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Commentaries on the Referendum

Philadelphia *Independent Gazetteer*, 1 May 1788

A correspondent says, that the state of Rhode-Island deserves applause and imitation for her wisdom and virtue in three very important matters. In the first place by an act of Assembly the state of Rhode-Island declared that all the negroes born there after March, 1784, were absolutely and at once free. The assembly also lately passed an act which laid a heavy fine upon any citizen of the state who should carry negroes from Africa to any part of the world whatever, and which made the vessel engaged in the horrid traffic liable to forfeiture.² In this holy and glorious zeal for a persecuted part of the human species (in which she has been considerably followed by the state of Pennsylvania) she deserves the esteem of the whole Christian world, and will draw down upon herself the blessings of Heaven. Secondly, The state of Rhode-Island a long time ago manifested a just indignation against the dangerous society of the Cincinnati, and declared that no members of that society should hold an office in the state.² Thirdly, They have submitted the new constitution to all the freemen of the state, who have rejected it by a large majority, and the motion which was made in the assembly for calling a convention, was rejected by a majority of 27. The new constitution therefore is cast out of that state (to use the strong expression of the prophet) AS A MENSTRUOUS CLOTH. In this procedure the house of representatives in Massachusetts Bay seem inclined to support her, and perhaps the people of New-Hampshire. If therefore the friends of liberty and human nature will unite, they may baffle the dark and wicked conspiracy which has been formed to enslave this country, notwithstanding Maryland has adopted the new government, and South Carolina probably will adopt it.

According to the poet,

The wise and active conquer difficulties
By daring to attempt them, sloth and folly
Shiver and shrink at sight of toil and hazard,
And MAKE the impossibility they FEAR.³

1. The fine was £100 for every person brought in illegally.

2. On 16 April 1784 the Boston *Independent Chronicle* reported that Rhode Island was about “to disfranchise any and every person who is a member [of the Society of Cincinnati], and render them incapable of holding any post of honour and trust in that government.” The rumor spread and was widely believed to be true. George Washington, in writing to Thomas Jefferson on 30 May 1787, refuted it: “The Legislature of Rhode-Island never passed any act whatever on the subject (that ever came to my knowledge).”

3. The verse from Isaiah 30:22 states “thou shalt cast them away as a menstuous cloth,” in reference to graven images.