Enumerating Slaves in Chester County, Pennsylvania, 1780-1821

Pursuant to an Act of General Assembly passed in Philadelphia on Wednesday the first day of March, anno Domini one thousand seven hundred and eighty one, entitled an Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, the hereinafter mentioned Slaves and Servants till the age of thirty-one years were returned into the Office of the Clerk of the peace for the County of Chester on, and before the first day of November one thousand seven hundred and eighty two, to be registered.

No. 1. Negro man named John aged fifty-eight years a slave for life.
2. Negro man named Ben aged twenty-four years a slave for life.
3. Negro boy named Joe aged seventeen years a slave for life.
4. Negro Child named George aged nine months a slave for life.
5. Negro Woman named Bell aged thirty-four years a slave for life.
6. Negro Woman named Sarah aged nineteen years a slave for life.
“Pursuant to an Act of General Assembly passed at Philadelphia on Wednesday the first day of March Anno Domini one thousand seven hundred and eighty Entitled an Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery …”

So begins the bound volume of blank pages now known as the Census of the Slaves in Chester County, Pennsylvania, serving as a record in one county of Pennsylvania’s conservative approach to the abolition of slavery [2]. The Act, which represented an early approach by a U.S. state to abolishing slavery, simply banned importation of new slaves into the state. Slaves already in the state remained enslaved for life, and children born to them were afforded the status of indentured servants, forced to serve their mothers’ master until the age of 28.
The Act stipulated that residents of the state had to register their existing slaves with the county government annually or risk manumission. Foreshadowing a long tradition to come, members of the U.S. Congress, then meeting in Philadelphia under the Articles of Confederation, were exempted from the Pennsylvania Act.

The volume, a part of the Slavery Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection (MS 717, Box 3, folder 8) in Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, was maintained by the Office of the Clerk of the Peace for Chester County, which lies West-southwest of Philadelphia. The census records Chester County’s slaves from 1780 through the last entry in the volume, dated 1821. The clerk’s office maintained an index, at the beginning of the volume, of the pages on which individual county residents' slaves were recorded. The Census provides a stark reminder of the extent of slavery in many Northern states in the decades between U.S independence and the onset of its Civil War. Pennsylvania’s legislature did not free slaves outright until 1847.