

Authored By: CitizenTrack

What were Benjamin Franklin's views on slavery? How did the opinions of one of the most outspoken and influential men of his time evolve over time? Benjamin Franklin has been praised by historians as one of America's first major opponents to the institution of slavery.<sup>1</sup> However, a closer examination demonstrates that Franklin's views evolved slowly during his lifetime. In the decade between 1750 and 1760, Franklin wrote little specifically concerning the merits or vices of slavery; however, he wrote frequently to attack the shortcomings of British colonial imperialism. When he did so, Franklin used the institution of slavery as a means to criticize the British governor's leadership of the American colonies. While he did not openly advocate the perpetuation or the destruction of the slave system, Franklin did blame Great Britain as the origination of slavery in the American colonies. Slavery would prove an infection caught from America's close association with Europe. British tyranny was far worse in Franklin's eyes and offered as a criticism of the system that he would eventually aid in removing from power.

Benjamin Franklin considered slavery in both economic and moral terms. However, he believed that slavery was a flawed system that failed to generate economic benefit for slave masters. In Franklin's opinion, freemen were a superior alternative to the work of slaves. Franklin considered the perpetuation of the institution primarily through a moral lens. Like many of his contemporaries, Franklin believed that slavery was the natural result of one race's innate superiority over another. However, Benjamin Franklin was a strong proponent of liberty for the colonialists and a harsh critic of the autocratic and tyrannical rule of the British. The rhetorical use of slavery as a method of criticism likely aided Franklin in developing his later opposition to all institutions of slavery. The determination of his personal views, expressed through his publication and personal letters, help illustrate Franklin's evolving opinion of socialized hierarchies.

A time of political change and social transition: 1750 to 1760

The turmoil of this decade did not afford extensive leisure time to devote to philosophical considerations of the design of society. The period between the 1750's and 1760's is important because the idea of abolishing slavery was still a radical concept.

“Perhaps it was the colonist's preoccupation with their economic and political relations with England that accounted for the widespread indifference with which they regarded slavery. Colonial problems were so urgent that little time was left in which colonists could concern themselves with humanitarian matters. If they could be assured that blacks would neither conspire to rebel nor offer aid and comfort to the French or the Indians, colonists seemed to have little reason to be concerned over this condition.”<sup>2</sup>

Most of the colonial world involved slavery and the work of slaves was an important component of the buttressing of the new American economy.

The French and Indian War ended in 1763. Political changes brought about new paradigms of thought concerning the role of slaves. Colonists felt oppressed by new regulatory actions such as the Sugar Act of 1764 and they began to consider their role as both the oppressed and the oppressor. “Almost overnight... some colonial leaders began to denounce not only England's new imperial policy but slavery and the slave trade as well.”<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Franklin was one of these leaders.

How did Benjamin Franklin come to become a vocal opponent of slavery? The chronological boundaries of this research project, the decade between 1750 and 1760, provide an excellent time to examine Franklin's views. These years represent a time when Franklin was free to write profusely concerning American colonial issues. He was not yet burdened with the reality of a war for independence and therefore his work was less likely to focus upon swaying supporters to the American cause. Rather, his work is more likely to be

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<sup>1</sup> Franklin, J. and Moss Jr. A., ((2000) *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*. New York, NY: Random House) p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> Franklin, J. and Moss Jr. A., ((2000) *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*. New York, NY: Random House) p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 80.

indicative of the man's own personal views concerning slavery as he discusses the shortcomings of the British colonial system

Likely, Franklin's criticism of the British governor during this ten year time period helped inspire Franklin to reexamine his views on slavery. He makes little mention of the actual slave system during this time period; however, when he does, he makes mention of the contentment of American slaves. In fact, he argues that American slaves are much happier and treated more fairly than their European counterparts. Benjamin Franklin would not really begin to become involved in the abolitionist movement until the early 1760's and later. For example, he did not formally join an abolitionist group until after 1780. Thus, the examination of the time directly prior to this decision allows scholars to consider the factors that would have shaped Franklin's later views on the perniciousness of slavery.

### The economic and the moral discussion of slavery

Arguments for the perpetuation of slavery may be based upon two premises. The first is the economic justification. Slaves were an important component of the economic system in the Americas. The cultivation of crops such as tobacco and cotton required a large population of low wage workers to work the fields. The use of slaves allowed wealthy landowners to maintain the bulk of their wealth. They were not required to pay their slaves and could subject their property to substandard living conditions, keeping their upkeep well below the cost of hiring free field workers. The abolition of slavery would have direct economic consequences for plantation owners, as the South's economic dilemma would demonstrate in the years after the Civil War.

The second argument for the perpetuation of slavery comprises a moral component. White individuals were able to justify their poor treatment of slaves by perpetuating the belief that slavers were substandard humans. This moral argument supporting slavery could be expanded to include not only Africans but those beaten in war. Conquerors enjoyed the right to enslave the conquered. African Americans were deemed savages because of their failure to practice Christianity; slaveholders often forbade their slaves to practice their indigenous religions and forced many to convert to Christianity. In addition, blacks were considered inferior in intelligence to their white owners. Blacks lacked morality, they were promiscuous, prone to violence and criminality. These defects were considered genetic, an aspect of racial difference, and therefore immutable.

As a result, the slave system was perpetuated by the belief that it actually improved the lifestyle of whites and blacks alike. Whites were able to benefit economically through the labor of their slaves and in exchange they offered their slaves a "civilized" lifestyle that was superior to their previous experience as savages. Therefore, this project seeks to determine the opinion of Franklin upon these two justifications of slavery. Before discussing his correspondence and publications between 1750 and 1760 in detail, it is helpful to consider Franklin's personal experiences with slavery that would have likely helped develop his opinion. Franklin's early life

Franklin is distinguished from the other founding fathers by one pivotal characteristic: Franklin had once been an indentured servant. (Waldstreicher, 2004). Many Americans are familiar with the story of Franklin's development as a printer; he learned the trade from his own brother. However, Franklin's experience as an indentured servant was far more complex than a simple education in a trade. Franklin's brother regularly beat him and eventually led him to runaway. Waldstreicher (2004) contends that this experience irrevocably changed Benjamin Franklin's nature.

In so many ways, American freedom often depended on running away and on keeping others from running away. The flip side of the self-made man in the eighteenth-century America was the servant and the slave. In some cases, they were the same people. In others, one person might play different roles in an ongoing drama of personal liberation and subjugation, freedom, and unfreedom. But even those who never served or ran away were touched by the remarkable extremes of freedom and unfreedom. When Franklin fled to New York and Philadelphia, he entered a changing social world. It was a world of new

opportunity that depended on the unfreedom of a great many people, people just as mobile, and often just as creative and skilled, as Franklin.<sup>4</sup>

Benjamin Franklin had himself lived the life as a slave and found it against his nature. His indentured servitude forced him to endure mistreatment from his brother that eventually brought him to the point of rebellion. As a result, he understood the role of the oppressed better than many who took up the American cause of freedom.

However, this experience did not bring Franklin to the point of rejecting the institution of slavery. Franklin himself owned two slaves that he had support him in his work as a newspaper publisher. Franklin's own publication, *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, published advertisements of slave auctions and reported run away slaves<sup>5</sup>. In addition, *Poor Richard's Almanac*, another of Franklin's publications, discussed the merits and pitfalls of capitalism in a "studied reflection on the commodification of human relations experienced--and promoted--by Franklin."<sup>6</sup> In other words, scholars may argue that Franklin's publications supported the propagation of slavery throughout the colonies. Thus, while Franklin had suffered under a system of oppression, he did not consider the enslavement of some as wrong.

### Franklin's economic opinion of slavery (1750-1760)

Franklin wrote little regarding the economic aspect of the slave system. However, in 1755, he argued against the perpetuation of slavery on economic grounds. "Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind" was printed within the text *Observations* and edited by William Clark. The purpose of this publication was to criticize the advancing aggression of French military upon the British controlled colonies in North America. Franklin's contribution was a greater discussion of the problems of colonizing governments. He contended that nations, poorly governed, would suffer various ills which would propel members of their populations to seek their living elsewhere through the establishment of colonies. Franklin offered a long list of governmental mistakes that contributed to the decline of society, including the loss of territory, the loss of trade, and the loss of food. The list also included the introduction of slavery. Franklin's complaints against slavery were economic in nature.

The Negroes brought into the English Sugar Islands, have greatly diminish'd the Whites there; the Poor are by this Means depriv'd of Employment, while a few Families acquire vast Estates; which they spend on Foreign Luxuries, and educating their Children in the Habit of those Luxuries; the same Income is needed for the Support of one that might have maintain'd 100. The Whites who have Slaves, not labouring, are enfeebled, and therefore not so generally prolific; the Slaves being work'd too hard, and ill fed, their Constitutions are broken, and the Deaths among them are more than the Births; so that a continual Supply is needed from Africa. The Northern Colonies having few Slaves increase in Whites. Slaves also pejorate the Families that use them; the white Children become proud, disgusted with Labour, and being educated in Idleness, are rendered unfit to get a Living by Industry.<sup>7</sup>

Franklin feared that the use of slaves put other whites out of work, leaving the bulk of the wealth of a nation in the hands of minority elite. In addition, he believed that the use of slaves taught white children that they were too good to work, leading them to lives of idyllic laziness.

Franklin did admit that there was one economic advantage to owning slaves: their lack of freedom permitted their owners a degree of dependability that a hired man lacked. "Slaves may be kept as long as a Man pleases, or has Occasion for their Labour, while Hired Men are continually leaving their Master (often in the midst of

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<sup>4</sup> D. Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004) p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> D. Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004) p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>7</sup> B. Franklin, "Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind" 1755.

his Business) and setting up for themselves.”<sup>8</sup> However, this contention did not sway Franklin’s rejection of slavery as a vice of a poorly governed nation.

Franklin’s condemnation of slavery within this text is important for two reasons. First, it is a publicly available, published text that argues against slavery as a whole. Second, it makes no mention of British mistreatment of its colonists. Franklin makes little mention of the need for American independence or freedom from British tyranny in this text. In fact, its subject of focus upon the French would demonstrate that Franklin disliked the institution of slavery even apart from discussions of American independence.

However, this text also demonstrates Franklin’s racist attitudes. Franklin does not argue against the belief that whites are superior to blacks. In fact, he reinforces the belief, using it as another reason to avoid the transplantation of blacks to America.

Which leads me to add one Remark: That the Number of purely white People in the World is proportionably very small. All Africa is black or tawny. Asia chiefly tawny. America (exclusive of the new Comers) wholly so. And in Europe, the Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians and Swedes, are generally of what we call a swarthy Complexion; as are the Germans also, the Saxons only excepted, who with the English, make the principal Body of White People on the Face of the Earth. I could wish their Numbers were increased. And while we are, as I may call it, Scouring our Planet, by clearing America of Woods, and so making this Side of our Globe reflect a brighter Light to the Eyes of Inhabitants in Mars or Venus, why should we in the Sight of Superior Beings, darken its People? why increase the Sons of Africa, by Planting them in America, where we have so fair an Opportunity, by excluding all Blacks and Tawneys, of increasing the lovely White and Red? But perhaps I am partial to the Complexion of my Country, for such Kind of Partiality is natural to Mankind<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, while Franklin did not support slavery upon economic terms, he nevertheless appeared to support the moral arguments that supported the institution. Franklin did not want more black people in America not because he disliked slavery but because he felt that White Europeans were members of a superior race that should not be tainted by the involvement of inferiors.

### Franklin’s moral consideration of slavery as a criticism of British autocracy (1750-1760)

Franklin’s dismissal of slavery on economic terms and his seemingly superior attitude toward other races did not prevent him from discussing slavery as a moral issue. Slavery was bad because it removed a man’s freedom, which is an essential component to happiness. However, the slavery enacted upon Americans was worse than standard slavery because these Americans were actually British and connected to their slave masters through blood ties and shared history. This argument is demonstrated by several of Franklin’s writings during the years between 1750 and 1760.

In December, 1754, Benjamin wrote a private letter to Governor William Shirley arguing against a British decision to exclude colonialists from a vote on public council meetings. Franklin’s concern was that those colonists of British origins were being denied their right to be involved in their governance. Franklin attempted to persuade the governor that the colonists were British by birth, despite their living in the New World, and therefore deserved to enjoy the same rights as British citizens living within Great Britain’s boundaries. He believed that the political decisions being made, such as the imposition of new taxes, represented a significant erosion of rights.

These Kind of Secondary Taxes, however, we do not complain of, tho’ we have no Share in the Laying or Disposing of them; but to pay immediate heavy Taxes, in the Laying Appropriation or Disposition of which, we have no Part, and which perhaps we may know

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<sup>8</sup> B. Franklin, “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind” 1755.

<sup>9</sup> B. Franklin, “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind” 1755.

to be as unnecessary as grievous, must seem hard Measure to Englishmen, who cannot conceive, that by hazarding their Lives and Fortunes in subduing and settling new Countries, extending the Dominion and encreasing the Commerce of their Mother Nation, they have forfeited the native Rights of Britons, which they think ought rather to have been given them, as due to such Merit, if they had been before in a State of Slavery.

Such a stance set the stage for Franklin's discussions of slavery and British rule. While Franklin did not object to the enslaved status of those who were inferior to the white man, Franklin did object to the enslavement of those whites who had labored to extend the control and wealth of the British Empire by settling the New World.

In the year of 1755, Franklin was particularly prolific. Writings during the year 1755 would extol the livelihood of those who were free from subjugation. With his private letters largely ignored, Franklin sought more public forums to air his grievances against the British governor. Franklin wrote several letters in this year attempting to convince the Governor of the political mistakes being made.

These criticisms often listed particular political events, using a legislative policy or official decision as an example of servitude unfit for free white men. He likened the rhetoric and legislative actions of the governor to slavery. On August 19<sup>th</sup>, Franklin, in discussing a property tax forced upon the citizens of Pennsylvania, called the policy a "law abhorrent to common Justice, common reason, and common sense."<sup>10</sup> Franklin further argued that this was "not merely Vassalage, it is worse than any Vassalage we have heard of; it is something we have no adequate Name for; it is even more slavish than Slavery itself"<sup>11</sup>

In this letter, Franklin also criticized the political rhetoric of the governor. Many free men had sought freedom from becoming involved in Britain's war against the French. They did not wish to become drafted into the military. The governor seized upon the opportunity to criticize the patriotism of the colonists. Franklin considered the governor's words a form of defamation, stating that

But what is the Loss of even Liberty and Property, compared with the Loss of our good Name and Fame, which the Governor has, by every Artifice, endeavoured to deprive us of, and to ruin us in the Estimation of all Mankind. Accusations secretly dispersed in the neighbouring Provinces and our Mother Country; nameless Libels put into the Hands of every Member of Parliament, Lords and Commons! But these were modest Attacks compared with his publick Messages, filled with the most severe and heavy Charges against us, without the least Foundation; such as those in his Message of the Sixteenth of May last; some of which, tho' then fully refuted, he now ventures to renew, by exclaiming in these Terms, "Had you any Regard for your bleeding Country, would you have been deaf to all the affectionate Warnings and Calls of his Majesty? and would you have refused the proper, necessary and timely Assistance to an Army sent to protect these Colonies?" For is it not well known that we have essayed every Method, consistent with our Rights and Liberties, to comply with the Calls of the Crown, which have frequently been defeated either by Proprietary Instructions or the Perverseness of our Governor?<sup>12</sup>

While this passage does not directly address the issue of slavery, it does offer pertinent insight into Franklin's views of freedom and liberty. In Franklin's mind, no greater punishment could be thrust upon a free man than the deprivation of his freedom. To Franklin, the governor had conceptualized the colonists as servants, not as free citizens, and that this view was demonstrated in the political leader's rhetoric and actions.

By conflating slavery with the governor's actions, Franklin put the British leadership on the defensive by morally attacking them. The elected officer established by the authority of the monarch of England did not

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<sup>10</sup> B. Franklin. "Pennsylvania Assembly: Reply to the Governor." August 19.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

wish to be associated with the cruelty of slave masters. Franklin published a second letter to the Pennsylvania Assembly one month later. On September 19<sup>th</sup>, Franklin acknowledged that the Governor was indignant at the accusation of enslavement of the colonists. Franklin reaffirmed the accusation by demanding for the “all the Powers and Privileges of an Assembly, according to the Rights of the Free-born Subjects of England, and as is usual in any of the King’s Plantations in America.”<sup>13</sup> Franklin’s criticisms extended into public mismanagement of funds and unfair taxes without the representation that was due to free man.

Franklin published the 1755 edition of *Poor Richard’s Almanac* with a discussion that further considered his political opinions.<sup>14</sup> Within this text, Franklin gave a frank accounting of the happiest man living in the American colonies: the farmer. One characteristic of the farmer was his removal from the system of slavery.

### The FARMER.

O happy he! happiest of mortal Men! Who far remov’d from Slavery, as from Pride, Fears  
no Man’s Frown, nor cringing waits to catch The gracious Nothing of a great Man’s Nod;  
Where the lac’d Beggar bustles for a Bribe, The Purchase of his Honour; where Deceit, And  
Fraud, and Circumvention, drest in Smiles, A Man without a Wife, is but half a Man. Speak  
little, do much. He that would travel much, should eat little.<sup>15</sup>

In Franklin’s estimation, the farmer enjoyed the benefits of freedom without having to interact with the flawed system of British rule. Franklin’s decision to single out the American farmer as being free from the system of slavery is ironic since the majority of slaves were employed as field hands in the employment practice of assisting farmers.

However, it is clear that here Franklin is not really interested in the actual institution of slavery. Rather, Franklin is using the opportunity of another publication to attack the British rule. The farmer enjoyed the freedom from slavery by being removed from the urban dwelling. Cities were the home of corrupt political leaders like the British governor. Because of the limitations of technology, farmers enjoyed a considerable distance from the remainder of colonial society. They lived upon the land that they themselves owned and they personified for Franklin the virtues that he sought to instill within the American public: virtue, honesty, and integrity. These were all characteristics missing from the British governance.

Franklin’s argument that freedom creates the happiest of men and that slavery is the worst offense would be echoed by later authors. The connection of America with the enjoyment of freedom despite the persistence of the institution of slavery would endure beyond 1760. Additionally, the significance of the American farmer as the ideal citizen would also be visited by later authors. In 1783, J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur asked the famous question “What is an American?” in a text that sought to derive a personal identity for the newly formed nation. His answer echoed many of Franklin’s sentiments, demonstrating that Franklin’s prior obliviousness of the contradiction of a nation that extolled freedoms while perpetuating slavery was not limited to Franklin alone. He distinguished the characteristic happiness of Americans by the freedoms that they enjoyed. “We have no princes for whom we toil, starve, and bleed; we are the most perfect society now existing in the world. Here man is free as he ought to be, nor is this pleasing equality so transitory as many others are.”<sup>16</sup>

### Franklin’s view on slavery after 1760

Likely, Franklin’s general opinion concerning the acceptability of some forms of slavery did not change until after 1760. In 1763, Franklin had the opportunity to witness the education of African children in a formal

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<sup>13</sup> B. Franklin. “Pennsylvania Assembly: Reply to the Governor, Sept. 29<sup>th</sup>.”

<sup>14</sup> B. Franklin. *Poor Richard Improved*. 1755.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2000) p. 67

school setting. In a December letter written to a friend John Waring, Franklin explained with great enthusiasm his reaction to this event.

I was on the whole much pleas'd, and from what I then saw, have conceiv'd a higher Opinion of the natural Capacities of the black Race, than I had ever before entertained. Their Apprehension seems as quick, their Memory as strong, and their Docility in every Respect equal to that of white Children. You will wonder perhaps that I should ever doubt it, and I will not undertake to justify all my Prejudices, nor to account for them.<sup>17</sup>

Franklin openly acknowledged not only his past discrimination against Africans but his personal failure to justify his prejudicial opinion. This private exchange is significant because it is unlikely that Franklin would have reached this opinion had he not considered the political dilemma of slavery in the context of his criticisms against British authority.

Franklin would later openly acknowledge that the existence of slavery within America was used by its detractors as proof of colonial hypocrisy.

On January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1770, Franklin would publish a scathing letter in the *Public Advertiser*. The letter contained a fictional conversation between an American citizen, a British man, and a Scotsman. In it, the European characters chided the American's rhetoric praising the enjoyment of liberty because the colonies nevertheless perpetuated the organized system of slavery as an important component of the economy. In this letter, Franklin, speaking as the American, uses the opportunity to defend America's slave system.

"But, Sir, as to your Observation, that if we had a real Love of Liberty, we should not suffer such a Thing as Slavery among us, I am little surprised to hear this from you, a North Briton, in whose own Country, Scotland, Slavery still subsists, established by Law."<sup>18</sup>

Franklin did not yet appear ready to publicly denounce the entire institution of slavery despite his private acknowledgement of the flaws of his own prejudice against black persons. However, Franklin did consider this argument in a refutation that demonstrated his evolving opinion of the problems of slavery. While America has rhetorically regarded itself as the "Home of the Free and the Home of the Brave," the legally endorsed establishment and maintenance of slavery through the early centuries of the nation's history would seem a stark contrast to such egalitarian sentiment.

Franklin publicly denounced the system of slavery in other nations and justified in moral terms the American form of slavery.

Amer. "In one Particular, indeed, English Slavery goes beyond that exercised in America.

Eng What is that?

Amer. We cannot command a Slave of ours to do an immoral or a wicked Action. We cannot oblige him, for Instance, to commit MURDER! If we should order it, he may refuse, and our Laws would Justify him. But Soldiers must, on Pain of Death, obey the Orders they receive; though, like Herod's Troops, they should be commanded to slay all your Children under two Years old, cut the Throats of your Children in the Colonies, or shoot your Women and Children in St. George's Fields."<sup>19</sup>

While Franklin was not yet ready to publicly denounce the incredible discrimination that resulted in slavery's persistence in America, Franklin nevertheless extended his argument to contend that American masters were moral in their treatment of their slaves. This distinguished the British treatment of slaves and furthered Franklin's prior arguments offered between 1750 and 1760. Rather than continuing his comparison of British rule to the institution of slavery, Franklin was willing to seriously consider the role of slavery itself within the

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<sup>17</sup> B. Franklin, To John Waring, Dec. 1733.

<sup>18</sup> B. Franklin. "A Conversation on Slavery" 1770.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

future of America. This consideration would likely have not occurred within his previous consideration of slavery during the 1750's.

Again, Franklin's argument that American slaves were better treated than slaves in Europe would influence the works of his contemporaries. De Crevecoeur wrote:

Our society treats them [slaves] now as the companions of our labours; and by this management, as well as by means of the education we have given them, they are in general become a new set of beings. Those whom I admit to my table I have found to be good, trusty, moral men; when they do not what we think they should do, we dismiss them, which is all the punishment we inflict. Other societies of Christians keep them still as slaves, without teaching them any kind of religious principles; what motive beside fear can they have to behave well? ... We gave them freedom, and yet few have quitted their ancient masters."<sup>20</sup>

Franklin's 1750 to 1760 writings mentioning slavery would impact the future direction of American thought. Authors like De Crevecoeur who were eager to establish a distinct American identity clung to the opinion that the slave system in America was a program very different from its European counterparts. The economic similarities of slaves performing menial duties did not change; however, to Franklin, the American slavery system was a more moral means of subjugation. American masters supposedly treated their slaves with greater dignity. Such treatment within the slave system was consistent with the outmoded racist belief in the superiority of some races over others. To Franklin and others, slavery of blacks was morally correct because of these racial differences, but slavery toward other whites was immoral because the white men did not deserve to be slaves.

### Conclusion

Franklin did not start as a public abolitionist; in fact, he clearly believed that slavery of some was justified because some men were superior to others. Like many of his time, Franklin believed that the black man was inferior to the white man naturally and that slavery was a necessary consequent of this genetic hierarchy. However, as Franklin considered the British mistreatment of American colonialists, Franklin's views changed. In his own lifetime, Franklin has served as both a slave and a master. This experience informed his political opinion and helped open up his eyes to the faults of the slave system. From the beginning, he dismissed economic justifications of slavery because he valued the honest labor of a paid, free man more than the forced servitude of the slave. His moral argument shifted during this pivotal ten year time period because British rule helped him to recall the reality of bondage. As a white man, he had experienced slavery as an indentured servant and he became convinced that he would not be a slave again for Great Britain.

Some critics contend that Franklin was no paragon of anti-slavery virtue. Waldstreicher contends that Benjamin Franklin effectively conflated "slavery, freedom and revolution" with his comparisons of "the paradox of American slavery and American freedom to a skeptical world--and to America itself."<sup>21</sup> Franklin used slavery frequently as a metaphor to criticize the British rule of its American colonies. His appropriation of the victimization of the African slave for the American cause has brought some scholars to criticize Franklin because his rhetoric created a smokescreen that obfuscated the problem. Instead of focusing the people's attentions on the failing of slavery itself, Franklin instead used slavery to focus the attention upon the American cause.

"In Franklin's French period, as in his years in England, this kind of appropriation of antislavery for the purpose of justifying American trumped antislavery itself. No one did it better than Franklin; maybe, no one ever could... Franklin's seizure of victimhood, of the

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<sup>20</sup> J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2000) p. 190.

<sup>21</sup> D. Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), p. xiii.



very idea of enslaved innocence, on the part of the United States pushed the dilemma of America's slaves off the table."<sup>22</sup>

However, an alternative reading of Franklin's writings between the years 1750 and 1760 demonstrates the man's changing opinion. Perhaps Franklin understood that he could only battle for one cause at a time. He prioritized the American cause until independence was achieved and then turned his attention to the wide system of slavery. In addition, he may have understood that slavery was such a pervasive part of American society that its battle could risk the entire future of the budding nation.

While Franklin likely began with the intent to use slavery as a metaphor of the ill treatment of Americans, his utilization of this rhetoric likely had a profound personal impact upon his worldview. Franklin could not write so extensively concerning the ills of slavery without considering the application of his own words upon the plight of others. Franklin would have remembered his own experience of being an indentured servant, his feelings of anger and rejection of the system, despite the social acceptance of his inferior station. Franklin's examination of slavery in the context of his arguments against British treatment could not help but further his personal disdain for all organized political and social systems of oppression.

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<sup>22</sup> D. Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), p. 221.

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