

Congress and Human Trafficking in 1812

Document 1. Excerpt from a letter from James McCulloch, the Collector of Customs in Baltimore, to Elisha Tyson and Thomas Ellicott, leaders of the Quaker community in that city.

Custom House, Baltimore, MD

Nov. 1, 1811

Gentlemen,

In the little time I have had for reflection on the subject of our late conversation, there has nothing appeared to my view more than has been already suggested for fulfilling the interests of the United States laws respecting the traffic in slaves. These laws take no notice of freemen of color entrapped as slaves or such as being entitled to freedom at a future period are carried beyond the bounds of the state where their rights are ascertained and enforced before the arrival of that time. . . .

There being few slaves in the Northern States, of course, few [are] interested to sacrifice principles and feelings in countenance to the traffic in our view; they who carry it on endeavor to get their prey into the nearest district of country where slavery prevails, for exportation thence. Unhappily Maryland presents her territory thus situated; there they are brought from Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York. Not such only as are lawfully held slaves, for there is little or no impediment anywhere to the sale of such. But free persons or entitled at some period to be free are thus by night in covered carriages brought into the state, lodged privately and set in bonds, or loaded on board the vessels destined to carry them away at the moment of sailing. This migration from one state to another should be forbidden, and instant liberty given.

. . .

Your friend,
James McCulloch