

COMMEMORATION OF THE BICENTENNIAL OF THE ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE, 1808–2008

...Let the first of January, the day of the abolition of the slave trade in our country, be set apart in every year, as a day of publick thanksgiving for that mercy. Let the history of the sufferings of our brethren, and of their deliverance, descend by this means to our children, to the remotest generations; and when they shall ask, in time to come, saying, What mean the lessons, the psalms, the prayers and the praises in the worship of this day? Let us answer them, by saying, the Lord, on the day of which this is the anniversary, abolished the trade which dragged your fathers from their native country, and sold them as bondmen in the United States of America.

– Absalom Jones, Minister, St. Thomas African Episcopal Church of Philadelphia and freed slave

With these words, on January 1, 1808, Rev. Absalom Jones hailed the legal abolition of U.S. participation in the transatlantic slave trade, a victory which seeded the ground for greater changes yet to come.

For the first twenty years after the founding of the United States, the slave trade was protected by the Constitution. A compromise had been reached at the constitutional convention of 1787, providing that the federal government could not prohibit the importation of slaves into the southern states for a period of 20 years.

As the 1808 expiration of the constitutional provision approached, Congress was divided on the issue of the slave trade. Then President Thomas Jefferson made a dramatic pronouncement. Jefferson, whose record on slavery was ambiguous but who strongly opposed the slave trade, declared in his annual message to Congress his support for the total abolition of the slave trade. A bill to this effect was introduced in Congress the next day. After heated debate, Congress passed the legislation. It was signed into law on March 2, 1807. The legislation prohibited the importation of any slave as of January 1, 1808, the day the constitutional prohibition on such a ban expired.

The abolition of the slave trade by the United States and by Great Britain (1807) led to the decline of the trade and, in time, contributed to the abolition of slavery itself in the British Empire (1834) and the U.S. (1865). For years after 1808, thanks to Absalom Jones and others, free black communities in the antebellum North celebrated January 1st, the anniversary of the abolition of the trade, as a black Fourth of July.

January 1, 2008 marks the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade. This date is not widely known. One key reason is that the slave trade was conducted on Northern ships, with Northern commodities, and Northern financial backing. The complicity of the North in slavery has been obscured, so that many Americans don't know the history of the trade and of its abolition. The bicentennial presents a historic opportunity to set the record straight.

The year 2008 will be an opportunity to “remember, reflect and respond” to the horrors of the slave trade and the struggle to bring it to an end. Momentum is building throughout the country to use the bicentennial to further the national conversation on race and justice, inspired by the efforts in England in 2007 to commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade. The British government invested the equivalent of \$40 million in major programs, exhibits, and events; a service was held at Westminster Abbey, the BBC aired programs, and the film *Amazing Grace* was released. Leadership in the U.S. is now being undertaken in Congress, the Smithsonian, state humanities councils, religious denominations, universities, museums and beyond. This bicentennial can inspire us, together, to look around the world and face the challenge of ending the forms of slavery that still exist. Simultaneously, we can rededicate ourselves to the work of tackling the many legacies of slavery that have, in one way or another, shaped all Americans.