

Teacher Page: Resource Sheet #05

Source: A Letter From Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, discussing slavery and the Missouri question, Monticello, 22 April 1820.

The Jefferson Papers, The Library of Congress

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/jeffwest.html#159>

The complete Thomas Jefferson Papers from the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress consists of approximately 27,000 documents. This is the largest collection of original Jefferson documents in the world. Document types in the collection as a whole include correspondence, commonplace books, financial account books, and manuscript volumes.

Teaching Tip: John Holmes was a Congressman from Massachusetts. Jefferson is writing to discuss the issue of the Missouri Compromise in 1820. “This momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled one with terror, I considered it at once as the knell of the Union. It is hushed indeed for the moment, but this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence . . . we have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him nor safely let him go.”

Bagatelle: A thing of little importance; a very easy task.

Emancipation: To be set free, especially from legal, social, or political restrictions.

Document Analysis:

1. What does Jefferson consider the status of slaves to be? Are they considered to be people?

Jefferson refers to the slaves as property, and fears the repercussions of losing them.

2. Is Jefferson calling for the restriction or expansion of slavery into new territories? Explain your answer.

Jefferson appears to be calling for a limit on or abolition of slavery in new territories or states and yet hesitates to abolish slavery where it exists already. In this way he is very similar to Abraham Lincoln, who only called for an end to slavery’s expansion, not total abolition. He fears the results of an end to slavery.

3. Describe how Jefferson feels about the future of the slave business.

Jefferson generally believes that the end of slavery may be imminent, but he fears for the nation if that happens. He believes that the economy is so dependent upon slavery that there would be trouble, both economically and socially.

4. Many historians argue that this passage may be the best source in this argument because of its evidence of conflict in the mind of Jefferson. Describe how the letter may argue that Jefferson both supported slavery and opposed it at the same time.

In this letter Jefferson voiced the fears of many Americans that conflicting views of states' rights, slavery, westward expansion, and the powers of the federal government had brought the United States to the verge of civil war. Despite the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which confronted slavery in the West and allowed Missouri to enter the Union as a slave state, he expresses his concerns about the future.