

**Letter Book of Robert Pleasants 1754-1797:  
An Annotated Index  
Virginia Yearly Meeting, Collection 1116, #168**

Robert Pleasants' Letter Book contains letters and other documents written over a forty-three year period by Robert Pleasants (1722-1801), an active member of Curles Monthly Meeting, Virginia. Pleasants, the Clerk of the Henrico Monthly Meeting (considered the same as Curles Monthly Meeting), freed the eighty slaves he possessed, and urged the ratification of a law proposing gradual emancipation for the children of slaves. Around 1782, Pleasants circulated a petition for the "Instruction of the Children of Blacks and People of Color," and established a school for the free children of slaves, eventually called Gravelly Hill School. Over the years he corresponded with several important people, most notably: George Washington, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry.

The compilation of his letters generally centers on matters of religion and abolition. The letters were collected and revised by Pleasants himself for the use and benefit of his children. Some letters do not include any substantive information and are summarized only with the date, page number and recipient's name (when available). Occasionally the location of the recipient is given, in this case the name is followed by "in" and the location given. When Pleasants gives his own location at the time the letter was written, the place precedes the date. Although the collection is generally arranged in chronological order, some letters were included by Pleasants in other places for various reasons or by mistake. These letters are indexed in the original order that they are found in the letter book. Some names and places are also corrected to aid researchers, in these cases the change is indicated by [sic], or the amendment is placed in parenthesis.

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To Israel Pemberton. Virginia, September 10, 1755, concerning the dangers of an independent state, p. 8.

To William Hanley and five other Friends taken as soldiers and confined at Winchester, Virginia. June 30, 1756, concerning Pleasants' sympathy for the plight of the imprisoned Friends and encouraging them to stay strong in their faith, p. 8.

To Robert Foster. Virginia, August 5, 1757, concerning the death of Pleasants' wife on May 5, p. 9.

To Israel and Mary Pemberton. Bush River, October 14, 1758, concerning the death of Pleasants' wife, as well as the Eastown Indian Treaty, and his regrets about leaving his children, p. 10.

To Thomas Lightfoot. Bush River, October 14, 1758, concerning the Epistle written by Mary Peisley and enclosed in the letter, p. 10.

To Samuel Fothergill in Warrington, Old England. Virginia, February 26, 1759, concerning the establishment of a good school that would be available to the poorer families in the area, p. 11.

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To Dorothy Briggs. April, 1759, concerning spiritual advice, p. 12.

To Isaac Webster. April 12, 1759, concerning a trip Pleasants and his cousin Robert took together, p. 13.

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To John Pleasants Jr. May 28, 1759, concerning Robert's dissatisfaction with John's decisions about marriage, p. 15.

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To Margaret and Robert Pleasants. August 30, 1761, giving them spiritual encouragement, p. 17.

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To Ann Thomas. January 16, 1763, concerning her health and welfare after losing her daughter, Pleasants' wife, p. 22.

To Mary Reams. June 6, 1763, concerning her disorderly conduct as a Friend, p. 22.

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To Robert Pleasants Jr. in Philadelphia. November 16, 1771; January 11, 1772; March, 1772, concerning Robert Jr.'s health after recovering from smallpox, p. 25.

To Roger Atkinson. October 24, 1772, concerning alcoholism and excessiveness, p. 26.

To William Hanley in North Carolina. December 16, 1772, concerning the death of William Hunt, p. 27.

To Samuel Pleasants Jr. Virginia, March, 1773, concerning Samuel's health and welfare, p. 28.

To William Davis. April 19, 1773, concerning Davis' declining health, p. 28.

To Ann Pleasants. June 8, 1773, concerning his daughter Nancy, p. 29.

To Archibald Cary Esq. July 22, 1773, concerning a visit to the Chesterfield Gaol [jail], and Pleasants' ideas on prison reform, p. 29.

To Charles Pleasants in Dublin. Virginia, July 12, 1774, concerning the relationship between America and England, p. 31.

To Robert Bolling Esq. in Buckingham, England. January 10, 1775, concerning the difficulties the Quakers were facing in regards to pacifism at the time, p. 33.

To John Thomas. Virginia, May 30, 1775, concerning the politics of the time and a brief mention of the abolition of slavery, p. 35.

- To Samuel Pleasants. September 16, 1775; January 3, 1776; March 12, 1776; May 17, 1776, concerning the events of the Revolution and the death of their brother, Jonathan, p. 36.
- To George Walker. June 30, 1776, concerning the Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, and the abolition of slavery, p. 38.
- To Samuel Pleasants. July 8, 1776, concerning the abolition of slavery, p. 39.
- To Philip Pleasants. From S. Parsons and Robert Pleasants, July 8, 1776, lecturing Philip on his actions as a member of the Society and the nature of Quakerism as it relates to the military, p. 40.
- To T.L. September 8, 1776, involving an admonishment about the recipient's behaviors and encouraging a more pious and moral life, p. 41.
- To John Crew. No date, concerns previous letter to T.L. and the conduct of Friends in general, p. 42.
- To Margaret Langley. February 23, 1777, advising her against a certain marriage, p. 43.
- To Israel Pemberton. April 21, 1777, concerning the abolition of slavery and human rights, p. 44.
- To Mary Sneed in Caroline County. September 11, 1777, p. 46.
- To Thomas Nicholson in North Carolina. November 4, 1777, p. 46.
- To Mary Sneed in Caroline County. November 22, 1777, concerning Robert Barclay's *Apology*, p. 47.
- To Samuel Pleasants in Staunton. January, 1778, concerning the death of Mary Pleasants, Robert's daughter, p. 47.
- To Joseph Lewis, Church Warden. July 29, 1778, concerning the treatment and freedom of Lewis' slaves, as well as the issue of racism in general, p. 48.
- To Robert Pleasants Jr. September 9, 1778, concerning the spiritual well-being and life of Robert Jr., p. 50.
- To Samuel Pleasants Jr. July 7, 1779, strongly urging him to follow the ways of truth and righteousness, and to resist worldly temptations, p. 52.
- To John Thomas. October, 1779; March 1, 1780, concerning Quaker testimony, as well as the inflated prices of provisions, p. 53.
- To Samuel Pleasants. January 6, 1780, concerning their father's estate and other financial issues, p. 54.
- To Thomas Nicholson in North Carolina. December 5, 1779, concerning the importance of the Friends' refusal to pay a tax that would support the war with England, p. 55.
- To Robert Crew. June 15, 1780, concerning the appropriate lifestyle of a Friend and warning Crew against certain worldly temptations, such as business, p. 56.
- To George Walker. July 15, 1780, concerning matters of religious discussion and debate, p. 57.
- To Mary Turner. August 10, 1780, concerning her disassociation from the Society and her past misconduct, p. 59.
- To Colonel Turner Southall. September 3, 1780, concerning tribute taxation, in which the public is forced to pay for the hire of men into the army, and thus also matters of Quaker conscience and pacifism, p. 60.
- To John Crew. October 8, 1780, concerning Crew's son's travels in an armed vessel, and matters of pacifism, p. 61.
- To William Ratcliff in Skimins. October 9, 1780, p. 62.

To Thomas Miller. November 11, 1780, concerning simplicity as the solution to vanity and pride, p. 62.

To Mary Pleasants Jr. December 25, 1780, concerning marriage, p. 63.

To Matthew Pleasants. December 26, 1780, concerning Matthew's exclusion from the Society based on his inability to adhere to the Quaker belief in pacifism, p. 64.

To Samuel and Mary Pleasants. February 15, 1781, concerning the actions of the British Army in Virginia, and Robert's overnight detention in prison despite his pacifism, p. 65.

To Evan Thomas in Maryland. February, 1781, concerning a bill about the freedom of slaves, presented by a committee of the Yearly Meeting to the last assembly, p. 66.

August 14, 1781, a memorandum concerning the actions of the British army, p. 67.

To Martha Clopton. July 20, 1783, concerning the books of some Friends, p. 69.

To Mary Grimes in Orange County. September 12, 1783, concerning the evils of war and slavery, p. 69.

To James Ladd. December 12, 1786, offering business advice, p. 71.

To Ann May. September, 1783, concerning her marriage prospects, p. 72.

To Miriam Pleasants. January 14, 1784, concerning her anger over a letter Robert had written with respect to the treatment of one of her slaves, p. 74.

To James and Sarah Rigbie in Deer Creek, Maryland. Virginia, March 13, 1784, concerning separation from the Church, p. 75.

To Samuel Pleasants. April 1 -- May 25, 1784, concerning the death of Samuel's daughter, the death of Anthony Benezet (another Friend), and Robert's unhappiness with his daughter's marriage, p. 77.

To William Ratcliff. May 8, 1784, concerning an appropriate lifestyle and Ratcliff's spiritual well-being, p. 77.

To Ann Thompson. January 31, 1785, concerning her living arrangements, p. 79.

To Edith Sharpless in Chester County, Pennsylvania. Virginia, March 21, 1785, concerning matters of the Meeting and Quaker plainness, p. 79.

To Ann Thompson. August 16, 1786, concerning her inappropriate conduct and lack of obedience to God, p. 81.

To Mary Grimes in Orange County. August 25, 1784, p. 83.

To James Pleasants in Goochland, Virginia. November, 1784, concerning James' drinking problem and inappropriate conduct, p. 84.

To Francis Irby in Charles City County. November 22, 1784, in response to a letter in which Irby argued in favor of slavery. Pleasants counters his claim and writes of the unlawfulness of slavery, p. 85.

To Joseph Pleasants. November 23, 1784, concerning Joseph's alcohol abuse, p. 88.

To Mary Grimes in Orange County. January 3, 1785, concerning her spiritual experiences, p. 89.

To James Pemberton. June 20, 1785, concerning Meeting records and two other members of the Society: John Gough and Edward Stabler, p. 92.

To James Pemberton in Philadelphia. September 30, 1785, concerning the previous letter and Pleasants' inability to obtain the requested documents from the Meeting, p. 92.

August 10, 1786, a detailed account of the first Settlement of Meetings and Sufferings of Friends in Virginia. Also mentions the meeting's position on slavery, p. 93.

- To John Lee Webster. No date, concerning Pleasants' hopes of salvaging familial ties, as well as inquiring about the state of emancipation in Webster's region, p. 96.
- To John Thomas in West River, Maryland. July 10, 1785, concerning Pleasants' decision to move his daughter to a home closer to the meeting to further protect her from any temptations and inappropriate ways of life, p. 97.
- To Mary Grimes in Orange County. July 18, 1785, concerning their previous spiritual and theological discussions, p. 98.
- To Christopher Anthony in Campbell County. August 7, 1785, advising him to resist the temptations of worldly affairs and to keep in mind the simplicity that Quaker testimony advocates, p. 100.
- To Ann Atkinson. September 20, 1785, concerning the seven year lack of communication between the two of them, p. 102.
- To George Washington in Mount Vernon. December 11, 1785, concerning the issue of slavery and Washington's duty to use his position to work towards emancipation, p. 103.
- To Mary Grimes in Orange County. February 22, 1786, concerning her religious and spiritual life, p. 104.
- To Samuel Pleasants. November 8, 1785, concerning adherence to Quaker principles and the need to resist the temptations of worldly matters, p. 106.
- To Deborah and Elizabeth Pleasants in Beaverdam. March 10, 1786, concerning their preoccupations with vain and material things, p. 107.
- To Mary Pleasants Sr. in Goochland. January 22, 1786, concerning her preoccupation with worldly pleasures, p. 109.
- To Edith Sharpless in Chester County, Pennsylvania. April 25, 1786, concerning his relationship with his daughter and matters of the meeting, p. 110.
- To Thomas Jordan in Hanover. June 10, 1786, concerning religious dedication and adherence to the simple and important things in life, p. 111.
- To Evan Thomas in Maryland. July 28, 1786, concerning the unification of Friends' Meetings in Virginia and Maryland, p. 113.
- To John Thomas in West River, Maryland. July 29, 1786, updating him on Pleasants' life and daughter, and the state of the Meeting, p. 114.
- To Margaret, Robert and Ann Pleasants. June 16, 1781, concerning religious advice and the need for equality and emancipation. The letter was written while a terrible fever was killing many throughout the region and the British Army under Cornwallis was in the area, p. 115.
- June, published in the *Virginia Gazette*, concerning the injustice of slavery and its cost to the nation, written by Pleasants and signed "A Virginian," p. 121.
- To Colonel Richard Bland. March 15, 1770, requesting his help in fighting against slavery, p. 124.
- To John Thomas in West River, Maryland. July 4, 1782, concerning the need for simplicity, and discusses the injustice of slavery, p. 125.
- To John Thomas. June 28, 1783, concerning the hypocrisy of the ideals that America is fighting for and the ferociousness with which it clings to slavery. Pleasants also writes about the politics between Britain and America, p. 126.
- To Fleming Bates. November 29, 1781, imploring him to free his slaves, p. 128.
- To Richard Crump. November 30, 1779, concerning the principles of the Quakers, specifically pacifism and the refusal to take oaths as they relate to governments and persecution, p. 129.

To Mary W. Manners. October 10, 1781, concerning her support (and his rejection) of the idea that a state of grace and perfection is attainable in this life by some, p. 130.

To E.L., A.A., and D.B. December 22, 1781, concerning the importance of living a spiritual life, p. 132.

July 6, 1787. Published August 1, 1787 in the *Virginia Independent Chronicle*, concerning the custom of uncovering the head in salutation, and the coercive means used in courts to impose the custom, p. 133.

To Isabella and Unity Ladd. September 15, 1787, concerning some proceedings at the meeting and discipline among female Friends, p. 135.

To John Michie. December 4, 1787, concerning the “necessity” of slavery as imaginary, and the importance of freedom, p. 136.

To Captain Robert Mitchel (sp?) in Richmond. December 5, 1787, concerning the custom of wearing hats as it relates to Quaker principles, p. 137.

To Henrietta Ogle in Anapolis [sic, Annapolis]. December 26, 1787, concerning her spiritual well-being, p. 138.

To Robert Pleasants Jr. January 1, 1788, concerning his spiritual well-being and the importance of resisting worldly temptations, p. 140.

To John Townsend in London. Virginia, January 25, 1788, concerning the issues of slavery and the idea of establishing schools for black children, p. 142.

To Mary Grymes [sic, Grimes] in Orange County. February 12, 1788, concerning Quaker testimony, p. 143.

To Elizabeth Langley. February 22, 1788, concerning basic Quaker principles, p. 145.

To Jacob Shoemaker Jr. and others on the Committee appointed by the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery. May 12, 1788, concerning the emancipation of slaves, p. 146.

To Ann Atkinson. August 30, 1788, concerning her spiritual well-being and Quaker principles, p. 147.

To Sarah Harrison in Philadelphia. August 16, 1788, p. 149.

To Thomas Colley in Shiffield, Old England. Virginia, October 4, 1788, concerning the state of religion and spirituality, p. 150.

To James Pemberton in Philadelphia. November 4, 1788, concerning the removal of Pemberton’s daughter from the Meeting, p. 150.

To John Thomas in West River, Maryland. January 20, 1789, p. 151.

To Job Scott. June 15, 1789, p. 152.

To Mary Pleasants Sr. in Goochland. June 27, 1789, p. 153.

To James Ladd at the Yearly Meeting in North Carolina. September 18, 1789, p. 153.

To Job Scott in North Carolina. September 18, 1789, concerning the end of the slave trade in Britain, and the hope that it will spark a similar event in America, p. 154.

To Thomas Bates in Goochland. April 6, 1789, concerning the need to resist worldly temptations, as well as the tax to make up the British debt, p. 156.

To Barnaby Nixon in Prince George County. October, 1789, concerning strict adherence to the Bible, p. 158.

To Sarah Harrison in Philadelphia. Virginia, November 28, 1789, p. 159.

To Patrick Henry Esq. in Prince Edward County. January, 1790, concerning the abolition of slavery, p. 166.

To Gressitt Davis [sic, Gresset] in Petersburg, Virginia. March 6, 1790, concerning a petition to the General Assembly requesting that the children of slaves (born and

- unborn) be set free and given equal rights. Also mentions the Quaker practices of plain speech and the refusal to use titles, p. 162.
- To Job Scott c/o James Pemberton in Philadelphia. March 9, 1790, concerning a Methodist and Quaker coalition to abolish slavery, and the petition to free the children of slaves, 164.
- June 22, 1790. Printed July 7, 1790 in the *Virginia Independent Chronicle*, concerning the abolition of slavery and the equality of all men and women, p. 165.
- To Gressett Davis in Petersburg, Virginia. April 30, 1790, concerning abolition, p. 168.
- To James Pemberton. Virginia, June 19, 1790, concerning the issue of membership of slaveholders in the Society, as well as emancipation and the Methodist alliance with the Quakers for abolition, p. 169.
- To Ann May. July 11, 1790, concerning her spiritual and physical sufferings, p. 170.
- To John Barker. September 22, 1790, concerning Pleasants' remarks on the *Book of Discipline of the Methodist Society*, p. 172.
- To Robert Pleasants Jr. July 14, 1792, concerning his spiritual well-being, [no page number, insert].
- To Robert Pleasants Jr. October 20, 1792, concerning his lack of attendance at the Meeting for Worship, [no page number, insert].
- To Samuel Bailey. July 23, 1790, concerning the emancipation of the slaves, p. 179.
- To Charles Carter in Shirley. August 17, 1790, concerning abolition, p. 181.
- To Patrick Henry Esq. in Prince Edward County. September 1, 1790, concerning the injustice of slavery and a petition to the General Assembly regarding emancipation, p. 181.
- To Joseph Potts. January 25, 1791, concerning the Militia Bill, p. 182.
- To Mary Ridgeway and Jane Watson. January 31, 1791, p. 183.
- To James Madison in Philadelphia. Virginia, June 6, 1791, requesting that Madison present a memorial on slave trade to the next session of Congress, as well as the promotion of emancipation in Virginia. Pleasants specifically notes that children of slaves should be set free at the ages of 18 and 21, he also writes of the Militia Bill, p. 184.
- Copies of the memorial sent by James Ladd on behalf of Virginia Yearly Meeting to the President, Senate, and House of Representatives, p. 185.
- To William Savoury [sic, Savery] in Philadelphia. September 12, 1792, concerning the behavior of Thomas Harris, p. 187
- To Robert Carter in Hominy. October 8, 1791, concerning Carter's decision to free many of his slaves, as well as other emancipation issues (including the petition to the General Assembly regarding the freedom of the children of slaves), p. 188.
- To Elizabeth Langley. November 15, 1791, p. 190.
- To the Henrico County Monthly Meeting. November 23, 1791, concerning Pleasants' daughter's misconduct and exclusion from the Society before her death, p. 191.
- To the Henrico County Monthly Meeting. October 26, 1791, concerning the return of those cast out from the meeting, p. 192.
- January 11, 1792. Concerning the death of Pleasants' daughter Ann, p. 192.
- September 15, 1791. Published October 19, 1791 in Davis's *Virginia Gazette*, concerning the issue of slavery, p. 196.
- October, 1791. The Petition to the Speaker and House of Delegates in Virginia (the General Assembly) for the gradual abolition of slavery, p. 198.

To James Joldings (sp?). June 3, 1792, concerning the abolition of slavery in London, p. 200.

To Ann Scott. June 6, 1792, concerning her spiritual well-being as well as the abolition of slavery, p. 201.

To Dr. George Chuseman in York County. July 6, 1792, concerning the lack of Baptists involved in the abolition movement, p. 202.

To Patrick Henry Esq. in Prince Edward County. July 21, 1792, concerning the abolition of slavery, p. 204.

To James Pemberton. October 15, 1792, concerning the memorial presented to the General Assembly, as well as the proceedings at the Quarterly Meeting, p. 205.

To James Pemberton. December 8, 1792, concerning the memorial as it affects a racist tradition Pleasants observed, p. 206.

Essay on happiness, p. 207.

Essay on war and offenses, p. 208.

To Colonel William Heth. June 13, 1793, concerning Pleasants' opinions about a Calvinist book and the doctrine of universal redemption without sanctification, p. 211.

To Samuel Pleasants in Philadelphia. September 4, 1793, concerning Robert's health, p. 213.

To Thomas Scattergood in Philadelphia. September 26, 1793, concerning Pleasants' health, p. 213.

To Samuel Pleasants in Philadelphia. October 28, 1793, concerning the recommendation of different denominations in Richmond to have a day of humiliation and fasting, p. 214.

October 29, 1793, published in one of the Richmond newspapers, denouncing the previously mentioned day of intercessions and humiliations, p. 215.

To James Pemberton in Philadelphia. November 15, 1793, concerning the ships involved in the Virginia slave trade, as well as the issues of the Assembly (i.e. the Militia Bill), p. 216.

October 29, 1793. Published November 25, 1793 in the *Richmond and Manchester Advertiser*, concerning the abolition of slavery through a petition involving the emancipation of the children of slaves, as well as their education, p. 218.

To Richard Jordan in Northampton County, North Carolina. May 10, 1794, concerning the acquisition of wealth and material riches, p. 220.

To John Eliot in London. Virginia, June 9, 1794, concerning Parliament's proceedings involving abolition. Also encloses an epistle from Virginia Yearly Meeting to the London Meeting, p. 221.

To John Lee Webster in Maryland. July 1, 1794, concerning the abolition of slavery, p. 222.

November 10, 1794. Published in the *Richmond and Manchester Advertiser*, warns against blasphemy, worldly temptations, and other things that serve to weaken one's faith, p. 223.

November 13, 1794. Published in the *Richmond and Manchester Advertiser*, concerning the nature of human life and advocating the necessity of pacifism, p. 227.

To Elizabeth Langley. January 28, 1795, p. 228.

To John Thomas in West River, Maryland. August 29, 1795, p. 229.

To Exum Newby. July 30, 1795, concerning the gradual abolition of slavery and the education of the freed slaves, p. 229.



- To Samuel Pleasants. January 16, 1796, concerning the death of Robert's son-in-law and the impending death of his daughter-in-law, p. 230.
- To Elizabeth Langley. January 26, 1796, concerning a request to his brother for a loan, as well as ways to find happiness in the world, p. 231.
- To Deborah Darby and Rebecca [sic] Young. March 9, 1796, concerning their "gospel labors," and good wishes on their journey to London, p. 232.
- To Thomas Jefferson Esq. in Monticello. June 1, 1796, concerning abolition and the education of freed slaves, p. 233.
- To Peter Yarnall. July 25, 1796, concerning the rewards given to faithful followers of the Lord after death, p. 233.
- To Evan Thomas in Maryland. July 26, 1796, concerning Thomas' "gospel labors" his work in Virginia and Maryland, p. 234.
- To Thomas Jefferson Esq. in Monticello. February 8, 1797, concerning Jefferson's efforts in promoting free and open education. Pleasants advocates separate education, believing that the children of slaves will not be given equal rights in the classroom because of racism and prejudice, p. 235.
- To St. George Tucker in Williamsburg. May 30, 1797, concerning Tucker's dissertation on slavery and the notion of gradual abolition, education, and land ownership, p. 235.
- October 31, 1791. Chart in the *National Gazette* concerning the number of people in the United States, p. 238 [though not numbered].
- To Micajah Davis. September 27, 1797, concerning Davis' declining reputation and behavior, p. 239.
- To Micajah Davis. December 23, 1797, concerning and defending Pleasants' previous letter to Davis, urging him towards morality and a greater focus on his actions and behaviors, p. 241