

PETITION FROM THE PENNSYLVANIA SOCIETY FOR THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY TO THE FIRST CONGRESS (1790)

In February 1790, the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery—headed by Benjamin Franklin—submitted an anti-slavery petition to the First Congress. The Society was the first abolitionist society in the United States, founded by the Quakers in 1775. A decade later, Franklin was elected the Society’s president. Franklin turned to the abolitionist cause late in life. He had befriended anti-slavery activists during his time in Britain and France, and he had long been exposed to the abolitionist views of the Quakers in Philadelphia. Following the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, Franklin became an outspoken critic of slavery, publishing several essays calling for slavery’s abolition. In his final public act, he sent this petition to the First Congress. In it, the Society urged Congress to pay “serious attention to the subject of slavery” and to “step to the very verge” of its powers to end both the international slave trade and the institution of slavery itself. The petition was introduced in the House and the Senate—sparking our nation’s first debates over slavery within Congress. Franklin died two months later.

Excerpt

To the Senate & House of Representatives of the United States,

The Memorial of the Pennsylvania Society for promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the relief of free Negroes unlawfully held in bondage, & the Improvement of the Condition of the African Races.

Respectfully Sheweth,

The anti-slavery movement is growing in early America. That from a regard for the happiness of Mankind an Association was formed several years since in this State by a number of her Citizens of various religious denominations for promoting the Abolition of Slavery & for the relief of those unlawfully held in bondage. A just & accurate Conception of the true Principles of liberty, as it spread through the land, produced accessions to their numbers, many friends to their Cause, & a legislative Co-operation with their views, which, by the blessing of Divine Providence, have been successfully directed to the relieving from bondage a large number of their fellow Creatures of the African Race. They have also the Satisfaction to observe, that in consequence of that Spirit of Philanthropy & genuine liberty which is generally diffusing its beneficial Influence, similar Institutions are gradually forming at home & abroad.

All people are formed by God; this is consistent with the Declaration of Independence; and slavery runs against both God and America’s Founding creed. That mankind are all formed by the same Almighty being, alike objects of his Care & equally designed for the

CONSTITUTION 101

Module 10: First Amendment: Speech, Press, Religion, Assembly, and Petition

10.5 Primary Source

Enjoyment of Happiness the Christian Religion teaches us to believe & the Political Creed of America fully coincides with the Position.

Congress has broad powers; they should be used to help African Americans. Your Memorialists, particularly engaged in attending to the Distresses arising from Slavery, believe it their indispensable Duty to present this Subject to your notice. They have observed with great Satisfaction that many important & salutary Powers are vested in you for “promoting the Welfare & Securing the blessings of liberty to the People of the United States.” And as they conceive, that these blessings ought rightfully to be administered, without distinction of Colour, to all descriptions of People, so they indulge themselves in the pleasing expectation, that nothing, which can be done for the relive of the unhappy objects of their care, will be either omitted or delayed.

Our goal is to abolish slavery and promote freedom; Congress should push for the same goal; only then will America live up to the promise of the Declaration of Independence. From a persuasion that equal liberty was originally the Portion, It is still the Birthright of all men, & influenced by the strong ties of Humanity & the Principles of their Institution, your Memorialists conceive themselves bound to use all justifiable endeavours to loosen the bounds of Slavery and promote a general Enjoyment of the blessings of Freedom. Under these Impressions they earnestly entreat your serious attention to the Subject of Slavery, that you will be pleased to countenance the Restoration of liberty to those unhappy Men, who alone, in this land of Freedom, are degraded into perpetual Bondage, and who, amidst the general Joy of surrounding Freemen, are groaning in Servile Subjection, that you will devise means for removing this Inconsistency from the Character of the American People, that you will promote mercy and Justice towards this distressed Race, & that you will Step to the very verge of the Powers vested in you for discouraging every Species of Traffick in the Persons of our fellow men.

***Bold sentences give the big idea of the excerpt and are not a part of the primary source.**