

20th Congress,
1st Session.

[Doc. No. 215.]

Ho. of Reps.

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

MEMORIAL

OF

INHABITANTS OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA,

PRAYING FOR THE

GRADUAL ABOLITION OF SLAVERY

IN THE

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

MARCH 24, 1828.

Referred to the Committee for the District of Columbia.

WASHINGTON :

PRINTED BY GALES & SEATON.

1828.

MEMORIAL.

To the Honorable the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled :

We, the undersigned, citizens of the counties of Washington and Alexandria, in the District of Columbia, beg leave to call the attention of your honorable body to an evil of serious magnitude, which greatly impairs the prosperity and happiness of this District, and casts the reproach of inconsistency upon the free institutions established among us.

While the laws of the United States denounce the foreign slave trade as piracy, and punish with death those who are found engaged in its perpetration, there exists in this District, the Seat of the National Government, a domestic slave trade, scarcely less disgraceful in its character, and even more demoralizing in its influence. For this is not, like the former, carried on against a barbarous nation; its victims are reared up among the People of this country; educated in the precepts of the same religion; and imbued with similar domestic attachments.

These people are, without their consent, torn from their homes; husband and wife are frequently separated, and sold into distant parts; children are taken from their parents without regard to the ties of nature; and the most endearing bonds of affection are broken forever.

Nor is this traffic confined to those who are legally slaves for life. Some who are entitled to freedom, and many who have a limited time to serve, are sold into unconditional slavery, and, owing to the defectiveness of our laws, they are generally carried out of the District before the necessary steps can be taken for their release.

We behold these scenes continually taking place among us, and lament our inability to prevent them. The People of this District have, within themselves, no means of legislative redress, and we, therefore, appeal to your honorable body, as the only one invested by the American Constitution with the power to relieve us.

Nor is it only from the rapacity of slave traders that the colored race in this District are doomed to suffer. Even the laws which govern us, sanction and direct, in certain cases, a procedure that we believe is unparalleled in glaring injustice by any thing at present known among the Governments of Christendom. An instance of the operation of these laws, which occurred during the last Summer, we will briefly relate.

A colored man, who stated that he was entitled to freedom, was taken up as a runaway slave, and lodged in the jail of Washington City. He was advertised, but no one appearing to claim him, he was, according to law, put up at public auction, for the payment of his jail fees, and sold as a slave for life! He was purchased by a slave trader, who was not required to give security for his remaining in the District, and he was, soon after, shipped at Alexandria for one of the Southern States. An attempt was made by some benevolent individuals to have the sale postponed until his claim to freedom could be investigated, but their efforts were unavailing; and thus was a human being sold into perpetual bondage, at the capital of the freest Government on earth, without even a pretence of trial, or an allegation of crime.

We blush for our country while we relate this disgraceful transaction, and we would fain conceal it from the world, did not its very enormity inspire us with the hope that it will rouse the philanthropist and the patriot to exertion. We have no hesitation in believing your honorable body never intended that this odious law should be enforced; it was adopted with the old code of Maryland, from which, we believe, it has been expunged since this District was ceded to the General Government.

The fact of its having been so recently executed, shows the necessity of this subject being investigated by a power which we confidently hope will be ready to correct it.

We are aware of the difficulties that would attend any attempt to relieve us from these grievances by a *sudden* emancipation of the slaves in this District, and we would, therefore, be far from recommending so rash a measure. But the course pursued by many of the States of this Confederacy, that have happily succeeded in relieving themselves from a similar burden, together with the bright example which has been set us by the South American Republics, proves, most conclusively, that a course of gradual emancipation, to commence at some fixed period, and to take effect only upon those who may thereafter be born or removed into the District, might be pursued, without detriment to the present proprietors, and would greatly redound to the prosperity and honor of our country.

The existence among us of a distinct class of people, who, by their condition as slaves, are deprived of almost every incentive to virtue and industry, and shut out from many of the sources of light and knowledge, has an evident tendency to corrupt the morals of the people, and to damp the spirit of enterprise, by accustoming the rising generation to look with contempt upon honest labor, and to depend, for support, too much upon the labor of others. It prevents a useful and industrious class of people from settling among us, by rendering the means of subsistence more precarious to the laboring class of whites.

It diminishes the resources of the community, by throwing the earnings of the poor into the coffers of the rich; thus rendering the former dependent, servile, and improvident, while the latter are tempted to become, in the same proportion, luxurious and prodigal.

That these disastrous results flow from the existence of slavery among us, is sufficiently conspicuous, when we contrast the languishing condition of this District and the surrounding country, with the prosperity of those parts of the Union which are less favored in point of climate and location, but blessed with a free and industrious population.

We would, therefore, respectfully pray that these grievances may claim the attention of your honorable body, and that a law of Congress may be enacted, declaring that all children of slaves, born in the District of Columbia, after the fourth day of July, eighteen hundred and twenty-eight, shall be free at the age of twenty-five years; and that those laws which authorize the selling of supposed runaways for their prison fees or maintenance, may be repealed.

And, also, that laws may be enacted to prevent slaves from being removed into this District, or brought in for sale, hire, or transportation; without, however, preventing Members of Congress, resident strangers, or travellers, from bringing and taking away with them their domestic servants.