

Dear Friends,

August 18th, 2020

In 1688, four people signed the Germantown Petition, declaring the equality of enslaved Black people (and all other humans), the application of the Golden Rule to all peoples, and called for the abolition of slavery on that basis. The Petition, which was delivered to the Dublin Meeting, marked the first recorded protest of the practice by a religious body on the American continent—and one of the earliest invocations of universal human rights in Western thinking. However, it did not lead to any immediate tangible results. The petition was passed from Monthly to Quarterly to the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, which took no action except to pledge to send it to London Yearly Meeting, although there is no record of whether this happened.

In the decades that followed, American Quakers moved closer to action in small steps. As early as 1712, individual Quakers petitioned the Pennsylvania colonial assembly to ban slavery outright. In 1718 the New York Yearly Meeting minuted that slavery was “not right” and the next year the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting prohibited Friends from importing additional enslaved people. From the 1730s onward, Yearly Meetings across the colonies admonished slaveholding. Finally, in 1774 the New York Meeting forbade slavery and the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of 1774 held that Quakers were not to buy or sell enslaved people, and that any Quakers who owned people were to free them as soon as possible. These bans were taken seriously enough that minutes from the 1776 Yearly Meeting of Pennsylvania and New Jersey Quakers called for the removal of membership from any Quaker who still owned people.

Quaker activism was not confined to internal management of Quaker affairs. Individual Quakers helped spark and sustain the abolitionist movement aimed at the elimination of chattel slavery. Roughly 150 years later, the movement culminated in the American Civil War and the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation (an executive action which freed enslaved people in Confederate-held territory) followed by the passage and ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States in 1865. The purpose of the amendment was to place the hard won abolition of chattel slavery beyond the reach of any future president, Congress, or Supreme Court. In that sense, the amendment was a success. It finally ended a specific practice that had marred the continent for nearly 250 years.

American Quakers have long celebrated the role of Friends in the abolition of chattel slavery. That celebration came too soon. The system of white supremacy necessary to sustain the generations-long institution of race-based slavery remained. This system exploited a textual loophole in the amendment to reassert its power.

The amendment has two sections, as follows:

Section 1: *Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.*

Section 2: *Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.*

While the plain text eliminates “slavery” and “involuntary servitude”, the “duly convicted” clause provides a broad opening for government-backed oppression. White people, who controlled the wealth, government, and police forces and otherwise held power where the formerly enslaved had none, enacted Jim Crow laws and other Black Codes to keep freed people and their families poor, powerless, and lowly. By disproportionately arresting Black Americans, often using the same people who had previously hunted down freedom seekers, those who had power were able to maintain it and pass down both that power and their racist ideologies to their children. Black people have been intentionally targeted by systems that lead to prison time ever since the Thirteenth Amendment was passed. This process has also focused on Black men in ways that intentionally break up Black families, and thus contribute to generational racial suffering and poverty. While chattel slavery was eliminated, “involuntary servitude” became the hallmark of an ever expanding prison system, weakening Black families while lining the pockets of those who profit from forced labor.

As of June 2020, the United States of America has the highest incarceration rate per capita of any nation in the world. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2018 Black adults represented 13% of the population and 40% of the prison population. This strong disparity is a direct result of generations of white Americans using their disproportionate power to push Black people through the loophole in the Thirteenth Amendment.

The Germantown Petition did not merely call for the elimination of slavery. It trumpeted the recognition of universal equality through universal application of the Golden Rule. Neither of those things can coexist with white supremacy, in any form, or under any pretext including as “punishment for crime.”

Friends, let us step forward and continue that long march to Freedom. It is time to truly end “slavery and involuntary servitude” in the United States of America. This will require a Constitutional amendment, which is not a quick or easy task, but Quakers are no strangers to fighting long fights against slavery and other injustices.

Amendments to the Constitution must:

1. Be approved by a two-thirds vote in both houses of Congress. Once this happens, it is sent to the states by Congress for ratification.
2. Be ratified by three-fourths of the states (38 of 50). This process varies between states, but is typically either done by convention or votes by state legislatures.

Alternatively, Congress must call a convention for proposing amendments upon application of two-thirds of state legislatures.

This means we have at least two paths forward:

1. Lobby Congress to make this amendment.
2. Lobby state legislatures to apply to Congress to make this amendment.

Following both routes simultaneously at a national scale produces the highest chance of success. It would be prudent to form a committee of qualified individuals to determine the amendment wording we propose when following those paths.

Friends, let us work together to finish making the abolition of “slavery and involuntary servitude” a reality and move one step forward to the universal application of the Golden Rule to all human beings.

Sincerely,

Jamie Clausen

Clerk of Meeting

Salmon Bay Friends Meeting

Seattle, Washington