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**“We Are to Be Reduced to the Level of Slaves”:
Planters, Taxes, Aristocrats, and Massachusetts
Antifederalists, 1787-1788**

By

John Craig Hammond

When “The result of the Federal Convention appeared” in wide circulation in Massachusetts, in October 1787, William Bentley of Salem recorded in his diary that “Some complaint is made that the advantage is unduly thrown in favor of the representation from the Southern States, &c &c.” Three months later, Samuel Thompson of Maine gave voice to these complaints at the convention meeting in Boston to ratify the Constitution. “If the southern states would not give up the right of slavery, then we should not join with them,” declared Thompson. Continuing, he insisted that the Constitution was “all a contrivance,” with “Washington at the head.” Thompson, like other Antifederalists, was convinced that “our delegates” were “overpowered by Washington and others” at the Philadelphia Convention that framed the Constitution.¹

A week earlier, Thompson stated one of his main quarrels with the Constitution. The three-fifths “rule is unequal.” Because of it, “Congress will have no impost or excise, but lay the whole tax on

¹ William Bentley Diary, Oct. 3, 1787, in *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution* (Hereafter cited as *DHRC*) ed., Merrill Jenson, John P. Kaminski, Gaspare J. Saldino, et. al., 18 vols. to date (Madison, Wisc., 1976 -), Vol. 4: 32-33; Samuel Thompson, Jan. 25, 1788, Theophilus Parsons, Notes of Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 6:1356. Thompson emerged as the leading Antifederalist in Massachusetts’s ratification convention.

polls.”² Still suffering from the 1786 tax levies that had provoked Shays’s Rebellion in western parts of the state, Massachusetts Antifederalists stood convinced that a planter and merchant dominated federal government would lay a heavy tax burden on the yeomanry of Massachusetts, reducing them to degraded, unrepresentative propertylessness.

Thompson’s comments illustrate an important but overlooked dimension of Massachusetts Antifederalists’ quarrel with the Constitution. Historians have recognized that the events which culminated in Shays’s Rebellion played an important role in Massachusetts Antifederalism, but they have overlooked how and why Antifederalists tapped a potent strain of Anti-southernism to oppose ratification of the Constitution. The sectional objections voiced by Massachusetts’s Antifederalists were not their central or exclusive concern.³ Sectional objections did, however, reinforce a broader critique of the Constitution, deepening objections to inadequate representation, excessive taxation powers, and the threat of a consolidated national government, all of which allegedly threatened to saddle Massachusetts farmers with yet another round of taxes.⁴

² Thompson, Jan. 18, 1788, Theophilus Parsons, Notes of Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 6:1241.

³ Jackson Turner Main, *The Anti-federalists: Critics of the Constitution, 1781-1788* (Chapel Hill, 1961) and Saul Cornell’s otherwise illuminating *The Other Founders: Antifederalism and the Dissenting Tradition in America, 1788-1828* (Chapel Hill, 1999) both overlook important sectional differences among Antifederalists. For the ratification debate in Massachusetts, see Van Beck Hall, *Politics Without Parties, Massachusetts, 1780-1791* (Pittsburgh, 1971); Richard D. Brown, “Shays’s Rebellion and the Ratification of the Federal Constitution in Massachusetts,” in *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity*, ed. Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter II (Chapel Hill, 1987), 113-127. For an excellent analysis of slavery and the Constitution, see Don Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government’s Relations to Slavery*, completed and edited by Ward M. McAfee, (New York, 2001), 15-47.

⁴ For a useful summary of general Antifederalist objections to the Constitution, see Cornell, *Other Founders*, 26-34.

Ideology and experience had taught Massachusetts Antifederalists the importance of adequate and effective representation. In providing additional representation for the southern states, the three-fifths clause threatened to leave New England dangerously underrepresented in the proposed government. If slaves were assessed at three-fifths the rate of freemen, it appeared likely to Antifederalists that the planter dominated government would use its excessive taxation powers to levy poll and direct taxes on the already burdened freemen of New England.⁵ Having spent the past two years experiencing what heavy, direct taxes entailed -- debt, insolvency, lost personal independence, lost farms and shops, closed courts, and in the western parts of the state Shays's Rebellion -- Massachusetts Antifederalists were particularly sensitive to taxation and their ability to gain redress should taxes prove burdensome.⁶

An examination of Antifederalists's sectional objections to the Constitution also forces historians to reconsider the relationship between ratification and Shays's Rebellion. According to Richard Brown, "in 1787 the aftermath of Shays's Rebellion -- the repression and the state election that followed -- mobilized participation in Massachusetts politics on an extensive scale and energized the Antifederalists." The

⁵ Poll taxes were uniformly assessed taxes on individuals. In Massachusetts, they were levied on all able-bodied men over the age of sixteen, and payable only in specie or its equivalent. Because all individuals were assessed the same amount, Antifederalists, along with many others, considered poll taxes "regressive." In Massachusetts, direct taxes were usually, and most heavily, levied on land. For taxation in Massachusetts, see H. James Henderson, "Taxation and Political Culture; Massachusetts and Virginia, 1760-1800," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd. Ser., 47 (1990), 90-114.

⁶ For the creation of a post-Revolutionary, "moral-economy" ideology, and the importance of "a defense of personal independence and moderate opportunity against perpetual exploitation and the threat of impoverishment by those who held the political reins," see Ruth Bogin, "Petitioning and the New Moral Economy of Post-Revolutionary America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., 45 (1988), 391-425. For the taxation issue that provoked Shays's Rebellion, see Richard Buel, Jr., "The Public Creditor Interest in Massachusetts Politics, 1780-86"; and Joseph A. Ernst, "Shays's Rebellion in Long Perspective: The Merchants and the 'Money Question,'" in Robert Gross, ed., *In Debt to Shays: The Bicentennial of an Agrarian Rebellion* (Charlottesville, VA and London, 1993), 47-56, 57-81; Henderson, "Taxation and Political Culture."

“mobilization of country representatives threatened to swamp the Constitution in a wave of antigovernment, antilawyer, antiestablishment reaction that was less related to the particular contents of the document itself than to the power and privilege its leading advocates symbolized.⁷

However, the “particular contents of the document itself” alarmed Antifederalists deeply. Among Antifederalists’ greatest concerns was to prevent the ruinous land and poll taxes that had led to Shays’s Rebellion in the first place. This was precisely the problem with the three-fifths clauses and the proposed constitution. The three-fifths clause’s assessment of slaves at three-fifths the rate of freemen portended heavy poll and direct taxes while the clause’s provision for representation left New England without representation adequate to prevent those taxes.

In their speeches and writings, Antifederalists who denounced the “sectional advantages” granted to the southern states displayed a pronounced sensitivity to the class dimensions of taxation and representation. Unless restrained by a well-designed constitution, the wealthy and powerful -- out of indifference or design -- would tax honest yeoman into a condition of economic peonage and political slavery that was profoundly at odds with the Revolution’s promise of propertied independence and republican self-government. Antifederalists praised Massachusetts’ Constitution of 1780 because it allowed the electorate to gain redress for their grievances. Though the General Court had levied the taxes that provoked Shays’s Rebellion in 1786, the “people” had elected new representatives and the General Court addressed the people’s grievances in the 1787 session. When they measured the federal Constitution of 1787 against the Massachusetts Constitution, Antifederalists found the federal Constitution wanting. The Massachusetts Constitution allowed them to resist the hated taxes that threatened their independence, and more importantly the property that underwrote personal independence. They expected no such reprieve from a federal government dominated by southern planters and the aspiring aristocrats of Massachusetts.

When considered as a whole, the three-fifths clauses, the provision protecting the slave trade through 1808, and the lack of any provision for eventual abolition suggested to Antifederalists that New England would

⁷ Richard D. Brown, “Shays’s Rebellion and the Ratification of the Federal Constitution in Massachusetts,” in *Beyond Confederation*, 113-127. Quotes at 122, 124.

continue to be underrepresented in the new government.⁸ In addition, the alleged over-bearing presence of Southern planters, combined with distrust of Massachusetts's leading Federalists, made it seem likely to Antifederalists that their representatives would remain unresponsive to constituents' concerns. The situation appeared dire enough to provoke language reminiscent of the Imperial Crisis. "It must clearly appear" wrote James Warren in one of his "Republican Federalist" essays, "that by the clause for regulating representation, we are to be reduced to the level of slaves, and that we shall soon be such, if the planters of the south are to send to the new Congress, representatives for three fifths of their *negroes*."⁹ No minor matter, the three-fifths clause would "reduce" the freemen of Massachusetts to the level of slaves.

For Massachusetts Antifederalists, the express function of representatives under a republican government was to secure the peoples' liberties and protect their interests. To ensure that representation remained responsive and effective, representatives had to remain close to "the people." And without frequent elections, instructions, and recall, representatives would lose their capacity to represent "the people." Antifederalists also feared that exposure to the trappings of power, luxury, and dissipation at the seat of government would corrupt their representatives further, leaving the people without an effective check against oppressive government. It was a common Antifederalist complaint that the Constitution provided neither adequate representation nor effective means for controlling representatives.¹⁰ For Massachusetts Antifederalists, this situation was especially alarming.

⁸ For an excellent treatment of "overrepresentation" for the South, and the various northern responses through the Civil War, see Leonard Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780 -1860* (Baton Rouge, 2000).

⁹ "The Republican Federalist VI," *Massachusetts Centinel*, Feb. 2, 1788, *DHRC*, 5:845. This theme of "real" slavery for Massachusetts is persistent in Warren's widely read "Republican Federalist" writings.

¹⁰ For Anti-federalists' use of "old Whig" understandings of representation, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic*, (Chapel Hill, 1969), 10-28, 520-22, 162-196. For the persistence of this notion of representation through the 1790's, see Cornell, *Other Founders*, 147-171; Richard E. Ellis, "The Persistence of Antifederalism after 1789," in *Beyond Confederation*, Beeman ed., 295-314.

The shadowy language of the three-fifths clause was more than “a strange collection of words.” As “bad as may be the mode of expression,” Thomas Wait of Maine found “the ideas” expressed to be even “worse.” The three-fifths clause was “an egregious imposition on the northern states,” concluded Wait. The essayist “Samuel” presented this argument in starker terms. After analyzing the contents of the Constitution in tedious detail, Samuel declared that the people of New England “may fairly conclude that if we should adopt” the Constitution, “these four states [i.e. New England] which are now so far reduced below par, would be reduced to no more than one representative to each state.”¹¹

In the ratification convention, Antifederalists expressed the same grave fears that the Constitution would operate unequally against New England in the future. Because “there was not even a provision that the negroes shall ever be free,” slavery would continue to benefit southern planters indefinitely at the expense of New England.¹² When Antifederalists continued to object that the Constitution provided no means for eventual abolition, Federalists moved to address these concerns.

Federalist Thomas Dawes explained to his colleagues that “It would not do to abolish slavery, by an act of Congress, in a moment, and so destroy what our southern brethren consider as property.” However, recognizing Antifederalist concerns that “slaves are reckoned five equal to three now,” Dawes assured Antifederalists that “in a few years slavery must be abolished.” Continuing, Dawes counseled that “Although slavery is not smitten by an apoplexy,” it “has received a mortal wound and will die of consumption.” For the better part of a week, Federalists insisted that the three-fifths clause would do little damage to the interests and liberties of New England. Moreover, some Federalists conflated Congress’s power to prohibit the international slave trade in 1808 with the power to abolish slavery completely. Commenting on the convention debates on slavery and the three-fifths clause, the *Massachusetts Centinel* assured its readers “that the justice in general, and superior advantage to

¹¹ Thomas Wait to George Thatcher, Jan. 8, 1788, *DHRC* 5: 646-647; Samuel, *Independent Chronicle*, Jan. 10, 1788, *DHRC*, 5: 679.

¹² Unknown speakers, Jan. 25, 1788, Convention Debates, *DHRC* 6:1352.

the northern States in particular, of the rule of apportionment...were amply shewn by Mr. Gore, Mr. Parsons, Mr. Jones (of Boston) and the Hon. Mr. King.”¹³ As far as the Federalists were concerned, any temporary advantages gained by the southern states would soon diminish, as southern slavery was surely on the road to extinction.

Antifederalists remained unconvinced. Francis Shurtleff’s “difficulty” with the three-fifth’s clause was “our negroes are free, but those of other states are not.” Benjamin Randall attacked Federalists arguments that equated congressional power to ban the slave trade with the power to abolish slavery. Randall was “Sorry to hear it said that after 1808 negroes would be free. If a southern man heard it, he would call us pumpkins.” A week later, the issue again overtook the convention. Despite repeated Federalist assertions that the Constitution provided New England with adequate representation because southern slavery would soon die out, William Bodman remained concerned that “those born slaves in the Southern States may still continue slaves.” Displaying an unrealistic understanding of southern planters’ tenacious commitment to slavery that was common among Massachusetts Antifederalists, Charles Jarvis of Boston went so far as ask his colleagues: “Can we say to those of the southern States we will not Join with them unless they abolish Slavery?”¹⁴

Federalist William Heath had a much more realistic grasp of white southerners’ commitment to the institution of slavery. He disagreed with other Federalists’ disingenuous claims that “those in slavery in the southern States, will be emancipated after the year 1808.” Federalists and Antifederalists wished to see southern slavery abolished conceded Heath, however, the people of New England “have no right to compel” our “brethren in the southern States” to “put a stop” to slavery. Still, Antifederalists could rest assured that “the federal convention went as far

¹³ Dawes, Jan. 18, 1788, Theophilus Parsons: Notes on Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 6: 1245-7. *Massachusetts Centinel*, Jan 26, 1788, *DHRC* 6:1249.

¹⁴ Francis Shurtleff, Jan. 17, 1788, Parson: Notes of Convention Debates, *DHRC* 6:1240. Benjamin Randall, Jan. 18, 1788, Parsons: Notes on Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 6:1247. William Bodman, Jan. 25, 1788, Theophilus Parsons: Notes of Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 6:1354. Charles Jarvis, Jan. 26, 1788, *DHRC* 7:1813. See also, Samuel Thompson, Jan. 25, 1788, Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 6:1354. “If the southern states would not give up the right of slavery, then we should not join with them.”

as they could” in placing slavery on the road to gradual extinction. Whether Heath was himself being disingenuous, or just confused, he nonetheless claimed that “The migration or importation, &c. is confined to the States now existing only, new states cannot claim it.” In addition, “Congress by their ordinance for erecting new states...declared, that the new States shall be republican, and that there shall be no slavery in them.”¹⁵

According to Heath, any new state entering the Union would be free of both slavery and slave representation. Nevertheless, Federalist arguments concerning the future of slavery still made little headway among Antifederalist delegates. General Thompson remained convinced that “By the proposed Constitution we were giving up every thing to the southern States...they always had the advantage, and now we are going to fix it.”¹⁶

Antifederalists throughout the North claimed to find the clause protecting the slave trade through 1808 especially galling. The slave states were “to be rewarded by having an increase of numbers in the general assembly,” should they continue to import slaves.¹⁷ More destructive to the Federalists’ cause, objections to unequal representation repeatedly shaded into denunciations of the clause protecting the international slave trade for twenty years, while denunciations of the

¹⁵ William Heath, Jan. 30, 1788, Convention Debates, Jan. 30, 1788, *DHRC* 6:1371. Heath refers to the Northwest Ordinance, which banned the further introduction of slavery north of the Ohio River. The Ordinance did not apply to the territory south of the Ohio River. In addition, there was of course no provision confining slavery to the states where it existed.

¹⁶ Samuel Thompson to the Convention, Jan. 25, 1788, *Massachusetts Centinel*, Feb. 23, 1788, *DHRC*, 6:1357. The *Hampshire Gazette* and the *Worcester Magazine* reprinted these remarks on Feb. 27 and Feb. 28, 1788 respectively.

¹⁷ Brutus III, *DHRC*, 13. For further debates over the three-fifths clause and the international slave trade, see Mark Antony, (Boston) *Independent Chronicle*, Jan. 10, 1788, *DHRC*, 5: 672-677; Atticus IV, *Independent Chronicle*, Dec. 27, 1787, *DHRC*, 5: 531-534. Virginia Antifederalist George Mason also objected to the continuation of the international slave trade. By December of 1787, five Massachusetts newspapers had printed “George Mason’s Objections to the Constitution,” *DHRC*, 4: 287-290.

slave trade shaded into debates over representation, reinvigorated debates on the three-fifths clauses.

James Neal, a Quaker from Kittery, Maine, and an ardent Federalist, aided Antifederalist opposition to the Constitution by repeatedly raising objections to the slave trade clause. Neal continuously “went over the ground of objection...that the slave trade was allowed to be continued for 20 years.”¹⁸ A week later, Neal again stated “that the article which respected the Africans was the one which lay on his mind.” Indeed, “how much soever he liked the other parts of the Constitution,” it remained “a sufficient reason for him to give his negative to it.”¹⁹

Despite Neal’s concerns, most Federalists in the convention insisted that the article allowing the prohibition of the slave trade in 1808 was “a step taken...towards the abolition of slavery.” Under the Confederation, “there was no provision whatever” for the “abolition” of the slave trade. “But this constitution provides,” continued Federalists, “that Congress may, after 20 years, totally annihilate the slave trade.” Indeed, Tristram Dalton favored the Constitution precisely because “we gain a right in time to abolish the slave trade.”²⁰

Aided by Neal, Antifederalists refused to allow the issue to die. On January 26, “the debate” on the slave trade “continued desultory.” Antifederalists “deprecated the slave trade in the most pointed terms,...pathetically lament[ing]...that this Constitution provided for the continuation of the slave trade for 20 years.” Though Federalists “rejoiced that a door was now to be opened, for the annihilation of this odious, abhorrent practice, in a certain time,” on February 4, as the convention was debating amendments to the Constitution, Antifederalists again “entered into the consideration of the 9th sect.” In “the most

¹⁸ James Neal, Jan 25, 1788, Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 6:1354. For claims that Neal influenced other Antifederalist delegates, see Jeremy Belknap to Benjamin Rush, Feb. 12, 1788, *DHRC* 7:1588.

¹⁹ James Neal, Jan. 31, 1788, Convention Debates, *DHRC* 6: 1377. The convention again debated the future of slavery and the slave trade on this date, though the official Convention Records say little about this. For what little record remains, see Justus Dwight Journal, Jan. 31, 1788, *DHRC*, 7:1818.

²⁰ Unrecorded speakers, Convention debates, Jan. 25, 1788, *DHRC*, 6:1354. See also, George Cabot, Jan. 18, 1788, Parsons: Notes, *DHRC*, 6:1248. Tristram Dalton, Jan. 25, 1788, Parsons: Notes, *DHRC*, 6:1356.

pathetick and feeling manner,” Antifederalists “described the miseries of the poor natives of Africa, who are kidnapped, and sold for slaves.”²¹

Neal and the Antifederalists’ criticisms of the slave trade pointed to a larger problem with the Constitution. Any constitution that protected and encouraged the slave trade for twenty years had to be a bad one. Moreover, by ratifying a constitution that protected and perhaps promoted slavery, the good people of Massachusetts would be implicating themselves in the enslavement of others. Samuel Thompson made this point with characteristic bluntness: “Shall it be said, that after we have established our own independence and freedom, we make slaves of others?”²²

Paralleling the debates in the Convention, the essayist “Adelos” attacked the Constitution in the *Hampshire Gazette* because “It permits, in express terms, of that most cursed of all trades, the African slave-trade.” Quite simply, “Massachusettians (above all people in [the] world)” must not give “countenance” to the federal constitution, “After establishing a constitution of their own, fronted with these words, ‘*All men are born free and equal.*’” Under the proposed constitution, Americans were free to “captivate thousands of free born men,...bring them to America and doom them to perpetual bondage.”²³

Adelos labeled Federalist claims that the citizens of Massachusetts shared no culpability for the sins of southern slaveholders and slave-traders as “too weak even for idiotcy itself.” For Adelos, the terms of ratification were both stark and simple: “the article ought to be expunged; or...we ought not to vote to give life to a constitution, which at

²¹ Jan. 26, 1788, Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 6:1358. Feb. 4, 1788, Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 6:1421.

²² Samuel Thompson, Jan 25, 1788, Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 6:1354.

²³ “Adelos,” *Hampshire Gazette*, Feb. 6, 1788, 5:871-873. Antifederalist delegates Consider Arms, Malachi Maynard, and Samuel Field wrote an extended critique of slavery, the slave trade, and the continuation of slavery in their “Dissent to The Massachusetts Convention,” *Hampshire Gazette*, April 16, 1788, *DHRC*, 7:1736-1743, setting off a rancorous debate over slavery and the slave trade. Philanthrop systematically addressed their objections to the three-fifths clauses and the slave trade. Philanthrop was in turn answered by Phileleutheros, *Hampshire Gazette*, April 23, May 21, June 4, 1788, *DHRC*, 7:1743-1749.

its first breath will be branded with eternal infamy, by having a stamp of slavery and oppression upon it.” The efforts of Adelos, James Neal, and Massachusetts Antifederalists were of little impact. Permitted to continue the slave-trade for twenty years, Deep-South planters imported over 40,000 slaves between 1803 and 1808, thus increasing the slave states’ already inflated representation while dooming even more Africans to bondage.²⁴

Despite the continuation and increase of slavery in the southern states, Massachusetts Antifederalists believed that southern domination of the new government might be checked, provided New England’s representatives respected the rights and interests of New England. According to Antifederalists, however, the people of Massachusetts would soon lose whatever meager representation the Constitution granted them. According to the essayists “Vox Populi” and “Cornelius,” the Constitution lacked the institutional means to exercise the “jealousy and distrust” over elected representatives which alone “induce a rational person to subject himself to civil government.” Under the proposed Constitution, the people could not “call” their representative “to account for any part of his conduct.”²⁵ This situation seemed especially troublesome because of fears that corrupted, overly powerful southern planters would overwhelm the weak-willed, aspiring aristocrats of Massachusetts, leaving the people without effective representation.

One of the more glaring problems with the Constitution, according to Massachusetts Antifederalists, was the undue influence granted to southern planters. William Widgery was distressed that “In legislation, one southern man with sixty slaves, will have as much influence as thirty-seven free-men in the eastern states.” Widgery also expected “that they will be as Likely to give a wrong account in the number of inhabitants” to increase their already inflated representation. Widgery’s criticism pointed to a larger problem. Most Antifederalists profoundly

²⁴ “Adelos,” *Hampshire Gazette*, Feb. 6, 1788, 5:871-873. William W. Freehling, “The Founding Fathers and Conditional Antislavery,” in *The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War* (New York, 1994), 12-33.

²⁵ Vox Populi, *Massachusetts Gazette*, Nov. 13, 1787, *DHRC*, 4:222; Cornelius, *Hampshire Chronicle*, Dec. 11, 1787, *DHRC*, 4:411. Both of these letters were part of a series that criticized the overrepresentation accorded to southern planters.

distrusted southern slaveholders.²⁶ Despite the celebrated stature and virtue of men like George Washington, Anti-federalists remained suspicious of “the luxurious inhabitants of the southern States.” Especially worthy of suspicion and distrust were the “southern Nabobs” who wantonly violated the most basic rights of slaves, and then “squander it all in luxuries.”

George Washington stood as the epitome of the once virtuous southern gentleman who was corrupted beyond redemption from constant exposure to slavery, and the trappings of luxury and unchecked power.²⁷ Like other members of the southern elite, “at the same time he [was] brandishing his sword, in the behalf of freedom for himself,” Washington was “likewise tyrannizing over two or three hundred miserable Africans, as free born as himself.” Samuel Thompson was especially dismayed by Washington. Though “he has immortalized himself,” in service to his country, Washington still “holds those in slavery who have a good right to be free as he has.” According to Thompson, “Washington’s character fell fifty per cent by keeping slaves.”²⁸

²⁶ William Widgery, Jan. 18, 1788, Parsons: Notes, *DHRC*, 6:1247. Widgery, Jan. 18, 1788, Justus Dwight Journal, *DHRC*, 7:1805. Thompson, Jan. 17, 1788, Parson: Notes, *DHRC*, 6:1241. William Symmes, Jr., to Peter Osgood, Jr., Nov. 15, 1787, *DHRC*, 4:236. Anti-federalists were not alone in holding a derogatory portrait of southern society in general and southern planters in particular. For an example of what might well be more general New England attitudes towards the South, see Noah Webster, “Miscellaneous Remarks on Divisions of Property, Government, Education, Religion, Agriculture, Slavery, Commerce, Climate, and Diseases in the United States,” in *A Collection of Essays & Fugitive Writings*, (1790, Reprint, New York, 1977), 361-369. For Federalist perceptions of the slaveholding south, see Linda K. Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca, 1970), 23-66.

²⁷ The Federalist *Salem Mercury* was willing to use slaveholding to discredit Antifederalists. Referring to the Massachusetts printing of Richard Henry Lee’s objections to the Constitution, on January 8, the *Mercury* stated that Lee, “who has written so much about the danger of losing our LIBERTY by the adoption of the New Constitution, is the master of several hundred SLAVES.” *DHRC*, 5:548n.9.

²⁸ Arms et. al., “Dissent,” *DHRC*, 4:53. Thompson, Jan. 25, 1788, Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 6:1354; Parsons: Notes, *DHRC*, 6:1356.

Agreeing with Thompson, “The Yeomanry of Massachusetts” declared, “we cannot think the noble general, has the same ideas as ourselves, with regards to the rules of right and wrong.” Washington had of course “wielded the sword in defense of American Liberty.” But “at the same time [he] was, and is to this day, living upon the labors of several hundreds of miserable Africans, as free born as himself; and some of them very likely descended from parents who, in point of property and dignity in their own country, might cope with any man in America.” Could it be expected, then, that even a man of Washington’s stature would respect the fundamental principle of Massachusetts’s republican government: “ALL MEN ARE BORN FREE AND EQUAL?” If Washington -- the expected president of the new union -- could not resist the corruption and tyranny inherent in slaveholding, neither could other southern planters who lacked the virtue of a Washington. Massachusetts’s freemen could not expect slaveholding tyrants to resist their inescapable impulse to tyrannize the free men of Massachusetts.²⁹

Worse still, Massachusetts Antifederalists expected their representatives to offer little resistance against slaveholders’ corrupting influence. When attending to government, Massachusetts’ representatives would have “[t]heir chief connections” with “men of the first rank in the United States, who have been bred in affluence at least, if not in the excesses of luxury.” In addition, they would “have constantly before them the enchanting examples of Ambassadors, other publick Ministers, and Consuls from foreign courts, who, both from principles of policy, and private ambition, will live in the most splendid and costly style.” In a letter to their constituents, laced heavily with criticisms of southern slaveholders, Consider Arms, Malachi Maynard, and Samuel Field expressed their expectation that the proposed government would degenerate into “a venal and corrupt administration, whose only wish may be to aggrandize themselves and families -- to wallow in luxury and every species of dissipation, and riot upon the spoils of the community.”

²⁹ “The Yeomanry of Massachusetts,” *Massachusetts Gazette*, Jan. 25, 1787, *DHRC*, 5: 803. “All men are born free and equal,” Article I of the Massachusetts Declaration of Rights (1780). For an especially scathing critique of the means by which slavery had already corrupted the South, and threatened to corrupt and destroy the nation, see Arms, Maynard, and Field, “Dissent,” *DHRC*, 7:1738-1743.

In short, “that luxury and extravagance,...which threatens the ruin of the United States; and that, to which the Eastern States in particular, are wholly unequal,” would overwhelm New England representatives, no matter how virtuous.³⁰

Already suspected of being “those who are for turning our republican government into a hateful aristocracy,” Massachusetts Federalists were subject to allegations that they were unable or unwilling to resist the machinations of southern planters. The proof of this was evident enough. Massachusetts Federalists embraced “a covenant that will degrade” the “freemen of Massachusetts” to “*the level of slaves*” by “giv[ing] to the States who have as many blacks as whites, *eight* representatives, *for the same number of freemen* as will enable this State to elect *five*.” The only explanation was that southern planters had corrupted and overwhelmed Massachusetts’s leading men.³¹

When pressed in the convention to answer why the Federalists favored a constitution that so obviously favored the South, Federalist Thomas Dawes asked “What could the Convention do more? The members of the Southern states, like ourselves, have *their* prejudices.” Caleb Strong was equally blunt: “The southern states have their inconveniences; none but negroes can work there.”³²

These answers did not satisfy Antifederalists. Arms, Maynard, and Field, writing three months after the convention, could still not “see any good reason why” the three-fifths clause was “consented to on the part of

³⁰ Arms et. al., “Dissent,” *DHRC*, 7:1736. Cornelius, *DHRC*, 4:412-413.

³¹ “Yeomanry,” *DHRC*, 5:804. James Warren, “Republican Federalist V,” *Massachusetts Centinel*, Jan. 19, 1788, *DHRC*, 5:750. Revolutionary Americans were of course predisposed to sniff the tainted breezes of corruption and conspiracy in just about every political dispute. In the still intensely personal world of American politics, men were predisposed to believe that corrupted politicians who put their own interests above the general good were the source of ill-designed political measures. For the important role of conspiracy in Revolutionary era politics, see Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 28-43. For an analysis of the social conditions that fostered a belief in corruption and conspiracy, see Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1991), 60-61, 174-5, 360.

³² Thomas Dawes, Jan. 18, 1788, Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 6:1245. Caleb Strong, Jan. 18, 1788, Parsons: Notes, *DHRC*, 6:1247.

our delegates.” Samuel Thompson, though, thought he knew exactly why Massachusetts’s delegates to the Philadelphia Convention had consented: “our delegates” were “over-powered by Washington and others.” Massachusetts Antifederalists expected more of the same from their representatives to the new federal government.³³ Not only would the South numerically dominate the federal government through the three-fifths clauses, New England representatives would be unable to counter slaveholders’ demands, as acceptance of the three-fifths clause demonstrated.

Massachusetts Antifederalists were largely correct that the three-fifths clauses would allow the slave states to dominate the federal government. As Don Fehrenbacher and Leonard Richards have recently demonstrated, planters from the slave states did indeed use the extra representation granted by the three-fifths clause to protect what would become their peculiar institution from northern interference.³⁴ Like so many northern voters and politicians through the Civil War, however, Massachusetts Antifederalists’ greater concern was not with the ways southern planters would protect southern slavery from northern interference, though many certainly were. Instead, most Antifederalists feared that southern domination of the government would encroach upon their lives. Massachusetts Antifederalists feared that southern planters who dominated the federal government would wield undue influence over their own representatives, and then tax the free men of Massachusetts into slavery.

In a series of letters to their constituents, Consider Arms, Malachi Maynard, and Samuel Fields explained their reasons for voting against ratification. After denouncing the three-fifths clauses and the inadequate means for controlling elected representatives, they concluded that “it may be possible, if not probable, that the congress may be composed of

³³ Arms et. al., “Dissent,” *DHRC*, 7:1734. Samuel Thompson, Jan. 25, 1788, Parsons: Notes, *DHRC*, 6:1356. For a pointed objection that the seat of the federal government would degenerate into a bastion of aristocracy, see Samuel Osgood to Samuel Adams, Jan. 5, 1788, *DHRC*, 5: 618-622. Osgood feared that members of the government would secure themselves in a federal city where they would “be secluded from the World of Freemen; & seated down among Slaves and Tenants at Will.”

³⁴ Fehrenbacher, *Slaveholding Republic*; Richards, *The Slave Power*.

men, who will wish to burthen and oppress the people.”³⁵ Still reeling from Shays’s Rebellion and the excessive poll and land taxes of 1786, Massachusetts Antifederalists were especially sensitive to taxes and the ways that they “burthen and oppress the people.”

The clauses pertaining to taxation, in conjunction with the representational issues discussed above, presented the specter of oppressive federal taxes that favored the South at the expense of New England’s farmers. Southern planters and northern merchants would be reluctant to pass an impost and excise tax because of planters’ alleged dependence on imported necessities and luxuries. In addition, planters would supposedly favor a direct tax that had “three free persons being reckoned equal to five slaves.” Antifederalists feared that hated poll and direct taxes, which would fall heaviest on New England farmers least able to bear them, would be used to finance the southern-dominated government.³⁶

Like the other twelve states, Massachusetts found it difficult to manage the state’s own war debt, let alone it’s share of the Continental debt. Attempting to arrest the Massachusetts debt, and responding to a new request for payment from the Continental Congress, the Massachusetts General Court of 1786 had levied the heaviest direct taxes in Massachusetts’s history. The effects of those taxes -- widespread insolvency and debt turning into foreclosures, imprisonment of delinquent taxpayers and debtors, and ultimately, Shays’s Rebellion in the western part of the state -- left many in Massachusetts and Maine especially fearful of direct poll and land taxes.

³⁵ Arms, Maynard, and Field: “Dissent,” *DHRC*, 7:1734. The second part of the letter, from which this is drawn, focused almost exclusively on slaveholders, slavery, and the continuation of the African slave trade.

³⁶ Cornelius, *DHRC*, 4: 417. Some Antifederalists also expressed concerns about laws designed to govern southern men and women who were “dissolute in their manners, and less industrious” than the men and women of New England. Agrippa IV, *Massachusetts Gazette*, Dec. 4, 1787, *DHRC*, 4:381-383. These laws would allegedly “debase” the “active, industrious, and sober” people of New England, “and render them unhappy, till all dignity of character is put away.” Agrippa XII, *Massachusetts Gazette*, Jan. 12, 1788, *DHRC*, 5:695. For similar sentiments, see Samuel Adams to Richard Henry Lee, Dec. 3, 1787, *DHRC*, 4:350.

In an economy chronically short of specie, poll taxes that could only be paid in specie or its equivalent hit Massachusetts farmers especially hard. Shays's Rebellion notwithstanding, Antifederalists contended that the people of Massachusetts managed to gain relief from those taxes with little violence. The Massachusetts Constitution provided for annual elections, and state representatives were in most cases close to their constituents. The 1787 General Court, at the insistence of voters and their new representatives, reduced the direct taxes, instead relying on an impost and excise to pay off the debt. Not surprisingly, Antifederalists who represented the poorer, farming towns of the interior and Maine, regions that had been hit hardest by the taxes of 1786, did not warm to a federal constitution that seemed to favor a new round of direct taxes, which would fall heaviest on New England's already hard-pressed yeomanry.³⁷

Massachusetts's Antifederalists favored an impost and excise tax to finance the war debt and the expenses of the state and federal government.³⁸ However, because the slave states were so dependent on manufactured imports, Antifederalists questioned whether southern planters and the New England merchants who sold to them would ever consent to an impost adequate for the government's finances. The Southern elites' unwillingness to part with slavery left them open to charges that they were consumed by a passion for idleness and luxury. Consequently, it seemed unlikely that they would consent to adequate impost or excise taxes on luxuries. Moreover, the Constitution stipulated that in matters of direct taxes, assessed by population, slaves were to be

³⁷ The currency and taxation problems that culminated in Shays's Rebellion, as well as widespread discord throughout rural areas, are well covered in Buel, "The Public Creditor Interest in Massachusetts Politics, 1780-86," and Ernst, "The Merchants and the 'Money Question.'" See also, Henderson, "Taxation and Political Culture."

³⁸ An impost was a tariff on imported goods. For the rather complicated history of the impost under the Confederacy and the proposed constitution, see Main, "The Antifederalists, chapters IV and V." For the Massachusetts' farming majority's support for an impost and opposition to direct taxes through the Confederation years see Main, 85-87, 110-113, and 144-145.

rated at three-fifths that of free persons, amounting to a massive tax break for southern planters.³⁹

Antifederalists doubted a “suitable excise and impost” would be forthcoming.⁴⁰ Few Antifederalists were as direct, candid, or insistent as Samuel Thompson, who repeatedly asserted, in one form or another, that “Congress will have no impost or excise, but lay the whole tax on polls.” But most seemed to have agreed with William Widgery that “Merchants in Congress will oppose imposts, and have direct taxation on polls.”⁴¹ Indeed, Widgery grew indignant at times, “If Congress have this power of taxing directly, it will be in their power to enact a poll tax. Can gentlemen tell me why they will not attempt it, and by this method make the poor pay as much as the rich.” Abraham White of Norton was equally blunt: “If we are to be taxed by numbers, it will ruin all the poor people.”⁴²

Ebenezer Peirce tied the inability of Congress to pass an impost directly to southern slaveholders. Because of the South’s “having no

³⁹ Southern planters never received the expected tax-break. The federal government instead relied most heavily on an impost for its revenues, supplemented by the sale of federal lands. The impost would of course become a standing complaint of southern planters. The best study of the political consequences of the three-fifths clause is Richards, *The Slave Power*.

⁴⁰ Prior to 1787, Massachusetts Federalists were equally skeptical about the willingness of the South to consent to an impost and congressional regulation of commerce. See Norman A. Graebner, “New England and the World, 1783-1791,” in *Massachusetts and the New Nation*, ed. Conrad Edick Wright (Boston, 1992), 1-34. By 1786, “Massachusetts’s leaders shunned the Annapolis convention, detecting no seriousness in Virginia’s appeal.” Quote at 17.

⁴¹ Thompson, Jan. 17, 1788. Parson, Notes, *DHRC*, 6:1241. William Widgery, Jan. 18, 1788, Parsons: Notes, *DHRC*, 6:1252. Merchants in Massachusetts, many of whom held state notes, also favored high direct and poll taxes, which were used to finance the interest payments on notes. Taxes earmarked for funding the state debt increased the negotiable value of the state notes, which merchants had often purchased at far below par. Ernst, “The Merchants and the Money Question,” 69.

⁴² William Widgery, Jan. 18, 1788, Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 6: 1251. Abraham White, Jan. 18, 1788, Parsons: Notes, *DHRC*, 6:1242.

manufactures of their own, and consuming much more foreign articles than the Northern,” Pierce did not expect “an impost.” An impost seemed even more unlikely “if we give Congress power to levy and collect direct taxes in time of peace.” Moreover, having been a member of the General Court, he knew that “the gentlemen in trade,” opposed all attempts to levy an adequate impost or excise.⁴³ Like other Antifederalists, Peirce believed that New England merchants and southern planters formed a powerful political faction against popular majorities. Having finally forced the Massachusetts General Court to levy an adequate impost in 1787, Massachusetts Antifederalists feared giving it up to a federal government over which they exercised precious little control.

Federalist Thomas Dawes understood why “some gentlemen have said, that Congress may draw their revenue wholly by direct taxes.” However, he and Francis Dana assured Antifederalists that Congress would first “resort to the impost and excise,” while using their “power to levy direct taxes” only if “the impost and excise should be found insufficient in case of a war.”⁴⁴ Rufus King agreed. “If direct taxes can only be collected from polls,” then the Antifederalists presented “a good reason for rejecting the Constitution -- but it is not true.” Seeking to placate further those who contended that direct taxes would fall most heavily on Massachusetts’ “already overtaxed yeoman,” Federalist Nathaniel Gorham agreed with Antifederalists that “the tax on polls” was “a distressful tax.” He assured them, however, that it “would never be adopted.” The “excise and impost...would be the easiest mode of raising a revenue,” and “it was the most natural to suppose it would be resorted to.” Under the Constitution, “the man of luxury will pay; and the

⁴³ Ebenezer Peirce, Jan. 23, 1788, Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 1313-1314.

⁴⁴ Thomas Dawes and Francis Dana, Jan. 18, 1788, Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 6:1244-1246, 1250-1251. Both speeches were delivered during debates over the propriety and necessity of the three-fifths clause on taxation. See, in addition of specific citations to selected Federalists, the speeches of Tristram Dalton, William Phillips, and Christopher Gore on Jan. 22, 1788, *DHRC*, 6:1305, 1301-2, 1299-1301. Dalton’s speech was reprinted widely in Massachusetts, see Editor’s note, 1306n.1. Finally, see the long addresses of King and Dawes, 1285-1289, where both asserted that the government created by the Constitution would be the most effective means of lessening taxes on farmers while increasing their prosperity.

middling and the poor parts of the community, who live by their industry, will go clear.”⁴⁵

Despite the efforts of leading Federalists, Antifederalists remained unconvinced that Congress would use an impost and excise before resorting to poll and direct taxes. The proposed Constitution seemed so heavily weighted against the interests of Massachusetts’ farmers that Antifederalists had difficulty seeing it as anything but a deliberate plot to free southern planters from taxes by shifting the burden to Massachusetts’s freemen.⁴⁶

In a letter to Peter Osgood, William Symmes delineated the particular problems that Antifederalists believed obstinate southern planters, along with New England merchants eager for their business, created. “The apportionment of taxes...will operate unequally against ye. Northern states,” wrote Symmes. Writing with a righteous anger that seethes from the page, he continued: “The soil & climate of Virginia are better than those of this State -- The staples of Virginia are in high demand -- Its Rivers ye. Finest in ye. World. How rich might Virginia be! -- But Virginia is not rich -- What then? -- Shall a man need no better excuse from taxes than Idleness?” The matter was simple enough. Idle but wealthy southern slaveholders squandered on luxuries the wealth generated by their slaves’ toil, and then refused to consent to equitable taxes. By taxing slaves at three-fifths the rate of freemen, “the convention have patronized Luxury, & taxed Industry & Oeconomy.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ruthus King, Jan. 25, 1788, Parsons: Notes, *DHRC*, 6:1356. Nathaniel Gorham, Jan. 25, 1788, Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 6:1353. Gorham continued by suggesting that the impost on some luxuries could easily run to “100 per cent.,” thus generating a sufficient revenue.

⁴⁶ In addition to poll taxes, Antifederalists feared that planters would favor direct taxes on land. Antifederalists alleged that the general wastefulness of slave society, combined with an abundance of southern lands, artificially lowered the values of those lands. Conversely, the supposed careful husbandry of New England lands, combined with New England’s unfavorably high land-to-population ratio artificially inflated the value of New England lands. Consequently, southern planters would push for land taxes, which northern merchants would likewise favor. For debates over the value of southern lands and the likelihood of land taxes, see the debates of January 17 and 18, *DHRC*, 6: 1239-1243.

⁴⁷ Symmes to Peter Osgood, *DHRC*, 4:236-237.

When the ratification convention moved to begin discussions of the article containing the three-fifths clause on taxation, Rufus King rose to defend it even before Antifederalists lodged any objections. “There has...been much misconception of this sect[ion],” began King. “It is a principle of this constitution, that representation and taxation should go hand in hand.” And because the slave population only counted three-fifths for representation purposes, taxes should be levied accordingly. Finally, King wished “to make the idea of taxation by numbers more intelligible” to confused Antifederalists. King explained that under the Constitution, “Five Negroe children of South-Carolina, are to pay as much tax as the three governours of New-Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Connecticut.”⁴⁸

Francis Dana joined King in defending the three-fifths clause. “As a friend to equal taxation,” Dana found much to recommend in the three-fifths clause. “The Negroes of the southern states, work no longer than when the eye of the driver is on them” explained Dana. He then asked rhetorically, “are not three of Massachusetts’s “independent freemen of more real advantage to a state, than five of those poor slaves?” Appealing to the manly, republican independence of Massachusetts’ yeomen who were surely better than degraded southern slaves, Dana assured Antifederalists that “Slaves are their masters’ moneys, and at their risk, and it would be unjust to tax a slave as much as a freeman.”⁴⁹ Massachusetts freemen were worth more than degraded slaves; they should be taxed accordingly.

Samuel Nasson negated quickly whatever gains Dana and King made. King had asserted “that five Negro children of S. Carolina were equally rateable as three governours of New-England.” However, Nasson “wished” King “had considered this question upon the other side.” King “should also have told us, that three of our infants in the cradle, are to be rated as high as five of the working negroes of Virginia.” Under the three-fifths clause, Massachusetts “will pay as

⁴⁸ Rufus King, Jan., 18, 1788, Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 6:1236-1237.

⁴⁹ Francis Dana, Jan. 18, 1788, Convention Debates and Parsons: Notes, *DHRC*, 6:1238, 1242. See also, Abraham Fuller, *DHRC*, 6:1242, “five slaves to three freemen is but equal, for slaves are but chattel.”

great a tax for three children in the cradle, as any of the southern States will for five hearty working Negro men.”⁵⁰

Samuel Thompson joined Nasson in illustrating the injustice of the three-fifths rule. According to Thompson, “The rule is unequal; as we have more children than the luxurious inhabitants of the southern States.”⁵¹ As convoluted as Thompson’s assertion might seem, it pushed to the core of Antifederalist concerns about the three-fifths clause and poll taxes.

Planters relied on the labor of their slaves, who the Constitution rated at three-fifths a freeman. At the same time, planters allegedly engrossed lands to exploit more effectively their slaves’ labor. The result: “In Virginia, one thousand acres has forty-eight polls,” with the planter’s family and his slaves. With planters profiting from their favorable climate and the labor of their slaves, any poll tax would fall but lightly on them. The three-fifths clause lightened that burden even more. However, “in Massachusetts, a family of six, to fifty acres, makes one hundred and twenty polls to the one thousand acres.” Massachusetts’ farming families relied on their labor to eke out a bare competency and secure a freehold, while planters exploited the labor of their slaves and engrossed lands. As their reward, the Constitution taxed Massachusetts’ sturdy yeoman far more heavily than it taxed the idle, slaveholding planters of the South.⁵²

Hailing from one of the poorest areas in Maine, Samuel Nasson emphatically made this point to the convention. Like most Antifederalists, Nasson considered poll taxes unjust because “the poor

⁵⁰ Nasson, Jan. 17, 1788, Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 5:1239. See also, Arms et al., “Dissent,” *DHRC*, 7: 1733.

⁵¹ Thompson, Jan. 17, 1788, Parsons: Notes, *DHRC*, 6:1241. For a similar claim, see Cornelius, *DHRC*, 4:417. New England the northern states “compared with the Southern, have always abounded in people more than in wealth; and from the nature of their climate and soil, will forever continue to do the same.”

⁵² William Widgery, Jan. 18, 1788, Parsons: Notes, *DHRC*, 6:1247. For the perceived profitability of southern slavery, see Symmes to Osgood, *DHRC*, 4:236. “I believe that every negro that cultivates ye. valuable staples, Tobacco, Wheat, Rice, Indigo, &c raises a greater profit to his master than any white can raise from his labour here.”

pay as much as the rich.” The Constitution would only make matters worse for Massachusetts families because “five slaves shall be rated no more than three children.” Nasson continued by asking the delegates “to consider this”: A “farmer takes three small orphans, on charity, to bring up -- when they arrive at 21 years of age, he gives each of them a couple of suits of clothes, a cow, and two or three young cattle -- we are rated as much for these, as a farmer in Virginia is for five slaves, whom he holds for life -- they and their posterity -- the male and the she ones too.”⁵³ A Constitution that taxed the poor but sturdy farming families of New England, while burdening the planters of the South but lightly was a Constitution too unjust for Nasson.

As far as Antifederalists were concerned, “education, small and nearly equal estates,” and “equality of rights” marked the “active, industrious, and sober” people of Massachusetts. What had planter dominance wrought for the South? The slave states, were marked by “the unequal distribution of property, the toleration of slavery, the ignorance and poverty of the lower classes,” and a “dissoluteness of manners.”⁵⁴ Southern slaveholders had turned the southern states into a wasteland of aristocratic and domineering planters, groveling white freemen, and degraded black slaves.

Massachusetts’s yeomen expected much the same for themselves under a federal government dominated by planters. Having already taxed their own free population into virtual slavery, while violating the rights of chattel slaves, southern planters would have few reservations about doing the same to the freemen of Massachusetts. Drawing together criticisms of slaveholders, the three-fifths clauses, the protection of the international slave trade, and the plight of Massachusetts’ freemen, Arms, Maynard, and Field concluded that the Constitution would create a

⁵³ Samuel Nasson, Feb 1, 1788, Convention Debates, *DHRC*, 6: 1398. For the severe poverty in Nasson’s region of Maine, and the town of Sanford, which he represented, see Alan Taylor, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill, 1990), 66-73. Nasson’s town was “so Poor” that he could “not Recommend it to them to Send any Member Next Year” to the General Court because “they must Pay the Cost of Sending.” Samuel Nasson to George Thatcher, Feb. 26, 1788, *DHRC*, 7:1708.

⁵⁴ Agrippa XII, *DHRC*, 5:695.

government that was “an engine of rapine, robbery, and murder,” for southern planters.⁵⁵

Writing in the *Massachusetts Centinel* while the convention was in session, “Ezra” issued the delegates a stern warning that paralleled Arms, Maynard, and Fields’s concerns: “The thinking yeomanry of this country, are not to be cajoled out of their senses” by Federalist sophistry. The “yeomanry” refused “to resign up all of their liberties, into the hands of a number of designing men -- (especially of the southern States) who, with others, it is evident, wish to make the common people, slaves to their mercenary purposes, wallow in luxury, and riot upon the spoils of the community.”⁵⁶

The tumultuous post-revolutionary economy made it difficult for the “yeomanry” of Massachusetts and Maine to secure the freeholds that alone underwrote republican independence. The 1786 tax levies had already driven many into insolvency and propertylessness. Any new taxes promised to do much the same. Yet, that was exactly what the Constitution seemed to promise Antifederalists in Maine and Massachusetts.

According to the essayist “Vox Populi,” the taxes of 1786 had left many in Massachusetts “taxed beyond [their] present power to pay.” These taxes had already “sunk the landed interest forty *per cent.*” If the federal government insisted upon that “baseless fabrick” -- “a dry tax on *polls* and *estates*” -- “the landed interest will soon sink ninety if not ninety-nine per cent..” The nation’s “only hope of discharging [the debt], must be founded on *a new system of taxation*, viz. a suitable impost and excise, as well on imports as other superfluities and luxurious articles.” This, however, seemed highly unlikely under the proposed Constitution. It had taken the disastrous tax levies of 1786 to finally get a “suitable impost and excise” in Massachusetts. Now, under the proposed Constitution, the people of Massachusetts would be “divest[ing] themselves of the power of adopting their own mode of taxation.”⁵⁷ With the interests of Massachusetts’s leading men, northern merchants, and southern planters all seemingly favoring direct taxes, and expecting

⁵⁵ Arms, et al, “Dissent,” 48.

⁵⁶ Ezra, *Massachusetts Centinel*, Jan. 23, 1788, *DHRC*, 6: 788-789.

⁵⁷ Vox Populi, *DHRC*, 4:224.

little effective representation to protect them, Massachusetts Antifederalists expected the Revolution's promise of propertied independence and republican dignity -- something that they had come to expect as a birthright -- to be dashed by yet another round of taxes.⁵⁸

Ultimately, enough Antifederalists committed themselves to ratification with amendments to allow for ratification in Massachusetts. One of the proposed amendments related directly to the problems of taxation: "Congress do not lay direct taxes but when the Monies arising from the Impost and Excise are insufficient for the Publick exigencies."⁵⁹ Federalists managed to obtain ratification, but long-standing animosities between Massachusetts' Federalists and Antifederalists would persistently frustrate Federalist efforts to present a united front in national politics.

Though sectionalism threatened the existence of the Union during its first twenty-five years, New England Federalists proved unable to counter effectively the Republican insurgence in New England. Republicans would enjoy widespread support in the Province of Maine, where leading men were fewer and far less influential. In Massachusetts itself, Federalist efforts to control the state were repeatedly frustrated by Republican challengers, supported by Antifederalists who continued to exhibit profound distrust of Massachusetts' Federalist elite. Federalist hegemony in New England never matched the wishes of the party leaders, as Federalist authority steadily eroded under the weight of its own excesses. This pattern would continue through the antebellum period, ultimately destroying the Whig party in Massachusetts in the mid- 1850s.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ For an excellent example of the continuing concern for "justice" in taxation matters, stemming from fears that Hamilton's financial program would tax Massachusetts farmers into insolvency and propertylessness, see Ruth Bogin, "Measures So Glareingly unjust': A Response to Hamilton's Funding Plan by William Manning," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 46 (1989), 315-331. For a more general examination about these concerns, see "Petitioning and the New Moral Economy of Post-Revolutionary America."

⁵⁹ "The Form of Ratification," Feb. 6, 1788, *DHRC*, 6:1469.

⁶⁰ For the threat of sectional disagreements engendering disunion during the 1790s, see James Roger Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation in Crisis*, (New Haven, 1993). For political divisions in Massachusetts from 1788 through 1815 and after, see Banner, *To the Hartford*

At the same time, however, those alienated by Federalists and Whigs proved somewhat reluctant to cast their lot with political parties dominated by southern planters. Ultimately, the allegiance of New England Republicans and then Democrats, to parties composed of the “planters of the South and the plain republicans of the North,” were based more upon common enemies than they were based on common interests or a shared ideology. Massachusetts’ Republicans were far more committed to “anti-Federalism” than they were ever committed to Jeffersonian Republicanism, or any other party allegedly dominated by southern planters.

As perceived planter dominance of the federal government grew in the 1850s, Massachusetts voters destroyed any hope of reviving the Whig Party. Like the Massachusetts Antifederalists in 1788, in the 1850s, Massachusetts voters believed that the greatest threat to their personal independence and republican self-government came from southern planters. In the 1850s, however, a party dedicated to checking the “Slave Power” gave them the means to free northern voters from the dominance of southern slaveholders. Not surprisingly, in 1856, Massachusetts voters overwhelmingly supported the Anti Slave-Power Party of “Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Speech, Free Men, and Fremont,” paving the way for the Republican triumph in 1860.⁶¹

Convention; Ronald Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture, Massachusetts Parties, 1790s -1840s*, (New York, 1983), 57-168; For post-Constitutional politics in Maine, see Taylor, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors*. Richard Buel, Jr., *Securing the Revolution: Ideology in American Politics, 1789-181*, (Ithaca, 1972), 72-89, delineates the impact of a divided New England electorate on Federalist political ideology and national politics. For the destruction of Whiggery and the rise of the Republicans in the 1850s, see Formisano, *Transformation of Political Culture*, 268-301; William Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856*, (New York, 1987), 43-44, 133-138, 214-223, 416-434.

⁶¹ For a good, brief examination of the ways in which Federalist politicians and policies helped create a Republican party that was more Antifederalist than pro-Jeffersonian, see Taylor, “From Fathers to Friends of the People: Political Personae in the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 11 (1991), 465-491, as well as *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors*. For the unwillingness of New England “Jacksonians” to embrace the party of Jackson, in part because of distrust of planters, see Paul Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic: Antimasonry and the Great Transition in New England, 1826-1836* (New York,

1988). For the Republican Party as the “anti-Slave Power” party, see Richards, *Slave Power*, and William E. Gienapp’s seminal article, “The Republican Party and the Slave Power,” in *New Perspectives on Race and Slavery in America*, ed., Robert H. Abzug and Stephen E. Maizlish (Lexington, KY, 1986).