



# A Contextual Contradiction: James Madison and Slavery in Revolutionary Virginia and Retirement

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## ABSTRACT

This research contrasts James Madison's perception of slavery during the Revolutionary War and the years following his retirement from public service through his personal correspondence. Most of the historical research done on Madison emphasizes his work on the Constitution and tenure as President of the United States. This paper eschews those periods and instead favors the timeframes when Madison was able to engage with slavery not as a political institution, but as a moral dilemma, social danger, and significant cultural and economic institution in Virginia. Ultimately, Madison's perception of slavery during the Revolutionary War depended on its contextual basis as it related to larger social implications in Virginia. Madison expressed anti-slavery sentiments when slavery threatened Virginia's safety or undercut the Revolution's driving principle of liberty but was much more conservative when writing about his own family's slaves at Montpelier. In retirement, Madison was wedded to the idea of emancipation in tandem with colonization and became much more conscious of the synonymous relationship between race and slavery in 19th century America. This paper examines the nuances of what it meant to be anti-slavery in Madison's America and confronts one of our country's most venerated Founding Father's complicated history with slavery. Madison's history, much like the history of America as a whole, contains moments of brilliance, moments of shortcoming, moments that must be praised, and moments that must be condemned.

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“In proportion as slavery prevails in a State...the Government, however democratic in name, must be aristocratic in fact.”<sup>1</sup>

In this urgent plea and dire warning to his country in 1792, Madison pondered the institution that tore both his conscience and, eventually, the United States apart. In the 1790s, the contradiction between liberty and slavery and the threat that slavery posed to the unity of an increasingly factionalized United States weighed heavily on Madison. By the end of his career, Madison became a United States congressman, Secretary of State, spearheaded the adoption of the Bill of Rights, cemented himself as the Father of the Constitution, and was elected the fourth president of the United States. Madison’s status as a slave-owner, however, marred his career, much like the vast majority of Founding Fathers.

This essay will focus on Madison’s personal view of slavery in Virginia during the Revolutionary War, 1774–1783, and following his retirement in 1817. Chronologically organized, the selected correspondence elucidates a connection between the increasing tangibility of an independent American republic, the development of Madison’s political career, and his disillusionment with the institution of slavery in Virginia during the Revolutionary War. In retirement, Madison’s anti-slavery sentiments only strengthened as the republic he helped build was on the verge of an existential crisis as the nation expanded west and the politics of slavery became dire. Madison wrote each letter tactfully to specific recipients, each in a unique military, political, or personal context. Madison’s purposeful intent in his letters must be considered when analyzing the meaning behind each letter.

In retirement, Madison opposed slavery in his letters and advocated for emancipation and forced colonization as race and slavery became synonymous in the nineteenth century; but was frustrated by the impossibility of bringing

an end to the institution. However, Madison owned over one hundred men, women, and children. His letters reveal that anti-slavery sentiments existed on a nuanced spectrum in early America. Madison opposed slavery even as he simultaneously was paternalist, anti-black, and owned enslaved people.

America’s Founding Fathers, and especially James Madison, have always been popular subjects in historical discussion. Scholars mainly concentrate on Madison’s role in creating the Constitution and the political issue of slavery during the deliberations of the Constitutional Convention, giving less attention to his relationship with slavery during the revolution or his retirement. In his 2008 work, *The Haunted Philosopher: James Madison, Republicanism, and Slavery*, Scott Kester explores Madison’s anti-slavery views through the prism of his moralistic deism, the belief that God does not intervene in human affairs and that human reason, morality, and natural law were God’s greatest gift to mankind. Kester argues that Madison was frustrated by the contradiction between slavery and liberty and its corrupting effect on national unity.<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Allison uses Madison’s Missouri Crisis allegory in his 1991 article, “From the Covenant of Peace, a Simile of Sorrow,” to argue that Madison’s support for emancipation and colonization was, from Madison’s perspective, in the best interest of both slaves and white Americans.<sup>3</sup> In her 2012 book *A Slave in the White House: Paul Jennings and the Madisons*, Elizabeth Downing Taylor uses the perspectives of Madison’s slaves to illuminate how dependent the Madisons were on their bonded laborers, especially during his presidency.<sup>4</sup> Each author agrees that while the presence of slavery in the United States frustrated Madison, he did little to combat it because of other political responsibilities. Madison recognized slavery’s moral evil and its corrupting influence on national unity. However, he built his entire livelihood on enslaved labor. Slave and free states formed a fragile union through compromises and concessions, and Madison prioritized this union of states over the lives and freedom of enslaved African Americans.

The numerous biographies of Madison’s life focus on his work in the Constitutional Convention.<sup>5</sup> Those that grapple with Madison’s relationship to slavery do so mainly within the context of his work on the Constitution. They conclude that he compromised morally and politically on slavery to see the Constitution ratified and the country united.<sup>5</sup> Irving Brant’s groundbreaking 1942 six-volume biography on Madison does not contain the word “slavery” in the indexes until volume three, where it appears in the context of Madison’s work on the Constitution.<sup>7</sup> Biographies offer a wealth of information spanning Madison’s life but they often lack sufficient depth and perspective that targeted analysis can provide.

Scholarship on slavery during the Revolutionary Era takes two primary forms: emphasizing enslaved people's direct action to combat their bondage and early pockets of abolitionism, primarily in New England. Benjamin Quarles, in the 1960s, focused on enslaved people as primary actors during the Revolutionary War and emphasized their political role in the conflict. Quarles' 1961 thematic approach to the question of slavery and the Revolution, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, centers around slaves' "loyalty not to a place nor to a people, but to a principle (freedom)." Manisha Sinha pays equal attention to slaves that took action to procure their freedom in her 2016 book *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*. The author echoes Quarles' focus on African American responsiveness by studying the Haitian Revolution and slave petitions for freedom in New England. Sinha articulates the role played by New England white clerics in early abolition movements and the blatant hypocrisy on behalf of southern revolutionary slaveholders like Patrick Henry and James Madison. In her 1983 article "Between Slavery and Freedom: Virginia Blacks in the American Revolution," Sylvia Frey examines slavery in Virginia during the Revolution and asserts that enslaved people made calculated and informed decisions based on their circumstances when choosing to run away, join the British, passively resist, or when they made the decision either to revolt or not. Scholarship on anti-slavery sentiment during the Revolution, regardless of the region or subject, heavily emphasizes the contradiction between the struggle for some men's rights and the sustained effort to deny the rights of everyone else. Madison's status as a lifetime slave-owner, a Founding Father, and philosopher provides a complicated perspective on what it meant to be anti-slavery during and after the American Revolution. A nuanced examination of Madison's surviving letters to friends and family is necessary to understand how his anti-slavery sentiments evolved based on varying times and contexts.

Universities and museums are leaders in recent efforts to explore the Founding Fathers' relationships with slavery as part of a larger trend to confront race, slavery, and memory in history. In 2017, the curatorial staff at Montpelier, Madison's family home, launched their exhibition "The Mere Distinction of Color" to help the public wrestle with understanding Madison as a slaveowner and slavery's role in shaping the country. Archaeologists unearthed and rebuilt Montpelier's slave quarters, and historians gathered testimonies from living descendants of Madison's slaves. The goal of the initiative is to "hear the stories of those enslaved at Montpelier...and explore how the legacy of slavery impacts today's conversations about race, identity, and human rights."<sup>8</sup> Princeton University, Madison's alma mater, recently followed the trend of universities, such as Wake Forest University, the University of Virginia, and

Georgetown University, in examining and reconciling their institutions' historical relationships to slavery.<sup>9</sup> Princeton's project focuses on Madison's relationship with one of his lifelong slaves, Sawney, as well as his political views on slavery as a whole.<sup>10</sup> The Princeton initiative effectively highlights Madison's complicated and layered relationship with slavery. These projects acknowledge and reconcile a troubled past and place silenced perspectives at the forefront. They do not shy away from bringing the uncomfortable histories of figures and institutions to light.

The Revolutionary War disrupted every part of life in Virginia, especially the status quo power dynamic between the landed gentry and the enslaved. In 1774, British taxation and perceived parliamentary overreach ignited tensions and fanned flames of rebellion. Influenced by Enlightenment thinkers, Madison spoke out against British infringements on colonial liberties prior to the war.<sup>11</sup> The constant threat of an impending British attack caused white Virginians to live in fear of a mass slave rebellion instigated by the British. This fear dominated Madison's perception of slavery throughout the Revolutionary War. When writing to his trusted Princeton friend and Philadelphia lawyer, William Bradford, in September 1774, Madison confessed his fears:

"If America and the British should come to war I fear an insurrection among the slaves may & will be promoted. In one of our Counties lately a few of those unhappy wretches met together & chose a leader who was to conduct them when the English Troops should arrive- which they foolishly thought would be very soon & that by revolting to them they should be rewarded with their freedom."<sup>12</sup>

Madison's trepidation about revolt stimulated by foreign interference was typical of the white slave owners in Virginia. The fear that conflict with the British would encourage slave insurrections across Virginia points towards Madison's deep-seated uneasiness about the relationship between slave and master. Madison asserted that slaves politically organized themselves to act as *de facto* ambassadors on behalf of the entire Virginia slave population to negotiate terms of service with the British. Madison remarkably saw these slaves as diplomats negotiating for their freedom. Madison held some level of confidence in bondspeople's ability to exercise agency as well as a non-paternalistic understanding of their yearning for freedom. British collusion with the enslaved population was a dire threat to the structure that kept slave owners in power. Madison's fears came to fruition shortly thereafter. Rumors of British interference threatened the fragile balance of power in Virginia, while further British actions would only ignite the colonial tensions.

In April of 1775, royal governor Lord Dunmore stoked Virginia slave-owners' fears when he confiscated Virginia's powder reserves as a preventive measure of a pre-emptive colonial revolt. This perceived breach of colonial rights heightened colonists' anxieties of possible slave uprisings within the colony due to the decreased capacity for militia protection. These worries manifested themselves in Madison's letter to William Bradford on June 19, 1775. Madison wrote, "It is imagined our Governor [Dunmore] has been tampering with the Slaves & that he has it in contemplation to make great use of them in case of a civil war in this province. To say the truth, that is the only part in which this Colony is vulnerable; & if we should be subdued, we shall fall like Achilles by the hand of one that knows that secret."<sup>13</sup> To Madison, the propensity for possible revolt increased dramatically with Dunmore's powder reserve seizure. Madison's positions as a slave-owner and in the militia and the Committee of Safety legitimized his concerns. Madison made his living through the forced bondage and labor of others. He was directly responsible for protecting Orange County from British invasion, both by British regulars and by proxy through slave forces. Madison's indictment of Virginia's economic reliance on unfree labor shows that he recognized the economic liability of a system built on slavery. Virginia's economy would collapse without complete control of the enslaved. According to Madison, the mobilization of slave forces by the British against the colony would be nothing short of cataclysmic.

It is important to contextualize how Madison referenced slavery in his correspondence. His ominous warnings to Bradford concern the institution of slavery in Virginia as a whole. Madison, however, never wrote about slaves he owned with the same sense of conviction. This distinction is accentuated in a letter to Bradford on July 28th, 1775: "The dysentery has been again in our family & is now amongst the slaves. I have hitherto Escaped and hope it has no commission to attack me."<sup>14</sup> Madison's friendly and comparatively trivial update on his own slaves' health to Bradford takes a jokingly hyperbolic tone. It is almost unrecognizable compared to the letters he fearfully wrote about Virginia's collective enslaved population. Madison's paternalistic perception of his slaves compared to his paranoia and disregard for the enslaved population as a whole displayed in the above letters was typical for southern slave-owners. Madison's benevolence concerning his family's slaves, which were an extension of the family itself, did not carry any anti-slavery connotation. Madison understood slavery in two separate ways: known and unknown threats. Enslaved people he owned posed less of a threat because he felt he knew them personally. Madison's feelings toward unknown slaves, or slavery as an idea, was shaped by racist stereotypes and fearmongering meant to keep slaveowners in power.

Madison's tone and conclusions in his letters concerning slavery varied based on to whom he was writing. After graduating from Princeton with Madison, Bradford was a bright and aspiring lawyer but lacked an intimate understanding of the relationships between the enslaved and free in Virginia because of his northern upbringing. Compared to other letters on the subject, Madison's letters to Bradford reflect an exaggeration of the situation in Virginia in order to convey the increased uneasiness in Virginia. Though his fears were sincere, his letters to Bradford must be viewed as a performance to present Virginia's military circumstances to an outsider. Madison was desperately trying to convey how the dangers of a newfound slave agency at the hands of the British threatened Virginia's economic and social fabrics.

Madison's fear of slave revolts catalyzed by the British invasion was a specific form of anti-slavery thinking. When writing to a militia officer tasked with protecting Orange County, the dire consequences of possible slave revolts overwhelmed his writings. Prior to the Revolutionary War, the possibility of a hostile insurrection stimulated by British interference was an immense concern for Madison. In 1774 and 1775, Madison's sole concern was protecting his home from hostile invasion and internal slave rebellion. His warnings to Bradford can be characterized as a specific form of anti-slavery thinking. Madison was against slavery in the context of an increased propensity for domestic danger due to a large enslaved population within Virginia. By taking an anti-slave *revolt* position, Madison subscribed to a broader anti-slavery sentiment because of the possible consequences it carried within the context of a foreign force invading Virginia. In this way, slavery represented a social and military liability.

Madison did not propose emancipation to alleviate potential social destruction at the hands of slaves. Instead, he indicated the possible consequences that an economy that relied on enslaved labor created for Virginia at this time of impending conflict and social unrest. Madison limited his anti-slavery position to the context of an imminent foreign invasion. He opposed the threat of slavery in concert with a British invasion created for Virginia. He did not offer any possible solutions in his letters, but that does not detract from his narrowly applied anti-slavery thinking. Madison's aversion to slavery as a direct threat to the cohesive bond between states eventually formed as the nation expanded and his political responsibility grew. Madison recognized that chattel slavery empowered him by stripping all power away from the enslaved and thus depended on an imbalance of power. Madison indicted this fragile imbalance due to his fears of a rebellion, but still did not advocate for emancipation.

From 1775 to 1780, Madison did not discuss slavery in Virginia in his personal or professional correspondence. In

early November of 1775, Lord Dunmore, Virginia's Royal Governor, declared martial law—shocking Virginians—by stating, “And I do hereby farther declare all indented Servants, Negroes, or others (appertaining to the Rebels) free, that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining his Majesty's Troops.”<sup>15</sup> By 1774, enslaved people made up nearly forty percent of Virginia's population.<sup>16</sup> Dunmore hoped broad emancipation would provoke an overwhelming fear of insurrection in order to force Virginians to abandon their rebel cause entirely. Interestingly, there are no published letters from James Madison that respond to or reference the proclamation. This omission is remarkable when compared to his fearful June 1775 letter to Bradford. There was a sharp increase in runaway slave ads in the *Virginia Gazette*, so Madison must have been aware of the massive slave exodus to the British.<sup>17</sup> Swift action forced Dunmore to evacuate to New York in 1776, and Virginia avoided a British-instigated slave rebellion, which might explain Madison's silence. A lack of evidence prevents historians from concluding with certainty how Madison's fears about British-catalyzed slave rebellions evolved during this time. Based on his 1774 and 1775 letters to William Bradford, it is not unreasonable to assume that Madison felt immense anxiety of slave insurrection and overwhelming relief during and after Dunmore's short occupation of Virginia. Despite the quick repulsion of Dunmore's forces, the war would return to Virginia in full force before the end of the decade.

In 1779, after serving on the Virginia Council of State, Madison was elected to the Second Continental Congress. Recruiting soldiers for the Continental Army was of the utmost importance for the Continental Congress, and the nation's fate depended on it. Joseph Jones, a fellow Virginia politician, wrote to Madison in November of 1780 about the complications of meeting Virginia's quota for enlisted soldiers in the Continental Army. Jones informed Madison that a bill set to enter the Virginia Legislature in November prescribed a “bounty in Negroes to such Soldiers as will enlist for the War” and expressed hope Congress would support this legislation. Madison responded that while he was “glad to find the legislature persist in their resolution to recruit their line of the army for the war,” he thought that the legislature should take it further and “liberate and make soldiers at once of the blacks themselves... It would certainly be more consonant for liberty which ought never to be lost sight of in a contest for liberty.”<sup>18</sup> Madison's letter to Joseph Jones offered his strongest and most principled criticism of slavery to date.

Incentivizing military service with a reward of human property did not align with Madison's perception of liberty. Madison did not propose emancipation, however, because the goal was military recruitment, not emancipation.

Madison used freedom as a means to an end, but it was not the end itself. In this context, emancipation was a pragmatic solution that conveniently fit within the Revolutionary War's stated objectives instead of a humanitarian cause. Madison's proposal was progressive, but it was not free from racist and paternalistic ideas.

The possibility of the British Army stealing slaves in exchange for military service alarmed Madison in 1774 and 1775. Conversely, Madison suggested in 1780 that arming and emancipating slaves to serve in the Continental Army and win the Revolution aligned with the principle of liberty. Madison, however, did not separate his endorsement of emancipation and military service from the fears he expressed concerning slave insurrection in his letter to William Bradford in 1774. He stated, “With white officers & a majority of white soldiers, no imaginable danger could be feared from themselves.”<sup>19</sup> Madison sought to reconcile the fears of Virginians by assuring Jones and his fellow Virginians that there would not be entire regiments of freedmen running through the countryside without supervision from white leadership. The incentive of freedom in exchange for service outweighed any desire to exact retribution on Virginia elites. Madison attempted to put this possibility to rest by relaying to Jones that “a freedman immediately loses all attachment & sympathy with his former fellow slaves.”<sup>20</sup> According to Madison, emancipated soldiers would have neither the desire or ability to lead a revolt because of their exposure to order and discipline amongst white people in the military.

Madison's advocacy for emancipation through military service was progressive for a slave-owning Virginian. The context of his proposal stemmed from a combination of both the necessity to recruit soldiers for the Continental Army in Virginia, as well as to adhere to the fundamentals of the Revolution. His push for emancipation, however, was contingent on military service. Madison wanted to avoid a compromising political situation, so he made a vague principled statement about conscription and slavery. It is not clear whether or not he was calling for the entire enslaved population to be immediately freed and enlisted. Madison did not specify if he envisioned only offering freedom to slaves of masters willing to emancipate some or all of their slaves to fight the British. Whether or not he favored freeing fugitive slaves that might flock to Continental camps to join in on the fight for liberty is not clear. However, Madison unambiguously stated that emancipation in exchange for military service was the ideal arrangement in compliance with liberty.

Madison's letter writing, in this case, was not limited to idealistic pontification to a colleague. The editors of *The Papers of James Madison* noted that Madison's original manuscript included brackets around the

aforementioned paragraph to designate them for publication.<sup>21</sup> Madison felt so strongly about this issue that he specifically marked pertinent sections for publication to a wider audience across Virginia. Madison made carefully-worded statements because he wanted his words to be published. Madison wanted a large audience to realize the contradiction inherent in offering slaves to entice men to enlist and endorse his suggested plan, even in the slavery stronghold of Virginia. He publicly stated that he was willing to compromise Virginia's entire economic and cultural foundation to preserve the Revolution principles. His proposal for emancipation in exchange for service, however, never turned into action.

Madison did not envision racial animus between white and formerly enslaved soldiers within the ranks in his letter to Jones. He did not think that newly-freed slaves would resist fighting alongside their former owners, or that arming former slaves would create a mob hell-bent on retribution. Madison assumed placing slaves under the leadership of white officers would maximize white control and prevent any attempts at retribution. Anti-slavery for Madison in the mid-1770s meant wariness of the social dangers the institution created for Virginia in a time of impending social upheaval. In 1780, it meant uncompromising dedication to the concept of liberty to survive the British invasion of Virginia. Still, his dedication to liberty was not free from racism.

In the immediate aftermath of the final siege at Yorktown, Madison's endorsement of emancipation for military service shifted back to relative orthodoxy as life in Virginia transitioned into a period of domestic normalcy for free people. Madison's letter to his father in March 1782 contained a brief update on the state of his affairs in Philadelphia as a delegate to the Congress of the Confederation. In reference to the possible delay of representatives receiving payment, Madison grimly stated, "unless liberal principles prevail on the occasion, I shall be under the necessity of selling a negro."<sup>22</sup> Pressed into economic uncertainty and refusing to rely on his father as a benefactor, Madison abandoned his previously familial tone when writing about his slaves. Madison did not view his slaves as people, but instead as property in the purely utilitarian and economic focus of the letter to his father. Madison disregarded the idea of emancipation in favor of his economic stability. This was not a political or philosophical endorsement of slavery but a practical solution to his financial woes.

Despite his apparent aversion to slavery in the context of revolutionary ideology, Madison remained complicit in keeping people in bondage. Edmund Pendleton, a friend and fellow Virginian politician, wrote to Madison in late August of 1782 requesting that Madison either facilitate the

return or receive proper payment for a runaway slave that belonged to Pendleton's nephew: "I shall pay due attention to the request contained in your favor the 29th," Madison responded, "should I however be so fortunate to recover him, the price of slaves here leaves no hope that a purchaser will be found on the terms demanded."<sup>23</sup> Madison wrote at length to his friend in this letter, but these were the only mentions of Pendleton's slave. An important development in Virginia at this time was the passage of a law that allowed slave owners to manumit their slaves at any time without government approval. Because of this, Madison did not urge his friend to ask his nephew to manumit his slave to be consonant with the principles of liberty. A valuable piece of property, in Pendleton's mind, ran away from his nephew's estate and he sought Madison's help in returning it.

On September 3, 1782, Madison expressed doubt to his friend over the possibility of recovering his nephew's fugitive slave, noting that, "at present they march in several divisions and halt but one day here [in Philadelphia]."<sup>24</sup> Despite the grim outlook of locating the slave amongst several French divisions stopping briefly in Philadelphia, Madison assured his friend, "I will take every step in my power to have him found out & secured."<sup>25</sup> Later in the month, Madison cheerily wrote, "I am very glad to find that the recovery hath at length been accomplished."<sup>26</sup> The same man who, two years earlier, urged for emancipation after conscription because it aligned with the principle of liberty was satisfied when he successfully helped return an escaped fugitive to bondage. In this case, however, the subject of Madison's contradicting letters is entirely different. Madison did not directly endorse the institution of slavery as a whole in a political or philosophical capacity, despite his complicity in the institution. This string of correspondences was simply Madison working on completing a favor for his friend's family member as an act of good faith. These letters indicate that the context and the letter's recipient influenced Madison's message and perception concerning slavery.

Letters penned by Madison and his peers concerning individual slaves cannot be scrutinized in the same context as Madison's radical 1780 letter because of the different social and political conditions under which they were composed. His correspondence with Pendleton shows the limits of his radical politics. Madison published egalitarian sentiments that reinforced the principles stated in the Declaration of Independence, but within his circle of associates, he did not preach the same message. Assisting a friend to find a runaway slave did not challenge the concept of liberty to Madison. Madison was by no means an abolitionist, but he was not an ardent defender of slavery either. He existed in the middle—condemning slavery as a whole in specific contexts and perpetuating forced bondage in others.

In a letter to his father shortly after the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783, Madison revealed how he struggled with the existence of chattel slavery in a now independent nation conceived in liberty. Madison confronted this contradiction personally with his own slave, Billy: “On a view of all circumstances I have judged it most prudent not to force Billy back to Virginia.”<sup>27</sup> Madison wrote about Billy’s unsuccessful attempts to run away while in Philadelphia, stating that, “I am persuaded his mind is too thoroughly tainted to be a fit companion for fellow slaves.”<sup>28</sup> Afraid that he might convince the other slaves to run away and seek freedom, Madison had reservations about returning Billy to Montpelier. Defending his reasoning for the net economic loss of selling Billy in Pennsylvania, Madison stated that he did “not expect to get near the worth of him.”<sup>29</sup> With this added to the prospect of a corrupted slave population, the decision for Madison to sell Billy was relatively easy. Madison claimed he could not send Billy back to Virginia, “merely for coveting that liberty for which we have paid the price of so much blood, and have proclaimed so often to be the right, & worthy the pursuit, of every human being...” but he was more concerned that Billy might convince the other slaves to run away to seek freedom.<sup>30</sup>

Writing to his father, Madison was not waxing political to a fellow congressional colleague or Virginia politician, but confessing that he could not bear to stifle in Billy the innate desire that so many Americans sacrificed for over the course of the struggle for independence.<sup>31</sup> Madison’s assertion of the fundamental right of freedom for all men was especially radical because he did not divide between enslaved black men and free white men, consistent with his letter in 1780 about emancipation for military service. This offers a more significant commentary on slavery, in his opinion, as the irreconcilable antonym of freedom and liberty. Within the context of an impending peace agreement to secure liberty, Madison could not reprimand his slave for exercising his own miniature revolution. Despite Madison’s recognition of Billy’s humanity, he did not manumit Billy but sold him in Pennsylvania.

Madison’s resounding criticism of slavery as a violation of natural law proved to be hollow. He valued profit and economic productivity at Montpelier more than he valued Billy’s innate desire to be free. Madison’s letter to his father marks the last of his wartime correspondence concerning slavery. It offers a convenient bookend to a formative period of his life, the beginning of what would become a legendary political career. During his political tenure, Madison chose to allow chattel slavery to continue in the United States, only worsening its entrenchment in America’s economy and culture.

By the time Madison’s career drew to a close, race and slavery were increasingly synonymous in America. For

Madison, this complicated the practicality and efficacy of emancipation. Madison articulated his concerns of the well-being of formerly enslaved people to Edward Coles, his former private presidential secretary and future governor of Illinois, in 1819. Coles freed his slaves and gave them land to farm, and Madison expressed concerns with their ability to prosper as free citizens. Madison solemnly said to his friend, “I wish your philanthropy could compleat its object by changing their colour as well as their legal condition.”<sup>32</sup> The simple difference between white and black skin, according to Madison, destined freedmen “to a privation of that moral rank and those social participation which give freedom more than half its value.”<sup>33</sup> Madison worried about the ability of black soldiers to perform their duties without white supervision in 1780. In 1819, Madison did not think that freed slaves could escape a cycle of oppression and toil due to their race—even with land, means to make a living, and opportunity. With acceptance of the racially hierarchal world that he lived in and perpetuated in mind, Madison tried to find a tenable plan for emancipation in a society that would not make room for freedmen and women.

During his post-presidency years, 1817–1836, Madison favored emancipation and forced colonization, on the condition that freed people be sent to Liberia. The idea of “colonization” in tandem with freedom brought Madison solace on the dilemma of increasingly hostile race relations within the United States. He joined the American Colonization Society shortly after its inception in 1817 and served as its president in 1833. He did not envision a racially heterogenous society where whites and blacks could coexist, despite his aversion to slavery in his retirement. Madison’s ideal solution to slavery in America—African American colonization in Africa—while well-intentioned, was unquestionably racist.

Despite his dedication to emancipation and colonization, Madison still thought critically about other alternatives to rid the United States of slavery. Frances Wright, a Scottish writer, social reformer, and staunch abolitionist shared her 1825 essay, “*A Plan for the Gradual Emancipation of Slavery in the United States*,” with Dolley Madison.<sup>34</sup> Wright advocated for an allotment of land on which former slaves would live and work to receive an education.<sup>35</sup> James Madison read Wright’s essay and his subsequent response was a detailed and informative look into his perception of emancipation. Opening with a strong rebuke of slavery, Madison stated, “The magnitude of this evil among us is so deeply felt, and so universally acknowledged, that no merit could be greater than that of devising a satisfactory remedy for it.”<sup>36</sup> Following this ardent anti-slavery statement, Madison expressed his anxieties over appropriately addressing the monolithic institution by

addressing his view of post-slavery race relations in South America:

“Unfortunately, the task, not easy under other circumstances, is vastly augmented by the physical peculiarities of those held in bondage, which preclude their incorporation with the white population. These peculiarities, it would seem are not of equal force in the South American States, owing in part perhaps to a former degradation produced by colonial vassalage, but principally to the lesser contrast of colours. The difference is not striking between that of many of the Spanish & Portuguese Creoles, & that of many of the mixed breed.”<sup>37</sup>

Madison compared and contrasted his perception of the harmonious assimilation of former slaves and people of mixed race into South American society, attributing it to the difference in pigmentation between the Spanish and Portuguese Creole classes, Anglo-Americans, and African Americans. This is an example of the immense influence that increasingly disparate race relations in a binary society—either white or black—had on Madison’s view of emancipation. Madison did not specify where the large population of mixed-race Virginians, many of whom had been emancipated between 1782 and 1785, fit into this society. Madison thought the only remedy to this reality was “the complete removal of those emancipated either to a foreign or distant region.”<sup>38</sup> The only clear solution to Madison was freedom paired with colonization.

Extending beyond the difficulties created by racial hostility, Madison also indicated that a plan must be put in place for freedmen to be “sufficiently educated for a life of freedom and of social order,” before emancipation could happen.<sup>39</sup> According to Madison, an even more difficult obstacle to overcome was the need for “the voluntary concurrence of the holders of the slaves... [to emancipate] with or without pecuniary compensation.”<sup>40</sup> He concluded his letter in warmth to his new and admired friend, but also urged her that his thoughts “not be brought before the public, where there is no obvious call for it.”<sup>41</sup> This letter serves as an example of Madison’s systematic thinking and tactful writing, but also the impossible vision of racially-homogenous societies due to the worsening race relations within the United States. His letter shows a pragmatic approach to emancipation that was simultaneously guided by racist ideology, which ultimately reinforced his unfeasible vision. It is clear that within the context of a nation embittered over sectionalism—the rivalry between free states in the North and slave states in the South—and slavery, Madison was anti-slavery, but also racist. His anti-

slavery rhetoric would prove to be only talk as Madison continued to hold over one hundred men, women, and children in bondage until his death.

Following his eighty-fifth birthday, shortly before his death in 1836, Madison wrote a letter to the editor of a local newspaper, *The Farmer’s Register*, in response to a request “to obtain information in relation to the history of the emancipated people of color in Prince Edward.”<sup>42</sup> Tracing the history of a group of slaves who were emancipated around a quarter century before his letter, Madison explained that the formerly enslaved prospered on the land they were given because of the industrious skills they learned while in bondage. The newer generations of freedmen, however, lived in “idleness, poverty, and dissipation.”<sup>43</sup> Following his scathing review of the state of affairs in the freed community, Madison concluded that, “whilst they are a very great pest and heavy tax upon the community, it is most obvious, they themselves are infinitely worsted by the exchange from slavery to liberty—if, indeed, their condition deserves that name.”<sup>44</sup> Madison’s analysis of the destitute conditions of the freedpersons ultimately evoked a paternalistic view that African Americans were better off enslaved than free.

Madison’s rebuke of emancipation did not come from a position that favored maintaining the institution of slavery. It was more so a commentary on the inability, in his view, of freedmen to make their way in the white man’s world without a white man’s guidance. Citing the burden that these neglected communities placed on taxpaying Virginians was another way that Madison advocated for colonization. Whether or not freedmen and women could support themselves across the sea in Liberia was not the central concern of his letter, but rather that they were unable to provide for themselves in Virginia. His condemnation of life after emancipation could also have been an attempt to rationalize his coming failure to emancipate any of his slaves upon his subsequent death just months after. His letter to *The Farmer’s Register* highlights Madison’s simultaneous anti-black, pro-emancipation, and pro-colonization tendencies. Madison thought that slavery benefited African Americans through the cultivation of work ethic and industriousness. He did not believe that subsequent generations of African Americans could prosper because they were not under the direct supervision of white masters. By highlighting their privation and arguing that it was an unavoidable consequence of their racial deficiencies, Madison tried to make the case that emancipation without colonization would be a costly venture to white Americans. He did not see colonization as a tool to benefit freedpeople. Instead, he saw it as a way for whites in America to avoid the necessary efforts to reconcile the privation they created for generations of African Americans.

In his last will and testament, Madison willed all of his slaves to his wife but stipulated that “none of them should be sold without his or her consent or in the case of their misbehaviour; except that infant children may be sold with their Parent who consents for them to be sold with him or her, and who consents to be sold.”<sup>45</sup> He recognized their humanity, agency, will, and choice, but he did not validate their status as equals with manumission. Madison also left a sum of two thousand dollars to the American Colonization Society, a sign of the strength of his conviction of their goal.<sup>46</sup> Madison justified his failure to emancipate his slaves as a result of his unfortunate financial affairs at the time of his death, but it can also be seen as his paternal desire to maintain what he thought was good care for his slaves within his family. His decree Dolley should not sell anyone without their consent was an act of goodwill, relative to other slave owners. His wish, however, was steeped in racism and oppression. Despite recognizing the apparent contradiction of enslaving people in a country founded on equality and liberty, Madison never broke his dependence on chattel slavery. From his first breath to his last gasp, James Madison was a slave-owner.

Examining Madison’s perception of slavery during the Revolutionary War reveals that he held an aversion to the institution as a whole when it threatened the wellbeing of the state of Virginia, directly harmed the concept of liberty that was key to the Revolution, or when it could be used to win the Revolution. Madison was inconsistently averse to slavery when he wrote to friends and family about individual slaves that he knew. His correspondences reveal the contextually driven conclusions of Madison’s anti-slavery thinking in the Revolutionary War. Madison’s view of slavery during the war was shaped by fear of an apocalyptic revolt; the desire to arm slaves before offering them as a conscription incentive; admiration of the raw, human pursuit of freedom; and neighborly satisfaction of keeping men in bonds.

In retirement, Madison’s anti-slavery rhetoric hardened, but his actions never matched his words. His unachievable vision for emancipation and colonization was representative of the racist society in which he lived. His progressive ideology, oppressive practice, and impossible vision for the future were also indicative of how deeply embedded slavery was in Virginia. It also foreshadowed the immense difficulty that would plague the United States in ridding itself of slavery. Madison fought for the bedrock ideals that the United States of America were founded on, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among them are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness,” but his racism and paternalism prevented him from fully realizing those principles.<sup>47</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 James Madison and David B Mattern, *James Madison’s “Advice to My Country”* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013). 99.
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- 3 Robert J. Allison, “‘From the Covenant of Peace, a Simile of Sorrow’: James Madison’s American Allegory,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 99, no. 3 (1991): 327–50.
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- 5 James Madison, Edward J Larson, and Michael Winship, *The Constitutional Convention: A Narrative History: From the Notes of James Madison* (New York: Modern Library, 2005), <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10126219>; Mary Sarah Bilder, *Madison’s Hand* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), <https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=6033417>; Richard E Labunski, *James Madison and the Struggle for the Bill of Rights* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10160533>.
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- 7 Irving Brant, *James Madison*, vol. 1–3, 6 vols. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1941).
- 8 “The Mere Distinction of Colour,” <http://www.montpelier.org/visit/mere-distinction>.
- 9 The Slavery, Race and Memory Project | About Wake Forest | Wake Forest University,” About Wake Forest, <https://about.wfu.edu/history/the-slavery-race-and-memory-project/>; “President’s Commission on Slavery and the University,” President’s Commission on Slavery and the University, <https://slavery.virginia.edu/>, “Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation,” <http://slavery.georgetown.edu/>.
- 10 Paris Am and a Spies-Gans, “James Madison,” <https://slavery.princeton.edu/stories/james-madison>.
- 11 Broadwater, *James Madison*, 6.

- <sup>12</sup> James Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, vol. 1, 17 vols. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1962). 129–130.
- <sup>13</sup> Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol 1. 153.
- <sup>14</sup> Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol 1. 161.
- <sup>15</sup> John E. Selby, *The Revolution in Virginia, 1775–1783* (Williamsburg, Va.: Charlottesville, Va: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation; Distributed by University Press of Virginia, 1988). 66.
- <sup>16</sup> Selby, *The Revolution in Virginia, 1775–1783*. 66.
- <sup>17</sup> Daniel C. Newcomb, “Stealing Themselves,” *Philologia* 5, no. 1 (April 1, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.21061/ph.v5i1.63>.
- <sup>18</sup> Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol 2. 198.
- <sup>19</sup> Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol 2. 198.
- <sup>20</sup> Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol 2. 209.
- <sup>21</sup> Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol 2. 209.
- <sup>22</sup> Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol 4. 127.
- <sup>23</sup> Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol 5. 27.
- <sup>24</sup> Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol 5. 27.
- <sup>25</sup> Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol 5. 102.
- <sup>26</sup> Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol 5. 157.
- <sup>27</sup> Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol 5. 102.
- <sup>28</sup> Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol 5. 102.
- <sup>29</sup> Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol 5. 102.
- <sup>30</sup> Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol 5. 102.
- <sup>31</sup> Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol 5. 102.
- <sup>32</sup> “Founders Online: From James Madison to Edward Coles, 3 September 1819,” <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/04-01-02-0456>.
- <sup>33</sup> “Founders Online: From James Madison to Edward Coles, 3 September 1819,” accessed March 19, 2020, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/04-01-02-0456>.
- <sup>34</sup> “Founders Online: Frances Wright to Dolley Madison, 26 July 1825,” <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/04-03-02-0581>.
- <sup>35</sup> Renee M. Stowitzky, “Searching for Freedom through Utopia: Revisiting Frances Wright’s Nashoba” (Vanderbilt University, 2004), <https://ir.vanderbilt.edu/bitstream/handle/1803/82/04StowitzkyRMHHT.pdf?sequence=1>.
- <sup>36</sup> “Founders Online: From James Madison to Frances Wright, 1 September 1825,” accessed January 22, 2020, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/04-03-02-0612>.
- <sup>37</sup> “Founders Online: From James Madison to Frances Wright, 1 September 1825,” <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/04-03-02-0612>.
- <sup>38</sup> “Founders Online: From James Madison to Frances Wright, 1 September 1825,” <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/04-03-02-0612>.
- <sup>39</sup> “Founders Online: From James Madison to Frances Wright, 1 September 1825,” <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/04-03-02-0612>.
- <sup>40</sup> “Founders Online: From James Madison to Frances Wright, 1 September 1825,” <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/04-03-02-0612>.
- <sup>41</sup> “Founders Online: From James Madison to Frances Wright, 1 September 1825,” <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/04-03-02-0612>.
- <sup>42</sup> Richard Randolph, a planter in Prince Edward County, Virginia, wrote in his will a year before his death in 1796 that he desired for all of his slaves to be freed following his death. His widow freed them in 1811 and granted 350 acres of her property for the 90 new freedmen and women to build a community. “Richard Randolph – Wythepedia: The George Wythe Encyclopedia,” [https://lawlibrary.wm.edu/wythepedia/index.php/Richard\\_Randolph](https://lawlibrary.wm.edu/wythepedia/index.php/Richard_Randolph).
- <sup>43</sup> “Founders Online: James Madison to the Editor of the Farmers’ Register, 22 March ...,” <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/99-02-02-3247>.
- <sup>44</sup> “Founders Online: James Madison to the Editor of the Farmers’ Register, 22 March ...,” <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/99-02-02-3247>.
- <sup>45</sup> “James Madison: Original Will, and Codicil of April 19, 1835, 15 Apr. 1835,” <https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/default.xqy?keys=FOEA-print-02-02-02-3114>.
- <sup>46</sup> “James Madison: Original Will, and Codicil of April 19, 1835, 15 Apr. 1835,” <https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/default.xqy?keys=FOEA-print-02-02-02-3114>.
- <sup>47</sup> “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription,” National Archives, November 1, 2015, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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