THE ANTISLAVERY CRUSADE
OF ANTHONY BENEZET

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ABSTRACT

Capturing the spirit of Great Awakening revivalism and appealing to certain Enlightenment ideas of the natural rights of man, Anthony Benezet, a Philadelphia Quaker, formulated a sophisticated antislavery thesis that was representative of the intellectual spirit of his time. He maintained a fervent testimony for basic Quaker religious beliefs while applying them, in his antislavery writings, to the eighteenth-century setting.

He made an incisive and novel attack on the prevailing attitudes of Negro race inferiority, drawing evidence from his own experiences with the Negro people as a teacher as well as from published evidence of men who had lived in Africa.

He was not a typical Quaker of his time. When he arrived in America, the Quaker religion was relatively crusted and dogmatic, and slaveholding was practiced among the members. Benezet's stand against this institution was directed to his own religious sect as well as all of society.

His crusade consisted of his work in Quaker committees, his accumulation and distribution of contemporary antislavery writings, his appeals to colonial legislators and political managers, and his influential correspondence with the outstanding British antislavery leaders. The heart of his crusade, however, was his unique and progressive philosophy.
INTRODUCTION

There are instances in which men, influential and respected in their own times, have been relegated in historical study to comparative obscurity and insignificance. This is true of the eighteenth-century Quaker antislavery leader, Anthony Benezet. Benezet and his work, especially his writings, generally have been overlooked by historians, who have concentrated on the figure of John Woolman. It is true that Woolman's journal remains important in revealing the Quaker personality and that his overpowering piety is almost an idealization of the Quaker type. His antislavery efforts, however, were largely confined to the Quaker sect itself. Benezet, on the other hand, worked with British reformers and colonial political leaders as well as with the Quakers. As a propagandist and especially as the author of a sophisticated antislavery thesis, Benezet merits greater scrutiny than heretofore received.

Working tirelessly in Quaker committees, petitioning colonial legislatures, distributing writings throughout America, maintaining a close correspondence with most of the British crusaders against slavery, Benezet made an important contribution to the antislavery impulse which elicited public response in the form of laws providing for gradual abolition of slaves and efforts to end the slave trade itself. As a writer he formulated a refined antislavery message grounded on a conviction of Negro equality and geared to certain philosophical tendencies of his age.
The wall of color caste, already anchored in the eighteenth century by a dogma of racial inferiority, saw the Negro as little more than an ape and destined only for servile labor under the whites. Utilizing his experiences with the Negroes as a teacher, his Quaker beliefs in human equalitarianism, and various reports of men who had seen Africa and its civilization, Benezet gave convincing arguments against any slaveholder who would say that the Negro was in his natural condition as a slave.

Benezet lived in a period of intellectual complexity. Rationalism, Newtonian thought, and natural rights took their stand beside old theological belief. To many individuals the two ways of looking at the world appeared incompatible. To other individuals they were complementary. From this complexity of thought, many different intellectual roads were open. A Jonathan Edwards, the towering figure of Great Awakening revivalism, could use empirical method to support basic Calvinistic beliefs. A Charles Chauncy could embrace a liberal religion which demanded intellectual scrutiny and emphasized salvation through study, observation, and instruction. Others could reject the growing trend toward rationalism and the assertion of man's inherent liberties and cling only to dogmatic religious tenets. Still others could emphasize morality, natural rights, and the innate greatness of man and choose to see a God only in terms of a first cause or an obscure force.

Benezet's antislavery philosophy reflected this confrontation of religious belief and the emerging theories of natural rights generated
by the Enlightenment. He still looked at the nature of man, his place in society, and his destiny through a basic acceptance of Quakerism. This faith, in the terms of contemporary considerations, was an "enthusiastic" religion; that is, it emphasized God working in man, directly inspiring individual effort through revelation. Benezet's inclinations always remained religious, and his antislavery writings show this. He also, however, found value in the discussions of the natural rights of man that were being forwarded in the revolutionary America of his time. Through his reconciliation of these ideas with his belief in the kind of primitive religion in evidence during the Great Awakening, Benezet represents an age that was witness to varying philosophical attempts to come to grips with the relationship of man to his world. In this sense, his coherent and logical statement against slavery may be seen as a reflection of his age.

Benezet was not a "typical" Quaker. Indeed, slaveholding was widely practiced among individual Quakers when Benezet came to America. His was a peculiarly individualistic effort to end a social institution embedded even in his own religious group.

There is still a great need for an adequate biography of Benezet. The most recent attempt, *Friend Anthony Benezet* by George Brookes, sees him in a cultural vacuum. Any figure must be considered in relationship to the times in which he lived and the emotional, psychological, and cultural atmosphere of his contemporary society. This book fails miserably in this regard.
Benezet was a unique and very important individual in the American antislavery movement. His work must be seen in the light of the society and the philosophical influences surrounding him. This thesis will attempt to indicate the scope of Benezet's work and the manner in which his philosophy reflected certain intellectual tendencies of his age.
CHAPTER I

COLONIAL AMERICA AND THE NEGRO

Supported by law, custom, and economic expediency, slavery was firmly entrenched in American society in the eighteenth century. In order to comprehend the significance of Anthony Benezet's campaign against this institution, it is necessary to understand something of its nature.

The slow but persistent growth of slavery in the colonies reflected the need for a dependable labor supply. Indentured servitude proved unsatisfactory to the exigencies of an emerging large-scale plantation production of tobacco and other money crops. The limited length of service for these persons, the problem of control over men often unruly and inclined occasionally to disappear, and the increasing price of free labor forced planters to look for a new labor system.

The advantages of Negro slavery were obvious. The Negro could be forced to serve for life. He constantly added to his own supply through breeding. He was less expensive to feed and clothe. His color, origin, and culture were early objects of prejudice. He was generally considered to be sub-human. He could not easily run away to merge into a predominantly white community.\(^1\) The work which had

been assigned to white indentured servants before 1675 was now delegated to the blacks. By 1715 one third of the total population of Virginia, Carolina, and Maryland was slave.¹

The status of the slave was clearly defined. In most states he was not to leave the plantation without permission. He was forbidden to keep personal property or real estate. He was not permitted to work for pay, to buy or sell anything, or to wear clothes other than the cloth that was given to him by the master. Runaway slaves were whipped. For repeated offenses they were branded, mutilated, and killed with relative impunity. They were not tried in regular courts. Indeed, a slave could be convicted of a capital offense on the oath of two witnesses without benefit of a jury. He was denied the right of education, marriage, and parental responsibility. His body was entirely the possession of the master.² His right to worship was generally denied. The Swedish traveler Peter Kalm wrote, "It is greatly to be pitied, that the masters of these Negroes in most of the English colonies take little care of their spiritual welfare, and let them live on in their spiritual darkness."³

As the demand for more Negroes grew in the colonies, the methods for acquiring them became more elaborate. Originally, traders would


cruise down the west coast of Africa garnering wax, gold, ivory, and slaves as the supply of these commodities at the villages afforded. This proved to be a cumbersome operation, as often traders would be forced to spend valuable weeks in filling their ships. The problem was redressed with the creation of trading factories, small European settlements designed to promote slave-hunting expeditions. At these factories were warehouses for storage purposes.

Trading with village chieftains for liquor, cloth, and ornaments, the men at these settlements encouraged inter-tribal wars and kidnapping. The hunt became big business with hordes of blacks, savoring thoughts of more liquor and trinkets, constantly penetrating further into the interior. Thomas Clarkson, a British antislavery leader, wrote of the loss of lives forged by these contrived wars. He said, "Where ten were supposed to be taken, an hundred, including the victors and vanquished, might be supposed to perish."6

Herded to the warehouses after capture, these Negroes waited. Slave ships arrived, the business transactions were settled, and the slaves were wedged into the holds. The absence of good food, the lack of sanitation, the crowded conditions, and the weeks at sea, typical of the "Middle Passage," resulted in many deaths. Teeming masses of people suffering almost any ailment from seasickness to scurvy and

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5 W. O. Blake, The History of Slavery and the Slave Trade (Columbus, 1858), pp. 98-99.

smallpox reminded one ship's doctor of a slaughterhouse. He wrote, "It is not in the power of the human imagination to picture a situation more dreadful or disgusting." One sailor described the slaves as "packed like herring on shelves. The shrieks and groans of the stifling wretches below echoed our orgies above."

The weaker Negroes submitted; the stronger ones tried to fight back. The Newport Mercury of September 16, 1765 reported the usual results of such attempts. It gave an account of an uprising which was "happily prevented by the Captain and his men, who killed, wounded and forced overboard, Eighty of them which obliged the rest to submit."

The losses of slaves through disease, suicide, attempts at rebellion, and despondency were staggering. The ships kept coming, however, and the slave population continued to grow. At the time of the Declaration of Independence there were nearly seven hundred thousand slaves in the North American colonies. The majority of these were in the South.

The fact of a mass of discontented, suffering, and desperate people engendered the incessant fear of slave uprising, and absolute

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7 Quoted in George Francis Dow, Slave Ships and Slaving (Salem, Mass., 1927), pp. 146-147.
8 Ibid., pp. 241-242.
control of the slave population was imperative. The threat of a massive slave revolt brought an incomprehensible fear to the masters. This strange black assemblage, more valuable than cattle but inclined to defiance, held the key to the planter's success; it, however, haunted him with nagging guilt and genuine dread. As plantations grew and slave forces increased in size, the threat of rebellion seemed greater. The masters tried to instill docility either through a kind of perverted religion which taught the slaves that they were cursed on earth but had hope in an after life or by heinous intimidation and punishment. After an attempted slave uprising in New Orleans in 1732, the heads of four men and one woman were displayed on poles as a warning to the slaves in that area.  

The dependence on slavery grew. In the South would be the nurturing-ground for a complex system of forced labor that would become valuable in itself. It would become a sectional symbol, a rallying-cry for both antagonists and defenders. It would be a loved evil and a mysterious obsession. In the eighteenth century, however, slave-holding also embraced the North. The sugar, molasses, and rum trades and the shipbuilding and fishing industries were considerably conditioned by the slave trade, and a suppression of it would throw thousands of seamen out of work and would leave hundreds of ships rotting in the harbors. Even in Pennsylvania, where German and Quaker interests encouraged humane treatment, freedom, and acculturation of the Negroes,

11Aptheker, American Negro Slave Revolts, p. 182.
Slavery was definitely in favor. The spectacle of the "drove," two slaves tied abreast, was a common one even in the Quaker City of Philadelphia.

Slavery was not a mere infant addiction but a fixed institution in America when Anthony Benezet arrived in 1731 with his French Huguenot father. Its continued growth seemed imminent.

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CHAPTER II
THE QUAKER AND HIS CRUSADE

In his fight against slavery Anthony Benezet seemed driven by a profound sense of mission, of making a contribution, meaningful and relevant to the values he accepted for himself. These values are revealed in the early experiences of his life before he set himself actively to work against slavery. They are explicitly seen in the ideas of the Quaker religion which he fervently accepted. They are especially disclosed in his manner of living and in the apparently trifling things that he said and did. In considering Benezet's passionate antislavery crusade, it is important to examine his background, the nature of the religion important to him, and certain characteristics of his unique personality.

Born at St. Quintin, France in 1713, Anthony Benezet was taken to Holland and then to England by his Huguenot father in search of religious asylum. In 1685 the revocation of the Edict of Nantes left French Protestants in a persecuted and intolerable state, and thousands evacuated the country. While in England, at the age of fourteen, young Anthony decided to become a member of the Society of Friends. When he was eighteen, Benezet migrated with his family to America and
William Penn's Quaker colony of Pennsylvania, known widely for its toleration of all religious sects.1

Benezet had served an apprenticeship in a mercantile house in London. When he arrived at Philadelphia, however, he rejected a career in trade to become a schoolteacher. This was the beginning of a career that would span his lifetime.2

As a teacher, he left a lasting influence on Pennsylvania educational history, at least in classroom technique. The conventional method of instruction in the classroom was based on control and rigid discipline of the students. Benezet encouraged self-assertion. His liberal approach to education, however, did not include the study of subjects he considered impractical. For example, he opposed the study of foreign languages and the classical authors such as Ovid, Homer, and Virgil who, in his opinion, nourished dangerous passions.3

1Roberts Vaux, Memoirs of the Life of Anthony Benezet (Philadelphia, 1817), pp. 10-14. This book is the earliest compilation of Benezet's letters and tracts. It is far from comprehensive.


3To John Pemberton, May 29, 1783, George Brookes, Friend Anthony Benezet (Philadelphia, 1937), pp. 389-390. This book is valuable for the long section containing letters and other documents written by Benezet. The first part of the book is a biographical account of Benezet's life and is distinct from the collection of Benezet's original writings at the end. For this thesis, both sections of Brookes' book were consulted. If a footnote in the thesis cites only page numbers, reference is to the biographical section of his book. If the footnote indicates that a letter was used, it is referring to the last section of Brookes' work.
In 1755, during the French and Indian War, the French Acadians of Nova Scotia were expelled from their country, because they refused to take a fidelity oath to the King of Britain. Accused of aiding the French cause, they were scattered throughout the American colonies with little chance for self-support. The hundreds that arrived in Philadelphia became relatively dependent on Benezet's helpful influence. He went from door to door soliciting funds. He wrote articles describing their pitiful condition and asking for aid. He was chosen by the Governor's Council to attend to their needs for food. He conducted small private classes in an effort to teach these French people how to earn a living in the American colonies. Many of them died, but Benezet's work was inestimatable to those who lived.  

He began to write tracts on many subjects. He wrote against war, "the teeming womb of mischief." He assailed liquor, the "burning spirits, the use of which bring on many fatal diseases, such as fevers, jaundice, dropsies, consumptions..." He became very disturbed about the Indian problem. Holding gatherings at his home, attending Quaker meetings, talking personally with many Indians themselves, he tried to promote some kind of understanding between the two races in Pennsylvania.

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4Ibid., pp. 66-74.
His feeling for the Indian would be echoed later in his fight for the slave. No man is actually a savage.

Benezet's choice of a teaching career, his work in helping the Acadians and the Indians, and his other humanitarian concerns are reflective of the ideals of his religion. Quakerism had deep importance for Benezet, and to understand his ideas of man and his nature it is necessary to examine the beliefs of this sect. Based directly on the value of the individual, this faith was a branch of Protestantism, and, therefore, sought a sweeping away of the intermediaries of Pope, priests, and saints. In this need for direct contact with the divine source, however, it surpassed simple Puritan practices.

The root of Quakerism lies in the doctrine of Inner Light. In the soul of each human being there is something of the divine, an innate sense of God's reality and inspiration. Emphasizing a mystical and personal experience with God at the center of the individual personality, the sect encourages a losing of the self in that which is infinite and eternal. Robert Barclay, author of a definitive theological tract, An Apology for the Principles and Doctrines of the People called Quakers, said, "He dwelleth with you and shall be in you." The principal founder of the Quakers, George Fox, remembered that he was "taken up in the love of God...it was opened unto me by the eternal Light and power, and I therein saw clearly that all was done...and to be done in and by Christ."
Quakers were opposed to ritualism, numerous sacraments, and ecclesiasticism. They supported the priesthood of believers, intin-erant clergy, prayer from inspiration, and direct access and inter-pretation of Scripture. Religion was a personal experience; it was not a blind following of theological doctrine.

The Quakers were scoffed at and rebuked by religious leaders as well as laymen. Here was a group of people that based religion and faith on the justification of merely knowing, with no relation to works or doctrine. It was a simple faith for common people.

Quakerism affirmed constantly the determination to establish a community based on the moral worth of each person, in his capability of being influenced by the vision of the Inner Light and of his divine nature as a part and creation of God. The apparent trivialities in the Quaker code of conduct, such as the refusal to take oaths and to remove the hat, are representative of the conscious effort to affirm this individual dignity. George Fox wrote, "Moreover when the Lord sent me forth into the world, he forbade me to put off my hat to any, high or low; and I was required to 'thee' and 'thou' all men and women, without any respect to rich or poor, great or small." This elevation of human worth in the Quaker belief led to social

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10 Nickalls, ed., p. 36.
sensitivity and to humanitarian efforts toward Indians, the poor, and especially the Negroes.

With his Huguenot parentage and experiences and his reliance upon these Quaker ideals, Benezet developed an indomitable spirit against intolerance. It seemed as if he searched for any oppressed or downtrodden person to help. He was a unique individual. His rigid values are seen in statements of his contemporaries and certain of his eccentric practices.

Frail and slight, Benezet often remarked about his ugliness.

Sarah Fisher, the wife of a prominent Philadelphia Quaker, reflected:

He is one instance among many how careful we ought to be not to let outward appearance prejudice us in disfavor of any person, his being nothing by any means pleasing, yet we find in him a mind enlarged by universal benevolence and true charity, an extensive knowledge improved by reading and observation, an unbounded desire of doing good, as far as his situation in life will admit of and to crown all is a sincere Christian. 11

Benezet set for himself high principles which he fully intended to follow. He structured for himself a code of conduct based on simplicity and charity and steeped in love. He seemed to respect everything that was alive almost to the point of absurdity. His house in Philadelphia was at one time nearly overrun with rats, principally because Benezet would feed them. A friend walked into his home one day to find Benezet standing in the center of the room throwing feed

to a group of these rodents much as one would feed chickens. He told
his visitor that men make thieves of the rats by maltreating and
starving them; Benezet was determined to make them "honest." 12

In his later years, Benezet refused to eat any meat and spent
his few spare moments raising a vegetable garden. Asked once to eat
poultry at his brother's house, he exclaimed, "What! would you have
me to eat my neighbours?" 13

If his consideration for animals was great, his consideration
for human beings was unbounded. The eminent Doctor Benjamin Rush of
Philadelphia wrote, "This amiable citizen considered his fellow-
creature, man, as God's extract, from his own works; and, whether
this image of himself, was cut out from ebony or copper - whether he
spoke his own or a foreign language or whether he worshipped his Maker
with ceremonies, or without them, he still considered him a brother..." 14

Wearing very simple clothes, living in a humble house, he talked
with beggars as well as political leaders. The Marquis de Barbe'-
Marbois, the secretary of the French legation in Philadelphia, wrote,
"For who could have lived a month in Philadelphia without knowing
Anthony Benezet." Ascribing to Benezet "intelligence, wit and fire,"

13 Ibid.
14 Dagabert Runes, ed., The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush
Barbe'-Marbois said, "He deserves as much respect as any man on the face of the earth."\textsuperscript{15}

Benezet was obsessed with man's duty. He detested waste whether it be of money or energy. He saw the idle rich and the affluent devoting many hours to balls and social delicacies. He saw the community leaders becoming continually more secular. He saw great potential sources of social betterment frittered away on levity. Why, with so large a field for improvement in society, should those with money and influence stand useless?\textsuperscript{16} Benezet frequently told of a person who was buried with several thousand dollars beside him in his grave.\textsuperscript{17}

Benezet had a vision of God's plan but was fearful of defiling it. He wrote that "one can distinguish the furniture of it, yet shall he presume, while clothed in rags, to enter therein."\textsuperscript{18} Like many men who constantly try rigidly to pattern their lives to a prescribed mold, Benezet oscillated between confidence and despair. Always wavering between the certainty that he was God's worker and the doubts about existence which plague every man, he revealed a temperament sometimes naive and irrational, often amusing, usually sympathetic and respectable.

He was a tireless worker, urging himself forward in activities which, to him, seemed solemn, urgent, and essential. He never felt

\textsuperscript{15} Eugene P. Chase, ed., \textit{Our Revolutionary Forefathers: The Letters of Francois, Marquis de Barbe'-Marbois} (New York, 1929), pp. 138-139.

\textsuperscript{16} To Samuel Fothergill, November 27, 1758, Brookes, p. 229.

\textsuperscript{17} Vaux, pp. 130-134.

\textsuperscript{18} To Samuel Fothergill, October 1, 1757, Brookes, p. 222.
that he had done enough or that he was worthy of any homage in this life or the next. Sometimes very critical of other people, he would lash out, in his quiet way, at practices which to some people seemed quite innocuous such as social drink or women's dresses that trailed on the floor. This was the disposition of a simple but intelligent Quaker, aware of the theological demands of his religion and tempered by a wide range of conditioning experience. All of his philosophical inclinations were antagonistic to human slavery; any of them may have triggered his determined impulse to overtly attack it.

Perhaps it was the memories of a child running with his father from hate and narrowness. Perhaps it was the power of a tolerant religion that spoke of sympathy and respect. Perhaps it was the gradual corroboration of all that he had before believed - that men were men, whether they were Catholic or Protestant; whether English or French; whether Indian or Negro. As he read articles written by travelers and agents in the West Indies and Africa, he was revolted. His concern drove him to the farms to talk with the masters and slaves; to the wharves where the slave ships docked; to the homes of the free Negroes; to the lodgings of travelers; to the Pennsylvania legislators. He talked with influential men and paupers trying to inform himself of the actual conditions involved in the trade. This would be his consuming work, and he zealously set himself to it.

Using pamphlets, articles, letters, and books, he began a warfare of words that would continually escalate. It would establish him as the most important American antislavery propagandist of the eighteenth century.
Interest in antislavery grew from the early years of William Penn and George Fox. Many individuals, from colonial leaders such as Cotton Mather to schismatics such as George Keith, spoke of the harsh abuses of slavery and its inconsistency with the Christian religion and common humanity.

Within the Society of Friends, persistent agitation by various members resulted in the disownment of some but also led to a progressively liberal stand on the slave issue. A growing force of workers against the trade began to resist the conservative stamina of inaction and moral apathy. A system of committees was developed to work locally in inducing Quaker slaveholders to consideration and possible abandonment of the practice. By friendly query, by testimonies in open meetings, the Quakers were reminded of their religion and of the impiety generated by slavery. The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and the London Yearly Meeting exchanged various tracts for reprinting which condemned the slave trade and the slave system and promoted measures among their own sect. 19

In 1754 an essay by John Woolman, submitted to the Yearly Meeting by Benezet, was used as the annual message to be forwarded to every Yearly Meeting in America. Forcefully portraying the slave trade as a sin, Woolman described the cruelties inflicted on the slaves, the hardening of consciences in the masters, and the violation of the Golden

Rule and the tenor of Christianity. The message demanded from the slaveholders humane treatment to those unfortunates already slaves and a consideration of manumission.  

In 1766 Benezet wrote his first important tract against slavery, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, of which two thousand copies were sent to the Society of Friends in London. English Quakers lauded the book. Many of them began to visit community and political leaders. Some of them approached schools such as Eton, Westminster, and the Carterhouse. From these schools and others would emerge a nucleus of reformers that would see 1808 and the official end of the slave trade.  

Benezet worked feverishly in Quaker committees, scurrying from place to place in Philadelphia with antislavery writings of various authors in one hand and his own in the other. In 1763, while heading Quaker antislavery forces in Philadelphia, Benezet represented his city at the Yearly Meeting in Flushing, New York.  

In 1768 Benezet wrote to the Society for the Propogating of the Gospel. This organization, established in England in 1701, tried to spread religious instruction in several parts of the world. It

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20 *An Epistle of Caution and Advice Concerning the Buying and Keeping of Slaves* (Philadelphia, 1754). This essay was credited to Benezet by Brookes, pp. 80-81. I have accepted the more recent evidence of Drake, pp. 55-57 and Dwight L. Dumond, *A Bibliography of Antislavery in America* that Woolman composed it. See also Gummere, pp. 344-346.


22 To John Smith, May 8, 1763, Brookes, p. 248.
urged slave conversion. Slaves should be taught to read, write, and study Scripture. The Society did not, however, suggest manumission. Benezet's letter pleading for an effort on the Society's part to end the trade, was answered with a carefully worded demand that Benezet discontinue his work. The slaves should be treated with kindness and affection, but the practice must not be condemned as unlawful. Masters would become more cruel if slavery were attacked. Slaves would be incited toward rebellion. The Society feared agitators. Benezet had only begun.

Benezet felt he could help the antislavery cause in another medium. Perhaps if he used his skills as a teacher to train young Negroes a fracture might be made into the crusted ideas of race inferiority. In 1770 he became the important figure in the establishment and operation of a Negro school. Classes were later moved into his own house for two years. Writing in 1783 to Benjamin Franklin of his work with the Negroes, he could say, "though not attended with so great pecuniary advantages as others might be, yet it affords me much satisfaction. I know no station in life I should prefer before it." In 1772, Benezet's *Some Historical Account of Guinea* was published. A long, plodding compilation of facts and quotes, this treatise was the most exhaustive effort yet made in describing the

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24 Quarles, p. 43.

25 To Benjamin Franklin, March 5, 1783, Brookes, p. 387.
African culture from which the slaves were extracted and the methods used for their extraction. One interested reader of the book was the Methodist leader, John Wesley. Apparently stirred by the cruelties involved in the trade, Wesley wrote his own *Thoughts on Slavery* in 1774, a very similar exaggerated account of a tranquil Guinea, basking as an Eden-like paradise before the Fall. If the picture was overdrawn, it was, however, incisive. Wesley's book was reprinted by Benezet in Philadelphia, and the little Quaker wrote to Wesley acknowledging it as "striking."26

Giving a prestigious name to the antislavery movement in England, Wesley would work for the Negro cause for the rest of his life. The Methodist Church would become known for its mixed congregations.27

One of Wesley's last letters was to William Wilberforce, one of the leaders of the British antislavery movement, charging him to "Go, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American Slavery, the vilest that ever saw the sun, shall vanish away before it."28

Another Englishman, Granville Sharp, became involved in the abolitionist movement. Working in 1765 in an obscure government office, this former linen-draper had doctored a beaten and abandoned slave to

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26 To John Wesley, May 23, 1774, Brookes, p. 318.
health. After the slave recovered, he was recaptured by his former owner. Sharp, who had earlier rejected a career in law because of his poor public speaking abilities, futilely appealed to the authorities for the release of the slave. This incident stirred Sharp to a detailed study of law and dedication to antislavery which would make him one of the most important British abolitionists.

Sharp became internationally recognized as a result of the Somerset Case. James Somerset, a Virginia Negro in England with his master, had escaped and had been recaptured. Basing the Negro's right to freedom on his stay in England, Sharp decided to make this a test case for the legal state of slavery in England. Lord Chief Justice Mansfield issued his verdict on June 22, 1772. There was no positive law sanctioning slavery in England. Somerset was released. Slavery in England was illegal.  

Applying to legislators and jurists for an end to the slave trade, Sharp became a tireless antislavery leader. Exchanging letters, books, and ideas with him, Anthony Benezet became his close correspondent. Sharp reprinted several of Benezet's books in England, books that did not sell well on the foreign commercial market. Sharp gave many of them away, however, distributing them largely at his own expense. He wrote that Benezet, although involved in the "errors of Quakerism," was universally respected and had a "large and extensive acquaintance."  

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30 Sharp to Benjamin Rush, February 21, 1774, Brookes, p. 447.
31 Brookes, p. 89.
Sharp's mind dwelled upon slavery, and his hatred intensified. His arguments became virulent and urgent. He wrote An Appendix to the Representation against Slavery in which he defended those who felt it their duty to protect runaway slaves. Laying his case on English common law which recognized that "inferior must give place to superior" and the Biblical law that "Thou shall not deliver unto his master a servant that is escaped from his master unto thee," Sharp suggested that this protection for fugitive slaves be applied in America. Benezet wrote to Benjamin Rush asking whether he should publish the letter. Rush, far more temperate than the pugnacious Sharp, knew intimately the irascibility of the slaveowners on this particular point. He answered Benezet's letter saying, "They would knock us on the head if we did!" Benezet filed the letter for possible future use.

Benjamin Franklin offered encouragement from London. After receiving an inquiring letter from the Quaker, Franklin wrote, "Your labours have already been attended with great effects. I hope, therefore, you and your friends will be encouraged to proceed. My hearty wishes of success attend you..."

Doctor Benjamin Rush, a refined and scholarly Philadelphia physician and humanitarian, was prompted by Benezet in 1773 to write against slavery. He published An Address to the Inhabitants of the

33 Brookes, p. 422.
Proposing a dissolution of the slave trade by action of Parliament, Rush referred to the African Company as an "incorporated band of robbers." Robert Pleasants, a planter on the upper James River and influential Quaker antislavery leader in Virginia, wrote to Benezet about Rush's tract. He said, "I think the Phisition has handled the subject of Slavery in a masterly manner, altho I suppose he may have very little to expect to share with his antagonist the thanks of the African Co., but let that be as it may he will receive what I expect will be more agreeable to him, the approbation of juditious and sencible man." Benezet continued his incessant correspondence with English Friends and antislavery leaders. He read almanacs, newspapers, and pamphlets concerning the slave trade and looked for any circumstances in which he might make himself useful. He wrote a letter to the Countess of Huntingdon, who, at the recommendation of George Whitefield, had founded the Orphan-house, a college for the indigent near Savannah. After the death of Whitefield, the new managers inverted a humane enterprise by buying slaves to labor in the college's rice and indigo plantations. Benezet wrote to the Countess imploring her to take action.

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35 (Norwich 1775), pp. 6-12.

36 From Robert Pleasants, February 22, 1774, Brookes, p. 426.
She replied that she had no willingness to approve such barbarism as slavery and that she would prohibit it.  

The increasing conflicts between England and the colonies and the surge of a native drive toward self-sufficiency in America created an incendiary situation which had already exploded at the "Boston Massacre." Men such as Otis, Henry, and Dickinson had been heard and widely believed. The drift toward revolution became obvious; the streams of differences and misunderstanding were rapidly expanding, and pamphlet warfare, fiery speeches, and street-corner talk interested the layman far more in the meanings of government and of his civic place than ever before. It was a period of excitement, fear, and uncertainty. The Boston Tea Party prompted Lord North's Coercive Acts and the closing of the port of Boston. Jefferson's A Summary View denounced all Parliamentary regulation. The gradual development of American political ideas and the British failure to understand them guided the colonies to the edge of independence. At the same time, the American Quaker was finding his pacific vows difficult to reconcile to a revolutionary world and, many times, even to himself. Some Quakers abandoned their anti-war principles and fought with the revolutionists. The majority, however, remained neutral. Most of them endured scathing sarcasm, physical hounding, and loss of property. Several were banished from Pennsylvania on being suspected of aiding the British war effort. The Quakers had a fervent testimony

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against war to uphold, and most of them persisted in their efforts throughout the war. Benezet wrote a tract against war in this period, but his overwhelming worry was still the slave question.

The date 1776 has been memorialized by Americans. The break with the mother country was declared, and America trusted her fate to a ragged army. The year also brought from the Quaker leadership in Philadelphia an overt demand that slavery among the membership be ended. From the time of this yearly Meeting announcement, any Quaker who continued to hold slaves would be issued a statute of excommunication. No longer was the exhortation against the Quaker citizenry a request; it was now a demand.

In 1778 Benezet wrote *Serious Considerations on Several Important Subjects*. A register of the troubled revolutionary times, this tract impugned war, spirituous liquors, and slavery.

By 1780 the tedious series of antislavery writings, the protracted struggle over slavery within the Society of Friends, the relative dispensability of slave labor in Pennsylvania, and the prevailing liberal sentiment against the institution resulted in the passage of an act in that state for the gradual emancipation of slavery. At a time when Revolutionary War antagonism did not endear the Quakers to public sentiment, Benezet had patiently interviewed every member of the predomin-

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inately Presbyterian legislature before the act's adoption. All children born in Pennsylvania thereafter were to be free, and all previously born children of slave or mulatto mothers were to be designated servants until the age of twenty-eight. Owners were compelled to register slaves by November 1, 1780. All Negroes were to have equality with the whites before the law and in the courts. It was a great victory for Benezet and the abolitionist forces in Pennsylvania, but it was merely a beginning.

The end of the Revolution brought refreshing relief for merchants and traders now freed from war restrictions and demands, and slave traders resumed their activity at a wild pace. Coming from either the eastern Caribbean islands or Africa, new loads of blacks hit the American shores welcomed by planters anxious to build new wealth from the raw beginnings of independence.

Anthony Benezet, now over seventy, addressed a poignant letter to the Queen of Great Britain pleading for royal intervention to end the trade. He wrote:

I hope thou wilt kindly excuse the freedom used on this occasion by an ancient man, whose mind, for more than 40 years past, has been much separated from the common intercourse of the world, and long painfully exercised in the consideration of the miseries under which so large a part of mankind, equally with us the objects of redeeming

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40 Vaux, p. 103.
41 Brookes, p. 108.
love, are suffering the most unjust and grievous oppression, and who sincerely desires thy temporal and eternal felicity, and that of thy royal consort.

The letter was delivered by the influential painter, Benjamin West, from whom the Queen had heard of the integrity of the little Quaker abolitionist. Little tangible result was effected by it.

In 1785, however, a student at the University of Cambridge, trying to gather information for a Latin dissertation that would be submitted for the senior prize at the school, read An Historical Account of Guinea. Thomas Clarkson wrote that in the book "I found almost all I wanted... I obtained by means of it a knowledge of, and gained access to the great authorities of Adamson, Moor, Barbot, Smith, Bosman and others."

Clarkson's essay was a dull, ponderous, and exaggerated account of the slave trade from antiquity to the eighteenth century. It attempted to prove, among other things, that the black of the Negro was caused entirely by climate, the rays of the sun striking mucous substances of the skin. He called this pigmentation a "universal freckle."

The essay was, however, potent. Giving relevant information, much of it gleaned from Benezet's book, it forcefully declared, "For

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43 To Charlotte, Queen of Great Britain, August 25, 1783, Brookes, p. 402.
44 Woodson, p. 49.
46 Clarkson, Essay, p. 103.
if liberty is only an adventitious right; if men are by no means superior to brutes; if every social duty is a curse; if cruelty is highly to be esteemed; if murder is strictly honourable and Christianity is a lye: then it is evident that the African slavery may be pursued."

The work on the book seriously affected Clarkson. The injustice and evil of slavery irritated him deeply. He would become one of the leaders of the British antislavery campaign, who, with men such as Wilberforce and Buxton, would struggle for British laws against the trade and against the institution itself. 48

The final abolition of the slave trade would officially come in 1808; slavery in the British colonies in 1838. These things Anthony Benezet did not see, for in May, 1784, he succumbed to old age and years of hard work. He was mourned by the largest funeral assemblage that the city of Philadelphia had ever seen. Among those people were those to whom he had given so much of himself, the Negroes. Hundreds of them stood there remembering his kindness and understanding. 49

The drive to end slavery moved on after the death of Benezet. An early abolitionist organization that he had led, the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, was expanded in 1784 with Franklin as its president. Printing tracts and other foreign articles, petitioning legislators and governors, this society, now called the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery,

48 See especially Sherrard.
49 Brookes, pp. 158-167.
stimulated the growth of organized abolitionist activities in other states. Benezet had left his entire estate, after the death of his wife, to Quakers in charge of educational funds for the establishment of an evening school for Negro, Mulatto, and Indian children. The Pennsylvania Society supplemented these funds and built other schools.

The Quaker sect was now ardently behind abolitionism. The Friends established schools for Negro children and adults; they formed committees to aid in helping the Negro to prepare for freedom. In generously compensating the Negroes whom they freed, the Quakers demonstrated the power of an idealism finally channeled in one direction. Most of the Negroes released by the Quakers returned to work with their former owners for wages. Most of them worked harder, and the owners found the plantations to be more profitable.

Hector St. John de Crevecoeur wrote of his recollections of the Quakers after the war. He remembered talking to the botanist John Bartram and seeing the Negroes eating at the tables of whites, working together with them in the fields, and learning to read and write. He wrote that "this is the most philosophical treatment of Negroes that I have heard of." It must have been a welcome palliative for the horrors...
he had seen in the South, especially the live Negro caged in a tree who was literally being eaten by birds and insects.  

The influence of Benezet extended not only through his writings and personal appeals; it extended through the work of his students. Several of them became important leaders in the antislavery movement.

William Dillwyn, who had been employed by Benezet as an amanuensis, later worked in England exchanging ideas with other leaders, petitioning Parliament, and working in his own propaganda group.  

Richard Allen and Absalom Jones established the Free African Society, an organization modeled after Quaker religious practices and devoted to charity, religious worship, and education.

Benezet had written for the world's ear, and the world had listened. At his simple brick house in Philadelphia he had talked with almost every foreigner of distinction who visited his city. His was a kind of front-porch campaign that had international implications. From his city he had directed an incessant stream of agitation throughout the American colonies and England.

Benjamin Rush wrote that Anthony Benezet stood alone in Philadelphia at one time in opposing slavery.  

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55 Kraus, p. 62.


57 Vaux, p. 154.
de Warville, a French revolutionary leader of the Paris Commune and Gerondin Party and organizer of the abolitionist society, Les Amis des Noirs, asked, "Where is the man in all Europe of whatever rank or birth, who is equal to Benezet."  

Benezet's international influence was marked. Those British antislavery leaders who did so much to end the slave trade, men such as Sharp, Clarkson, and Wesley, circulated his pamphlets and tracts. They wrote to him frequently for advice. In America, he was a primary and directing force in informing the country of the evils of slavery and of providing a concrete and pungent philosophy against it.

The era of the Revolution brought manumission to many slaves as a result of their service in the American armed service. Most of all, the liberal offensive directed against British parliamentary authority and its subjugation of human rights brought a similar sortie against the mischief of slavery. With Benezet at the center of the activity, new laws in New England and the Middle Colonies cut some of the heart from the giant sore, and new antislavery societies emerged to try to bring its final collapse. After Benezet's death, frequent slave petitions were brought before state legislatures in an effort to secure freedom for individual persons. Various groups constantly

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59 See the excellent review of the Negro situation at the time of the Revolution in Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution.*
lobbied in state legislatures. For a time it seemed as if slavery's extermination were near. The failure of the Constitutional Convention to outlaw it and the subsequent rise of King Cotton would bring its Southern institutionalization and the days of another generation.
CHAPTER III
EMERGING ABOLITIONIST CONCEPTS

Anthony Benezet fashioned his antislavery philosophy on many factors - his own personal experiences and the attitudes built from them, specific conditions and dispositions of contemporary society, and the record of abolitionist literature left by his predecessors. The importance of the antislavery work done before him cannot be overlooked. His arguments were not plucked from a hidden intellectual well that was suddenly unearthed. A framework of reasoning, proof, and theme had been erected for half a century by earlier writers, and Benezet's thesis significantly manifested and expanded most of what these individuals had engrossed in their arguments.

Benezet's philosophy was one that echoed the philosophical tendencies of his day, and to see the development that he gave to the antislavery theme and the way in which he implanted it into the events and controversies of his own time, one must understand just what the early writers had said.

These men were mostly Quakers. Most were either ignored or harassed. They were individuals who recognized an evil through the camouflage of custom and set themselves, either quietly or fanatically, to attack it. From their arguments emerged a kind of pyramidal structure, some arguments establishing a base and the following ones adding to it.
In the seventeenth century there was derisive comment on slavery in the colonies from such leaders as Cotton Mather and William Penn. George Fox, the early Quaker leader, appealed to masters in Barbados to instruct their slaves in religion and to treat them humanely. William Edmundson, an Irish Quaker and a friend of Fox, encouraged education and religion for the slaves in order to make them less likely to rebel.¹

Almost all of the early objections were based on slavery's character and abuses and not upon the fact of its existence. Not until 1688 did a definitive statement effectively challenge the institution. In that year a group of immigrants from Kresheim, Germany, living in Pennsylvania, issued a trenchant formal protest against slavery. Telling of the fear that the little group had of being enslaved by Turkish pirates on their migration from the continent, they declared that buying, selling, and holding men in slavery was "irreconcilable with the precepts of the Christian religion." They told of the crimes of manstealing, of the separation of families, of the killings and the punishments, of the foul vices infused in men who set themselves up as diety. The Pennsylvania Germans pleaded for liberty of conscience and body for every man. They warned that prospective immigration from Holland and Germany would be impeded into Pennsylvania by the knowledge of slavery there. This Germantown Protest was favorably received by a monthly meeting of the Quakers at

Dublin, Pennsylvania; the Burlington Yearly Meeting, however, forestalled any positive action.  

In 1700 Chief Justice Samuel Sewall, in an attempt to limit slave importation into Boston, presented a memorial to the legislature which he called The Selling of Joseph. Seeing slaves included in the tax lists along with cattle, horses, and hogs, this lawyer and Christian was moved to write that all men are sons of Adam; that justification for slavery must rest only on punishment for crimes. Many of his arguments were pragmatic. The Negroes' constant yearning for freedom makes them unwilling servants; their racial differences will always prohibit any kind of tolerable assimilation in the white culture; the general welfare of the province demands that white indentured servants be used for labor purposes. His philosophical argument was based on Old Testament justice. He wrote, "Liberty is in real value next unto life."  

The essentially democratic character of the Quaker religion makes it understandable that most of the early abolitionists were of their sect. The idea of the divine origin of every individual directed their notions of the social structure. Holding another man as property is a sacrilege, a spoiling of a creation of God. With their coarse writings these men set the foundation for later writers and took the abuse and censure so often thrust on men who first fight any social

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2Appelgarth, p. 70. See also Watson, Vol. 1, p. 23; Drake, pp. 11-12; Spaid, p. 1186.

3Drake, p. 3. See also Blake, p. 176; Greene, p. 171.

4(Boston, 1700), pp. 2-3.
problem. Because of their work, other men would have at least some kind of respectability within which to work. If they were inclined to a too zealous and fanatical attack, they did, however, bring slavery to judgement. They loosened an entrenched acceptance of the institution, and men began to question if slavery were morally consistent with the values they held.

In 1715 a New Jersey Quaker, John Hepburn, wrote a short tract, *The American Defense of the Christian Golden Rule*. Hepburn attacked the labor without pay, the violence, the unlawful stealing and punishment of men, the family separations, the encouragement of war and murder, and the induced adultery, sin, and suicide.5

Contradicting the ideas of predestination, he wrote that God had given to all men free will. Christ did not die for those already saved; if he did, his death and religion, in general, would be in vain. God wills salvation to all. The Bible does not say that God so loved the elect, but that he loved the world. Men who hold other men in ignorance and abject poverty as slaves are corrupting their chance to know God and his commandments.6

In 1729 Ralph Sandiford, an immigrant from Liverpool, continued the Biblically-based antislavery attack. Frequently quoting from the Old Testament, constantly referring to the "Laws of God," he wrote that man owes protection to all of God's creatures, even to the oxen, bees, ants, and flies and that the Gospel pertains to all nations and

5 (New York, 1715), pp. 47-54.
6 Ibid.
people. He attacked the hypocrisy of the Quakers who held slaves. Ostracized by conservative Friends, sick with worry, Sandiford died at the age of forty.

In 1733 a young Quaker carpenter of Nantucket, Elihu Coleman, published his little pamphlet, *A Testimony Against that Antichristian Practice of Making Slaves of Men*. A rather moderate attack, it emphasized, as the earlier writings had done, the religious and Biblical unlawfulness of slavery. Coleman said that slavery was based on pride and love of idleness. He wrote that generally the rich own slaves so that "they might go with white Hands," and that their wives might "paint and adorn themselves." This was a foreshadowing of the later discussions by John Woolman of the effects of slaveholding on the masters.

In Ralph Sandiford's last days, his friend Benjamin Lay often visited him. An odd little hunchbacked eccentric, this Quaker abolitionist blamed Ralph Sandiford's death on the hounding he had received from slaveholders. A sometime farmer, storekeeper, and bookkeeper, Lay had visited the Holy Land, had had a personal interview with George II, and had held slaves in Barbados. Sickened by what slavery

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7 *A Brief Examination of the Practice of the Times* (Philadelphia, 1729), pp. 20-44.
8 Drake, pp. 41-43.
9 *(Boston, 1733)*, p. 16.
had done to him and what it had done to society, he went on a bizarre personal campaign to end it.

He kidnapped a slaveholder's son to show the father how Negroes must feel. He appeared at a Quaker meeting wearing a military coat and sword under his Quaker clothes and concealing a bladder of red liquid in a hollowed-out book. He rose during the meeting and, throwing off his Quaker clothes, thrust the sword through the book, spilling the liquid over astonished Friends. He cried, "It would be as justifiable in the sight of the Almighty if you should thrust a sword through their [slaves] hearts as I do through this book."  

Disillusioned with Quakers who held slaves, Lay moved out of Philadelphia to live in a cave six miles away, where he raised vegetables for food and flax for clothing. It was here he wrote a scathing denunciation of Quakers and ministers who held slaves. He called them "a Parcel of Hypocrites, and Deceivers...under the greatest appearance and Pretention to Religion and Sanctity that ever was in the World." He called his 278 page book, *All Slave-Keepers that keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates*. His assault was aimed at hypocrisy. He saw slaveholders "Riding, Drinking, Galloping about...Smoking, Snuffing, Chewing Tobacco...spending their precious time in their

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12 Drake, pp. 45-46.
13 Ibid., pp. 44-45.
master's (Satan's) Service." He saw ministers who "Preach more to Hell than they do to Heaven." The Yearly Meeting of 1738 publicly disowned the weird little hermit. He lived for twenty more years in his small cave and was able to learn of the decision of the Yearly Meeting to disown members who bought or sold slaves. Perhaps his work had not been completely in vain.

Veiled in Lay's virulent attack on slavery was the demand for slave education. If free, the Negroes must be able to subsist. They must be taught to read and write and to learn "some Honest Trade or Employment." Here was the seed of a practical program. It would take later writers to refine its implications.

John Woolman, a pious Mt. Holly, New Jersey tailor, appealed to relaxed persuasion. If Lay had attacked the slaveowners, Woolman attacked the institution. The differences in their antislavery campaigns reflected basic differences in their temperaments. Woolman was enthusiastic but gentle. He traveled through slave colonies, such as Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina, staying with slaveowners and trying to convince them that slavery was an abomination in the sight of God.

Reminding the members of the demands of their faith, he demonstrated by example the gentleness and understanding implicit in

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15 Ibid., p. 197.
16 Ibid., p. 106.
17 Drake, p. 46.
18 All Slave-Keepers, pp. 53-55.
19 Clarkson, Abolition of the Slave-Trade, pp. 120-128.
any man who faithfully lives by the Quaker code. Influential at meetings, gifted as a writer, he was able to impute to the antislavery attack an air of amiability. Compassionate and pacific, Woolman had a kind of impelling power that forced masters to reflect on his words and ideas. He, like the other early Quaker antislavery leaders, generally confined his work to the sect itself.

In his writings, Woolman recreated the horrible spectacle of slavery as well as any writer. His importance, however, in the swelling abolitionist theme was his affirmation of the effects that slavery procreated in the master. He wrote that "seed sown with the Tears of a confined oppressed People, Harvest cut down by an overborne discontented Reaper, makes Bread less sweet to the taste of an Honest Man."  

Identifying the foundation of the slave system as the love of luxury, he described the selfish and earthly passions that tend to dominate a man who thinks he owns another man. Such assumed power corrupts, and any man holding it finds his values blurred. He is crazed with an intoxicating sense of efficacy that destroys his ability to know himself or his world. Woolman wrote, "Selfishness being indulged, clouds the Understanding; and where selfish Men, for a long Time, proceed on their way without Opposition, the Deceivableness of Unrighteousness gets so rooted in their Intellects that a candid Examination of Things relating to Self-interest is prevented."  

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20 Considerations on Keeping Negroes (Philadelphia, 1762), p. 27.

21 Quoted in Gummere, ed., p. 367.
Woolman wrote of inherited sin, of the children reared in a slave atmosphere and "being Masters of Men in their Childhood."

Perhaps this was the most noxious effect, for it laid the foundation for future unquestioning acceptance of the institution and guaranteed its expansion.

There had been other early important antislavery agitators such as John Farmer, a visiting Englishman who appeared at various meetings demanding unconditional freedom for Negroes, and William Southeby, a Quaker convert from Catholicism who was censored by a Philadelphia Monthly Meeting in 1716, but their words echoed the arguments of men such as Sewell and Hepburn. By the middle of the eighteenth century the antislavery philosophy had gained considerable maturity. When Anthony Benezet began to take up his pen the worth of the slave had been argued as well as the moral evils of slavery. Violations of the Golden Rule and other Quaker and Biblical principles had been attacked. An embryonic vision of Negro preparation for freedom had been offered as well as a discussion of the effects of slavery on owners. The way had been prepared for a more sophisticated abolitionist philosophy, grounded on the basic ideas of former writers, but alluding to the prevailing attitudes and controversies of the times.

Anthony Benezet would write of the whippings, the continual labor, the plantation executions, the induced psychological degeneracy.

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22 Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes (Philadelphia, 1754), p. 16.

23 A Caution and Warning to Great Britain and Her Colonies (Philadelphia, 1767), pp. 21-32.
He would write of the hypocrisy of slaveowners professing the Christian religion. He would write of slaveowners' corruption, "that forgetfulness of God and insensitivity to every religious impression; as well as that general depravation of manners, which as much prevails in those colonies in proportion as they more or less enriched themselves at the expense of the blood and bondage of the Negroes." He would write of his plan for Negro freedom. Recognizing the dangers to both whites and Negroes in sudden mass manumission without preparation, he would offer a realistic design for Negro assimilation into the white culture. Slave importation should be immediately and unconditionally ended. Those Negroes already enslaved in the colonies should be released after a period of indentured service under which they would receive education and religious training. After obtaining their freedom, the Negroes would be resident under the care of the overseers of the poor who would give encouragement and help. A small tract of land would be granted to Negro families along with renumerations from the original owners as debts for previous service. Benezet would suggest colonization for the Negroes in the area west of the Alleghanies where there was rich opportunity for farming and fresh atmosphere for a new beginning.


25 Some Historical Account of Guinea (Philadelphia, 1771), p. 93. See also A Caution and Warning, pp. 4-16; Some Historical Account, pp. 139-140.

26 A Short Account of that Part of Africa Inhabited by the Negroes (Philadelphia, 1762), pp. 69-72. See also Some Historical Account, pp. 139-140.
Anthony Benezet's ideas on slavery would be an appeal to both the old and the new. He would write with an understanding and appreciation of the work that had been done by earlier abolitionists. He would, however, reflect an America still superstitious but appealing to science and reason; still haunted by dusty institutions but looking toward self-assertion and free thought.
CHAPTER IV

"ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL"

At the vital center of Anthony Benezet's philosophy against slavery is his attack on the dogma of Negro inferiority. It was one thing for a writer to base an antislavery attack on theological grounds or on the cruelty of the institution; it was another to base it on an actual affirmation of the intellectual and moral equality of the Negro people. Many individuals could philosophically proclaim the inherent corruption of slavery and yet believe that the Negroes were on a lower evolutionary plane or were a lower species than the whites. Benezet's positive and forceful assertion of the equality of the Negro race was a novel stand especially in the eighteenth century.

As slavery in America became wholly identified with the Negro, the justification for color caste was placed on certain deficient mental and moral characteristics of the Negro people. They were looked on as a despised lot - contemptible in appearance, wretched in manner, lowly in mind. They were feared and scorned but needed. They were outsiders, brought to satisfy economic ends. They were seen as a people not capable of assimilation into society, a sub-human work force, created by nature in the likeness of beasts.

To elucidate Negro inferiority, careful treatises by famed writers appeared. Succinct theories of the origin of the Negro race arose along with exacting characterizations of the bodily differences between the races.
Doctor Charles White, an eminent English physician and surgeon, tried to prove the Negro to be an intermediate specie between the white race and the apes and more akin to the apes. After all, he said, even some apes have been taught to play harps. He even declared that Negroes were relatively insensitive to pain.¹

The Scottish jurist, Lord Kames, figured that the degeneration of Adam's progeny was a "little puzzling." The Negro race was obviously another creation. He decided that this "re-creation" must have taken place at the time of the building of the Tower of Babal.²

David Hume wrote, "I am apt to suspect the Negroes and in general all the species of men to be naturally inferior to the whites." He discounted rumors of an educated Negro in Jamaica as a "parrot, who speaks a few words plainly."³

Bernard Romans, author of a 342 page history of East and West Florida, wrote, "The very perverse nature of this black race seems to require the harsh treatment they generally receive...Let not therefore the narrow system of morality...restrain us from properly using this naturally subjected species of mankind."⁴

¹ Thomas F. Gassett, Race - The History of an Idea in America (Dallas, 1963), pp. 47-50.


⁴ A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida (New York, 1775), p. 107. This book also bitterly castigates Oglethorpe for his attempted early ban on slavery in Georgia.
Even Thomas Jefferson, who was philosophically opposed to the institution of slavery and who made several efforts toward its abolition, considered the Negro race to be inferior. Pointing to such physical characteristics of the Negro as general ugliness, less hair, strong odor, and a need for less sleep, he decided that their existence was more "sensation than reflection." He wrote, "in memory they are equal to the whites, in reason much inferior...in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous."  

Calvinists could look at the sorry state of the Negro race as a sign of damnation, a suffering inflicted as a part of God's wrath. The social and political cosmos had been divided into systematic groups, and the Negro race in subjugation is in its natural condition. In 1773 a student of Harvard called the Negro "a conglomerate of child, idiot and madman."  

"Negro" was often used as a term of derision. The evangelist Gilbert Tennent, in castigating the New England clergy, used such terms as "Caterpillars," "Letter-learning Pharisees," "dead Dogs that cannot Bark," "dead drones," and "moral Negroes." Even the dastardly New England clergy was at least "moral."  

Such tripe was needed to justify a slave system. Slaveholders could say, as Southern apologists did in the nineteenth century, that

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7 Charles Chauncy, Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England (Boston, 1743), pp. 249-250.
the Negro was in his natural state; they could pass the buck to God. If the slave were a horse or mule, there was no reason to treat him as a man.

Anthony Benezet tried again and again to disparage this absurd theory. He had seen the improvement of older Negroes in his school and the brightness of the youngsters. He had watched the environmental effects of slavery begin to decompose before patient instruction. With understanding, the blacks could learn. This he tried to emphasize in every one of his major works on slavery.

In order to prove that the observable intellectual and moral differences of the species are caused by environment, he compared the African in his native country with the slave in America. He took accounts from men who had lived in slave factories, and he described an Africa of rain, humidity, intense heat, and disease; of plentiful grain, fruits, poultry, and cattle. He talked of a relatively advanced native culture oriented in basic modes of government and law. He talked of a people kindly disposed to each other, simple in manner, sociable, humane, superstitious, inclined to idolatry, sober, industrious, illiterate but generally intelligent. He looked at a culture in which adultery was generally a capital offense and compared it to a slave plantation where fornication and adultery were encouraged, where legal

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8 *Some Historical Account*, pp. 1-6.
marriage was essentially non-existent, where man and woman were often separated by sale.  

He charged that the Negroes were "entirely different from the stupified and malicious people some would have thought them to be. They have judgement and industry sufficient to cultivate their country."  

The claim of Negro inferiority is a "vulgar prejudice, founded on the Pride and Ignorance of the lordly Masters, who have kept their Slaves at such a distance, as to be unable to form a right judgement of them."  

The barbarism of slavery had driven these people to an abject condition - mentally, physically and emotionally. The continual rigorous labor, the lack of education, the strangeness of the white people and their language, the punishments, the loss of relatives, the lack of opportunity to improve talents or make decisions had emptied all their incentive. They saw no fate in their future but slavery. Docility, depression, and idleness are the fruits of a constant persuader to a man that he isn't one. It sickens the senses and takes from him consciousness of his own worth. Broken in spirit, humiliated by caste, a man loses the dignity which he must feel in himself to function normally. To have confidence and enthusiasm, a man must have pride. To have initiative, he must have self-respect.

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10 Ibid., pp. 36-37.
11 A Short Account, p. 19.
13 A Short Account, pp. 51-56.
In his descriptions of Africa and his discussions of the Negro's natural capacities, Benezet was arguing for common respect. A rational being possessed of the same faculties, capable of the same improvement must be offered the same opportunities by society. He must be given that control over his own life worthy of any man. A thinking, fearing, loving human being, he must be accorded the right to operate as one.

In arguing for Negro equality, Benezet approached the question on another level - the religious one. Robert Barclay, the Quaker apologist, had written, "Christ is in all men as in a seed, yea, and that he never is nor can be separate from that holy pure seed and light which is in all men." ¹⁴

Man is more than physical; more than moral; more than intellectual or rational. He is infinite and unbounded. Benezet questioned, "Did not he that made you make them?" ¹⁵ Benezet looked at the mystery of the person and saw spiritual superexistence. The individual has dignity, because he is in direct relationship with the absolute. He has that natural longing for autonomy and dynamism that God allots to him. His chances for salvation rest on the primary interaction between man and God, an interaction of soul and body. In the heart of each man is an inward power; slavery impeded the force of this power, constraining the slave into a condition that exhausted his energies, his ability to think, his opportunity to morally discriminate.

¹⁴Barclay, p. 143.

Benezet described the Negroes as "equally with us the objects of Christ's redeeming grace and as free as we are by nature."\(^{16}\) This is the divine nature of man, a being who has value merely by his existence. Immanuel Kant wrote, "their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves - that is, as something which ought not to be used merely as a means - and consequently imposes to that extent a limit on all arbitrary treatment of them."\(^{17}\)

To understand the fervent pursuit of Benezet against slavery, his conception of the Negro race must be realized. His intimate association with the Negroes had given him compassion and a wealth of knowledge about their problems. He knew them as people and not as a mass. He wrote, "I can with truth and sincerity declare, that I have found amongst the negroes as great variety of talents as among a like number of whites."\(^{18}\)

Benezet was one of those who could enjoy a vicarious satisfaction in humanity as a whole. From a respected accomplishment of an intellectual praised by society to the knowing smile of the little student who has just understood, he could feel identification. He frowned upon human failings and became frequently disillusioned, but he always found solace in knowing that man was from and under God. As any sincere

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\(^{16}\) Quoted in Vaux, p. 33.


\(^{18}\) A Short Account, p. 19.
Quaker, he felt that man was capable of good; that he had a will capable of being influenced and directed toward moral respectability.

All men are obviously not equal in all respects; there would be no purpose in life if they were. They must, however, be considered equal in the important respects. When the physical differences, class positions, social acquaintances, places of residence, job holdings, and the immeasurable number of arbitrary variables are swept from consideration, each man has a sovereignty unto himself. The garnishings of organized society may artificiallylocate men in roles, but when these trappings are seen for what they actually are, they appear relatively meaningless.

Each man is a vehicle of expression in the world. It is his capacity to reason, to distinguish between good and evil, to find self-respect, to care for others, to overcome suffering with virtue that is the intrinsic measure of his worth.

Dwight Dumond has written, "In its broader aspects slavery was the apotheosis of the principle of Negro inferiority, a functional philosophy which overreached the geographical limits of bond labor and conditioned social attitudes." The Negro's small frustrations, the fatigue and ache, the sweat stinging the eyes, the dirtiness, the monotony, the constant wilting of hope were lost in fabricated stereotypes about the Negro by vested interests.

Benezet understood the vulnerability of an institution based on such racial theories. Just as cephalic indices are no indicators

of intelligence, class heredity and skin pigmentation are no indicators of human value. His assertion of Negro equality formed the very core of his entire antislavery attack. His philosophical and emotional appeal was grounded in the desire to see the Negro accorded his deserved respect as a man.
CHAPTER V

RELIGIOUS ENTHUSIASM AND THE GREAT AWAKENING

The religious revival known as the Great Awakening was a complex phenomenon in colonial history. Anthony Benezet, preaching a primitive and zealous form of Quakerism, the beliefs and spirit of George Fox and Robert Barclay, is representative of certain theological currents of this revival. He does not reflect the Quakerism of the eighteenth century, a religion that had become relatively inert. Much of the passion and intensity of its early supporters had evaporated in a kind of listless and passive acceptance, and many Quakers had deeply immersed themselves in trade, politics, and even slaveholding. Much of Benezet's assault on slavery was based on the religious sluggishness of his contemporary society and his own Quaker sect. The parallel of Benezet's religious appeal with many of the tendencies of the Great Awakening rests on his preaching in his antislavery writings a kind of basic "enthusiastic" religion which cogently stressed revivalism, a religion steeped in a belief in revelation and one that echoed the faith of previous generations.

As a portion of the upper classes was turning to Enlightenment generalizations to explain man's position in the world, as strict congregational demands for admission into the Calvinist churches had yielded to the halfway covenant and then to mass communal confessions, as the Calvinist liberals began to place faith in a rational and gradual
salvation, Jonathan Edwards countered by preaching the sovereignty of God, man's corrupt nature, and the necessity of conversion experience. Edwards' strict Calvinist theology was set against the rationalist tendencies which threatened, in Edwards' mind, to impugn the complete power of God. Edwards wrote, "Religion shall not be an empty profession...but holiness of heart and life shall abundantly prevail."

The revival, ignited by electrifying sermons, grew to startling proportions as many individuals, formerly passive in matters of religion, found expression for their latent energies in a fresh and passionate concern for salvation. New congregations arose, and itinerant ministers such as George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent preached an evangelical religion which implied that true virtue was possible only after the vital indwelling principle of grace is realized in the individual.

Jonathan Edwards felt that the Great Awakening was divinely inspired. Always demanding discretion and solemn thought, he rebelled against attacks upon the established clergy by the traveling preachers. He also warned of self-deception and superstition in all of the bodily afflictions that affected thousands of people. Emphasizing the need to distinguish between true religion and false, he believed, however, that vital religion must come from an emotional experience. Writing of religious persons he said, "the spring of their action is very much religious affection: he that has doctrinal knowledge and speculation

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only, without affection, never is engaged in the business of religion." Edwards sincerely believed that fear of God and of his omnipotent power must be induced in the people. Man's utter depravity and helplessness; his incapacity for willful virtue; his divinely dominated and predestined life force must be emphasized. Perhaps the preaching of terror would bring men from their exalted self-perception. In "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" he wrote:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight.

Dr. Charles Chauncy, pastor of the First Church of Boston, led the opposition to the Great Awakening. He wrote of the ridiculous bodily effects provoked by the frightening sermons of "ostentatious and assuming" itinerant ministers whose purpose was to scare and not to inform. 

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2Clarence Faust and Thomas Johnson, eds., Jonathan Edwards - Representative Selections (New York, 1962), p. 215. The great dividing line between the Quaker faith and staunch Calvinist belief such as Edwards preached was on the question of revelation. Edwards believed in complete predestination; man cannot will his will but can only do what he wills. Man is not even capable of virtuous action on his own part. The Puritans usually castigated the Quakers viciously because of their belief in revelation. In the case of the Great Awakening, Edwards' support rested completely on God's power of controlling the world and not upon man's revelation of God in himself.

3Ibid., p. 164.

4Seasonable Thoughts, pp. 36-40.
Despising the emphasis on revelation and emotion in religion, he said, "The passionate discovery of Love is not the best Evidence, either of its Being or Strength: The surest and most substantial proof is Obedience to the Commandments of God." Religion is a methodological process culminated in works of justification called "Fruit of the Spirit."\(^5\)

The theological controversy between supporters of the Great Awakening and its critics is representative of the effort to find the place of religion in society. The Great Awakening was a movement that very much involved the lower classes and gave them new religious energy. It tasted of Quakerism. Perry Miller has written, "the Awakening was to the eighteenth century what Quakerism had been to the seventeenth before it became overformalized."\(^6\) The lay preaching, the psychological involvement of the masses, the allusions to individual divine inspiration and supernatural revelation all suggest the basic Quaker beliefs. Indeed, Chauncy accused George Whitefield of being "Quakerish."\(^7\)

Anthony Benezet, throughout his antislavery writings, preached primitive Quakerism. He called for a return to the basic principles identified with George Fox and Robert Barclay. He wrote of the unlimited power of God and of man's sacredness under grace. In this sense, he

\(^6\) Errand Into the Wilderness, p. 224.
\(^7\) Tolles, p. 106.
reflects the appeals of many Great Awakening ministers to return to a revitalized religion.

Quakers had long attacked the "unconverted" ministry. They had long rested their faith on God's inner light. They had long stood for the equality of men under God. These are Great Awakening tendencies, and they are positively asserted in Benezet's antislavery philosophy. His writings are largely based on his conception of man and his place under God and of the responsibilities that he has in the social world. His philosophy is a return to general Quaker principles applied to an eighteenth-century setting. It is a striking parallel to the enthusiastic impulses generated by a religious revival that emphasized man's active effort to discover God for and in himself. Concealed behind the shrieks and moans of terrified people, the obvious excesses of the Great Awakening, was a dynamism, as Jonathan Edwards said, that swept thousands of common people to a new religious awareness.

To Anthony Benezet religion was a way of life. It was his most profound interest. In an age when religion no longer is the topic discussed over breakfast or at the corner store, his preoccupation with it seems almost unreal. Early America, however, had seen letters, journals, and diaries filled with religious fears and expectations. Many immigrants had come to the new world primarily from religious motives. Their daily life revolved on their concern for salvation; this was life's business. With the growth of larger cities, with expanding social obligations, with the everyday economic concerns, a secularizing spirit in the eighteenth century had drained this
absorbing concern for religion from many people. In Anthony Benezet it remained.

For Benezet, religion was not merely historical or speculative. In the spirit of Great Awakening revivalism, it was reaching for truth, a "stretching with all its Desire after the Life of God, it is a Leaving as far as it can, all its own Spirit to receive a Spirit from above..."\(^8\)

It is an inclining of the mind, a searching for principle; it is an individual discovery of the encompassing will of God. Man must conduct a religion almost as he would conduct a business. He must weigh evidence and search for the right action. He must have an unwavering goal - the pious life. He must, most of all, always be prepared to receive revelation. To a Jonathan Edwards, resting his philosophy on the doctrine of election and the principle of man's complete passivity in his regeneration, such a reaching and activeness would be useless. To Benezet, it was imperative. Robert Barclay had directed:

> Wait then for this in the small revelation of that pure light which first reveals things more known; and as thou becomest fitted for it, thou shalt receive more and more, and by a living experience easily refute their ignorance, who ask, How dost thou know that thou are actuated by the Spirit of God.\(^9\)

Benezet saw man as a responsible agent. Revelation is not closed, and man is obliged to follow the revealed demands. This is

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\(^8\)Observations on the Inslaving, p. 11.

\(^9\)Barclay, p. 66.
the battle of life - the acceptance or rejection of God and his plan by the individual. This had been an express if hidden importance of the Great Awakening - men and women actuated by religious inspiration searching for answers. For Anthony Benezet and his philosophy against slavery it meant an appeal to each individual for a decision. It meant an appeal to allow all, including Negroes, to live their own lives and to incline toward salvation.

Much as the Calvinists, Benezet looked at man in his unregenerate state as corrupt. He wrote, "Weakness and inbred Corruption attend human Nature." Left to itself, this nature has no power but that of producing evil. Man is driven by self-interest. He said, "If here You see open Wickedness, there only Form of Godliness; if here superficial Holiness, political Piety, crafty Prudence, there haughty Sanctity, partial Zeal." The greatest heresy is a concentration on the secular, "a joy that seeks...the Riches, Honours, and Friendships of this World." The lust for wealth brought slavery. Africa was raped because of this heinous thirst to get rich, "the principal and moving cause of the most iniquitous and dreadful scene that was perhaps, ever acted upon the face of the earth." John Stuart Mill described such self-

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12 Ibid., p. 9.
13 Some Historical Account, p. 97.
interest as, "the love of domineering over others; the desire to engross more than one's share of advantages; the pride which derives gratification from the abasement of others; the egotism which thinks self and its concerns more important than everything else."  

Benezet felt, however, that human beings, if divested of this self-interest and directed in a Christian spirit, are capable of great things. Intent, design and purpose are everything. He talked of the plague of London in 1665 when, in some months, over one thousand people died each day. At first the people naturally hid and cursed. As the plague worsened, they began to crowd churches. With imminent death, the pettiness of prejudice and vanity meant little. Nurses and apothecaries cared for the sick with little apparent concern for their own lives. Public confessions were numerous. In crisis the people had gained a realization of the real importance of life.  

Benezet charged men to end their catering to selfishness and to have fulfillment in the love of God and all mankind. The attitudes of "Self-denial, mortification, sympathy and benevolence, to do good and to communicate, to seek judgement and relieve the oppressed" are so often pronounced ideally as just and righteous but so often shunned in practice. Stewardship must not be a limp expression but an unqualified duty.

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15 Some Serious and Awful Considerations Recommended to All (Philadelphia, 1769), pp. 35-44.
16 To John Smith, August 1, 1760, Brookes, p. 241.
Benezet emphasized the theological virtue of charity. Always basing his ethical propositions on the general ideas of the Sermon on the Mount, usually rebelling against complicated theological discussion which obscured the simple but genuine points of religion, he saw in man the capability of having humility, honesty, tenderness, and compassion. There was something of the divine in all men. It had to be cultivated. From a religious revival such as the Great Awakening there was at least evidence of that internal struggle faced by all men, especially the poor. When Benezet wrote his antislavery thoughts on a religious base, he was talking to farmer and artisan as well as to landowner. If men were brought to an awareness of themselves, the worshipped distinctions of social class, name, country, and race would be exposed to their own absurdities.

In his stress upon revelation and divine impulses in every individual, Benezet was restating basic Quaker convictions. In the eighteenth century, however, these convictions were either undermined or ignored in many Quaker circles, and Benezet was not a typical individual of this sect. It is necessary to understand what had happened to this religion.

In the infant stages of a creed, the reforming zeal and militant assertion of belief is at its height. With its establishment and the living of it from day to day, its basis becomes vague, lost in an externalized but misunderstood acceptance. Quakerism became a relatively relaxed religion. It had been long ago that men had withered in prison for it. Individuals still wore the plain clothes; they still said "thee" and "thou"; they still held simple meetings in
simple buildings. The impulsiveness and spontaneity, however, of a George Fox developed into what Frederick Tolles calls "quietism."

Impassioned conviction became a kind of saturated dogmatism.

Philadelphia, the center of Quaker leadership, became a great center of commerce. New luxurious homes appeared, built by successful Quaker merchants. Many began to dress lavishly. Many paid taxes for military purposes. Others occupied positions as legislators and magistrates. Patrick Henry remarked that many had no other claims to the Quaker faith than that they were children or grandchildren of Quakers.

Especially disturbing was the growing reliance by Friends on slave labor. Peter Kalm wrote, "The Quakers alone scrupled to have slaves; but they are no longer so nice, and they have as many Negroes as other people." One Quaker said that he had visited in a single

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17 See Quakers and the Atlantic Culture especially pp. 110-112. Tolles describes the contemporary Quaker religious awareness as a kind of gradualism induced by meditation and contemplation. They were not moved in one great experience like George Fox who saw the light in a "flash."

18 Benezet to Sam Allinson, October 23, 1774, Brookes, p. 322. Rufus Jones in The Quakers in the American Colonies (New York, 1962) spoke of the lack of the human element within the Quaker society. Most of them withdrew into themselves and remained largely uneducated, accepting their beliefs with little reason. In order to understand himself, the Quaker would have had to have comprehensive experience in the external world. Cut off from civic responsibility, he became stagnant and dogmatic.

Quarterly Meeting the owners of more than one thousand slaves. 20

As the Quakers began to use more slaves, they began to consider them more indispensable. Custom became sanction; habit became law. The faith was stretched, and a callous practice became morally acceptable. At one meeting a Quaker rose to suggest that none of the members should buy Negroes in the future. He was met with the reply that for the peace and unanimity of the church such discussion should stop. After all, there was the question of how to dispose of those already owned. There was the chance of "prejudice and evil speaking one of another." 21

The Quakers rarely accepted a Negro member. 22 George Fox had urged religious instruction for the slaves in Barbados, and William Penn had started regular meetings for Negroes in 1700, but few, generally, became actual members. 23 Indeed, John Drinker could later write, "There is no People in the World that I ever heard of, who held forth such Liberal Universal Principles as the People called Quakers, and yet to my astonishment they are the only People I know who make any objections to the Blacks...joining them in Church Fellowship." 24

20 Spaid, p. 1186.
23 Cadbury, pp. 151-171. One incident that is indicative of the race-consciousness of the Quakers at this time occurred at a Concord Monthly Meeting, July 4, 1781. A woman being considered for membership was described by the committee as being "not darker than some who are esteemed white."
All of this deeply disturbed Benezet. He wrote to Robert Pleasants that "the backwardness of Friends amongst us to promote the welfare of the Blacks except where there is a prospect of advantage to themselves is painful to me in this as in all others where there is a selfish disposition it will manifest itself."  

As the Quaker conscience hedged, custom assumed obligatory power and authority. Slaveholding became a binding norm, a legislative will based on a reverence for past success. Woven in domestic habit and legal sanction, slavery justified itself merely on the grounds of its existence. To meet and accept this justification, the Quaker had to compromise his moral position. Benezet saw that injustice was so established by law that men became insensible of guilt.

Boldness and security are not complementary. As a custom is constantly reinforced by acceptance, its implications expand and arguments against it become less meaningful. It became easier for men to look away from the death and pain involved in the slave system and to consider only its economics. As slavery became more engrained, it was increasingly difficult to persuade men of its ills. In the southern United States, slavery would finally become so enmeshed in society because of its long continuance and uniform character that it would yield to no argument. Indeed, it would be the emblem of a people. Its compulsory nature would represent everything from states rights to fried chicken.

To Robert Pleasants, March 17, 1761, Brookes, pp. 352-353.
Patrick Henry was not a Quaker, but his experiences as a slaveholder reflect on the power of custom that plagued the Quaker sect. He once wrote to Robert Pleasants that slavery was totally repugnant to Christianity. He wrote of the enlightened age in America and of the improvements in the arts and sciences. His was an era when men were talking of justice and liberty. He then said, "Would any one believe that I am Master of Slaves of my own purchase! I am drawn along by the general Inconveniences of living without them! I will not, I cannot justify it."  

Like Patrick Henry, Henry Laurens saw the evils of slavery. Like Patrick Henry, he refused to release his slaves. He wrote, "What will my children say if I deprive them of so much estate...I will do as much as I can in my time, and leave the rest to a better hand."  

The experiences of these men are indicative of the weakening of principle in the face of convention, and, to the eighteenth-century Quaker sect, convention held debilitating control. The torpid willingness of Quakers to succumb to slaveholding as contrasted with the power of their religion itself is reflective of the way great possible works are thwarted by simple base cravings. T. S. Eliot has

26 Patrick Henry to Robert Pleasants, January 18, 1773, Brookes, p. 444.  
written:

Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the shadow.

Most of the Quakers were "Hollow Men." Frustrated by self-interest, fear, impotence of character, and incapacity of will they could reach a kind of nobility in their understanding but could suffer in doing nothing and remaining under habit's sway. Benezet wrote, "by Degrees we silence the Dictates of Conscience and reconcile ourselves in the Perpetuation of such Things which, when first proposed to our un-prejudiced Minds, would strike us with Amazement and Horror." 28

The Quakers generally opposed the Great Awakening. The eighteenth-century Quaker rebelled against his seventeenth-century image. 29 The appeal to impulse and sudden revelation appeared brash to a sect that had come a long way from the intense days of Fox and Penn. In this respect and others the philosophy of Anthony Benezet did not represent contemporary Quaker feeling.

Benezet's antislavery writings are a reflection of primitive Quaker religious zeal. His was a philosophy that drove fervor into a stale theological atmosphere in a similar emotional spirit to that which

28 A Short Account, p. 4.
characterized the Great Awakening. He saw God working in the world. He saw evils such as slavery as arising from man's religious reluctance. He saw war and famine as divine punishment. When several Quakers were banished during the Revolution from Pennsylvania under suspicion of helping the British, Benezet wrote, "has not our conformity to the world, our engagements of life in order to please ourselves and gain wealth, with little regard to the danger to the better part been productive of all the evils pointed out in the Gospel, has it not naturally led us...hence the sumptuousness of our dwellings, our equipage, our dress..."30 The suffering brought upon the Quakers was calculated to bring them to an awareness of their sins against God and their own religion.

Benezet was representative of the Quaker ideal and not of the typical eighteenth-century Quaker. The Marquis de Chatellux wrote of him, "This Mr. Benezet may be looked on rather as a model of what the Quakers ought to be than as a specimen of what they are."31

The Great Awakening brought a new spirit of conversion to the minds and hearts of the people. Religion once again came alive. This is what Benezet preached to his Quaker friends as well as to all of society. Quakerism or any religious meaning is not outside of being and distant from this life. It is not lost in time and history but

30To James Pemberton, January 28, 1778, Brookes, p. 327.
31Quoted in Warville, A Critical Examination, p. 3.
is imbued in any man who remains open to the mystery of existence. This kind of religious enthusiasm breeds social change, and perhaps from such an atmosphere would come the abolition of slavery. Benezet wrote, "In the Hour of Reflection, that awful hour which will come upon all, not hardened in obduracy or sunk in stupidity...how much comfort will it afford to those, who...have laboured by precept and example to depreciate and remove an evil of so deep a dye."32

Basic Quakerism went further than most Protestant sects to the divine source with its mysticism and insistence on revelation. This is the appeal of Anthony Benezet's antislavery philosophy, a philosophy tasting of Great Awakening revivalism. When the religious philosophy of Benezet is considered along with his ideas of natural rights, some of the intellectual struggle faced by men of the eighteenth century can be clearly seen.

CHAPTER VI

REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA AND THE NATURAL RIGHTS PHILOSOPHY

Certain ideas of man's inherent liberties that were coalesced with a foundation of religious belief into Anthony Benezet's antislavery philosophy were forwarded in an America that headed for revolution. Perhaps the future of her people would not rest within the British Empire. Perhaps there lay a self-reliant future free from arbitrary political control, free from an old and heavy social system. As this future became clearer, people began to wonder whether it would be a destiny or a doom. With the Declaration of Independence, however, there would be no turning back.

Written to lay before the world a justification for revolution, the Declaration of Independence pictured a simple and pure people under the tyrannical yoke of a sinful king. A long and highly exaggerated list of injuries against America were presented to affirm to the world that the colonies were not rebelling against a legal authority. The king had already abdicated his right of control through malevolence. Implicit in this claim of revolutionary right was a theory of government wrapped in terms very unfamiliar to legal minds of Britain. The colonists were appealing to natural law and the natural rights of man.

Hugo Grotius defined natural law as a "dictate of right reason, which points out that an act, according as it is or is not in conformity
with rational nature, has in it a quality of moral baseness or moral necessity; and that, in consequence, such an act is either forbidden or enjoined by the author of nature, God.\textsuperscript{1} To an individual who believes in a certain natural law, it is eternal and unchangeable, binding at all times on all people. It is an a priori command, predetermined and implied in nature, which is independent of history, tradition, custom, and experience. The converging of man's rational and social experiences depends upon the character of the universe, man's place in it, and his own nature. Natural law is an expression of those thoughts on the make-up of life in general.

These laws are absolutes which defy definition or proof; supposedly self-evident principles given varying transcendental and utilitarian emphasis. Actually, however, they are shifting and always evolving concepts related to the exigencies of the time and the situation.

Because of its lack of preciseness and its artificial quality, a natural law as conceived by one individual never entirely correlates with the concepts of another. It is an abstract appeal to man's basic state in nature, and all individual theorists look at this state in widely different lights. Appeals to natural law have supported opposite sides on many questions, including the slavery issue.

Grounded in the assumption that man, with his reason, can discover the genuine order of society, the Declaration of Independence

\textsuperscript{1}Francis W. Kelsey, trans., \textit{De Jure Belli Ac Pacis} (Oxford, 1925), Book 1, pp. 38-39.
claimed that men are naturally in a state of freedom and uniformity. From this assumption emerged the emphasis on human rights and the concentration on men and not institutions which Anthony Benezet would accept so literally. Whether or not this focus upon the nature of man and the world was supposed to be merely windowdressing compared to the list of grievances drawn up against the king is not important in this context. The importance of the natural rights appeal in the Declaration lies in its implications for America's future political and social creed. If the ideas were, in the minds of some of the framers, of secondary importance; if the ideas to others were only insipid jargon or excess verbiage, they have, however, remained as a symbol of unification to the country and have been an impetus toward social reform.

Indeed, a reform movement invaded America even in the revolutionary days. Laws protecting women and children were passed. The number of offenses calling for capital punishment were reduced. There was new public interest in penology and the poverty problem as well as the perplexing evils of liquor and war. It was an aroused social conscience that began to fight for simple human needs.  

In the controversy over slavery these ideas of human rights were basic. The famed Montesquieu had written, "But as all men are

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born equal, slavery must be accounted unnatural..." James Otis, in his *Rights of the British Colonies*, wrote, "The Colonists are by the law of nature free born, as indeed all men are white or black...it is a clear truth, that those who every day barter away other men's liberty, will soon care little for their own."

The Revolution and its implications had unmasked the glaring inconsistency between basic human rights and the institution of slavery. Many individuals began to look at their own habits while resisting those of Britain. Perhaps sincerity of purpose behind the colonists' fight for freedom needed confirmation in another fight for freedom. In any case, the equation of the two struggles became obvious.

In the Pennsylvania act for the gradual abolition of slavery the legislators included the statement that "it is our duty...to extend a portion of that freedom to others, which hath been extended to us; and a release from that state of thraldom to which we ourselves were tyrannically doomed and from which we have now every prospect of being delivered." Many other individuals and groups saw the relationship between the two revolutions. Anthony Benezet was one of them.

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4 (Boston, 1764), p. 29.

5 *The Constitution of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery* (Philadelphia, 1787). Other documents are included under this title among which is the act for gradual abolition.
Benezet wrote in 1766:

At a time when the general rights and liberties of mankind, and the preservation of those valuable privileges transmitted to us from our ancestors, are become so much the subjects of universal consideration; can it be an inquiry indifferent to any, how many of those who distinguish themselves as the Advocates of Liberty, remain insensible and inattentive to the treatment of thousands and tens of thousands of our fellow men.

Any American, longing for political freedom would be a witness against himself as long as he remained a slaveholder. The practice of holding from some men all of their rights does not argue well for a slaveholder trying to secure freedom from Britain and its parliamentary control.

Benezet listened to men such as Sam Adams, Thomas Paine, Otis, and Jefferson. The Whig ideals of liberty had long appealed to his Quaker sense of equality. Benezet would not support a war, but he could find basic positive value in the pamphlets, articles, and tracts that poured from the revolutionary press. He wrote, "Indeed nothing can more clearly and positively militate against the slavery of the Negroes, than the several declarations lately published that 'all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights'..."

The new discoveries in science by men such as Kepler and Newton had introduced to the philosophic mind a secular and empirical habit

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6 A Caution and Warning, p. 3. See also Short Observations on Slavery, pp. 2-3; Serious Considerations on Several Important Subjects, pp. 30-31; A Short Account, p. 24.

7 Serious Considerations on Several Important Subjects, p. 28.
of thought. It marshalled in a reverence for the energies of reason and an optimism that sensed the limitless powers of man. All of nature's phenomena - the causations and relationships, the inter-working forces, the structured and harmonious system of the universe - could be explored and comprehended by a trained mind. Perhaps everything could be discovered, understood, and proved.  

To Benezet, as it had been to Newton himself, such discoveries were only exemplifications of God's handiwork. To Benezet, rationalism did not connote secularism. Just as man's faith should not depend on a blind obedience to doctrine or scripture, his intellect is not wholly valuable in itself. A man must be moved in the heart. He must be passionate. He must be willing to temper his empiricism with emotion. Benezet's philosophy was one that emphasized the essential harmony between reason and revelation. Reason infused with the love of God is a tool with which man can learn of the world, of its demands upon an individual, of the rights he has in it. God had given to man something that, properly channeled, could yield understanding and sympathy.

Benezet found comfort in the revolutionary expressions of liberty and equality, but he found distress in their worship of "man." In his desire to renounce unconverted human nature, Benezet stood against the confidence of the Enlightenment. He still looked at the physical world, infested with its corruption. He still saw the inclination

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8 Ralph Barton Perry, *Puritanism and Democracy* (New York, 1944), pp. 149-150.
men had toward evil. He still sought salvation in his religion and not in the movements of the moon in its orbit or in the reflected light of a prism.

To Benezet, natural law was the divine law. He described it as "heavenly law and divine government." Man, however, in his unconverted condition has no power of producing good. As Defoe's Robinson Crusoe lamented, "I was born to be my own Destroyer." Only through God can man do great things.

Directly opposed to Locke who argued against innate ideas, Benezet believed that each man, including the Indian and Negro, had the "law of truth" within himself. "Written in the heart," this knowledge transcends scientific discovery. His law of nature is the order of the cosmos only in so far as it is ruled by divine reason, but it is open for discovery to those willing to submit to the demands of God.

Implying a supreme standard, immutable and eternal, it goes back to the beginnings of man's reflections on right and wrong and the question "what is man?" Man can know himself and his duty under God if his motives are unpolluted. A platonic millennium under God is held off by misunderstanding and egotism, but any one individual is capable of seeing and striving toward a moral and spiritual life.

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9. Serious Considerations on Several Important Subjects, p. 7.

Enlightenment thought tended to base rights of man on the claim that each individual must obey his autonomous will. This absolute independence of ego necessarily leads to contradictive claims of what is a right and of what right supercedes another when they clash. To Benezet, such conflicts would seem to come from self-interested misconceptions of the divine commands or a refusal to listen to them. For a man inclined properly toward acceptance, they are obvious. Robert Barclay had written, "for this divine revelation, and inward illumination, is that which is evident and clear of itself, forcing by its own evidence and clearness, the well-disposed understanding to assent." Frederick Nietzsche worshipped egoism and superiority of talent. Benezet worshipped harmony under God.

A religious conception of duty and responsibility should preclude uncontrolled selfish aims. Benezet had written of an inward principle of divine intelligence, favored to all men, obeyed by those uncorrupted by lust and a longing for power. Men are, however, collectively fallible. Even if some are morally aware, many are morally lethargic. In a social group, one man's crying conscience

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11 Apology, p. 19.

12 Plainess and Innocent Simplicity of the Christian Religion (Philadelphia, 1782), p. 23. Benezet discusses the second king of Rome, Numa Pompilius, who worked hard for education and peace. For a period of 43 years, the arts, agriculture, and manufacturing flourished under his rule. Benezet writes of him as a man not defiled by passion or desire for material wealth.
is usually less liable to forcefully assert itself, and social inaction often results from a lack of a common moral denominator, caused by simple reluctance to agree on basics. If one man does stand up, he is often dismissed as a radical agitator.

Benezet's natural law is a theological view of the universe, a looking at the world, not only at what it was, but at what it should have been. Because of its intrinsic validity it expects obedience irrespective of human power. It is the expression of the mystery of God in the world, a personal God and not merely a conception of the first cause. The Enlightenment tended to supercede the relationship of God and man with that of nature and man. Benezet, however, reaffirmed God as a working spirit.

Like the Enlightenment thinkers, Benezet affirmed the importance of reason. He wrote, "men are noble, only in an exact proportion with their being rational." Like the Enlightenment thinkers, he acknowledged the natural rights of man. Like the Enlightenment thinkers, he completely endorsed the ideas of social responsibility. Like the Enlightenment thinkers, he saw the great potentialities of man. Unlike the Enlightenment thinkers, however, he tried to maintain his complete dependence on religion.

Benezet looked for a kind of child-like simplicity in discovering the truths implanted by God. His ideas about the defiling influences of the world on man and the need to return to simple truths are reflected

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13To Abbe Raynal, July 16, 1781, Quoted in Vaux, pp. 44-45.
in Wordsworth's "Intimations on Immortality." Much of this poem's regret of drifting constantly further from the divine source are echoed in Benezet's ideas of a corrupting environment that must be overcome. The innate knowledge of a previous existence are drowned as one ages. Wordsworth wrote:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

A surrender to God needs no profound exploration of doctrine or study of theological arguments. A simple, childlike faith yields simple truths.

The right to be responsible under God, the right to one's physical body, the right to pursue a rational and moral life, the right to marry and to have a family, and the right to cultivate one's mind and talents are retarded by slavery. A forced heathenism, slavery destroys the distinction between person and thing. Man's right to himself, the most inviolable substance of his life, is taken away; his free will as a rational, thinking, and feeling person is nullified. Benezet wrote, "God gave to man dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowls of the air, and over the cattle but imposed no involuntary subjection of one man to another."\(^{14}\)

\(^{14}\) A Caution and Warning, p. 22.
The slave will always have a natural right to his own person and property. Benezet declared:

It cannot be, that either war or contract can give any man such a property in another as he has in his sheep and oxen: Much less is it possible, that any child of man should ever be born a Slave... Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air. And no human law can deprive him of the right which he derives from the law of nature.

Even if a slaveowner were to clothe a Negro in the best of clothes; house him in the best of houses; feed him with excellent food, his slavery would be wrong. Its evil is unconditional.

Benezet had included all races in the "self-evident" principles of the Declaration of Independence. No man, black or white, is to be stopped by civil law from striving for regeneration and personal happiness. There is a divine freedom, the law of God, which, divorced from the secular community, requires that all men be given their chance. Benezet wrote, "...no legislature on earth can alter the nature of things, so as to make that to be right which is contrary to the law of God."\(^{16}\)

Benezet saw natural and divine law as speaking the same things. This philosophy was directly opposed to men such as Thomas Hobbes who tried to sever the ideas of political and social equality from a theological base. Hobbes had fashioned a science of power,

\(^{15}\) Notes on the Slave Trade (Philadelphia, 1781), p. 8.

\(^{16}\) Some Historical Account, p. 131.
an ethical theory that saw every man at war with another and with a right to enslave if he were able to do so. Benezet saw the inherent possibility of salvation in all men and a conceivable amity between them. His beliefs of equality of opportunity do not sanction destruction of other men's opportunity.

Benezet looked to government as the protector of human rights. He wrote, "Government is the ordinance of God, a compact and agreement of a number of people, mutually to support justice and order amongst themselves..." 17 Most Enlightenment philosophers had envisioned government as a compact between man and nature or man and man. Benezet's ideas of the compact theory echo, once again, the older claims of divine ordering in the world.

If government is instituted by God and for the protection of human rights, the state has the moral function of guaranteeing a justice that transcends human caprice. As a society accords to its members the chance of self-realization, it is just. Government does not have the right to promote misery, to restrict natural liberties or to sell bodies. Indeed, it has the obligation to oppose these things. Benezet wrote, "...the design of the institution of government is for a terror to evil-doers, and the praise of them that do well..." 18

Men obviously have widely different opinions, personalities, talents, tastes, and physical characteristics. These natural inequalities


18 The Case of our Fellow Creatures, the Oppressed Africans (Philadelphia, 1784), p. 8.
must remain equitable. Any individual must be stopped from invading the sanctity of another person's human liberties in his efforts to climb politically or socially in the world. In this sense, government, conceived by God, is essentially a powerful agent for moral reform in the country. This accounts for Benezet's persistent personal pleading with state officials, his addressing letter after letter to legislators and heads of states, his saying over and over again that ignorance of the situation must be the reason that government tolerated slavery. Just as he proposed liquor prohibition in 1779 saying that men often do not know their own minds, he constantly agitated for intervention in the slave trade. He always seemed amazed that such an evil could exist under the eye of a powerful English government. His letters and pamphlets that were expressly sent to England tried to inform those in power of the actual conditions involved in slavery and the slave trade. He thought that if government leaders knew the facts, they could not any longer tolerate them.

Benezet's ideas of natural rights did not, of course, conform to those of most of the Enlightenment. His ideas were too religiously oriented. There had been a tendency in the Enlightenment to transfer ethics from theism to rationalism; from religious duty to social responsibility. Benezet had tried to fuse these ideas into a coherent

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19 The Mighty Destroyer Displaced (Trenton, 1779), p. 43. He suggested laying high taxes on distilled liquor that would drive it off the market.
combination. His is a philosophy that peculiarly reflects this clash of science and religion. Here was a man who steadfastly maintained his religious ideas but who saw the wonders in man's capabilities. His battle against slavery was pitched to an eighteenth-century tempo, and in it, certain intellectual strains of the age are apparent. His philosophy mirrors aspects of his day. There were natural rights. Man did have a great power of reasoning. Natural rights were, however, imbued in man by and for God. Whatever the microscope can study, whatever fabulous scientific mysteries man can uncover, the mind and heart must ponder. Where did it all come from? What is it all for?
CHAPTER VII
THE LEGACY

Drawing upon earlier antislavery writings, capturing the religious enthusiasm generated by the Great Awakening and his own Quaker faith, and utilizing the Enlightenment ideas of human rights, Anthony Benezet produced a theory against slavery peculiar to and representative of the changing and revolutionary America of the eighteenth century. In his philosophy the colonial conception of natural rights shared hands with the Christian doctrine of the common descent from Adam. It was the philosophy of a pious but intellectual individual whose ideas did not have the opaque and dogmatic quality so apparent in earlier antislavery writings. He saw practical moral value in the liberal social trends that were breaking the crusted ground of tradition, but he also saw great danger in losing sight of a personal religion.

His ideas bear an apparent hazy mingling of contradiction. Here was an obvious mystic who appealed to reason; a teacher who feared too much education; a believer in the natural depravity of man who worshipped that bit of goodness in each man. He wavered between a belief in man's potential greatness under God and a regret of his failures in the world. His philosophy was a simple way of looking at the world and its people. Conversion is man's highest achievement, but conversion must embody social implications as well as personal

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salvation. Man, born in the image of and living under the guidance of God, has certain limits under which he must morally function. He has a favored place in the world, but he has obligations in it. Man must unite socially as well as religiously. From the idea of a "priesthood of believers" to the idea of divine natural law, Benezet's ideas are a statement to all men, high and low - an equation of civil and religious morality universally applicable.

Benezet's mystical milieu could obviously never be realized. It presupposed far too many consistencies in man's moral and rational nature. Ideas on rights and duties emerge from custom, individual differences, learned behavior, special interests, and personal and local prejudice. One all pervading truth or direction is difficult to see in a world made up of different cultures and different people.

His ideal, however, offered direction. In all societies there seem to be common grounds of understanding and certain moral inclinations. All societies have love and charity, hate and suspicion. All have pain and fear.

Benezet looked at the common base of humanity with an affection that could exceed the bonds of family loyalty or national loyalty to a universal loyalty. He entreated men to broaden their concerns for one religion to all religions; from one culture to all cultures; from one race to all races. He looked to a society where patriotism would no longer represent conquest or the quenching of animal appetites but a dedication to people, to all men that have a need to live their own lives free from intimidation, force, and exploitation.
In a later period of American history when humanitarianism and philanthropy surged, men such as Emerson and Whitman would write of the sacredness of each individual; of his divine origin; of his need to build his own life; of his valid claims to self-assertion, self-reliance, and personality. Benezet's ideas of man rested on the sectarian qualification of conversion, 'but they tasted of this sympathy and understanding.

Benezet represented the typical complexity of a Quaker inflamed with hatred of a social wrong and anxious for social change and a Quaker forced to respect his radical perfectionist views of love and nonviolence. His appeal to political leaders in power did, however, wrestle his quest for abolition from the vacuum of complete religious idealism that plagued his predecessors. He took his demands from Quaker circles to the world, and he was heard. He skillfully utilized every traveler he met, every conversation he joined, and every opportunity for publishing he encountered to spread his ideas. Propagandist, organizer, distributor, and writer, Benezet was caught in the cosmopolitanism of Philadelphia where ideas and books had begun to profoundly inform the public. No longer would arguing at a Quaker meetinghouse or knifing a bladder of red liquid seem to hold possibilities for actual reform. He had to reach the leaders of the country and the royal heads of state. He had to speak their language and find a common level of insight into the problem. In the ideas of human equality and man's natural right to freedom, he found words long preached by Quaker ministers, and he rephrased them in a religiously-oriented philosophy against slavery that had wide appeal.
Concentrating on salvation as a impetus to social change, Benezet saw conflict in the world as resulting from the collision of good and evil. Opposing evil by evil methods only compounds the problem, and, for the same reasons that he opposed war, he laid the basis of his antislavery writings in the discussion of evil rather than the preaching of hate.

If his liberal idealism of free will hints at later abolitionists such as Layman Beecher and others, it has a different emphasis. Instead of militantly coughing out hatred of the slaveholder as an individual, Benezet preached hatred of the evil practices into which he had fallen. Never did his appeals savor of a pugnacious fighting spirit that would drive men to war. Always he pleaded for reason and for simple judgement. He abhorred the violence of slavery, the barbarism, the heinous cruelties, and unfathomable injustice done to an entire people. He hated the fact that such inhumanities were possible. He hated what it had done to the country and to the slaveholders themselves. Sunk in a lust for getting rich and an insensible love of power, the owners were odious. They were, however, pitiable. Salvation was possible with repentance. This, Benezet never forgot.

Benezet seems to have had no property confiscated. He seems to have suffered little social ostracism. At a time when the Quakers as a sect were under persecution, he seems to have had his most success. There are probably many factors that were involved in his acceptance. The country was immersed in a war that generated social change. King Cotton had not as yet enclosed his tyranny over a spiritually frozen
slaveocracy, and the intense sectionalism so characteristic of the
teneth century had not completely shown its form. Benezet,
himself, was probably considered less a threat than later abolitionists
such as Weld or Garrison. Lacking political or financial backing,
Benezet was only one individual writing pamphlets and articles. Unlike
the Tappans and Weld he did not appear to be headed for much success.
Moral arguments based on religion and reason might induce sympathy,
but they do not often induce fear. Slaveholders, at least those not
already starched in dogmatism, were more likely to value his opinion
even if they were not at all considering the possibility of releasing
their slaves.

As slavery became further institutionalized in the South, even
those favorably disposed to consider the evils inherent in it became
wrapped in property rights, tradition, and fear of change. Those who
were philosophically rejecting the system and still clung to it were
placing faith in a kind of self-liquidating process that was supposed
to result finally in destruction. Perhaps if left alone or ignored,
the vices would disappear or at least become more palliatable. In
later years, however, Southern apologists indicted abolitionists for
being obsessed with sin and a neurotic concern for perfection. They
fabricated fantastic defenses of slavery based on its inherent good-
ness and in inferiority of the Negro race. Self-liquidation would
never materialize. Instead, slavery had its own seeds of growth, and
the fruit would be war.
Reinhold Niebuhr has written, "The selfishness of human communities must be regarded as an inevitability. Where it is inordinate it can be checked only by competing assertions of interest; and these can be effective only if coercive methods are added to moral and rational persuasion."¹ Reason is always reflective of interest in a social situation. Injustices are not usually resolved by simple argument but by a clashing of social, political, or economic power. It would take a war to end slavery. The implications of abolition were too great to be quietly endured by the South. The supposed benefits of the system had been constantly reinforced in the minds of the Southern people. Whether duped by the slaveholding aristocracy or genuinely in love with the institution, they were willing to suffer for it.

Benezet's success is remarkable when his political and financial resources are considered. In another respect, however, it is not. The spirit of reform in the country had produced an atmosphere that did incline toward abolitionism. The several laws enacted in the North during and after the Revolutionary War and the abolition of the slave trade in the early nineteenth century revealed a national willingness to deal with the problem. This willingness would never again be so strong.

Southerners had felt dependent upon slavery. Indeed, a few Southern states blocked Jefferson's attempt to include a philippic

against slavery in the Declaration of Independence. The cotton gin, however, had not as yet brought complete Southern subservience to slavery. More men such as Benezet might have choked off slavery in this early period. Because they did not appear, the way was left open for Southern fanaticism over slavery to grow and the days of Robert Barnwell Rhett and Robert E. Lee.

Greatness is an immeasurable quality. Benezet wrote, "True greatness consists in humility and favour with God." If feeling a sympathy for and trying to solve the problems of the despised; if sacrificing wealth and position for a chance to help them; if teaching respect and fighting vanity is a measure of greatness, then Benezet merits that adjective.

He was not a politician, a great intellectual, or a war hero. He was a simple unassuming character with a simple but refreshing attitude toward the world and its people. He had an insight into the true nature of sacrificial giving. Intelligent and introspective, he could probably have been very successful in many other occupations. Instead, he shut himself up in his schoolhouse and his home and taught Negroes. He tirelessly wrote pamphlets and articles. He taught his message by example, helping the Acadians, the Indians, and especially the slaves. Emerson wrote, "Thinking is the function. Living is the functionary. The stream retreats to its source. A great soul will be strong to live, as well as strong to think." Far from merely an

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2Brookes, p. 208.
academic reformer, Benezet used his insight into the social and ethical problems of his time in an active, day by day, effort to help others.

Benezet's writings, hurt by his rush to finish most of them, were often coarse. The moral demands he made upon his neighbors often approached the comic. Some of his fears of too much education were unrealistic. He was, however, devoted to a way of life and the moral requisites under it. There was one right way to live, and he was determined to live it. If he was critical of his neighbors, he was also critical of himself. On his death bed he is said to have expressed a wish to live longer so that he might "bring down SELF." Immanuel Kant commanded, "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." This is the way Benezet at least tried to live. His was an ideal that no man could reach.

He had a kind of humble eminence that sometimes overwhelmed his friends. J. P. Brissot wrote, "The life of this extraordinary man should be known to thinking men, that is, to those who respect more the benefactors of humanity than they do the flattered and basely idolized oppressors of mankind."

The slave had not asked for the value systems, the color barriers, and the forced subjugation. All he needed was a chance to

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5 A Critical Examination, p. 218.
break out of his prison of skin, a chance to prove that he was capable, and this is what the slaveholder would not give. Benezet's philosophy was an idealistic appeal to equality that struck thorns in the prevailing ideas of Negro inferiority. Slavery had to be justified by the slaveholder in the denial of a human quality in the Negro, and, comforting the slave in the stoical hope of life after death, the slaveholder told him that he was inferior because God had willed that he be so. If the slave accepted his fate, things would get better for him in the future. From Benezet's religious beliefs, from his work with the Indians, from his career as a teacher of the Negroes, the little Quaker could see no truth in the inferiority of the species, and his antislavery statement is a fervent testimony to this conclusion.

Paul Tillich speaks of the innumerable functional differences which prevent an actual equalitarian system in society. Dismissing the possibility of such a system, he, however, writes of the one principal of social justice that must be considered fundamental - that a man be treated as a reasoning being. He said, "Justice is always violated if men are dealt with as if they were things...it contradicts the justice of being, the intrinsic claim of every person to be considered a person." This is the root of Anthony Benezet's ideas.

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against slavery. In his school he had preached to the Negroes their
divine origin. In his writings he made clear the idea that he was
not advocating kind treatment to dumb beasts but honor and respect
for human beings.

The whites denied the Negro the opportunity to cultivate his
innate capacities and then accused him of lacking that which he was
denied the right to acquire. Those in power refused to recognize that
an evil existed, or, seeing the evil, refused to do anything about it.
Benezet, in an effort to attack ignorance, presented facts and appealed
to intelligence and reason. In an effort to attack self-interest
he appealed to religion. His thesis against slavery was unique. It
represents the confronting strains of Enlightenment thought on natural
rights and Great Awakening revelation. Benezet saw no antithetical
conflict between certain aspects of the two ways of looking at the
world, and in his philosophy the usual clash became an unusual associ­
ation. Through an examination of his antislavery thesis some of the
intellectual spirit of revolutionary America can be seen. His ideas
represent an early but sophisticated attempt to meet the expanding
social problem of slavery in the terms of the age in which he lived.

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