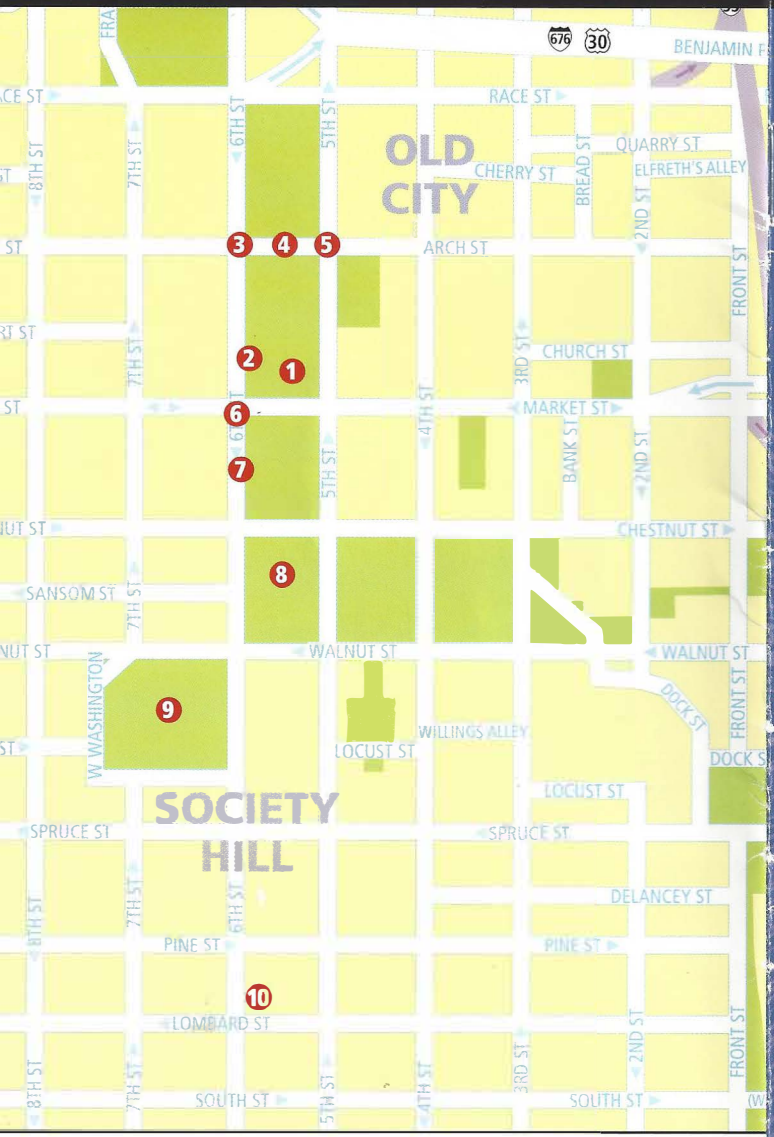
Walking Tour Map



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

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Quest for Freedom: the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia

Walking Tour

"I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person now I was free. There was such a glory over everything... I felt like I was in heaven!"

—Harriet Tubman

background:
Illustration, Middle Passage. Courtesy of Harpers Ferry Center, National Park Service

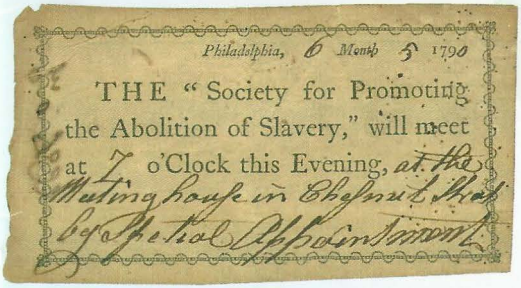
right:
Meeting Announcement, Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, 1790. Collections of Independence National Historical Park

Introduction

Neither underground nor a railroad, the Underground Railroad was a system of routes to freedom for those who fled bondage and those who helped them. The Underground Railroad was also a social protest movement in which people of all colors and backgrounds joined together to end slavery in America. Philadelphia played a vital role in this quest for freedom.

Stop 1: East Side of the Independence Visitor Center

Slavery and Abolition in the Americas Since the early 1500s, Africans had been captured, enslaved, and brought to the Americas, many enduring the brutal journey across the Atlantic known as the Middle Passage. By 1790, over 750,000 Africans lived in the new United States, and over 90% of them were enslaved. Early efforts at abolition had already begun. As early as 1688, a group of Germantown Mennonites published a document condemning slavery. In 1780, Pennsylvania passed the Gradual Abolition of Slavery Act, beginning the manumission of slaves. In Pennsylvania, the 1790 census listed two-thirds of the Africans as free. The existence of this thriving free African community contributed heavily to Philadelphia's leadership in the abolition movement.


Philadelphia, 6 Month 5 1790

THE "Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery," will meet at 7 o'Clock this Evening, at the Meeting house in Chestnut Street by special Appointment.

As the colonies prepared to fight for independence from Great Britain, individuals met to discuss the evils of slavery and to make plans for its demise. The first abolitionist society in America, called the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, started in Philadelphia in 1775. Eventually, that organization became the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society.

Engraving, "William Penn's Treaty with the Indians" after Benjamin West, 1775. Collections of Independence National Historical Park

Stop 2: First Africans in British North America

First Africans in the New World The first Africans arrived in Jamestown in 1619. In the beginning, Africans in Virginia participated in the life of the colony. There were Africans who were indentured servants and there were free Africans who acquired indentured servants. There were Africans who acquired land and who testified in court.

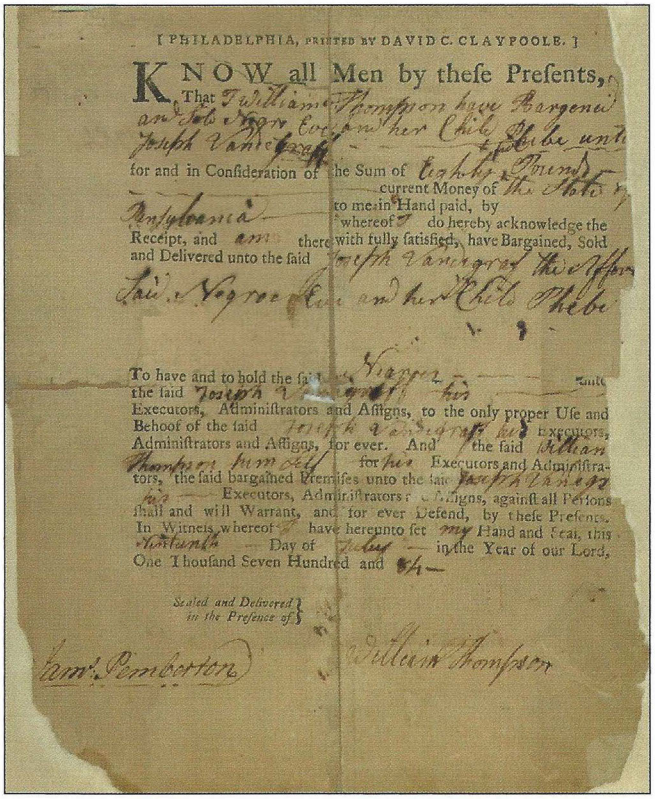
Transition to Slavery In 1705, the Virginia assembly passed a law that legalized the enslavement of all Africans. Suddenly, Africans who had been indentured or free were now slaves for life. They were considered property and not people. Slavery was based on skin color alone.

Resistance to Slavery From the beginning, there were enslaved Africans who resisted being enslaved and who tried to escape. Some Africans revolted and took over slave ships bound for the Americas. Fugitive slaves began running away to the northern colonies and Canada, Mexico, and Florida.

Stop 3: Sixth and Arch Streets

The First Africans in Philadelphia The first Africans arrived in Philadelphia not long after the Quakers. William Penn allowed slavery to exist in his colony, and himself owned enslaved Africans. It was not until the mid-1770's that the Quakers officially condemned slavery, and prohibited their members from owning slaves. Many Quakers became abolitionists who published newspapers, wrote pamphlets, made public speeches, and promoted anti-slavery legislation in an attempt to raise the consciousness of the American people about the horrors of slavery. These activities created an atmosphere that supported the creation of the Underground Railroad.

The Burning of Pennsylvania Hall Anti-slavery organizations built Pennsylvania Hall in 1838, as a home for their activities. It was located two blocks north of where you now stand. Two days after the building opened, a pro-slavery mob burned the building to the ground.



[PHILADELPHIA, PRINTED BY DAVID C. CLAYPOOLE.]

KNOW all Men by these Presents, That William Thompson have Bargained and Sold Negro Cato and her Child Phebe unto Joseph Vanderegg

for and in Consideration of the Sum of Eighty Pounds current Money of the State of Pensylvania to me in Hand paid, by whereof I do hereby acknowledge the Receipt, and am therewith fully satisfied, have Bargained, Sold and Delivered unto the said Joseph Vanderegg this Office Lai. Negroe Cato and her Child Phebe

To have and to hold the said Negroes unto the said Joseph Vanderegg his Executors, Administrators and Assigns, to the only proper Use and Behoof of the said Joseph Vanderegg his Executors, Administrators and Assigns, for ever. And I the said William Thompson himself for my Executors and Administrators, the said bargained Premises unto the said Joseph Vanderegg his Executors, Administrators and Assigns, against all Persons shall and will Warrant, and for ever Defend, by these Presents. In Witness whereof I have hereunto set my Hand and Seal, this Nineteenth Day of July in the Year of our Lord, One Thousand Seven Hundred and Eighty-four.

Sealed and Delivered in the Presence of

Wm. Pemberton

William Thompson

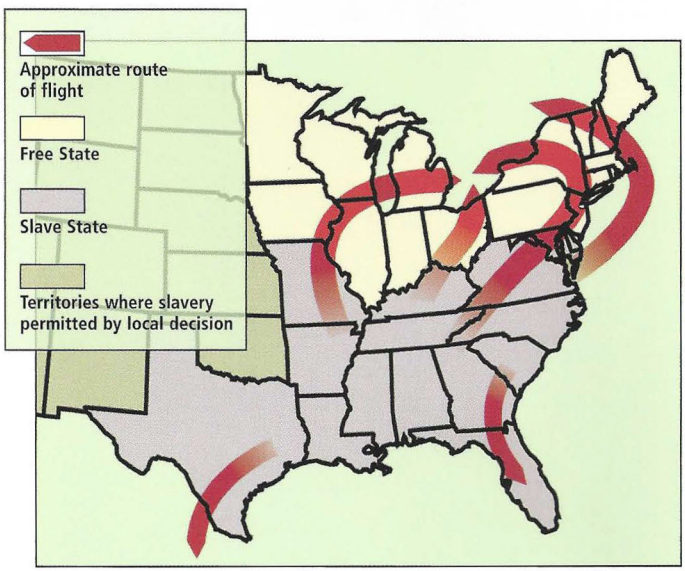
Bill of Sale for Enslaved Mother and Child, 1784. Collections of Independence National Historical Park

Stop 4: Arch Street between Sixth and Fifth Streets

The Underground Railroad The Underground Railroad emerged in the 1830s as a term to define a secret network of people and shelters strategically located to assist fugitive slaves in their escape to freedom.

Conductors, Agents, and Superintendents Assisting those escaping from plantations in the South was a group of extremely brave individuals known as conductors. These were the men and women who actually traveled in the South encouraging freedom seekers, making arrangements, and guiding fugitives on their journeys to freedom. The agents allowed their homes to be used as depots for fugitive slaves and often coordinated local escape routes. Superintendents coordinated the operation of the railroad in an entire state. They maintained lines of communication, escape routes, and gathered the financial support to aid fugitives.

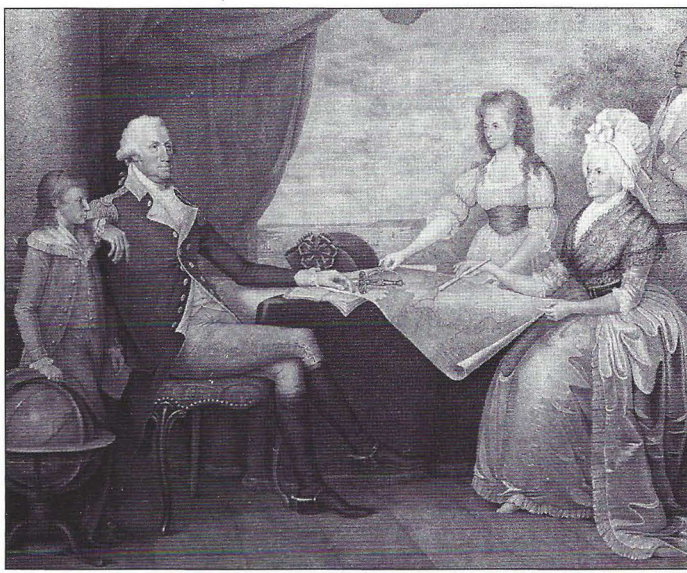
Harriet Tubman One of the most famous of the Underground Railroad conductors was Harriet Tubman. She had been enslaved in Maryland and had escaped to the North, passing through Philadelphia on her journey to freedom. She returned to the South 19 times, and brought over 300 fugitive slaves safely to freedom.



Illustration, Escape Routes. Courtesy of Harpers Ferry Center, National Park Service

Stop 5: Fifth and Arch Streets

William Still The General Vigilance Committee was located where the United States Mint stands today, and aided fugitive slaves when they arrived in Philadelphia. William Still worked there, and recorded information about hundreds of fugitives, like Henry "Box" Brown who mailed himself to Philadelphia in a wooden crate; and Ellen and William Craft who traveled by train from Georgia to Philadelphia in order to obtain their freedom. Ellen disguised herself as a white man, and her husband William posed as her slave.



Engraving, "The Washington Family" by Edward Savage, 1798. Collections of Independence National Historical Park

Stop 6: The Liberty Bell

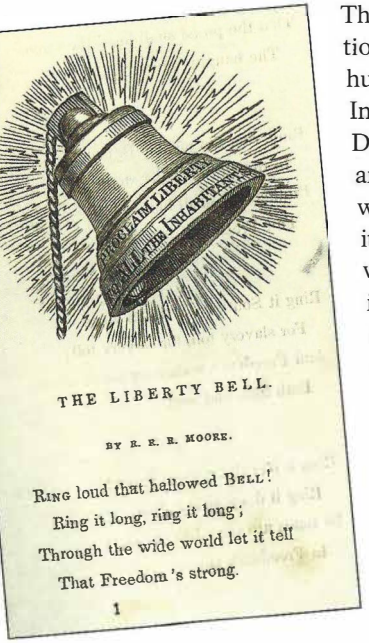
Presidents' House This is where the executive branch of government was located when Philadelphia was the capital city from 1790 to 1800. George Washington and John Adams both lived and worked in the house once located here.

Washington's Slaves When George Washington lived here during his presidency, he brought some of his enslaved Africans from Mount Vernon. Two of his slaves escaped while living in Philadelphia: Hercules, the cook, and Oney Judge, a personal servant to Martha Washington.

"I never ran my train off the track, and I never lost a passenger."

—Harriet Tubman

Stop 7: Sixth Street between Market and Chestnut Streets

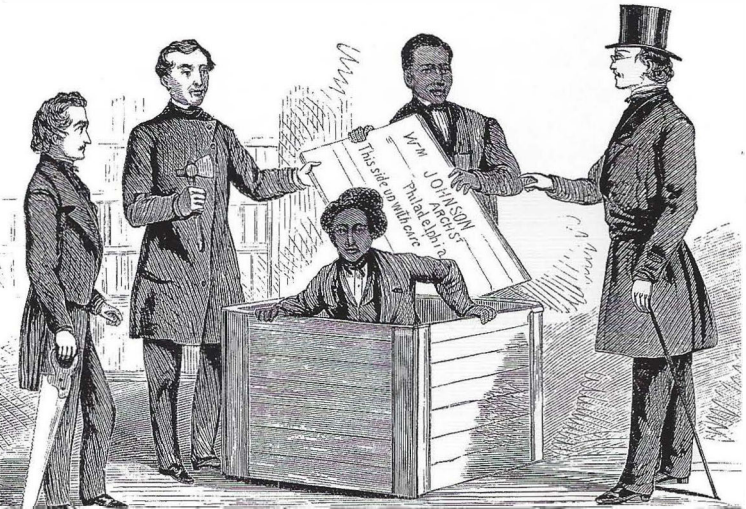


The Liberty Bell This international symbol of freedom hung in the bell tower of Independence Hall when the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution were signed. The Bell received its name from abolitionists who noticed its biblical inscription. *"Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof".*

Poem, "The Liberty Bell" by R.R.R. Moore for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Fair, 1844. Collections of Independence National Historical Park

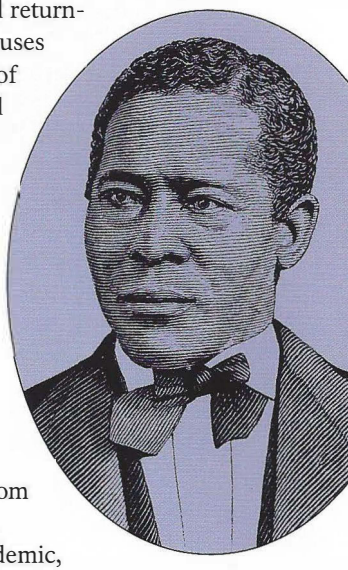
Stop 8: Independence Square

All Men are Created Equal The Declaration of Independence was adopted here in Independence Hall, and was publicly read for the first time on July 8, 1776 here on Independence Square. From the beginning, many people recognized the irony present in a slave-holding nation declaring that all men are created equal. The symbols associated with the establishment of this country served as the beacons of freedom to those held against their will.



The United States Constitution and Slavery No formal motion to abolish or restrict slavery was put forward at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, though the convention delegates agreed that the importation of slaves into the United States would end in 1808. A compromise, known as the three-fifths compromise, was struck which stated that five slaves would be counted as three residents when determining representation in the House of Representatives.

Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 This law was passed by the U.S. Congress and it gave sanction to the practice of tracking down fugitive slaves and returning them to their owners. The abuses of this law led to the false arrest of free Africans who were then sold into slavery in the South. This law also dictated that anyone who knew about an escaped slave or aided a fugitive could be fined or jailed. Trials for those accused were held on the second floor of Independence Hall.



Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793 Free Africans in Philadelphia fought their own battle for freedom within the white-dominated city. During the 1793 yellow fever epidemic, Free African Society leaders organized groups of black volunteers who picked up coffins left on the Chestnut Street curb in front of the Mayor's Office and buried the dead. Their service won the black community enough white cooperation and financial support to complete the first African American churches in the city.

left:
Engraving, "Resurrection of Henry Box Brown" from The Underground Rail Road by William Still, 1872. Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia

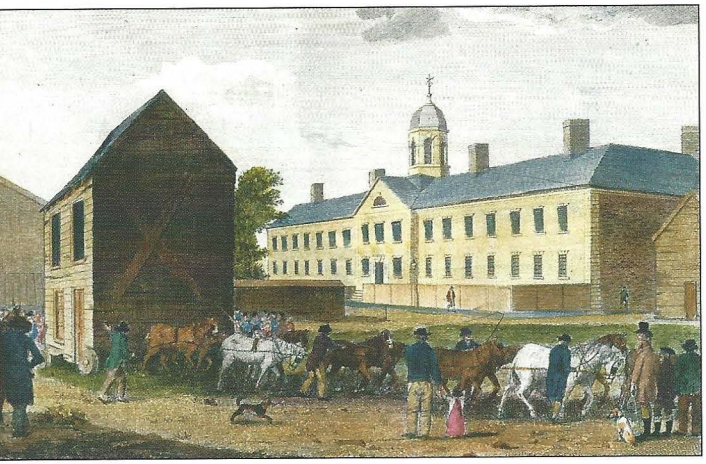
above right:
Engraving, "William Still" from The Underground Rail Road by William Still, 1872. Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia

Stop 9: Washington Square

Free African Community Richard Allen and Absalom Jones came together to form the Free African Society in 1787. This group, funded by dues-paying membership, gave aid to the destitute and attempted to improve the morals of its members.

African Burial Ground Africans in Philadelphia were not allowed to be buried in white cemeteries, and were interred here in a potter's field. Africans used the square on Holidays and to hold dances.

Stop 10: Mother Bethel Church



Mother Bethel was founded when several Africans decided to build their own church after being disturbed during their prayer and told to move to a segregated section of St. George's Church. The Reverend Richard Allen purchased this lot for Mother Bethel Church in 1787, and it is the oldest parcel of real estate owned continuously by black people in the United States. In addition to his religious leadership, Allen was a prominent abolitionist activist. Black churches like this one fostered racial pride and leadership, and often served as a sanctuary for fugitives on the Underground Railroad.

above:
Engraving, "Gaol in Walnut Street Philadelphia [or Moving a Blacksmith's Shop for Use as the First Home of Mother Bethel Church]" by William and Thomas Birch, 1799. Collections of Independence National Historical Park

right:
Pamphlet, "The Constitution of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery", 1788. Collections of Independence National Historical Park

Secondary Tour

Stop 1: 6th and Delancey, Absalom Jones House

Absalom Jones was born a house slave in 1746 in Delaware. He taught himself to read out of the New Testament, among other books. When sixteen, he was sold to a store owner in Philadelphia. There he attended a night school for blacks, operated by Quakers. At twenty, he married another slave, and purchased her freedom with his earnings. Jones bought his own freedom in 1784. At St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church, he served as lay minister for its black membership, and eventually established the Free African Society (along with Richard Allen) and Saint Thomas African Episcopal Church.

Stop 2: 5th and Adelphi, St. Thomas African Episcopal Church

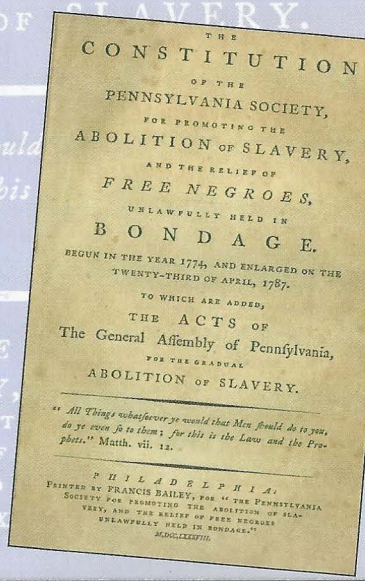
This African Church applied for membership in the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania as an organized body with control over their local affairs and choice over their own leaders. In October 1794, it was admitted as St. Thomas African Episcopal Church. Bishop White ordained Absalom Jones as a deacon in 1795, and as a priest on September 21, 1802. St. Thomas Church grew to over 500 members during its first year.

Stop 3: Willings Alley, Free African School

It was largely due to schoolmaster Anthony Benezet's efforts that the Quakers established and supported a school for free blacks in 1773. Over the next six years, the school served about 250 black students, accepting enslaved children when there were not enough free children to fill the classes.

Stop 4: 3rd and Walnut, Thomas Harrison House

Quaker Thomas Harrison was a member of the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society, and was involved in the covert abolitionist activities of the Acting Committee.



THE
CONSTITUTION
OF THE
PENNSYLVANIA SOCIETY,
FOR PROMOTING THE
ABOLITION OF SLAVERY,
AND THE RELIEF OF
FREE NEGROES,
UNLAWFULLY HELD IN
BONDAGE.
BEGUN IN THE YEAR 1774, AND ENLARGED ON THE TWENTY-THIRD OF APRIL, 1787.
TO WHICH ARE ADDED,
THE ACTS OF
The General Assembly of Pennsylvania,
FOR THE GRADUAL
ABOLITION OF SLAVERY.

"All Things whatsoever ye would that Men should do to you, do ye even so to them; for this is the Law and the Prophets." Matth. vii. 12.

PHILADELPHIA:
PRINTED BY FRANCIS BAILEY, FOR "THE PENNSYLVANIA SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY, AND THE RELIEF OF FREE NEGROES UNLAWFULLY HELD IN BONDAGE."
M,DCC,LXXXVIII.