

Washington June 22, 1850

Hon Wesley Shannon

My Dear Sir: I don't know when I received any news which gratified me more, than did that, that our first Assembly had excluded, by law, the introduction of free Negroes. There is no truth more plain, than that the legislator should now seek to legislate temporarily. It is his duty to take a higher stand. He is called upon to unmask the future, and, looking down through the vista of coming years, legislate alike for the generations present and to come. In the act referred to, is to be seen, in my judgement, that far-seeing forecast, that will guide the legislator to eminence, and the state which he helps command, to greatness and glory.

It is no new thing to me, to meditate upon the condition of the races. They are as wide apart in their advancement to greatness and civilization, as they are in their physical formations. Whether their moral condition is the result of any natural superiority of one race over the other, or whether it proceeds from accident, or whether it grows out of a long series of usurpations of one race over the other, is not material for us to consider, in our legislative deliberations for Oregon. The legislator must deal with things as they are, and not with them as they ought, or might be. He must shape his laws,

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with a direct reference to men and things, as without the existence of those, there would be no need of laws. And I take it, that there is nothing more plain, in moral ethics, than, that an act whose results and tendencies will, upon the whole, be productive of more evil than good, is a wrong act, and cannot be justified. This law applies alike to private and legislative acts. The converse of this proposition is equally true; and a legislator is not at liberty to omit an act, within the scope of his powers, and which he has the ability to perform, if the results of that act, in the progress and duration of his state, will be promotive of his good. Laying aside, then, the question of constitutionality of an act which prohibits the incoming of a free negro who may be a free citizen of one of the states of the Union, which is a disputed point, the only thing to be looked at, in my judgement, to justify such a law, is whether the law, if enforced, will be promotive of the good of our Territory. Upon that question, I am very clear, and so were a majority of the Assembly, or they would not have passed the act.

It is very generally admitted, that the existence of negro slavery is the only essentially weak point in our government. But it is equally clear, to my mind, that the existence of so many of the African race, in a free condition, in this country, as are now held

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in servitude, would be quite, if not more, ominous of evil to the Republic. That the one is a real weakness, is beyond question, and that the other would be more so, I think there is little doubt. Who can doubt, if he reflects upon the laws of population, that the time is as sure to come as fate, that there will be a convulsion in the country, growing out of the existence of the African race among us? It may be delayed for centuries. Tho the time indicated, is much shorter. Come when that time will, the result will either be the extermination of one of the races, or the expulsion of one from the North American continent. I hold, that it is quite clear, that the white and black races cannot, and will not, live together

in a state of equality. The one must be servant or master. This, tho not theoretically true, in the free states, yet, practically, it is. And it probably is true, that the slaves in the southern states are better clothed and better fed, and enjoy quite as much of the comforts of life, as the blacks of the north. The institution of slavery is a curse, but one which was entailed. It now exists from necessity, and must exist by force, till the country can be rid of it in a way that shall redound to its glory. And existing as it does, we are called upon, by every consideration of duty, to protect ourselves from its evils. Is such the tendency of the law we are considering? If it is, let it stand—let it be strengthened.

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In all the free states, in 1790, there were 27,109 free colored persons; in 1800, 47,154; 1810, 78,241; 1820, 99,281; 1830, 137,499; and in 1840, 170,728. In all the states and territories in 1840, there were 386,293 free colored persons. Taking from 386,293, 170,728, you have left, 215,565. This latter number are the number of free colored persons, in the southern states and territories, in 1840. This number of free colored persons, in the free status, in 1840, were distributed as follows: in Maine, 1,355; N.H., 530; Mass., 8,669; R.I., 3,238; Conn., 8,105; Vt., 730; NY, 50,027; N.J., 21, 044; Penn., 47,854; Ohio, 17,342; Ind., 7,165; Ill., 3,598; Mich., 707; Wis., 185; and Iowa, 172.

In 1840, the number of slaves in the United States were 2,487,355, while the whole white population was 14,189,705, making 17,063,353 total, population of the United States. This shows but a little over five and a half whites to one black in the United States. In the free states, the white population was 9,554,068. While in the slave states, it was but 4,632,637. The free colored population of the free states, in 1840, being 170,728, then were, at that time, nearly one colored man to every fifty five whites in the northern states. It is also seen, that in the slave states, in 1840, there were not two

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whites to one black!

What are the numbers of free blacks now in the free states, will appear by the census to be taken this season. It is generally understood, however, that since 1840 they have increased rapidly. Altho in 1840 there were but 707 in Michigan, there is now in one of the interior counties from five to seven hundred. What is true of this state, is true of most other free states, where the legislatures, or the people have not arrayed themselves against their immigration. It is now, no unfrequent thing, for whole colonies of manumitted, wretched beings to be sent from the slave states and located in the free states. Many or all of the southern states will not allow slaves to be set free, unless they are removed. When you consider the large number of free blacks in the slave states, and reflect on the alarming increase of their slaves, you cannot fail to see, that the tide of black immigration to the free states, will rapidly increase, until our whole domain will become one common poor house, for this race of beings. The Northern states, generally, begin to grow alarmed, and there is, now no doubt for such is the tendency, but in ten years, every free state will have upon its statute book the most stringent laws against the introduction of free negros.

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No man can fail to see, that the south must have some outlet for the surplus & refuse population of her slaves, and so long as the gateways are open, this surplus, that refuse and blight-bearing hord [sic] will be turned over to us, to fill our alms houses, and degrade our honored and sturdy yeomanry. But if that outlet is closed, by the stern sentinels of the law, executed by a free people tenacious of their rights, and watchful of the good of their state, slavery will work out its own destiny. Density and suffocation of the two races, pent up in the slave states, will follow, until the pains of travail will deliver, God only knows how, this nation of the burden of slavery, which now makes her clumsy to staggering, and drags down the energies of her nature. If the free states will adopt this policy, we will be rid of the complaints growing out of fugitive slaves, and it will not be long before the slave states themselves will read their own troubles in the increase of slaves, and seeing it, will groan to be delivered with groans which none but the distressed can utter.

California is free—Oregon is free. We are the Pacific Coast. Of what benefits could free negroes be to us? None. But who does not know, that there is a northering blight surrounding the negro. He is degraded, and will continue to be so—it proceeds from the aversion of the

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white to the negro race. His presence beside our freemen, will bring a stigma upon labor, for it is well known what an influence association has upon the human mind. Let us then, as our first Assembly nobly and wisely did, exclude this race from among us, and build up a community where labor shall not be associated with negroes, and where, to plough the field, shall be an honor to the white man who ploughs it. We have but a few negroes now—let us take care that no more come among us. I know not how to express my feelings of pleasure, that we have started right, to the first assembly be it said. No more withering curse could befall us, than to have negroes, slave or free, forced upon us.

Here I should close, but I have one word. I have opposed thus far all attempts to strike out the word “white” in our land bill. I am fully satisfied, from information I have, that if it should be, and the land law should pass, we should be overrun with a negro population. Whole townships of land, & sometimes, counties, are now purchased, in the free states, from which to colonise manumitted negroes. What would be the result, should the United States give them land in Oregon? This gift would entitle them to the right to go and there settle. Hence I will oppose it at every hazard. I know no other cause, than to look after the interests of those who sent me here; and how would I do it, to allow them

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and their posterity to be saddled with a weight of pauperism that would grind them to the dust, and introduce a race among them, who would do no honor to themselves, but would bring this very life of greatness, manual labor, into dishonor and depredation? With Oregon I am allied for life and in death—for well or for woe; and my greatest desire is, that I may live long, and be well, to do battle in her cause. Now, my dear Shannon, I must leave you. If you can read these hastily scribbled lines, you will learn my opinion of the law, let that law, in honor of its enactors, go down in the archives of the state, and when

Africans and African slavery, shall have left our shores, and the former shall be flourishing, if flourish they ever do, in their own country, let that law remain as a proud reminiscence of its making.

I am, dear sir, your friend and fellow citizen. Samuel R. Thurston