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Letter from George Sibley to the New York Daily Tribune, September 20, 1851

George Champlin Sibley
Lindenwood College

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JEFFERSON ON SLAVERY.

LISHEN WOOD, for St. Charles, Missouri, Saturday, Sept. 20, 1851.

To the Editors of the N. Y. Tribune:

"Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia," written and published in 1781-2, in answer to certain queries propounded to the author by the Count de Marbois, has become a scarce book, I believe; else a reference to the book itself, for such of the "Notes" as I am desirous to have republished in your columns, might have saved me the labor of copying them from an old edition, printed in Boston in 1802. The discussion of what may well be called "The Negro Question," occupies so many minds, and employs so many pens in this our day, (in too many instances injuriously to the cause of truth and justice,) that I have thought it might serve a good purpose to act before the public what were, nearly seventy years ago, Thomas Jefferson's views of the Negro Race and of Negro Slavery. In reply to the 8th, 14th and 15th queries of M. de Marbois, Mr. Jefferson found himself called on for some particular remarks upon this subject, which he did not fail to furnish. These elicited and embraced the distinguished author's views and opinions of the then existing condition of the negro race in Virginia; the natural and marked distinction between the white and black races; the true policy and moral duty of the one; the true interests of the other, and of both. These views, written so long ago, when the subject could be calmly and dispassionately considered, when it was not, as it now is, liable to be drawn in and incorporated with, and made subservient to the ephemeral party politics of the day, were presented with the manifestly single object of promoting, in due season, the cause of practical philanthropy and justice, in the premises. High above all the groveling party propensities that actuate men, and inflame their narrow prejudices at this day, on this particular subject, as truly are the opinions here set forth by the great Philanthropist and Statesman. A republication of those views and opinions cannot but be acceptable, I am sure, to the readers of your very useful and popular publication. And I trust you will, with your usual candor and fairness, give them a place in The Tribune. If ever "this blot on our country" is to be removed, and removed it must be, or else—It must be effected by Colonization; and if ever by Colonization, the National power, cooperating with that of the "Slave States," must be used. The races must be widely separated. Shall twenty millions of Whites suffer three millions of Blacks, by their mere presence among us, either nominally free, or in slavery, to mar the peace and endanger the union of this great and mighty Republic? Surely not if a remedy can be found. For one, I am prepared and ready to give my voice unhesitatingly in favor of any feasible plan to send every negro far away (to Africa) from our land, with all possible dispatch—peaceably, if we can, forcibly if we must. This must be done in the spirit of kindness and Christian philanthropy toward the blacks, and from the pressing motive of self-preservation on the part of the whites. And I assume the ground that the latter cannot be secured, unless the other is first accomplished.

A careful, candid consideration of this whole subject, in all its bearings, aided by Mr. Jefferson's masterly views, here with presented, cannot fail, it seems to me, to convince any rational mind that separation by Colonization is the only remedy—that this remedy must be resorted to, and can only be effectively applied through the power and influence of the National Government, acting in full concert with the "Slaveholding States." Can all this be done? This is a most consequential question, truly; but, in behalf of the Republic, I boldly answer Yes. It may cost many millions of dollars, but if the gold mines of California should be exhausted, and as much more, in the enterprise, the consummation would be cheaply purchased. G. C. S. September 20, 1851.

In reply to the 8th query—"The number of its inhabitants?"—Mr. Jefferson makes the following statements and remarks: "Free inhabitants, 236,852; slaves, 270,762; 507,614 inhabitants, of every age, sex and condition.—Under the mild treatment our slaves experience, and their wholesome though coarse food, this blot on our country increases as fast, or faster, than the whites. During the Regal Government, we had at one time obtained a law which imposed such a duty on the importation of slaves, as amounted nearly to a prohibition, when one inconsiderate Assembly, placed under a peculiarity of circumstances, repealed the law. This repeal met a joyful sanction from the then Sovereign, and no devices, no expedients which could ever after be attempted by subsequent Assemblies—and they seldom met without attempting them—could succeed in getting the Royal assent to a renewal of the duty. In the very first session held under the Republican Government, the Assembly passed a law for the perpetual prohibition of the importation of slaves. This will, in some measure, stop the increase of this great political and moral evil, while the minds of our citizens may be ripening for a complete emancipation of human nature."

In answer to the 14th query—"The administration of Justice, and the description of the Laws?"—The author, after enumerating several proposed alterations in the laws, quotes the following, (most probably proposed by himself) as a plan to rid the State of the "blot" of negro slavery, and then proceeds to give his views, fairly and freely, of the character and condition of the black race, &c. "To emancipate all slaves born after passing the Act . . . that they should continue with their parents to a certain age, then be brought up at the public expense, to tillage, arts or sciences, according to their geniuses, till the females should be eighteen, and the males twenty-one years of age; when they should be colonized to such place as the circumstances of the time should render most proper, sending them out with arms, implements of household, and the handicraft arts, seeds, pairs of the useful domestic animals, &c., to declare them a free and independent people, and extend to them our alliance and protection, till they have acquired strength, and to send vessels at the same time to other parts of the world, for an equal number of white inhabitants, to induce whom to migrate hither proper encouragements were to be proposed." It will probably be asked, why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the State, and thus save the expense of supplying by importation of white settlers the vacancies they will leave? Deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites, ten thousand recollections by the blacks of the injuries they have sustained, new provocations, the real distinctions which nature has made, and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties and produce convulsions, which would probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race. To these objections, which are political, may be added others which are physical and moral. The first difference which strikes us is that of color. Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and the scarfskin, or in the scarfskin itself, whether it proceeds from the color of the blood, the color of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us. And is this difference of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races? Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expression of every passion by greater or less suffusions of color, in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony which reigns in the countenances, that immutable veil of black, which covers all the emotions of the other race? Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form, their own judgment in favor of the whites, declared by the preference of them, as uniformly as is the preference of the (transient) for the black women over those of their own species. The circumstance of superior beauty is thought worthy of attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals—why not in that of man? Besides those of color, figure, and hair, there are other physical distinctions, proving a difference of race. They have less hair on the face and body, they secrete less by the kidneys and more by the glands of the skin, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odor. This greater degree of transpiration renders them more tolerant of heat and less so of cold than the whites. Perhaps, too, a difference of structure in the pulmonary apparatus, which a late experimentalist (Crawford) has discovered to be the principal regulator of animal heat, may have disabled them from extracting in the act of respiration so much of that fluid from the outer air, or obliges them to aspirate to part with more of it. They seem to require less sleep. A black, after hard labor through the day, will be induced by the slightest amusement to sit up till midnight, or later, though knowing that he must be out with the first dawn of the morning. They are at least as brave, and more adventuresome, but this may perhaps proceed from a want of forethought, which prevents their seeing a danger till it is present. When present, they do not go through it with more coolness or steadiness than the whites. They are more ardent after their female; but love seems with them to be more an eager desire than a tender, delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation. Their griefs are transient, those numberless afflictions, which render it doubtful whether Heaven has given life to us in mercy or in wrath, are felt less and sooner forgotten with them. In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection. To this must be ascribed their disposition to sleep when abstracted from their diversions and unemployed in labor. An animal whose body is at rest, and who does not reflect, must be disposed to sleep, of course. Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull and anomalous. It would be unfair to follow them to Africa for this investigation. We will consider them here

on the same stage with the whites, and where the facts are not apocryphal on which a judgment is to be formed. It will be right to make great allowances for the difference of condition, of education, of conversation of the sphere in which they move. Many millions of them have been brought to, and born in America. Most of them, indeed, have been confined to tillage, to their own homes, and their own society. Yet many have been so situated that they might have availed themselves of the conversation of their masters. Many have been brought up to the handicraft arts, and from that circumstance have always been associated with the whites. Some have been liberally educated, and all have lived in countries where the arts and sciences are cultivated to a considerable degree, and have had before their eyes samples of the best works of this kind, will often carve figures on their pipes not destitute of design and merit. They will crayon out an animal, a plant, or a scenery, so as to prove the existence of a germ in their minds which only wants cultivation. They astonish you with strokes of the most sublime oratory, such as prove their reason and sentiment strong, their imagination glowing and elevated.—But never yet could I find a black that had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration—never seen even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture. In music, they are more generally gifted than the whites, with accurate ears for tune and time; and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch. (The instrument proper to them is the banjo, which they brought hither from Africa, and which is the original of the guitar, its chords being precisely the four lower chords of the guitar.) Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved. Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks there is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar ostium of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion, indeed, has produced a *Psyllis Watejig*, but it could not produce a poet—the compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. The heroes of the Dunciad are to her, as Hercules to the author of that poem. *Ignatius Sancho* has approached nearer to merit in composition, yet his letters do more honor to his heart than to his head. They breathe the purest effusions of friendship and general philanthropy, and show how great a degree of the latter may be compounded with strong religious zeal. He is often happy in the turn of his compliments; and his style is easy and familiar, except when he affects a *Stamden* fabrication of words. But his imagination is wild and extravagant, escapes incessantly from every restraint of reason and taste, and in the course of its vagaries, leaves a tract of thought as incoherent and eccentric as is the course of a meteor through the sky. His subjects should often have led him to a process of sober reasoning; yet we find him always substituting sentiment for demonstration. Upon the whole, though we admit him to the first place among those of his own color, who have presented themselves to the public judgment; yet when we compare him with the writers of the race among whom he lived, and particularly with the epistolary class, in which he has taken his own stand, we are compelled to enroll him at the bottom of the column. This criticism supposes the letters published under his name to be genuine, and to have received amendment from no other hand; points, which would not be easy of investigation. The improvement of the blacks in body and mind, in the first instance of their mixture with the whites, has been observed by every one, and proves that their inferiority is not the effect merely of their condition of life. We know that among the Romans, about the *Augustan age* especially, the condition of their slaves was much more deplorable, than that of the blacks on the continent of America. The two sexes were confined in separate apartments, because, to raise a child cost the master more than to buy one. Cato, for a very restricted indulgence to his slaves in this particular, took from them a certain price. But in this country the slaves multiply as fast as the free inhabitants. Their situation and manners place the commerce between the two sexes almost without restraint. The same Cato, on a principle of economy, always sold his sick and superannuated slaves. He gives us a standing precept to a master visiting his farm, to sell his old oxen, old wagons, old tools, old and diseased slaves, and everything else become useless. The American slaves cannot enumerate this among the injuries and insults they receive. It was the common practice to expose in the island *Esculapian*, in the Tiber, diseased slaves, whose cure was like to become tedious. The Emperor *Claudius*, by an edict, gave freedom to such of them as should recover, and first declared that if any person chose to kill rather than expose them, it should be deemed homicide. The exposing them is a crime, of which no instance has existed with us; and were it it to be followed by death, it would be punished capitally. We are told of a certain *Vadus Pallas*, who, in the presence of Augustus, would have given a slave as food to his fish, for having broken a glass. With the Romans, the regular method of taking the evidence of their slaves was under torture. *Here*, it has been thought never to resort to their evidence. When a master was murdered, all his slaves in the same house, or within hearing, were condemned to death. *Here*, punishment falls on the guilty only, and as precise proof is required against him as against a freeman. Yet, notwithstanding these and other discouraging circumstances, among the Romans, their slaves were often the rarest artists. They excelled, too, in science, inasmuch as to be usually employed as tutors to their master's children. *Epictetus*, *Terence*, and *Phaedrus* were slaves. But they were of the race of whites. It is not their condition then, but nature, which has produced the distinction. Whether further observation will or will not verify the conjecture, that nature will be found to have done these justice. That disposition to theft, with which they have been branded, must be ascribed to their situation, and not to any depravity of the moral sense. The man in whose favor no laws of property exist, probably feels himself less bound to respect those made in favor of others. When arguing for ourselves, we lay it down as a fundamental, that laws to be just must give a reciprocation of right; that without this, they are mere arbitrary rules of conduct, founded in force, and not in conscience. And it is a problem which I give to the master to solve, whether the religious precepts against the violation of property, were not from for him as well as his slave? and whether the slave may not as justifiably take a little from one who has taken all from him, as he may slay one who would slay him? That a change in the relations in which a man is placed, should change his ideas of moral right and wrong, is neither new nor peculiar to the color of the blacks. Homer tells us it was so twenty-six hundred years ago.

"Love fix'd it certain, that whatever day
Makes man a slave takes half his worth away."

104. 77-311.

But the slaves of which Homer speaks were whites. Notwithstanding these considerations which must weaken their respect for the laws of property, we find among them numerous instances of the most rigid integrity and as many as among their better instructed masters of benevolence, gratitude, and unshaken fidelity. The opinion that they are inferior in the faculties of reason and imagination must be hazarded with great diffidence. To justify a general conclusion, requires many observations, even where the subject may be submitted to the anatomical knife, the optical glasses, the analysis by fire, or to solvents. How much more then where it is a faculty, not a substance, we are examining; where it eludes the research of all the senses; where the conditions of its existence are various and variously combined; where the effects of those which are present or absent bid defiance to calculation! Let me add too, as a circumstance of great tenderness, when our conclusion would degrade a whole race of men from the rank in the scale of being which their Creator may perhaps have given them. To our reproach it must be said, that though for a century and a half we have had under our eyes the races of black and red men, they have never yet been viewed by us as subjects of natural history. I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether original, a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and of mind. It is not against experience to suppose, that different species of the same genus, or varieties of the same species, may possess different qualifications. Will not a *lover of natural history* then, one who views the *gradations* in all the races of animals with the eye of philosophy, excuse an effort to keep those in the department of man as distinct as nature has formed them? The unfortunate difference of color, and variance of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people. Many of their advocates, while they wish to vindicate the liberty of human nature, are anxious also to preserve its dignity and beauty. Some of these, embarrassed by the question, "What further is to be done with them?" join themselves in opposition with those who are actuated by sordid avarice only. Among the Romans, emancipation required but one effort: the slave, when made free, might mix with, without staining the blood of his master. But with us a second is necessary, unknown to history; when freed, he is to be removed beyond the reach of commerce."

In answer to the eighteenth query, Mr. Jefferson remarks as follows: "It is difficult to determine on the standard by which the manners of a nation may be tried, whether general or particular. It is more difficult for a nation to bring to that standard the manners of its own nation, familiarized to him by habit. There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people, produced by the existence of Slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submission on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. This quality is the germ of all education in him; from his cradle to his grave, he is learning to do what he sees others do. If a parent could find no motive, either in his philanthropy or his self-love, for restraining the intemperance of passion toward his slave, it should always be a sufficient one that his child is present. But generally it is not sufficient. The parent sternly; the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath; puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves; gives loose to his worst passions, and thus saps, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped with its odious peculiarities. The man must be a profligate who can

retain his manners and morals undepraved under such circumstances. And with what execration should the statesman be loaded, who, permitting one-half of the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots, and these into enemies; destroys the morals of the one part, the *other part* of the other! For if a slave can have a country in this world, it must be any other in preference to that in which he is born to live and labor for another, in which he must lock up the faculties of his nature, contribute, as far as depends on his individual endeavors, to the advancement of the human race, or entail his own miserable condition on the whole generations proceeding from him. With the morals of the people their industry also is destroyed; for in a warm climate no man will labor for himself who can make another labor for him. This is so true that of the proprietors of slaves a very small proportion indeed, are ever seen to labor. And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure, when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? that they are not to be violated but with His wrath! Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that His justice cannot sleep forever; that considering numbers, nature, and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation is among possible events; that it may become probable by supernatural interference. The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest. But it is impossible to be temperate and to pursue this subject through the various considerations of policy, of morals, of history, natural and civil. We must be contented to *hope* they will force their way into every one's mind. I think a change is already perceptible, since the origin of the present revolution. The spirit of the master is arbitrary; that of the slave is rising from the dust, his condition mollifying; the way, I hope, preparing, under the auspices of Heaven, for a total emancipation; and that this is disposed, in the order of events, to be with the consent of the master, rather than by the extirpation of the slaves."

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