

Speech by Benjamin Gale, 12 November 1787

At a town meeting appointed by act of Assembly 12 November 1787.

Gentlemen, We are summoned by act of Assembly to convene upon this day, and I should be glad to know what is the business of this meeting. Perhaps our representatives can explain to us what the business of this meeting may be.

I know it has been given out that we are called together to consider the new form of government, and that it is referred back to the *people* to say whether they will adopt it or reject it, but when I come to examine the act of Assembly, you have no voice in the case. All our business, gentlemen, is to make choice of delegates to say whether you shall be made to submit to it or not—not whether you approve of it or not. That is not our business nor is it submitted to you.

...The last clause of this paragraph limits the number of Representatives [to] 1 to 30 thousand. At present we are allowed 5, and there be 150 thousand inhabitants in this state to entitle us to five Representatives. So that when the number of our inhabitants are taken, after all our emigrations to New York and Vermont, I suspect we shall not have more than 4 Representatives, if so many—and can you think such a representation in Congress will be sufficient thus connected with and fettered with the Southern States, where they have such high notions; not only to tax us by duties, excises, and impost, but to make laws for us, when you see by their numbers they can force us to submit to 3 fifths of their slaves exempted. It seems to me, gentlemen, this alone might convince you of the impolicy of adopting this Constitution. While I am upon the subject of *Negroes* and the artful language they use to cover their meaning, I would object to the 9th section which is in these words: [Article I,] section 9, [paragraph 1]. Why all this sly cunning and artful mode of expression unless to cover from your observation and notice that *Negroes* was intended by the word *persons*, again used on this occasion, lest it should frighten people who may have some tender feelings and a just sense of the rights of human nature. What man, that has the feelings of a man, can once think it right to send our ships across the Atlantic to tear parents from their children, children from their parents, husbands from their wives, and wives from their husbands, stifle one-half of them in their crowded ships, and the remainder sell as we do our cattle to drag out the remainder of their lives in slavery, to be whipped and lashed like horses, without being struck with horror and shudder at the deed? It might have been sufficient, one would have thought, not to have said anything about it in those articles of this blessed Constitution planned out for us by the Convention and hurried on to be established with as much precipitation as though the salvation of our souls depended upon our adopting it *immediately*. But it fills my mind with the highest resentment to read that they lay a restraint upon Congress that they shall not restrain or prohibit that antichristian and most abominable and wicked practice of trading in *bodies and souls of men* for the space of 21 years yet to come. They need not have extended it to one-half of that period, for my mind for in less than one-half of that time, if we adopt this system of government, 3/4 of us will be slaves to all intents and purposes whatsoever without any trouble or expense of sending to Africa for slaves, for it is as perfect a system of slavery as I ever saw

planned out by any nation, kingdom, or state whatever. For what have we been contending and shedding our blood and wasting our substance, but to support the natural rights of men. I am told our reverend clergy in general are much engaged to support this new plan of government, but if this is really the case, they may in future preach and pray to the Africans that may be imported by virtue of this new Constitution. For my own part, any who vote for it, if I know them, will not offend my ears, neither with their prayers or preaching to the latest period of my life.

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