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George Washington

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George Washington On the Wrong Side of the Slavery Issue?

By William B. Allen

Professor William B. Allen spoke on George Washington at the Hauenstein Center in April, 2004. Countering Henry Wiencek's book, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America*, Allen discussed Washington's exemplary leadership in his Last Will and Testament.

Washington's Will is as much one of our founding state papers as his 1796 Farewell Address. It conveys not merely his wishes but also the principles he wished to guide the nation. Among the founders Washington was unique in providing such specific moral guidance. Just as he committed the new nation to lift up the poor and oppressed of all nations and religions, he showed how to realize that commitment through public and private acts. His ultimate private act became in that sense his consummate public act.

He completed the Will on July 9th, 1799, and in it -- subject only to the opening bequest of "the use, profit, and benefit of my whole Estate, real and personal, for the term of her natural life," to his dearly beloved wife Martha -- he declared,

"th[at] all the Slaves that I hold in [my] own right, shall receive their free[dom]... ac[cor]ding to this devise, there may b[e s]ome, who from old age and bodily infir[m]ities, and others who on account of [thei]r infancy, that will be unable to [su]pport themselves; it is [my] Will a[nd de]sire that all who [come under the first] and second descrip[ti]on shall be comfort[ably] clothed and [fed by my heirs while] they live; and that such of the latter description have no parents living, or are living but unable, or unwilling to provide for them, shall be bound by the Court until they should arrive at the age of twenty five years.... The negroes thus bound, are... to be taught to read and write, and to be brought up to some useful occupation, agreeably to the Laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia, providing for the support of Orphan and other poor Children. And I do hereby expressly forbid the Sale, or transportation out of said Commonwealth, of any Slave I may die possessed of, under any pretense whatsoever. And I do moreover most pointedly, and most solemnly enjoin it upon my Executors hereafter named, or the Survivors of them, to see that this [c]ause respecting Slaves, and every part thereof be religiously fulfilled at the Epoch at which it is directed to take place; without evasion, neglect or delay."

Let me pause to say that people often ask, "Why wait until he's dying and in his will to do this?" I ask you, I beg you, to pay attention to the provision he is making, and to ask what prudent activities are required to assure resources for the purposes that he has in mind. He didn't merely free his slaves, he provided for them. This meant he devoted years, husbanding his resources and increasing them, to make it possible to provide for them. He also had to deal with the difficulties of manumission itself under the laws at that time which greatly restricted it, apart from circumstances of providing full provision for the freed slaves. So it's not merely a question of emancipation, it's a question of emancipation to what -- emancipation with what -- and Washington demonstrated how to answer that question.

So, I continue, Washington did not leave to interpretation his religious injunction regarding the treatment of the slaves. Under no subterfuge of necessity, or the need to satisfy claims on the estate, were any of his people to be sold or given away. By providing for his wife during her natural life he did not defer the freedom of the slaves, he dealt with a legal problem. He dealt with the problem of "The Widows Third," meaning that his slaves could not effectively become hers, to be disposed of by her or her successors. You must simply appreciate the thoroughness of his prudence, his thinking about every single eventuality, for had he done it otherwise there was a lawful provision called "The Widows Third" that would have transferred those slaves to his wife's ownership and left them to be disposed of by other people, and not George Washington himself. This, as is the case of many of his other relatives, would have meant sale and separations.

Precisely because Washington had participated in the ordinary transactions affecting slavery in the social state, he was keenly aware of the provisions required in order that freedom for his slaves would be a blessing and not a curse. As he said to Lafayette, merely to set them afloat would be a curse. Now in his will he demonstrated what great provisions must be made in order to ensure the slaves were not worse off in freedom than they had been in slavery.

Nor was Washington content only to influence the fate of the slaves for whom he was directly, or indirectly through marriage, responsible. In a further provision of his Will he addresses the status of slaves held by a sister-in-law, but ultimately entitled to him. These were slaves Washington had not known, nor even owned, save by legal prescriptions. Thirty-three such persons, in settling the estate of Bartholomew Dandridge, had been taken in execution, sold, and purchased in on his own account. This illustrated, by the way, how one becomes a major slave holder without so much as lifting a finger; it had happened to Washington before. Of these slaves, whom he had never owned or used, Washington provided that they would continue to attend the widow, his sister-in-law, while she lived, but thereafter without regard to any other heirs or relations they shall receive their freedom if forty years old and upwards. For those under forty but above sixteen they shall serve seven years and then be freed in the terms of indentured servitude, primarily for whites at that time. While those sixteen and under shall serve until 25 years of age and then be free.

The common principle for Washington was freedom, subject to such conditions as a social state made prudent or necessary. But clearly annunciated and consistently provided, it was important Washington showed himself a responsible steward before his own example could compel the stewardship of others. Washington provided for his own estate in a manner that reveals his excellence in judgment and in character.



William Allen in Grand Valley's
Loosmore Auditorium