

FIRE BELL IN THE NIGHT SOURCE DOCUMENTS

Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson was one of the authors of the Declaration of Independence, Governor of Virginia, Minister to France, Vice President and finally President. When the Missouri Compromise happens he is in retirement at Monticello. His correspondence provides a window into how people understood the crisis.

Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes

Monticello Apr. 22. 20.

I thank you, Dear Sir, for the copy you have been so kind as to send me of the letter to your constituents on the Missouri question. It is a perfect justification to them. I had for a long time ceased to read the newspapers or pay any attention to public affairs, confident they were in good hands, and content to be a passenger in our bark to the shore from which I am not distant. But this momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union. It is hushed indeed for the moment. but this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence. a geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper. I can say with conscious truth that there is not a man on earth who would sacrifice more than I would, to relieve us from this heavy reproach, in any *practicable* way. the cession of that kind of property, for so it is misnamed, is a bagatelle which would not cost me in a second thought, if, in that way, a general emancipation and *expatriation* could be effected: and, gradually, and with due sacrifices, I think it might be. but, as it is, we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other. of one thing I am certain, that as the passage of slaves from one state to another would not make a slave of a single human being who would not be so without it, so their diffusion over a greater surface would make them individually happier and proportionally facilitate the accomplishment of their emancipation, by dividing the burthen on a greater number of co-adjutors. an abstinence too from this act of power would remove the jealousy excited by the undertaking of Congress, to regulate the condition of the different descriptions of men composing a state. this certainly is the exclusive right of every state, which nothing in the constitution has taken from them and given to the general government. could congress, for example say that the Non-

freemen of Connecticut, shall be freemen, or that they shall not emigrate into any other state?

I regret that I am now to die in the belief that the useless sacrifice of themselves, by the generation of '76. to acquire self government and happiness to their country, is to be thrown away by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons, and that my only consolation is to be that I live not to weep over it. if they would but dispassionately weigh the blessings they will throw away against an abstract principle more likely to be effected by union than by scission, they would pause before they would perpetrate this act of suicide on themselves and of treason against the hopes of the world.

to yourself as the faithful advocate of union I tender the offering of my high esteem and respect. Th. Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson to John Adams

Monticello Dec. 10 1819

Dear Sir

I have to acknowledge the receipt of your favor on Nov. 23. The banks, bankrupt law, manufactures, Spanish treaty are nothing. These are occurrences which like waves in a storm will pass under the ship. But the Missouri Question is a breaker on which we lose the Missouri country by revolt, and what more God only knows. From the Battle of Bunker's Hill to the treaty of Paris we never had so ominous a question. It even damps the joy with which I hear of your high health, and welcomes to me the consequence of my want of it. I thank god that I shall not live to witness it's issue.

The Adams-Jefferson Letters. Edited by Lester J. Cappon. 1959. The University of North Carolina Press.

Thomas Jefferson to Congressman Hugh Nelson

Monticello Feb. 7 1820

Dear Sir

...I thank you for your information on the progress & prospects of the Missouri question. It is the most portentous one which ever yet threatened our Union. In the gloomiest moment of the revolutionary war I never had any apprehensions equal to what I feel from this source.

I observe you are loaded with petitions from the Manufacturing commercial & agricultural interests, each praying you to sacrifice the others to them. This proves the egotism of the whole and happily balances their cannibal appetites to eat one another. The most perfect confidence in the wisdom of Congress leaves me without a fear of the result. I do not know whether is any part of the petitions of the farmers that our citizens shall be restrained to eat nothing but bread, because that can be made here. But this is the common spirit of all of their petitions. My ill-health has obliged me to retire from all public concerns. I scarcely read a newspaper. I cannot tell you what is a doing in the state, but this you will get fully from others. I will therefore add only the assurances of my great and friendly esteem and respect.

John Adams

John Adams was a member of the Continental Congress, assisting Thomas Jefferson draft the Declaration of Independence. He would later serve as a diplomat, Vice President and President of the United States. Though he did not address the slavery issue much as a politician, Adams was against slavery and did not own any slaves. Though belonging to two different political factions, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson resumed a close friendship after their time in office.

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson

November 23rd, 1819

Dear Sir

... Congress are about assemble and the clouds look Black and thick, Assembling from all points, threatening thunder and Lightning. The Spanish Treaty, the Missouri Slavery, the encouragement of Manufactures by protecting duties or absolute prohibitions, the project of a Bankrupt Act, the plague of Banks, perhaps even the Monument for Washington, and above all the bustle for Caucuses for the approaching Election for President and Vice President will probably produce an effervescence, though there is no doubt that the present President and Vice President will be re-elected by great Majority's, as they ought to be, unless Tompkins should be chosen Governour of New York.

May God preserve you many years, Amen.

John Adams

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson

December 21st. 1819

Dear Sir

...The Missouri Question I hope will follow the other Waves under the ship and do no harm. I know it is high treason to express a doubt of the perpetual duration of our vast American Empire, and our free Institution(s), and I say as devoutly as Father Paul, *estor* (i.e. *estor*) *perpetua* ("be thou everlasting"), but I am sometimes Cassandra enough to dream that another Hamilton, another Burr might rend this mighty Fabric in twain, or perhaps into a leash, and a few more choice spirits of the same Stamp, might produce as many nations in North America as there are in Europe...

John Adams

John Quincy Adams

John Quincy Adams was the son of a prominent American statesman and became a well known statesman himself. He served as a diplomat and Secretary of State, helping to craft the Monroe Doctrine. He would later be elected as President and also serve in the House of Representatives. He was firmly against slavery throughout his time in office. He was an active diarist and writer of letters.

John Quincy Adams to President James Monroe

Department of State

Washington, March 4, 1820

Sir:

In answer to the question upon which you have done me the honor to require my written opinion in the words following:

“Has Congress a right under the powers vested in it by the Constitution to make a regulation prohibiting slavery in a territory?

My opinion is that it has.

And in answer to the question in the words following:

“Is the eighth section of the act, which passed both Houses on the 3d instant for the admission of Missouri into the Union, consistent with the Constitution?”

My opinion is that it is.

Which is respectfully submitted.

John Quincy Adams

Memoirs of John Quincy Adams

March 1st, 1820- I was at the President's. The Missouri slave question has come to its crisis in Congress. The majorities in the two houses are on opposite sides, and there are Committees of Conference to effect a compromise.

2nd. The compromise of the slave question was this day completed in Congress. The Senate have carried their whole point, barely consenting to the formality of separating the bill for the admission of the State of Maine into the Union from that for authorizing the people of the territory of Missouri to form a state government. The condition that slavery should be prohibited by their Constitution, which the House of Representatives had inserted, they have abandoned. Missouri and Arkansas will be slave states, but to the Missouri bill a section is annexed, prohibiting slavery in the remaining part of the Louisiana cession north of latitude 36 30. This compromise, as it is called, was finally carried this evening by a vote of ninety to eighty-seven in the House of Representatives, after successive days and almost nights of stormy debate.

3d. ... And so it is that a law for perpetuating slavery in Missouri, and perhaps in North America, has been smuggled through both houses of Congress. I have been convinced from the first stating of this question that it could not end otherwise. The fault is in the Constitution of the United States, which has sanctioned a dishonorable compromise with slavery. There is henceforth no remedy for it but a new organization of the Union, to effect which a concert of all the white States is indispensable. Whether that can ever be accomplished is doubtful. It is a contemplation not very creditable to human nature that the cement of common interest produced by slavery is stronger and more solid than that of unmingled freedom.

Rufus King

Rufus King led a long and distinguished life as one of America's Founding Fathers. He was a Massachusetts representative to the Continental Congress and later signed the Constitution. He would later be a Federalist candidate for President and Vice President. Throughout his life he was an opponent of slavery. While a member of the New York Senate he delivered powerful remarks about the allowance of slavery in Missouri.

Rufus King to R. Peters Jr.

Jamaica L.I. Nov. 30 1819

Sir:

...In virtue of these regulations, and of the rights reserved to the states respectively, the States where slavery exists are unquestionably the exclusive judges of whether slavery shall be continued within their area, or the slaves gradually, or at once emancipated.

...Every citizen who disapproves of the introduction of slavery, or the continuance thereof in his own State, ought to object to the establishment of Slavery in Missouri, or any other new state beyond our antt. limits...

Yours &c

R. King

Rufus King Senate Speeches 1819

...The question respecting slavery in the old thirteen states had been decided and settled before the adoption of the constitution, which grants no power to congress to interfere with, or to change what had been so previously settled- the slave states therefore are free to continue or abolish slavery. Since the year 1808 congress has possessed the power to prohibit and have prohibited the further immigration or importation of slaves into any of the old thirteen states, and at all times under the Constitution have had power to prohibit such migration or importation into any of the new states, or territories of the United States... Congress may therefore make it a condition of the admission of a new state that slavery shall be forever prohibited in the same. We may, with the more confidence, pronounce this to be the true construction of the Constitution, as it has been so amply confirmed by the past Congress.

James Barbour

James Barbour was a prominent Virginia politician during the early 1800's. He served in the House of Delegates, served as Governor and was a Senator during the period of the Missouri Compromise. He was a colleague of Thomas Jefferson, with Jefferson actually designing his house. Senator Barbour delivered a lengthy speech to the Senate on the Missouri Compromise.

Senate Speech January 31, 1820

...The question we are called to discuss is not whether slaves shall be multiplied. If it was, there would be but one sentiment here. What is the real question? Shall we violate the constitution by imposing restrictions on the people of Missouri?... And shall we finally do an unmeasurable act of injustice, in excluding the people of one half the republic from participating in that country bought by a common treasure and their exclusive counsels? And for what? Not to diminish slavery, but to define it within its present limits- destructive to the slaves themselves, and fatal eventually to the whole population- instead of diffusing them over a wide-spread country, where their comforts would be increased, and by their disproportionate numbers they might be within reach of the suggestions of policy and of humanity.

...When, then, they gave to Congress the power of admitting new states into this Union, it must be understood that, with the exception of the power then transferred to the general government, or expressly withheld by the constitution, all other power belonged to the states, and, the moment that a new state is admitted into the Union, it is placed upon the most perfect equality with the other states, as well to its rights as its obligations.

Have we not a right to contend, that, if the Convention had intended to give to Congress the power of admitting on conditions, it would have said so? The constitution has not authorized the exercise of such a power directly, and there is nothing to justify the exercise of such a power by implication, if implication were allowable.

If she be admitted as a state, all the attributes of the old states instantly devolve on her, and the most prominent of those attributes is the right to fashion her government according to the will and pleasure of the good people of the state: whereas your restriction deprives her of that privilege forever...

Address to the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States

November 21st 1818

The idea of finding an asylum for an oppressed people in the land of their fathers is humane and noble, commending itself to the sympathy of the philanthropist, and the benevolence of the Christian.

...The removal of multitudes from the land which gave them birth to foreign and Christian lands, however effected by the ambition and rapacity of wicked men, gives an opportunity by the return of some of their descendants, to introduce the useful arts and a knowledge of our holy religion more easily, naturally, and extensively into the continent of Africa, than could have been done by any other system of means which human wisdom could have devised.

...A colonization of the free people of colour of the United States in Africa will operate, in several ways, directly against this trade. It will take away its grand temptation with the native princes and people by introducing those articles of foreign produce and manufacture, to which they have become accustomed, and have few means of obtaining except by the sale of slaves.

...The elevation of the character of the free people of colour, who are now in this country is another inducement to their colonization in Africa. They have not here a fair opportunity to show themselves men. Their minds are in some degree shackled from childhood... The principal ground of their inferiority is acknowledged to be a matter of prejudice. But the time when colour will not be a ground of prejudice in this country is not near.

...Raise the character of one man of colour, and a favour is done to the race. Educate a few Paul Cuffees, establish a few Sierra Leone, and they will acquire a reputation which will baffle prejudice and attract respect.

...Sierra Leone was planted when the slave-trade was unchecked, in a soil not the most fertile, and with shoots by no means very promising: but these

plants have taken root, acquire strength, extend their branches and now begin to bear abundant fruit.

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The Adams letters and correspondence (for both John and John Quincy) may also be available through the Massachusetts Historical Society. Interested parties may look at this website <http://www.masshist.org/adams/>.