

Commemorating 1808

In March 1807, President Thomas Jefferson signed a bill prohibiting the importation of African slaves into the United States. A few weeks later, the British House of Lords passed a similar act, abolishing the slave trade in its colonies. Both countries faced opposition to abolishing the slave trade, but they also found support in the increasing number of calls from anti-slavery movements, which homed in on ending the slave trade as the first step in abolishing slavery. In fact, the acts invigorated anti-slavery proponents, who opposed slavery on moral and philosophical grounds. Anti-slavery committees in the British Caribbean grew in numbers and took the opportunity to increase pressure on colonies of other European states to join Britain and the United States in abolishing the slave trade. While they made some headway, their success was limited until the 1830s, when the slave trade became illegal throughout the Atlantic zone. The end of the slave trade, however, did not mean the end of slavery.

Nevertheless, free blacks and abolitionists hoped this was the first step in ending slavery outright. Although President Jefferson signed the bill ending the trade in 1807, a provision in the U.S. Constitution (ratified in 1788) that prohibited any such act for twenty years kept the bill from taking effect until 1808. On January 1, 1808, free blacks and abolitionists gathered in northern cities of the U.S. to celebrate the first day of the abolition of the slave trade. Clergyman Absalom Jones, a freed slave, of St. John's African Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, called for all to mark the day every year as one of thanksgiving. In the decades that followed, commemorative celebrations on January 1 were primarily religious in nature. Those who celebrated remained hopeful, yet there were few signs that the legal abolition of the slave trade was leading to the end of the institution of slavery.