

to whom they shall subsequently do service. Indeed we are of the belief that although you may have authority to Legislate and prescribe conditions in regard to manumissions hereafter to be made, you have no power to interfere with those already in existence under the power given by the act of 1796 and its supplements. The power to do any act having been legally exercised under existing laws cannot be restricted afterwards by subsequent legislative enactments. For instance the laws of this state allow free negroes to hold real and personal property. It would certainly not be competent to divest those, who actually hold property of their vested rights and no Judicial tribunal could enforce such a law. A fortiori the Laws of Maryland having given masters authority to manumit their slaves and to declare that their freedom shall commence at a future period, and also to declare the state and condition of their issue, a subsequent law cannot declare an act so legally done void. The contract is executed, although the freedom of the slave is to take effect at a future period. A different doctrine would upset and throw into chaos the whole system of Legislation, and no man would be secure in either his liberty or his property. Your Memorialists would also suggest to your Honorable Body that the requirements of the law would separate husbands and wives, parents and children; because many of the manumitted slaves have wives, husbands and children in bondage. A measure of this description must strike the philanthropist - may every man, who possesses the feelings of a man, as one of cruelty and injustice; and if there be a God and He be just and impartial (and who can doubt it) His everlasting frown must rest upon a measure fraught with such barbarity, inhumanity and injustice. Your Memorialists are utterly at a loss to conceive, why there should be so much dreaded from the residence of free negroes among us, and so little apprehensions should be entertained in regard to the slaves, whose dissatisfaction must be greatly increased when they shall understand that their free wives and children are to be driven out of the state, and that although they may labour hard, behave themselves well, and be careful of their masters interests, all hope of freedom is cut off, and that they and their descendants are forever doomed to servitude with all the horrible accompaniments of unmitigated oppression, such as stripes, sales, starvation and other cruelties incident to the falling into the hands of relentless, and hard-hearted masters. This course will be calculated to goad them on to desperation, and to implant in their bosoms the most inveterate hatred for the whites, which will manifest itself sooner or later in assassinations, insurrections, conflagrations &c. &c. -

W. Jefferson