

Teacher Page: Resource Sheet #07

Source: A Letter From Thomas Jefferson to William A. Burwell, January 28, 1805
Courtesy of *“Thomas Jefferson’s Farm Book*

Note: Jefferson's secretary William Burwell, a Virginian native, was part of the Presidential “family” from 1804 until 1806. Burwell's support for Jefferson was steadfast, and he led Jefferson’s defense in 1805 against the accusations of the journalist James Callender. Jefferson and Burwell maintained a warm personal and political correspondence for years after Jefferson’s departure from the President’s House.

Document Analysis:

1. By 1805, how does Jefferson feel about the prospects for the abolition of slavery?
Jefferson realizes that slavery will not end during his lifetime, but he senses a decline in the economic practice of slavery as being effective. He seems to believe that if left alone, slavery would erode naturally and be abolished.
2. Describe the many different attitudes that seemed to exist at this time about the issue slavery.
There seem to be moral, economic and political issues at stake in this debate. While arguing against slavery from a morality perspective, Jefferson admits that the nation would struggle economically and politically if slavery were to be abolished.
3. Jefferson seems to indicate that slavery may fail on its own. What evidence in the document supports that theory?
Jefferson argues that slavery is failing economically and may collapse as a labor system. “...The value of the slave is every day lessening. His burden on his master is daily increasing...”
4. Describe how Jefferson sees the potential for violence, and its effect on abolition.
Jefferson is fearful of slave rebellions, despite their lack of success. He foresees a time when uprisings will occur more rapidly and achieve success. “Interest is therefore preparing the disposition to be just; and this be will goaded from time to time by the insurrectionary spirit of the slaves. This is easily quelled in its first efforts, but from being local it will become general. And whenever it does, it will rise more formidable after every defeat, until we shall be forced, after dreadful scenes and sufferings to release them in their own way, which without such sufferings we might now model after our own convenience...”
5. How does this document help to answer the question, “Where Did Thomas Jefferson Stand on the Issue of Slavery?”
This document supports the concept that Jefferson was truly conflicted on the issue. He laments that many of his contemporaries hesitate to make change, but that change may be inevitable.