

Explained "The Selling of Joseph"

The Selling of Joseph clearly reveals Sewall's mounting abhorrence of the slave trade. Citing passages from the Bible, he states his case; in the subsequent section of the tract, judge Sewall raises, and answers, hypothetical objections to his verdict condemning the practice of slavery.

Answering the objections, he inadvertently attests the prejudices of his era. Sewall was enlightened relative to his time, bold enough to condemn slavery, but the answers to his objections betray him as, regrettably, still a racist. One could argue that, just perhaps, Sewall, after first offering Biblical proof of the evils of slavery, proceeded to offer more practical, secular proofs of those evils, adopting something of the contemptible thought processes of the day solely for the sake of exposing their weakness and refuting them. Unfortunately, the supposition rings hollow, as soon as Sewall notes, "they can never embody with us, and grow up into orderly Families, to the Peopling of the Land."

Although he condemned slave holders and traders, he would rather not have Blacks in Boston. Although an abolitionist, he remained a segregationist.

Nevertheless, *The Selling of Joseph* represents an essential element in the study of the abolitionist movements on US soil.

Sewall's tract was, in part, inspired by a slave, Adam, who was held by John Saffin, one of Sewall's legal colleagues in Boston and, like Sewall, a respected merchant. Unlike Sewall, Saffin trafficked in slaves; particularly galling to Sewall, Saffin reneged on a deal to manumit Adam. Sewall and Saffin argued over the issue. Sewall criticized Saffin in private, but Saffin went public and issued his defense of slavery in his *A Brief Candid Answer to a Late Printed Sheet Entitled, The Selling of Joseph* in 1701. The "Sewall-Saffin Dialog" represents the roots of the antebellum slavery debates in America.