

*New Jersey's
Revolutionary Experience*

14

*Blacks in the
Revolutionary Era*

FRANCES D. PINGEON

New Jersey Historical Commission

NEW JERSEY'S REVOLUTIONARY EXPERIENCE

Larry R. Gerlach, *Editor*

This series of publications is dedicated to the memory of Alfred E. Driscoll, governor of New Jersey from 1947 to 1954, in grateful tribute to his lifelong support of the study and teaching of the history of New Jersey and the United States. He was a member of the New Jersey Historical Commission from 1970 until his death on March 9, 1975.

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Foreword

New Jersey's Revolutionary Experience is a Bicentennial pamphlet series published by the New Jersey Historical Commission with a grant from the New Jersey Bicentennial Commission. The twenty-six numbers and two teachers' guides are intended to acquaint secondary school students and the general public with the state's history during the era of the American Revolution. Some titles treat aspects of the Revolution in New Jersey, while others show how important themes of the colonial period developed during the revolutionary years; some bring together the results of existing scholarship, while others present the findings of original research; some are written by professional historians, and others by laymen whose investigations of Jersey history exceed avocation. Because the series is directed to a general audience, the pamphlets have no footnotes but contain bibliographical essays which offer suggestions for further reading.

New Jersey's Revolutionary Experience is the product of a cooperative venture by numerous individuals and agencies. On my behalf and that of the pamphlets' readers, I accord recognition and appreciation to the individual authors for their contributions to New Jersey history, to the New Jersey American Revolution Bicentennial Celebration Commission and the New Jersey Historical Commission for their support of the project, to Hank Simon, president, Trentypo, Inc., for his invaluable suggestions and cooperation in producing the series, and to the staff of the Historical Commission: Richard Waldron, Public Programs Coordinator, who as project director supervised the series from commencement to completion; Peggy Lewis, Chief of Publications and Information, and Lee R. Parks, Assistant Editor, who edited and designed each number; and William C. Wright, Associate Director, who contributed valuable suggestions at every stage of production.

Larry R. Gerlach
University of Utah

Ten Dollars REWARD.

RAN away on the night of the 29th instant, a Negro Man named HARRY, between 30 and 34 years of age, his complexion between that of a molatto and black, about five feet ten inches high, rather lean than fat inclined, chews tobacco and is fond of drink, speaks good English and Low Dutch, and tells a very pleasing story, but is a great liar: he is a turner and chair-maker by trade, and very handy at almost any kind of business: He had on when he went away a homespun short coat of a lightish colour, linen trousers, a good homespun great coat a little of a mixed lightish colour, a tow and linnen old shirt: Took with him a fine white shirt, and a long blue broad-cloath coat with metal buttons; the long coat is well worn. It is likely he will sell his great coat or blue coat to get drink. Whoever takes him up and secures him in any gaol, and gives information, so that his master may get him again, shall be entitled to the above reward.

JAMES COLE.

New-Brunswick, State of New-Jersey, Sept. 30, 1795.



NEW-BRUNSWICK—Printed by ABRAHAM BLAUVELT.

*Advertisement for a New Jersey runaway slave. A turner was a craftsman who shaped pottery, stone or wooden articles.
Courtesy Rutgers University Library.*

In the years following the American Revolution travelers expressed amazement at the large number of slaves in New Jersey. Peter Chandler, a businessman from Connecticut, called it "the land of slavery." The Duke de la Rochefoucault Liancourt, studying social customs in America, observed that New Jersey's slave laws were as severe as those of the southern plantation states and the West Indian colonies. The black presence in New Jersey was a legacy of colonial times when Africans represented a substantial minority. Of the wide variety of ethnic groups in the colony, blacks probably surpassed in numbers all but the English, Dutch and Germans.

The English acquired New Jersey along with New York in their conquest of the Dutch colony of New Netherland in 1664. In 1676 New Jersey was divided into two provinces, East and West Jersey, each governed by a separate Board of Proprietors, which owned the land. The two proprietary colonies were reunited in 1702 as a royal province. The dividing line between the Jerseys ran southward from the Delaware River near the water gap to the Atlantic Ocean near Little Egg Harbor. East Jersey lay abreast of Manhattan, Long Island, Staten Island and the lands north of Manhattan, which had all been part of New Netherland. As early as 1627 Dutch slave traders had landed Africans at the request of the colonial government, which considered them essential to agricultural prosperity and defense against Indian attacks. Most of New Netherland's blacks belonged to Dutch settlers, and the majority lived in slavery or semislavery. Thus, from its earliest settlement the area was inhabited by Africans forcibly removed from their homelands as well as by Europeans who came to escape poverty or religious persecution.

The province of East Jersey became a frontier for the restless, ambitious and discontented of the former Dutch colony and for new settlers from Europe and from other colonies of the western hemisphere. Many planters deserted the teeming and unhealthy island of Barbados to come to Bergen and Monmouth counties via the port of New York. They brought with them slaves whom they used to clear the wilderness and cultivate their plantations. Dutch farmers, often younger sons, crossed the Hudson or sailed the narrows from Long Island to Monmouth County to escape the overcrowded farms of New York. They settled in the fertile lands of the Raritan and Passaic river valleys and cultivated large estates in the townships of Middletown, Freehold and Shrewsbury in Monmouth County. They too brought their black slaves and employed them in ever increasing numbers to clear and improve their farms. These blacks transmitted from Africa agricultural skills which may have contributed to the Hollanders' reputation as the most proficient of New Jersey farmers. Wealthier New Englanders and, later, Scots also discovered the convenience and status offered by the use of black labor, and they relied on it heavily for agricultural and domestic service. Several free black families, descendants of New Netherland slaves, left New York for New Jersey to find land on which they could live and farm.

Throughout the eighteenth century between 10 and 12 percent of East Jersey's population were blacks, and in some communities they exceeded 20 percent. Except for the few free families, some of whom acquired substantial landed estates, the vast majority of blacks lived under the harsh laws of slavery. Acute racial tensions existed in prerevolutionary East Jersey.

In West Jersey the blacks, fewer than those in the eastern colony, never became a substantial bulwark of the economy. At the time of the Revolution they comprised only about 4½ percent of the total population. Much of the acreage of West Jersey—pine barrens and the marsh lands along parts of the Delaware River—was unsuited to eighteenth century farming, a factor which limited the growth of population. Although many of the early prosperous Quaker settlers who predominated in Burlington, Gloucester and Salem counties had owned both Indian and African slaves, by the eve of the Revolution the Quakers had taken a strong position against slavery. By 1776 the Quaker meetings of Philadelphia and

West Jersey had resolved that Friends who continued to hold slaves would be read out of meeting. Some of the inhabitants of the former frontier counties of Hunterdon, Sussex and Morris—usually Dutch farmers who had come from the eastern counties—continued to own blacks long after the Revolution. Later in the century an increasing number of free blacks lived in their own West Jersey communities, some working as day laborers and some as skilled artisans.

These communities were usually comprised of slaves and descendants of slaves who had been freed by their Quaker masters. A few were unique like Gouldtown in Cumberland County which, according to legend, had been founded as a result of an inter-marriage between the daughter of John Fenwick, one of West Jersey's earliest settlers, and a black man named Gould. Some of its later inhabitants were named Gould and probably had a heritage of freedom. Most of the free blacks of West Jersey, however, were of slave origin. The majority of them had, with the encouragement of their owners, bought their own freedom and often that of their wives and children after many years of hard work as both slaves and freedmen. Usually, families lived alone in a house or cottage located in one of the many black settlements which had sprung up near the estates of their former owners. One such village, established during the eighteenth century by the freed slaves of John Thorne of Gloucester County, was called Guineatown after a black born in Guinea, West Africa who claimed to be of royal blood.

During the era of the Revolution, Quaker records told of the many free blacks of West Jersey who had acquired a reputation for industry, talent and honesty in a variety of enterprises. Cyrus Bustill, born a slave in Burlington on February 2, 1735, gained his freedom at the age of thirty-six and opened a highly successful bakery. He used the substantial profits he earned from the bakery to give his children "an education beyond many of his white neighbors in equal circumstances..." During the revolutionary war, Bustill supplied the Continental army with bread. It is believed that George Washington gave him a piece of silver as a medal which the Bustill family still preserves.

Caesar Murray of Burlington County served twenty-five years as a slave before he was given his freedom. A shoemaker by trade, he opened up a business in this field and employed from three to

five apprentices and several artisans in his shop. Some of these were black. His skill and diligence earned him not only a leading position in the business community in Burlington but attracted many customers from the surrounding country and Philadelphia. He used the profits to buy the freedom of his wife and children, to build them "a genteel commodious home" and to educate his children. One of his sons, Robert Murray, became a shoemaker on his own.

Peter Hill was a slave in Burlington County until he was well over twenty when he negotiated with his master to buy his freedom in regular installments. In the meanwhile, he had learned the art of watch and clock making from his master and set himself up in the business of making and selling clocks and watches. This enabled him to complete the payments for his own freedom and buy the freedom of his wife. According to the records, he carried on a thriving business and he and his wife were an "exemplary couple."

Charles Selcey obtained his freedom at thirty-one, purchased his wife and children for £95, and brought up a family of eight children, most of whom became working men and women. Selcey had earned his living on a farm which he rented for £50 a year and by the time of the Revolution, he had accumulated a significant amount of property.

Black women as well as men earned status in West Jersey during the revolutionary era. The wife of Sharper Veree, a black landowner in Burlington County, was reported to be an inspiration to both her black and white neighbors. Her character, New Jersey Quakers wrote, "shines with distinguished lustre in the sphere of life in which she stands. . . . Her conduct and demeanor being of such a stamp as to excite esteem and even friendship where she is known." Other black women were described as hardworking mothers, wives and housekeepers, willing to take on chores outside of their homes to help educate their children.

A strong religious faith, an education, and the ownership of property were measures of success in revolutionary New Jersey. A substantial number of West Jersey blacks attended Quaker meetings regularly and educated their children at integrated schools scattered throughout the region. As schools in New Jersey were not free, black parents who could afford to paid for their children's education. In many cases, they were

helped by Quaker philanthropy.

Religion was a vital force in the life of the West Jersey black. William Boen, born a slave in Mount Holly in 1735, is a good example of how it helped blacks to become not only free but effective members of the community. When Boen's master asked him to cut down all the trees on a hillside, Boen believed that God, whom he considered to be his true master, wanted him to leave one tree standing, which he did. In this way he placed his religious duty above obedience to his owner. When his master gave him freedom at age twenty-eight, he was determined to live according to his principles and because he believed that slavery violated his religion, he refused to use or wear any article that had been manufactured or transported "through that corrupt channel." Boen was probably New Jersey's earliest black abolitionist.

The profound difference in attitudes toward the black population between the inhabitants of East and West Jersey during the revolutionary era originated when New Jersey was divided into two separate colonies with clearly divergent population structures, geographic positions and religious faiths. The people of West Jersey were largely English Quakers and they continued to predominate for some time. There were relatively few blacks, in part because the Dutch—who had a reputation for holding substantial numbers of black slaves—had made no large migrations into the province. Further contributing to the low percentage of blacks was West Jersey's remoteness from the slave-trading port of New York and its easy access to the port of Philadelphia, where white servants were in plentiful supply. But more important in defining the difference in attitudes toward blacks were the philosophies of the religious bodies that dominated the two provinces. The Quaker "conceived it to be his business not only to establish harmony within himself but also harmonious relations with men of all races and colors with whom he came into contact for all men have something in them that is sacred and human life is divine." Most slave owners in East Jersey belonged to the Dutch Reformed and Anglican churches. The more rigid hierarchial dogma of the Dutch Reformed Church, where each man had his ordained position on the ladder of society and was predestined to remain there, failed to recognize the problems of race and slavery. The aristocratic Anglican Church (Church of England) looked on slavery as an

economic expedient and limited its official policy to converting blacks and Indians to the Anglican faith. Although the laws of both colonies discriminated against blacks and Indians, a more tolerant attitude prevailed in the counties of West Jersey than in the eastern province, where the black population was relatively large and where Anglicans, Dutchmen and Barbadian planters held key positions in the government.

Laws dealing with "Negroes and Indians" in Burlington County, West Jersey, prohibited owners from putting them to work on the Sabbath or from allowing them to wander about town during religious services after sunset on that day. Quaker concern for the soul of the black or Indian slave, more than fear of unruly or rebellious behavior, was probably the cause of this legislation. Breaking the Sabbath was an offense against God, and the law protected members of all races from committing it. West Jersey law forbade trade between black and white, but both parties to such transactions were equally punished. Published court records report neither capital punishment of blacks nor any serious criminal offense by them. True, the records hint at indignities suffered by many of these uprooted Africans, as when "negro Mingo" was whipped for publicly stating that his master had "forcibly lain with his [Mingo's] unwilling spouse." But on the whole Quaker justice was the most liberal of the day. The harsh punishments so common in East Jersey rarely occurred in the western province. From the beginning Quakers regarded slavery as an institution of doubtful morality. West Jersey law had stated in 1676 that the province "should be free from slavery and oppression in so far as in us lies," and individual Quakers tended to own blacks only when they could not resist the temptation to profit from an available source of labor.

East Jersey, inhabited by people of many cultures, traditions and religions, lacked the unity that the English Quakers brought to West Jersey. Like all societies which depended heavily on slave labor, East Jersey was vulnerable to the stresses caused by considerable numbers of blacks living together in slave quarters and on adjoining plantations. These blacks, many born in Africa, refused to accept the inferior status forced upon them. In part, their continuous struggle to escape the bonds of slavery gave rise to the harsh laws and attitudes of East Jersey that were to prevail until long after the Revolution. The attitude of East Jersey whites that

blacks, like Indians, were an alien people created a society in which violence or its threat was an ever-present danger.

From the beginning East Jersey law made it clear that blacks, whether slaves or servants, were to receive neither the advantages nor the protection given to white servants. Unlike "Christian servants," they would have no claim to land upon the expiration of their terms of bondage. Not only did blacks' service rarely expire, but promoters of settlement in the colony did not have to persuade black labor to immigrate by offering the concessions needed to attract white servants. Nor were slaves protected against physical abuse from their masters. A law passed in 1682 provided "that if a man or woman maim or smite the eye of his servant, being a white servant, so that it perish . . . , such servant shall go free; the law accorded black slaves only the rights of sufficient food and clothing.

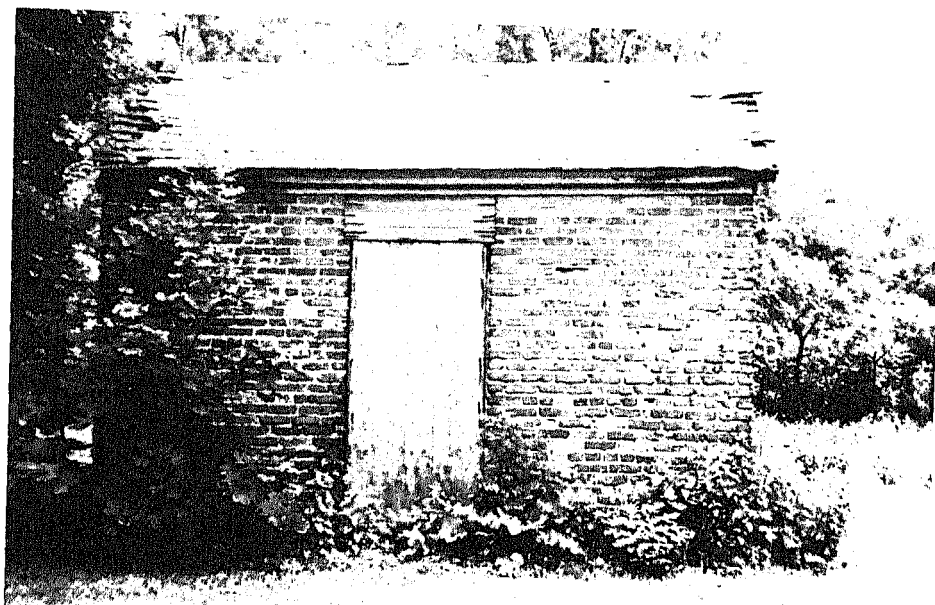
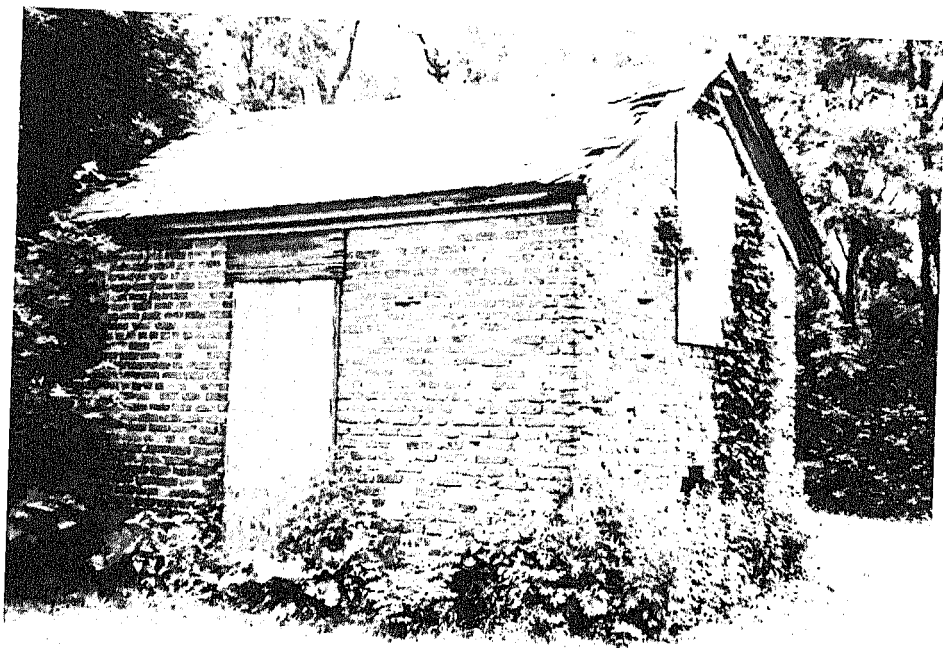
The blacks of East Jersey's early plantations and villages retained some of their African culture and traditions. Their skill in hunting, herding cattle and finding their way in the wilderness made them particularly valuable to European settlers accustomed to smaller landholdings and a more confined way of life. Dutch and Barbadian planters frequently put slaves in charge of their swine and cattle. But the relative freedom with which slaves carried on these activities, killing swine for their own uses and hunting with guns in groups of fellow Africans, terrified white settlers and led to the prohibition of hunting except in the company of an authorized white man. The spectacle of blacks with guns produced an obsessive fear of slave insurrection, and owners of slaves who allowed them to engage in such practices were "liable to punishment against their estates and their bodies."

Black rebellion did indeed influence the history of proprietary East Jersey. From the beginning it was clear that many blacks had no intention of accepting their status as slaves without resistance. In 1695 two Monmouth County blacks were hanged and another burned to ashes "for traitorously, maliciously and of malice forethought" consprimg and executing "the horrid murder" of Lewis Morris of Passage Point, an owner of many slaves, "by shouting [shooting] him through the body with a gun whereof he died." During the proprietary period at least six blacks were executed in Monmouth County. Fearful of slave insurgence, the East Jersey assembly set up special courts to expedite the conviction of black

rebels, indicating that harsher justice would be administered to blacks than to whites.

After the two provinces were united in 1702, East Jersey attitudes toward blacks prevailed in the laws of the colony. Although the legal status of slavery was never defined by statute in colonial New Jersey, the laws passed by the assembly reflected the underlying fear and suspicion that had characterized East Jersey. In 1704 a law authorized burning as a punishment for slaves committing arson or murder, and castration for "any carnal knowledge of a white woman." This law was later disallowed, but its significance remained clear: New Jersey had decided that the black slave was potentially savage and that only cruel and unusual punishment could restrain his nature. The slave code of 1713 reenacted the provisions of 1704 but omitted allusion to any barbaric forms of punishment. Slave felonies would be tried in special courts, as they had been in proprietary East Jersey, but jury trial was excluded unless the slave's owner requested and paid for it. The slaveholders of every county would compensate the owner of any executed slave to the amount of £30 for a male and £20 for a female. Freed blacks were removed from any participation in society. Called "an idle and slothful" people, they were not permitted to hold property, "either land, houses or hereditaments." To free a black the owner had to post a bond of £200 and guarantee him an income of £20 a year—a financially prohibitive arrangement for most slaveholders.

During the eighteenth century New Jersey slaveholders' attitudes toward blacks reflected a growing dread of slave crime, conspiracy and insurrection. In 1734, a time of slave rebellions in Jamaica and other West Indian colonies, a black in Somerset County, said to be drunk, promised to show that he was as good as his master. This led to the discovery of what was alleged to be New Jersey's first important slave conspiracy, which, one spectator at the trial testified, involved several hundred Somerset County slaves. According to this report, they planned to rise one midnight during the spring, murder the slave owners, ravish their wives, and escape to the Indians. The two ringleaders were condemned to hang, one slave had an ear cut off, and many others were beaten. The witness to the trial called the Africans "barbarous monsters" and warned New Jersey masters to keep their slaves under tighter control. In 1741, the year of a famous New York slave conspiracy,



*Slave quarters on the Basking Ridge estate of William Alexander (Lord Stirling).
Courtesy Rutgers University Library.*

three blacks in Hackensack were convicted and burned alive for setting fire to seven barns. The people of Hackensack, dreading the spread of the New York insurrection, armed themselves and placed the town under military watch. Many suspected acts of revenge by slaves strengthened the conviction that blacks would stop at nothing to escape bondage. Burning slaves for murder, suspected murder or arson was a frequent practice in eighteenth century New Jersey. A punishment prescribed only for blacks, it was usually carried out in public as a warning to all of them.

The last prerevolutionary laws regulating slaves were more severe than those of 1713. Although the trial of black felons was removed to the regular courts for convenience, blacks who committed murder, arson or physical attack were condemned to death without benefit of clergy. Any slave, "Negro, Indian or mulatto," who stole goods above the value of £5 or committed manslaughter would suffer death "or such other penalties as the court would see fit." The owner who wished to free a black slave was still required to post a £200 bond for his support. In 1769 the legislature imposed a tariff on the importation of slaves into the colony. This has been interpreted as an attempt to limit the expansion of slavery in the colony, but it was really prompted by a desire to discourage the increase of blacks.

Despite the strains produced by the presence of large numbers of slaves, New Jersey imported them in substantial numbers through 1764. Advertisements in Philadelphia newspapers during the early 1760s announced the sale at Cooper's Ferry (later Camden) of large numbers of blacks of all ages from the west coast of Africa. Why did these African slaves, considered a threat to security, continue to be a valuable and desirable source of labor? One important reason was that labor was in short supply and land abundant. Even the prejudiced view of blacks as "barbarous monsters" may have added to their value. By preventing them from joining the colonial militia, they were made more available to employers, especially during periods of intercolonial war. Equally important, advertisements for runaway slaves suggest that blacks were not undisciplined, indolent and disorderly, and that many possessed skills essential to the economy. They were as competent as Europeans in forest clearing, hunting, iron forging, mining and the use of timber to make staves or wooden tools, and they may have sur-

passed Europeans in experience with herding cattle and loading, unloading and handling small boats. Blacks in prerevolutionary New Jersey were masters of many trades, and their owners were aware of their versatility. Cornelius Low, a wealthy Dutchman of Raritan Landing, described his runaway slave in these words:

He is an extream handy fellow at any common work, especially with horses and carriages of any sort having been bred to it from a little boy, and to the loading and unloading of boats, a good deal used to a farm, can do all sorts of house-work, and is very fit to wait upon a gentleman, speaks very good English and low Dutch and also pretty good high Dutch, is noted for his energy and particularly for any activity he takes in hand.

In an age when a trade brought European colonists both status and good wages, it gave blacks neither. The ability of some to speak two or three languages and to read, write and cipher, and the skill and industriousness attributed to them by their masters, indicates that they had to an unusual degree adapted to their new environment. But neither their skill nor their knowledge convinced most prerevolutionary owners that slaves qualified for or should justly be given freedom.

While the Dutch and English settlers of East Jersey became increasingly apprehensive about their slaves, the movement in West Jersey to end the buying and selling of blacks and ultimately to abolish slavery gained momentum. The Quakers who owned slaves in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, with a few exceptions, believed that because blacks and Indians came from non-Christian cultures they were primitive and uncivilized, and that treating them kindly and teaching them the gospel, even while holding them as slaves, was the most compassionate way to deal with them. Because of the nature of their faith, the laws that the Quakers passed concerning blacks and Indians reflected an interest in the welfare of these "less fortunate beings", rather than an anxiety that they would disrupt society by rebelling against their bondage.

As early as 1696 the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, the Quaker organization of Pennsylvania and West Jersey, instructed Friends who owned Negroes to care for them, to bring them to meetings, and to restrain them from "loose and lewd living as much as in

them lies and from rambling abroad" on the Sabbath and at other times. Throughout the eighteenth century the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting dealt increasingly with the issue of slavery. In 1758 it decided that those who persisted in purchasing or selling slaves would be denied positions of authority in the meeting. By 1776 many members had not yet yielded to the persuasion to free their slaves, and Pennsylvania and West Jersey Quakers decided to read all slaveholders out of their respective meetings. After that, slavery among Quakers in West Jersey became a dying institution. Quaker abolitionists were not content simply to free their slaves. They were determined that free blacks should have employment, education and Christianity, and in their many visits to black communities they sought to instill the virtues which they themselves valued: sobriety, thriftiness, godliness and the desire for learning. Numerous advertisements for runaway slaves described them as possessing fiddles or other musical instruments which, according to their masters, they played with great skill. Quakers disapproved of the fiddling and dancing and conviviality that was part of the African heritage.

As the revolutionary crisis approached and the rights of man became a popular issue, the differing attitudes of East and West Jersey toward slavery became dramatically clear. Numerous petitions from the Quaker counties to the assembly in 1773 and 1774 asked for duties that would end forever the importation of blacks into the colony and for a law to ease the requirements for freeing slaves. The petitioners stressed both the evils of slavery and the necessity that New Jersey show the world "a conduct consistent with the principles of liberty which we claim as our birthright." The manumission bill they supported would have withheld from newly freed blacks the right to vote, hold office, intermarry with whites, and testify in court except against each other, and it would have forced black debtors into indentured service. Nevertheless, petitions from East Jersey asked the assembly to consider the dangers of the bill and reject it. Slaveholders in Shrewsbury and Middletown complained of the "great numbers of negroes, men, women and children, being slaves and greatly increasing in numbers and impudence." They were, according to the petitioners, "very troublesome," and ran about at all hours of the night riding people's horses and stealing, "in great degree owing to their having correspondence

and resources to the houses of them *already free*.” The laws against them, according to this view, were already too easy, and the assembly was asked to weigh any law that might increase their liberty. Perth Amboy petitioners warned the assembly that the proposed law might have more dismal consequences than any yet passed in the province.

From the long experience wee have had of negroes both in slavery and in freedom we apprehend that they are a very dangerous people to have freedom in any of his majesty's dominions much more so in as defenseless a province as this of New Jersey. To keep them in a state of slavery wee presume is very difficult and will be much more so when generally set free as they will then have time to consult any plan they please to invade the inhabitants and accomplish their inhuman designs which we have the strongest reasons to believe would be to bring the white people into the same state that the negroes are now in.

They pleaded with the assembly “to be very careful to preserve the liberty of the white people of the province—lest in setting the blacks free you bring us into bondage. . . .”

There were reasons for the fear voiced in the petitions from the eastern counties. In the impending conflict with England, New Jersey would be placed in an exposed and defenseless position, with a population sorely divided. American strategy depended on a loyal population which would not swing over to the British camp in adversity. Perth Amboy and to a lesser extent Shrewsbury and Middletown were hotbeds of loyalism and, located on or near the coast, were vulnerable to attack. The large number of blacks in Perth Amboy and Monmouth County intensified fears that slaves would use the war to gain their freedom and in one way or another subjugate the white man.

Much remains to be learned about the nature and structure of black society in the towns of East Jersey. The notion that whites and blacks lived together in relative harmony has been disproved. In many of the towns one of every five inhabitants was black. A significant number of households had ten or more slaves. Some had as many as twenty, who often outnumbered the white family. Most slaves in Dutch towns lived in groups of five or more, not singly as is sometimes assumed. Many had separate houses located at some

distance from their masters, which helped to preserve social cohesion among the slaves. The laws and petitions concerning black activity suggest that they possessed a distinctive culture of their own. In spite of the laws, slaves and free blacks congregated on the public thoroughfares at night, rode their owners' horses, and were suspected of devising subversive plots. With the approach of war in a colony divided between patriots and Tories, the fear of nocturnal meetings among blacks haunted certain communities.

In the revolutionary ferment of 1775 and 1776 all bills proposing to improve the condition of the blacks were dropped, as were efforts by West Jersey Quakers to introduce a bill for the gradual abolition of slavery. William Livingston, the first governor of the state, postponed his appeal to the assembly to free the slaves until the revolutionary crisis was over. But the issue of freedom for blacks was far from dead. In New Jersey the Revolution evoked "the most extensive newspaper debate on the subject before the 1830s." The issue gained renewed urgency when the Pennsylvania legislature in 1780 passed an abolition act that granted freedom at the age of twenty-eight to all blacks born after passage of the bill. A group of petitioners expressed deep distress "that the state of New Jersey which has ever distinguished itself among the foremost in the Union should be preceded by any other state in acts of liberality and disinterestedness." Jerseymen who wished to free their slaves argued that blacks, given education and opportunity, were equal to whites, and that it was paradoxical to keep blacks in slavery while whites fought a war for liberty and equality. According to the abolitionists, God would not heed the prayers of the American revolutionaries while "the groans of their slaves were continually mingled with them." They were convinced that all men were born to be free and that it was impossible that those of black complexion lacked the same emotions and needs "as their red or brown haired neighbors." When wives and husbands were separated at the whim of the slave owner, and children sold away from their parents, how could blacks be accused of lacking a sense of family responsibility? The New Jersey opponents of slavery raised these and other disturbing questions.

The defenders of slavery in New Jersey maintained that blacks born in slavery expected nothing more and were content to remain as they were. This view was expressed despite the many stringent

slave laws designed to destroy the blacks' initiative and repress rebellion. According to this argument, blacks were "impulsive, wanting in judgement and discretion, compelled to gratify and satiate every thirst, and therefore, unfit for freedom." But, in fact, the slaveholders based their defenses more on the fear of free blacks and the belief in the need for slave labor than on the idea that blacks were unable to support themselves. "At this time," warned a writer in the *New-Jersey Gazette*, "when many parts of the state . . . are laid waste and rendered desolate by the ravages of the army and many families . . . depend in great measure on the labor of slaves for their livelihood, it would be unreasonable to deprive them of their only support." The quantity of labor, it was argued, would be greatly reduced by the abolition of slavery at a time when all the energy of the people should be strained "to furnish money and supplies for the army on which our liberty and property depends." Proslavery patriots claimed that free blacks would not only refuse to work but would turn against whites and roam the country-side "committing plunder and rapine" and disrupting the already troubled state. Finally, the strongest objection to emancipation was that free blacks would revolt and set up a kingdom of their own, possibly as rulers of the whites. Slaveholders were unable to envision a community in which blacks and whites could live together in peace and equality.

The concentration of blacks in parts of East Jersey was a source of uneasiness, and rumors of black insurrection and suspected treason pervaded the area throughout the Revolution. How much was based on fact and how much on wartime hysteria, it is difficult to say. In 1772 a slaveholder in Perth Amboy, alarmed by reports of a black conspiracy there, urged that all blacks, including seven of his own, be sent to Africa at their owners' expense. In 1775 the committee of correspondence of Shrewsbury and Freehold ordered that "all arms in the hands of or at the command of negroes, either slave or free, shall be taken and secured by the militia officers of the several districts." This action was taken in response to "numerous and riotous meetings of negroes at unlicensed houses," which the committee perceived as dangerous in itself and fraught with dangerous implications. Shrewsbury and Freehold were vulnerable to British attack from Long Island and to the internal disruption of a significant Loyalist population. On July

5, 1776, Samuel Tucker, president of the Provincial Congress, asked the Continental Congress for relief from the care of prisoners of war in New Jersey because of the tense military situation. "The story of the negroes," he wrote, "may be depended on so far, at least, as to their arming and attempting to form themselves in Somerset County. Our militias are gone off in such numbers that we have hardly men or arms left in these parts which are best affected to the cause." The population of Somerset County was over 15 percent black. In Elizabethtown in 1779 blacks were accused of plotting with Loyalist agents to murder white inhabitants.

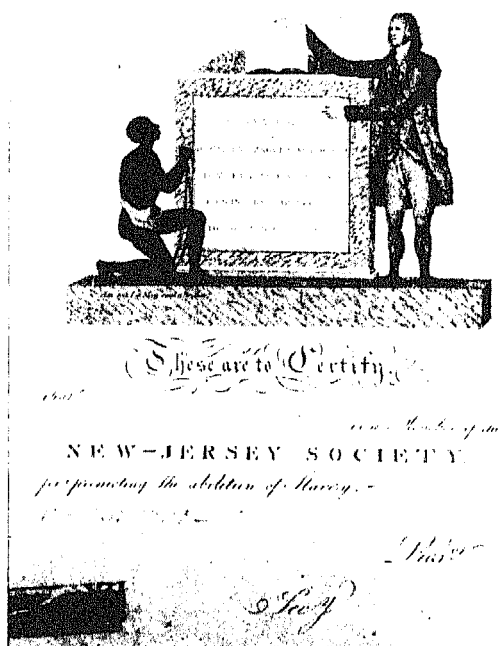
In spite of the continued existence of slavery, some blacks in New Jersey, both slave and free, chose to fight on the American side and made important contributions to the cause. On March 31, 1780, Moore Furman, state quartermaster general, asked his commanding officer to pay his teamsters in order to prevent their wholesale desertion. "Private teams cannot be found," he warned. "Besides the season for ploughing is at hand when if they are forced from their teams, it will totally ruin them and in their ruin, the army must fail to support." A number of blacks, probably more than records show, drove wagons for the Continental army at Trenton when many white inhabitants would not leave their farms. Ceaser, Pomp, Will, Andrew, Jack, and Dick, all listed as "negroes," were among those who furnished the army with corn, flour and other essentials. Although George Washington had cautioned against using black soldiers as teamsters because it would be so easy for them to escape with horses and wagons to the enemy, there is no record of black desertion in New Jersey. Instead, they served the army in an essential capacity when, as Furman made clear, teamsters were nearly impossible to find. Whether these men were slaves or free is unknown.

Some free blacks had outstanding military records. Oliver Cromwell of Burlington County served as a private in the New Jersey Continental Line from 1777 to 1781, a long term for any soldier in the Revolution. He fought in the battles of Trenton, Brandywine, Princeton, Monmouth and Yorktown and received a pension from the United States government. Jacob Francis served monthly tours in the Hunterdon County militia between 1777 and 1781 and was given a pension. James Array of Readington, a descendant of one of the few landowning black families of New

Jersey, served in the Continental Line and the Hunterdon County militia. Samuel Simonson, called "Negro Sambo" in the casualty book of the Fourth New Jersey Regiment, served in the Somerset County militia and the Continental army. The laws discouraged the enlistment of slaves in the Continental regiments of New Jersey and of both slaves and free blacks in the New Jersey militia. However, many commanders, faced with the continual desertion of white men to their farms and families, welcomed black men into their units. Some served as substitutes for their masters and were often rewarded with land and freedom. Others may have run away and joined either local militia or the Continental army, claiming to be free. On at least three occasions the legislature, after confiscating the property of a Loyalist, granted freedom to a slave who had performed military service.

Blacks joined the American side for material rewards, the chance of freedom, even patriotism. If they were free blacks, money, bounties and adventure no doubt tempted them to escape white society, where opportunities were limited. Many slaves had no faith in British promises of freedom, since Loyalists had been among New Jersey's largest slave owners. Some slaves looked on a war in the name of liberty and independence as the surest way of earning their own freedom. The attitudes of most blacks depended on their relationships with their white owners or employers. If they trusted their promises of freedom, they had good reason to join the American side. Those blacks who were aware of the public debate over slavery may have identified their interests with the goals of the Revolution. West Jersey blacks were more inclined than those in the east to choose the patriot side.

Blacks who joined the British usually came from townships near New York. They did so as a means of escape from bondage and of retaliating against their white masters. Over two hundred black Jerseymen were carried off by the British during the Revolution. According to their own reports, they were usually slaves who had run away and joined the Loyalist camp to gain the freedom that the British had promised them. The number of runaway slaves greatly increased during the Revolution, and many were suspected by their masters of joining the enemy. Most were from the East Jersey towns that British troops had either invaded or constantly harassed. Blacks played an important role in the repeated Loyalist



Broadside of the "New-Jersey Society for promoting the abolition of Slavery," organized in 1793. Courtesy Rutgers University Library.

raids on the East Jersey coast. David Forman of Monmouth County wrote his commanding officer on June 16, 1780, "that we have at this minute an express [letter] that a party of negroes about thirty in number, did this afternoon attack and take Captain Barns Smock and a small party that was collected at his house for mutual defense." Loyalist Captain Thomas Ward of Bergen County had command of a force of blacks who plundered and raided "Elizabethtown, [modern Elizabeth] New Barbados Neck and along Bergen Hill as far up as Closter and New Bridge." A black called Tye, who had the title of colonel and "commanded a motley crew at Sandy Hook," frequently visited New Jersey. On June 22, 1780, he raided the Monmouth County coast, commanding thirty blacks, thirty-six Queen's Rangers and thirty other refugee Tories. Tye, who was eventually killed in action, was noted for his courage. Among New Jersey black Loyalists were several spies. The most ingenious was Isaac Siscoe, a free man who came from a family of landhold-

ing blacks of Bergen County. He was an important agent there, and the British used his reports of rebel activity.

Victory in the Revolution did not alter most New Jersey slaveholders' attitudes toward blacks, but they could no longer use the perilous conditions of war to postpone the issue of black emancipation. In all the northern states except New Jersey and New York the revolutionary ideology of liberty and justice had inspired important measures toward abolition. While the colonial institution of slavery had never been questioned seriously except by the Quakers, the coming of the Revolution, with its focus on equality and the rights of man, had raised a moral question among men of conscience. Although William Livingston, New Jersey's governor from 1776 to 1790, had been persuaded to put aside his appeal for emancipation during the war, he was determined "to push the matter until it is effected, being convinced that slavery was utterly inconsistent with the principles of Christianity and humanity; and in Americans who have almost idolized liberty, peculiarly odious and disgraceful." Both Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, themselves slaveholders in Virginia, proclaimed the harmful effects of slavery on both the slave and the master, and they looked forward to the day when it would disappear from the nation.

In the atmosphere of concern for human rights kindled by the Revolution, New Jersey abolitionists launched a new campaign to end slavery. They were aware of the obstacles in the way of convincing lawmakers; while the influence of the western counties was on the side of abolition, the representatives of the eastern counties unanimously opposed it. According to the New Jersey Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, founded in 1793, no issue so divided the state as that of slavery: "To a foreigner it would appear that some physical property in the climate of the eastern and western counties has created sentiments and opinions as opposite as any two principles in nature." Even before the Revolution most West Jerseymen had abandoned slavery as a corrupt and shameful practice, and by the end of the war free black or white day laborers had largely replaced slave labor. In the eastern counties slavery was too deeply rooted to be affected by abstract religious principles. The holding of blacks, far from stigmatizing, represented the affluence and prestige of the slave owner. East Jersey inhabitants continued to regard free blacks as subversive agents of an alien and barbaric

culture and feared that their presence in larger numbers might disrupt or even destroy the new society they were attempting to create.

Aware of the intransigence of their opponents, the abolitionists adopted a moderate approach. As one assemblyman explained, there was little hope that those "who are entrenched under the wall of prejudice could be overcome with the weapons of truth and reason." To publicize the issue openly in a state that had a region of firmly entrenched slavery would, in the opinion of the antislavery interest, only intensify the already bitter opposition to their cause. "Within a large part of the state," the Abolition Society reported, "where slavery is most approved . . . there are very few friends to abolition and those few watched with an evil eye." Unlike the antislavery organizations in other northern states where proslavery sentiment was weaker and more scattered, the Society discouraged speeches or public debates on slavery. "In East Jersey," it warned, "such discourses would not be tolerated. In West Jersey, they are unnecessary." The abolitionists could accept delays, compromises and defeats because of their belief in the inevitability of their triumph. Faith in the ultimate victory of good over evil was the essence of the enlightened spirit of the times. The West Jersey Quaker leader, Samuel Allinson, asked the friends of the Negro "to equally avoid a neglect of their cause and an intemperate zeal for their assistance," for either course would delay their relief, which "would be brought about by the omnipotent God of mankind in due time." In 1798, after the assembly had rejected a bill for gradual abolition, the Abolition Society reaffirmed its belief in ultimate success: "Time and the silent operation of justice . . . are making numerous proselytes and it can not be doubted but a short time will ensure the object of our wishes, a gradual abolition of this pernicious practice." Allinson spoke for the antislavery coalition when, in a letter to David Brearly, chief justice of New Jersey, he called it "shameful, indeed, for a free Christian people that a being with an immortal soul . . . whose only crime is a difference in color . . . should be bought and sold and subject for life to the unfeeling whim of an arbitrary master."

If freedom was the gospel of the abolitionists, property was the battle cry of the slaveholders. The colonists had been called to arms by what they considered the illegal confiscation of their property by

British taxes. The slavery interest had no intention of relinquishing its property, and its representatives opposed all the bills introduced in the legislature for the gradual abolition of slavery. Defending the rejection of a bill to free children of slaves at the age of twenty-eight, Assemblyman Jonas Wade of Essex County accused the sponsors of attempting to rob the slaveholder of his most valuable property. "We claim a right to our slaves," he declared. "We take them in a state of nature and their offspring as soon as they are brought into this world are our own. . . . Where is the boasted right of property in this case?" He saw nothing immoral in claiming that the infants of black men and women automatically became the property of their white masters without regard for the natural rights of parents and children. While the abolitionists worked to diminish racial tensions, the proslavery element sought to excite fear. Slaveholders, decrying the "misconduct" of freed slaves and alleging that they could not earn a living, warned of "the danger to which the state would be exposed by freeing so large a number at one time" (in spite of the gradual nature of the proposed abolition laws). They predicted crime, higher taxes, riots and even insurrections as the inevitable consequences of a large population of free blacks. The bloody slave rebellion in Santo Domingo in 1794 reinforced the popular image of the dangerous black man, and the slavery interest used the uprising as a warning of what might happen in New Jersey should emancipation become law.

For more than twenty years after the Revolution the slaveholders of the eastern counties succeeded in defeating the many bills for gradual abolition. In 1800 the Abolition Society denounced the state for "continuing to countenance within its bosom the most palpable violation of . . . equal rights by withholding from several thousand human beings their right to liberty, at a time when the American Confederacy is celebrated around the world for upholding freedom and independence." East Jersey legislators had been unable, however, to prevent the passage of measures granting black slaves certain rights that white servants had always held. Masters could no longer abuse their slaves physically with impunity. The cruel punishments inflicted on blacks who gathered together were repealed. Slave owners were required to teach their slaves to read. To sell slaves out of the state without their consent became a misdemeanor. The voluntary freeing of blacks became a simple and

automatic procedure no longer hedged in by expensive and complicated restrictions. Free blacks were allowed to own and inherit property in the same manner as whites.

Success in neighboring states helped New Jersey abolitionists. The Gradual Manumission Act passed in New York in 1799, like the Pennsylvania Act of 1780, exerted pressure on New Jersey. Could it stand out indefinitely as a bastion of slavery in the Middle Atlantic states? Such a possibility seemed unlikely. Only a day's journey from freedom, New Jersey slaves could escape to join free black communities in the neighboring states. Was slavery in New Jersey, surrounded by free states, any longer a profitable institution? Had blacks become a burden rather than an asset to their owners? These were questions slaveholders had to ponder in deciding whether to continue their resistance to the campaign for abolition. By 1804 the majority had decided the battle was lost.

Crucial to the nearly unanimous acceptance of the Abolition Law was the scheme to compensate the owner for the ultimate loss of children of his slaves, a plan first enacted in New York. The New Jersey law gave owners the exclusive right to the labor of their slaves' children born after July 4, 1804, until they reached the age of legal freedom, twenty-five for males and twenty-one for females. The law permitted the slave owner to abandon black infants at the age of one year to the local overseer of the poor, who became responsible for boarding them out as slaves or servants until they reached the age of freedom. A householder would receive \$3 a month for the maintenance of each child. To prevent the expense of unwanted blacks from falling exclusively on the slaveholding communities, the funds came from a statewide tax. The law allowed infants to be separated from their mothers at the whim of their masters. But the scheme, designed to win votes for abolition, did not operate as its sponsors insisted it would. Instead, most slave owners abandoned children on paper only and then reclaimed them in order to be eligible for monthly payments. In this way the owner was not only compensated for the future loss of his slave by many years of productive unpaid labor but was also paid \$36 a year, an amount which exceeded the yearly wage of a free day laborer. It soon became evident that the continued operation of the abandonment clause would bankrupt the state. In 1805 the clause was repealed, but the state continued to be responsible for the

support of black children until 1811, when all payments were discontinued because of widespread fraud. In one year the support of these children amounted to over 40 percent of the state budget. In terminating the payments it was observed that in some instances the state had paid the guardian, usually the slave owner, more than the lifetime price of the slave.

Although New Jersey blacks had achieved an important victory, fear and hostility continued to divide blacks and whites. Freedom did not improve the economic status of blacks in the former slaveholding counties. Instead, large numbers were reduced to unemployment and poverty. As some fugitive slaves escaped from the South into New Jersey, Jersey men in the northeastern counties continued to be obsessed with the belief that blacks would overrun their state, despite the declining percentage of blacks in the population. At a time when slavery was disappearing in the other northern states, blacks continued to be held as slaves in significant numbers in New Jersey. It was the persistence of slavery after the passage of the abolition law that so astonished travelers in postrevolutionary New Jersey. As late as 1860 there were eighteen slaves listed in the New Jersey census. New Jersey's abolition law was, nevertheless, a milestone; it was the last state to initiate peacefully the freeing of slaves.

For Further Reading

The best general study of attitudes toward blacks in the colonial and revolutionary periods is Winthrop Jordan's *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1968). Other good introductions to the history of the Negro are John Hope Franklin's *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (3rd ed., New York: Vintage Books, 1969), Edward McManus's, *Black Bondage in the North* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973) and Arthur Zilversmit's *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965). For the role of blacks in the Revolution, Benjamin Quarles's *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1961) is an indispensable beginning.

The best study of the survival of African culture among North American blacks is Melville J. Herskovit's *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

For research on the Negro in New Jersey, the student should first consult *New Jersey and the Negro: A Bibliography, 1715-1966* (Trenton: New Jersey Library Association, 1967), an invaluable guide to published material. Henry Cooley's *A Study of Slavery in New Jersey* (Baltimore, 1896), although not an adequate survey, is still the most complete work on the subject. This should be supplemented by Marion T. Wright's "New Jersey Laws and the Negro," *Journal of Negro History*, vol. 27 (1943); James Connelly's "Slavery in Colonial New Jersey," *Proceedings of New Jersey Historical Society*, vol. 14 (1929); A. C. Keasby's "Slavery in New Jersey," *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*, vol. 4 (1907) and vol. 5 (1908); and Simeon Moss's "The Persistence of Slavery and Involuntary Servitude in a Free State," *Journal of Negro History*, vol. 35 (1950). A personal account of rural slavery in New Jersey is given by Andrew D. Mellick, Jr., in *The Story of an Old Farm* (Somerville, 1889); republished under the title *The Old Farm*, edited by Hubert G. Schmidt; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1961).

Frances D. Pigeon's "Slavery in New Jersey on the Eve of Revolution" in William C. Wright ed., *New Jersey in the American Revolution: Political and Social Conflict* (rev. ed., Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1974) presents new material on the life and status of blacks during the eighteenth century. Arthur Zilversmit's paper "Liberty and Property: New Jersey and the Self-Evident Truths," in the same publication analyzes the meaning of the abolition of slavery in New Jersey. An older but extremely valuable account of a community of free blacks in New Jersey is William Steward, *Gouldtown, a Very Remarkable Settlement of Ancient Date . . .* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1913).

The student should also consult the many volumes of William A. Whitehead et al. eds., *Archives of the State of New Jersey . . .* 1st. ser., 42 vols. (Various Places: State of New Jersey, 1880-1949), especially the extracts from newspapers and abstracts of wills.

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