

GABRIEL'S REBELLION, AUGUST, 1800

Document Set #4:

1805 January 28 (Jefferson to William Burwell, who served as Jefferson's personal secretary from 1804-1805).

. . . I have long since given up the expectation of any early provision for the extinguishment of slavery among us. There are many virtuous men who would make any sacrifice to affect it, many equally virtuous men who persuade themselves either that the thing is not wrong. Or that it cannot be remedied. And very many with whom interest is morality. The older we grow, the larger we are disposed to believe the last party to be. But interest is really going over to the side of morality. The value of the slave is every day lessening. His burden on his master is daily increasing. Interest is therefore preparing the disposition to be just; and this will be goaded from time to time by the insurrectionary spirit of the slaves. This is easily quelled in its first efforts, but from being local it will become general. And whenever it does, it will rise more formidable after every defeat, until we shall be forced, after dreadful scenes and sufferings to release them in their own way, which without such sufferings we might now model after our own convenience.

1808 January 1 (article appearing in the *Richmond Virginian*)

Two opposing opinions now distract the state. One set of men, with honest, generous, but imprudent zeal, aim at a general and unconditional emancipation—Others influenced by motives equally pure, not only thwart and oppose these humane innovators, but seem to take delight in oppressing and embittering the fate of the unfortunates. In both of these cases perhaps true policy is neglected. . . Another course ought to be adopted, promising not only to guard against general emancipation, but an amelioration of the condition of the slaves.

Every slave ought to have some means of protection against the cruelty, injustice, and systematical oppressions of inhuman and flinty hearted masters. . . Indiscriminate and general emancipation at this time ought not to be countenanced. . . Slaves ought to be solely employed in agricultural or other occupations of plain labour. It is worthy of enquiry whether mechanics, house servants, waiters, wagoners, draymen and water-men ought to be taxed more than those who are employed in agriculture, and whether in future, and by degrees the blacks should not be excluded from mechanical employments, and from being public carriers. . .

. . .the object of writing these sentences, is not to render the condition of the good and virtuous slave worse than heretofore, but to prevent the wicked from forming plots and conspiracies. . .

1. How would you summarize Jefferson's attitude about a remedy to the "slavery problem" as he describes it in his letter to William Burwell? Is he optimistic or pessimistic about finding a solution to this problem? Explain.
2. What role does he assume slaves will play in the ultimate outcome of the slavery issue?
3. Compare the article from the *Richmond Virginian* with Jefferson's letter. To what extent are they similar or different in their outlook on the issue of the future of slavery in Virginia?

4. In particular, do they have similar or different outlooks on the prospect of violent rebellion by slaves, and what to do about it?

5. Based on these two documents, would you predict that conditions for slaves in Virginia are likely to improve or worsen? Cite specific evidence in the documents to support your answer.