



George Washington and Slavery: A Documentary Portrayal

Fritz Hirschfeld

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"I never mean (unless some particular circumstance should compel me to it) to possess another slave by purchase; it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted, by which slavery in this country may be abolished by slow, sure and imperceptible degrees."—George Washington, September 9, 1786

No history of racism in America can be considered complete without taking into account the role that George Washington—the principal founding father—played in helping to mold the racist cast of the new nation. Because General Washington—the universally acknowledged hero of the Revolutionary War—in the postwar period uniquely combined the moral authority, personal prestige, and political power to influence significantly the course and the outcome of the slavery debate, his opinions on the subject of slaves and slavery are of crucial importance to understanding how racism succeeded in becoming an integral and official part of the national fabric during its formative stages.

The successful end of the War for Independence in 1783 brought George Washington face-to-face with a fundamental dilemma: how to reconcile the proclaimed ideals of the revolution with the established institution of slavery. So long as black human beings in America could legally be considered the chattel property of whites, the rhetoric of equality and individual freedom was hollow. Progressive voices urged immediate emancipation as the only way to resolve the contradiction; the Southern slave owners, of course, stood firm for the status quo. Washington was caught squarely in the middle.

As a Virginia plantation proprietor and a lifelong slaveholder, Washington had a substantial private stake in the economic slave system of the South. However, in his role as the acknowledged political leader of the country, his overriding concern was the preservation of the Union. If Washington publicly supported emancipation, he would almost certainly have to set an example and take steps to dispose of his Mount Vernon slaves. If he spoke out on the side of slavery, how could he legitimately and conscientiously expect to uphold and defend the humanistic goals and moral imperatives of the new nation as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and embodied in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights? His was a balancing act that became more and more difficult to sustain with the passing years.

Relying primarily on Washington's own words—his correspondence, diaries, and other written records—supplemented by letters, comments, and eyewitness reports of family members, friends, employees, aides, correspondents, colleagues, and visitors to Mount Vernon, together with contemporary newspaper clippings and official documents pertaining to Washington's relationships with African Americans, Fritz Hirschfeld traces Washington's transition from a conventional slaveholder to a lukewarm abolitionist. *George Washington and Slavery* will be an essential addition to the historiography of eighteenth-century America and of Washington himself.

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