

## **"Speech on the Abolition Bill"**

### **The speech of John Addison in the Committee of the Whole House for the gradual abolition of slavery.**

**(c.1796 referred to in a letter to Van Gaasbeek March 1796)**

Mr. Chairman,

In considering this subject, it is important to inquire whether the negroes are descended from Adam, or any other Progenitor, or whether they are the descendents of the abominable Ham – whether their intellect's are inferior to those of White People, or whether their colour and adverse circumstances have doomed them to be in a certain state of Bondage in whatever situation the Municipal Law of this or any other state may have or will place them. Such inquiries may amuse but do not enlighten interest; they may entertain but do not enlighten the mind.

The whole subject may be reduced to the two following Questions. 1<sup>st</sup> What is the nature and extent of the interest and property which the owners of slaves in this state have in them? 2<sup>nd</sup> Do the Constitution and Laws of this state secure the Possession and enjoyment of this Interest to their Owners?

Before I enter on the Discussion of these Questions I would observe Sir, that pure and absolute slavery does not subsist in this Country: such I mean whereby an absolute and unlimited power is given to the Master over the Life and Fortune of the slave – NO! On disobedience or neglect of duty the Master may correct and chastize moderately but not to the extent of Life or Limb: so by law may a man his servant or apprentice, a Parent his Child, a Master his Scholars, and in certain cases a Husband his Wife.

First then Sir, I define the nature and extent of the Interest and property which the owners of slaves have in them: To be a Right to their labour and services for life founded on a bonafide consideration paid for them and the Masters clothing, supporting and maintaining them through all the incissitudes of Life, of Infancy, manhood, sickness and old age.

That slaves are to be considered a Property was Law under the Colony Administration and the same idea is recognized by the Laws of England, although they declare that the moment a negroe lands in England, he becomes a freeman as to the

enjoyment of his person and property, yet with regard to the right which his Master has to his perpetual service, that will remain exactly the same. Nor, Sir, is this variant from the state of subjection which apprentices submit to for the space of seven years, or for a longer term.

But Sir, it is contended by Gentlemen, that his right of the Owners to the perpetual service of their slaves, is inconsistent with the Law of nature and the immutable rules of Justice. Let us examine this – The Law of nature is, "That all men being both equal and free each has a right to do what he pleases." The consequences however of so many discordant wills soon forced man in his rudest state to sacrifice part of the Privilege of the Law of Nature for the more substantial Blessings of society. The different nations of the earth having of their own free will and accord formed themselves into societies and among them the various Tribes of Africa: One of the established rules of these Heathen is: "That the Father hath power to dispose of his Children, and the Victor power over the Life and Fortune of his Captives taken in war." True it is, these Laws adopted by the Natives of Guinea are not defensible as to them; but surely they do not affect the American master in his original contract – he takes the Laws of the Country as he finds them: Gives a consideration for the slaves he purchases, redeems them from a state of also like slavery, from Captivity and Death, and receives them into a milder state of society, where their lives are protected, all the Necessaries of Life assured to them by Law; and the only return they are obliged to make is their labour when well – not different from and in many Instances preferable to the other hired servants. Thus in this point of view, the advantage of the bargain is manifestly on the side of the slaves: and the reciprocal Duties of Labour on the one part, and Protection, food and raiment on the other is perfectly consistent with the immutable rules of absolute Justice. But it is asserted that this right of masters to the perpetual service of their slaves is contrary to the Law of God. Sir, the very reverse of this is true: for as far as ancient precedent will go, the Law of God confirms and establishes this right.

In the Code of Laws which God delivered to Moses from Mount Sinai for the Government of the Children of Israel after their settlement in the Land of Canaan (Leviticus 25<sup>th</sup> Ch. 44-5 &c.) is the right of purchasing bond men and bond maids from among the Heathen round about them, who should be their absolute property and descend

to their Children as an Inheritance – and be their possession, while every fiftieth year was a year of freedom or Jubilee to every other person; it did not extend to these bond servants of Israel nor to the Children born of the bond maids, these followed the condition of their Mothers – nor is this Law ever repealed or altered, nor nothing to be found in the Books of the New Testament inconsistent with or repugnant to it.

I proceed now to shew, that the Constitution and Laws of this state consider slaves as property with regard to their perpetual services and secure the possession and enjoyment of this property to their masters.

It will surely not be contended, Sir, by the advocates for this Bill, that the Negroes were Citizens, that they were any of the contracting Parties at the formation and adoption of the Constitution. I have already observed that under the Colony Administration they were recognized as the property of their Masters, and the Constitution of this state ensures the protection of Life, Liberty and Property to all the citizens thereof – so in the 7<sup>th</sup> Article of the Amendments to the federal Constitution, it is expressly provided that no Property shall be taken from the Citizens but by due process of law.

Again, Sir, they are recognized as property by the definitive Treaty of Peace between the United States and his Britannia Majesty. The 7<sup>th</sup> Article expressly stipulates, "That his Brittanic Majesty shall with all convenient speed, and without causing any Destruction and carrying away any Negroes or other property of the American Inhabitants withdraw all his Armies &c." The same Principles of property is expressly declared by the Laws of this state. Those who are slaves are declared to be the property of their masters & the Children born of female slaves shall follow the condition of their Mothers.

Thus Sir, from this reasoning and the authorities quoted, I presume I have in some measure evinced, that the right of Owners to the perpetual service of their slaves is a personal property vested in the Masters, and of course that we have no right either to infringe or deprive them of.

If the original contract for the Negroes in Guinea is a fair bargain and not funded in rapine, stealth and murder, as the Advocates for the Bill have allege: If the holding of slaves is not inconsistent with the Law of Nature as ameliorated by entering into society, nor repugnant to the immutable rules of Justice. If it is not only not inconsistent with, but

justified and warranted by the Law of God. If the Constitution of this state and the United States recognize and ensure to the masters of slaves a right to their perpetual services. If the Treaty of Peace between the United States and Great Britain realizes the same doctrine. And if the existing laws of this state unequivocally declare them to be the property of their owners – with what Propriety, nay with what Justice, can we pass this Bill? Would it not be a departure from the proper business of Legislation, and instead of protecting the Property of our Constituents would it not be at one Blow to deprive them of it? But I am told here that the Bill now before the Committee contemplates not the Manumission of the present generation of slaves, but the gradual Abolition of those who are yet to be born; Sir, I answer that it is as unconstitutional & illegal to deprive a man of the right of acquiring property, as it is to deprive him of that which of right belongs to him and is actually in his possession. There is not the least difference. I am as much entitled by every principle of Law and Justice to the future Produce of my Property as to the Property itself.

I remarked, Sir, on a former occasion, that this Bill was ill-timed and that should it pass into Law, I apprehend a train of ills by far more dangerous to the Peace and Welfare of Society than the general Evil intended to be removed. 'Tis a trite observation but not the less true because it is common, "That there is a Time for everything." So is there for the gradual manumission of slaves; and the rapid and progressive state of population in this country justifies the prediction that the Period is not far distant. When the owners of slaves can hire servants at a lower price than the costs of keeping & maintaining their slaves, self interest will prompt them to give them their freedom; & then and not till then will our Constituents part with this species of property or voluntarily surrender a right which both Law and Justice entitles them to.

The state of Pennsylvania is a striking Instance of the Evils consequent on the Manumission of slaves; these crimes of almost every Dye are frequently perpetuated, their goals filled with Banditti and nineteen out of twenty of the punishments which are inflicted in that state are inflicted on Negroes which have been made free.

Thus, Sir, I have delivered by sentiments on this important subject as a representative of the People at large. If I have erred in principles or reasoned wrong from them, it is not intentionally. My mind is still open to information, and if the subject is

susceptible of Principles different from those I have stated, or of reasoning more cogent, I shall readily yield, if not, I must withhold my assent from the Bill under any modification whatever.

But Sir, admitting (which by no means the case) the Principles of the Bill to be just, it bears glaring marks of Partiality and Injustice on the face of it. The Bill contemplates that the children born of female slaves after they arrive at a certain age shall become free, and that the Owners of the Children at the time of their Birth shall rear them up to this age. Is there justice in this? If as is contended, slavery as it exists in this state is a general evil, the remedy for the removal ought also to be general. Should not the expense be proportionally divided among all the Citizens? Should not those who have none contribute their Proportion to make up the loss to those who have and upon whom this Property is to be forced? Or if there is a superabundance of money in the Treasury, why is there not a provision in the Bill to pay the owners from that source? Sir, I am aware that neither of these modes would be agreeable to the supporters of this Bill either in the House, or to its well wishers out of it. Attack their pockets and the Ardor of their Zeal would instantly flag – open the Gates of your Treasury and it would be almost drained. So difficult, nay so impossible is it to frame a Bill which will operate equitably, or give general satisfaction when its Principles are radically wrong. Sir, it is impossible to reduce the first mode to a practicable Acquiescence of our Constituents in General, because it would be unjust to compel by an Act of Legislation on part of the citizens to alleviate the misfortunes of another. Secondly, because admitting there was a superabundance of money in the Treasury it would not only be impolitic but unjust to compel the owners of slaves to part with them at a given price contrary to their inclination. The Advocates for the Bill may if they please hold out by way of Bounty for a price for the manumission of slaves, but consistent with the Constitution and the Laws of this state it must be in the option of the Owners to accept or refuse the Encouragement.

Thus, Sir, I have viewed this subject in every light and I hope the Advocates for the Bill have or can cash it; and in every view, it is impracticable, illegal and unjust and although in the progress of the business I may assent to resolutions which may acknowledge the principles upon which I have grounded my opposition, yet I shall not

consent either to present or future Manumission, even on the Principles of payment –  
when that payment implies in it Compulsion.

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