

# Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

---

## **Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion**

**Review Number:**

604

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 31 May, 2007

**Author:**

Eva Sheppard Wolf

**ISBN:**

9780807131947

**Date of Publication:**

2006

**Price:**

£30.00

**Pages:**

312pp.

**Publisher:**

Louisiana State University Press

**Publisher url:**

<http://www.lsu.edu/lsupress/bookPages/9780807131947.html>

**Place of Publication:**

Baton Rouge

**Reviewer:**

Howard Temperley

What does it mean to say that all men are created equal? In the context of the American Declaration of Independence it could be seen as merely a rather grandiose way of saying that Americans have as much right to self-government as Englishmen. 'No taxation without representation' was another rallying call of the time, but that had been a parliamentary slogan during Charles I's reign. To rally supporters and gain the world's approval Americans needed something more up-to-date that would show they had rebelled for good cause, and not simply because they resented paying taxes for the upkeep of an empire in which their interests were not fully represented. And what more elevating principles were available to men of the latter part of the eighteenth century than those forged by the philosophers of the Enlightenment? Freedom from tyranny, a government dedicated to serving the needs of the people, the universal rights of man? that was what the Enlightenment was about, and that was what the founders of the United States decided it should be about too. True, a number of them happened to be slaveholders. That was inconvenient. But wasn't it better to have high aspirations than no aspirations at all? The important thing was to get rid of the British. Sorting out the details could be left until later.

Taken literally, of course, the idea of men being equal is nonsense. As John C Calhoun and other defenders of slavery would in time argue, some men arrived in the world better equipped than others. It was a matter of common observation that men?women were another matter?differed in terms of physical strength, intelligence, industriousness, and in countless other ways. Furthermore, it was the case that all societies were based on the notion of there being some kind of hierarchy. Far from being an anomaly, Calhoun went on to argue, slavery was a time-honoured institution, a 'positive good'. It was also democratic to the extent that all societies depended for their successful operation on the performance of mundane tasks of a kind unbefitting those responsible for bearing the burdens of citizenship. What slavery did was to underwrite democracy by providing a subordinate class peculiarly suited to performing tasks of that kind. That had been the case in Ancient Athens, and it was no less the case with the United States. Some men were born equipped to give orders, others to obeying them. In short, the idea of men being born equal was contrary to common sense and sound policy.

This, however, is looking ahead to the 1830s. At the time of the War of Independence, and indeed for most of the period dealt with in *Race and Liberty in the New Nation*, slaveholders were less assured in their pronouncements on the subject. Borne forward on the tide of Revolutionary rhetoric, few were prepared to dismiss the principles of the Declaration in so robust a manner as Calhoun. After all, embarked as they were on an entirely new experiment in government, quibbling over principles would have been not only divisive but also unpatriotic. All the same, there were those, even at the time, who expressed unease over what struck them as the overly sweeping character of the principles evoked. What was this notion of there being natural rights to which all men were entitled? Either the rights in question were not universal or slaves were not men. One way or another, a formula would have to be found for getting around this seeming contradiction.

The most obvious, and the one initially resorted to, was to say that the rights concerned, whether universal or not, were in practice available only to citizens. As the Virginia Declaration of Rights put it, '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'. It was obvious that slaves, being wholly owned, could not be citizens. But what about free blacks? Their numbers had been swollen by the war's disruptions. To get around that problem Virginia's legislators defined entitlement to citizenship as being confined to, 'all white persons born within the territory of this commonwealth, and all who have resided therein two years'. By such Jesuitical reasoning Virginia's legislators contrived to say, without blatantly spelling it out, that, at least in Virginia, liberty was for whites only.

This was, according to Eva Sheppard Wolf, a view shared by Americans at large. Nevertheless, the way Virginians approached the issue had much to do with their efforts to balance a slaveholders' freedom to emancipate their slaves with growing unease over the number of free blacks in the state. As the book's subtitle indicates, *Race and Liberty* is not simply a general discussion of Virginian attitudes, for example as reflected in political speeches and newspaper editorials, but one firmly grounded in archival records concerning specific applications for manumission. In consequence, Wolf is able to delve beneath the public pronouncements of important persons and show how ordinary citizens sought to reconcile themselves to the continuing existence of slavery in a society supposedly dedicated to universal freedom.

One response was to wish that slavery had never been introduced. In his original draft of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson had had the temerity to insert a passage condemning George III for enslaving innocent Africans and for encouraging an 'execrable commerce in men'. King George might be responsible for a lot of things, but to blame him for slavery on top of everything else was so patently self-serving that Congress had it struck it out. The issue, however, was not how Americans came to be in the position they were in but how to get out of it without landing themselves in an even worse one. Slaves produced the bulk of Virginia's exports. They were also personal property. Apart from land, more capital was tied up in the ownership of slaves than in any other commodity. Once the state began meddling with property there was no telling where it would end. Besides, how would the slaves fare once they had been freed? Would one even be doing them a favour by freeing them? At present they were quite unequipped to manage on their own. Might they gang together and seek vengeance? And wouldn't living without slaves

prove extraordinarily inconvenient, particularly in Virginia? Thus, while it was possible to agree with Patrick Henry that slavery was a 'lamentable evil', there were strong arguments for not doing anything about it.

Yet, many ordinary Virginians believed not only that slavery was wrong but that ways of dealing with it would have to be found. One step in that direction was to ban the further importation of slaves. Although nominally antislavery, this served the interests of the slaveholders of the eastern counties who did not wish to see the value of their holdings reduced by allowing further imports. More indicative of the softening of attitudes, however, was the removal of the legal provisions requiring those who freed slaves to send them outside the state. Thus, from 1782 until 1806 a window of opportunity was opened that allowed slaveholders to free their slaves without providing for their resettlement elsewhere. Whether moved by Revolutionary ardour, religious conviction, or some combination of the two, a minority of owners, George Washington among them, began emancipating some or all of their slaves. Now they were joined by Methodists and Baptists. Urged on by two visiting English evangelists, Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, Methodists submitted a petition to the Virginia House of Delegates calling for general manumission, claiming, among other things, that any American who upheld slavery was a hypocrite on the grounds that the way masters ruled their slaves was far more oppressive than Britain's rule over its former American colonists. This, not surprisingly, did not go down well. As one anti-emancipation petition had it, the War of Independence had, 'sealed with our Blood, a Title to the full, free, and absolute Enjoyment of every species of our Property'. Once again, it was claimed, the British were up to their old tricks, conspiring to deprive Americans of their liberties, in this instance their liberty to hold property in slaves. In reporting the matter to George Washington, James Madison reported that the petition had aroused a great deal of indignation and that a motion had been passed to throw it under the table.

On the basis of manumission records it would appear that locality was as important as religious persuasion in determining the behaviour of individuals. For example, in Accomack County on the Eastern Shore the collapse of tobacco agriculture led to an exceptional number of manumissions. On occasion, too, the result could be attributed to the example of a local figure. Among the most revealing of Wolf's findings is the change in the character of manumissions that occurred over time. Initially it tended to be Revolutionary principles that spurred slaveholders to action. In such cases the articles of manumission would commonly be accompanied by expressions of antislavery belief. Soon, however, they took on a different character suggesting that promises of emancipation were being used as a means of persuading slaves to work harder, thereby actually strengthening slaveholders' control over their workforces.

Emancipation could also be made into a money-making proposition by having slaves accumulate funds, first to purchase their own freedom and then that of the rest of their family. Wolf cites cases in which hardworking individuals born into slavery spent forty years of their lives struggling to achieve what white Americans took to be their birthright, namely the right to live surrounded by their family and in a place of their choice.

In 1806, declining commitment to Revolutionary ideology and increasing alarm over the number of free blacks, especially in cities, persuaded Virginia's lawmakers to make manumission conditional on freedmen leaving the state. The discovery of Gabriel's plot and ever more alarming news of the rebellion in Haiti also contributed to the heightening of racial fears. The result was a hardening of policy that was destined to continue right up to the Civil War. Virginians found that in order to justify slavery they were increasingly obliged to fall back on the claim that blacks were inherently different from whites. In the case of newly-imported Africans, outlandish in appearance and unacquainted with Western ways, this had not been difficult to demonstrate. The irony was that as African Americans increasingly acquired the manners, attitudes and predilections of free white Virginians, not to mention the racial mixing that was occurring, the differences were becoming ever harder to discern. In what respects, other than legal status and accident of birth, was a Virginian whose grandmother had come from Africa different from other Virginians?

Yet, embarrassing, irritating and absurd though all this was, it was something else entirely that brought slavery to the forefront as a political issue.

At the time of the War of Independence, three-quarters of Virginia's population, including virtually all of its slaves, had been concentrated east of the Blue Ridge Mountains. However, with the decline of the tobacco industry, a basic demographic shift took place. By 1830 almost half of the state's white population was located west of the mountains. In terms of origin and occupation it differed from the population to the east being largely composed of small farmers and artisans, a good many of whom were foreign born. Meanwhile, the black population of the Tidewater and Piedmont had increased to the point that African Americans outnumbered whites by a ratio of roughly three to two. Thus there were now two Virginias, one a fully-fledged slave society in which blacks outnumbered whites, the other a predominantly white society that employed slaves but on a much smaller scale.

As was commonly the case along the Atlantic coast from Massachusetts to Georgia there was a degree of hostility between the tidewater and the backcountry, a recurring issue being the refusal of those in the longer-settled areas to allocate seats in the legislature to those in the hinterland. In the case of Virginia, however, these tensions were exacerbated by the easterners' claim that they deserved special privileges in view of the peculiar nature of their property. It was basically the same argument that the slaveholding states as a whole had used at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 to justify the three-fifths rule allowing them additional seats in Congress on account of their slave holdings. Virginia planters did not dare repeat this demand, but at the State Constitutional Convention of 1828 they rejected the notion of universal white male suffrage on the grounds that the greater part of the State's wealth was located east of the Blue Ridge. As one of the principal purposes of the social compact was to protect property, why should those with property lay themselves at the mercy of those without? Seats should be allocated on the basis of wealth rather than population. As much of the personal wealth of the state was represented by the ownership of slaves, easterners were demanding more control over policy than their numbers justified. In the end a 'compromise' was reached that, in spite of the westerners' demands, left between a third and a half of all white men disfranchised. In short, the slaveholders had won.

This, then, was the background to the Virginia slavery debates of 1831 to 1832. Hitherto the easterners had striven to prevent an open debate on the future of slavery, but faced with the alarm aroused by Nat Turner's Rebellion they had no alternative. The result was a unique and far-ranging discussion of the available options in a state whose divisions increasingly mirrored those of the country at large. There was, however, one important difference between the two, namely the inability of Virginians, even those most strongly opposed to slavery, to envisage a future in which blacks and whites lived amicably together. If slaves were to be freed it must be on condition of their being sent elsewhere. Much of the debate, in fact, was not about freeing slaves but about removing blacks to Liberia, an idea that had wide appeal. Planters looked to it as a means of ridding the state of free blacks; critics of slavery as a way of reducing and perhaps eventually eliminating slavery altogether.

The impracticability of both schemes soon became apparent. Simply removing the free black population, which is to say paying for its transportation and supervising its resettlement, would involve a vast increase in taxes. In the case of slaves there would be the additional cost of compensating owners. Although fine in theory, the costs were prohibitive. That aside, the high mortality rate among blacks who returned to Africa and the troubles arising out of their displacement of native Africans made it hard to see how such schemes would benefit anyone. But what most clearly emerged from the debates was the incompatibility of two visions of Virginia society, one based on the essentially northern notion of free white farmers and artisans creating wealth through their industry, the other on the southern vision of a privileged white plantocracy supporting itself on the unrequited labour of African Americans. Common to both visions was an ingrained belief that men were not equal and that freedom was a white prerogative.

In the event nothing was done because, so far as Virginians could see, nothing could be done. When people believe in incompatible things they get into terrible muddles. Reading *Race and Liberty in the New Nation*

there are times when one wishes the story were being told, not by Professor Wolf, but by Mark Twain or H. L. Mencken. This is not to impugn her scholarship or the skill with which she guides the reader through the tangles into which Virginians got themselves, but merely to regret that humour is considered unseemly in works of serious scholarship. And perhaps rightly so, for this is, above all, a tale of how the conjunction of economic interests and ideology can lead otherwise perfectly ordinary and decent people into committing acts of appalling cruelty without even realising that that is what they are doing. Anyone wishing to learn how a nation dedicated to notions of universal freedom could go so spectacularly off the rails need look no further.

**Other reviews:**

H-Net Reviews

<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php> [2]

Journal of Interdisciplinary History

<http://muse.jhu.edu/login> [3]

Civil War Book Review

<http://www.cwbr.com/index.php> [4]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/604>

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4035>

[2] <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=22864>

[3]

[http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/journal\\_of\\_interdisciplinary\\_history/v03](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/journal_of_interdisciplinary_history/v03)

[4]

<http://www.cwbr.com/index.php?q=3844&field=ID&browse=yes&record=full&searching=yes&>