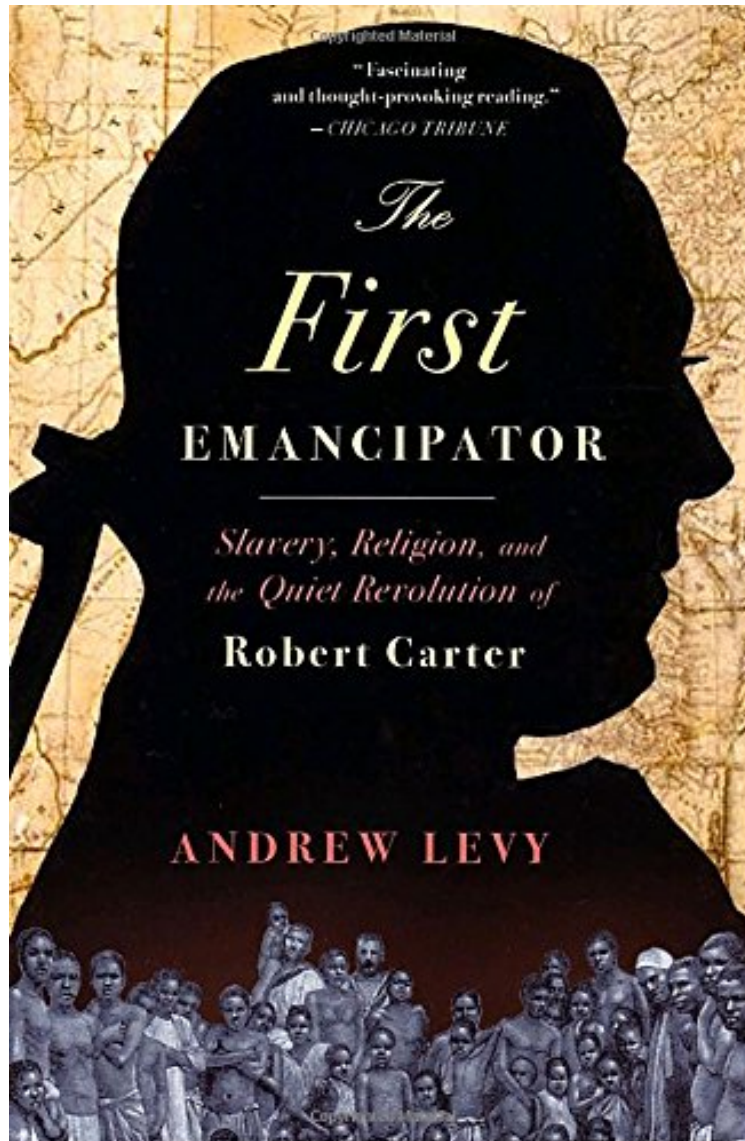


The First Emancipator: Slavery, Religion, and the Quiet Revolution of Robert Carter

Andrew Levy

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Andrew Levy : The First Emancipator: Slavery, Religion, and the Quiet Revolution of Robert Carter before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The First Emancipator: Slavery, Religion, and the Quiet Revolution of Robert Carter:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Very Emotionally Moving StoryBy AvidReaderThis is an unforgettable true story of a man who rebelled against his family, friends, and society to follow his heart. Born into the

lap of luxury he had considerable wealth and land holdings along with access to the top of society. His social circle included George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and many other founding fathers. Yet he chose to do the right thing when it was uncomfortable, expensive, challenging, unrewarding, and seemed to only turn people against him. He freed all of his slaves because he began to realize that slavery was wrong. As simple as that sounds, it was unthinkable to so many upper class people of that time. The author does a tremendous job of researching from original documents like journals and letters the details of how this man's heart began to change. This book does an excellent job of putting American history in perspective and just how much courage it took for someone to go against the flow. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Compelling and fascinating storytelling By Nibrocla I'm well into (but not yet finished with) this fascinating story, motivated by wanting to learn more about my 1st cousin, 6x removed. Levy writes as a true storyteller, weaving together facts in ways that are compelling and logical. There's a lot to be learned about Virginia history here, not just Carter himself. Well worth reading! 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Important Book By Mary S The First Emancipator introduces us to an individual that few, even those who have an interest in the era, would know. A cousin of Carter Burwell, another grandson of Robert "King" Carter, "owner of the magnificent Carter's Grove near Hampton Roads, Virginia, Robert Carter owned tens of thousands of acres of fields and woods, multiple houses, and numerous mills and forges in Virginia and Baltimore, all of which were manned by African slaves. Although many of the founding fathers were troubled by institutionalized slavery, most threw up their hands on how best to deal with freeing vast numbers of people held in bondage throughout Virginia. Unlike George Washington, who made arrangements for freeing his slaves after the death of his wife Martha, or Thomas Jefferson, whose slaves were sold to pay off his massive debts, Carter's "Deeds of Gift" were enacted, for the most part, during his lifetime. From Levy's research, it seems that Carter was always bothered by his ownership of his fellow human beings, but he simply did not know how to go about freeing them, and once freed, what were his responsibilities to those with no property and little education? His turmoil can be seen in his theological studies and wanderings: Anglican, Deist, Baptist, and Swenborgian. Whatever revelation he was seeking, it seemed that it was always just beyond his reach. As he became disenchanted with one, he moved onto the next, including visits to Quaker meeting houses in Maryland. Despite differing theologies, each interaction served to reinforce his decision to free his slaves. The discomfort he caused his slave-holding neighbors by his Deeds of Gift is evidenced by his removal from the Northern Neck of Virginia to Baltimore where he died. Robert Carter is an enigma, and after having read the Great Emancipator, I don't know that I understand him or his motives any better than when I started. There is no record of lofty speeches or elevated commentary to guide a reader nor is there a record of any of those he freed taking his surname when so many freed slaves did take the last names of their masters. But, in the end, it doesn't matter what internal debates resulted in Carter freeing those bound to him. What is important is that he did it when few others had the courage to do so. Washington and Jefferson spoke of freeing their slaves; Carter did it. For that reason, Robert Carter deserves to be known, and this book is about as close as most of us will come to knowing him.

"[Andrew Levy] brings a literary sensibility to the study of history, and has written a richly complex book, one that transcends Carter's story to consider larger questions of individual morality and national memory."—The New York Times Book Review In 1791, Robert Carter III, a pillar of Virginia's Colonial aristocracy, broke with his peers by arranging the freedom of his nearly five hundred slaves. It would be the largest single act of liberation in the history of American slavery before the Emancipation Proclamation. Despite this courageous move—or perhaps because of it—Carter's name has all but vanished from the annals of American history. In this haunting, brilliantly original work, Andrew Levy explores the confluence of circumstance, conviction, war, and emotion that led to Carter's extraordinary act. As Levy points out, Carter was not the only humane master, nor the sole partisan of emancipation, in that freedom-loving age. So why did he dare to do what other visionary slave owners only dreamed of? In answering this question, Levy reveals the unspoken passions that divided Carter from others of his class, and the religious conversion that enabled him to see his black slaves in a new light. Drawing on years of painstaking research and written with grace and fire, *The First Emancipator* is an astonishing, challenging, and ultimately inspiring book. "A vivid narrative of the future emancipator's evolution."—The Washington Post Book World "Highly recommended . . . a truly remarkable story about an eccentric American hero and visionary . . . should be standard reading for anyone with an interest in American history."—Library Journal (starred review) "Absorbing. . . Well researched and thoroughly fascinating, this forgotten history will appeal to readers interested in the complexities of American slavery."—Booklist (starred review)

From Publishers Weekly Starred . On the most fundamental level, this work can be seen as an exploration of the "'gross imbalance' between promise and execution" that characterizes American culture. We hold the loftiest ideals of freedom and progress ("liberty and justice for all"; "no child left behind"), argues Levy, but more often than not, these ideals fall flat in practice. Levy presents a painstakingly rich portrait of an American who overcame this imbalance: Robert Carter. A contemporary of Jefferson and Washington, Carter has largely been forgotten by historians because he seems less heroic than these great men; nevertheless, he managed to do something that they and the other founding fathers—for all their greatness—could not: free his slaves with little or no material gain. In so doing, Levy argues, Carter

provides an example of an unsung American hero: no tragic flaw of moral failing to set the glow of his great deeds in sharper relief, no titanic struggle on the stage of national politics to realize his ideals, simply a thoughtful man pushing himself in moments of private reflection to rid himself of the moral contradictions of his time. Levy does a wonderful job bringing Carter to life from the somewhat wooden written remains of his account ledgers, business journals and letters, reminding readers just how peculiar his life and his choices were by setting them in the context of the other great Virginians of his time. This well-written and thoroughly engaging book will certainly appeal to readers interested in the history of 18th- and 19th-century Virginia, but also to those interested in the history of slavery and racism in America and in historical biography. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From Booklist*Starred * In 1791, at a time when the nation's leaders were fervently debating the contradiction of slavery in a newly independent nation, wealthy Virginia plantation owner Robert Carter III freed more than 450 slaves. It was to be the largest emancipation until the Emancipation Proclamation, signed by Abraham Lincoln. Levy offers an absorbing look at the philosophical and religious debate and the political and family struggles in which Carter engaged for years before very deliberately and systematically freeing his slaves as he attempted to provide a model for others to follow. Drawing on historic documents, including Carter's letters and painstakingly detailed accounts of plantation activities, Levy conveys the strongly held beliefs that drove Carter through the political and religious fervor of the time to arrive at a decision at odds with those of other prominent leaders and slaveholders of the time, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Levy offers a fascinating look at one man's redemption and his eventual lapse into historical obscurity despite his incredibly bold actions. Well researched and thoroughly fascinating, this forgotten history will appeal to readers interested in the complexities of American slavery. Vanessa Bush Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved Advance praise for *The First Emancipator* "This luminous book recovers from the fog of historical amnesia a wealthy slave-owning Virginia gentleman (and neighbor of George Washington) who tried to lead the slave-bound new nation toward a better future. A gripping, important must-read that will convince many that the founding fathers could have abolished slavery."—GARY B. NASH, professor emeritus, UCLA, author of *Red, White Black: The Peoples of Early North America* "Robert Carter III and his emancipatory Deed of Gift 'fell out' of American history for the same reason that racial equality disappeared, until recent times, from the American social contract. Andrew Levy's engrossing *The First Emancipator* rescues an amazing contemporary of the Founders from the void."—DAVID LEVERING LEWIS, author of the two-volume biography of W.E.B. Du Bois, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1994 and 2001 "Andrew Levy's vivid biography—of a fabulously rich slaveholder who, imagining the impossible, broke all society's rules—shatters one of our favorite historical mirrors. In the 1790s, freeing hundreds of slaves became a religious obsession for Robert Carter III. How he hammered out a working model for a radically different American future only to have it instantly and permanently forgotten redefines our past in ways that test the resiliency of the American mythos."—FORREST CHURCH, author of *The American Creed: A Spiritual and Patriotic Primer* From the Hardcover edition.