England and France by John Romeyn Brodhead, Esq., IV (Albany : Weed, Parsons and Co., 1865), 37.

²²DuBois, Suppression of the African Slave-Trade, 19.

²³Alexander C. Flick (ed.), History of the State of New York, IV (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933), 328-329.

proposal was even introduced demonstrated that the seeds of social revolution had begun to take root. The obstacles that had to be overcome, however, were indeed substantial. Introduced by Gouverneur Morris the rejected proposal read:

And whereas a regard to the rights of human nature and the principles of our holy religion, loudly calls upon us to dispense the blessings of freedom to all mankind: and inasmuch as it would at present be productive of great dangers to liberate the slaves within this State: It is, therefore most earnestly recommended to the future Legislatures of the State of New York, to take the most effective measures consistent with the public safety, and the private property of individuals, for abolishing domestic slavery within the same so that in future ages, every human being who breathes the air of this State, shall enjoy the privileges of a freeman.²⁴

Morris' concern was not shared by a majority of the delegates who easily succeeded in defeating the measure by a vote of 24 to 12.²⁵

Writing in 1788 to an English abolition society, John Jay confessed the extent to which pre-Revolutionary New York was devoid of antislavery conviction.

Prior to the late revolution [he wrote] the great majority, or rather the great body of our people had been so long accustomed to the practice and convenience of having slaves, that very few among them even doubted the propriety and rectitude of it. Some liberal and conscientious men had, indeed, by their conduct and writings, drawn the lawfulness of slavery into question, and they made converts to that opinion; but the number of those converts compared with the people at large, was then very inconsiderable.²⁶

In examining the effect of the Revolution on slavery, one

²⁴McKee, Labor in Colonial New York, 168.

²⁵E. Wilder Spaulding, New York in the Critical Period, 1783-1789 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 87.

²⁶William Jay, The Life of John Jay: With Selections from his Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers (New York: J. and J. Harper, 1833), I, 232.

must first reckon with military considerations, which provided the initial impetus toward general emancipation. Military developments operated to disrupt the slave system in many ways. In their early occupation of southern New York, for example, the British forced many supporters of the American cause to flee the area. In their haste these patriots left behind much of their property, including slaves. These abandoned blacks usually merged into the free Negro community or left with the British at the close of the war.²⁷

Considerably more damaging to the master-slave relationship was a proclamation issued by Sir Henry Clinton promising freedom to those slaves who would join the British ranks. This declaration of July 3, 1779, by the Commander of British forces in New York stated:

I do most strictly forbid any person to sell or claim Right over any Negro, the property of a Rebel, who may take refuge in any part of this Army: And I do promise to every Negro who shall desert the Rebel standard, full security to follow within these lines, any occupation which he shall think proper.²⁸

It did not take long for this news to spread. Loyalist newspapers and individuals sympathetic with the Tory cause were quick to point out to slaves the reward for deserting their patriot masters. "Received a Letter from Robert Yates," wrote one member of the Commission for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies, "informing that there is a certain Thomas Anderson in . . . Livingston a Blacksmith

²⁷McManus, Negro Slavery in New York, 154.

²⁸Roi Ottley and William J. Weatherby (eds.), The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History (New York: Oceana Publications, Inc., 1967), 35.

who is charged . . . with encouraging Negroes to desert from their Masters to go over to the Enemy."²⁹ The minutes of this Commission are filled with similar testimonies.³⁰

The impact of this development upon enslaved blacks was immediate. Hundreds of slaves attempted to reach British lines. And notwithstanding efforts by the Commission for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies to obstruct this tide, large numbers of blacks reached the British.³¹ Historian Alexander Flick noted that slaves literally "flocked" to New York City after being informed that they would obtain their freedom if they escaped from their rebellious masters.³²

This large scale exodus of blacks to the British camp adversely affected the patriot war effort in New York. Because the colony was faced with large numbers of disgruntled slaves who realized that freedom was now well within their reach, there was always the threat of insurrection. In view of this threat, the New York Provincial Congress felt constrained to enact a Militia Act which provided that one detachment of soldiers be used "to guard against the insurrection of slaves."³³ This law was passed even though soldiers were urgently needed in the field.

²⁹Victor Hugo Paltsits (ed.), Minutes of the Commissioners for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies in the State of New York, I (Albany: Published by the State of New York, 1909), 142.

³⁰Ibid., I, 304.

³¹Ibid., II, 704.

³²Flick, History of the State of New York, IV, 57.

³³Ottley, The Negro in New York, 35.

This continuing threat of slave insurrection, in addition to the frequent desertion of slaves to the British, evoked various responses from New Yorkers and Americans in general. In some cases, Americans attempted to halt slave desertions by becoming more restrictive in their policies regarding blacks. Some masters, for example, threatened their slaves with severe punishment if they ran away. Others sent their blacks to locales far removed from the battle fronts.³⁴ But perhaps a more prevalent reaction was a liberalization in American policy regarding Negroes. It will be remembered that in November, 1775, General George Washington had issued instructions to recruiters to discontinue enlisting free blacks. Those Negroes who were already serving in the army were to be discharged. But subsequent to Washington's decision came Lord Dunmore's invitation to Virginia slaves to desert their masters and gain freedom by serving the British cause. This development moved the pragmatic Washington to reverse his earlier decision. In December he issued instructions which gave "license for their [free Negroes who had previously served in the Continental Army] being [re]enlisted."³⁵

Receiving approbation from the Continental Congress the following month, this new policy, while more flexible, did not go far enough for some of the colonies. They began to enlist not only free blacks but slaves as well. In 1776 the New York Provincial Congress, for example, sanctioned a proposal allowing slaves to substitute for

³⁴Quarles, The Negro in the American Revolution, x.

³⁵Aptheker, The American Revolution, 221-222.

whites who had been drafted.³⁶ And two years after Sir Henry Clinton's proclamation, the state passed an act promising freedom to all slaves who served in the army for three years or who were honorably discharged.³⁷ To induce masters to part with their slaves, the law further stipulated that for each able-bodied slave a master allowed to enlist, he would receive a grant of "bounty lands unappropriated."³⁸ It seems that substantial numbers of slaves and masters found the new law attractive. A Hessian officer with Burgoyne at Saratoga observed as much when he stated that "no regiment is to be seen in which there are not negroes in abundance: and among whom are able-bodied, strong, and brave fellows."³⁹

Another way in which New York slaves achieved their freedom by virtue of military developments related to the nature of British evacuation of New York at the close of the war. As General Guy Carleton was preparing to depart, Washington recommended that he prevent slaves who had joined the British during the war from being carried off. In response Carleton insisted that he could not conscientiously renege on Britain's promise to these blacks. "The Negroes," he explained, "I found free when I arrived at New York. I had therefore no right, as I thought, to prevent their going to

³⁶Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, 135.

³⁷Brackett, "The Status of the Slave," Essays, 297.

³⁸George Livermore, An Historical Research Respecting the Opinions of the Founders of the Republic on Negroes as Slaves, as Citizens, and as Soldiers (Boston: A. Williams and Co., 1863), 127.

³⁹Ibid., 111.

any part of the world they thought proper."⁴⁰ One historian estimated that over 3,000 slaves sailed away with Carleton.⁴¹

To recapitulate, military developments had operated in such a way in New York as to disrupt to a considerable degree the master-slave relationship. British occupation of southern New York in the early stages of the war impelled patriots to flee that area and leave behind many of their slaves. These slaves usually merged with the free Negro population or joined the ranks of the British military. As a measure calculated to cripple the patriot cause, Sir Henry Clinton, several years later, announced that slaves deserting their patriot masters and joining British forces would receive their freedom. New York authorities countered with an act offering freedom to slaves serving in the army for three years. Thus the policies pursued by both the British and Americans resulted in the liberation of a considerable number of slaves. This in itself was very important, especially to the slaves involved. But more significant in the long run for the Negro population in general was the effect that this practice of liberation had upon the white community.

Whites had begun to free blacks. Granted, their motives for doing so were not so noble, but, nonetheless, they had begun to free slaves. And gradually it dawned upon many that to do otherwise would be blatantly inconsistent with all they had been saying for

⁴⁰Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, Father Knickerbocker Rebels: New York City During the American Revolution (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 262.

⁴¹Quarles, The Negro in the American Revolution, 172.

a decade or more. The most dull could not fail to grasp the contradiction in white Americans demanding freedom while at the same time denying it to black Americans. This contradiction pierced the consciences of many New Yorkers, and for the first time on a large scale, newspapers, individuals, and organizations began to voice disapproval of chattel slavery.

Several New York newspapers were quick to assail slaveholding and call for its speedy end. Appearing in one New York City newspaper, for example, was an editorial which characterized blacks as "poor pagans whom Christians have thought fit to consider cattle."⁴² More piercing was a fictitious conversation appearing in the New York Weekly Post-Boy between an Englishman and a black slave: "What you think massa Inglis," questioned the Negro, "if black man come steal you, steal wife, and take them quite away, where no see one another again?"⁴³

Newspapers were not alone in their denunciation of slaveholding. Many prominent individuals joined the protest against this conspicuous violation of Revolutionary principles. The future Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, lent his influence to efforts in behalf of emancipation. In a letter to John Jay in March, 1779, Hamilton noted that the "contempt we have been taught to entertain for blacks, makes us fancy many things that are founded

⁴²McManus, Negro Slavery in New York, 151.

⁴³Ibid.

neither in reason nor experience."⁴⁴ Continuing, he commended to Jay a plan whereby slaves in South Carolina would be enlisted and given "their freedom with their muskets." Such a policy, Hamilton believed, would undermine the whole slave system "by opening a door to . . . emancipation" for the entire slave population. "This circumstance," he observed, "has no small weight in inducing me to wish the success of the project; for the dictates of humanity and true policy equally interest me in favour of this unfortunate class of men."⁴⁵ Despite numerous other responsibilities, Hamilton also took an active part in the New York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves. He became in fact the organization's first secretary.⁴⁶

One of the most articulate and persistent opponents of Negro slavery in New York was the aristocrat John Jay. As a delegate to New York's Provincial Convention in 1776, Jay had expressed his opposition to slavery and his desire to implement measures which would abolish the institution. He thought he saw an opportunity to do just that when he was selected as Chairman of the Committee to prepare the state's first constitution. In this capacity he unsuccessfully urged the inclusion of an article providing for an end to slavery. Four years later he commended to New York's Attorney General Pennsylvania's gradual abolition law. "An excellent law,"

⁴⁴Alexander Hamilton, The Papers of Alexander Hamilton, ed. Harold C. Syrett, II (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 17-18.

⁴⁵Ibid., 18.

⁴⁶Ibid., III, 597.

he wrote from Spain, "might be made out of the Pennsylvania one, for the gradual abolition of slavery."⁴⁷ He went on to caution that until "America comes into this measure, her prayers to Heaven for liberty will be impious."⁴⁸ Recognized as one of the leading champions of Negro freedom in New York, Jay was honored by being selected as the New York Manumission Society's first president. Shortly after assuming that office he penned this eloquent statement:

It is much to be wished that slavery might be abolished. The honour of the States, as well as justice and humanity, in my opinion, loudly call upon them to emancipate these unhappy people. To contend for our own liberty, and to deny that blessing to others, involves an inconsistency not to be excused.⁴⁹

Besides individual agitation in behalf of New York's blacks, there came into existence in 1785 "A Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves, and Protecting such of them as have been or may be Liberated." As its Declaration of Principles announced, the Manumission Society was committed "to working for the liberation of slaves, mitigating the evils of slavery, to defend the rights of the blacks, and especially to give them the elements of education."⁵⁰

This organization was the second of its kind in the United States, and the first organized agency of antislavery in New York.⁵¹

⁴⁷Jay, The Life of John Jay, I, 229.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Livermore, Research Respecting Opinions on Negroes, 47.

⁵⁰Payne, "The Negro in New York," The Howard Review, 28.

⁵¹Ibid.

Although its primary purpose was to help bring about total emancipation, the organization was also concerned about the long range welfare of freed slaves. Realizing that freedom for the uneducated slave presented many problems, members of the Society were determined to provide young blacks with at least the rudiments of education. The erection in 1787 and 1792 of Negro schools in New York City attested to their commitment.⁵²

In the wake of this unprecedented wave of individual and organized protest and disaffection, the state legislature enacted a series of laws progressively restricting the institution of slavery in New York. Whereas there were undoubtedly other considerations which prompted the legislation, the new and more liberal acts represented to a large degree the social implications of the American Revolution.

Although not affecting large numbers of slaves, a law freeing blacks taken from confiscated Tory estates signaled this more liberal trend. Freeing these slaves had not been the State's only possible course of action. Virginia had found a partial solution to this problem by selling such slaves for exportation.⁵³ But widespread disapproval of slavery in the post-war period precluded such methods in the Knickerbocker state. New Yorkers "were unwilling," wrote one historian, "that the State should either possess or sell

⁵²Sidney Irving Pomerantz, New York: An American City, 1783-1803 (Port Washington, N. Y.: Ira J. Friedman, Inc., 1965), 222.

⁵³Brackett, "The Status of the Slave," Essays, 305.

slaves."⁵⁴

As a result of this seemingly deep-seated conviction, a law was enacted giving freedom to all slaves acquired by the State by virtue of the departure of Tory masters. In addition to freeing the slaves, the law also made important concessions to such slaves who might be unable to sustain themselves because of age or illness. The Commissioners of Forfeitures were "to provide for the comfortable subsistence of all such slaves."⁵⁵ Following the termination of the office of Commissioners of Forfeitures, the task of providing for these superannuated blacks rested with local overseers of the poor. They were required by law to grant the same support to these old or disabled blacks as was provided for other poor people in the community.⁵⁶

The decision to grant freedom to slaves taken from confiscated Tory estates was encouraging, but it did not, of course, satisfy antislavery advocates. Their efforts were directed in behalf of more thoroughgoing reforms. Specifically, they wished to see an end to the slave trade, a lifting of the restrictions on private manumission, and, most importantly, a gradual abolition statute.

As was mentioned previously, there were attempts prior to the Revolution to reduce by means of an import duty the number of slaves

⁵⁴Hirsch, "The Negro and New York," The Journal of Negro History, XVI, 388-389.

⁵⁵Harry Beller Yoshpe, The Disposition of Loyalist Estates in the Southern District of the State of New York (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 91.

⁵⁶Ibid.

coming into New York. These usually unsuccessful endeavors, however, had nothing to do with humanitarian concern for blacks. Often they merely represented short term responses to the stress of a recent insurrection or a need for additional revenues.

The Revolutionary period witnessed efforts to end altogether the importation of blacks. New York's participation with the other twelve colonies in the Association, an agency of commercial retaliation to Britain's Coercive Acts, required, among other things, that they "neither import nor purchase any slave imported after the first day of December next; after which time we will wholly discontinue the slave trade."⁵⁷ Evidence seems to suggest that New York's willingness to enter into this arrangement likewise had little to do with antislavery sentiment. Professor W. E. B. DuBois held that a primary motivation behind this measure was a desire to put economic pressure on Great Britain and thereby compel her to come to terms. Indeed, if the anti-slave trade clause rested on humanitarian considerations, it is rather remarkable that there was so little comment upon its passage. One Connecticut town meeting noted "with singular pleasure . . . the second Article of the Association in which it is agreed to import no more slaves."⁵⁸ But this appears to be the only instance of a governmental unit specifically mentioning the slave trade clause.⁵⁹ Had New York been

⁵⁷Morison, Sources and Documents, 123.

⁵⁸DuBois, Suppression of the African Slave-Trade, 45.

⁵⁹Ibid.

chiefly concerned with ending the "evil traffic in slaves," surely upon the adoption of such an agreement there would have been some favorable public declaration.

Whereas the acceptance in 1774 of the temporary prohibition against importing slaves was possibly a matter of expediency, efforts to outlaw permanently the foreign trade in New York in the 1780's revealed strong humanitarian backing. In 1785 the New York Gazette attacked the traffic in slaves as "cruel, wicked, and diabolical,"⁶⁰ while the New York Journal acrimoniously suggested that slaveowners deserved to be "plundered, tormented, and even massacred by the avenging hands of their purchased slaves."⁶¹ Considerably less virulent, but equally piercing, was Hamilton's laconic characterization of the trade as "a commerce so repugnant to humanity, and so inconsistent with the liberality and justice which should distinguish a free and enlightened people."⁶²

Pressured by this opposition to the trade, the legislature enacted a law in 1785 which forbade the further importation of blacks. Violators of the law were forced to forfeit the slaves involved and pay a fine of one hundred pounds.⁶³ Three years later legislators outlawed another aspect of the trade by an act which prohibited the "purchase of slaves for removal to another State . . . under a

⁶⁰Edgar J. McManus, "Antislavery Legislation in New York," The Journal of Negro History, XLVI (October, 1961), 212.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Hamilton, Papers, III, 654.

⁶³Payne, "The Negro in New York," The Howard Review, 63.

penalty of 100 pounds."⁶⁴

Although public opposition to the trade had been intense, opponents of this anti-slave trade measure were still numerous and powerful. This fact is suggested in the letter of a member of the New York Manumission Society to the Quaker, James Pemberton.

I have to lament the many obstacles and embarrassments [it was written] which the Advocates of Freedom in this State, have to encounter with, and none perhaps of a more potent nature than the circumstance of a great body of Dutch who hold Slaves . . . and seem, as it were startled, and in arms, whenever a proposition comes forward touching that People.⁶⁵

Notwithstanding these powerful vested interests and the "urgent demand for labor and for wealth in a community whose resources had been exhausted by war," the New York legislature carried through with measures ending the slave trade.⁶⁶ This action is significant as it provides compelling evidence of the social revolutionary nature of the American Revolution. The demands of self-interest, which would have continued the slave trade, were outweighed in part by the recognition that slavery was a great moral wrong, contrary to the principles for which the colonists had fought.

While agitation against the slave trade was mounting, anti-slavery advocates were also involved in efforts to repeal the restraints on private manumission. Since 1717 a master who wished to free his slave was hampered by legislation which made manumission

⁶⁴DuBois, Suppression of the African Slave-Trade, 230.

⁶⁵Arthur Zilversmit, The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 160.

⁶⁶Locke, Anti-Slavery in America, 135.

almost financially impossible. The law required that a manumitter post a bond of two hundred pounds to assure that his freed slave would not become a public charge. This restriction did not stifle private manumissions altogether, but it was, nonetheless, a serious obstacle to a large number of slave owners.⁶⁷

But the Revolution had created a climate favorable to a repeal of the restrictive law. Legislation freeing slaves on confiscated Tory estates, in addition to anti-slave trade measures, encouraged agitation for more substantive concessions. Thus connected with the 1788 law which rendered illegal the exportation of slaves was a provision which removed the restrictions on private manumission. Slave masters henceforth were allowed to free their slaves without incurring bonded responsibility provided the freed slave was able-bodied and under fifty. In order to prohibit masters from abandoning their responsibility to old or disabled slaves, the law required that a two-hundred-pound bond be posted before these slaves could be manumitted. Should an unscrupulous master violate the law, the violation would operate to free the slave and force the master to continue supporting him.⁶⁸

The effect of this new law seemed to be quite significant. Freed from exacting financial obligations and stimulated in part by the spirit of freedom emanating from the Revolution, New Yorkers began to free their slaves in considerable numbers. "Manumissions,"

⁶⁷Jones, Quakers in the American Colonies, 258-259.

⁶⁸Brackett, "The Status of the Slave," Essays, 299.

wrote John Jay in 1788, "daily become more common among us."⁶⁹

The most radical objective of those opponents of slavery was gradual abolition of the institution. In 1777 it will be remembered that a majority of delegates to the state provincial congress had left no doubt that they were unfavorably disposed toward this proposal. An attempt in that year to insert into the constitution a clause instructing future legislatures to effect gradual emancipation was easily defeated.

Yet in 1785, owing to several factors, the situation was quite different. Observed one Quaker involved in efforts to obtain legislative support for gradual emancipation:

On conversing with divers of the members [of the legislature] we had the satisfaction to find a considerable number to be in favour of it, and these of the most active--and they announced to us a determination to pursue the matter.⁷⁰

In fact, of the forty-seven members of the lower house, forty-six supported some form or another of general emancipation.⁷¹ The majority supported gradual measures, but this, nevertheless, represented considerable progress from eight years before.

The bill which eventually emerged from the lower house provided for the gradual abolition of slavery. It did not affect blacks already enslaved, but children born of a slave after 1785 would be

⁶⁹Jay, The Life of John Jay, I, 234.

⁷⁰Zilversmit, The First Emancipation, 147.

⁷¹McManus, "Antislavery Legislation," The Journal of Negro History, XLVI, 208.

free at birth.⁷² While this aspect of the bill was encouraging, many found accompanying discriminatory provisions of the bill unpalatable. These provisions would operate to burden the freed slaves with social and political handicaps which would make first-class citizenship impossible. Among these discriminatory features were clauses forbidding intermarriage between blacks and whites, disallowing Negroes the right to testify against whites in state courts, and denying them the franchise.⁷³

A number of those who found these features of the bill untenable were members of the upper house of the New York legislature. Their opposition to these denials of civil, social, and political rights resulted in the assembly abandoning all restrictions except the one denying Negroes the ballot. On this issue they were intransigent. Anxious to see a law passed, the senate accepted the undesirable suffrage restriction, and, thus, on March 12, 1785, both houses were in agreement.⁷⁴

Had it not been for the objections of the Council of Revision, a body consisting of the governor, chancellor, and Supreme Court judges which exercised a check on the legislature, the proposed bill would have become law. On March 23 this body vetoed the proposal stating, among other things, that to deprive blacks of the ballot "holds up a doctrine, which is repugnant to the principle

⁷²Ibid., 209.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Spaulding, New York in the Critical Period, 41.

on which the United States justify their separation from Great Britain."⁷⁵

In this way New York was denied in its second attempt to institute a policy of gradual abolition of slavery. Yet even in defeat it can be seen that antislavery had made important inroads in New York. In eight years New York lawmakers had moved from a position of strong opposition to near unanimous acceptance of the desirability of some form of general emancipation.

There are historians who have questioned the significance of Revolutionary ideals as a major impetus in the movement to end slavery in New York. They maintain that while Revolutionary ideals provided a rationale for change, the basic causes lay elsewhere. Briefly, these writers suggest that a rapid growth in the free labor supply, gradually rendering slavery unprofitable, disposed New Yorkers to antislavery positions they otherwise would not have taken. In other words, pocketbook issues, and not leveling tendencies of the Revolution, explain eighteenth-century changes in New York. The argument is quite persuasive. It is pointed out that a higher birth-rate, combined with the influx of large numbers of immigrants, supplied New York with an expanding supply of free labor. This free labor was more desirable than slave labor in several ways. Most importantly, it was cheaper. An employer could hire free laborers with no responsibility other than paying them bare subsistence wages. On the other hand, slavery required continuing responsibilities

⁷⁵Messages, II, 237-239.

which were considerably more expensive. Thus, if free labor was available--and this seemed to have been true in New York--it did not make sense to invest in slaves.⁷⁶ These economic considerations, so it is maintained, rather than revolutionary ideals, provided the major stimulus for antislavery measures in the 1780's.

It is, of course, true that these economic developments played no inconsiderable part in the success of antislavery measures in New York. But it does not necessarily follow that pecuniary motivations were predominant in the limited scope of changes occurring in the 1780's. One historian maintained that the trend toward an expanding supply of free labor began in the 1760's.⁷⁷ If this is true, that is, if slavery was becoming economically unprofitable in the 1760's, why was there so much opposition in 1777 to a provision that would instruct future legislatures to end slavery? This is not to deny that economic considerations played a vital role. The point is that force of habit and prejudice do not always allow individuals to respond to issues in a manner consistent with their best interests. Granted, sentiment favorable to the prohibition of the slave trade and the gradual abolition of slavery would have undoubtedly developed at some point because of the changing character of New York's economy. Slavery was becoming economically unprofitable, and this fact alone would assure success to antislavery measures. But without the Revolution it is quite conceivable that

⁷⁶McKee, Labor in Colonial New York, 171.

⁷⁷McManus, Negro Slavery in New York, 193.

amelioration would have taken longer. Revolutionary ideals provided an important impetus for ending the slave trade, removing restraints on private manumissions, and efforts to abolish slavery gradually. Economic forces guaranteed their success. Ideals and economics worked together in a sort of symbiotic relationship. Without the presence of both forces, it is difficult to see these important changes in slavery coming as they did in the 1780's.

In summation, slavery in pre-Revolutionary New York was a firmly entrenched institution. Besides Quakers there were few, it seems, who were bothered about holding another human being in bondage. Certainly there were no organized efforts to abolish the system. The institution, however, came in for severe criticism during the era of the American Revolution. A growing number of people felt increasingly the contradiction between the principles of freedom and equality for which they were supposedly fighting and the glaring fact of slavery. Initially, military exigencies forced both authorities and the populace to grant or accept the fact of Negro freedom. Concessions granted as a result of military developments were limited but important, for they encouraged renewed agitation for antislavery measures after the war. At this time, efforts centered around three primary objectives: the ending of the slave trade, removal of restrictions on private manumission, and general emancipation. Whereas efforts in the first two areas met with success, the struggle to effect general

emancipation did not.⁷⁸ It failed, not because of a lack of support, but rather because of disagreement over the related issue of civil rights.

Most historians agree that changes occurring in the institution of slavery during the 1780's were substantive. They disagree over the forces behind these changes. Those stressing the economic conditions attending change marshal convincing evidence. Their arguments, however, fail to answer the contention that without the impact of the Revolution it is doubtful that changes in attitudes and changes in laws would have come so rapidly.

⁷⁸In 1799 the legislature enacted a gradual manumission act. It provided that a black born of a slave after 1799 would be free after twenty-eight years of service to his mother's master. McManus, "Antislavery Legislation," The Journal of Negro History, XLVI, 214.

CHAPTER IV

PENNSYLVANIA

Reforms in the institution of slavery in Revolutionary Pennsylvania were undoubtedly more thoroughgoing than in Virginia and New York. Chief among the reforms occurring in Pennsylvania during this general period was the first gradual abolition statute ever enacted in America. The preamble to this unprecedented act declared, in part, that "we conceive that it is our duty . . . to extend a portion of that freedom to others, which hath been extended to us, and release [slaves] from that state of thralldom, to which we ourselves were tyrannically doomed" ¹ The words of the preamble, at least, suggested that the Revolution played a major role in the passage of this abolition law.

Abolition in Pennsylvania was aided, however, by other factors. Unlike pre-Revolutionary Virginia and New York, Pennsylvania's colonial period was marked by a considerable degree of antislavery sentiment. Years before the Revolution the slave system in Pennsylvania was being subjected to severe pressure as a result of moral, social, and economic forces. In order to determine the importance of the Revolution as a factor in slavery reform during the 1770's and 1780's, it is first necessary to analyze the impact and results of these pre-Revolutionary antislavery forces.

¹The Pennsylvania Gazette, 1728-1789 (Philadelphia: Microsurance, Inc., 1968), XXI, 207.

The Society of Friends, or Quakers, was the major source of antislavery sentiment in Pennsylvania before the Revolution. In spite of the fact that many Quakers owned slaves, they were never successful in completely reconciling the practice with their religious beliefs. The recognition of the inconsistency between slavery and Christian principles led Pennsylvania Quakers in a period of some seventy years to adopt progressively more radical measures against slavery--measures which ultimately ended in complete prohibition. Of course, the Quaker decision to discontinue holding slaves was not binding on the colony at large. However, the effect of the Quaker protest against slavery in Pennsylvania was far-reaching. Benjamin Franklin observed as much when he wrote, "It appears that the seed [of the 1780 abolition law] was indeed sown in the good ground of . . . [the Quaker] profession . . . and its springing to effect at last . . . is some confirmation of Lord Bacon's observation, that a good notion never dies."²

As previously suggested, the prohibition against Quaker slaveholding was not the initial response of the Society of Friends to slavery. It was the culmination of more than seventy years of agitation within the Society. Preceding this decision were the consideration and adoption of less radical measures. Quakers first attacked the slave trade. Hardly had slavetrading begun in Pennsylvania when a group of Friends in Germantown, Pennsylvania, registered their opposition to the practice. Wrote Daniel Pastorius

²Livermore, Research Respecting Opinions on Negroes, 35.

and other Germantown Friends in 1688:

These are the reasons why we are against the traffic of men-body Is there any that would be done or handled at this manner? . . . Now, though they are black, we cannot conceive there is more liberty to have them slaves [than] it is to have other white ones. There is a saying that we shall do to all men like as we will be done ourselves, making no difference of which generation, descent, or color they are. And those who steal and rob men, and those who buy or purchase them, are not they all alike?³

At first the Yearly Meeting did not take action on the matter since it had "so General a Relation to many other Parts."⁴ But the issue was not dead. In 1693 George Keith warned Philadelphia Quakers that "to buy Souls and Bodies of men for Money, to enslave them and their Posterity . . . we judge is a great hindrance to the spreading of the Gospel, and is occasion of much . . . Cruelty and Oppression . . . of the highest Nature."⁵

Keith's excoriation of slavery was accompanied by an appeal to Philadelphia Quakers to set free their slaves.⁶ Although this proposal was regarded as too extreme in 1693, there did exist considerable receptivity to the notion that Quakers should discontinue their participation in the foreign slave trade. In 1696 the Yearly

³Albert Bushnell Hart (ed.), American History Told by Contemporaries: Building of the Republic, 1689-1783, II (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1899), 291.

⁴Hildegard Binder-Johnson, "The Germantown Protest of 1688 Against Negro Slavery," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LXV (1941), 153.

⁵George Keith, "An Exhortation and Caution to Friends Concerning Buying or Keeping of Negroes," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, XIII (1899), 266.

⁶Ibid., 267.

Meeting acknowledged the evil of the traffic and suggested that Friends "ought not to encourage the further importation of slaves."⁷ Many local meetings agreed, and some went further. "After some time spent in the Consideration [of importing and buying Negroes] . . . ," record the minutes of the Chester Quarterly Meeting of 1715, "it is the Unanimous sence of this meeting that Friends should not be concerned hereafter in the Importation thereof nor buy any."⁸ Although the Yearly Meeting had not yet resolved the issue, Quaker records reveal that by 1737 Friends had virtually ceased importing slaves.⁹

While the more radical Quakers were encouraged by this development, they did not cease to agitate for more substantive reform. Largely as a result of their pressure, the Yearly Meeting in 1758 resolved that Quakers should henceforth cease importing, selling, and purchasing slaves. Friends who persisted in these activities were to be disowned.¹⁰

Quaker animus against the importation of slaves had a significant impact upon the entire colony. Because Quakers controlled the early Pennsylvania legislatures, their particular moral

⁷William Edward Burghardt DuBois, The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 12.

⁸Edward R. Turner, The Negro in Pennsylvania (Washington, D. C.: American Historical Association, 1911), 67n.

⁹Edward R. Turner, "Abolition of Slavery in Pennsylvania," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, XXXVI (1912), 131.

¹⁰DuBois, Suppression of the African Slave-Trade, 21.

scruples often found their way into the statute books. Accordingly, some historians have interpreted Pennsylvania's efforts to restrict or prohibit the foreign trade in slaves during the colonial period as instances where Quaker moral principles had been translated into law.¹¹ There are historians, however, who disagree. Richard Wright, Jr., for example, concluded that various duties imposed on slaves from 1700 to 1780 were levied more for the purpose of obtaining revenue than for prohibiting the slave trade.¹² More specifically, it is the opinion of Arthur Spaid that the attempt to prohibit the trade by a twenty-pound duty in 1712 was not inspired by moral considerations. According to Spaid, this prohibitive duty, the first attempt to end the trade in the American colonies, reflected the widespread fear of slave insurrection following a Negro uprising in New York.¹³

It is, of course, difficult to ascertain predominant motivations behind various attempts to levy restrictive or prohibitive duties on slaves coming into Pennsylvania. But there does seem to be a close connection between the growing moral antipathy to the trade manifested in numerous Quaker meetings and the Quaker dominated legislature's attempts to reduce and prohibit the trade. One

¹¹Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh, Rebels and Gentlemen: Philadelphia in the Age of Franklin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 255.

¹²Richard R. Wright, Jr., The Negro in Pennsylvania: A Study in Economic History (Philadelphia: AME Book Concern, 1912), 23.

¹³Arthur R. M. Spaid, "Slavery in Pennsylvania," The American Historical Register, II (July, 1895), 1187.

scholar claimed that Pennsylvania was the only colony whose early attempts to restrict the trade "acquire a distinct moral tinge."¹⁴

Aside from this interesting question of causation, it must be pointed out that the British government invariably disallowed prohibitive impositions on slaves. Responding, for example, to the 1712 twenty-pound import duty on slaves, the King in Council informed the Pennsylvania governor that he was "strictly Enjoined and required not to permit the said Law . . . to be from henceforth put in Execution."¹⁵ Subsequent attempts to prohibit the trade were likewise quickly disallowed.¹⁶

Some Quakers were not satisfied with strictures against importing, buying, and selling slaves. Indeed, these conscience-ridden Friends would not be mollified until Quakers ceased holding slaves. As one prominent Quaker later put it, "Perhaps thou wilt say, 'I do not buy any negroes: I only use those left me by my father.' But is it enough to satisfy your own conscience?"¹⁷

Almost from the beginning of the colony's existence there had been Quakers who were opposed to the slave system. In 1688 the Germantown Quakers, for instance, had inveighed not only against

¹⁴DuBois, Suppression of the African Slave-Trade, 26.

¹⁵William R. Riddell, "Pre-Revolutionary Pennsylvania and the Slave Trade," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LII (1928), 9.

¹⁶Theodore Thayer, Israel Pemberton: King of Quakers (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1943), 198.

¹⁷Turner, "Abolition," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, XXXVI, 133.

the slave traffic but slaveholding as well. And it will also be recalled that in 1693 George Keith had attacked Quaker slaveholding and appealed to Friends to liberate their blacks. The unwillingness of the vast body of Quakers to embrace abolition did not deter individual Friends from carrying on the work of men like Keith. Least of all did it deter the Quaker Benjamin Lay. Abolition was but one of numerous crusades for which Lay worked, but it was a cause to which he was most devoted. His uncompromising stand on the practice of Quaker slaveholding was forcefully illustrated in All Slave-Keepers That Keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates (1737). "I know no worse or greater stumbling blocks the devil has to lay in the way of honest inquirers," Lay wrote, "than our ministers and elders keeping slaves; and by straining and perverting Holy Scriptures, preach more to hell than ever they will bring to heaven by their feigned humility and hypocrisy."¹⁸

Like Keith and the Germantown Quakers before him, Lay was far in advance of his time. He and other Quakers who advocated the complete and immediate abolition of slavery in the 1730's met determined resistance from their coreligionists. Few, it seems, were yet convinced of the moral reprehensibility of holding blacks in bondage. Yet despite the lack of any tangible results, the work of these early advocates of abolition was not in vain. Their untiring agitation kept the issue of abolition alive and forced complacent Friends to reconsider their stand on slaveholding.

¹⁸Drake, Quakers and Slavery, 43.

It was in the ensuing period of reassessment and uncertainty that John Woolman appeared. Some scholars regard this Quaker as the greatest champion of Negro freedom that the Friends ever produced.¹⁹ Woolman apparently acquired a distaste for slavery quite early in his life. As a sensitive young man of twenty-three, he quit his job as an accountant to avoid writing receipts for the sale of blacks. He later spent much of his life traveling from one colony to another preaching the sin of slavery and urging Quakers to liberate their blacks.²⁰ Woolman's antislavery views were eloquently stated in his book, Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes: Recommended to the Professors of Christianity of Every Denomination (1754). This influential work was the most widely circulated anti-slavery statement of its time.²¹

Profiting from the groundwork laid by previous Quaker abolitionists, Woolman's work began to yield results. Spurred by Woolman and like-minded Friends, the Yearly Meeting in 1758 categorically condemned the slave system and took the all important step of advising those Friends who held slaves to set them free.²² To expedite manumission the annual meeting prevailed on several Friends

¹⁹Edwin H. Cady, John Woolman: The Mind of the Quaker Saint (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1966), 68.

²⁰W. D. Weatherford, American Churches and the Negro (Boston: The Christopher Publishing Co., 1957), 60-62.

²¹Dwight Lowell Dumond, Antislavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 17.

²²Rufus M. Jones, The Quakers in the American Colonies (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1966), 517.

to visit all Quaker slaveholders, advising them "towards obtaining that purity which it is evidently our duty to press after."²³ No further decision came until 1775 when the Yearly Meeting decided to disown all slaveholding members of the Society. Evidently, few Quakers were disowned, for by 1776, according to one historian, abolition was practically complete among Pennsylvania Friends.²⁴

The Society's decision to require that its members liberate their blacks had a negative influence upon the future viability of the slave system in Pennsylvania. One historian estimated that Quakers held from one-third to one-half of all the slaves in Pennsylvania during the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century.²⁵ With such a large number of slaves being granted their freedom, the slave system in Pennsylvania was dealt a severe blow. Obviously, this religiously-inspired antislavery sentiment in the Quaker community provided fertile soil for antislavery measures during the Revolutionary period.

The continuous antipathy to slavery by non-Quaker German settlers also undermined the strength of the slave system in Pennsylvania in the years prior to the Revolution. From a very early date German immigrants had manifested an aversion to the slave system. A number of the early German settlers were already or later became Quakers and thus based their antislavery conviction on

²³Drake, Quakers and Slavery, 61.

²⁴Thayer, Israel Pemberton, 199.

²⁵Turner, The Negro in Pennsylvania, 58.

religious principles.²⁶ Religious conviction, however, explains in only a limited way the reasons behind the German immigrants' disdain for slavery. More pertinent were their non-English background and unfamiliarity with the slave system.²⁷ In addition, their "feelings of sturdy industry and self-reliance" led the German settlers to react unfavorably to the slave system.²⁸

In 1789 the Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush commented on the aversion of German farmers to slave labor.

The Germans [he wrote] seldom hire men to work upon their farms. . . . Hired help was procured only in harvest time. Slaves were particularly objectionable to the Germans, because the latter did their own work and thus would be compelled to work side by side with a race instinctively repulsive to them.²⁹

Rush's observation was confirmed the following year by the first American census. According to the census only 1.1 percent of German families in Pennsylvania held slaves in 1790. This meant that out of 19,307 German families in Pennsylvania in 1790, 19,103 were non-slaveholders.³⁰ The fact that German inhabitants by the

²⁶German Quakers registered the 1688 protest against slavery.

²⁷Binder-Johnson, "The Germantown Protest," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LXV, 155.

²⁸Turner, The Negro in Pennsylvania, 68.

²⁹Albert Bernhardt Faust, The German Element in the United States: With Special Reference to its Political, Moral, Social, and Educational Influence (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1909), I, 135.

³⁰Other nationality groups in Pennsylvania and the percentages of families within those groups who held slaves in 1790 were as follows: English and Welsh, 2.6 percent; Scotch, 5 percent; Irish, 3.8 percent; Dutch, 6.2 percent; French, 2.1 percent. The breakdown in numbers was as follows: English and Welsh--1,123 slaveholding

mid-eighteenth century had constituted approximately one-third of the Pennsylvania population made their attitudes decisively important.³¹ This fact is forcefully illustrated in national terms by the following analysis appearing in the American census of 1790:

It is significant that the smallest proportion [of slaveowners] is shown by the Germans who even at the early period were obviously opposed to slave ownership. Had the proportion of slaves for the entire white population of the United States in 1790 been the same as it was for the German element the aggregate number of slaves at the First Census would have been but 52,520 instead of approximately 700,000.³²

In several ways, economic factors also militated against the growth and success of the slave system in pre-Revolutionary Pennsylvania. Although not morally opposed to slavery, the white free laboring class did strike an indirect blow at the slave system. It appears that a number of Pennsylvania slaveowners adopted the practice of hiring out their slaves during periods of idleness, a practice which evoked considerable resentment from the free laborers who were unable to compete with the slaves for jobs. In 1726 a group of white mechanics and day laborers appealed to the legislature to prevent this "unfair" competition. Their appeal stated,

families out of 43,026 total families; Scotch--428 out of 8,552; Irish--59 out of 1,555; Dutch--29 out of 465; French--8 out of 377. U. S., Bureau of the Census, A Century of Population Growth: From the First Census of the United States to the Twelfth, 1790-1900. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1909), 275.

³¹Jordan, White Over Black, 102.

³²Binder-Johnson, "The Germantown Protest," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LXV, 155-156.

That the practice of blacks being employed was a great disadvantage to them who had emigrated from Europe for the purpose of obtaining a livelihood; that they were poor and honest; they therefore hoped a law would be prepared for the prevention of the employment of blacks.³³

The Pennsylvania legislature responded to the petition by going on record as opposed to masters hiring out their slaves, maintaining that the practice was "dangerous and injurious to the republic and not to be sanctioned." Four years later they made the practice illegal.³⁴

White free laborers had not directed their protest against the slave system as such, but their actions did work against the system. By discouraging masters from acquiring slaves beyond their own personal needs, the free laborers' protest worked to restrict the number of slaves in Pennsylvania and thereby facilitated the demise of the slave system.

Other economic developments had also stifled to some extent the growth of slavery in Pennsylvania. The primarily intensive rather than extensive nature of the agricultural system did not favor a large slave force as in the South.³⁵ There had existed a great demand for slave labor during the early stages of Pennsylvania's development when there were forests to be cleared and other strenuous pioneer work to be done. But as the years passed, this need

³³Wright, The Negro in Pennsylvania, 19.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Wayland Fuller Dunaway, A History of Pennsylvania (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1935), 245-246.

gradually diminished while the number of white immigrants coming in-
to the colony increased. Some historians regard the increasing
availability of free white labor as signaling the approach of the
end of slavery in Pennsylvania. They argue that where free labor
was obtainable slave labor could not compete and was thus economically
unprofitable.³⁶ Benjamin Franklin propagated this argument as
early as 1751.

Tis an ill-grounded Opinion [he wrote] that by the Labour of
slaves, America may possibly vie in Cheapness of Manufactures
with Britain. The Labour of Slaves can never be so cheap
here as the Labour of working Men is in Britain. Any one may
compute it. Interest of Money is in the Colonies from 6 to
10 per Cent. Slaves one with another cost thirty pounds
Sterling per Head. Reckon then the Interest of the first
Purchase of a Slave, the Insurance or Risque on his Life, his
Cloathing and Diet, Expences in his Sickness and Loss of Time,
Loss by his Neglect of Business . . . Expençe of a Driver to
keep him at Work, and his Pilfering from time to time . . .
and compare the whole Amount with the Wages of a Manufacturer
of Iron or Wood in England, you will see that Labour is much
cheaper there than it ever can be by Negroes here.³⁷

It can be readily seen that colonial Pennsylvania was not
lacking in strong forces tending to work against the institution of
slavery. Economic conditions reinforced religious and social
forces and served to restrain greatly the growth of the slave pop-
ulation in the state. This development played a vital part in the
success of subsequent antislavery measures and undoubtedly hastened
the death of the slave system in Pennsylvania.

It would, however, be a mistake to conclude that these

³⁶Wright, The Negro in Pennsylvania, 18-19.

³⁷Benjamin Franklin, The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, ed.
Leonard W. Labaree, IV (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961),
229-230.

pre-Revolutionary antislavery forces had struck the death blow to slavery. Slavery had been checked, but on the eve of the Revolution it was still firmly rooted in many quarters. According to one estimate, there were approximately 6,000 slaves in Pennsylvania in 1770.³⁸ They were particularly numerous in Scotch-Irish counties in the western part of the colony. In Westmoreland County, for example, records reveal that at the beginning of the Revolution there were over 700 slaves, a considerable number for a frontier county. Scotch-Irish Presbyterians held the bulk of these blacks.³⁹ A decade later in Washington County, 155 slaveholders registered 443 slaves.⁴⁰

Although slavery might be declining as a result of economic conditions, antislavery advocates still had to overcome powerful vested interests. In addition to the resistance by Scotch-Irish settlers to antislavery measures, there existed a strong phalanx of proslavery sentiment among Philadelphia merchants. In 1761, for example, members of this group registered a strong protest to a proposed ten-pound duty on imported slaves.⁴¹

Other conditions also helped to sustain the slave system

³⁸Dunaway, A History of Pennsylvania, 221.

³⁹Robert L. Brunhouse, The Counter-Revolution in Pennsylvania, 1776-1790 (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical Commission, 1942), 80.

⁴⁰Whitfield J. Bell, "Washington County, Pennsylvania in the Eighteenth Century Antislavery Movement," The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine, XXV (1942), 136.

⁴¹DuBois, Philadelphia Negro, 16.

in Pennsylvania. Although free white labor was more plentiful in Pennsylvania than in colonies farther south, the supply did not satisfy the demand. Domestic servants and farmhands were quite scarce in many quarters throughout the colonial and Revolutionary periods. Moreover, it appears that where free labor was obtainable, it often proved difficult to retain.⁴² Despite contentions to the contrary, it seems that slavery was still quite profitable in many cases.

The influence of the Revolution in bringing about a climate favorable to antislavery measures first manifested itself in the unprecedented wave of criticism against the slave system from many individuals. As the struggle with Great Britain intensified, the contrast between what Americans were demanding for themselves and what they were imposing on Negroes became too blatant. The recognition of this contradiction helped slowly to work a revolution in the attitude of numerous individuals toward the slave system. Wrote one Pennsylvanian concerning the incompatibility in slavery and revolutionary ideals:

If these solemn truths, uttered at such an awful crisis, are self-evident: unless we can shew that the African race are not men, words can hardly express the amazement which naturally arises on reflecting that the very people who made these pompous declarations, are slaveholders, and by their legislative conduct, tell us, that these blessings were only meant to be the rights of whitemen not of all men.⁴³

Other Pennsylvanians, among them prominent and influential

⁴²Turner, The Negro in Pennsylvania, 76n.

⁴³Jordan, White Over Black, 290.

men, followed suit. The famous Philadelphia physician, Benjamin Rush, joined the ranks of antislavery reformers. In 1773 he wrote An Address to the inhabitants of the British Settlements in America upon slavekeeping, in which he urged Americans to free their blacks from the shackles of slavery.

The plant of liberty [he declared] is so tender a nature that it cannot thrive long in the neighborhood of slavery. Remember, the eyes of all Europe are fixed upon you, to preserve an asylum for freedom in this country after the last pillars of it are fallen in every other quarter of the globe.⁴⁴

Two years later Rush became a member of "The Society for the Relief of Free Negroes unlawfully held in bondage," the first antislavery organization in America. Rush's humanitarian concern for blacks was evidenced not only in his service to the cause of Negro freedom but also in his willingness to provide without charge medical services to poor Negroes.⁴⁵

Quakers also recognized the force of antislavery arguments based on Revolutionary principles. Anthony Benezet, a Quaker schoolmaster from Philadelphia, invoked political ideas perhaps more frequently than religious principles in his long and dedicated service to the antislavery cause.⁴⁶

Now is the time to demonstrate to Europe, to the whole world

⁴⁴Dagobert D. Runes, The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 17.

⁴⁵Lyman H. Butterfield (ed.), Letters of Benjamin Rush (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), I, 77.

⁴⁶Michael Kraus, "Slavery Reform in the Eighteenth Century: An Aspect of Transatlantic Intellectual Cooperation," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LX (1936), 57.

[he plead in one of his numerous antislavery publications] that America was in earnest, and meant what she said, when, with peculiar energy, and unanswerable reasoning, she plead the cause of human nature, and . . . insisted, that all mankind came from the hand of their Creator equally free: Let not the world have an opportunity to charge . . . that her sons are not real friends to freedom.⁴⁷

In view of later antislavery successes it seems only natural that organized protest against slavery in the form of an anti-slavery society should first appear in Pennsylvania. On April 14, 1775, five days before Lexington and Concord, twenty-four persons met at Sun Tavern in Philadelphia and formed "The Society for the Relief of Free Negroes unlawfully held in bondage." The Pennsylvania Society was not only the first such organization of its kind in America, but also the most influential. As one historian put it, "It considered itself and was in fact by all considered the directing head of the [antislavery] movement, the clearing house for the propagation of antislavery in America."⁴⁸ The war disrupted the activities of the Pennsylvania Society for several years, but immediately following the war it became very active again. With reorganization and a changing of its constitution in 1784, the Society entered a new and more radical phase in its antislavery agitation. Its new name, "The Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, for the Relief of Free Negroes unlawfully

⁴⁷Anthony Benezet, A Serious Address to the Rulers of America on the Inconsistency of their Conduct Respecting Slavery: Forming a Contrast Between the Encroachments of England on American Liberty, and, American Injustice in Tolerating Slavery (Philadelphia: [n.n.], 1784), 4.

⁴⁸Bell, "Washington County," Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine, XXV, 135.

Held in Bondage, and for Improving the Condition of the African Race," suggested its more thoroughgoing objectives.⁴⁹

It was in this auspicious atmosphere of individual and organized dissent that reform-minded Pennsylvanians began to take steps which they hoped would eventually result in general emancipation. Their first objective was the suppression of the foreign slave trade. Efforts to limit the foreign trade in Pennsylvania were not without precedent. Decades before the Revolution, Quaker-controlled legislatures had sought to restrict and in some instances prohibit the flow of slaves by means of import duties. British authorities, however, were usually quick to disallow these impositions.

But British opposition to restrictive legislation was not the only obstacle to be overcome. Within the colony there were strong vested interest groups which vigorously disapproved of restrictive duties on slaves. Pennsylvania merchants were among the most powerful and vocal. Their antipathy to slave-trade restrictions, coupled with the opposition of the royal government, made it extremely difficult for the Pennsylvania legislature to impose restrictive duties. As early as 1715 the legislature deleted from an impost bill a tariff on blacks because of the "Opposition likely to be made by the Merchants of this City, [Philadelphia]

⁴⁹Edward R. Turner, "The First Abolition Society in the United States," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, XXXVI (1912), 94-95.

and by the African Company."⁵⁰ Time did not lessen the merchants' resistance to anti-slave trade measures. In 1761 Philadelphia merchants petitioned the governor to veto a proposed ten-pound duty on imported slaves.

We, the subscribers, [they declared] ever desirous to extend the Trade of this Province, have seen for some time past, the many inconveniencys the Inhabitants have suffered for the want of Labourers and artificers . . . have for some time encouraged the importation of Negroes. . . . We humbly beg your honour will take into consideration the hardships we shall Labour under by such a Law taking effect.⁵¹

Of course, many slaveholders also objected to anti-slave trade proposals. Benjamin Rush noted this fact in commenting on the reaction to a pamphlet in which he had been particularly scathing in an attack upon the slave trade. He later wrote that the pamphlet had an extensive publication and in his opinion "did some good in removing several errors and prejudices upon the subject, but," he added, "it did me harm by exciting the resentment of many slaveholders against me."⁵²

The weight of public opinion, however, seemed to be on the side of those espousing reform. "Anthony Benezet stood alone a few years ago in opposing negro slavery in Philadelphia," noted one Pennsylvanian in 1773, "and now three-fourths of the province, as well

⁵⁰Riddell, "Pre-Revolutionary Pennsylvania," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LII, 13.

⁵¹Ibid., 16.

⁵²George W. Corner (ed.), Autobiography of Benjamin Rush (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 82-83.

as the city, cry out against it."⁵³ In 1773, despite the unlikelihood of success, a considerable number of Philadelphia residents petitioned the legislature to urge the King to prohibit the further introduction of African slaves into all of the American colonies. Although it gave the petition a cordial reception, the assembly thought it inexpedient to comply. Instead, legislators increased the duties on imported slaves from ten to twenty pounds and made the new imposition perpetual.⁵⁴ This increased duty amounted to a tacit prohibition of the foreign trade in Pennsylvania and, thus, represented a victory for anti-slave trade advocates. The victory, however, was to prove short-lived because the King in Council disallowed the high duty early the following year.⁵⁵

The disallowance of prohibitory legislation in 1773 represented only a temporary setback, for this marked the last time that the British government would interfere with Pennsylvania's efforts to prohibit the trade. In 1774 Pennsylvania joined with the other rebellious colonies in a Continental Association, an organization formed to exert economic pressure on Great Britain. Participation in the Association bound Pennsylvania to enforce, among other things, a temporary, de facto ban on the importation of

⁵³Charles Stuart, A Memoir of Granville Sharp, to which is added Sharp's "Law of passive Obedience," and an Extract from his "Law of Retribution" (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1836), 21.

⁵⁴Butterfield, Letters of Benjamin Rush, I, 79.

⁵⁵Riddell, "Pre-Revolutionary Pennsylvania," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LII, 18-19.

slaves.⁵⁶

Nothing further was done in the way of legalizing this de facto resolve until 1780. In that year antislavery advocates in Pennsylvania succeeded in including in the gradual emancipation bill a provision outlawing the importation of slaves by sea and land. Unlike the Virginia law of 1778, Pennsylvania's anti-slave trade statute made no provision for bona fide settlers coming in- to the state with their slaves. "No man or woman," the law stated, "of any nation or color, [except those blacks in Pennsylvania not freed by the gradual abolition provision] . . . shall at any time hereafter be deemed, adjudged or holden, within the territories of this Commonwealth as slaves . . . but as free men and free women."⁵⁷

This anti-slave trade provision of the 1780 law represented an important breakthrough, but in many ways it proved ineffectual in preventing certain abuses. It seems that many Pennsylvanians had found ways to circumvent the purpose of the law. The domestic traffic in slaves, for example, assumed alarming proportions after the war. Moreover, some Pennsylvanians openly engaged in the slave trade outside of the state.⁵⁸

The state government, committed to preventing these evasions from undoing the work of 1780, enacted a law in 1788 rendering

⁵⁶DuBois, Suppression of the African Slave-Trade, 43.

⁵⁷The Pennsylvania Gazette, December 29, 1779, XXI, 207.

⁵⁸Turner, "First Abolition Society," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, XXXVI, 100-101.

anti-slave trade provisions more stringent. The domestic trade was seriously curtailed by a clause which provided that husbands and wives could not be separated for more than ten miles without their approval. The law also provided that anyone who persisted in the slave trade outside the state would be subject to a fine of one thousand pounds.⁵⁹

A more ambitious goal of antislavery advocates in Revolutionary Pennsylvania was legislative enactment of an abolition bill. Abolition was not a new thing in Pennsylvania. Quaker reformers had been preaching it for more than seventy years and had finally convinced their coreligionists of the injustice of slaveholding. By 1776 practically all Pennsylvania Quakers had freed their slaves, an action of extreme significance owing to the fact that Quakers held a majority of slaves in the colony. At an earlier time when Friends dominated the colonial assembly their commitment to abolition might well have affected the entire colony. But Quaker rule in Pennsylvania ended in 1756,⁶⁰ and, thus, their abolitionist policy which crystallized a few years later had no colony-wide application. Abolition in pre-Revolutionary Pennsylvania was a cause for which Quakers struggled, but they were virtually alone in their efforts.⁶¹

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Daniel J. Boorstin, The Americans: The Colonial Experience (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), 60.

⁶¹Turner, "Abolition of Slavery," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, XXXVI, 136.

As previously noted, however, the Revolution had thoroughly aroused the public to the injustice of slavery and had thus provided a great impetus for antislavery measures. And many Pennsylvanians were not content with the half-way measure of ending the slave trade. They recognized that prohibiting the trade was a milestone in the antislavery crusade and applauded its operation, but they would not be satisfied until the State abolished slavery. By 1778 this abolitionist sentiment was fairly widespread.⁶²

Sensing this deep-seated abolitionist mood, George Bryan, himself a staunch supporter of abolition and president of the Pennsylvania Executive Council, decided to act. In November, 1778, the executive council, spurred by Bryan, urged the assembly to prepare a bill for the gradual abolition of slavery in Pennsylvania.

In divesting the state of slaves [the council's appeal read] you will equally serve the cause of humanity and policy, and offer to God one of the most proper and best returns of gratitude for his great deliverance of us and our posterity from thralldom. You will also set your character for justice and benevolence in a true point of view to all Europe, who are astonished to see a people, eager for liberty holding Negroes in bondage.⁶³

Unfortunately, because the executive council offered to supply the draft of an abolition bill, the assembly refused to deliberate on the proposal. This refusal did not stem from the legislature's aversion to abolitionist legislation. The general feeling among assemblymen seemed to be that the council had overstepped its

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Burton Alva Konkle, George Bryan and the Constitution of Pennsylvania, 1731-1791 (Philadelphia: William J. Campbell, 1922), 164-165.

constitutional limitations and was encroaching upon the assembly's prerogatives. Legislation was supposed to originate in the assembly, not in the executive council. Thus the assembly's determination to resist any revival of bicameralism was the factor which rendered impossible the enactment of an abolition bill in 1778.⁶⁴

Public support for legislative abolition persisted. Early in 1780 four petitions from Chester County and one from Philadelphia urging the enactment of a general emancipation statute reached the assembly. In the assembly there also continued to exist considerable abolitionist sentiment, and so on March 1, 1780, by a vote of 34-21, the Pennsylvania Assembly enacted the first general emancipation statute in the United States.⁶⁵ This novel enactment provided for gradual abolition of slavery. There was no immediate freeing of slaves. The law stated that as of March 1, 1780, no child born in Pennsylvania could be a slave. Children born of a slave mother might be held as servants until they reached the age of twenty-eight, at which time they were to be freed. While they served their mother's master, they were entitled to all the privileges of indentured servants. In addition, the law required that slaveowners register their slaves; unregistered Negroes would be considered free.⁶⁶

Remarkably enough, antislavery reform in Pennsylvania did

⁶⁴Ibid., 168-170.

⁶⁵Brackett, "The Status of the Slave," Essays, 288.

⁶⁶The Pennsylvania Gazette, December 29, 1779, XXI, 207.

not stop with gradual emancipation. Enlightened men recognized that not until blacks were put on a plane of equality with whites would full justice be served. Accordingly, the assembly included in the abolition law measures which marked a beginning, at least, of providing blacks with civil and social rights. For instance, blacks would henceforth be tried and punished in the same manner as whites. Moreover, a number of minor restrictions regulating slaves and free blacks were repealed, including a ban on inter-marriage between blacks and whites.⁶⁷

The preamble to the abolition law revealed how great was the influence of the Revolution in bringing about its enactment:

When we contemplate our abhorrence of that condition, to which the arms and tyranny of Great Britain were exerted to reduce us; when we look back . . . on how miraculously our wants in many instances have been supplied and our deliverances wrought . . . we are unavoidably led to a serious and grateful sense of . . . [our] manifold blessings. . . . Impressed with these ideas, we conceive that it is our duty . . . to extend a portion of that freedom to others, which hath been extended to us⁶⁸

Though enacted by a comfortable margin, the gradual abolition law of 1780 did not pass without determined opposition. Almost 40 percent of the membership of the assembly voted against the bill. While opposition was scattered throughout the state, the majority of those twenty-one assemblymen who voted against the bill were representatives of the largely Presbyterian backcounties of

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

Pennsylvania.⁶⁹ George Bryan noted this fact when he said, "In the meantime it is irksome to find, that these few opposers of the bill should generally be members of the Presbyterian Churches, which are otherwise remarkable for their zeal and for their exertion in the cause of freedom."⁷⁰

Proslavery elements in Pennsylvania did not cease in their opposition to antislavery reform after 1780. There were repeated efforts to evade or undo the work of 1780. Many slaveowners, for example, petitioned the legislature to allow additional time to register their slaves. It seems that numerous masters had lost their slaves, ostensibly through ignorance of the law but more likely through carelessness in complying with it. At any rate, their failure to meet the registration deadline had operated to free their unregistered slaves, and so they now sought an extension of the registration date so that they might reenslave their blacks. To the credit of the assembly such proposals were easily rejected.⁷¹

One cannot easily overestimate the significance of this gradual abolition act. Quakers had called the morality of slavery into question long before 1780 and the Revolution. Moreover, economic conditions which did not favor the extensive use of slaves in colonial Pennsylvania worked against the success of slavery. In the course of many years the forces of religion and economics

⁶⁹Zilversmit, The First Emancipation, 131.

⁷⁰Konkle, George Bryan, 192.

⁷¹Brunhouse, The Counter-Revolution in Pennsylvania, 102.

might have moved the remaining slaveholders in Pennsylvania to manumit their slaves. But against this indefinite continuation of slaveholding, the Revolutionary abolition law struck a mortal blow.

In summation, antislavery sentiment in Revolutionary Pennsylvania was not without precedent. During the colonial period Quaker antislavery agitation had been quite pronounced. In addition, the aversion to the use of slave labor by the German inhabitants and the strong protest registered against slavery by the white laboring class had operated against the extensive use of slave labor. These pre-Revolutionary antislavery developments were indispensable to the success of reform efforts in the 1770's and 1780's. By checking the number of slaves in Pennsylvania they made it much easier for the legislature, once it was convinced of the injustice of slavery, to carry through with antislavery measures. After all, it was considerably less difficult to enact a gradual emancipation law when there were but 6,000 slaves in the state rather than 200,000 as in Virginia. But the point is that before the Revolution, except within the Quaker community, there existed no widespread moral aversion to slavery in Pennsylvania. The legislature had not considered emancipation legislation, and the public had not demanded it. However, as the conflict with Great Britain deepened, the irony in the colonists demanding their own liberty while at the same time denying it to others became evident to the slowest mind. Recognizing this blatant inconsistency, an aroused public became more critical of the slave system. Many individuals who heretofore had remained silent on slavery began to speak out against

it. It was in this favorable atmosphere that antislavery advocates began to mobilize public support behind two reform goals: the suppression of the African slave trade and the gradual abolition of slavery. The subsequent success of these efforts stemmed in large part from the leveling impact of the American Revolution. To many Pennsylvanians at this time it was only fitting to work for the enactment of anti-slave trade and abolition legislation. As Thomas Paine had written in October, 1775:

And when the Almighty shall have blest us, and made us a people dependent only upon Him, then may our first gratitude be shown by an act of . . . legislation, which shall put a stop to the importation of Negroes for sale, soften the hard fate of those already here, and in time procure their freedom.⁷²

⁷²Thomas Paine, The Writings of Thomas Paine, ed. Moncure Daniel Conway (New York: AMS, 1967), I, 65.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The strength of the slave system in colonial Virginia, New York, and Pennsylvania varied considerably. In Virginia the institution was firmly woven into the fabric of society. On the eve of the Revolution with a slave population numbering over 200,000, Virginia had twice as many blacks as her closest southern neighbor, South Carolina, eight times more than New York, and approximately thirty-three times more than Pennsylvania. Moreover, pre-Revolutionary antislavery agitation in Virginia was quite negligible. Most Virginians, it seems, were rarely troubled by their consciences about slavery. They accepted the system as a normal aspect of their affairs. To be sure, Virginia Quakers had called the morality of slavery into question long before the Revolution, but their influence on the colony at large was insignificant.

Although the number of slaves in colonial New York did not approach the number in Virginia, the slave system in this colony was also quite strong. Aside from members of the Society of Friends, it appears that there were few who questioned the morality of slavery. As in Virginia, many colonial New Yorkers viewed slavery as a natural and necessary institution. To be sure, there were instances when the legislature attempted to check the foreign slave trade and when individuals privately manumitted their slaves, but these actions were rarely morally inspired. Motivations lay primarily

in economic and social considerations.

Unlike pre-Revolutionary Virginia and New York, colonial Pennsylvania was characterized by a considerable degree of anti-slavery sentiment. Many years before the Revolution the slave system was being subjected to severe pressure as a result of the religiously-inspired Quaker antislavery agitation. Other factors present in the colonial period also worked to undermine the strength of the slave system in Pennsylvania. The fact that the German settlers who comprised a large portion of the colony's population did not generally hold slaves worked to restrict the number of blacks coming into the colony. A strong protest registered against slavery by the white free laboring class had the same effect.

Thus, in two of the three colonies under consideration, Virginia and New York, there existed no significant antislavery agitation in the pre-Revolutionary period. In Pennsylvania where antislavery sentiment was at work during the colonial period, its presence had served primarily to check the growth of the slave population in the colony. Before the Revolutionary era in Pennsylvania, there were no legislative attempts to abolish the system, nor was the general public aroused against the injustice of slavery.

The Revolutionary era marked a distinct turning point in race relations in the three colonies. As the conflict with Great Britain emerged into a conflict expressed partly in terms of human liberty, numerous individuals began to question the propriety of holding human beings in bondage. This unprecedented wave of individual protest against slavery led to organized protest in the

form of antislavery societies in New York and Pennsylvania. In this auspicious atmosphere of individual and organized protest, anti-slavery advocates in all three colonies sought support for measures they hoped would eventually end in gradual abolition. In Virginia and New York there were essentially three antislavery goals: legalization of private manumission, the ending of the foreign slave trade, and gradual abolition of slavery. In Pennsylvania those individuals and groups who wished to see an end to slavery concentrated their efforts around the two latter goals.

It has been the contention of this study that to a large degree these reform efforts were the results of an internal social upheaval accompanying the conflict with Great Britain. In other words, antislavery measures in the 1770's and 1780's, as Jameson maintained, were primarily products of the Revolution. There is at least one exception. In Virginia the movement to abolish the foreign slave trade, while receiving strong moral backing, had at least a fifty-year history and seems to have been motivated chiefly by economic and social considerations.

The Revolution affected slavery in the three colonies in varying degrees. Its effects in Virginia were perhaps least satisfying to antislavery supporters. Although many prominent leaders in Virginia for the first time spoke out against slavery and expressed the hope that the system would gradually be abolished, efforts to this end were unsuccessful. Antislavery advocates in the state were encouraged in 1782, when a legislative enactment provided that masters were legally entitled to free their slaves.

In the next ten years Virginia slaveowners freed some 10,000 blacks, an important beginning, at least, in a deeply racist society.

In New York where the slave system was very strong in the colonial period, antislavery made important inroads during the Revolutionary era. In 1785 the foreign slave trade was abolished as were restrictions on private manumission in 1788. There also existed evidence of substantial support for gradual emancipation, and had it not been for disagreement over the issue of Negro civil rights, the New York legislature would have passed a gradual emancipation statute in 1785. As it was, gradual emancipation did not come until 1799, in the post-Revolutionary era.

Pennsylvania's efforts to alleviate the plight of the Negro slave were the most successful. In 1780 the Pennsylvania legislature passed a statute outlawing the foreign slave trade and providing for gradual abolition of slavery. In addition, the legislature passed measures which marked a beginning, at least, of providing blacks with civil and social rights.

The impact of the American Revolution had not resulted in the immediate abolition of chattel slavery in Virginia, New York, or Pennsylvania, a fact which qualifies somewhat the concept of the American Revolution as a social revolution. However, in New York and Pennsylvania the institution was significantly undermined, and in all three states, as one historian noted, the Revolutionary period was the "most favorable era in Negro-white relations"

in their early history.¹

¹Louis Filler, The Crusade Against Slavery, 1830-1860 (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 3.

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