

# GABRIEL'S REBELLION, AUGUST, 1800

## Document Set #3:

*In the aftermath of the discovery of the slave conspiracy of 1800, the Virginia General Assembly passed legislation allowing for the eviction from the state, rather than the execution, of condemned slaves. By a resolution of 31 Dec. 1800, which Monroe enclosed to Jefferson on 15 June 1801, the Virginia legislature requested the governor to correspond with the president to find a place to send such transported criminals.*

**1801 November 24** (President Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe)

Conspiracy, insurgency, treason, rebellion among that description of persons who brought, on us the alarm, and on themselves the tragedy, of 1800 [Gabriel's Rebellion], were doubtless within the view of every one: but many perhaps contemplated, and one expression of the resolution might comprehend, a much larger scope. respect to both opinions makes it my duty to understand the resolution [alluded to above] in all the extent of which it is susceptible. . . . Could we procure lands beyond the limits of the US. to form a receptacle for these people? The West Indies offer a more probable & practicable retreat for them. inhabited already by a people of their own race & colour; climates congenial with their natural constitution; insulated from the other descriptions of men; Nature seems to have formed these islands to become the receptacle of the blacks transplanted into this hemisphere. whether we could obtain from the European sovereigns of those islands leave to send thither the persons under contemplation, I cannot say: but I think it more probable than the former propositions, because of their being already inhabited more or less by the same race. the most promising portion of them is the island of St. Domingo, where the blacks are established into a sovereignty de facto, & have organised themselves under regular laws & government. I should conjecture that their present ruler might be willing, on many considerations, to receive even that description which would be exiled for acts deemed criminal by us, but meritorious perhaps by him. the possibility that these exiles might stimulate & conduct vindictive or predatory descents on our coasts, & facilitate concert with their brethren remaining here, looks to a state of things between that island & us not probable on a contemplation of our relative strength, and of the disproportion daily growing: and it is over-weighed by the humanity of the measures proposed, & the advantages of disembarassing ourselves of such dangerous characters.

**1802 July 13, 1802** (President Thomas Jefferson to Rufus King)

Dear Sir,--The course of things in the neighbouring islands of the West Indies appears to have given a considerable impulse to the minds of the slaves in different parts of the U. S. A great disposition to insurgency has manifested itself among them, which, in one instance, in the state of Virginia, broke out into actual insurrection. This was easily suppressed: but many of those concerned, (between 20. and 30. I believe) fell victims to the law. So extensive an execution could not but excite sensibility in the public mind, and beget a regret that the laws had not provided, for such cases, some alternative, combining more mildness with equal efficacy. The legislature of the state, at a subsequent meeting, took the subject into consideration, and have communicated to me through the governor of the state, their wish that some place could be provided, out of the limits of the U. S. to which slaves guilty of insurgency might be transported; and they have particularly looked to Africa as offering the most desirable receptacle. We might for this purpose, enter into negotiations with the natives, on some part of the coast, to obtain a settlement, and, by establishing an African company, combine with it commercial operations, which might not only reimburse expenses but procure profit also. But there being already such an establishment on that coast by the English Sierre Leone Company, made for the express purpose of colonizing civilized blacks to that country, it would seem better, by incorporating our emigrants with theirs, to make one strong rather than two weak colonies. This would be the more desirable because the blacks settled at Sierre Leone, having chiefly gone from these states would often receive among those we should send, their acquaintances and relations. The object of this letter, therefore, is to ask the favor of you to enter into

conference with such persons private and public as would be necessary to give us permission to send thither the persons under contemplation. It is material to observe that they are not felons, or common malefactors, but persons guilty of what the safety of society, under actual circumstances, obliges us to treat as a crime, but which their feelings may represent in a far different shape. They are such as will be a valuable acquisition to the settlement already existing there, and well calculated to cooperate in the plan of civilization.

1. What did Jefferson suggest might be the solution to the problem of deciding what to do with rebellious slaves?

2. Why did he think this might be the best option?

3. According to Jefferson, how do Virginians now feel (two years later) about the steps they took in the aftermath of Gabriel's rebellion?

4. What does Jefferson ask Rufus King to do? Why?

5. Jefferson writes,

“It is material to observe that they are not felons, or common malefactors, but persons guilty of what the safety of society, under actual circumstances, obliges us to treat as a crime, but which their feelings may represent in a far different shape. They are such as will be a valuable acquisition to the settlement already existing there, and well calculated to cooperate in the plan of civilization.”

Why did Jefferson write this, and how would you interpret what he means? Is this consistent with his earlier description of slave rebel?

6. Given this characterization of slave rebels, why do you think Jefferson couldn't imagine these men and women living somewhere in the United States?