

Excerpts from James Madison's *Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787*

Wednesday, August 22

In Convention. —

[Mr. SHERMAN](#) [Connecticut] was for leaving the clause as it stands. He disapproved of the slave-trade; yet as the States were now possessed of the right to import slaves, as the public good did not require it to be taken from them, and as it was expedient to have as few objections as possible to the proposed scheme of government, he thought it best to leave the matter as we find it. He observed that the abolition of slavery seemed to be going on in the United States, and that the good sense of the several States would probably by degrees complete it. He urged on the Convention the necessity of despatching its business.

[Colonel MASON](#). [Virginia] This infernal [slave] traffic originated in the avarice of British merchants.

[Mr. ELLSWORTH](#), [Connecticut] as he had never owned a slave, could not judge of the effects of slavery on character. He said, however, that if it was to be considered in a moral light, we ought to go further and free those already in the country.

[Mr. PINCKNEY](#). [South Carolina] If slavery be wrong, it is justified by the example of all the world. He cited the case of Greece, Rome, and other ancient states; the sanction given by France, England, Holland, and other modern states. In all ages one half of mankind have been slaves.

[General PINCKNEY](#) [South Carolina] declared it to be his firm opinion, that if himself and all his colleagues were to sign the Constitution, and use their personal influence, it would be of no avail towards obtaining the assent of their constituents. South Carolina and Georgia cannot do without slaves.

[Mr. RUTLEDGE](#). [South Carolina] If the Convention thinks that North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, will ever agree to the plan, unless their right to import slaves be untouched, the expectation is vain. The people of those States will never be such fools as to give up so important an interest.

[Mr. SHERMAN](#) [Connecticut] said it was better to let the Southern States import slaves than to part with them, if they made that a *sine qua non*. He was opposed to a tax on slaves imported, as making the matter worse, because it implied they were *property*.

[Mr. DICKINSON](#) [Delaware] considered it as inadmissible, on every principle of honor and safety, that the importation of slaves should be authorized to the States by the Constitution.

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/convention/debates/0822-2/>