

George Washington, Letter to Robert Morris (1786)

On March 30, 1786, Philip Dalby of Alexandria, VA published a notice in two Virginia newspapers entitled "A CAUTION to all TRAVELERS to PHILADELPHIA from the SOUTHERN STATES." In it, he warns how the Society of Friends, or Quakers, in Philadelphia encourage the slaves of any who enter the city to seek freedom for themselves. He then recounts how his own accompanying slave was thus enticed and the resultant inconveniences and legal proceedings from being served with a writ of habeas corpus on account of that slave. George Washington, presumably upon reading Dalby's notice, wrote this letter to Robert Morris, a prominent Pennsylvania politician. Morris wrote Washington two weeks later and informed him that the Pennsylvania court had decided in favor of Dalby, who had recovered his slave.

April 12, 1786

Dr Sir,

I give you the trouble of this letter at the instance of Mr Dalby of Alexandria; who is called to Philadelphia to attend what he conceives to be a vexatious law-suit respecting a slave of his, which a Society of Quakers in the City (formed for such purposes) have attempted to liberate. . . . [I]t should seem that this Society is not only acting repugnant to justice so far as its conduct concerns strangers, but, in my opinion extremely impolitically with respect to the State—the City in particular; & without being able (but by Acts of tyranny & oppression) to accomplish their own ends. He says the conduct of this society is not sanctioned by Law . . . and if the practice of this Society of which Mr Dalby speaks, is not discountenanced, none of those whose *misfortune* it is to have slaves as attendants will visit the City if they can possibly avoid it; because by so doing they hazard their property—or they must be at the expence (& this will not always succeed) of providing servants of another description for the trip.

I hope it will not be conceived from these observations, that it is my wish to hold the unhappy people who are the subject of this letter, in slavery. I can only say that there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it—but there is only one proper and effectual mode by which it can be accomplished, & that is by Legislative authority: and this, as far as my suffrage will go, shall never be wanting.

But when slaves who are happy & content to remain with their present masters, are tampered with & seduced to leave them; when masters are taken at unawar[e]s by these practices; when a conduct of this sort begets discontent on one side and resentment on the other, & when it happens to fall on a man whose purse will not measure with that of the Society, & he loses his property for want of means to defend it—it is oppression in the latter case, & not humanity in any; because it introduces more evils than it can cure. . . .

G: Washington