

George Washington's Last Will and Testament, 1799

Upon the decease of my wife, it is my Will & desire that all the Slaves which I hold in my own right, shall receive their freedom. To emancipate them during her life, would, tho' earnestly wish{ed by} me, be attended with such insu{pera}ble difficulties on account of thei{r interm}ixture by Marriages with the {dow}er Negroes, as to excite the most pa{in}ful sensations, if not disagreeabl{e} c}onsequences from the latter, while {both} descriptions are in the occupancy {of} the same Proprietor; it not being {in} my power, under the tenure by which {th}e Dower Negroes are held, to man{umi}t them. And whereas among {thos}e who will recieve freedom ac{cor}ding to this devise, there may b{e so}me, who from old age or bodily infi{rm}ities, and others who on account of {the}ir infancy, that will be unable to {su}pport themselves; it is m{y Will and de}sire that all who {come under the first} & second descrip{tion shall be comfor}tably cloathed & {fed by my heirs while} they live; and that such of the latter description as have no parents living, or if living are unable, or unwilling to provide for them, shall be bound by the Court until they shall arrive at the ag{e} of twenty five years; and in cases where no record can be produced, whereby their ages can be ascertained, the judgment of the Court, upon its own view of the subject, shall be adequate and final. The Negros thus bound, are (by their Masters or Mistresses) to be taught to read & write; and to be brought up to some useful occupation, agreeably to the Laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia, providing for the support of Orphan and other poor Children. and I do hereby expressly forbid the Sale, or transportation out of the said Commonwealth, of any Slave I may die possessed of, under any pretence whatsoever. And I do moreover most pointedly, and most solemnly enjoin it upon my Executors hereafter named, or the Survivors of them, to see that th{is cla}use respecting Slaves, and every part thereof be religiously fulfilled at the Epoch at which it is directed to take place; without evasion, neglect or delay, after the Crops which may then be on the ground are harvested, particularly as it respects the aged and infirm; seeing that a regular and permanent fund be established for their support so long as there are subjects requiring it; not trusting to the {u}ncertain provision to be made by individuals. And to my Mulatto man William (calling himself William Lee) I give immediate freedom; or if he should prefer it (on account of the accidents which ha{v}e befallen him, and which have rendered him incapable of walking or of any active employment) to remain in the situation he now is, it shall be optional in him to do so: In either case however, I allow him an annuity of thirty dollars during his natural life, whic{h} shall be independent of the victuals and cloaths he has been accustomed to receive, if he chuses the last alternative; but in full, with his freedom, if he prefers the first; & this I give him as a test{im}ony of my sense of his attachment to me, and for his faithful services during the Revolutionary War.