
Primary Source Comprehension: Robert Carter III's Deed of Gift

Reporting Category: Virginia and United States History

Topic: Early America: Settlement and Colonization; Revolution and the New Nation

Primary SOLs: VUS.2, VUS.3

Materials: Video about Robert Carter III; Robert Carter III's Deed of Gift; exercise questions

Directions: Students will watch a video about Robert Carter III's Deed of Gift and read portions of the primary source document. Answer the corresponding questions in several sentences.

Document Context: Robert Carter III was one of the largest landowners in Virginia after the American Revolution. He owned approximately 65,000 acres of land and over 500 enslaved people. Carter's slaves and the land he owned drove his prosperity. But in 1791, he filed a Deed of Gift at the Westmoreland County courthouse that gradually freed 452 of his slaves within the next ten years.

Carter III joined the anti-slavery Baptist church and found the treatment of enslaved people disturbing. He summarized his reasons for freeing many of his slaves in his Deed of Gift (below).

Document Text:

Whereas I Robert Carter of Nomony Hall in the County of Westmoreland & Commonwealth of Virginia am poss[ess]ed as my absolute property off, in & to many negroes & mullatto slaves whose number, names, situations & ages will fully appear by a Schedule hereunto annexed: And whereas I have for some time past been convinced that to retain them in Slavery is contrary to the true principles of Religion & justice, & that therefore it was my duty to manumit them, if it could be accomplished without infringing the laws of my Country, & without being of disadvantage to my neighbours & the community at large: And whereas the General Assembly for the Commonwealth of Virginia did in the year seventeen hundred and eighty two enact a Law entitled "An Act to authorize the manumission of slaves" now be it remembered that said Robert do under the said Act for myself my heirs executors & administrators emancipate from slavery all such my slaves emancipated in the aforesaid Schedule (as are under the age of forty six

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years) but in a manner & form as hereafter particularly mentioned & set forth, that is to say: that for as much as I have with great Care & attention endeavoured to discover that mode of manumission from Slavery which can be effected consonant to law & with the least possible disadvantage to my fellow Citizens I have determined to discharge myself from this act of justice & duty by declaring that my Slaves not receive an immediate but a gradual Emancipation in the following manner—viz—Fifteen of my slaves under the age of forty six beginning at the oldest & descending according to their age are hereby emancipated & set free on the second day of January seventeen hundred & ninety two: And fifteen more of my slaves shall be liberated & set free on the first day of January seventeen hundred & ninety three & so annually in every year upon the first day of January (unless when that happens on a Sunday & then on the next succeeding day) until the year eighteen hundred & one inclusive

By which means one hundred & fifty of my slaves with the age restricted by the act aforesaid will be manumitted; Regard still being had in all the subsequent manumissions that the oldest of my slaves be the first emancipated:—And whereas it will be found from the Schedule aforesaid that a large number of my male & Female slaves are at present under the ages of twenty-one & eighteen years; I do hereby declare that such & every of the male negroes shall be emancipated & set free when he or they shall have attained the age of twenty one years & such & every of the Females when [s]he or they shall have attained the age of eighteen years respectively according to the said schedule, & the aforesaid act of assembly: In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand & affixed my seal this first day of August in the year of our Lord seventeen hundred & ninety one

*Sealed & delivered in presence of—
Rob^t Carter [Seal]*

And whereas sundry female slaves mentioned in the annexed Schedule have been delivered of Children since the first day of January seventeen hundred & ninety one, which Children are considered as slaves in this commonwealth & to provide for the Children that may be so born I do now declare that all the males & females that may be born of the aforesaid women in the course of the present year seventeen hundred & ninety one shall be free—that is to say the males in the year eighteen hundred & twelve—females in the year eighteen hundred & nine or as many of them as may be then living—as witness my hand & seal the day & year written before—

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Whereas I Robert Carter of Henrico Hall in the County of Westmoreland & Commonwealth of Virginia am possessed as my absolute property of, in & to many negroes & mulatto slaves whose number, names, situations & ages will fully appear by a Schedule herunto annexed. And whereas I have for some time past been convinced that to retain them in Slavery is contrary to the true principles of Religion & Justice, that therefore it was my duty to manumit them, if it could be accomplished without infringing the laws of my Country, & without being of disadvantage to my neighbours & the Community at large: And whereas the General Assembly for the Commonwealth of Virginia did in the year seventeen hundred eighty two enact a Law entitled "an Act to authorize the manumission of Slaves" now be it remembered that I the said Robert do under the said Act for myself my heirs Executors Administrators emancipate from Slavery all such my slaves enumerated in the aforesaid Schedule (as are under the age of forty six years) but in a manner & form as hereafter particularly mentioned & set forth, that is to say: that for as much as I have with great Care & Attention endeavored to discover that mode of Manumission from Slavery which can be effected consonant to Law with the least possible disadvantage to my fellow Citizens I have determined to discharge myself from this Act of Justice & duty by declaring that my Slaves not receive an immediate but a gradual Emancipation in the following manner - viz - Fifteen of my slaves under the age of forty six beginning at the oldest & descending according to their age are hereby emancipated & set free on the second day of January seventeen hundred & ninety two: And fifteen more of my slaves shall be liberatd & set free on the first day of January seventeen hundred & ninety three & so annually in every year upon the first day of January (unless when that happens on a Sunday then on the next succeeding day) until the year eighteen hundred & one inclusive

By which means one hundred & fifty of my slaves within the age restricted by the Act aforesaid will be manumitted; & regard still being had in all the subsequent manumissions that the older of my slaves be the first emancipated: - And whereas it will be found from the Schedule aforesaid that a large number of my male & female slaves are at present under the ages of twenty one & eighteen years, I do hereby declare that such every of the male negroes shall be emancipated & set free when he or they shall have attained the age of twenty one years & such every of the Females when he or they shall have attained the age of eighteen years respectively according to the said Schedule & the aforesaid Act of Assembly: In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand & affixed my seal this first day of August in the year of our Lord seventeen hundred & ninety one sealed & delivered in presence of -

Rob^t Carter Seal

And whereas sundry female slaves mentioned in the annexed Schedule have been deliverers of Children since the first day of January seventeen hundred & ninety one, which Children are considered as slaves in this Commonwealth to provide for the Children that may be so born I do now declare that all the males & females that may be born of the aforesaid women in the course of the present year seventeen hundred & ninety one shall be free - that is to say the males in the year eighteen hundred & twelve - females in the year eighteen hundred & nine or as many of them as may be then living - as witness my hand & seal the day & year written before -

Rob^t Carter Seal

at a district Court, continued held for the district of Richmond, Westmoreland, Lancaster North & at Northumberland Courthouse, on Monday the 5th day of September 1791. This deed of Emancipation & the Schedule herunto annexed were this day acknowledged in open Court & ordered to be recorded.

Exercise:

1. What were Robert Carter III's reasons for granting freedom to 452 of his slaves?
2. Why did Robert Carter III gradually emancipate his enslaved laborers rather than free them all immediately?
3. How do you think Carter III's fellow Southerners reacted to his Deed of Gift? Why did they react that way?
4. In one or two paragraphs, discuss whether key principles outlined in America's founding documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Bill of Rights might have influenced Carter's decision to emancipate his slaves. Or does Carter's Deed of Gift stand alone from those documents?