

50. George Tucker on Gabriel's Rebellion (1801)

Source: Letter to a Member of the General Assembly of Virginia on the Subject of the Late Conspiracy of the Slaves; With a Proposal for Their Colonization (*Baltimore, 1801*), pp. 5–18.

In 1800, a plot by slaves in Virginia to gain their freedom was organized by a Richmond blacksmith, Gabriel. The plot was soon discovered and the leaders arrested. Twenty-six slaves, including Gabriel, were hanged and dozens more transported out of the state. The conspiracy, commented George Tucker, a member of one of the state's most prominent families, demonstrated that slaves possessed "the love of freedom" as fully as other men. Gabriel's language, he added, reflected "the advance of knowledge" among Virginia's slaves, which would inevitably continue.

Like Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and many others of his generation, Tucker opposed slavery but could not envision the United States as a biracial society of free citizens. He proposed that the Virginia legislature adopt a plan to emancipate the slaves and settle them outside of the state, somewhere "on the western side" of the Mississippi River (an area then under the control of Spain). The legislature, however, moved in the opposite direction. It tightened controls over the black population and severely restricted the ability of masters to free their slaves voluntarily.

THERE IS OFTEN a progress in human affairs which may indeed be retarded, but which nothing can arrest. Moving on with slow and silent steps, it is marked only by comparing distant periods. The

causes which produce it are either so minute as to be invisible, or, if preceived, are too numerous and complicated to be subject to human controul. Of such sort is the advancement of knowledge among the negroes of this country. It is so striking, as to be obvious to a man of the most ordinary observation. Every year adds to the number of those who can read and write; and he who has made any proficiency in letters, becomes a little centre of instruction to others. This increase of knowledge is the principal agent in evolving the spirit we have to fear. The love of freedom, sir, is an inborn sentiment, which the God of nature has planted deep in the heart: long may it be kept under by the arbitrary institutions of society; but, at the first favourable moment, it springs forth, and flourishes with a vigour that defies all check. This celestial spark, which fires the breast of the savage, which glows in that of the philosopher, is not extinguished in the bosom of the slave. It may be buried in the embers; but it still lives; and the breath of knowledge kindles it into flame. Thus we find, sir, there never have been slaves in any country, who have not seized the first favorable opportunity to revolt.

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In our infant country, where population and wealth increase with unexampled rapidity, the progress of liberal knowledge is proportionally great. In this vast march of the mind, the blacks, who are far behind us, may be supposed to advance at a pace equal to our own; but, sir, the fact is, they are likely to advance much faster. The growth and multiplication of our towns tend a thousand ways to enlighten and inform them. The very nature of our government, which leads us to recur perpetually to the discussion of natural rights, favors speculation and enquiry.

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There is one argument to which I have not even hinted; but which some may think of more weight than any other;—I mean the ease with which they may become the tools of a foreign enemy. Granting that the danger from themselves is slight or remote, this, it must be confessed, depends upon an event that is altogether uncertain. War

is sometimes inevitable; no human prudence can guard against an event that may be brought about by the insolence, the injustice, or the caprice of *any* nation. Whenever we are involved in this calamity, if our enemies hold out the lure of freedom, they will have, in every negro, a decided friend. The passage is easy from friends to auxiliaries: little address would be necessary to excite insurrection; to put arms into their hands, and to convert a willing multitude into a compact and disciplined army.

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The following hints I submit to your serious and candid consideration.

That application be made to the United States, to procure from the Spanish government, or to furnish from its own territory, such a tract of country as shall be deemed sufficient for the colony proposed. The consideration of future peace would recommend the western side of the Mississippi. Present convenience and economy would advise a purchase of some part of the Indian country, comprehended within the limits of the state of Georgia.

That this colony be under the protection and immediate government of this state, or the United States, until it contained a number of inhabitants sufficient to manage their own concerns: and that it be exclusively appropriated to the colonization and residence of people of colour.