

Eric Foner, *Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History*, Volume 1 (Norton, 5th ed., 2017).

Voices of Freedom

fluence can be acquired and established for a series of —no man can obtain dominion over a large territory— and saving, who are generally the best citizens, will his share of property and power, and thus the balance and power will continue where it is, in the *body of the*

and tolerably equal distribution of landed property is the national freedom: The system of the great Montesquieu is erroneous, till the words *property or lands in fee simple* are a *virtue*, throughout his *Spirit of Laws*.

Patriotism, or love of country, never was and never will be, unless the laws are changed, a fixed, permanent principle and supplement. But in an agricultural country, a general possession in fee simple, may be rendered perpetual, and the laws introduced by commerce, are too fluctuating to endanger it. An equality of property, with a necessity of continually operating to destroy combinations of powerful interests, is the very *soul of a republic*—While this continues, the laws inevitably possess both *power and freedom*; when this is destroyed, liberty expires, and a commonwealth will inevitably assume some other form.

of the press, trial by jury, the Habeas Corpus writ, the Charter itself, although justly deemed the palladium of all inferior considerations, when compared with a general diffusion of real property among every class of people. The concentration of real property is more dangerous to liberty and republicanism, than all the constitutions that can be written on parchment, or than a standing army. Let the people have property, and they will have power—a power that will for ever be exerted to the restriction of the press, and abolition of trial by jury, or the denial of any other privilege. The liberties of America, in all her forms of government, stand on the broadest basis. In the face of the fears of a foreign invasion and conquest, they are to the convulsions that shake other governments;

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and the principles of freedom are so general and energetic, as to exclude the possibility of a change in our republican constitutions.

Questions

1. Why does Webster consider an equal distribution of landed property more important to freedom than liberty of the press, trial by jury, and other rights?
2. Why does Webster believe the republican institutions of the United States will survive indefinitely?

37. Liberating Indentured Servants (1784)

Source: New York Independent Journal, January 24, 1784.

The upsurge of demands for equality during the Revolution brought into question many forms of inequality. In 1784, a group of "respectable" New Yorkers proposed to "liberate" a newly arrived shipload of indentured servants on the grounds that their status was "contrary to . . . the idea of liberty this country has so happily established." The incident was one small contribution to the rapid decline of indentured servitude, which by 1800 had all but disappeared from the United States. This development sharpened the distinction between freedom and slavery, and between a northern economy relying on what would come to be called "free labor" (that is, working for wages or owning a farm or shop) and a South ever more heavily dependent on the labor of slaves.

WHEREAS THE TRAFFIC of *White people*, heretofore countenanced by this State while under the arbitrary control of the British Government, is contrary to the feelings of a number of respectable Citizens, and to the idea of *liberty* this country has so happily established.

And whereas it is necessary to encourage emigration to this country, upon the most liberal plan, and for that purpose, a number of Citizens of this State, have proposed to *liberate* a cargo of Servants just arrived, by paying their passage, and repaying themselves by a small rateable deduction out of the wages of such Servants, Such of the Citizens of this State as wish to encourage so laudable an undertaking, and if necessary, to petition the Legislature for a completion of their humane intentions, are requested to meet at the Hyderally Tavern, the lower end of King Street, *this Evening*, at Six of the Clock.

Questions

1. What practical reason does the notice give for eliminating indentured servitude?
2. Why do you think the notice singles out the sale of "White people" as contrary to liberty?

38. Letter of Phillis Wheatley (1774)

Source: Connecticut Gazette; and the Universal Intelligencer, March 11, 1774

The revolutionary generation's emphasis on liberty inevitably raised questions about the future of slavery in the new republic. Many slaves saw the struggle for independence as an opportunity to assert their own claims to freedom. This letter to the Rev. Samson Occom, a Native American poet and Presbyterian minister, from the celebrated black poet Phillis Wheatley of Massachusetts, who would not gain her own freedom until 1778, is an early antislavery statement pointing to the contradiction between the revolutionary language of liberty and the continued reality of slavery. But the stark fact is that slavery survived the Revolution and continued to grow. The first national census, in 1790, revealed that despite the many who had become

free through state laws, voluntary manumission, and other means, there were still 700,000 slaves in the United States—200,000 more than in 1763.

REV'D AND HONOR'D SIR,

I have this Day received your obliging kind satisfaction with your reasons respecting the Negro. It is reasonable what you offer in vindication of those that invade them cannot be insensible. It is chasing away the thick darkness which by Africa; and the chaos which has reign'd so long. It reveals more and more of a beautiful order, and reveals more and more of a dispensation of civil and religious Liberty, which is limited, that there is little or no enjoyment of it.

Otherwise, perhaps, the Israelites had been contented without it, by no means, for it has been implanted a principle, which we call impatient of oppression, and pants for deliverance. Of our modern Egyptians I will assert, that they are in us. God grant deliverance in his own way, and honour upon all those whose avarice impels them to help forward the calamities of their fellow-men.

This I desire not for their hurt, but to convince them of the absurdity of their conduct whose words and actions are really opposite. How well the cry for liberty, and for the exercise of oppressive power over others, think it does not require the penetration of a philosopher.

Questions

1. What does Wheatley mean by the "absurdity" of their conduct?
2. How does she use the language of the white revolution to end to slavery?