

1777-1787. Gouverneur Morris denounces the “nefarious institution”

Sources: <http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/B/morris/morris.htm>

<http://www.colonialhall.com/morrisg/morrisg.php>

http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/rcah/html/ah_061500_morrisgouver.htm

http://www.philly.com/mld/inquirer/news/special_packages/constitution_center/6217773.htm

Gouverneur Morris was born in 1752 on his family’s Morrisania estate in what is now the Bronx. His family was politically influential and wealthy. His mother owned enslaved African and his half-brother was a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Gouverneur Morris became a leader of the new nation despite losing a leg in a carriage accident as a young man. He graduated from Columbia University (then known as King’s College) in 1768 and became a lawyer. From 1775 to 1777, he represented Westchester County in New York’s Revolutionary congress (1775-77) and he help draft the first New York State constitution. At the state’s constitutional convention, he proposed a motion, which was defeated, to abolish slavery in New York. He served in the first New York state legislature and the Continental Congress, where he signed the Articles of Confederation. In 1779, Morris relocated to Philadelphia and he represented Pennsylvania at the Federal Constitutional Convention.

At the Constitutional Convention, Gouverneur Morris was on the committee that prepared the final draft of the Constitution and he opposed constitutional protection for slavery, the slave trade and the three-fifths compromise. Morris described slavery as a “nefarious institution. . . . The curse of heaven on states where it prevailed” and argued that Congressional representation should be based on “one for every 40,000 free inhabitants.”

Morris later moved back to New York City, traveled in Europe as a diplomat and merchant, was elected to the U.S. Senate, helped found the New-York Historical Society in 1804 and served as the founding chairman of the Erie Canal Commission. He died at Morrisania in 1816 and was buried at St. Ann's Episcopal Churchyard, in the Bronx.

1777. Motion proposed by Gouverneur Morris at the New York State Constitutional Convention

And whereas a regard to the rights of human nature and the principles of our holy religion, loudly call upon us to dispense the blessings of freedom to all mankind: and inasmuch as it would at present be productive of great dangers to liberate the slaves within this State: It is, therefore most earnestly recommended to the future Legislatures of the State of New-York, to take the most effectual measures consistent with the public safety, and the private property of individuals, for abolishing domestic slavery within the same, so that in future ages, every human being who breathes the air of this State, shall enjoy the privileges of a freeman.

1787. James Madison Report on Gouverneur Morris’ Address to the Federal Constitutional Convention

He never would concur in upholding domestic slavery. It was a nefarious institution. It was the curse of heaven in the States where it prevailed. Compare the free regions of the Middle States, where a rich & noble cultivation marks the prosperity & happiness of the people, with the misery & poverty which overspread the barren wastes of Va. Maryd & the other States having slaves. Travel thro' the whole Continent & you behold the prospect continually varying with the appearance and disappearance of slavery. The moment you leave the E. Sts. & enter N. York, the effects of the institution become visible, passing thro' the Jerseys & entering Pa. every criterion of superior improvement witnesses the change. Proceed southwldly & every step you take thro' the great region of slaves presents a desert increasing, with the increasing proportion of these wretched beings. The admission of slaves into the Representation when fairly explained comes to this: that the inhabitant of Georgia and S.C. who goes to the Coast of Africa, and in defiance of the most sacred laws of humanity tears away his fellow creatures from their dearest connections & damns them to the most cruel bondages, shall have more votes in a Govt. instituted for the protection of the rights of mankind, than the Citizen of Pa. and N. Jersey who views with a laudable horror, so nefarious a practice. ... He would sooner submit himself to a tax for paying for all such negroes in the U. States, than saddle posterity with such a Constitution.