



## Robert Carter III and Integrity

### Handout A: Narrative

#### BACKGROUND

In 1782, the Virginia Assembly passed a bill allowing slaveholders to manumit their slaves. Many slaveholders, inspired by Revolutionary principles of liberty and equality as well as Christian ideals, freed their slaves. Within a decade, nearly 10,000 slaves were freed in Virginia. Between 1792 and 1797, one of the largest slaveholders in Virginia, Robert Carter III, released more than 450 slaves, making it the largest manumission in American history.

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Robert Carter III made a momentous personal decision on September 6, 1778. In the presence of more than 400 men and women, he was fully immersed in the waters of the Totuskey Creek, close to his home on an offshoot of the Potomac River, to be baptized. Although most planters worshipped at the Anglican Church, Carter decided to be baptized as an adult in the dissenting Baptist Church. His Christian conversion had a profound impact on his life as one of the largest slaveholders in Virginia.

Robert Carter was well-known among his fellow Virginians for his integrity even before his conversion. He owned an estimated 65,000 acres of property, and by the time of the American Revolution, he owned more than 450 slaves. As a fellow Virginian noted, Carter was “by far the most humane to his slaves of any in these parts.” Carter paid his slaves for voluntarily working on Sunday, trusted slaves’ version of events when relating some mistreatment by a cruel overseer, allowed his slaves to be educated, allowed them to marry and move to his other plantations to be with their spouses, refused to buy or sell slaves, and did not break up slave families. He was also generous to white planters and poor farmers, earning the reputation around Williamsburg as “the benevolent, the generous, the honorable, the rich Mr. Carter.”

Although he already had a reputation for integrity, Carter’s conversion led him to become even more dedicated to living according to his principles. The Baptist denomination of Christianity emphasized the equality of souls regardless of race or social class. The 1783 Baptist General Convention even declared that slavery was at odds with scripture. Carter not only gathered his family for daily Bible readings and to listen to the preaching of ministers of various dissenting denominations, but he invited his slaves as well to convert to Christianity and hear a message of equality. He routinely referred to slaves as human beings and even as his “brothers.”

Carter treated his slaves even better after his conversion. He forbade all of his overseers from physically punishing his slaves with whipping and other brutal treatment. He did not even punish runaways for attempting to escape slavery or avoid working for several days. Carter’s slaves

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were such skilled artisans, and he had such extensive holdings, that his slaves more or less ran his business and acted with a great deal of autonomy to a degree highly unusual on plantations. In 1788, Carter joined a splinter church and became even more radical on his views of slavery.

That year, Carter asserted that “tolerating slavery shows great depravity” and sought the emancipation of slaves in Virginia and especially on his own plantations. He publicly supported dissenters’ petitions calling for the general emancipation of slaves. He started to plan for the manumission of his hundreds of slaves. Carter went to great lengths to send his sons away to other states and did not allow them to visit the Carter family’s plantation, Nomini Hall, because they would have their manners corrupted by being around slaves and masters. Carter gave his sons financial help setting up other businesses so that they would not be dependent upon the income derived from plantation slavery.

In August 1791, Carter sat down in the library of his plantation and wrote out a historic document. It was a scheme to manumit fifteen of his slaves every January 1 according to the slaves’ ages. Most importantly, he made it an ironclad and explicit freedom so that no descendent could break or find a loophole to deny freedom to these people. On September 5, Carter traveled by wagon to the Northumberland courthouse to deliver his “Deed of Gift” personally and presented it to be recorded as a legal document. He was divesting himself of slaves, one of the greatest sources of his wealth, at great personal sacrifice. He thought slavery was wrong and he acted on his beliefs.

In 1792, Carter, a man of integrity, followed through on his promise to his slaves. He freed the first fifteen of his slaves. He offered the slaves wage contracts if they remained on his plantations to work as free men. They were also offered the opportunity to lease land and own private property for the first time. As a significant symbolic gesture, slaves who presented themselves at the courthouse for their freedom ceremony were allowed to name themselves rather than living with the name given to them by their master. Carter only broke with his “Deed of Gift” in granting twenty-four slaves (nine more than stated in the deed) their freedom in 1792. Many stayed on Carter’s lands and worked as free men earning wages because of their former master’s benevolence.

Carter continued freeing his slaves ahead of schedule and emancipated 57 slaves in 1793. In May of that year, he moved away from his Virginia plantation to an urban dwelling in Baltimore to distance himself from the stain of slavery. Carter moved to a mixed neighborhood of whites and free blacks and attended church services with both races. Carter kept freeing his slaves in droves, and, by 1797, he ceased owning other human beings. He spent the next few years abiding by his promise to answer any request by his former slaves to confirm their free status and ensure they were not re-enslaved by greedy whites. He died in 1804 with a clear conscience that he was no longer a slaveholder and requested that he be given a simple berth in an unmarked grave at Nomini Hall.

Robert Carter was a man of integrity who lived out his principles. The principles of the American Revolution and his Baptist faith caused him to examine his life critically. Deciding that slavery conflicted with those principles of liberty and equality, he made the move to free

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his slaves regardless of the significant personal cost. No other slaveholder in the United States would release as many slaves as Robert Carter III when he manumitted 450 men, women, and children in the early 1790s. Carter had always been reputed to have great integrity, but acting on his principles even when it essentially ruined him financially was a great example of virtue that few others would follow.