

Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences



Petition of Absalom Jones, and Others, People of Color, and Freemen

Philadelphia, 1797



Absalom Jones

Absalom Jones was an African-American abolitionist and clergyman. He was the first African American ordained as priest in the Episcopal Church of the United States.

We apprehend this solemn Compact [the Constitution of the United States of America] is violated by a trade carried on in clandestine [secretive] manner to the Coast of Guinea [West Coast of Africa], and another equally wicked practised openly by Citizens of some of the Southern States upon the waters of Maryland and Delaware: Men ... for the brutal purpose, are employed in kidnapping those of our Brethren that are free, and purchasing others of such as claim a property... thus these poor helpless victims like droves of Cattle are seized, fettered [shackled around the ankles], and ferried into places provided for this most horrid traffic, Such as dark cellars and garrets [dismal attic], as is notorious at Northurst, Chester-town, Eastown, and divers other places. After a sufficient number is obtained, then, are forced on board vessels, crowded under latches, and without the least commiseration [sympathy], left to deplore the sad separation of the dearest ties in nature, husband from wife, and Parents from children thus pocket'd together they are transported to Georgia and other places and there inhumanely, exposed to sale: Can any Commerce, trade, or transaction, so detestably, shock the feelings of Man, or degrade [lower] the dignity of his nature equal to this, and how increasingly is the evil aggravated when practised in a Land, high in profession of the benign [gentle] doctrines [laws] of our blessed Lord who taught his followers to do unto others as they would they should do unto them!—

...The Law not long since enacted Congress called the Fugitive Bill, is, in its execution found to be attended, with circumstances peculiarly hard and distressing for many of our afflicted Brethren in order to avoid the barbarities wantonly exercised upon them, or thro fear of being carried off by those Men-stealers, have been forced to seek refuge by flight; they are then hunted by armed Men, and under colour of this law, cruelly treated, shot, or brought back in chains to those who have no just claim upon them.

In the Constitution and the Fugitive Bill, no mention is made of Black people or Slaves— therefore if the Bill of Rights, or the declaration of Congress are of any validity, we beseech that we as men, we may be admitted to partake of the Liberties and unalienable Rights therein held forth firmly believing that the extending of justice and equity to all Classes would be a means of drawing down the blessing of Heaven upon this Land, for the Peace and Prosperity of which, and the real happiness of every member of the Community, we fervently pray—

Slavery Perspective Documents:

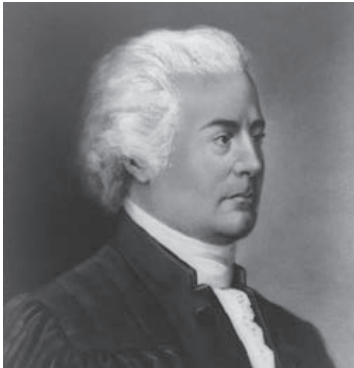
Constitutional Convention Debates Texts



Luther Martin

Luther Martin was a politician and one of the United States' Founding Fathers who refused to sign the Constitution because he felt it violated states' rights. He was a leading Anti-Federalist, a prominent supporter of the passage of the Bill of Rights (Baltimore, Maryland).

Slaves (through the danger of insurrection) weaken one part of the Union, which the other parts are pledged to protect. The privilege of importing slaves is therefore unreasonable. Furthermore, it is inconsistent with the principles of the American Revolution and dishonourable to the American character to continue the slave trade. I say abolish it.



John Rutledge

John Rutledge was the second Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. A lawyer and a judge, governor of South Carolina during the American Revolution, and a delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 (Charleston, South Carolina).

I, for one, am not afraid of slave rebellions, and would gladly exempt the other states from the obligation to protect the South against them. Religion and humanity have nothing to do with the question of importing slaves. Interest alone is the governing principle with nations. The true question at present is whether the southern states shall or shall not be parties to the Union. If the northern states consult their interest, they will not oppose the increase of slaves, which will increase the number of goods that they will ship.

Slavery Perspective Documents:

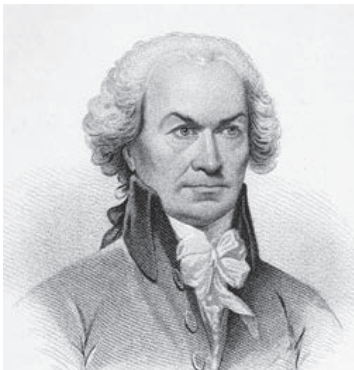
Constitutional Convention Debates Texts *(continued)*



Rufus King

Rufus King was an American lawyer, politician, and diplomat. He was a delegate for Massachusetts to the Continental Congress. He also attended the Constitutional Convention and was one of the signers of the United States Constitution on September 17, 1787, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He represented New York in the United States Senate (Massachusetts).

The continued admission of slaves is a most grating circumstance to my mind and to most of the people in America. One part of the Union is pledged to protect another. Why should the North agree to protect the South when it is free to increase the danger by continuing importation of slaves?



Oliver Ellsworth

Oliver Ellsworth was an American lawyer and politician, a revolutionary against British rule, a drafter of the United States Constitution, United States Senator from Connecticut, and the third Chief Justice of the Supreme Court (Hartford, Connecticut).

Let every state import what it pleases. The morality and wisdom of slavery are considerations belonging to the states themselves. What enriches one part of the Union enriches the whole, and the states are the best judges of their particular interest. The old government under the Articles of Confederation has not meddled with this point, and I see no great necessity for us to start meddling today.

I unlike Colonel Mason [who has three hundred], have never owned a slave and cannot be a judge of the effects of slavery on character. If [slavery] were to be considered in a moral light, we ought to go further and free those already in the country. Slaves multiply so fast in Virginia and Maryland that it is cheaper to raise than import them, whilst in the sickly rice swamps, foreign supplies are necessary. Let us not be unjust towards South Carolina and Georgia. Let us not meddle. As population increases, poor laborers will be so plentiful as to make slaves useless. Slavery, in time, will not be a speck in our country.

Slavery Perspective Documents:

Constitutional Convention Debates Texts *(continued)*



Charles Pinckney

Charles Pinckney was an American politician who was a signer of the United States Constitution, the 37th Governor of South Carolina, a Senator, and a member of the House of Representatives (Charleston, South Carolina).

South Carolina can never join the Union if it prohibits the slave trade; in every proposed extension of the powers of Congress, that state has expressly and watchfully excluded the meddling with the importation of Negroes. If the states all be left alone on the question of prohibiting the importation of slaves, South Carolina may perhaps by degrees do what Virginia and Maryland have already done [ban the importation of slaves from Africa]. But South Carolina will never consent to being forced to stop importing slaves.

It is my firm opinion that my and my colleagues' personal influence could not get the Constitution ratified if it contained a clause prohibiting the slave trade. You have your choice. You can abolish the slave trade and lose South Carolina, Georgia and I don't know how many other states, or you can remain silent on the subject and keep these states in the Union.

South Carolina and Georgia cannot do without new slaves. As to Virginia, she will gain by stopping the importations. Her slaves will rise in value and she already has more than she wants. It would be unfair to require South Carolina and Georgia to join the Union on such unequal terms.

The importation of slaves would not be for the interest of the whole Union. The more slaves, the more produce to employ merchants and seamen, the more consumption also, and the more revenue for the common treasury.

Slavery Perspective Documents:

Constitutional Convention Debates Texts *(continued)*



George Mason

George Mason was a Virginia planter, politician, and a delegate to the U.S. Constitutional Convention of 1787, one of three men who refused to sign (Mason Neck, Virginia).

The immoral traffic in slaves started in the greed of British merchants. The British government constantly checked the attempts of Virginia to put a stop to it. The present question concerns not the slave-importing states alone, but the whole Union. Maryland and Virginia have already banned the importation of slaves outrightly, and North Carolina has all but done the same. All this would be in vain if South Carolina and Georgia were at liberty to import slaves. The western people are already calling out for slaves for their new land and will fill that country with slaves if they can get them through South Carolina and Georgia.

Slavery discourages arts and manufactures. The poor hate labor when performed by slaves. Slaves prevent the immigration of whites who really enrich and strengthen a country. They produce the most terrible effect on morals. Every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant. Slaves bring the judgment of Heaven on a country. As nations cannot be rewarded or punished in the next world they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes and effects, fate punishes national sins by national disasters.

I sorrow that some of our New England brothers had, from a lust for gain, started this evil traffic. I hold it essential in every point of view, that the general government should have power to prevent the increase of slavery.

Slavery Perspective Documents:

Constitutional Convention Debates Texts *(continued)*

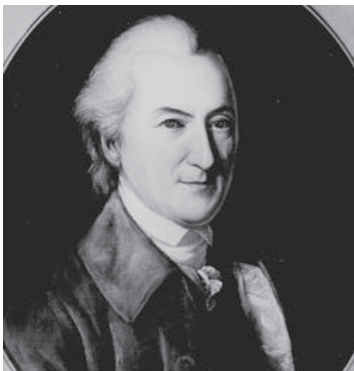


Roger Sherman

Roger Sherman was an early American lawyer and statesman. He was the only person to sign all four great state papers of the U.S.: the Continental Association, the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution (New Haven, Connecticut).

I cannot say that I agree with the slave trade. I thoroughly disapprove of it. But we must remember we are writing a Constitution of which the states must approve. The slave trade is now permitted to the states. The public good does not require that we take this right away from the states. So, it is best that we leave this matter as we found it.

The abolition of slavery is proceeding in several of the states. Let us leave this matter in the good sense of the several states who will undoubtedly proceed with abolition on their own.



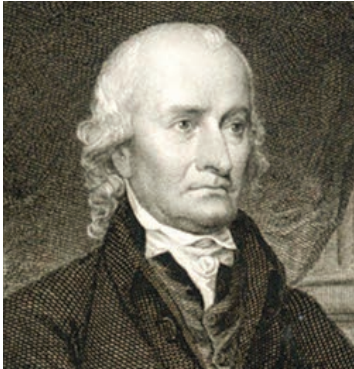
John Dickinson

John Dickinson was a Founding Father of the United States and politician from Philadelphia (Wilmington, Delaware).

It is inadmissible on every principle of honor and safety that the importation of slaves should be authorized to the states by the constitution. The true question is whether the national happiness would be promoted or hurt but the importation of slaves and this question must be decided by the national government, and not by the states particularly interested in slavery. England and France permit slavery, but exclude the importation of slaves from their kingdoms. History teaches us that Greece and Rome were made unhappy by their slaves. I cannot believe that southern states will refuse a Constitution that prohibits their importation of slaves.

Slavery Perspective Documents:

Constitutional Convention Debates Texts *(continued)*



Hugh Williamson

Hugh Williamson was an American politician. He is best known as a signatory to the U.S. Constitution and for representing North Carolina at the Constitutional Convention (Edenton, North Carolina).

We in North Carolina do not directly prohibit importation of slaves. But we tax such importation. You should realize this is a matter for southern states to work out for themselves. The southern states will not join the Union if you prohibit the slave trade. It is wrong to force anything down the throats of the states.



Timothy Dwight

Timothy Dwight was an American academic, educator, minister, theologian, and author. In the wake of the 1800 Virginia slave insurrection known as Gabriel's or Prosser's Rebellion and of Thomas Jefferson's election to the presidency, Dwight saw slavery as the gravest danger for America's future. In this excerpt from a mocking tribute (and warning) to Jefferson's home state of Virginia, Dwight might also be seen to distantly foretell the outcome of the Civil War (Connecticut).

**Proceed great state – thy arts renew,
With double zeal thy course pursue,
Call on thy sister states t'obey,
And boldly grasp at sovereign sway –
Then pause – remember ere too late,
The tale of Santo Domingo's fate,
Though Gabriel dies, a host remain
Oppress'd with slavery's galling chain,
And soon or late the hour will come,
Mark'd with Virginia's dreadful doom.
(January 1, 1801)**

Slavery Perspective Documents:

Constitutional Convention Debates Texts *(continued)*

Anonymous

“A Person Confined in a New Jersey Prison”

You boast of your freedom – your mild Constitution
See tears undissembled for Liberty flow!
Unmov’d can you witness such cruel delusion,
Who feel in your bosoms Philanthropy glow?
Were we not by the same common Parent created?
Why then for the hue of my race am I hated?
Why, faultless, to misr’y and chains am I fated?

Anonymous

“Reflections on the Slavery of the Negroes, Addressed to the Conscience of Every American Citizen”

We broke our fetters, yet enchain our kind.
We boast and glory in our liberty,
And in our sweet equality rejoice,
And joy that we be so supremely blest,
In wealth, peace, safety, wise and virtuous laws;

Yet, fifty myriads of our kindred kind,
The hapless children of rich Afric’s shores,
Groan round our land, in base captivity,
And weep, and sigh, bound in Columbia’s chains.
Alas! Our boasted justice how absurd!....

The fierce revolt of Afric’s tortured tribes.
Which now wide range around Caribbean isles,
Our half reflecting minds too quick condemn.
Were we in dire captivity and chains,
Opprest, degraded, as they’ve been for ages,
We would revolt, had we means and pow’r...

Slavery Perspective Documents: Constitutional Convention Debates Texts (*continued*)



Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton

Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton was a poet, born in Boston to a wealthy family. Morton had the reputation of one of America's best-loved female poets. In the poem below, Morton denounces the hypocrisy of slave societies that fought against the tyranny of Britain (Massachusetts).

Child of the sun, proud *Carolina* rise!
And say what chief thy haughty hand supplies!
Canst thou contend for freedom, while yon vale
Pours its deep sorrows on the sultry gale!
Thus rise with patriot heart supremely brave,
Nor heed the scourge, that breaks thy shackled slave
