



CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION

csac.history.wisc.edu > Document Collections > The Founding Period and Slavery > The Middle States Debate Slavery and the Constitution > Debates Over Slavery in General

James Pemberton to Moses Brown, Philadelphia 16 November 1787 (excerpts)

I lately recd. thy acceptable letter of 17th ulto. by which I perceive that thy mind has been exercised in like manner with many others of thy brethren in these parts, on account of the present stirrings among the people in their political pursuits, and that the members of our religious Society may be preserved in a conduct consistent with our profession, to promote which, some caution was verbally given in our late yearly meeting, it being the united sense of the Solid & Judicious among friends, that our union, and safety depended on our quietude, & forbearance to intermix with the people in their political consultations, and debates on the present occasion; the like cautionary advice has been repeated in our quarterly meeting, and if the Representatives from the other quarters, and other concerned friends who attended the yearly meeting perform their duty, care will be taken to revive, and diffuse the same in the quarterly meetings now coming on, and transmit it to the monthly meetings, as also to their members individually as occasion offers, the weighty part of friends being much united in Judgment on the subject, but we are numerous, and there are many among us weak & unstable who stand in need of suitable counsel on occasions of this kind, as on others, in which our testimony is concerned; that there is ground to apprehend, that divers were precipitately drawn in to sign petitions to the Assembly towards the close of their session in the ninth month last to promote a speedy Election of Delegates for the State Convention, which proceeded from inattention, and I believe many have been Since convinced of the impropriety of their conduct in that matter, from whence the people who are active in these concerns may have taken occasion to represent the Judgment of the Society being favorable to their cause, but an Election of Delegates for the proposed State Convention has since been held in this City, and other parts, and I do not find, that our members have intermeddled any way, except a few inexperienced young men, and others who are resolute to follow their own wills without due consideration, and run with the multitude at all hazards—

Altho' it is most consistent & safe for us to avoid an active part in the business now in agitation, yet we can but observe those things which are exceptionable in the plan of Government recommended by the late General Convention, and that there are several parts which may affect Civil & religious liberty, at the same time Charity leads me to conclude that they have done the best they could under the circumstances attending their deliberations, and Some of the Delegates appologize for its imperfections particularly in respect to that part which appears to give countenance to the Slave trade for twenty one years, tho' the construction they put on those Sections is, that they only limit the power of the Foederal Legislature, and are not intended to restrain the Legislatures of the respective States from enacting such laws, or Supplements to laws already in force, as they shall judge expedient for the prohibition of the trade, or the abolition of

Slavery within their own jurisdiction, and some of our Lawyers have given their opinion to the same purport; There was a desire prevailed in the Convention to subvert the enormous traffic, which the Representatives from So Carolina, & the Adjacent States being aware of, vigorously opposed, and is Said to be the Sole cause of this very inconsistent part of their System professed to be founded on liberal principles, and is given out among other reasons by the Virginia Delegates who declined Signing, for their dissent; However should the plan be adopted, which seems not to be improbable; it will be requisite for the Advocates for the Enslaved Negroes to consider, whether consistent with their laudable desire for their emancipation, and the Suppression of the iniquitous Commerce to Africa for Slaves, they ought not firmly to remonstrate against those very exceptionable parts of a Constitution said to be intended to hold up a Standard of impartial Liberty, and I hope friends here, and others will not be inattentive to a Subject of such weighty importance. . . .

The Essay on the Slave trade thou Sent me I have delivered to one of our news-printers for republication, and observe it is inserted in a paper of this day; The Act lately passed by your Assembly to prevent the Slave Trade does them credit. but I fear it is not sufficiently explicit to prevent evasion; There is an Intention of applying to the Assembly of this Government for a Similar law, instances having lately occurred to make it expedient. . . .

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. XIV: Commentaries on the Constitution, Public and Private [2] (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1983), 524–25.