

## **1783. General George Washington Discusses the Status of Escaped Slaves**

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During the winter and spring of 1783, General George Washington was headquartered at Newburgh, New York. In correspondence with American petitioners, colonial officers and British officials, Washington discussed the status of previously enslaved African Americans who had enlisted in the American forces or served with the British army during the American Revolution. Washington objected to British plans to evacuate formerly enslaved Africans as a violation of the provisional peace agreement and sought to find and reacquire people he claimed as his own property. Fifty-six formerly enslaved Africans sailed from New York to Halifax, Nova Scotia in October, 1782.

### **1. African Americans Serving with American Forces**

Letter to Brigadier General Rufus Putnam, February 2, 1783 (p. 90)

Sir: Mr. Hobby having claimed as his property a Negro Man now serving as a soldier in the 3rd Massachusetts Regiment you will be pleased to order a Court of Enquiry, consisting of five as respectable Officers as can be appointed in your Brigade, to examine into the validity of the claim, the manner in which the person in question came into service, and the propriety of his being discharged or retained in service, having inquired into the matter with all the attending circumstances, they will report to you their opinion thereon, which you will communicate to me as soon as conveniently may be.

Letter to Brigadier General Rufus Putnam, February 4, 1783 (p. 95)

Sir: By the enclosed Letter from Mr. Hobby, it appears that he wished to suggest some new Matters which he supposes would operate in procuring a Discharge for the Negro Man claimed by him. Hereupon, His Excellency the Commander in Chief is pleased to direct, that you will cause the Proceedings to be revised by the same Court, in order that they may be enabled to take into consideration any additional circumstances or reasons which may be exhibited by the Claimant and report thereon.

Letter to Jonathan Hobby, February 7, 1783 (p. 107)

Sir: As the Court of Enquiry upon a revisal of their Proceedings are still of opinion that the Negro man claimed by you is legally holden to serve the term he is enlisted for, and that your only remedy is against the State. The Commander in Chief does not think himself authorized to discharge the said Negro, unless another man is obtained by the State, or otherwise, to serve in his room.

### **2. Sale of Free African Americans**

Letter to Brigadier General Elias Dayton, April 7, 1783.

Sir: The Negro Boy, whom it is said Captain Ballard attempted to sell, waits upon you with this; he reports that the Person who pretended to purchase him consents to give up the Bill of Sale, upon his obtaining a certificate that Captain Ballard had no right to dispose of him as a Slave. Justice and Humanity require the Matter should be enquired into; that, in case it shall appear the lad is free, and was not the property of Captain Ballard, and in case Captain Ballard has nevertheless presumed to sell him for a Slave; the former may be liberated from his bondage and relieved from his apprehensions, and the latter prosecuted in a suitable manner if practicable. These are the Commander in Chiefs sentiments, and he requests you will take the trouble of causing the Investigation to be made, and Justice to be done in the premises.

### 3. Status of Enslaved African Americans Who Escaped to the British

Letter to Theodorick Bland, March 31, 1783 (p. 274)

Sir: The Article in the provisional Treaty respecting Negroes, which you mentioned to Sir Guy Carleton, had escaped my Notice, but upon a recurrence to the Treaty, I find it as you have stated. I have therefore thought it may not be amiss to send your Letter to Sir Guy, and have accordingly done it. Although I have several Servants in like predicament with yours, I have not yet made any attempt for their recovery. Sir Guy Carleton's reply to you, will decide upon the propriety or expediency of any pursuit to obtain them. If that reply should not be transmitted through my Hands, I will thank you for a Communication of it.

Letter to Daniel Parker, April 28, 1783 (364)

Sir: Being informed by Colonel Humphry as well as by your Letter to me, that you have been induced to accept, for the present, the superintendence of the Embarkation from New York of the Tories and Refugees who are leaving the Country, and to prevent if possible, their carrying off any Negroes or other property of the Inhabitants of the United States; [and having seen Sir Guy Carleton Orders on this Head] I take the Liberty of enclosing to you a List and description of Negroes which has been sent me by Governor Harrison of Virginia, and to beg that you will improve the Opportunity you will have, of obtaining and securing them agreeable to the Governor's Request, if they are to be found in the City. Your Endeavours will not only be very obliging to the Governor, but will be thankfully acknowledged by me. Some of my own slaves, may probably be in New York but I am unable to give you their Descriptions; their Names being so easily changed, will be fruitless to give you. If by Chance you should come at the knowledge of any of them, I will be much obliged by your securing them, so that I may obtain them again.

Letter To Governor Benjamin Harrison, April 30, 1783.

I transmitted the list of your Slaves to a Gentleman; a worthy active Man, of my acquaintance in New York and requested him to use his endeavors to obtain and forward them to you. All that can be done, I am sure he will do, but I have but little expectation that many will be recovered; several of my own are with the Enemy but I scarce ever bestowed a thought on them; they have so many doors through which they can escape from New York, that scarce any thing but an inclination to return, or voluntarily surrender of themselves will restore many to their former Masters, even supposing every disposition on the part of the Enemy to deliver them..

Letter To Governor Benjamin Harrison, May 6, 1783.

My dear Sir: A few days ago I wrote to you from Newburgh; and informed you (if I mistake not) of the meeting I was to hold with Sir Guy Carleton consequent of the resolve of Congress directing me to make arrangements with him for delivery of the Posts, Negroes and other property belonging to the Citizens of the United States. This meeting I have had; but the Indisposition of General Carleton has taken him back to New York this Morning before the business could be brought to a close: I have discovered enough however, in the course of the conversation which was held, to convince me that the Slaves which have absconded from their Masters will never be restored to them. Vast numbers of them are already gone to Nova Scotia.

Letter to Sir Guy Carleton, May 6, 1783.

Sir: . . . I was surprized to hear you mention, that an Embarkation had already taken place, in which a large Number of Negroes had been carried away. Whether this Conduct is consonant to, or how far it may be deemed an Infraction of the Treaty, is not for me to decide. I cannot however conceal from your Excellency that my private opinion is, that the measure is totally different from the Letter and Spirit of the Treaty. But waving the Discussing of the point, and leaving its decision to our respective Sovereigns, I find it my Duty to signify my Readiness, in Conjunction with your Excellency, to enter into any Agreements, or take any Measures which may be deemed expedient to prevent the future Carrying away *any Negroes or other property* of the American Inhabitants.