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Opposition to the Constitution's Provisions Concerning Slavery

Jeremy Belknap to Benjamin Rush Boston, 12 February 1788 (excerpt)

. . . It gives me great Pleasure to hear of the intended effort of your Society to obtain a Law prohibiting the African Trade. Rhode-Island, bad as they are in some respects, have set us a good Example in *this* Instance, they have by Law prohibited under a severe Penalty the buying and selling slaves in foreign Parts & to render Conviction easy the Evidence of one Seaman belonging to the Vessell is sufficient for a Condemnation—

In our late Convention something was said by way of objection to the Constitution because “it *established*” (as the speakers said) “the importation of Slaves for 20 years” Several of the antifederal Party urged this, but none more violently than a certain Quaker Preacher who went so far as to predict that the same measure should be meted to us—i.e that we should lose our Liberties as the Africans lost theirs He was answered very ably by Mr Parsons who construed that article into a dawn of hope for the final abolition of the horrid Traffick & spoke of it as a great Point gained of the southern states. However the Quaker remained inflexible & as I know him to be a Man of influence in the Circle of *Friends* at the Eastward I suppose he will prejudice the minds of a great Part of that fraternity against the Constitution. The reason of my mentioning this to you is to desire you to inform me whether among the Quakers of Pennslva: any such Construction is put on that article wch respects the Migration or Importation of Foreigners—I think there must be some Men of Sense among them who cannot be so prejudiced, but I wish to be made certain of it & I think I shall be able to make a good use of the Information. . . .

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