



CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION

csac.history.wisc.edu > Document Collections > Religion and Ratification > Quaker
Opposition to the Constitution's Provisions Concerning Slavery

Timothy Meanwell

Philadelphia *Independent Gazetteer*, 3 November 1787

Friend Oswald, When I wrote to thee last, it was with a wish that if I had imbibed a wrong idea of our proposed new constitution that some friend or other would endeavour to set me right: I have seen the publication of a person under the *pirated* signature of *Plain Truth*; I call it *pirated*, because the signature is affixed to that which is not *true*, in which performance he pretends to remove some of the objections which had taken hold of my mind relative to the new constitution; instead of answering or removing any of those objections, he has the more firmly fixed them with me, he has not removed a single one, neither has he touched upon any part of my letter, only that which alludes to the importation of slaves, and instead of his removing of this objection, he has confirmed it, and has inserted a part of the new constitution, which he says will prove *my* assertion, to be false; the constitution runs thus, “The migration or importation of persons, as any of the states now existing shall think proper to admit, *shall not be prohibited by the Congress*, prior to the year 1808;” mark these words, “*they shall not be prohibited, &c.*” this confirms the very objection which I had to the clause allowing of the importation of slaves; he goes on further, and says, “Would not every candid reader conclude from this, that in one and twenty years, such importations *may be prohibited, &c.*” here he does not entertain the least shadow of a prohibition taking place before 21 years, and after that time he says, a prohibition *may take place*; if he meant in the least degree to have removed my objections, he ought not to have relied upon *may-be’s*; such flimsey arguments will not in the least tend to conviction with me, I must have more solid reasoning than such pitiful *may-be’s* as these: he will I trust, excuse me if I am a little severe in my reply, after being treated so cavalierly by him. He goes on further and says, “What alteration does the present constitution make in the present system adopted by many of the states relative to slavery;” he draws the answer himself, which is not the answer of *Plain Truth*, and says “NONE contrary to that system:” this is false, because, if the new constitution is adopted, it will in a great measure contravene the act of assembly of Pennsylvania for the gradual abolition of slavery, which act expressly forbids the further importation of slaves;¹ the new constitution says they *shall not be prohibited* for 21 years, and goes no further, and does not say that a prohibition shall take place after that period: this is left to be determined by the *great Congress* hereafter to be chosen, who may or may not abolish this inhuman traffic after 21 years, as they in their great goodness and unbounded wisdom may think proper—This new constitution by implication says thus—Ill done ye bad and faithless servants, continue your endeavours to complete the inglorious work which you have begun, our assistance is not far distant, for ere the child now born shall arrive to the age of manhood, the supreme power of the United States, after having established slavery

for 21 years, they will entirely and irrevocably fix it altogether, and in the mean time the new constitution will encourage it all that it can.

I fear thou hast stole the signature of *Plain Truth*, that thy disturbed spirit has led thee to make these remarks, before thou hast examined the new constitution.

I observe by a part of thy performance, that thou either are tolerably well versed in the scriptures, or at least thou would have the public to entertain that opinion of thee. There is some matters in the scriptures which I sometimes have heard mentioned, and am at a loss to find answers for; I have no doubt but that from thy acquaintance with that old-fashioned and too much neglected book, thou canst answer them; I will give thee one of them, if thou canst answer thou wilt do me a kindness, *Pray who was David's grandfather's nurse?* this answer I expect thou wilt give as the result of thy own information, and not seek it from any divine; I shall then perhaps, entertain a better opinion of thy knowledge in the scriptures than I do at present, some other queries may be offered to thee as they occur.

I must, before I conclude, beg leave to inform thee, that I had a very great suspicion that thou wast not what thou wouldst have the world to believe thou art, that is, that thou art not that *venerable old dame* designated by the title of *Plain Truth*, but that thou hadst *pirated* her name, to affix to thy publication, having had some considerable acquaintance with this *venerable lady*. I made it my business to wait upon *her*, in hopes that if I had imbibed a wrong notion of the new constitution *she* would set me right. After making some enquiry for *her*, (for thou must understand, *she* is so often attacked and abused *she* is obliged frequently to remove *her* quarters) I found *her* inhabiting of a very neat small house up a little ally out of doors tied to a stump; after passing of the usual compliments, I told *her* that I had seen a publication under *her* signature in the Independent Gazetteer, of the 30th October, which I did not altogether understand, and I waited upon *her* for *her* explanation of the matter. *She* immediately denied having wrote or published any thing. I answered that I had the paper in my pocket and would shew it to *her*; *she* took it and perused it, and told me that it was none of *her* performance, and that *she* totally disclaimed every iota contained in that publication as *her* performance; the *venerable lady* seemed very much enraged and out of humour, thinking that any person should thus so much traduce *her* as to publish *untruths* under *her* signature, and told me *she* wished *she* could detect the impostor, and requested that I would have the advertisement herewith sent,^(a) (which *she* handed me) immediately published that the impostor might be detected. I told *her* I would take special care to have it done. *She* told me *she* took it very kind in my waiting on *her* on this occasion, and requested immediate information if any more impositions should appear in future, when after the usual salutations we parted.

All the other objections which I have made to the new constitution I presume are acceded to, as none of them have been contradicted.

I fear friend Oswald I have trespassed too much upon thy good nature, but having been informed that thou wast very obliging, made me trouble thee thus long, which I hope thou wilt excuse; and should the same person who has signed himself *Plain Truth* appear again unless he adduces better arguments than his last, I shall not take up the time of thy readers, as too much of thy valuable paper will be lost by answering of him, I choose not to be throwing of *pearls before swine*, but only hope that he may not enjoy the first fruits of this new constitution, especially to have that part retorted on him that relates to slavery, by his being sold as a slave to the Dey of

Algiers or to Botany Bay, that he may not there know the blessings of liberty, and be debarred from the enjoyment of it, perhaps he may then repent that he had not paid a more minute attention to this new constitution, and wish that he had given the establishment of it all the opposition in his power, however if he has such contracted notions of liberty, I leave him to *Satan to buffet with*. I am, With the greatest respect, Thy assured Friend. TIMOTHY MEANWELL.

Spank Town, October 31st, 1787.

(a) Stop Thief! Stop Thief!

Whereas a certain person under the signature of *Plain Truth* published in the Independent Gazetteer of the 30th October, has made free to pirate my name and palm it upon the public attached to a performance, which I totally disavow and hereby disclaim every iota of. I also hereby offer a reward adequate to the trouble to any person who shall detect the impostor and deliver him to me.

Given under my hand and seal at my palace at a little house up an alley out of doors tied to a stump, this 31st day of October, 1787. PLAIN TRUTH.

1. This act, passed in March 1780, required that all slaves in the state be registered before 1 November 1780, and that none but slaves so registered “shall at any time hereafter be deemed, adjudged or holden, within the territories of this commonwealth, as slaves or servants for life, but as free men and free women, and except the domestic slaves attending upon delegates in Congress from the other American states, foreign ministers and consuls, and persons passing through or sojourning in this state, and not becoming resident therein. . . .”

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), 515–19.