

ROBERT CARTER III

By
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The Man Who Freed 500 Slaves

Long before slavery would divide a nation, and years before the abolitionist movement would build strength in the North, one wealthy man in Virginia chose to free around 500 of his slaves with a written order in 1791. Robert Carter III, mostly forgotten by history, was viewed with derision by many in his community, including some members of his family, but he chose to stand by his conscience.

Other Virginian Patriots spoke and wrote about the problem of declaring independence yet continuing to retain slaves, but they were never able to truly put those anti-slavery ideas into practice during their lifetimes. Carter, on the other hand, didn't try to develop a politically or socially acceptable policy: He simply took action to free his own slaves. And as one of the largest landowners in the country, his action made a lasting impact.

"No other Virginian of the Revolutionary era—including those, like Jefferson and Washington, who spoke out so passionately against slavery—managed to reconcile freedom in theory and freedom in practice with such transparent simplicity," writes Andrew Levy in *The First Emancipator: The Forgotten Story of the Founding Father Who Freed His Slaves* (Random House, 2005).

Carter's colossal emancipation didn't start a revolution or lead his neighbors to follow suit, but his decision was a highly uncommon, singular one that obviously had far-reaching effects

on his slaves and their families for generations to come. "This was a private, not an overtly political, act," Frank Delano, a resident of Warsaw, Va., who spearheaded the 200th anniversary celebration of Carter's emancipation act in 1991, told *The Washington Post*. "He took all this talk of liberty during the Revolution and internalized it. He decided it meant black people, too."

Who Was Robert Carter?

Carter's grandfather, Robert "King" Carter Sr., was a first-generation American colonist, born in Virginia in the early 1660s. The senior Carter served as president of the governor's council of the Virginia colony and briefly as acting governor of Virginia. He also served as a representative of Lord Fairfax, the English proprietor of the Northern Neck of Virginia. During that time, he acquired more than 110,000 acres in northern and western Virginia for himself and his family.

When King Carter and his son, Robert II, both died in the early 1730s, Robert Carter III was still a child—but through his grandfather and father's enormous inheritance, he was one of the wealthiest colonists in the New World. Carter studied at the College of William and Mary and studied law at the Inner Temple in London, and by the time he was 21, he had inherited vast land holdings, wealth and 100 slaves. Thrust into the life of a successful plantation owner, Carter had more money, land and slaves

than either Washington or Jefferson. But he was less focused on politics and power.

Although he was appointed to the governor's council of the Virginia Colony at the age of 29, where he served for 10 years, Carter seemed more interested in managing his own plantation than in his political position. He supported the Revolution and served as a colonel in the Virginia militia, but his primary role in the war effort was to supply food and manufactured goods to the Continental Army.

"While most of his contemporaries were moving more and more into politics, [Carter] was moving away from worldly things and concentrating more and more on the spiritual," Delano told *The Washington Post*. "He was a seeker after religion his whole life."

Developing New Beliefs

Throughout his life, Carter continuously sampled new doctrines and religious ideas. He started out in the Anglican Church of England and later became a deist. However, within a few years, he was shaken by a spiritual experience while he was sick with smallpox and began seeking religion again. He joined the Baptist church, which at that time was small and viewed suspiciously by other landowners. By the time he died in 1804,



76-year-old Carter had begun following the beliefs of Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg.

All this spiritual searching likely had an influence on Carter's views toward slavery. While he had inherited 100 slaves, Carter avoided buying and selling more slaves, relying on the natural multiplication of his workforce when his inherited slaves had families.

Carter's records show he was more likely to rent slaves from other plantations or purchase white indentured servants when he needed more laborers. He was well-known for treating slaves humanely, particularly focused on keeping families together.

While Carter continued to own slaves, he seemed to be wrestling with the ethics of slavery by 1786, when he sent two of his younger sons to study at Baptist University (now Brown University) in Rhode Island rather than keeping them nearby at William and Mary. In a letter he sent with them, Carter told the school's

president: "The prevailing Notion now is to Continue the most abject State of Slavery in this Common-Wealth—On this Consideration only, I do not intend that these my two Sons shall return to this State till each of them arrive to the Age of 21 years," according to Brown University's *Encyclopedia Brunoniana*.

However, Carter's decision to free his slaves wasn't completely altruistic. According to Levy, the choice was as much economic as it was ethical. In the 1780s, the new country was experiencing a postwar recession. The tobacco economy that northern Virginia had relied on was declining. Feeding his own family, along with his 500 slaves, was expensive. In addition to easing their consciences, Carter and his wife decided it would be more profitable to free their slaves and rent out land to them, Levy writes.

Taking Action

Freeing slaves had been illegal in Virginia since 1723, but after the

Revolutionary War, in which many African-Americans had displayed loyalty and courage, Virginians loosened the restrictions. In 1782, a new law passed that allowed slaveholders to free slaves by filing a statement in the county court. One stipulation: Any slaves who were physically or mentally disabled or deemed too old or too young to support themselves (younger than 18 for females and 21 for males, or older than 45 for both) were required to be provided for by their previous masters. This stipulation prevented slaveholders from simply abandoning young, old and sick slaves into society unable to care for themselves.

When he was ready to offer freedom to his slaves, Carter carefully devised a plan that would accomplish the work gradually. He filed a detailed document in the Northumberland County courthouse, titled "The Deed of Gift," which explained his plan.

"I have with great care & attention endeavored to discover that mode of Manumission ... which can be effected ... with the least possible disadvantage to my fellow Citizens," Carter wrote. He immediately freed the 30 slaves who were over the age of 45, knowing he would be responsible for their continued care. Then he set free 15 slaves each year for 10 years.

To help ease the transition to freedom, Carter—who owned an estate in Westmoreland County called Nomini Hall—rented land to his former slaves and experimented with sharecropping. While he experienced pushback to his plan from neighboring plantation owners who feared a slave revolt as well as from his own children—including the two sons sent to Rhode Island—Carter's legal document guaranteed that the slaves would continue being freed, even after his death. Because some of the slaves Carter freed were babies born in 1791 who couldn't be legally freed for 21 years, the gradual emancipation continued until 1812, eight years after Carter died. 🌀

Tracing Family History to Carter

Historians have little knowledge of what became of most of the slaves freed by Robert Carter's Deed of Gift in 1791, and have not been able to locate modern descendants of Carter's freed slaves. However, historians in the northwestern Virginia area say there was a large community of free blacks in the region dating to long before the Civil War—and they attribute that to Carter's manumission.

It's possible that thousands of African-Americans could trace their genealogies to some of the slaves originally freed by Carter's Deed of Gift. In his document, Carter ordered that each slave come to court with both a first and last name to start a life of freedom. The following family names included on his deed of manumission might provide clues for researchers:

Allen, Arnold, Banks, Brooke, Brutus, Burke, Burton, Cary, Colson, Conway, Cooper, Craft, Daley, Daniel, Dial, Dicher, Dickerson, Gaskins, Glascock, Greggs, Gumby, Hackney, Harris, Harrison, Henry, Hollady, Hubbard, Johnson, Johnston, Jones, Kenardy, Mitchell, Newgent, Newman, Peterson, Puss, Reid, Richards, Richardson, Robinson, Single, Smith, Spence, Taylor, Thomas, Thompson, Thornton, Tossport, Tuckson, Walker, Weldon, Wells, Wilson, Wormley and Wyatt.

The Nomini Hall Slave Legacy Project (<http://nominihallslavelegacy.com>) chronicles the slaves freed by Carter from his Nomini Hall estate and includes the known details about some of their descendants.