

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



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 & nine or as many of them as may be then living—as witness my hand & seal the day & year written before—

PRINCE WILLIAM

Historic Preservation

Whereas I Robert barter of nemony Hall in the County of Westin or land & Commonwer alth of Vorginia am possed as my obsolute property off, in Ho many negroes tellulatto Manes whose number, names, estuationes baged will fully appear by a Schedule hereinto annexed : and whereas How for some time past been convinced that to retain their in blavery is contrary to the true principles of Relegion & intice . Hear therefore it was my duty to manusuit liken , if it could be accomplished without infringing the laws of my Country, dwithout being of disasontage to my mighbows the Community at darge . and whowas the General Afabruly for the Commonwealth of Vorginia did in the year swentern hundres beighty too west a Low entitled "an act to authorize the inauminision of slaves" now be it remembered that the said Robert do under the said act for my self my hers Executors Vadrums trators emanciplete from Slavery all wich my blaves imancipated in the aforesaid Schedule Casare under the age of forty en years) but in a manner form as how after particularly mentioned set forthe, that is to say: that for as much as Thave with great bare Vattention endeavoured to discove that made of Manuafreau from Havery which can be effected consonant to law with the least possible des advantage to my fellow betizens Have determined to dis charge myself from this act of instice & duty by diclaring that my Slaves not receive an immediate but a gradual Emancipation in the following manner - or Fifteen of my slaves under the age of forty buy beginning at the oldest & decending according to their age are hereby amountated that free on the second day of January sevention hundred buinty two . and fifteen more of my slaves shall be liberated feet free on the first day of Jamary swentern lundred buinty. Three too annually in every year upon the first day of Tamony (culifs when that happens on a sunday other on the next succeeding days will the year eighten him and some inclusive

By which means one hundred offits of my slaves within the age restricted by the are afonsone will be manimitted; Regard still being losd in all the subrequent manimissions that the older, of my slaves be the first emancipated: - And whereas it will befound from the ages of twenty one that a large number of my snale V Funale slaves are at present under the ages of twenty one beighteen years; I do hereby declare that such down of the male negroes shall be emancipated but free when he or they shall have attained the age of twenty one years struck devery of the Tomales when he or they shall have attained the age of eighteen years respectively according to the said selve dule, the aforesaid act of afambly. In witness where I have known to set my have defined my seal this first day of dagast in the year of our soid sweather hundred sundry seal the spectra of the Sait should be shall be such that the spectra of the sealed between in presence of -

and whereas sundry finale slaves mentioned in the annual Schedule have been delivered of Children since the first day of Samuary seventeen hundred from ty one, which blut were are considered as slaves in this commonwealth to provide for the Children that way be so born I do now declare that all the males of fourths that way be born of the oforesaid women in the was of the prevent year seventeen hundred trincity one shall be free that is to say the males in the year eighteen hundred time or as many of them as may be then living — as writing hand beed the day bypan written before —

At a disturt bowel constrained the of the distuct of Michin and Westword and Sancuster Growth of at transfer who plant the for the day of september 1791. This deed of him was plated the school and bound south with the school of him was plated.



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?