Slavery And The History Of The Negro. Essay, Research Paper

Slavery and the History of the Negro.

The issue of slavery has been touched upon often in the course of

history. The institution of slavery was addressed by French

intellectuals during the Enlightenment. Later, during the French

Revolution, the National Assembly issued the Declaration of the Rights of

Man, which declared the equality of all men. Issues were raised

concerning the application of this statement to the French colonies in

the West Indies, which used slaves to work the land. As they had

different interests in mind, the philosophes, slave owners, and political

leaders took opposing views on the interpretation of universal equality.

Many of the philosophes, the leaders of the Enlightenment, were

against slavery. They held that all people had a natural dignity that

should be recognized. Voltaire, an 18th century philosophe, pointed out

that hundreds of thousands of slaves were sacrificing their lives just so

the Europeans could quell their new taste for sugar, tea and cocoa. A

similar view was taken by Rousseau, who stated that he could not bear to

watch his fellow human beings be changed to beasts for the service of

others. Religion entered into the equation when Diderot, author of the

Encyclopedia, brought up the fact that the Christian religion was

fundamentally opposed to Black slavery but employed it anyway in order to

work the plantations that financed their countries. All in all, those

influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment, equality, liberty, the

right to dignity, tended to oppose the idea of slavery.

Differing from the philosophes, the political leaders and

property owners tended to see slavery as an element that supported the

economy. These people believed that if slavery and the slave trade were

to be abolished, the French would lose their colonies, commerce would

collapse and as a result the merchant marine, agriculture and the arts

would decline. Their worries were somewhat merited; by 1792 French ships

were delivering up to 38,000 slaves and this trade brought in 200 million

livres a year. These people had economic incentives to support slavery,

however others were simply ignorant. One man, Raynal, said that white

people were incapable of working in the hot sun and blacks were much

better suited to toil and labor in the intense heat. Having a similar

view to Raynal, one property owner stated that tearing the blacks from

the only homes they knew was actually humane. Though they had to work

without pay, this man said slave traders were doing the blacks a favor by

placing them in the French colonies where they could live without fear

for tomorrow. All of these people felt that the Declaration of the

Rights of Man did not pertain to black people or their descendants.

All people were not ignorant, however. There was even a group of

people who held surprisingly modern views on slavery; views some people

haven’t even accepted today. In his Reflections on Black People, Olympe

de Gouges wondered why blacks were enslaved. He said that the color of

people’s skin suggests only a slight difference. The beauty of nature

lies in the fact that all is varied. Another man, Jacques Necker, told

people that one day they would realize the error of their ways and notice

that all people have the same capacity to think and suffer.

The slavery issue was a topic of debate among the people of

France. The views of the people, based on enlightenment, the welfare of

the country or plain ignorance were tossed around for several more years

until the issue was finally resolved. In the end the philosophes, with

their liberated ideas, won out and slavery was abolished.