

The 1688 Germantown Quaker Petition Against Slavery

Historical Background

Pennsylvania was founded in 1682 by William Penn as an English colony where people from any country and faith could settle, free from religious persecution. In payment of a debt to Penn's father, Penn had received from King Charles II of England a large land grant west of New Jersey which Penn named Pennsylvania, meaning "Penn's woods". Penn had become friends with George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, called Quakers after their unique way of speaking in Meeting for Worship. Penn had converted to Quakerism and had been imprisoned several times for his beliefs. The king allowed Penn to establish a proprietary colony where Penn appointed the governor and judges but established an otherwise democratic system of government with freedom of religion, fair trials, elected representatives, and separation of church and state.

In the period 1660-1680 several Quakers including William Penn visited Holland and the Rhine valley of what would later become Germany, and organized gatherings where they preached the Quaker testimony. Many people, including some who had been Mennonites in Krefeld, in what was then Holland, and Krisheim, in the German "Palatinate", converted to the new Quaker faith. Among them was Francis Daniel Pastorius, a young German born near Würzburg to a family of elite officeholders. After training as an attorney, Pastorius sought spiritual release from his lucrative but uninspiring practice with the local gentry, and he turned inward looking for a philosophical purity in his life. He was attracted to Penn's colony as a place where religious freedom would allow him to start afresh a life free from "libertinism and sins of the European world." Meanwhile, the Mennonites and Quakers in Holland and along the Rhine valley were often imprisoned for belonging to a faith other than the officially recognized Catholicism and Lutheranism.

In 1681, Penn invited people from his native England and from other European countries to the new colony. He arrived in 1682, had the land surveyed, organized Philadelphia as a welcoming town laid out as a grid with many green spaces, and profited by selling lots. Soon, the waterfront was a bustle of activity, town streets were laid out with houses built on narrow lots, and churches of several different faiths were established. The town merchants traded with the largely Quaker colony of West Jersey. The town and surrounding countryside prospered.

The German Settlement

In 1683 Pastorius was delegated authority to purchase land in the new Pennsylvania colony by a group of men from Frankfurt who intended to emigrate. He traveled to Philadelphia in August, 1683, having purchased a warrant from Penn's agent on behalf of the Frankfurt men who had supplied the funds. In October, 1683, thirteen German-Dutch families from Krefeld in the Rhine valley arrived with their own land claim. Seizing upon a chance to create a viable German-speaking town, Pastorius negotiated with Penn to combine the two

claims. As it turned out, the people from the Frankfurt Company never emigrated to the new colony, but more Quakers and Mennonites came from the Rhine valley and Pastorius' ambitious plan for a German-speaking town near Philadelphia grew and became real.

Pastorius had devised a simple plan for a town, with lots parceled out along one long main thoroughfare, where settlers could build their houses. He required land good for tilling because the emigrants would need to grow their own food to survive. Pastorius and Penn became good friends, and they often discussed plans for the new settlement over dinner. The land originally promised to Pastorius was supposed to be level and along a navigable river, and Pastorius had paid for 6,000 contiguous acres. However a suitable tract of land near Philadelphia was unavailable on the Delaware River, because level ground there was valuable and most of it had already been sold. Penn suggested land near the Schuylkill Falls (East Falls), but it was too steep for Pastorius' plan, so as an alternative Penn suggested land a little further east, near the top of a gentle hill between two creeks, and Pastorius agreed. Germantown was thus founded along a Lenni Lenape trail four miles north of Philadelphia, between the Wissahickon and Wingohocking creeks. Pastorius had the land surveyed, and over the first winter the families lived in downtown Philadelphia while struggling to clear the land for their makeshift log houses. Germantown became a separate and self-sufficient town of Dutch and German speakers.

The thirteen original Krefelder families were Mennonites who had become Quakers in their native Holland before they arrived in the New World. Because they had been persecuted in their own land on account of their beliefs they understood the value of a community founded on religious toleration. Unlike Pastorius, they were not wealthy, but were skilled craftsmen who knew they would have to work hard for a living. By trade they were carpenters, weavers, dyers, tailors, and shoemakers, so they were not fully prepared for the hard work of clearing the forest. Over the first year they cleared land and planted crops for food and flax for weaving. They set up looms and soon were producing linen cloth that sold widely throughout the colonies.

The Issue of Slavery

Some of the early English settlers of Philadelphia and its surrounding towns were wealthy and purchased slaves to work on their farms. Although many such slaveowners also had immigrated to escape religious persecution, they saw no contradiction in owning slaves, because serfdom, slavery and servitude had existed in Europe since the Middle Ages. Although serfdom was abolished in northwestern Europe by 1500, servitude was ubiquitous in Europe, sometimes under harsh conditions. Some immigrants to the new colony were indentured servants, working for several years in exchange for being carried on a boat to the new colony. Slaves were widely owned in the colonies and local slave markets made purchasing slaves easy. The slave trade was protected by the British crown and some thought it necessary for economic growth in the colonies. It was justified by racism and intolerance towards what many British saw as "uncivilized" cultures. Many ship owners and captains made large profits carrying slaves from Africa to the Caribbean islands and the mainland colonies. William Penn oversaw the economic progress of his colony and once proudly declared that during the course

of a year Philadelphia had received 10 slave ships.

The first settlers of Germantown were soon joined by several more Quaker and Mennonite families from Krisheim, also in the Rhine valley, who were ethnic Germans but spoke a similar dialect to the Hollanders from Krefeld. Some out of pragmatism attended the local Quaker Meetings held in the newly-built homes of immigrants, becoming involved and accepted in the Philadelphia Quaker community, and eventually joining as members. However, in several ways they felt themselves outsiders, which allowed them to see and question what the English could not. Some attended the Quaker Meeting temporarily while they waited for a Mennonite minister to arrive, and then helped to build the first Mennonite Meetinghouse. The town prospered and grew, and a Quaker Meeting was organized at Thones Kunders' house, under the care of Dublin (Abington Meeting). By 1686 a Quaker Meetinghouse was constructed near the current site of Germantown Friends Meeting.

The German-Dutch settlers were unaccustomed to slaves, although from the shortage of labor they understood why their British neighbors relied on slaves for prosperity. Slaves and indentured servants were a valuable asset for a farmer because they were not paid. Yet the German-Dutch settlers refused to buy slaves themselves and quickly saw the contradiction in the slave trade and in farmers who forced people to work. Although in their native Germany and Holland the Krefelders had been persecuted because of their beliefs, only people who had been convicted of a crime could be forced to work in servitude. In what turned out to be a revolutionary leap of insight, the Germantowners saw a fundamental similarity between the right to be free from persecution on account of their beliefs and the right to be free from being forced to work against their will.

About the Contents of the Petition

In 1688, five years after Germantown was founded, Pastorius and three other men decided to raise the issue of slavery with the Quaker Meeting which they attended. The men gathered at Thones Kunders' house and wrote a petition based upon the Bible's Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," urging the Meeting to abolish slavery. It is an unconventional text in that it avoids the expected salutation to fellow Quakers and does not contain references to Jesus and God. It argues that every human, regardless of belief, color, or ethnicity, has rights that should not be violated.

Throughout the petition the reference to the Golden Rule is used to argue against slavery and for universal human rights. On first reading, the argument presented in the petition seems indirect. Nowhere is the Meeting specifically asked to condemn the practice of slavery. Instead, in reference to the Golden Rule, the four men ask why Christians are allowed to buy and own slaves, almost in mock sarcasm, to get the slaveowners to see their point. In doing so, it arguably was very successful, but it would be easy to miss the sophistication of their argument. They emphatically argue that in their society the capture and sale of ordinary people as slaves, where husband, wife and children are separated, would not be tolerated, again referring to the Golden Rule.

The four men also assert that according to the Golden Rule, the slaves would have the right to revolt, and that inviting more people to the new land would be difficult if prospective settlers saw the contradiction inherent in slavery. In mentioning the possibility of a slave revolt, they clearly were suggesting to the English colonists that slavery would discourage potential settlers from emigrating. In the Caribbean colonies there had been many slave revolts over several decades, so the possibility was real. However, the power of the argument for potential settlers from Europe was more than the fear of a revolt -- it was that any such revolt would be justifiable according to the Golden Rule. This logic strengthened the newly defined universal rights, which applied to all humans, not just the "civilized". The petition has several examples of such counter-intuitive but forceful arguments to push the slave-owning reader off his balance.

The petition contains several points of difficulty for the reader unfamiliar with history. First, the petition's grammar seems unusual today but reflects the Krefelders' incomplete knowledge of English as well as typical pre-modern use of variable spelling. The original wording includes "ye." which is a contraction of the word "the", and might be confused with the second person plural "ye" that was widely in use at the time.

Second, the petition mentions Turks as an example of a people who might take someone on a ship into slavery in their native Turkey. Although this example would be considered neither helpful nor politically correct today, the four men were referring to the widely known stories of Barbary pirates who had established an outpost of the Ottoman Empire on the coast of North Africa and for hundreds of years had plundered ships. After the Moors were driven out of Spain in 1492 they took revenge on the Spanish coast and the Spanish countered with more attacks. The Barbary pirates in the period (1518-1587) were allied with the empire in Constantinople and captured slaves to be brought back to North Africa or Turkey. Thus in their early period, their motivation was political. In the later period during the 1600's the North African pirate communities became more independent and lived mainly on plunder so the motivation for piracy was mainly economic. In that period up to 20,000 captured Christians were said to be kept as slaves in Algiers. The slave raiders traveled throughout the Mediterranean Sea and the North Atlantic, often taking slaves from Italy and Spain, but ranging as far north as Iceland. Among the Barbary pirates were renegade individuals from Europe including England and Holland. A long list of English, French, and Germans were allowed to pay their way out of slavery and so brought back the stories of marauding pirates capturing slaves.

The petition's mention of this point, then, is another example of their sophisticated reasoning. The widely circulated stories of slavery on the Barbary Coast were true, for Europeans had been the prey of political enemies and renegades who had captured them as slaves. This analogy in the first paragraph of the petition cast the taking of slaves by the English in a questionable light. The four men were claiming that slaves had social and political equality with ordinary citizens.

Third, the petition refers to the black slaves as "negers", which was a German word meaning black or negro. In its 1688 usage the term was simply descriptive and not in any way

derogatory. Throughout the petition the four men show respect for enslaved people and declare them equals.

The Effect of the Petition

The four men presented their petition at the local Monthly Meeting at Dublin (Abington), but it is not clear what they expected to happen. Although they were accepted in the Quaker community, they were outsiders who could not speak or write fluently in English, and they also had a fresh view of slavery that was unique to Germantown. They must have understood from the beginning that it would be difficult to force the whole colony to abolish slavery, as it was generally believed that the colony's prosperity depended on slavery. It is not clear whether the four men expected the local Meeting to affirm their view, because they knew that nearby Meetings might not be in agreement, and consequences would be far-reaching. The Meeting decided that although the issue was fundamental and just, it was too difficult and consequential for them to judge, and would need to be considered further. In the usual manner the Meeting sent the petition on to the Philadelphia Quarterly Meeting, where it was again considered and sent on to the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (held in Burlington, NJ). Realizing that the abolition of slavery would have a wide and overreaching impact on the entire colony, none of the Meetings wanted to pass judgment on such a "weighty matter." An epistle describing the petition and the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's concerns about it was sent on to London Yearly Meeting where again no action was taken.

The practice of slavery continued and was tolerated in Quaker society in the years immediately following the 1688 petition. Some of the authors continued to protest against slavery, but for a decade their efforts were rejected. Germantown continued to prosper, growing in population and economic strength, becoming widely known for the quality of its products such as paper and woven cloth. Eventually several of the original Krefelders rejoined the Mennonites and moved away from Germantown at least in part because of their insistence not to side with slave-owners. Several other petitions and protests were written by Quakers against slavery in the next several decades, but were based on racist or practical arguments of inferiority and intolerance. Some of the protests became entangled with politics and theology and as a result were dismissed by the Yearly Meeting, confusing the issue. Almost three decades passed before another Quaker petition against slavery was written with sophistication comparable to the Germantown 1688 petition. But the Germantowners' condemnation of slavery continued, and their moral leadership on the issue influenced Quaker abolitionists and Philadelphia society.

Gradually over the next century, due to the efforts of many dedicated people such as Benjamin Lay, John Woolman, Anthony Benezet, and Dr. Benjamin Rush, Quakers became aware of the essential wrongness of the institution of slavery. Many of the Quaker abolitionists published their articles anonymously in Benjamin Franklin's newspaper. In 1776 a proclamation was written by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting banning the owning of slaves. By that time, many Quaker monthly meetings in the Delaware Valley were encouraging freed slaves by providing funds and encouragement for them to start businesses, attend Quaker meetings and educate their children.

Historical and Social Importance

The 1688 petition was the first American public document of its kind that made a plea for equal human rights for everyone. It compelled a higher standard of reasoning about fairness and equality that continued to grow in Pennsylvania and the other colonies with the Declaration of Independence and the abolitionist and suffrage movements, eventually giving rise to Lincoln's reference to human rights in the Gettysburg Address. The 1688 petition was set aside and forgotten until 1844 when it was re-discovered and became a focus of the burgeoning abolitionist movement. After a century of public exposure, it was misplaced and once more re-discovered in March 2005 in the vault at Arch Street Meetinghouse. It was discovered in deteriorating condition, with tears at the edges, paper tape covering voids and handwriting where the petition had originally been folded, and its oak gall ink slowly fading into gray. To preserve the document for future generations, it was treated at the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts in downtown Philadelphia, where tape obscuring the text was removed, the document's paper treated by a protective anti-acidic solution, and thin Japanese paper carefully applied to bridge the voids. Finally, the petition was photographed at high resolution and was sealed into mylar protective sheets in an inert atmosphere. The petition was shown at an exhibit of original rare American documents at the National Constitution Center on Independence Mall in the summer of 2007. It currently resides at Haverford College Quaker and Special Collections, the joint repository (with Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College) for the records of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Today the 1688 petition is for many a powerful reminder about the basis for freedom and equality for all.

In a world where slavery continues in many forms, the 1688 petition seems relevant to many people because of its statement on the nature of human suffering and institutions that conspire to continue injustice based on power and tradition. In many countries today people have been reported to be duped into being taken to foreign lands where they are held under difficult conditions and forced to work with meager pay. The power of economic progress has in some cases created conditions where those with less education and resources are convinced to travel from familiar surroundings and feel threatened not to complain for fear of losing their work. Ethnic minorities and women of many third-world countries are especially vulnerable. Societies that are sometimes called "advanced" are to some extent dependent on cheap labor and resources taken from those less fortunate. Some believe that our worldwide environmental crisis has been created by our willingness to ignore the pleas and lost lives of people who would work hard for equal pay and privilege. The expectation of equal rights for everyone is a powerful motivator that may help to give economic progress and environmental responsibility worldwide.

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Poster and introductory text prepared by Germantown Friends Meeting Working Group on the 1688 Petition Against Slavery, Copyright (C) 2008 by Germantown Friends Meeting of the Society of Friends.

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Text of the 1688 Petition:

This is to the monthly meeting hold at Rigert Warrells.

These are the reasons why we are against the traffick of men-body, as followeth:

Is there any that would be done or handled at this manner? viz., to be sold or made a slave for all the time of his life? How fearful & fainthearted are many on sea when they see a strange vassel - being afraid it should be a Turck, and they should be tacken, and sold for slaves into Turkey. Now what is this better done, as Turcks doe? yea, rather is it worse for them wch say they are Christians, for we hear that the most part of such Negers are brought heither against their will & consent and that many of them are stollen.

Now tho they are black, we can not conceive there is more liberty to have them slaves, as it is to have other white ones. There is a saying that we shall doe to all men licke as we will be done ourselves; macking no difference of what generation, descent or Colour they are. and those who steal or robb men, and those who buy or purchase them, are they not alicke? Here is liberty of conscience wch is right and reasonable; here ought to be likewise liberty of the body, except of evildoers, wch is an other case. But to bring men hither, or to robb and sell them against their will, we stand against. In Europe there are many oppressed for Conscience sacke; and here there are those oppressed wch are of a Black Colour.

and we who know that men must not comitt adultery, some doe comitt adultery in others, separating wives from their husbands and giving them to others. and some sell the children of those poor Creatures to other men.

Ah ! doe consider well this things, you who doe it, if you would be done at this manner? and if it is done according Christianity? You surpass Holland and Germany in this thing. This mackes an ill report in all those Countries of Europe, where they hear off, that the Quackers doe here handel men licke they handel there the Cattle. and for that reason some have no mind or inclination to come hither. And who shall maintaine this your cause, or plaid for it? Truely we can not do so, except you shall inform us better hereoff, viz: that christians have liberty to practise this things.

Pray, what thing in the world can be done worse towards us, then if men should robb or steal us away, & sell us for slaves to strange Countries, separating housband from their wife and children. Being now this is not done at that manner we will be done at, therefore we contradict & are against this traffick of men body.

And we who profess that it is unlawfull to steal, must likewise avoid to purchase such things as are stollen, but rather help to stop this robbing and stealing if possibel. and such men ought to be delivered out of the hands of the Robbers, & made free as well as in Europe. Then is Pensilvania to have a good report, in stead it hath now a bad one for this sake in other Countries. Especially whereas the Europeans are desirous to know in what manner the Quackers doe rule in their Province, & most of them doe loock upon us with an envious eye. But if this is done well, what shall we say is done evill?

If once these slaves (wch they say are so wicked and stubborn men) should joint themselves, fight for their freedom and handel their masters & mastrisses, as they did handel them before; will these masters & mastrisses tacked the sword at hand and warr against these poor slaves, licke we are able to belive, some will not refuse to doe? or have these Negers not as much right to fight for their freedom, as you have to keep them slaves?

Now consider well this thing, if it is good or bad? and in case you find it to be good to handel these blacks at that manner, we desire & require you hereby lovingly that you may informe us herein, which at this time never was done, viz., that Christians have such a liberty to do so. To the end we shall be satisfied in this point, & satisfie likewise our good friends and acquaintances in our natif Country, to whose it is a terrour, or fairfull thing that men should be handeld so in Pensilvania.

This is from our meeting at Germantown, hold the 18 of the 2 month, 1688, to be delivered to the Monthly Meeting at Richard Warrels.

gerret hendericks
derick up de graeff
Francis daniell Pastorius
Abraham up den graef

Monthly Meeting Response:

at our monthly meeting at Dublin, the 30 - 2 mo., 1688, we having inspected the matter above mentioned & considered of it we find it so weighty that we think it not Expedient for us to meddle with it here, but do Rather commit it to the consideration of the Quarterly meeting the tennor of it being nearly Related to the truth. On behalf of the monthly meeting,

Signed, P. Jo. Hart.

Quarterly Meeting Response:

This, above mentioned, was read in our quarterly meeting at Philadelphia, the 4 of the 4th mo. '88, and was from thence recommended to the Yearly Meeting, and the above said Derick, and the other two mentioned therein, to present the same to the above said meeting, it being a thing of too great a weight for this meeting to determine.

Signed by ord the meeting,

Anthony Morris.

[Yearly Meeting Response:

At a Yearly Meeting held at Burlington the 5th day of the 7th month, 1688.

A Paper being here presented by some German Friends Concerning the Lawfulness and Unlawfulness of Buying and keeping Negroes, It was adjusted not to be so proper for this Meeting to give a Positive Judgment in the case, It having so General a Relation to many other Parts, and therefore at present they forbear It.]

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