



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

THE PENNSYLVANIA ABOLITION SOCIETY Petition to the Constitutional Convention *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 5, 1788

The following Memorial, drawn up by the Society for the gradual abolition of slavery in Philadelphia, was intended to be presented to the late Fœderal Convention, but was withheld, upon an assurance being given by a member of the convention that the great object of the memorial would be taken under consideration, and that the memorial, in the beginning of the deliberations of the convention, might alarm some of the southern states, and thereby defeat the wishes of the enemies of the African trade. While we rejoice in the step which has been taken by the convention to put a total stop to the commerce and slavery of the negroes one and twenty years hence, it is to be hoped the publication of the memorial may have some weight with individual states, to pass laws to prohibit that inhuman traffic, before the power of Congress over that part of the commerce of the states shall take place.

J.H.

To the Hon. the CONVENTION of the United States of America, now assembled in the City of Philadelphia.

The MEMORIAL of the Pennsylvania Society for promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and the Relief of free Negroes unlawfully held in Bondage.

The Pennsylvania Society for promoting the abolition of slavery, and the relief of free negroes unlawfully held in bondage, rejoice with their fellow citizens in beholding a Convention of the states assembled for the purpose of amending the fœderal constitution.

They recollect with pleasure, that among the first acts of the Illustrious Congress of the year 1774, was a resolution for prohibiting the importation of African slaves.

It is with deep distress they are forced to observe, that the peace was scarcely concluded, before the African trade was revived, and American vessels employed in transporting the inhabitants of Africa to cultivate, as slaves, the soil of America, before it had drank in all the blood which had been shed in her struggle for liberty.

To the revival of this trade the Society ascribe part of the obloquy with which foreign nations have branded our infant states. In vain will be the pretensions of the United States to a love of liberty, or a regard for national character, while they share in the profits of a commerce, that can only be conducted upon rivers of human tears and blood.

By all the attributes therefore of the Deity, which are offended by this inhuman traffic—by the union of our whole species in a common ancestor, and by all the obligations which result from it—by the apprehensions and terror of the righteous vengeance of God in national judgments—

by the certainty of the great and awful day of retribution—by the efficacy of the prayers of good men, which would only insult the majesty of heaven if offered up in behalf of our country, while the iniquity we deplore continues among us—by the sanctity of the christian name—by the pleasures of domestic connections and the pangs which attend their dissolution—by the captivity and sufferings of our fellow citizens in Algiers, which seem to be intended by divine providence to awaken us to a sense of the injustice and cruelty of dooming our African brethren to perpetual slavery and misery—by a regard to the consistency of principles and conduct which should mark the citizens of republics—by the magnitude and intensity of our desires to promote the happiness of those millions of intelligent beings, who will probably cover this immense continent with rational life—and by every other consideration that religion, policy and humanity can suggest—the Society implore the present Convention to make the suppression of the African trade in the United States a part of their important deliberations.

June 2, 1787.

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski, ed., *A Necessary Evil?*, Constitutional Heritage Series, Vol. II (Madison House, Madison, Wis. 1995), 147–48.