



## “where MEN should be bought & sold”

### The deleted slave-trade clause in Thomas Jefferson’s draft of the Declaration of Independence, 1776

In June 1776, the United States and Britain had been at war for over a year, and the Second Continental Congress was nearing agreement to issue a formal declaration of independence. A committee of five delegates — John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston — was formed to create the declaration, and the task of writing a first draft was given to Jefferson. Much of Jefferson’s draft was ultimately adopted by the full Congress, but it removed his clause on the king’s culpability in promoting the slave trade in America and in encouraging slaves to rise up in insurrection against their slaveholders.

*he has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating it’s most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain. determined to keep open a market where **MEN** should be bought & sold. he has prostituted his negative<sup>1</sup> for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce; and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die,<sup>2</sup> he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people for whom he also obtruded them:<sup>3</sup> thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.]*

John Adams to Timothy Pickering, 1822: “I was delighted with [the draft’s] high tone and the flights of oratory with which it abounded, especially that concerning Negro slavery, which, though I knew his Southern brethren would never suffer to pass in Congress, I certainly never would oppose. . . . Congress cut off about a quarter of it, as I expected they would; but they obliterated some of the best of it, and left all that was exceptionable, if anything in it was. I have long wondered that the original draft had not been published. I suppose the reason is the vehement philippic against Negro slavery.”

National Humanities Center, 2010: [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/).

<sup>1</sup> i.e., he has abused his power to veto legislation by nullifying every attempt in America to ban or limit the slave trade.

<sup>2</sup> i.e., that slavery might lack no redeemable feature (die=dye: color, feature), in other words, by promoting slave insurrections against the Americans, the king is guaranteeing the worst of slavery’s consequences in the colonies.

<sup>3</sup> Obtrude: impose one’s opinion; i.e., the king is urging slaves to kill the slaveholders upon whom the king imposed the slaves in the first place.