

# John McDonogh's Experiment, 1822-1850

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Taken from *Life and Work of John McDonogh*, by Willam Allan (Baltimore: Press of Isaac Friendenwald, 1886), pp. 42–51.

Here was the mystery. It appears in a footnote on pages 50 and 51.

Mr. Ed. E. Parker, a prominent and wealthy citizen of New Orleans, noticing the extraordinary industry of some of Mr. McDonogh's people engaged on some buildings near his residence, repeatedly offered to buy their foreman, Jim, from his master, offering finally \$5000. Finding the slave could not be bought, he thus described their manner of work to Mr. McDonogh, who was never with them: "Why, sir, I am an early riser, getting up before day ;—I am awakened every morning of my life by the noise of their trowels at work and their singing and noise before day ; and they work as long as they can see to lay brick, and then carry up brick and mortar for an hour or two afterwards, to be ahead at their work the next morning. And again, sir, do you think they walk at their work? No, sir, they run all day. I never saw such people as those, sir; I do not know what to make of them. Was there a white man over them with whip in hand all day, why then I could understand the cause of their incessant labor; but I cannot comprehend it, sir. Great man, sir, that Jim—great man, sir. I should like to own him." After laughing heartily at Mr. Parker's description, which was true. Mr. McDonogh informed him that there was a secret 'about it which would some day be disclosed.'

Here was his secret.

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[42] It was in 1822 that Mr. McDonogh, in the management of his slaves, took the first steps towards that course which subsequently developed into his unique and noted plan for liberating them, after a suitable training for the duties and responsibilities of freemen. His slaves were numerous; the greater part of them lived in quarters built for them near his own house. Though he required steady and faithful work, Mr. McDonogh was a kind master, who looked carefully after the welfare of his dependants.. He thus describes the change made at this time in his management: "Having at all times been

opposed to laboring on the Sabbath day (except in cases of actual necessity), one of my rules for the walk and guidance of my slaves always was, that they should never work on that holy day, prohibited as we are from doing so by the Divine law. A long experience, however, convinced me of the impossibility of carrying this out in practice with men held in bondage and obliged to labor for their master six days in the week; and on reflection, I saw much in their case to extenuate the offense against my rule. They were men, and stood in need of many little necessities of life not supplied by their master, and which they could obtain in no other way but by labor on that day. I had therefore often to shut my eyes and not see the offense, though I knew my instructions on that head were not obeyed. Consequently, after long and fruitless exertions (continued for many years) to obtain obedience to that injunction, I determined to allow them the one-half of Saturday (from midday until night) to labor for themselves, under a penalty (if they violated thereafter the Sabbath day) of punishment for disobedience, and sale to some other master. From this time the Sabbath was kept holy. Church was regularly attended forenoon and afternoon. I had a church built expressly for them on my own plantation, in which a pious neighbor occasionally preached on the Sabbath day, assisted by two or three of my own male slaves, who understood, preached, and expounded the Scriptures passably well, and at times I read them a sermon myself. I perceived in a very short time a remarkable change in their manners, conduct and life, in every [43] respect for the better.” The slaves were permitted to work for whom they would, but usually preferred to work for their master, who always paid them on Saturday night. The men received wages at the rate of 62.5 cents per day in summer and 50 cents per day in winter, and the women were paid at the rate of 50 cents and 37.5 cents per day in summer and winter respectively. This plan worked so well that at the end of three years Mr. McDonogh expanded it into the larger scheme by which so many of his slaves were enabled to acquire their freedom. This scheme will be set forth in the next chapter. . . .

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **(1825–1845)**

[44] Mr. MacDonogh had now reached middle life with health re-established. His fortune was secure and was rapidly growing. Firmly established habits made untiring labor his greatest pleasure. The large schemes of benevolence which for years had been before his mind, began to assume more definite shape and to become a more and more absorbing object of contemplation. These plans, as they gradually unfolded themselves in his mind, took increasing hold upon his energy and his enthusiasm, and stimulated him to unflagging efforts in the accumulation of wealth. He had no confidants to whom he revealed or with whom he discussed his plans. The natural reserve of his nature

increased with age. He had ever been a strong, self-reliant, self-contained man, not needing and not caring for the sympathy and encouragement of others in his work. To him, as to all men, popular appreciation was grateful, but he never sought it, and the lack of it never caused his energies to flag. He decided upon the purposes of his life from the best lights within reach, and carried out these purposes with rare vigor and determination, unaided and unhindered by the sentiments of those around him.

Though Mr. McDonogh always declared that the manumission of his slaves was in him a simple act of justice to them, the mere execution of a contract of which they had fully performed their part, no act of his life shows more clearly his interest in the welfare of others. It shows also his appreciation of the difficulties which beset the question of how best to secure the welfare of the slave when once freed. He was too wise to bestow sudden freedom upon negroes whose only preparation for the new condition had been ages of serfdom. He devised a mode of training adapted to develop habits of self-control, of steady purpose, [45] of prudence and foresight. He provided for them a school in which the young should be taught the elements of education, and many were well instructed in trades. He was particularly careful to provide for them moral and religious training. His conviction was strong that as freemen they should be removed from contact and competition with the superior race, and he therefore included in his scheme their transportation to Liberia. The plan he followed illustrates, too, some of his peculiarities. For many years it was kept an entire secret between himself and his slaves ; and though it subjected him to frequent misrepresentation and ill-natured criticism, he disdained to remove the misapprehension by a single word of explanation. Only after his experiment had been worked out to a successful conclusion and after the first shipload of slaves had sailed for Africa (June, 1842), did he make known the plan he had pursued for seventeen years in the treatment of them. An inquiry addressed to him through a newspaper elicited, first, the statement that he was not opposed to slavery, but on the contrary was ready to purchase more slaves. He then declared his strong opposition to permitting freed slaves to remain in Louisiana, and observed that his act had been " one of simple honesty alone. I lay no claim nor am I entitled to any credit or praise on the score of generosity." A few days later (July 10, 1842), in a long letter addressed to the *N. O. Commercial Bulletin*, he fully explained his motives and method of operation.

In this letter, after explaining the measures he had taken to prevent his slaves. from working on Sunday (see last chapter), he states that the result of these measures led him to calculate how long it would take a slave to purchase his entire working time if he had his half Saturdays as 'a capital to start with. Having decided that it could be done in fourteen or fifteen years, and that the doing of it was desirable from every point of view, he called together, one Sabbath afternoon, the ten or twelve leading men and women of his slaves, and, after expressing his deep interest [46] in the welfare of them

and their children both in this world and the next, he said:

If you and your children will be faithful, honest, true, sober, economical, industrious (not eye servants), laboring day and night, considering the affairs and interests of your master as the affairs, concerns and interests of each and every one of you individually, and all this with a fixed determination to persevere in well-doing to the end under every temptation that may assail you, and over every obstacle that may fall in your way, and will, in everything, be ruled, directed and guided by me, I will then undertake so to manage your affairs as to insure your freedom and that of your children, with the blessing of the Most High (viz., your freedom in Liberia, in the land of your fathers). This will be effected in conformity with my plan and estimate in the following manner—viz.: The one-half of Saturday being already your own (in consequence of my agreement with you that no labor should be done on the Sabbath day), your first object will be to gain a sufficient sum of money to purchase the other half of Saturday, which is the one-eleventh part of the time you have to labor for your master, and in consequence the one-eleventh part of the value your master has put upon you, and which you have to pay him for your freedom. This, I notify you, will be the most difficult part of your undertaking, and take the longest time to accomplish, and it is to be effected by laboring for me on Saturday afternoons, and leaving the amount of the labor in my hands to be husbanded up for you. By foregoing everything yourselves, and drawing as little money as possible out of my hands, I calculate you will be able to accomplish it in about seven years. That once accomplished, and one whole day out of six your own, you will go on more easily and rapidly; indeed, that once effected, your success is certain. You will be enabled easily by your earnings on one entire day in each week to effect the purchase of another day of your time in about four years. Now master and owner of two days in each week, you will be able in two years more to purchase another day, so that three days, or the one-half of your time, will be your own; in one and a half years more you will be able to purchase another day, making four days your own ; in one year more, another or the fifth day, and in six months, the last day, or the whole of your time, will be your own. Your gains in less than another year will suffice to free (added to what the youths will have gained in the meantime) your children, and all will be accomplished. In the foregoing estimate, I calculate that you will draw from me occasionally some small sums of money to furnish little necessities you may need; but you will remember, when one draws, the whole of you must draw at the same time: the men, an equal sum each; the women, the three-fourths part

each of the sum drawn by the men. You shall be estimated at fair and reasonable prices-say the men at \$600 each, the women at \$450, and the boys, girls and children in proportion. An account shall be opened at once on my books and your valuations charged, without taking into account the increased valuation of the youths and children as they advance in age, and no child to be charged that shall be born [47] after the commencement of this agreement. This is to be as some measure as a counterbalance to an interest account, as none will be calculated or allowed you on account of your gains in my hands. Such men and women as have no children of their own, when they have worked out their prices, shall be held and obligated to assist in paying for the children of the others, so that the whole company shall go on the same day on board ship and sail for your fatherland. I expect and shall insist on the strict performance of your moral and religious duties in every respect. . . . Should any of you commit crimes at any time whilst serving under this agreement, he or she shall immediately be put up at public sale (their offenses declared and made known) and sold ; and whatever money they had earned under this agreement shall go to the benefit of the others in general.'

He continues:

Their surprise and astonishment at such a proposal . . . may be easily conceived; they gave their consent with tears of joy, declared the confidence they entertained of my truth, honesty, and pure intentions .to do them and their children good, and their willingness . . . to be guided in all things by me. . . . On separating I told them to communicate my plans and proposal to their adult fellow-servants, male and female, and to say to them that none were bound or forced to come into the arrangement who had any objection to it; . . . that such as did not wish to accept of it should go on under the same old regulations, . . . and I requested one and all of them to consult together through the week and to give me their final answer . . . on the next Sabbath in church; . . . charging them as they valued my affection to keep what I had said to them (desirous as I was to avoid making the slaves of other plantations unhappy or discontented) in their own bosoms, and never to disclose it, until after they should have left the country for Africa, to a living being on earth. . . . On the next Sabbath day I met them in church, and was told that they had informed all their fellow-servants of my views and intentions towards them; . . . that they had well reflected during the past week on all that I had said to them; that they were at a loss for words to express their love and gratitude to me for what I had

done and was now desirous of doing for them and their children, and that they had always looked on me in the light of a father, deeply interested in their welfare; that I was the only true friend they had on earth; . . . that they accepted one and all of the proposals I had made them.

Mr. McDonogh explained to them distinctly that their freedom was not to be a gift of his, but that they were to purchase it by extra diligence and labor. Said he:

My object is your freedom and happiness in Liberia, without loss or cost of a cent to myself from sending you away, and conferring that boon [48] (as the humble instrument of the Most High) on you and on your children. . . . There is but one way, one mode to effect it, . . . and that is by greater assiduity and exertions in the slave to his labor during the usual hours of day labor, and especially by extra hours of labor before day in the morning and after night in the evening. One hour after night in the evening and one hour before day in the morning would be two hours extra in twenty-four hours, and would be the one-sixth part more of time devoted to labor than is generally demanded of the slave, which is equivalent to two years and a half of additional labor in fifteen years. . . . In the mode which I propose, your master will not make you a present of an hour of your time, and you will in reality have gained and placed in his hands previous to going out free, a sum of money arising from your extra labor fully sufficient to enable him to purchase an equal number of people with yourselves, to take your place in the work of his farm, so that his work and revenue shall not be stopped for an hour; and to fit you out with all things necessary in your new life and new undertaking. . . . On my part, you may depend on my prudence not to involve myself by speculation or otherwise (with the Divine blessing) so as to put it out of my power to carry out the agreement; and I will take care by keeping regular accounts of all your gains, and by instructions to my executors (in case of death), to have our agreement truly and fully executed, and justice rendered you. . . .

Mr. McDonogh thus states the result of the proposal so gratefully accepted by his slaves:

In less than six years the first half day was gained and paid for by them. In about four years the next or second day of the week was paid for and their own. In about two and a quarter years the third day was paid for. In about fifteen months the fourth day was theirs. In about a year the next or fifth day was gained ; and in about six months the last or sixth day of the

week became their own and completed the purchase, . . . , effecting their freedom in about fourteen and a half years. After this it took about five months' labor to pay the balance due on 'their children. Any discrepancy in the period in which they effected the purchase of the different days is to be accounted for in their drawing more money at one period than at another, as they frequently did towards the last. Their freedom was effected in August, 1840, at which time they would have taken their departure for Liberia; but as the Abolitionists of the Northern and Eastern States of our Union had occasioned much excitement in our State, not only among the owners of slaves but among the slaves themselves, I did not consider it safe, or myself at liberty, . . . , as there was a considerable black population in the immediate neighborhood of the residence of my black people, to send them away. I therefore told them (without giving them the cause) that they must be satisfied to remain where they were until the proper time for their departure should arrive, with which they remained satisfied. So they effected their freedom . . . in about fourteen years and a half; and the assertion I made in your *Gazette* of the 24th of June last, that "the act of [49] sending these people away is in my case one of simple honesty alone," is explained in my having received in money from'them (or the equivalent of money) the full price agreed on between us for their freedom in Liberia.

Mr. McDonogh thought his method of making the slave gain his own freedom much preferable to conferring it as a gift.

Without hope, a certain something in the future for him to look forward and aspire to, man would be nothing. Deprive him of that inspiring faculty of soul, and he would grovel in the dust as the brute. But, say they, why not promise him at once freedom after fifteen years' service? To this I have many and strong objections. In that mode his freedom would appear the gift of his master, who might repent and retract his promise. In the other mode the slave would have gained it—have purchased and paid his master for it. Hope would be kept alive in his bosom; he would have a goal in view continually urging him on to faithfulness, fidelity, truth, industry, economy, and every virtue and good work.

Of his people who had sailed for Liberia, he continues:

I can say with truth and heartfelt satisfaction that a more virtuous people does not exist in any community; and I pray the Most High to continue unto them the blessings which He never ceased to shower down on

their heads whilst under my roof.

I will further observe that since the day on which I made the agreement with them (notwithstanding they had at all times previous thereto been a well-disposed and orderly people), an entire change appeared to come over them; they were apparently no longer the same people; a sedateness, a care, an economy, an industry, took possession of them to which there seemed to be no bounds but in their physical strength. They were never tired of laboring, and seemed as though they could never effect enough. They became temperate, moral, religious, setting an example of innocent and unoffending lives to the world around them which was seen and admired by all. The result of my experiment, in a pecuniary point of view, is not one of the least surprising of its features, and is this: that in the space of about sixteen years which these people served me, since making the agreement with them, they have gained for me, in addition to performing more and better labor than slaves ordinarily perform in the usual time of laboring, a sum of money (including the sum they appear to have paid me in the purchase of their time) which will enable me to go to Virginia or Carolina and purchase double the number of those I sent away.

In urging the adoption of his plan upon others, he recognized the difficulties in the way; the necessity of legislation to secure their earnings to the slaves, etc., and frankly states that the scheme can only succeed when the master [50] following sketch of his mode of treating his slaves:

They were lodged in warm and comfortable houses, fed with good salt provisions and corn bread, with a plenty of garden vegetables cooked with pork; clothed with strong, durable clothing, according to the season; a ration of molasses and one of salt was allowed them weekly, and a little coffee and common tea every six months. Christmas and New Year presents served to supply their little wants, and enabled them to leave nearly everything arising from their own labor untouched in my hands. They kept hogs and fowls of their own, and cultivated what ground they needed in corn and vegetables. In sickness, I had as good care taken of them as of myself, with good nurses to attend them. When they committed or were charged with offenses, I did not order an arbitrary punishment, but had them tried by their peers. I would summon a jury of five or six of the principal men, and say to them: "Such a man or such a woman is charged with such or such an offense; the witnesses, I am told, are such and such persons; summon them, hold your court, have him tried, and report to me your judgment and the punishment to be inflicted." It was done all in due form



(the court-room was the church); the trial took place, and the punishment (if found guilty) was reported to me, and I generally found it necessary to modify it in reference to leniency. If twenty lashes were awarded, I would say to the judges, who were the executors of the sentence, "Give ten lashes and a moral lecture to the culprit for the offense." It was done, the criminal acknowledged the justice of the sentence, promised better things for the future, and forgot not to be grateful to the master who had reduced the punishment and reinstated him in place and favor.

For upwards of twenty years I had no white man over them as an overseer. One of themselves was their manager or commander who conducted, directed and managed the others; nor would I have the time once in six months to see in person what they were doing, though the commander would report to me nightly what he had done through the day, and receive my instructions for the day following. They were, besides, my men of business, enjoyed my confidence, were my clerks; transacted all my affairs, made purchases of materials, collected my rents, leased my houses, took care of my property and effects of every kind, and that with an honesty and fidelity that was proof against every temptation.'

[51] Mr. McDonogh thus closes his letter:

The scene [at taking leave of them] I will not attempt to describe; it can never be erased from my memory. Though standing in need of consolation myself (in bidding a last farewell on earth to those who had so many claims on my affection, and who had been round and about me for such a long series of years), I had-to administer it to them who stood in greater need of it, and tell them that the separation was **but** for a brief period of time, .and that we should meet again, I trusted, in a better **and** happier state. . . . On Saturday morning the Kev. Mr. McLain, the agent of the American Colonization Society, crossed the river to dispatch .the ship and see them take their departure. After seeing them off, Mr. McLain came into my house for breakfast, and on seeing 'him much affected in his manner, I inquired if anything had happened to give him pain; to which he replied: "Oh, six, it was an affecting sight to see them depart. They were all on the deck of the ship, and your servants who have not gone were on the shore bidding them farewell, when from every tongue on board the ship I heard the charge to those on shore: 'Fanny, take care of our master; James, take care of our master; take care of our master as you love us, and hope to meet us in heaven—take care of our beloved master.' These ejaculations continued until they were out of hearing."

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