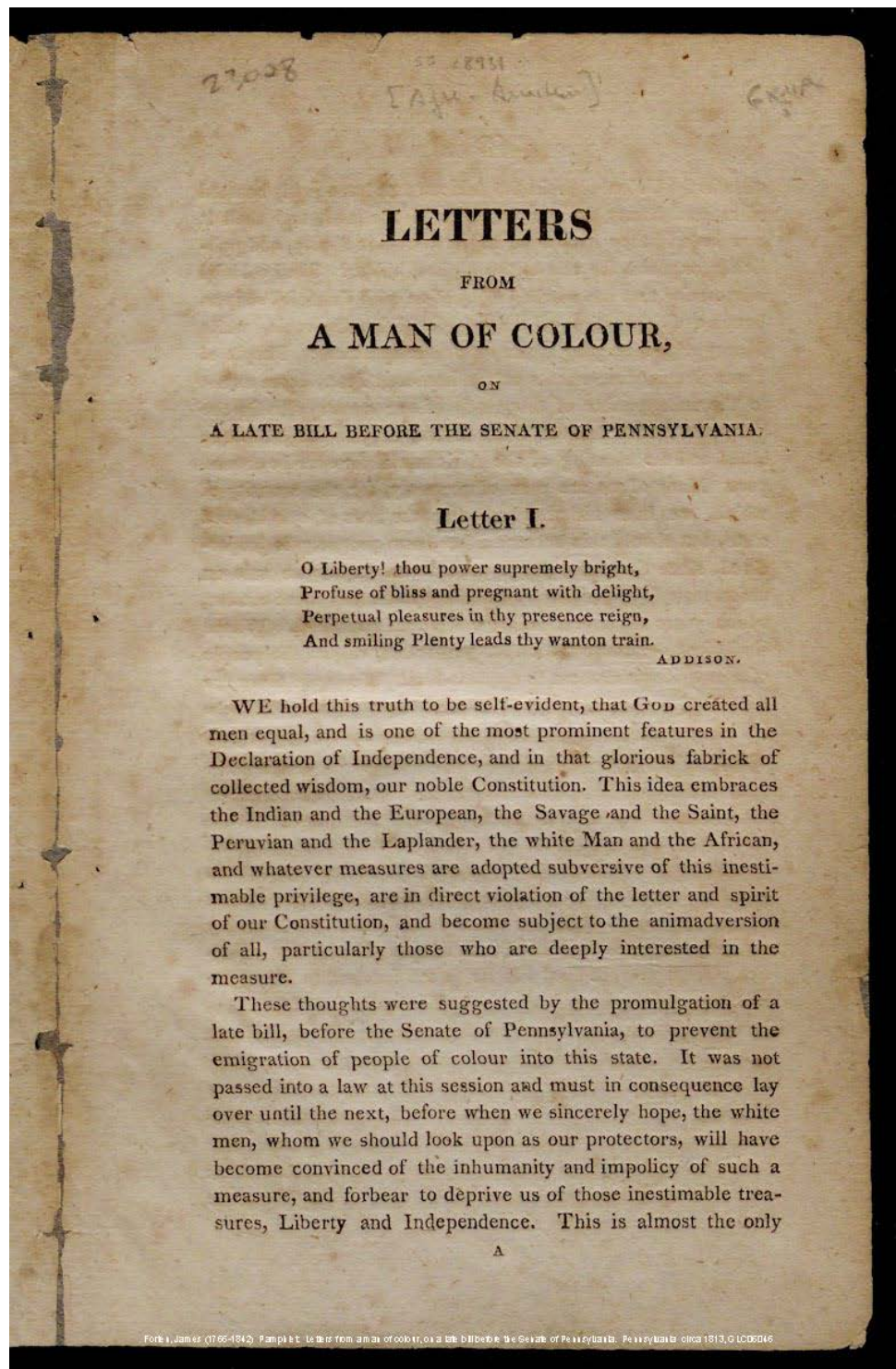


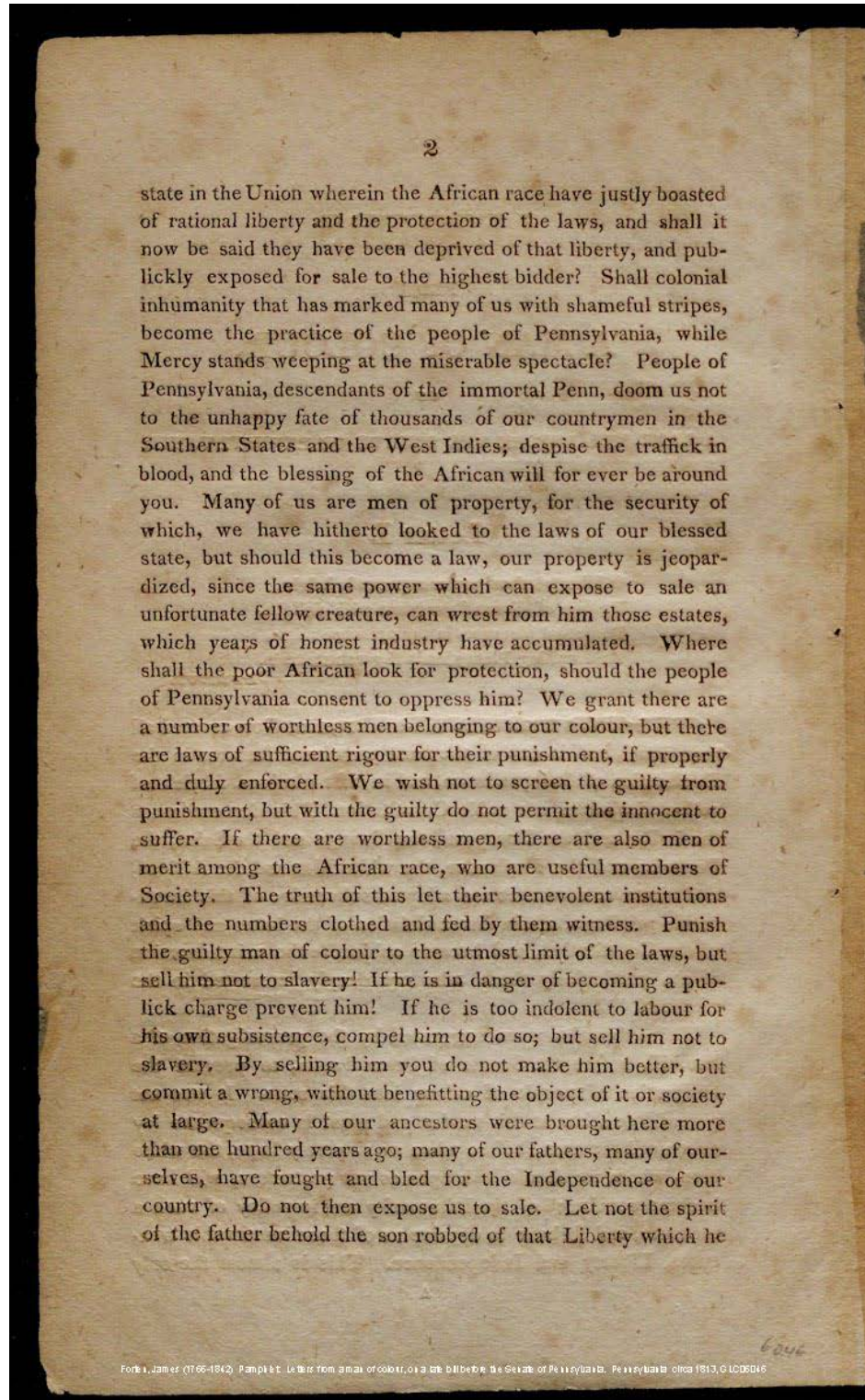
Letters from a Man of Colour, on a late bill before the Senate of Pennsylvania,
1813

Image



James Forten, Letters from a Man of Colour, on a bill before the Senate of Pennsylvania, 1813.
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC06046)

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died to establish, but let the motto of our Legislators be: "The Law knows no distinction."

These are only a few desultory remarks on the subject, and intend to succeed this effervescence of feeling, by a series of essays, tending to prove the impolicy and unconstitutionality of the law in question.

For the present, I leave the publick to the consideration of the above observations, in which I hope they will see so much truth, that they will never consent to sell to slavery

A MAN OF COLOUR.

APRIL, 1813.

Letter II.

THOSE patriotick citizens, who, after resting from the toils of an arduous war, which achieved our Independence and laid the foundation of the only reasonable Republick upon earth, associated together, and for the protection of those inestimable rights for the establishment of which they had exhausted their blood and treasure, framed the Constitution of Pennsylvania, have by the ninth article, declared; that "All men are born equally free and independent, and have certain inherent and indefeasible rights, among which are those of enjoying life and liberty." Under the restraint of wise and well administered laws, we cordially unite in the above glorious sentiment, but by the bill upon which we have been remarking, it appears as if the committee who drew it up mistook the sentiment expressed in this article, and do not consider us as men, or that those enlightened statesmen who formed the constitution upon the basis of experience, intended to exclude us from its blessings and protection. If the former, why are we not to be considered as men. Has the God who made the white man and the black, left any record declaring us a different species. Are we not sustained by the same power, supported by the same food, hurt by the same wounds, wounded by the same wrongs, pleased with the same delights, and propagated by the same means. And should we not then

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enjoy the same liberty, and be protected by the same laws.— We wish not to legislate, for our means of information and the acquisition of knowledge are, in the nature of things, so circumscribed, that we must consider ourselves incompetent to the task; but let us, in legislation, be considered as men. It cannot be that the authors of our Constitution intended to exclude us from its benefits, for just emerging from unjust and cruel mancipation, their souls were too much affected with their own deprivations to commence the reign of terror over others. They knew we were deeper skinned than they were, but they acknowledged us as men, and found that many an honest heart beat beneath a dusky bosom. They felt that they had no more authority to enslave us, than England had to tyrannize over them. They were convinced that if amenable to the same laws in our actions, we should be protected by the same laws in our rights and privileges. Actuated by these sentiments they adopted the glorious fabrick of our liberties, and declaring “all men” free, they did not particularize white and black, because they never supposed it would be made a question whether *we were men or not*. Sacred be the ashes, and deathless be the memory of those heroes who are dead; and revered be the persons and the characters of those who still exist and lift the thunders of admonition against the traffick in blood. And here my brethren in colour, let the tear of gratitude and the sigh of regret break forth for that great and good man, who lately fell a victim to the promiscuous fury of death, in whom you have lost a zealous friend, a powerful, an herculean advocate; a sincere adviser, and one who spent many an hour of his life to break your fetters, and ameliorate your condition—I mean the ever to be lamented Dr. BENJAMIN RUSH.

It seems almost incredible that the advocates of liberty, should conceive the idea of selling a fellow creature to slavery. It is like the heroes of the French Revolution, who cried “*Vive la Republick*,” while the decapitated Nun was precipitated into the general reservoir of death, and the palpitating embryo decorated the point of the bayonet. Ye, who should be our protectors, do not destroy.—We will cheerfully submit to the laws, and aid in bringing offenders against them of

Forbes, James (1766-1842). Pamphlet: Letters from a man of colour, on a late bill before the Senate of Pennsylvania. Philadelphia: circa 1813. OLC05016

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every colour to justice; but do not let the laws operate so severely, so degradingly, so unjustly against us alone.

Let us put a case, in which the law in question operates peculiarly hard and unjust.—I have a brother, perhaps, who resides in a distant part of the Union, and after a separation of years, actuated by the same fraternal affection which beats in the bosom of a white man, he comes to visit me. Unless that brother be registered in twenty four hours after, and be able to produce a certificate to that effect, he is liable, according to the second and third sections of the bill, to a fine of twenty dollars, to arrest, imprisonment and sale. Let the unprejudiced mind ponder upon this, and then pronounce it the justifiable act of a free people, if he can. To this we trust our cause, without fear of the issue. The unprejudiced must pronounce any act tending to deprive a free man of his right, freedom and immunities, as not only cruel in the extreme, but decidedly unconstitutional both as regards the letter and spirit of that glorious instrument. The same power which protects the white man, should protect

A MAN OF COLOUR.

Letter III.

THE evils arising from the bill before our Legislature, so fatal to the rights of freemen, and so characteristick of European despotism, are so numerous, that to consider them all, would extend these numbers further than time or my talent will permit me to carry them. The concluding paragraph of my last number, states a case of peculiar hardship, arising from the second section of this bill, upon which I cannot refrain from making a few more remarks. The man of colour receiving as a visiter any other person of colour, is bound to turn informer, and rudely report to the Register, that a friend and brother has come to visit him for a few days, whose name he must take within twenty four hours, or forfeit a sum which the iron hand of the law is authorized to rend from him, partly for the benefit of the REGISTER. Who is this Register? A

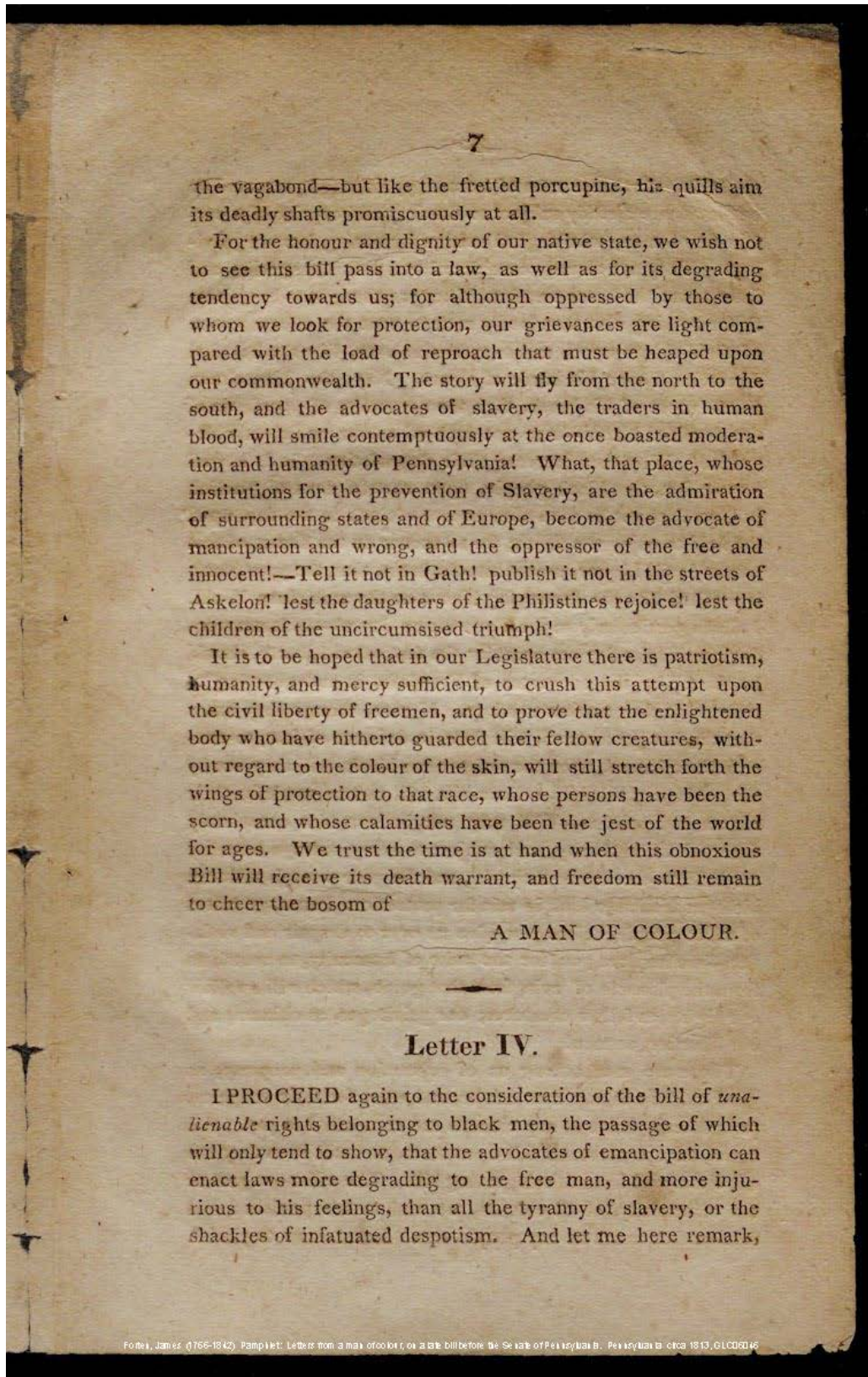
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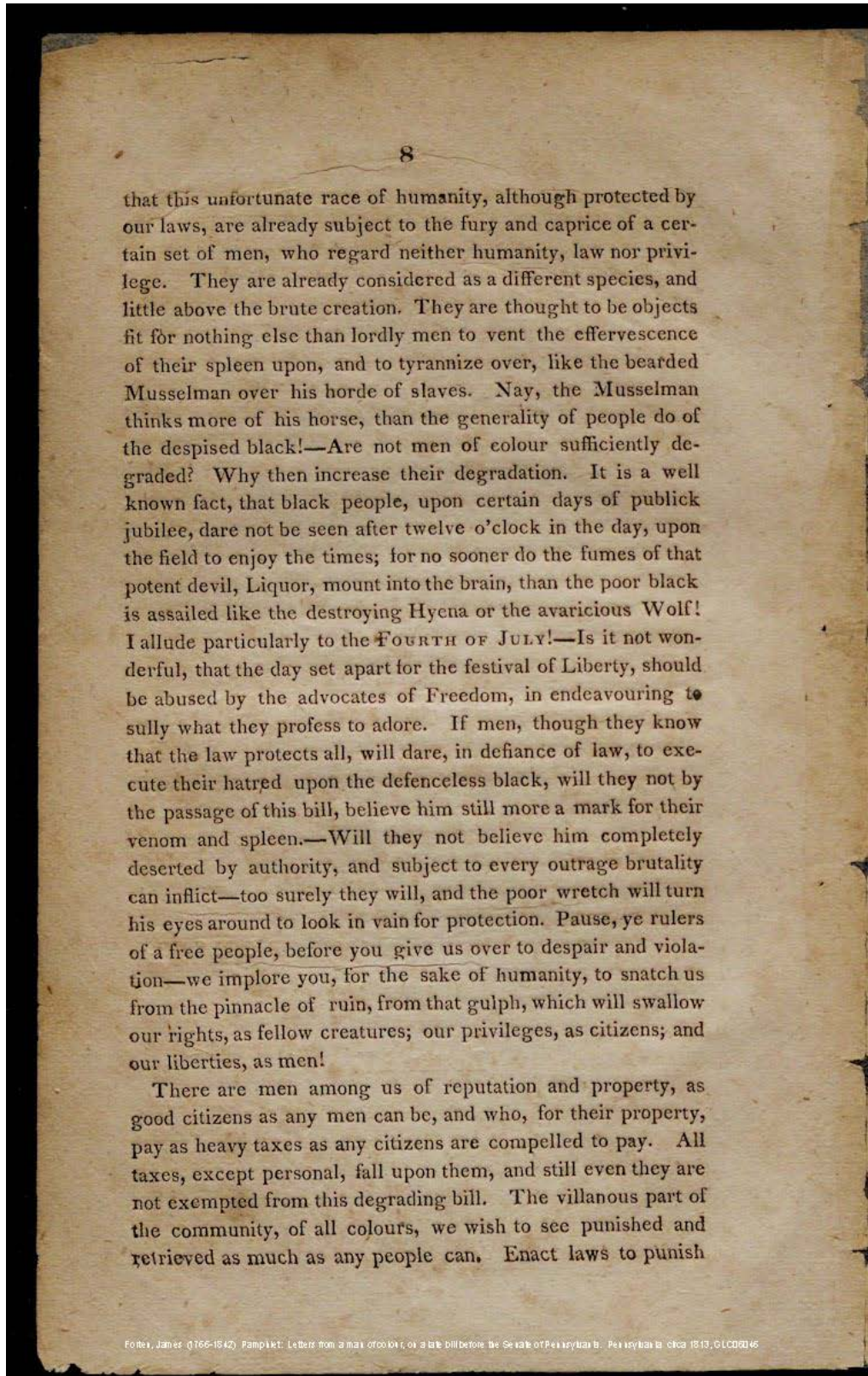
man, and exercising an office, where ten dollars is the fee for each delinquent, will probably be a cruel man and find delinquents where they really do not exist. The poor black is left to the merciless gripe of an avaricious REGISTER, without an appeal, in the event, from his tyranny or oppression! O miserable race, born to the same hopes, created with the same feeling, and destined for the same goal, you are reduced by your fellow creatures below the brute. The dog is protected and pampered at the board of his master, while the poor African and his descendant, whether a Saint or a felon, is branded with infamy, registered as a slave, and we may expect shortly to find a law to prevent their increase, by taxing them according to numbers, and authorizing the Constables to seize and confine every one who dare to walk the streets without a collar on his neck!—What have the people of colour been guilty of, that they more than others, should be compelled to register their houses, lands, servants, and *Children*. Yes, ye rulers of the black man's destiny, reflect upon this; our *Children* must be registered, and bear about them a certificate, or be subject to imprisonment and fine. You, who are perusing this effusion of feeling, are you a parent? Have you children around whom your affections are bound, by those delightful bonds which none but a parent can know? Are they the delight of your prosperity, and the solace of your afflictions? If all this be true, to you we submit our cause. The parent's feeling cannot err. By your verdict will we stand or fall—by your verdict, live slaves or freemen. It is said, that the bill does not extend to children, but the words of the bill are, “Whether as an *inmate, visiter, hireling, or tenant, in his or her house or room.*” Whether this does not embrace every soul that can be in a house, the reader is left to judge; and whether the father should be bound to register his child, even within the twenty four hours after it is brought into the world, let the father's feelings determine. This is the fact, and our children sent on our lawful business, not having sense enough to understand the meaning of such proceedings, must show their certificate of registry or be borne to prison. The bill specifies neither age nor sex—designates neither the honest man or

Porter, James (1766-1842). Pamphlet: Letters from a man of colour, on a late bill before the Senate of Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania, circa 1813, OLC00046

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them severely, but do not let them operate against the innocent as well as the guilty. Can there be any generosity in this? Can there be any semblance of justice, or of that enlightened conduct which is ever the boasted pole star of freedom? By no means. This bill is nothing but the ignus fatuus of mistaken policy!

I could write for ages on the subject of this unrighteous bill, but as I think enough has already been said, to convince every unprejudiced mind, of its unjust, degrading, undeserved tendency, one more number shall conclude the Letters from

A MAN OF COLOUR.

Letter V.

A FEW more remarks upon the bill which has been the subject of my preceding numbers, shall conclude these Letters, which have been written in my own cause as an individual, and my brethren as a part of the community. They are the simple dictates of nature and need no apology. They are not written in the gorgeous style of a scholar, nor dressed in the garments of literary perfection. They are the impulse of a mind formed, I trust, for feeling, and smarting under all the rigours which the bill is calculated to produce.

By the third section of this bill, which is its peculiar hardship, the police officers are authorized to apprehend any black, whether a vagrant or a man of reputable character, who cannot produce a Certificate that he has been registered. He is to be arrayed before a justice, who is thereupon to commit him to prison!—The jailor is to advertise a Freeman, and at the expiration of six months, if no owner appear for this degraded black, he is to be *exposed to sale*, and if not sold to be confined at hard labour for seven years!!—Man of feeling, read this!—No matter who, no matter where. The Constable, whose antipathy generally against the black is very great, will take every opportunity of hurting his feelings!—Perhaps, he sees him at a distance, and having a mind to raise the boys in hue and cry against him, exclaims, "Halloa! Stop the Negro!"

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The boys, delighting in the sport, immediately begin to hunt him, and immediately from a hundred tongues, is heard the cry—"Hoe, Negro, where is your *Certificate!*"—Can any thing be conceived more degrading to humanity!—Can any thing be done more shocking to the principles of Civil Liberty! A person arriving from another state, ignorant of the existence of such a law, may fall a victim to its cruel oppression. But he is to be advertised, and if no owner appear—How can an owner appear for a man who is free and belongs to no one!—If no owner appear, he is exposed for sale!—Oh, inhuman spectacle: found in no unjust act, convicted of no crime, he is barbarously sold, like the produce of the soil, to the highest bidder, or what is still worse, for no crimes, without the inestimable privilege of a trial by his peers, doomed to the dreary walls of a prison for the term of seven tedious years!—My God, what a situation is his. Search the legends of tyranny and find no precedent. No example can be found in all the reigns of violence and oppression, which have marked the lapse of time. It stands alone. It has been left for Pennsylvania, to raise her ponderous arm against the liberties of the black, whose greatest boast has been, that he resided in a State where Civil Liberty, and sacred Justice were administered alike to all.—What must be his reflections now, that the asylum he had left from mancipation has been destroyed, and that he is left to suffer, like Daniel of old, with no one but his God to help him! Where is the bosom that does not heave a sigh for his fall, unless it be callous to every sentiment of humanity and mercy?

The fifth section of this bill, is also peculiarly hard, inasmuch as it prevents freemen from living where they please.—Pennsylvania has always been a refuge from slavery, and to this state the Southern black, when freed, has flown for safety. Why does he this! When masters in many of the Southern states, which they frequently do, free a particular black, unless the Black leaves the state in so many hours, any person resident of the said state, can have him arrested and again sold to Slavery:—The hunted black is obliged to flee, or remain and be again a Slave. I have known persons of this description sold three times after being first emancipated. Where shall

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he go? Shut every state against him, and, like Pharoah's kine, drive him into the sea.—Is there no spot on earth that will protect him! Against their inclination, his ancestors were forced from their homes by traders in human flesh, and even under such circumstances, the wretched offspring are denied the protection you afford to brutes.

It is in vain that we are forming societies of different kinds to ameliorate the condition of our unfortunate brethren, to correct their morals and to render them not only honest but useful members to society. All our efforts, by this bill, are despised, and we are doomed to feel the lash of oppression:—As well may we be outlawed, as well may the glorious privileges of the Gospel, be denied us, and all endeavours used to cut us off from happiness hereafter as well as here!—The case is similar, and I am much deceived if this bill does not destroy the morals it is intended to produce.

I have done. My feelings are acute, and I have ventured to express them without intending either accusation or insult to any one. An appeal to the heart is my intention, and if I have failed, it is my great misfortune, not to have had a power of eloquence sufficient to convince. But I trust the eloquence of nature will succeed, and that the law-givers of this happy Commonwealth will yet remain the Blacks' friend, and the advocates of Freemen, is the sincere wish of

A MAN OF COLOUR.

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Transcript
