THE ACT OF MANUMISSION:

Correlations Between the Freeing of Slaves and Socioeconomic Status of Philadelphia Quakers

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THE PHILADELPHIA SOCIETY OF FRIENDS BATTLED TO RID ITSELF OF THE INFECTION OF SLAVERY FOR NEARLY A CENTURY, FINALLY FORBIDDING SLAVEHOLDING WITH THE MINUTES OF 1776. THE ROAD TO REDEMPTION WAS NOT EASY, AS MEETING MEMBERS FIRST STRUGGLED TO REALIZE THE CONTRADICTION BETWEEN THEIR LIFESTYLES AND RELIGION, THEN TO STAND UP IN SINGULARITY TO PRESENT THEIR NEWFOUND TRUTH, AND FINALLY TO ADDRESS IT ON A LARGE SCALE IN ORDER TO CONVINCE THEIR BROTHERS OF ITS SINFULNESS. THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS IS OFTEN SEEN AS A GROUP OF FORWARD-THINKING REFORMERS, AND WHILE THEIR ACTIONS CAME BEFORE MANY OTHER ABOLITIONIST GROUPS, THEIR MATERIALIZING CONSCIOUSNESS WAS ANYTHING BUT UNIFIED.

The Quaker embrace of manumission was complex, beginning in 1711 with abolitionist efforts by the Philadelphia Meeting, a religious organization intertwined with the Quaker-dominated Pennsylvania government. Prohibitions on the further importation of slaves were passed by the Pennsylvania General Assembly, but disallowed by the Privy Council, as were similar measures to impose a prohibitory duty of £20 on slave imports.[i] This movement was isolated, and efforts to curb the trade subsided for the time being. In fact, imports of human cargo were expanded to diversify the commerce of the Delaware River as well as to provide a vessel for the growing investments of Quakers who were finding success in Philadelphia's trade and crafts markets. Although Quakers facilitated these trades, they expressed misgivings about their cargo, which surprisingly "sprang from the uncertainties of quality and sales and the prevalence of stomach disorders among the merchandise, not from moral revulsion."[ii]

The earliest men to protest the institution of slavery in Philadelphia were Ralph Sandiford in 1729 and Benjamin Lay in 1737. These two men set the tone for what would become the standard in presenting the wrongs of slavery. Sandiford, in his paper *Brief Examination of the Practices of the Times*, spoke with outraged eloquence, presenting his argument on the wrongs of slavery in purely biblical terms. He paralleled slaveholding to theft in the Bible, looking at "the brethren of Joseph, that sold him to the Israelites, the seed of the Bond-Woman, and then again sold him into Egypt, and though they paid for him by bargain twenty pieces of silver, yet it did not excuse them from Theft."[iii] This view of the purchaser of plundered goods being as guilty as the plunderer is one presented time and time again in the argument for manumission. Sandiford set the tone of the argument against slaveholding, while Benjamin Lay chose the audience. In his paper, *All Slave-keepers that Keep the Innocent in Bondage*, he opened with an address to "My dear beloved friends and elder brethren," aiming his words at this particular demographic.[iv] Efforts by individuals to promote manumission were almost exclusively targeted at leaders in the Friends community, who were older, wealthy and landed, creating an influence that swayed only the upper echelons of Quaker society.

However small a voice these two men had in Philadelphia society, there was an appropriate and sizeable reaction among the men at whom their messages were aimed. From 1730 to 1750 the percent of slaveholders within the Philadelphia upper class dropped from 60 percent to 50 percent, while the same statistics for the lower classes climbed significantly. While some, including Lay and Sandiford, would argue that this progress in the upper classes was made through realization that one must free their slaves to free themselves from the manacles of sin, it can be argued that economics and social climate played a much larger role than are given credit.[v]

The influx of immigrant workers in the 1730s up to the Seven Years War set the stage for a shift in ownership of slaves from the wealthy to the working. The availability of cheap labor in the form of German immigrants, fleeing religious persecution in the German states, drove down the prices of slaves. These low prices, combined with the exponential growth of urban commerce in the early decades of Pennsylvania's colonial life, made slave holding very attractive to workers, craftsmen, and artisans for whose industry one extra body could make a large difference. Philadelphia's economy was organized in a way where labor was the most cost-intensive of all overhead.

According to the books of Gregory Marlow and James West Shipbuilding Company, in the early decades of the 1700s, the cost of building one boat included £5 towards supplies and £30 towards workers.[vi] The temptation to hold slaves was powerful to a middle class not tempered against it. Records and wills of the time reflect this middle class transition to slaveholding as the upper classes began to abandon the institution. In the two decades prior to the Seven Year's War, the percentage of craftsmen and middle class members holding slaves jumped from less than 36 percent to over 70 percent.[vii] Clearly, during this period the economy-driven middle class embraced slaveholding, as intellectual and religious forces began the dissolution of slaveholding among the upper class.

In 1758, in the midst of the Seven Years War, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting made its first official decision toward prohibiting slavery among its members. The decision took a two-pronged approach: punishing those who purchased and sold slaves by eliminating them from meeting leadership, as well as by forming Committees to Treat, which would visit the homes of slaveholders to convince them of their wrongs.[viii] This approach was a compromise, an effort by reformers to move toward ending slavery while slaveholders won time to ponder the institution, yet still reap the benefits of unpaid labor. These two initiatives were aimed at affluent Quakers, as Lay's and Sandiford's writings had been, and continued the trend of influencing the wealthy, as threats of public discussion and reprimand had less of an impact on the middle class.

The Minutes came at a time of crisis within the economy, as the war with France dried up the supply of men and women who could serve as indentured servants and workers. At the height of the labor shortage, Thomas Willing, a successful Philadelphia merchant and Quaker asserted that "All importation of white servants is ruined by enlisting them and we must make more general use of slaves."[ix] The resulting phenomenon of price increase had a two-fold effect on Quaker middle class society. First, the Minutes' subsequent banning of trading slaves would have given craftsmen economic incentive to hold on to their investments. Scarcity of free labor as well as the future value of their slaves provided sound economic basis for slaveholding. Second, the push to import slaves made their possession, accumulated by the middle classes during the pre-war dip in prices, more of a status symbol than ever.

As seen in Figure A (on next page), which illustrates the populations of slaves and servants in Philadelphia, there is an obvious decline in the importation of slaves in the decade ending in 1760. This drop in the urban slave population of 10.6 percent to 8.5 percent would have created a shift in supply and therefore a downward turn in prices, creating an atmosphere where many middle class individuals took advantage of low prices to make their purchases.[x] This bargain combined with the push for slaves during the war and the postwar recession made urban middle class slavery the dominant issue as the Society of Friends attempted to push slavery from its society all together.

The Committees to Treat, formulated in the Minutes of 1758, are the most visible and recorded pieces of the process toward manumission. The Philadelphia Committee, or the Committee of Five, was led by prominent Quaker figures and ministers including Daniel Stanton, John Scarbough, John Churchman, John Sykes, and most notably John Woolman. Their influence, combined with the caveats surrounding slaveholding societal leadership, effectively convinced upper class Quakers to manumit their slaves.[xi] The efforts of the Committees to Treat were effective because the audience they were targeting was susceptible to their specific message.

The Quaker aristocracy, the descendants of the First Purchasers of Penn's land, had nothing to gain from the social clout associated with slaveholding during the colonial period. The close marriage bonds among founding families created a tight circle, which few controlled and fewer could hope for assimilation into. The Philadelphians, headed by the Lloyd family, later to become the Pemberton and Lloyd families, held a strong influence that was not lim-

FIGURE A

DECADE ENDING	SERVANT POP.	SLAVE POP.	PHILADEPLHIA POP.	% SRVTS IN PHILA. POP.	% SLAVES IN PHILA. POP.	SRVT: SLAVE RATIO
1730	285	880	5808	4.9	15.2	1 TO 3
1740	575	1209	8017	7.2	15.1	1 TO 2
1750	635	1131	10720	5.9	10.6	1 TO 2
1760	1305	1139	13413	9.7	8.5	1 TO 1
1770	396	1682	15718	2.5	10.7	1 TO 4
1775	457	1394	18692	2.4	7.5	1 TO 3

SOURCE: SALINGER, *TO SERVE WELL AND FAITHFULLY: LABOR AND INDENTURED SERVANTS IN PENNSYLVANNA, 1682-1800.* (CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS: NEW YORK; 1987). TABLE A3, 64.

"As seen in the data above, which illustrates the populations of slaves and servants in Philadelphia, there is an obvious decline in the importation of slaves in the decade ending in 1760."

ited to the city's boundaries. Ties to the prominent families of Newport, New York, and Virginia cemented their status as leaders in their circle, whether or not they owned slaves.[xii] The Quaker leaders, first in wealth and influence, were not only exempt from the social maneuvering that was so important among the middle classes, but also found themselves in the unique situation of being able to set the direction in which societal trends moved. The first three decades of the eighteenth century were marked by a subtle move toward the finery of high society and away from the simplicity of truth. Likewise, by 1750 the tides of fashion had turned, as shifts in power and population made leadership "perceive a need to strengthen their solidarity by emphasizing the religious peculiarities which differentiated them from their fellow Philadelphians."[xii]

By the same token, the upper class of Philadelphia society had motivations to stop the trading of their slaves under the threat that they would lose their positions of leadership within the Church. This clause provided a dark reality to the leaders, as they had lost much of their influence in the decade prior. At the start of the Seven Year's War, Quakers sitting on the General Assembly forfeited their seats in favor of their religious pledge to denounce violence, a pledge they could not possibly keep in the face of aggressors approaching both by land, the Native Americans, and by sea, the French. Without a voice in the colonial government, the Meeting was the last place where their influence could be felt—and if the price to keep that influence was their slaves then they were more than willing to end their involvement in the slave trade system.

With the majority of factors playing to the advantage of upper class Friends—the accepted establishment, social status, and economic security— the main concern of these men, so involved in the leadership of their religion, was their relationship with the Lord and the condition of their soul and conscience. Realizing this, the Committees to Treat did their utmost to take advantage of their audience's vulnerability with religious arguments, similar to those of Sandiford and Lay, recounted in detail in Woolman's journals. The men worked to foster a sense of responsibility and example in the leading members of the Society. Woolman devoted time and energy meticulously transcribing this goal. He wrote of many accounts of meetings with elders, ministers, and friends of influential leaders in his diaries, and consistently cited his discussions in which he spoke "freely and plainly to them concerning their slaves." In one particular meeting with ministers and elders in May of 1758, Woolman relates his conversation, noting that he told the men present that "as the first rank in society . . . [they] were under the stronger obligation to look carefully at themselves . . . to be thoroughly divested of all selfish views." He goes on to call on the men present to serve as an example to the lower classes, and to take up their obligation to educate them through example.[xiv]

The language of the Committees, as well as that of other articles published for the purpose of conversion, was aimed to pull at the heart strings of the men and women addressed. The prose written and spoken by committees and individuals alike seemed to present the darkest of outcomes in the most eloquent of manners, discussing the damnation of those who did not remove themselves from the trading of slaves. Notably, Woolman referred to the habits of slaveholders as "likely to prove snares in that they may more grievously entangle them in the spirit of selfishness and exaltation, which stand in opposition to real peace and happiness; and renders them enemies to the cross of Christ."[xv]

In writings brimming with biblical references, these men hoped to dissolve every possible piece of biblical evidence upon which one would be able to build a case for slavery. Woolman drew on Proverbs, as well as Old Testament stories to prove his points. He looked at the story of Cain and Abel, denouncing the commonly held idea that slaves were the descendants of Cain, marked with dark skin for the sin of killing his brother. He defeats that idea by sighting scripture to prove that the Flood killed those most offensive in the Lord's eyes–including Cain's lineage.[xvi] Nathanial Appleton, in his *Considerations on Slavery in a Letter to a*

Friend, pointed to the wrongs of slavery in much the same fashion. Appleton called on passages from Deuteronomy to explain the sins in that "He that stealeth a man and selleth him, or if he be found in his hands, he shall surely be put to death."[xvii]

This imagery, combined with accusations of absent virtues, and the promise of judgment by those slaves wrongfully held expedited the process of manumission among the wealthy. The upper classes were also at an advantage as they were economically able to support their slaves after freedom. The Minutes of 1758 dictated that no slave could be bought or sold, so all had to be set free, with their former master held accountable if they fell into need.[xviii] While the upper classes were willing to free their slaves for the cause of their image, faith, and salvation, at their moment of conversion their concern was not generally one of freeing of slaves, but of freeing themselves from sin.

The upper classes of Quaker society were successful in achieving the goals of the Minutes of 1758; however, the middling classes of craftsmen and artisans could not claim the same progress. The lack of manumission within the middle class can be credited to the lack of effort of the Committees to Treat put toward influencing this cross-section of society, as well as a lack of the consequences that had been found so persuasive by the upper class. Unlike the grandees and First Purchasers of the Quaker aristocracy, the middle classes lived in a situation where social status was anything but cemented in place. For the wealthy, "a staff of black servants clearly denoted the owner's power and wealth," however for the middle class it was the accumulation of one or two slaves that set an individual apart from their neighbor.[xvix]

The economic disadvantages of the middle classes were also clear, as their income offered less flexibility than did that of the upper class. The requirement of supporting freed slaves and restrictions on the sale of slaves led to prohibitive losses from manumission for most. Additionally, for many the holding of one slave was the difference between turning a minimal profit and a substantial one. Often trained in a specific trade, a slave was counted on to be an extra, free set of hands and in some cases even work to support a family after the death of his master.[xx] For these reasons and others, as the upper class shed their slaves in favor of cheap immigrant labor and a clear conscience, craftsmen and artisans took on more than enough slaves to keep the ratios of white to black workers steady, as seen in Salinger's data on slave and indentured servant populations. Now why did this happen—why were committees so effective among the upper class and not the working?

Philadelphia middle class Quakers were not alone in facing the challenge of balancing morality with affluence. New York and other northern urban centers saw the same inconsistency in slaveholding between classes—both Quaker and non-Quaker. Craftsmen and skilled workers throughout the northeastern colonies preferred slaves to servants for two reasons. First, servants or apprentices would one day become competition within the trade, while slaves would never rise to the position of a peer. Second, and also reflecting middle class Quaker reluctance toward manumission, was the influence of upper class slaveholding,

". . . at their moment of conversion [the upper class concern] was not generally one of freeing of slaves, but freeing themselves from sin."

which molded the middle class to "have seen ownership of slaves as a sign of prestige to which they aspired."[xxi] Certainly, individuals of a certain religious persuasion would not be immune to the forces so strongly in play throughout their society.

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In 1774, as disownment loomed on the horizon for slaveholders, the dominant demographic was much the same as it had been in the 1760s, with working men and women holding the most slaves. In examining the wills of 900 citizens from the tri-colony area (Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware), 131 of which were from Philadelphia, it is clear that on the eve of forced manumission society's wealthiest had already freed their slaves, generally for religious and moral reasons. Even in this small sample of society, the working class owned overwhelmingly more slaves than the wealthy (see Figure B on next page).[xxii] In examining the wills below, compiled without note of religion, evidence is provided for the argument that middle class Quakers not only held the most slaves, but also were entrenched in a social and economic environment where, among their peers, manumission was the exception rather than the rule.

In an atmosphere such as this one, where a middle class, regardless of religion, was most involved with slavery, the result was an attitude toward manumission that was nearly the polar opposite of the religious vehemence behind the motivations of the upper class over the past two decades. As committees began to court the remaining individuals owning slaves, interactions became colder than ever as many offenders, seeing the impending loss, would purposefully be out or would simply ask for more time to consider. Unlike the wealthy, there was very little soul-searching taking place, as those who still held their slaves were not inclined to suddenly have an awakening of conscience.[xxiii]

The predominant factor in this lack of reflection and embrace of the law was the absence of motivation in the middle classes. The wealthy risked losing their leadership within the Meeting if they continued to buy and sell men and women, therefore slave trading halted among them. This shift presumably sent prices down to levels where the working class could continue and even increase their purchases of slaves. By the end of the 1760s, the middle class made up over one-third of all masters and controlled about 40 percent of the slave population, reflecting their tightening grip on the institution.[xxiv] Even in the economic crunch of the post-war years, hired help would have been a viable alternative had it not been for the structure established to regulate manumissions. Such factors as the inability to sell the slave made a large loss necessary in order to come clean with the practice. Many were unwilling to absorb this loss. The requirement of supporting freed slaves, often economically unrealistic to artisans struggling to make ends meet, only added to the negative light shining on manumission. Economic hardship, coupled with the complex social strata of the working class and the reality of competition with non-Quaker slaveholders, made for a reality incompatible with the teachings of the Committees to Treat. With concerns and goals based on immediate needs, middle and working class people were not susceptible to the anti-slavery religious arguments used so successfully on the wealthy, nor were they as frequently targeted.[xxv]

FIGURE B

NAME	PROFESSION	SLAVE STAUS	WEALTH, POUNDS
JOHN ENGLE BINCKES	FARMER	NONE	10
MARTHA ELLIOT	WIDOW	2 CHILDREN	43
HENRY IRELAND	INNKEEPER	MULATTO BOY	84
LUDWIG STUMP	YEOMAN	*SERVANT BOY , 12 YEARS*	142
DANIEL LONDIS	SADDLER	*8 YEARS OF A SERVANT GIRL'S TIME*	211
DANIEL JONES	BAKER	3 MALE SLAVES	314
GEORGE KEMBLE	STABLE KEEPER	MAN, WOMAN, AND BABY	321
ISRAEL JENKINS	COOPER	1 MAN	341
THOMAS GILBERT	MERCHANT	NONE	361
JACOB DUFFIELD	YEOMAN	1 MULATTO WENCH	481
CHARLES JOLLEY	FAMER AND MILLER	125	525
THOMAS HUMPHRY	FARMER	NEGRO GIRL	609
WILLIAM HEASLTON	MARINER	*2 SERVANTS TIME*	650
ANDREW CROCKET	FARMER	MAN, WOMAN, BOY, AND 2 GIRLS	892
JOSEPH MAXFIELD	LEGAL OFFICER	1 WENCH	895
ABRAHAM WENTZ	SMITH	1 WOMAN	923
JOSEPH FRAZER	BAKER	*TIME OF 3 SERVANTS*	1037
GEORGE PLIM	CARPENTER	NONE	1113
ANDREW GEORGER	FARMER	NONE	1116
JAMES TAYLOR	MARINER	1 MAN, 1 WOMAN, 1 GIRL, AND 1 MULATTO	1361
WILLIAM GOETTING	SHOPKEEPER	NONE	1379
GEORGE STUMP	YEOMAN	NONE	1487
BENJAMIN HOWELL	FARMER	MULATTO MAN, NEGRO BOY	1532
LYNFORD LARDNER	PROVINCE OFFICER AND LANDHOLDER	NONE	1826
CAPT. JOSEPH STOUT	CAPT. ROYAL NAVY	1 MAN CRIPPLED, 1 BOY	2397
ELIZABETH VANDERSPIEGLE	WIDOW	NONE	2562
JOHN JOHNSON	TALLOW CHANDLER	1 MAN AND 2 YOUNG GIRLS (9 AND 11)	2609
JAMES MILLER	CAPTAIN	NONE	2761
JOHN ISAAC KLEIN	FARMER	NONE	5159
MARGARET WILLIAMS	WIDOW	NONE	5308
STEPHEN CARMICK	MERCHANT	NONE	8931
SAMUEL NEAVE	MERCHANT	NONE	11415

The final steps towards abolition within the Quaker community were not taken until nearly twenty years after the publication of the Minutes of 1758. The Minutes of 1774 were the first of a two-part ultimatum issued to those who persisted in slave holding. It prescribed that anyone who continued in the slave trade was to be disowned if they did not provide for the freedom of their purchase. The second portion, published two years later in the Minutes of 1776, required that all local meetings were to disown all slaveholders, effectively ending slavery in Philadelphia's Quaker society and the surrounding meeting area. The mechanisms for enforcement which varied by meeting were slow in taking root, but once the already converted leadership began to pursue the topic after 1776, decisions had to be made.

Instead, the middle classes approached manumission and the threat of disownment by accepting the certainty of economic and social loss. As the Philadelphia Meeting took a stricter approach leading up to 1776, the prosecution of slaveholders became the standard, and expulsion became all the more common in an effort to exemplify Philadelphia's moral leadership, which had come to be expected in its role as the largest Meeting in the area. Between the years of 1765 and 1776, when holding slaves would no longer require a trial but outright disownment, 75 percent of cases heard by the Monthly Meetings on individuals who would not free their newly purchased slaves ended in expulsion from meetings, or from the Society itself.[xxvi] When looking at this data, that those middle class members who manumitted their slaves did so under duress is clear. Many chose to hold on to their slaves and forego their religion. The continued dominance of slaveholding among their social tier led many to side with the Germans and Scots-Irish of the area in their continued practice of finding compatibility between their religion and chattel slavery.

The story of Warner Mifflin, a Quaker who freed his slaves before his death in keeping with the decisions of the meetings, was published in the early 1800s in multiple newspapers in both the colonies and in Britain as an example of the outcome of Quaker manumission. Mifflin, painted as a warm, caring man, called his 27 slaves into his parlor one by one and addressed them, announcing their freedom. He left each with the Quaker directions to "be prudent and industrious: in every misfortune and distress, thou will find a sure friend in thy ancient master, Warner Mifflin."[xxvii] This account, while an example of the best side of an upstanding individual eager to manumit his slaves, highlights the illusion of a united, decisive front against slavery. In truth, especially in the case of Philadelphia, the hub of the Society in the New World, the endeavor was anything but unified.

The writings and Meeting Minutes collected from the mid to late 1700s show, through first-hand accounts and hard statistical evidence, that in truth the manumission of slaves was not a unilateral decision by the Society of Friends, nor was it accepted by all Quakers. Hoping to free and educate their slaves was more of an exception than a rule. Before the threat of disownment, Treating had little effect on the middle class because, as David Cooper noted in his observations on slaveholding in *A Mite Cast into the Treasury*, one cannot force someone to obey the laws of God when the laws of men are on their side.[xxvii] Once the laws of God and man met in 1774, the Society of Friends, in Philadelphia and elsewhere, was successful in completely flushing slavery from their system nearly a century before the rest of the continent would. It should be remembered that this societal shift did not occur seamlessly, but in a series of calculated compromises which were engineered along class boundaries. In the actual moment of manumission, most of those who did free their slaves were not thinking of the souls of their captives but of their own, and were not motivated by the cause of freedom, but of ridding the Society of its worldliness and sin.

ENDNOTES

i. Bronner (33-67)
ii. Wax (147-48)
iii. Sandiford (5)
iv. Lay (7)
v. "Probate Records on Occupation, Wealth, and Slaveholding among Inventoried Decedents in Philadelphia (1682-1780)"; Soderlund (64)

vi. "Gregory Marlow and James West Account Book, 1703" published in Wigley (21)
vii. "Probate Records"; Soderlund (64)
viii. Soderlund (149-50)
ix. Thomas Willing to Coddrington Carrington, September 3, 1756, quoted in Wax (32)
x. Salinger (64)
xi. Woolman
xii. Tolles (109-132)
xiii. Tolles (123, 233)
xiv. Woolman (67)
xv. Woolman (108)
xvi. Woolman (60)
xvii. Appleton; Cooper
xviii. Soderlund (150)
xvix. Soderlund (64)
xx. Berlin (45-100); Soderlund (62-64); "Marlow and West Account Book" published in Wigley (21)
xxi. Harris (346)
xxii. Jones
xxiii. Soderlund
xxiv. Berlin, 180
xxv. Woolman
xxvi. Soderlund
xxvii. Locke (37-38); "The Benevolent Quaker"
xxviii. Cooper (17)

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of all colours, and nations, as his own soul. Philadelphia: Benjamin Franklin.

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