

Teacher Page: Resource Sheet #16

Source: From Thomas Jefferson's "Notes on the State of Virginia," 1781-1784

Note: Jefferson wrote his notes in 1781, before leaving to serve in France. They were published in 1784. Unlike his letters, he could not control the information that was presented to the public. While his ideas about religion, politics, science, and agriculture were internationally acclaimed, he never intended for the public, especially in slave-holding colonies, to read his ideas on slavery and he was roundly criticized for them.

He confided to James Madison that, "there are sentiments on some subjects which I apprehend ought to be displeasing to the country [and] perhaps to the [Virginia] Assembly or to some who lead it. I do not wish to be exposed to their censure."

Note: The term *amor patriae* is defined as love on one's country or patriotism.

Document Analysis:

1. How does Jefferson characterize the relationship between slave and master?

Jefferson finds slavery to be a terrible situation for all involved. He believes that the dependency of white slave owners on forced labor is destructive to society.

"...The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. And with what execration should the statesman be loaded, who permitting one half the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots, and these into enemies, destroys the morals of the one part, and the *amor patriae* of the other..."

2. Jefferson describes a relationship between climate and labor. How does he use climate to explain the condition of slavery?

Jefferson argues that warm climate inspires people of wealth to seek forced labor, as opposed to working themselves. "...For in a warm climate, no man will labour for himself who can make another labour for him..."

3. Jefferson was not a devoutly religious man, yet he mentions God in his argument. How does he do that?

Jefferson fears the wrath of God for the nation's refusal to exist in its concepts as written in the Declaration. "...And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever..."

4. Does this document portray Jefferson as a defender of slavery or opponent of slavery?

Jefferson is opposed to slavery in this selection and he hopes that its abolition will occur as the result of the will of the masters and not by the destruction, revolt or uprising of the slaves.