



## Back in Time: Benjamin Franklin and Slavery by Lady Reid

There is no doubt that Benjamin Franklin owned slaves; his newspaper in the 1730s often featured slaves for sale. Most black servants were slaves, fully owned property of the master, while many white servants were indentured, probably ex-convicts serving out their sentences. One typical advertisement read: 'A servant man's time for nearly three years to be disposed of. He is a joiner by trade and a very good worker.' We know that Franklin owned Peter and his wife Jemima, and a young boy named Othello, who may have been their son, bought in June 1757 for £41 and 10 shillings. Other slaves in the Franklin household were George and John. Deborah wrote to Franklin in June 1772 that since the death of George's wife, he had become a 'dreadfull cryer'. John was released and accompanied Franklin to London in 1764.

Franklin arrived in London in July 1757 with Peter and his son William and William's servant King. King ran away within a year, but was soon traced to a lady in Suffolk who was gentrifying him – teaching him music and literacy – and so they left him there. 'Whether she will finally be willing to part with him, or persuade Billy to sell him to her, I know not. In the meantime he is no expence to us.'

There are several passages about Peter, mostly in letters to Deborah, in which Franklin praises Peter's loyalty and competence. 'He has a few faults as most of them, and I see with only one eye, and hear with only one ear, so we rub on comfortably.' Franklin seems to have been a considerate and reasonable owner and willed that Peter should be freed upon his death.

Significantly, there was a gradual realisation in many of the colonies that slavery was inconsistent with emerging ideas of liberty and individual sovereignty. These opinions gradually became fundamental to Franklin and began to permeate his political and economic writings.

In 1760 Franklin was elected to the Bray Associates, a society given a legacy by a Dr. Bray to set up schools for Negro children in the colonies. Samuel Johnson, who had a longstanding slave/friend Frank, was also a Bray Associate, who had helped open a school in Philadelphia in November 1758; by 1763 others had opened in New York, Williamsburg, and Newport, Rhode Island. There are many letters concerned with the qualifications of teachers and use of the legacy. One of Franklin's argued that Negro shortcomings were due to lack of education rather than nature: 'Free Negroes were generally improvident and poor. I think they are not deficient in natural understanding, but they have not the advantage of education. They make good musicians.'

36 Craven Street London WC2N 5NF United Kingdom  
phone: +44 (0)207 839 2006  
website: [www.benjaminfranklinhouse.org](http://www.benjaminfranklinhouse.org)  
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Franklin became quite sensitive to the morality of slave holding, especially in the context of America's future, and he railed against British hypocrisy in declaring (1772) Negroes free once they set foot on British soil while sending to America boatloads of human beings that would be sold. Franklin began to consort with great anti-slave trade leaders like Granville Sharp and Benezet, and eventually went on to acknowledge that the Declaration of Independence left slaves out of its commitment to life, liberty and happiness.

Toward the end of his life Franklin became President of the Pennsylvania Anti Slavery Society, which presented a Petition for the Abolition of Slavery to the House of Representatives. On his deathbed in 1790, he heard Andrew Jackson's speech before Congress against any interference with the system of slavery, and his last printed letter was to the *Federal Gazette* using his time-tested trick of ridicule by analogy. He told the fictitious story of a Muslim leader defending the necessity of capturing and keeping Christian slaves, mirroring Jackson's arguments. He signed it 'Historicus'. Once again, through reason, practicality, enlightened morality, and humour, Franklin showed that democracy and economic progress were incompatible with the institution of slavery. He made a stand seventy years before fellow Americans were willing to join him.

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