

# Thomas Jefferson

## On Slavery

This selection of texts is from Notes on the *State of Virginia* (Boston, 1 pages 144-151, 169-171). It has often been quoted because of the eloquent appeal to end slavery as degrading to the Southern family and endangering the liberty of all.

Jefferson was one of the remarkable group of Virginia liberal slaveholders who hoped to free the slaves and colonize them in Africa. In *Notes on Virginia*, first published in 1782 shortly after his term of office as governor, Jefferson explained his legislative program for the emancipation of all slaves born after the passage of his law, providing for education at public expense “according to their geniuses,” and thereafter to be colonized in a distant area under the protection of this country.

.... It will probably be asked, Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the state, and thus save the expense of supplying, by importation of white settlers, the vacancies they will leave? Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained... will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.

To these objections...may be added others, which are physical and moral. The first difference which strikes us is that of colour...whether it proceeds from the colour of the blood, the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature...And is this difference of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races?...Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form, their own judgment in favour of the whites...there are other physical distinctions proving a difference of race. They have less hair on the face and body. They secrete less by the kidneys, and more by the glands of the skin, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odour. This greater degree of transpiration renders them more tolerant of heat, and less so of cold than the whites. Perhaps too a difference of structure in the pulmonary apparatus... They seem to require less sleep. A black after hard labour through the day, will be induced by the slightest amusements to sit up till midnight, or later, though knowing he must be out with the first dawn of the morning...

It will be right to make great allowances for the difference of condition, of education, of conversation, of the sphere in which they move.... Many millions of them have been brought to, and born in America. Most of them indeed have been confined to tillage, to their own homes, and their own society: yet many have been so situated, that they might have availed themselves of the conversation of their masters; many have been brought up to the handicraft arts, and from that circumstance have always been associated with the whites. Some have been liberally educated, and all have lived in countries where the arts and sciences are cultivated to a considerable degree, and have had before their eyes samples of the best works from abroad.

The Indians, with no advantages of this kind, will often carve figures on their pipes not destitute of design and merit....But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never saw even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture. In music they are more generally gifted than the whites...

This unfortunate difference of colour, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people....Among the Romans emancipation required but one effort. The slave, when made free, might mix with, without staining the blood of his master. But with us a second is necessary, unknown to history. When freed, he is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture...

Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever...

“Thomas Jefferson on Slavery,” *From Revolution to Reconstruction...and what happened afterwards*, 6 March 2003, <<<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/P/tj3/writings/slavery.htm>>> (17 February 2004).