

Report of Select Committee February 10, 1836

The Committee charged by the [sic] Honorable the General Assembly with the consideration of questions connected with the subject of domestic servitude in the United States and the proceedings of certain societies having for their object the immediate abolition of slavery in the Southern states of the Union, beg leave respectively, to report, that they have had the whole matter confined to their charge under examination and have bestowed upon it that deliberation which its importance demands.

Your committee do not consider themselves called upon to examine the subject of slavery in the abstract, or to reason upon its justice or injustice in any way, it is sufficient for them to say that they find among the institutions of their country that of domestic servitude fixed upon a basis which cannot now be disturbed without destroying a "Union" which has served to make the Nation great, powerful, and prosperous.

Every true philanthropist, every just reasoner upon the natural rights of mankind and every sincere Christian might well wish that the mildew of servitude had never fallen upon any part of mankind, but from the earliest history of our race, in every country and under every religion man in some form or other has been the slave of his fellow man. "Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren," and in most countries where the relation of master and slave does not exist in a direct form it is found under some other guise quite blightly if not so obvious.

But passing from this general reflection which has not much concern with our duties as legislators in the present attitude of our institutions and laws. Your committee would call the attention of the General Assembly not to be a condition of things which individuals might wish to call into existence but to a subject which has become a matter of much solicitude to those who think correctly upon the political relations of these United States and desire to perpetuate that Union which is the true foundation of our national greatness.

It is well known to all persons tolerably acquainted with the history of past events as connected with the subject of slavery in this hemisphere that the attention of wise and good men at the South, as well as the North was directed to the institution of domestic servitude for many years anterior to the Revolutionary War. And it was

in the first draft of the declaration of our Independence made a matter of special grievance by Mr. Jefferson against the King of Great Britain that he would not at that time arrest a traffic which that far seeing statesman feared would ultimately bring fearful evils upon his country. The subject then of Slavery is not one which the citizens of Southern States have shut their eyes against, it is to them a matter of deep, constant and abiding solicitude. It is a subject which concerns them nearly and exclusively. One which the people of the north have no right to handle or touch much less to make an object of open incessant and never tiring attack.

When the several states of the Confederacy assembled their delegates in the general convention in order to form a more perfect Union they appeared as separate single and Independent Sovereignities. Each state was absolute master of its own actions and had an unlimited control over its own functions, powers, and duties. For the purpose of forming a Union it became necessary for the Sovereigns to surrender up certain of their powers, and disrobe themselves of some of the attributes of supremacy, but it was expressly understood between them and solemnly agreed that “the powers not delegated should be reserved to the states respectively or to the people.”

In looking over the list of concessions made by the States to the central power, your committee find none other than this in relation to servitude namely that Congress by implication might after the year 1808 prohibit the importation of persons which the several States before that time could lawfully introduce within their own borders. But at the same time it was expressly provided that no person held to service or labor in one state under the laws thereof escaping into another should in consequence of any law or regulation therein be discharged from such service or labor. It is clear then that the several States when they came into the Union surrendered up none of their powers over the subject of domestic servitude except such only as related to the importation of slaves from foreign countries. All other matters connected with the subject were left by the Constitution where they were found by that instrument under the exclusive power and absolute control of the several States. Rhode Island therefore has no more right to interfere with the institutions of South Carolina in relation to servitude than the latter has with those of the former in relation to free schools. Indeed the condition of the slave holding States in connection with this matter is such as absolutely to prohibit in the opinion of your committee any attack upon their institutions in any way directly or indirectly, openly or covertly. In the one section of the country property, happiness,

safety and life itself are staked upon the question in the other nothing is put at hazard but the soundness or unsoundness of mere speculative opinions.

Why then should we interfere in any way with the institutions of the South concerning a matter over which we have no control. In the charter of "Union" adopted by the States this subject is left to the intelligence, the humanity and patriotism of those who are most concerned with it. And the South may well say to us who made you a judge over another man's servant. "To his own master he stands or falls." But there is another part of this question of vast practical importance to those who are concerned in the institutions of the South which has not escaped the observation of your committee, and which presents some difficulties from which other parts are free. We allude to the societies established for the immediate abolition of slavery and their proceedings in relation to the object of their organization.

If the persons connected with these societies are sincere in their professions they must have some practical object in view ultimately to be obtained, for no special pains need be taken at the North at this day to inculcate what are here considered sound opinions in relation to the general question. In what way then do these societies propose to act. By what mode do they expect to arrive at the results by them desired. Certainly not by influencing the opinion of the citizens of the North in relation to the abstract proposition for that is already fixed and decided and in the way the abolitionists themselves would desire. It is not then to influence the opinion of the North that these societies are established but they profess the desire to work a change in the sentiments of the Slave holder and finally to induce him practically to begin in the work of emancipation. But can it be rationally supposed that this is a question not reflected upon by the Slave holder himself deeply and anxiously at all times and in all seasons. Is it not a matter which concerns his very existence and will he be likely to need prompting from men who know little or nothing of the practical operations of such institutions and cannot be fitted to give sound advice in relation to them. Do they expect to make converts of those who are daily taunted with their condition and held up by fantastical zealots to the execration and scorn of mankind. Can men be convinced by reproach and contumely or seduced from their positions by denunciation and anathema. It can hardly be that the abolitionist of the North really and conscientiously hope, believe, or expect that the slave holders of the South will ever change their opinions or the actual condition of their servants while this fierce war of

denunciation is carried on. What then is the probable object proposed to themselves by the immediate abolitionists. Your committee are constrained to believe that their intention is not to operate directly upon the Southerner but upon the Northern opinions to induce all the inhabitants of the non slave holding states to think as they think and finally to act as they would be willing to act. That is to say to abolish slavery at all events and at all hazards.

Your committee after a careful and anxious examination of the subject in all its bearings are of opinion that this can never be done under existing circumstances, but at the expense of that Union which binds these States together.

No proposition having for its object the abolition of servitude will be for a moment listened to by the inhabitants of the South when it is presented to them by those who are not personally and individually involved in all the consequences which are to follow from a measure so important in itself, so critical in its bearings, so momentous in its results. The entire condition of a country so extensive, powerful and intelligent as the southern section of the United States is cannot be changed without extreme care and the utmost precaution. Indeed it is by no means a settled problem that the white inhabitants of the South can ever under any circumstances which safety permit the blacks to take equal rank with themselves. In the opinion of your committee such a condition of things would produce consequences no less deplorable than those presented by Slavery itself. The meeting of the two adverse tides of the black and white population impelled by equal forces and moved by the same causes cannot be looked upon with unconcern even by those who are not to be mingled in the fierce encounter.

That the two classes can ever amalgamate themselves into one in which the feelings prejudices and passions of both shall be absorbed and morped your committee do not believe. But if it were possible to accomplish such an object it is not desirable that it should ever be consummated. The union referred to would doubtless improve the conditions of the blacks, but it would at the same time debase the white race past redemption. It is at the same time absurd to suppose that the two adverse and opposing classes so opposite in color, habits and feelings can remain happily and quietly in the same community with equal rights and corresponding privileges. There must and will be a constant and underlining struggle for supremacy between them and it is a conclusion to which good men, who think upon the subject with care, must come with great reluctance but unerring

certainty that while the black and white population remain together in the same country, the one race must of necessity be subordinate to the other.

Under these circumstances the views, objects, and purposes of the abolitionists are in the opinion of your committee unwise, unjust inexpedient, and visionary. That their attacks upon the present institutions of the South will produce there anything but scorn and defiance, cannot reasonably be expected and the question comes up whether the white inhabitants of the North can fairly and honestly under the compact which binds the States together and in a spirit of just dealing towards the inhabitants of the South permit their peace quietude, and safety to be invaded with impunity by individuals who have nothing either of property, happiness, or safety at stake upon the issue.

A full discussion fairly and honestly conducted upon most topics may generally be permitted in all free communities, but your committee are yet to learn that an unbiddable license is to be tolerated in matters affecting not merely the property but the safety of millions of their fellow citizens. The very fact that societies are organized at the North having for their object the emancipation of the Slaves of the South, when known to the latter as it cannot fail to be known, will produce in the minds of the latter a spirit of change, restless hope, insubordination and daring. These societies by their organization justify the servants disobedience to his master and must inevitably have a tendency to produce a spirit of resistance if not of direct attack in the opinion of your committee they ought not to be permitted to exist. To suffer them to organize and perpetuate themselves in the non-slaveholding states is to violate the spirit of the federal compact, to provoke a hostile temper in the South against the North, to excite jealousy and heart burnings first, and then open collision, Civil War and disunion.

This is the natural tendency of these societies the South cannot permit such incipient attacks upon their institutions with safety to themselves and they ought not to be made by the people of the North. Prudence and fair dealing alike require that an end should be put in some way to proceeding so dangerous to the Union. So subversive of the foundation of the Federal Government.

Under the same head may be placed the various incendiary supplications which emanate from individuals engaged in the same objects with the abolition societies. They are decidedly of evil tendency and should be by all proper means discouraged if not suppressed. That the Legislatures of the several states have absolute power over their citizens in these respects cannot be doubted and that their powers should

be exercised in the matters under consideration is to your committee a matter of as little doubt.

Good faith and fair dealing towards the South require a judicious exercise of our powers and a desire to maintain and perpetuate the Union leads directly to action upon the subject. And the condition of the blacks themselves demands our interposition to suppress societies and publications that cannot accomplish their object but have a tendency on the contrary to make the feelings of servitude more galling and rivet them firmer and faster in time to come.

Upon these circumstances your committee would recommend the enactment of laws having for their object the suppression of the abolition societies and all incendiary publications having a tendency to render the condition of the South less secure in respect to domestic servitude. In order therefore to test the question fairly and at once your committee have thought it their duty as a preliminary matter to submit the following proposition to the consideration of the General Assembly. Resolve, that the organizations of societies and the publication of addresses having for their object the abolition of Slavery in the Southern States are of evil tendency and ought to be suppressed.