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Opposition to the Constitution's Provisions Concerning Slavery

Moses Brown to James Thornton, Sr. Providence, R.I., 13 November 1787 (excerpt)

. . . I shall . . . touch on An Other [subject] where we seem to be happily United; that is the Stopping of the African Slave Trade the Effect of Our Applycation to the Assembly of this state having been Sattisfactory I Inclose thee a Copy of Our Address & the Act Obtained thereupon which I had struck off[f] for my friend, doubtless thou hast heard by the friend from your way of the Applycation to the Massachusetts allso. On my getting home from Our Assembly the 1st. of this mo. I sent off a Copy of the Act with a Letter to their Committee,¹ no friend on the Committee being ready to accompany me or I should have gone down to Boston again on the subject, I am in hopes of hearing dayly of their doing something to the like purpose, I may now mention my desire you may be favourd to bring about an Act similar in Pennsylvania² Seeing there is now no hopes from Congress, the present not being Competent and the new if it Takes place have Bard that Door of hope for 21 years & I fear from that Concession much Longer, indeed their doings on this subject aspecialy the 3d paragraph of the 2d sectn. of the 4th Article appears Calculated on purpose 'tho, Plauseably Coverd, to distroy the present Effect of the 1st Article of the Massachusetts Bill of Rights by which all Negroes when in that Jurisdiction are Declared free, as well and on the same ground as in England and no Law there can support a Claimmer in Carrying One Out of that Assylim or City of Refuge which it has been to many, many Others have agreed with their masters to Serve a Certain time and then take manumissions, by means of this, their Retreat from the Injuries of Slavery, but alas instead of Extending Humanity and good Will to that People the Convention has, I think very Unhapily Wounded the Cause of Liberty & the rights of Men, the Justice of Such an Assylim is supported by the Divine Law Deut 23, 15–16 which Grenvill Sharp has Adopted in an Argument proving the Right of protection & of Protectors to slaves who Escape from their masters, which I could Wish had been laid before that Assembly as it appears to me Conclusive on the point, tho I must Confess till I saw it I had some doubts whether it was best for friends to protect them 'tho this doubt arose from a fear of Blame and so hurting Our Testimony, not from the Right they had to Take their Liberty when Ever they Could, I mentiond this matter in a Lr sometime since to James Pemberton & Queryd how We could Unite in the present federal system, & answer Our Query “Whether we bare a faithfull Testimony against slavery” Once a Quarter I Wish for the Cause of Humanity, Justice, Liberty & Religion that this Usurpation Over the Massachusetts Constitution [The remainder of the letter is missing.]

1. Brown's letter was addressed to the Committee on the Revision of the Laws of the Massachusetts legislature, which in June 1787 had been directed to report a bill upon “the subject matter of negroes in this Commonwealth at large.” This action had been prompted by a Quaker petition against the slave trade.

2. On 8 January 1788 Benjamin Rush informed Jeremy Belknap that the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery “are about to address our legislature in favor of a law to prohibit the fitting out, owning, or insuring vessels in Pennsylvania that are to be employed directly or indirectly in the African slave trade. It is expected this law will meet with no opposition.”

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), 522–23.