

Resource Sheet #05

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

"This momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me 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 . . . I can say with conscious truth that there is not a man on earth who would sacrifice more than I would, to relieve us from this heavy reproach, in any practicable way. The cession of that kind of property, for so it is misnamed, is a bagatelle which would not cost me in a second thought, if, in that way, a general emancipation and expatriation could be effected: and, gradually, and with due sacrifices, I think it might be. But, as it is, we have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other. . . . Of one thing I am certain, that as the passage of slaves from one state to another would not make a slave of a single human being who would not be so without it, so their diffusion over a greater surface would make them individually happier and proportionally facilitate the accomplishment of their emancipation. . . ."

Document Analysis:

1. What does Jefferson consider the status of slaves to be? Are they considered to be people?
2. Is Jefferson calling for the restriction or expansion of slavery into new territories? Explain your answer.
3. Describe how Jefferson feels about the future of the slave business.
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.