

1834. Reverend Peter Williams, Rector of St. Philip's Church, Resigns from the Anti-Slavery Society Under Pressure and Denounces the American Colonization Society

Source: Journal of Commerce – July 15, 1834, p. 1

On Friday night, as has been previously recorded in this paper, the mob assailed and damaged the African Episcopal Church, called St. Philip's, which is under the charge of the Rev. Peter Williams, a colored clergyman, of exemplary character and conduct. The Bishop of this Diocese, the Right Rev. Benj. T. Onderdank, took occasion, in reference to this assault upon the church, to write to Mr. Williams, the annexed letter of advice; and by Mr. William's reply – the spirit and temper of which will commend him, we are sure, to the public respect – it will be seen that he formally separates himself from the Anti-Slavery Society. We are glad to be able to say, that the damage reported to have been done to St. Philip's church was much exaggerated. The fence around it, and the steps were injured, but not the interior. The organ, reported as destroyed, was not touched.

A letter from Bishop Benjamin Onderdank to the Rev. Peter Williams

I am sure I need not assure you of the sincere sympathy which I feel for you and your people. . . . Let me advise you to resign, at once, your connexion, in every department, with the Anti-Slavery Society, and to make public your resignation. I cannot now give you all my reasons. Let me see you as soon as you can. I can better say than write all I think. Make the within known in any way, and as extensively as you can. . . . Let it be seen that on whichever side right may be, St. Philip's Church will be found on the Christian side of meekness, order, and self sacrifice to common good, and the peace of the community. You will be no losers by it, for the God of peace will be to you also a God of all consolation.

A Statement by Rev. Peter Williams to the Citizens of New York

It has always been painful to me to appear before the public. It is especially painful to me to appear before them in the columns of a newspaper, at a time of great public excitement like the present; but when I received Holy orders, I promised "reverently to obey my Bishop, to follow with a glad mind his godly admonitions, and to submit myself to his godly judgment." My Bishop, without giving his opinions on the subject of Abolition, has now advised me, in order that the Church under my care "may be found on the Christian side of meekness, order and self-sacrifice to the common good and the peace of the community," to resign my connexion with the Anti-Slavery Society, and to make public my resignation." There has been no instance hitherto, in which I have not sought his advice in matters of importance to the Church, and endeavoured to follow it when given; and I have no wish that the present should be an exception. But in doing this, I hope I shall not be considered as thrusting myself too much upon public attention, by advertising to some facts in relation to myself and the subject of the present excitement, in the hope that when they are calmly considered, a generous public will not censure me for the course I have pursued.

My father was born in Beekman street in this city, and was never, in all his life, further from it than Albany, nor have I ever been absent from it longer than three months, when I went to Hayti, for the benefit of my brethren who had migrated there from this country. In the revolutionary war, my father was a decided advocate of American Independence, and his life was repeatedly jeopardized in its cause. . . .

This attachment to the country of his birth was strengthened and confirmed by the circumstance that the very day on which the British evacuated this city, was the day on which he obtained his freedom by purchase, through the help of some republican friends of the Methodist Church, who loaned him money for that purpose, and to the last year of his life, he always spoke of that day as one which gave double joy to his heart, by freeing him from domestic bondage and his native city from foreign enemies. The hearing him talk of these and similar matters when I was a child, filled my soul with an ardent love for the American government, and made me feel, as I said in my first public discourse, that it was my greatest glory to be an American. . . .

My friends who assisted me in entering into the ministry, know that if the Church with which I am connected as pastor, could have been established without my becoming its minister, I should have been

this day enjoying the sweets of private life; and there has not been a day since I have entered upon the duties of my office, that I would not have cheerfully retired to earn my living in some humbler occupation could I have done so consistently with my sense of duty. By the transactions of last Friday evening, my Church is now closed, and I have been compelled to leave my people. Whether I shall be permitted to return to them again, I cannot say; but whether or not, I have the satisfaction of feeling that I have labored earnestly and sincerely for their temporal and spiritual benefit, and the promotion of the public good.

In regard to my opposition to the Colonization Society, it has extended no farther than that Society has held out the idea, that a colored man, however he may strive to make himself intelligent, virtuous and useful, can never enjoy the privileges of a citizen of the United States, but must ever remain a degraded and oppressed being. I could not, and do not believe that the principles of the Declaration of Independence, and of the Gospel of Christ, have not power sufficient to raise him, at some future day, to that rank. I believe that such doctrines tend very much to discourage the efforts which are making for his improvement at home. But whenever any man of color, after having carefully considered the subject, has thought it best to emigrate to Africa, I have not opposed him; but have felt it my duty to aid him, all in my power on his way, and I have the satisfaction of being able to prove that the most prominent and most useful men in the Colony have been helped there by me. . . .

For several years I had given considerable attention to the education of our people, and was much interested about our public schools. I was anxious that some of our youth should have the opportunity of acquiring a liberal education, and felt that it was my duty to strive to rear up some well qualified colored ministers. I selected two lads of great promise, and made every possible effort to get them a collegiate education. But the Colleges were all closed against them. Anti-Slavery men generously offered to aid us in establishing a Manual Labor College, or High School, for ourselves. . . . I joined with them in this work heartily, and wished them all success, as I still do, in their endeavors, by all means sanctioned by law, humanity and religion, to obtain freedom for my brethren, and to elevate them to the enjoyment of equal rights with the other citizens of the community; but I insisted that while they were laboring to restore us to our rights, it was exclusively our duty to labor to qualify our people for the enjoyment of those rights. . . . I now, in conformity to the advice of my Bishop, publicly resign my station as a member of the Board of Managers of the Anti-Slavery Society, and of its Executive Committee, without, however, passing any opinion respecting the principles on which that society is founded.

I should have offered my resignation long before this, had I not thought that there might be occasions, when, by having the privilege of addressing the Board, I might exercise a restraining influence upon measures calculated to advance our people faster than they were prepared to be advanced, and the public feeling would bear. But I am not disposed to blame the members of the Anti-Slavery Society for their measures. I consider them as good men and good Christians, and true lovers of their country, and of all mankind. I thought they had not an opportunity of knowing my brethren, nor the state of public prejudice against them, as well as myself; and all I supposed that I could do was to aid them in this particular.