

Manumission in Virginia:
The Anti-Slavery Legacy of John Lynch

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Author Biography

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Introduction

This paper is in no way an apology for the institution of slavery in any form. In fact, it is a reiteration of Biblical doctrine and natural rights philosophy that posit all humans are created equal. The institution of slavery knew few bounds throughout recorded history and was as ubiquitous and durable as the activities of marriage or warfare, practiced by every culture and religion (Drescher 2009, 7-8, 12-39). Negro slavery specifically was an institution in all colonies of the New World at some point in history (Davis 1969, vii). The morality of slavery was an unquestioned fact of life throughout the history of mankind until the 18th century (Sowell 2011, 18). In 1788, John Jay described this sentiment in a letter, noting that before the Revolution few had questioned the institution of slavery (Dorsey 1851, 56).

Biblical text is devoid of specific prohibition against slavery, a fact sadly used as justification for its continuation (Blake 1857, 408). The Quakers, however, were one of the few religious groups who invoked Scriptural admonitions to publicly question the status-quo of the seemingly unshakeable “peculiar institution” in the thirteen colonies (Helg 2019, 1, 39). This paper will discuss a brief historical background of manumission, the evolution of manumission in Virginia and the natural rights doctrines and Quaker teachings that guided notable Virginian slave holders, including Lynchburg’s founder John Lynch, to voluntarily manumit their slaves nearly eighty years before Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

Historical Background on Manumission

The word “manumit” is a transitive verb meaning “to release (a person) from slavery, bondage, or servitude; to set free,” while “manumission” refers to the action of manumitting (Oxford 2021). The difference between the more commonly known term emancipation, and manumission is that “emancipation is the process of freeing slaves through government action” whereas “manumission takes place when masters free their slaves voluntarily” (Finkelman 2006, 450). However, in the Colonial and pre-Civil War period the two terms were sometimes used interchangeably (Bodenhorn 2010, 146n).

The concept of manumission pre-dates the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Biblical manumission guidelines in the Old Testament can be found in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15. Early American texts on the slave trade refer to these Old Testament scriptures as guidance for manumissions (Tucker 1796, 60).

Within the Roman Empire, an individual’s state of slavery could be terminated by manumission through a variety of methods (*ibid.*, 61). Manumission was sometimes offered as a reward for the slave’s commendable service. For example, the slaves freed following participation in military campaigns under Scipio in the third century (Blake 1857, 51, 57).

Manumission in the Early Christian era was considered a virtuous act but not required or prevalent (Gerbner 2018, 15). The short, one-chapter New Testament Book of Philemon is a letter by the Apostle Paul written to a Christian man named Philemon regarding Philemon’s runaway slave Onesimus. In the text Paul is appealing to Philemon to volitionally receive Onesimus back, not as a slave, but rather as a brother in Christ. Verses 8-19 read:

⁸ Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— ¹⁰ that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

¹² I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. (New International Version)

It is noteworthy that in Paul's opinion Philemon and Onesimus's relationship would be improved and even more beneficial to Philemon if Onesimus is received as an equal, rather than a subordinate. This letter confirms Paul's other writings regarding slavery and the inherent value of slaves as individuals in relation to other humans and as God's creation. Galatians 3:28 reads, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Paul restates this theme again in Colossians 3:11, "Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."

A thousand years later, laws put forth by William the Conqueror in 11th century England also made allowance for a master to manumit his slave (Tucker 1796, 70). The opportunity for manumission existed in some form in all European colonies in the New World, but slaves in English, French or Dutch colonies had more legal barriers and lower likelihood for manumission than their contemporaries in Spanish and Portuguese territories (Helg 2019, 71).

Manumission in Pre-Civil War Virginia

Laws governing the manumission process and manumitted individuals changed over time in the colony, and later State, of Virginia. Certain periods were more legally restrictive regarding manumission than others (Bodenhorn 2010, 161-162). Until the mid-seventeenth century, some African slaves in Virginia worked contractually, similar to indentured servants and were able to gain their freedom at the end of a specified term of five to seven years (Helg 2019, 71). Slave codes were soon introduced to limit the growing number of free blacks in the colony. In 1670, all manumissions had to be documented in wills or deeds notarized by the owner (*ibid.*, 72). After 1691, newly manumitted slaves had to be transported out of Virginia at the former-owner's expense within six months, and by 1723 all manumissions had to be approved by the colonial governor and assembly in order to limit such actions to free enslaved individuals (*ibid.*).

Independence for the former colonies led to a window of opportunity for manumission in Virginia. Quakers, Baptists and Methodists in the South channeled their antislavery efforts into securing liberalization of manumission laws based on slave owners' property rights in Virginia in 1782 (Berlin 2015, 96-97). These loosened manumission laws in Virginia allowed private individuals to manumit slaves at the owner's discretion leading to an immediate increase in manumissions (Miller 1977, 21-22). These manumissions were supported by both religious and secular Enlightenment arguments (Brana-Shute and Sparks 2009, 310). For Protestant fringe groups such as the Quakers, the natural rights philosophy espoused in the Declaration only bolstered their Biblical-based position regarding human equality (Berlin 2015, 48-49). These beliefs were put into practice leading to an uptick in manumissions (Forret 2010, 227).

This unusual repudiation of slavery by actual slave owners in the form of voluntary manumissions occurred almost nowhere except the upper South in the states of Virginia and Maryland (Berlin 2015, 48-49). Approximately 15,000 slaves gained their freedom by manumission in Virginia between 1782-1808 (Helg 2019, 136-137). The free black population in Virginia grew from 3,000 in 1782 to 30,000 in 1810 largely because of manumissions (Finkelman, 432). Following Gabrielle's Revolt of 1800 near Richmond, VA, fears of future slave revolts led to the unfortunate passage of new laws in 1805 once again limiting manumission, requiring any slave freed after 1806 to leave the state within a year of being freed (*ibid.*, 230). Manumission by deed, rather than through wills, reached its climax in 1790 thanks to the Quakers' now unyielding anti-slavery views (Brana-Shute and Sparks 2009, 317).

The Influence of Natural Rights

Natural law and natural rights philosophy grew out of the Enlightenment and highly influenced Revolutionary era Americans, including many of the Founding Fathers. Most, if not all, Virginian Founding Fathers subscribed to the philosophy of natural rights (Antieau 1960, 43). This discussion was not limited to the political elites. As early as 1717 Protestant clergy were recorded sermonizing on natural rights (West 2017, 21). Influential Quaker itinerant minister John Woolman recounted a discussion regarding natural rights in his journal, retelling how he posited to a companion his belief "that liberty was the natural right of all men equally" (Woolman 1871, 103).

In the philosophical framework of natural law, an individual not only has the natural right to self-ownership, but also control of one's own body, free of coercion, not because of a government's recognition, but simply because they are a human being (Rothbard 2020, 33-34). According to natural rights, no one can take away the liberty of another, and all individuals are rightfully to live free from coercion (West 2017, 28). Slavery, along with kidnapping are crimes against the person, violating the principle of self-ownership (Block 2015).

One of the specific writings that directly contributed to the Founding Fathers' views on natural rights was John Locke's *Two Treatises on Government*. The very first sentence of the first chapter begins with a blunt condemnation of slavery; "Slavery is so vile and miserable an estate of man, and so directly opposite to the generous temper and courage of our nation, that it is hardly to be conceived that an Englishman, much less a gentleman, should plead for it" (Lock

1823, 7). Farther into the treatise Locke states, "we must consider what estate all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of Nature, without asking leave or depending upon the will of any other man." (*ibid.*, 106). According to Locke, human persons are self-owners (Block 2015). With no stipulation made regarding race, status or creed, the views articulated by John Locke offer a resounding case for the equality of each human being as the co-creations of a common creator:

"The state of Nature has a law of Nature to govern it, which obliges every one, and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions; for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker; all the servants of one sovereign Master, sent into the world by His order and about His business; they are His property, whose workmanship they are made to last during His, not one another's pleasure. And, being furnished with like faculties, sharing all in one community of Nature, there cannot be supposed any such subordination among us that may authorize us to destroy one another, as if we were made for one another's uses, as the inferior ranks of creatures are for ours" (*ibid.*, 107).

Natural rights concepts, including the notion that all men are created equal, took hold in the colonies in the early 18th century forming the core of the Founding Fathers' political philosophy (West 2017, 19-21). Thomas Jefferson was not alone in this time period writing in such a manner. His future political antagonist Alexander Hamilton wrote in 1775 that "the sacred rights of mankind are not to be rummaged for, among old parchments, or musty records. They are written, as with a sun beam, in the whole volume of human nature, by the hand of the divinity itself; and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power." In that same letter Hamilton recommended his detractor needed to educate himself on natural rights by suggesting a reading list including Locke, Montesquieu and Grotius (Hamilton 1775).

In the shadow of John Locke, Thomas Jefferson penned the now famous words of the Declaration of Independence including the bold statement: "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." Anyone who took the "self-evident" words in the Declaration of Independence, "all men are created equal" at face value would have great difficulty rectifying the continuation of human bondage (West 2017, 19-20). The nation's founding document explicitly posited that *all* men were created equal, with no caveat for racial distinction (Drescher 2009, 124).

Many question the Founders' true intentions regarding equality as it appears in the text of the Declaration, however, most of the first states' constitutions written in the years following independence, including Virginia's, leave little doubt regarding self-ownership (West 2017, 25). Written in 1776, Article 1, Section 1 of Virginia's Constitution reads: "That all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, 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.”

Some scholars, such as Helg and Ely criticize the contradictory notion of the American Revolution, noting the colonial protagonists’ justification on the basis of universal natural rights, while refraining from extending those same principles to a large subset of the population or discounting the percentage of slaves freed through manumissions in Virginia (Ely 2004, 35, Helg 2019, 114). However, this blindly ignores the fact that slavery was a global norm that came to the colonies over 150 years before the writing of the Declaration of Independence and before any of the Founding Fathers were even born (Sowell 2005, 163). Multiple states abolished slavery in the 1780s, including Pennsylvania, Vermont, New Hampshire and Massachusetts, demonstrating that the continuation of slavery was already in question (Carey 2012, 217). It should also be noted that immediately after Virginia was free of British control following Cornwallis’s surrender at Yorktown in October 1781, the liberalization of manumission laws was soon legislated in 1782, demonstrating a clear desire of Revolutionary era Virginians for legal pathways to emancipate enslaved persons.

Even in the southern slave societies, several notable Virginians of the founding era including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, among others, wrestled with the philosophical incongruity of slavery. Their desire to see slavery ended in the newly formed nation was tempered by the logistical and political obstacles to emancipation (Sowell 2011, 18). Contemporaneous writings illuminate their desire for a peaceful end to slavery and the potential for the issue to undermine national stability, which would be justified within just a few generations. George Washington wrote to a contemporary comparing Pennsylvania to Maryland and Virginia noting that “there are Laws here for the gradual abolition of Slavery, which neither of the two States abovementioned have, at present, but which nothing is more certain than that they must have, & at a period not remote” (Washington 1796). And a year later Washington wrote “I wish from my Soul that the Legislature of this State could see the policy of a gradual abolition of Slavery; It might prevt [sic] much future mischief” (Washington 1797).

Thomas Jefferson likewise regarded the propagation of slavery in a negative light as seen in a draft of instructions he wrote to the delegates of the Continental Congress in 1774. “The abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in those colonies where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state. But previous to the infranchisement [sic] of the slaves we have, it is necessary to exclude all further importations from Africa” (Jefferson 1774). Near the end of his life in 1820 Jefferson issued a prophetic warning when commenting on the Missouri Compromise which effectively divided the Northern free and Southern slave states (original spelling and punctuation left intact):

but this mementous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union. it is hushed indeed for the moment. but this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence. a geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once concieved and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper. I can say with conscious truth that there is not a man on earth who would

sacrifice more than I would, to relieve us from this heavy reproach, in any practicable way. the cession of that kind of property, for it is so misnamed, is a bagatelle which would not cost me a second thought, if, in that way, a general emancipation and expatriation could be effected: and, gradually, and with due sacrifices, I think it might be. but, as it is, we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other (Jefferson 1820).

Notable Virginians & Manumission

It is historical record that many well-known citizens of Virginia played a key role in the founding era of the United States. A number of these notable Virginians also manumitted their slaves in their wills or through deeds, illustrating the extent this viewpoint had spread by the dawn of the 19th Century, even among the political and economic elite. Slavery was a fixture in Virginia and the complexities regarding potential emancipation or manumission facing members of Southern plantation society should not be dismissed (Schwartz 2000). Many plantation owners feared that mass manumission would lead to their own financial and social ruin (*ibid.*) From the writings of many of the Founders, the overarching question of how to end slavery or how to go about manumitting personal slave holdings was not always as straightforward as we moderns would have preferred (Ellis 2004, 263). “The dangers and constraints of their times have too often been either ignored or brushed aside as mere excuses, as if elected leaders operating under constitutional law could just decree whatever they felt was right” (Sowell 2005, 163).

Any implication that Virginians of the Founding era were not interested in ending slavery would be to overlook the historical record. A well-known court case at the time regarding Virginian manumission law was the 1798 case of Pleasants v. Pleasants regarding the will of John Pleasants III, a wealthy Quaker who had died in 1771 (Hardin 2017, 212). Pleasants had specified in his last will that his “further desire is, respecting my poor slaves, all of them as I shall die possessed with, shall be free if they chuse [*sic*] it when they arrive at the age of thirty years, and the laws of the land will admit them to be set free, without their being transported out of the country” (Call 1854, 319).

This explicit instruction reveals that John Pleasants desired to free his slaves many years prior to Virginia’s 1782 liberalization of manumission but was prevented by the legal statutes at the time. He specifically noted that *should* manumission laws change, he desired his heirs to set his former slaves free, a provision that would become the main subject of the lawsuit (Hardin, 212-213). The case for freeing Pleasants’s former slaves was argued by Virginian Founding Father John Marshall, the future Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in front of fellow Founder George Wythe (*ibid.*, 211). After an extensive legal battle, a ruling was passed down by the Virginia Court of Appeals in 1799 upholding Wythe’s original ruling that the freedom provision of John Pleasants’s will was valid, ultimately freeing over 400 enslaved persons (*ibid.*, 212, 228).

Despite his own dissonant feelings of fighting for liberty while still owning slaves, George Washington confided in letters that he favored gradual abolition, but believed that it would require legislative action if it were to succeed (Ellis 2004, 163). Thomas Jefferson also wrestled with the proper course of action regarding slavery, even criticizing King George III in

the first draft of the Declaration for his contribution to the growth of the slave trade in the colonies, a line that was edited out of the final copy with which we are now familiar (Drescher 2009, 124-125). Despite his fiery rhetoric denouncing the continuation of slavery, Jefferson only freed 8 out of his 200 slaves (Bodenhorn 2010, 2). However, through the time of his death, Jefferson was heavily constrained by the indebtedness of his mortgaged estate, for which his slaves were collateral (Meacham 2012, 496).

President George Washington is probably the most well-known American in history but may be lesser known for his own manumission efforts. In Washington's letters he stated his desire to replace slave labor with hired labor at a future opportune time at Mt. Vernon following a hoped-for military victory and American independence (Washington 1778, Ellis 2004, 165). Washington shrugged off the guilt of Quaker moralistic urgings to free his slaves on the grounds that Quakers had sat out the war as pacifists (Ellis 2004, 259). Robert Pleasants, a Quaker who himself manumitted about 80 slaves had encouraged Washington to do the same, commenting in a letter to Washington on the irony of the hero of American independence held men in bondage (Pleasants 1785, Ellis 2004, 160-161). Several years later however, Washington noted in his diary that he was visited by Quaker anti-slavery advocate Warner Mifflin who "used Arguments to shew the immoral[i]ty—injustice and impolicy of keeping these people in a state of Slavery; with declarations, however, that he did not wish for more than a gradual[sic] abolition, or to see any infraction of the Constitution to effect it" (Washington 1790).

Not finding an economically viable time to manumit his slaves, Washington altered his will to guarantee manumission of all the slaves that were his property following his wife Martha's death, as well as ensuring the slaves' financial care and basic welfare following their eventual manumission (Ellis 2004, 263). Washington died in 1799 and Martha Washington, while still living, fulfilled his wish, manumitting 153 of Washington's former slaves in 1801 (Helg 2019, 138). Washington's directions in his will concerning his slaves sound akin to the unquestionable directives of a military commander and illustrate his "personal rejection of slavery" (Ellis 2004, 263).

Upon the decease of my wife, it is my Will & desire that all the slave[s] which I hold in my *own* right, shall receive their freedom... I do hereby expressly forbid the Sale, or transportation out of the said Commonwealth of any slave I may die possessed of, under any pretense whatsoever. And I do most pointedly and solemnly enjoin it upon my Executors hereafter named...to see that this clause 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 (Washington 1799, Ellis 2004, 263).

There are other records of Virginians manumitting large numbers of enslaved persons in their wills. One such example is Virginia statesman John Randolph of Roanoke, a cousin of Thomas Jefferson who served as a Senator, Representative and filled posts for Presidents Washington and Jackson. Despite his staunch defense of States Rights, he consistently opposed the slave trade and never bought or sold a slave (Kirk 1964, 131). Though not a Quaker himself, he claimed his upbringing in the vicinity of Quakers influenced his view of slavery (*ibid.*, 128).

His correspondences showed his ongoing criticism of the institution and sought constitutionally appropriate means of regulating and limiting slavery (Wood 2012, 119).

In his will he noted his conscience directed him to free his slaves and lamented that Virginia laws and the conditions of his inherited mortgage prevented earlier manumission (Kirk, 131, 153). On his death bed he reaffirmed his intention to free his slaves and provide transportation and land for them in the free state of Ohio (Kirk, 157). After lengthy arbitration, 383 slaves were ultimately manumitted from John Randolph's estate in Charlotte County, Virginia (Wolverton 2017, 39).

Richard Randolph, brother of John Randolph, was also a proponent of manumission. As a young man Richard Randolph was influenced by Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and revolutionaries such as George Wythe and stepfather St. George Tucker (Ely 2004, 22). Despite his condemnation of slavery, he himself was also a slaveowner through the inheritance of a portion of his father's estate and could not free the slaves attached to the estate until all encumbering debts were paid (*ibid.*, 27). Through some effort, his wife was able to implement his intentions and approximately 100 slaves were manumitted through Richard Randolph's will and these freedmen lived successfully among whites forming a community in Prince Edward County, Virginia called Israel Hill which lasted into the twentieth century (*ibid.*, 49, 432).

Englishman Samuel Gist owned land and slaves in several Virginia counties including Amherst, Goochland and Hannover (Trotti 1996, 456). After extensive legal wrangling that required legislative approval, his daughters, who were Virginians, were able to enact the stipulations in his will, manumitting 350 slaves, and endowed the former enslaved persons with his holdings which financially underwrote their departure from the state and acquisition of land in Ohio where they settled (*ibid.*, 458, 466-469)

Robert Carter III of Westmoreland County, Virginia was an extremely wealthy slaveholder who was friends with Jefferson, Mason and Henry (Levy 2005, xi). He was highly influenced by a range of groups including the Baptists, Swedenborgians and Quakers (*ibid.*, 164). Carter labored over a highly detailed plan to manumit all of his slaves, numbering over 450 persons. These manumissions were implemented at the Westmoreland County courthouse through a "Deed of Gift" in 1791 which was written in such a way that it would withstand any legal challenges he presumed would come (*ibid.*, 146-149). Carter sped up manumissions whenever local whites complained about his actions and shrugged off criticism for leasing out his lands to the newly freed individuals (*ibid.*, 150-151). The manumission Deed of Gift reads- "I have for some time past been convinced that to retain them in Slavery is contrary to the true Principles of Religion and Justice, and that therefore it was my duty to manumit them" (*ibid.*, 144). Unlike the other notable manumitters mentioned here, Carter began manumitting his slaves while he was still living, in what culminated in the largest manumission project recorded in American history (*ibid.*, 146-149).

Large-scale manumissions by notable figures, as those described above, were typically executed through their wills upon death, as with the exception of Robert Carter III. Most manumissions, however, were much smaller in numbers and according to research by Theodore

Babcock the average manumitter owned 5 slaves and freed only 3 (Trotti 1996, 458). Hundreds of small-scale manumissions were carried out through deeds by living Virginians of individual or small numbers of slaves (USU Manumission 2021). Many of these manumission documents reference “natural rights” or a paraphrase of the Golden Rule motto “do unto others.” Many of these living manumitters were Quakers.

The Evolution of Quaker Views on Slavery

The rich history of the Quaker movement justifies its own study. Quaker beliefs sprang from 17th century teachings of Englishman George Fox (Braithwaite 1955, 28). For the context of this paper, a simple background is warranted to understand their eventual approach to the issue of slavery that would lead to a corporate drive for manumission. Quakers as a group have one of the longest histories of anti-slavery sentiment, dating back at least to 1688. However, Quakers in the New World, including the thirteen colonies, owned slaves and profited from slave labor, just as all other religious groups at the time (Gerbner 2018, 52). Over the years, their denominational stance on slavery would evolve dramatically and local meetings came to oppose slavery at different times (Soderlund 1985, 200). Quakers, also referred to as the Society of Friends, differed from many protestant groups of that period, in that they believed anyone could experience a personal relationship with God which was not predicated on external characteristics such as class, sex, or race (*ibid.*, 5).

In 1657, George Fox wrote to Friends on the island of Barbados to adjure them to be merciful to their slaves, reminding them that God is no respecter of persons, and all nations are one blood. Fox did not, however, question the master/slave hierarchy or call for manumission. In 1660 Richard Pinder also called for reform, but not abolition, of slavery. He wrote to remind Friends to prevent the suffering of servants and slaves, and that overseers should be restrained from tyrannical violence against slaves on Biblical grounds (Gerbner 2018, 54). George Fox visited Barbados in 1671 and was disconcerted by the brutality against enslaved persons and advocated for righteousness in the family sphere, including sharing the gospel with household slaves (*ibid.*, 56-57 & 63).

The questioning of the spiritual and moral issue of slavery “began as a meeting problem - a problem of individual and church duty” among local Quaker gatherings (Jones 1911, 510). In 1676, William Edmondson addressed a letter to North American Friends stating that Christianity and slaveholding were incompatible and called on Friends to separate themselves from the institution of slavery (Rodriguez 2007). In 1688, a group of German immigrant Quakers to Pennsylvania authored the first anti-slavery document written in North America, known as the Germantown Declaration (Gerbner 2018, 69-71). This document was put forward by German Quakers with a personal background in persecution. They compared oppression of black Africans to that of their brethren in Europe, pointing out that European Christians feared capture by Turks to be sold as slave and rejected the notion of compatibility of peaceful living with the coercive nature of slavery (Friends 1688). It was ultimately rejected by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting but served to launch a debate on the ethics of owning slaves among Quakers (Gerbner 2018, 69-71).

In 1693, a pamphlet was published called, “*An Exhortation & Caution to Friends Concerning Buying or Keeping Negroes,*” a work that presaged future abolition writings (Davis 1969, 310). This writing was often credited to schismatic George Keith who had been disowned by the Friends but was most likely socially authored by a group calling themselves the Christian Quakers (Gerbner 2011, 552, 564). It shared at least one co-signer of the Germantown Protest and contained similar themes, opposed slavery on moral grounds and reiterated the Golden Rule (*ibid.*). This writing admonished the end of buying and selling slaves based in Biblical teachings against “manstealing” (Davis 1969, 311). The pamphlet pointed out that Christ had died to bring spiritual and physical liberty through salvation to people of all colors (Grebner 2018, 71). Quakers were reminded that it was their Christian duty to care for those in distress and declared that choosing to manumit one’s slaves was a true test of character (Davis 1969, 311, Gerbner 2018, 71).

Significantly earlier than the political movement for abolition that would eventually spring up, individual Quaker believers took an unwavering stand against the institution of slavery. Quaker preachers, lawyers and activists began to take up the abolitionist cause in the 18th century including Benjamin Lay, Anthony Benezet and John Woolman (Friends 1843). Through the teachings of Woolman and those before him, the Quaker opposition to slavery had become doctrine (Blake 1857, 406). Woolman’s main argument against slavery stemmed from its violation of the Golden Rule (Carey 2012, 185). The Quakers were at times reviled for the stance on slavery within the new U.S. Congress, and even politicians who desired to see an eventual end to slavery were dismissive of the group due to their lack of support during the Revolutionary War (Blake 1857, 408-411). Through a gradual process nearly ninety years in the making, Quakers would become the first religious sect to oppose slavery in all forms, concluding that it was “a threat to their own eternal salvation, not simply a temporal misfortune of others” (Sowell 2005, 130).

Thanks to the urgings of Benezet, Woolman and Lay, the Quaker's 1758 Philadelphia Yearly Meeting embraced a corporate view that slave holding was a sin (Dandelion 2008, 52). By 1776, the Friends’ Yearly Meeting had adopted an official anti-slavery stance that called for the Christian admonition of Friends in the local gatherings to manumit their human property. This was to be “enforced” within the Society of Friends by disownment from the meetings for individuals who chose to retain slaves (Friends 1843). Quakers came to a group agreement not only to abstain from owning slaves, but went to the extreme, of avoiding purchasing any good or service that involved slave labor (*ibid.*). At the time, slavery was illegal nowhere else in the world, and agriculture and service industries relied on slave labor along much of the supply chain (*ibid.*). With the growing view among Quakers that Biblical doctrine showed that people of all colors and social standing were fellow children of God, a push for manumission among the slave-owning members of the Society of Friends began.

One prime example of a Quaker of prominent political standing in the colonies and later the newly independent nation living out his beliefs was John Dickinson. He was an outspoken opponent of slavery in general, writing extensively on the topic, decrying its immoral nature and argued against the slave trade at the Constitutional Convention as a delegate from Delaware. He

had previously been a slave owner and begun manumitting his slaves in 1777 (Murchison 2013, 195-196). The growth of grassroots Quaker influence could be witnessed in Pennsylvania, when it became “the first state in the world to abolish racial slavery by a duly deliberated legislative act” in 1780 (Drescher 2009, 127).

Slave society was far more deeply ingrained in Virginia, with a considerably larger numbers of slaves and slave owners than in neighboring Pennsylvania. Virginians had a much greater financial stake in the continuation of slavery than did the vast majority of citizens in the northern states that abolished slavery following independence (Miller 1977, 30). Virginia Quaker historian Douglas Summers Brown points out that:

The Friends in the South were in a most difficult position in regard to slavery. Their situation was very different from that of their Northern Brethren. Today we are apt to underestimate their moral courage, or to the circumstances. To begin, they were in the midst of other slave holders and they had to compete financially with them. This alone would have kept their lot from being an easy one. From a personal point of view, it was a question of finances as well as conscience. Generally speaking, the local Quakers were large landowners and there was no such thing in those days in the rural South as hired white labor. It was next to impossible to obtain any but slave help. But their code called not only for the freedom of the negroes, but also prohibited the hiring of those held in bondage. Some even contended that a good Quaker should not buy or use materials produced by slave labor. The crops could not go unplanted without spelling bankruptcy. If the Quaker was fortunate enough to be able to plow his own fields and make a living, he and his family lost all trace of social prestige. In the South before the Civil War it was considered degrading for a white man or woman to work in the fields or do any manual labor. Even under such circumstances they could hardly hope to compete successfully with the slave holding planters. From 1800 on, in Virginia every Friend had to make a choice of one of three things, (1) hold his slaves and be expelled from Meeting, (2) free his slaves with the possible result of financial ruin, loss of caste and becoming an object of distrust and suspicion among his neighbors, (3) pack up and go West to the free States (1986, 43-44).

In the end, the Quakers’ unwavering stance on slavery led to the demise of Quaker influence in Virginia. The local meetings shrank as many Quakers moved to free states and those Friends who refused to manumit their slaves were disowned (Early 1927, 46, Elson 2004, 13)

Quaker Manumissions in Virginia

Under colonial rule, manumission in Virginia was effectively illegal, in all but rare cases. Breakthrough came in 1782 when Quakers and other opponents of slavery effectively lobbied for liberalized manumission laws in the newly independent Virginia that allowed for private individuals to manumit slaves at the owner’s discretion without the consent of the governor or legislative assembly as had been required under British rule (Miller 1977, 21-22). Virginian manumission was unique in that it was completely voluntary, and many freed their slaves out of principle (Brana-Shute and Sparks 2009, 332-333). Though Quakers made up only a very small

percentage of Virginia's population, it is estimated that Friends accounted for over 25% of manumissions between 1782 and 1806 (*ibid.*, 330-331).

Based on examination of contemporaneous manumission documents it would appear that many Virginians used familiar phrasing written on many manumissions listed in the extensive, yet incomplete catalog of pre-1820 Virginia manumissions in a Utah State University manumission database. The term "natural right" appears on 263 deeds and some paraphrase or reference to the Golden Rule occurs in many of the about 1000 cataloged manumission deeds (USU Manumission 2021). Here are just several examples of this wording in manumission deeds from an assortment of Virginia counties which combine references to natural rights and the Golden Rule:

I Francis Brown of Dinwiddie County being fully persuaded that freedom is the natural right of all mankind and that it is my duty to do to others as I would desire to be done unto in the like situation, and having under my care a Negro man named Jacob whom I heretofore held as a slave. I hereby emancipate. 2nd day 11 month 1791. proved 7 November 1791.

[Accomack County] Wills &C. 1784-87, 390-1, September 25, 1787, To all Christian People to whom these presents shall come, Greeting Know Ye that I George Corbin. . . for divers good Causes and Considerations me hereunto moving but more Especially from Motives of Humanity, Justice, and Policy, and as it is Repugnant to Christianity and even common Honesty to live in Ease and affluence by the Labour of those whom fraud and Violence have Reduced to Slavery; (altho' sanctified by General consent, and supported by the law of the Land) Have, and by these presents do manumit and set free the following Persons. James, Betty Senior, Jenny Senior, Joshua, son, Betty Junior Bob, Jarry, Spencer, Levin, Abel, Peter, Parker, Lithco, Alicia, Hannah, Amey, Esther, Jenny Junior, Sue, Bob, Liddia, and Will; and that the Identity of the aforesaid persons may in future be better known, and thereby their Right to freedom firmly secured, I do hereby affix to Each and every one of them the Sirname of Godfree. Have and I do hereby for myself my heirs, Executors, and Administrators relinquish all my right or Title of in and unto the Persons aforesaid and their increase forever . . . ; Reserving only to myself . . . the power of holding the Young ones who are under lawful age in such manner only as negroes born free. Proved 31 July 1787.

11 Feb [17]88 – Augustin Heath – of Prince George County after full and deliberate consideration (and agreeable to our Bill of Rights) am fully persuaded that freedom is the natural right...that no law, moral or divine hath given me a just right, or property, in the persons of any of my fellow creatures and desirous to fulfill the injunction of our Lord & Saviour Jesus Christ ...do unto others...Do hereby set free from bondage the following Negroes vizt. Seila, Sarah, James on [17 May 96], Betty [27 Oct. 95], Henry [23 June 02], Charles [21 Dec 05], Alexander [5 April 06] – as several of the above named Negroes are yet in their nonage, I desire to have the care guardianship and instruction of the said children till they arrive at full age – rec 12 Feb 88

Howell Myrick of Sohampton—after mature deliberation of Bill of Rights [VA], freedom is natural right and doing unto others at injunction of Jesus Christ etc—frees Negroes Samuel aged 25; Thomas, 30; Frank, 25; Hardy, 23; Lucy, 23; Violet, 25; Jack on 8 Mar 179?; Lettice on 8 Mar 1795; Rachell on 8 Mar 96; Anthony on 8 Mar 02; Willis on 8 Mar 03; Polly on 8 Mar 02 and Cherry on 8 Mar 01—10 May 85—rec 12 May 85—

4 July [17]82—James X Watkins of Sussex being fully persuaded that freedom is the natural right of all mankind and that it is my duty to do unto others as I would desire to be done to in the like situation emancipates Negro man Kinchen aged abt 26 yrs old—rec 17 Oct 82

I Samuel Pleasants, Jr., being fully persuaded that freedom is the natural right of all mankind and that it is my duty to do to others, as I would desire to be done by in the like situation, and having in my possession four negroes of the following names and ages vizt. Sam (27), Jane (26), Richard a mulatto boy (10), and Polly a negro girl (1 the 15 February last), who I do hereby emancipate...8 January 1797, proved same date.

This now familiar terminology also appears in the manumission documents signed by John Lynch of Campbell County, Virginia as will be shown below.

John Lynch's Quaker Influence

Virginia Quakers such as Lynchburg's founder John Lynch had to make the very personal and voluntary decision to manumit their slaves, shirking contemporary societal norms and overlooking the personal cost in lost capital and labor. John Lynch (born 1740) was described as a pious and devout member of the Society of Friends and a most respected citizen of the city he founded and bears his name. His mother raised him among Friends as part of the South River Meeting House in modern-day Lynchburg.

It is said that Quaker itinerant minister and antislavery proponent John Woolman visited the modern Lynchburg area as early as 1746 and did more to arouse opposition to slavery among the Society of Friends than any other individual (Brown 1986, 42). Woolman noted in his journal that in mid-1757 he visited Friends at the monthly Cedar Creek Meeting in Bedford County, VA and spoke against slavery as he travelled through the area of modern Lynchburg (Woolman 1871, 105). Sarah Clark Lynch, and her sons John and Charles, would have been members of this meeting as it was the predecessor to the South River Meeting, which was founded in November 1757 (Christian 1900, 11, Brown, 96). The land for the first meeting house was provided by Mrs. Lynch, a devout woman who raised her children to follow in her footsteps, holding regular times of worship and instruction with her family and others in her home, out from which the South River Meeting grew (Christian, 11, Early, 24). She was well respected among local Friends, with even the larger Monthly Meeting being held in her home in 1759 and later being made an elder in the South River Meeting (Brown, 24) We also see record of influential Virginia Quaker Robert Pleasants, who himself would manumit his slaves visiting the South River Meeting multiple times and staying with Sarah Clark Lynch's family in the mid-18th century (*ibid.*, 95, 99)

The historically documented crossing of paths between influential anti-slavery Quakers and the Lynch family undoubtedly shows the influence these men had on the members of the South River Meeting. Sarah Clark Lynch's daughter, John Lynch's sister, Sarah Lynch Terrell was an outspoken anti-slavery advocate in the local Meeting, "so strongly did she impress her neighbors that many leading men acted on her suggestion and freed their bondsman" (Brown, 42, Early, 46). Records of the South River Meeting in 1771 note that the local Friends were no longer buying or selling slaves and by 1787 it was said that all Virginia Quakers had freed their slaves (*ibid.*).

John Lynch and Manumission

The town of Lynchburg had not yet been incorporated in 1782 when manumission was liberalized in Virginia and the deed documents referenced here were recorded at the Campbell County courthouse. Court records show John Lynch manumitting slaves in 1782, and then later again with his brother Charles Lynch, and nephew Edward manumitting several slaves in 1793. Charles had been disowned by the Friends for swearing an oath when he became a burgess and then again for taking up arms in the revolutionary cause (Christian, 12-13). However, his actions show that he was clearly agreeable to manumission. Previously in 1769, Charles was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses and along with many of the future Founding Fathers signed the Nonimportation Resolution that among other items, prohibited the importation of slaves (Virginia 1769).

It should be noted that the term "lynching" which sadly evolved to mean mob injustice, often toward African Americans, stems from a bastardization of "Lynch Law" attributed to Col. Charles Lynch (Early 1927, 195). During the Revolutionary War, Col. Charles Lynch was tasked with arresting white pro-England Tories who were making trouble in the region. Due to the exigencies of wartime conditions Col. Lynch oversaw a tribunal court that maintained a form of due process (Early, 195, Elson 2004, 6). The accused could present evidence and if exonerated were released with an apology, those convicted would be tied to a walnut tree in Col. Lynch's yard and receive 39 lashes or until uttering "Liberty forever." If this was insufficient, the man would be strung up by his thumbs until he did, after which the guilty party would be released with "words of admonition" (Early, 196, Elson 6). No evidence has been shown that Col. Lynch carried out any hangings, and then-Governor Thomas Jefferson confirmed no executions occurred during the war (Early, 197). "Considering that Quakers were the first religious sect to advocate freedom for African Americans, it is bitter irony that this former Quaker's name later became a synonym for... the hanging of African Americans" (Elson, 6)

Many "disownments" for all manner of infractions against Quaker beliefs, large and small, are recorded in the South River Meeting records for a wide variety of reason (*ibid.*, 11-12). John was well known as a generous man and zealous Quaker throughout his life (*ibid.*, 15). He was not above the discipline of the South River Meeting, in one instance, John was rebuked in "for using harsh words towards a Friend" and also censured or possibly disowned at one point, as evidenced by a letter he wrote to the Monthly Meeting asking for reconciliation in 1787 (Christian, 13, Early, 46). Over the years, South River records show him serving as an elder and a clerk for the meeting and more poignantly, as a former-slaveowner, among a group of Friends

who went to exhort their brethren to end any connection with slavery and record pertinent manumissions (Elson, 12).

In 1810 John Lynch penned a letter to part-time neighbor Thomas Jefferson, whose summer home Poplar Forest in Bedford County was not far from a growing Lynchburg. In the letter John Lynch proposed that Jefferson support a colonization scheme to repatriate future freedmen to West Africa as a deliberate enticement for American slave owners to manumit their slaves (Lynch 1810).

John Lynch's court record of manumitting his slaves in 1782 predictably incorporates references to natural rights philosophy and the Golden Rule as seen in the examples above (spelling and grammar errors purposely left intact):

I John Lynch of Campbell County being fully persuaded that freedom is the natural right of all mankind and that it is my duty to do unto others as I would be done by in the like Situation and having under my care four negroes Names and ages as followeth Tom aged fifty five years Peter Hacket aged thirty nine years Hanny Aged thirty five years Esther thirty four years. I do hereby [e]mancipate and sett free the above named Slaves. And do for my self my heirs Executors Administrators relinquish all my rights title intrust and claim or pretention of claim whatsoever. Either to their persons or to any estate they may hereafter acquire. And having also twelve more under my care in their minority of the following names and ages William aged nineteen years and six months Joe aged fifteen years and six months Susy aged fifteen years and six months. Sarah aged thirteen years and six months. Dean aged twelve years and six months, Agatha aged ten years and six months Esther aged nine years and six months Amey aged seven years and six months Rachel aged four years Hannes aged one year and two months. Nancy aged two years and eight months. Whom I also emancipate and sett free and do for myself my heirs[,] Executors[,] Administrators relinquish all my right[,] Title[,] Interest and claim or pretentions of claim whatsoever either to their persons or to any Estate they may acquire after they shall attain to the age of Twenty one or eighteen years when the said Negroes and their Posterity are to Enjoy their freedom in as full and ample a manner as if they had been born of free Parents with out any Interruption from me or any Person for by or under me. In Witness whereof I have hereunto sett my hand and Seal this 5th day of the 9th month 1782.

John Lynch (Seal)

At a Court held for Campbell County September 5th 1782

This manumission was Acknowledged by John Lynch Partey thereto, and ordered to be recorded (Lynch 1782).

On a later manumission document, John and his brother Charles Lynch's names appear together in a Campbell County, VA manumission deed from 1793 which reads as follows:

We Charles Lynch, John Lynch & Sam Mitchell from a conviction that all men are by nature free & agreeable to the Command of Our Savior Christ believe it our duty to do

unto all men as we would they should do unto us. We do hereby under an existing act of the Virginia Assembly liberate the following Negroes. To wit, Robert[,] Feander[,] James & Harry which they shall have a right to Claim on the first day of June in the year Seventeen Hundred & ninety five.

In Witness whereof we do hereunto set our hands & Seals on this 10th day of June 1793

Chas [Charles] Lynch (Seal)

John Lynch (Seal)

Sam Mitchell (Seal)

(Lynch 1793)

The greatest test of John Lynch's faith and resolute beliefs that all men were created equal occurred when his son Dr. John C. Lynch was poisoned and died, allegedly at the hands of a slave named Bob and a freewoman accomplice. Through the legal requisites, John Lynch became the executor of his son's estate, including the slave Bob. John Lynch not only manumitted Bob, reiterating the "natural rights and do unto others" theme and that "vengeance was the Lords" in the manumission deed but also paid for Bob's legal defense in a trial declared not guilty (Early, 68, Virginia Argus 1810). Following the trial of Bob, John Lynch in turn manumitted his son's former slave out of principle, rejecting the opportunity for reprisal to sell Bob into continued bondage, as can be seen in the words of the manumission deed:

"...being fully persuaded that freedom and liberty is the natural law of mankind and no law, moral or divine hath given me a right to property in the person of any of my fellow creatures and notwithstanding the injury done to me and mine, by Bob from his confession and evident circumstances, for which he was tried and acquitted by the laws of this country – believing as I do that no circumstances whatever can change the principle, and leaving the event unto Him who hath said "Vengeance is mine and I will repay" I therefore for myself and heirs do hereby emancipate Bob... (Early, 68).

John Lynch did not simply manumit his own slaves in the face of personal financial loss and tragedy, he also admonished his fellow Quakers and advocated for measures he hoped would encourage others to do the same. Though many of the Founding Fathers struggled to manumit their own slaves during their lifetimes or even publicly espouse outright abolition, the record of John Lynch's actions, like many of his fellow Quakers showed no such hesitation. One obituary published following John Lynch's death noted,

"He was a zealous and pious member of the Society of Friends... and such was the veneration which the inhabitants of the town entertained for him, that he might be regarded as standing amongst them very much in the light of one of the patriarchs of old. Few measures of a general nature were set on foot without consulting him, and he was always found a zealous promoter of whatever tended to advance the general good. Amongst other traits of character in this excellent man, those of charity and benevolence were very conspicuous. To the poor his doors were ever opened" (Christian 1900, 76).

By all descriptions, John Lynch was a magnanimous man who led by example, lived his beliefs daily, showing the world around him how the Inner Light of Christ, to use Quaker vocabulary, could truly guide a person to Biblical moral action to better his community.

Conclusion

Slavery had been a scourge of the human condition throughout the course of world history. Idealistic 17th century Quakers and political philosophers, followed by 18th century American Founders, began the history changing discussion that would eventually culminate in the abolition of slavery in the United States. The struggle to eliminate slavery was a long and arduous process for those held in bondage and their advocates. It must be considered that at the earliest opportunity following independence, some American states and individual slaveowners were choosing to end slavery where they had power to do so. Slavery, and the fight to end this evil practice are clearly intertwined with the early portion of U.S. history. It should be noted however, that in the long view of history, slavery transitioned from an unquestioned fact of life to completely abolished in the western world in a miraculously short period.

The Founding Fathers groped for a method to bring about the peaceful end to the institution of slavery in the young nation. Manumission was potentially the best opportunity to avoid the disastrous and unnecessary Civil War and the racial divisions that have plagued the United States since. John Lynch and many of his fellow Virginians and Quaker brethren acted willfully and proactively to end their connections to slavery many decades prior to the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Through his conviction to walk out his Biblical beliefs, John Lynch took a stand against slavery that was personally costly, both financially and socially. However, in the Book of Isaiah chapter 56, it is made known that blessings will follow upright people who keep the law of God and abide by His covenant.

¹ This is what the LORD says: “Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed. ² Blessed is the one who does this— the person who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps their hands from doing any evil.” ³ Let no foreigner who is bound to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely exclude me from his people.” And let no eunuch complain, “I am only a dry tree.” ⁴ For this is what the LORD says: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant— ⁵ to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever. ⁶ And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant— ⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations” (New International Version).

Throughout the course of his life, John Lynch remained unwavering in his principled beliefs of universal natural rights and Christ’s Biblical injunction to treat others as one would desire to be treated. Today, we too must pursue righteousness and justice by fervently affirming the self-evident truth of the intrinsic value and equality of every individual.

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