



Germantown Protest (1688)

The Germantown Protest was the first anti-slavery document written in the British colonies that became the initial United States. The authors represented a community of Dutch and German Quakers, many of them former Mennonites, who had migrated from Europe to Pennsylvania seeking religious freedom. They were disturbed to discover that in Pennsylvania there were Africans being held in slavery by English Quakers. (The word Negers, used in the document, is equivalent, in both Dutch and German, to the English word Negroes.) Written in the authors' imperfect English, their anti-slavery protest was sent to a local Quaker governing body, the Monthly Meeting. From there, the document was passed up to a central governing body in Philadelphia, the Yearly Meeting, which declined to comment on the issue.

These are the reasons why we are against the traffic of men-body, as followeth:

Is there any that would be done or handled at this manner, viz., to be sold or made a slave for all the time of his life? How fearful and fainthearted are many on sea when they see a strange vessel, being afraid it should be a Turk and they should be taken and sold for slaves into Turkey. Now what, is this better done than Turks do? Yea, rather is it worse for them which say they are Christians, for we hear that the most part of such Negers are brought hither against their will or consent and that many of them are stolen.

Now, though they are black, we cannot conceive there is more liberty to have them slaves than it is to have other white ones. There is a saying that we shall do to all men like as we will be done ourselves, making no difference of what generation, descent, or color they are. And those who steal or rob men, and those who buy or purchase them, are they not all alike?

Here is liberty of conscience, which is right and reasonable; here ought to be likewise liberty of the body (except of evildoers, which is another case). But to bring men hither, or to rob and sell them against their will, we stand against. In Europe there are many oppressed for conscience's sake; and here there are those oppressed which are of a black color.

And we who know that men must not commit adultery, some do commit adultery in others, separating wives from their husbands and giving them to others; and some sell the children of those poor creatures to other men. Ah! do consider well this thing, you who do it, if you would be done at this manner? And if it is done according to Christianity? You surpass Holland and Germany in this thing. This makes an ill report in all those countries of Europe, where they hear of that the Quakers do here handle men like they handle there the cattle; and for that reason, some have no mind or inclination to come hither. And who shall maintain this your cause or plead for it? Truly we cannot do so except you shall inform us better hereof, viz., that Christians have liberty to practice this thing. Pray, what thing in the world can be done worse towards us than if men should rob or steal us away and sell us for slaves to strange countries, separating husband from their wife and children?

Being now this is not done at that manner we will be done at, therefore we contradict and are

against this traffic of men-body. And we who profess that it is unlawful to steal must likewise avoid to purchase such things as are stolen, but rather help to stop this robbing and stealing if possible; and such men ought to be delivered out of the hands of the robbers and made free as well as in Europe. Then is Pennsylvania to have a good report; instead, it hath now a bad one for this sake in other countries, especially whereas the Europeans are desirous to know in what manner the Quakers do rule in their province, and most of them do look upon us with an envious eye. But if this is done well, what shall we say is done evil?

If once these slaves (which they say are so wicked and stubborn men) should join themselves, fight for their freedom, and handle their masters and mistresses as they did handle them before—will these masters and mistresses take the sword at hand and war against these poor slaves, like we are able to believe some will not refuse to do? Or have these Negroes not as much right to fight for their freedom as you have to keep them slaves?

Now consider well this thing, if it is good or bad? And in case you find it to be good to handle these blacks at that manner, we desire and require you hereby, lovingly, that you may inform us herein, which at this time never was done, viz., that Christians have such a liberty to do so, to the end we shall be satisfied in this point and satisfy likewise our good friends and acquaintances in our native country, to whom it is a terror or fearful thing that men should be handled so in Pennsylvania.

This is from our meeting at Germantown, held the 18th of the 2nd month, 1688. To be delivered to the Monthly Meeting at Richard Worrell's.

Gerret Hendricks
Derick op de Graeff
Francis Daniel Pastorius
Abraham op de Graeff

Source: Samuel W. Pennypacker, “The Settlement of Germantown, and the Causes Which Led to It,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 4 (1880), 28-30, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/gri.ark:/13960/t8qc7z07x>. Public domain.

Checked against a digital scan and transcription of the original manuscript, available at “Quaker Protest Against Slavery in the New World, Germantown (Pa.) 1688,” Quakers and Slavery Project, TriCollege Libraries, http://tritych.brynmawr.edu/cdm/ref/collection/HC_QuakSlav/id/8.

Names spelled as per the printing of the protest that appears in John W. Jordan, ed., *Colonial Families of Philadelphia* (New York: Lewis Publishing Co., 1911), 2:1199, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/cool.ark:/13960/t1xd1gm95>. Public domain.

This presentation of the text edited by John-Charles Duffy. Paragraph breaks inserted for readability. Some grammar emended. Spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and the abbreviation of ordinal numbers modernized or Americanized. The capitalization of *Negers* reproduces the usage of the Pennypacker and Jordan printings but not that of the original manuscript. The lowercasing of the racial labels *black* and *white* replicates all the sources.

This edited presentation of the Germantown Protest is intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite one of the source publications listed above.



© 2021 by John-Charles Duffy. Except as otherwise noted, this work is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution–NonCommercial–ShareAlike 4.0 International License, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

All rights are reserved for the flag-shaped “Empire and American Religion” logo; if you alter this work, you may not reproduce the logo. Use of the Creative Commons license icon is subject to the Creative Commons Trademark Policy.