

Slave Petition for Freedom to the Massachusetts Legislature

January 13, 1777

INTRODUCTION

The Founders were united in their unequivocal denunciations of slavery. Consider, for example, Thomas Jefferson's forceful condemnation of the evils of slavery in his original draft of the Declaration of Independence: the king "has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty" by condoning the slave trade. The principles of equality and liberty also inspired the slaves' own eloquent pleadings, as in this petition to the governor and legislature of Massachusetts. Particularly striking is the slaves' embrace of natural rights as the basis of their liberty. Natural rights, the rights all possess simply by being human, protect conscience, property, and self-government. Slavery stifles or denies all

of these, they argue. Nor can we lead fully Christian lives, the slaves urge, for our masters usurp biblical authority demanded of parents and children. Might at least our children be free and not also condemned to an unnatural life of slavery, they plead.

Though this and other petitions failed, after the Revolution, in the Quock Walker cases of 1783, the Massachusetts Supreme Court concluded that the Constitution of 1780 abolished slavery. The petition's arguments echo in the most moving and the most profound language of African-American freedom, from Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King and Clarence Thomas. Both natural rights and biblical faith demand freedom.

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To The Honorable Counsel & House of [Representa]tives for the State of Massachusitte [Massachusetts] Bay in General Court assembled, Jan. 13, 1777.

The petition of A Great Number of Blackes detained in a State of slavery in the Bowels of a free & Christian Country Humbly shewith that your Petitioners apprehend that thay have in Common with all other men a Natural and Unaliable Right to that freedom which the Grat Parent of the Unavers hath Bestowed equalley on all menkind and which they have Never forfeuted by any Compact or agreement whatever—but thay wher Unjustly Dragged by the hand of cruel Power from their Derest friends and sum of them Even torn from the Embraces of their tender Parents—from A popolous Pleasant and plentiful contry and in violation of Laws of Nature and off Nations and in defiance of all the tender feelings of humanity Brough hear Either to Be sold Like Beast of Burthen & Like them Condemnd to Slavery for Life—Among A People Profesing the mild Religion of Jesus A people Not Insensible of the Secrets of Rational Being Nor without spirit to Resent the unjust endeavours of others to Reduce them to a state of Bondage and Subjection your honouer Need not to be informed that A Life of Slavery Like that of your petioners Deprived of Every social privilege of Every thing Requisit to Render Life Tolable is far worse then Nonexistence.

[In Imitat]ion of the Lawdable Example of the Good People of these States your petitiononers have Long

and Patiently waited the Evnt of petition after peti- tion By them presented to the Legislative Body of this state and cannot but with Grief Reflect that their Suc- cess hath ben but too similar they Cannot but express their Astonishment that It has Never Bin Considred that Every Principle form which Amarica has Acted in the Cours of their unhappy Dificultes with Great Briton Pleads Stronger than A thousand arguments in favowrs of your petioners they therfor humble Beseech your honours to give this petion [petition] its due weight & consideration & cause an act of the Leg- islatur to be past Wherby they may be Restored to the Enjoyments of that which is the Naturel Right of all men—and their Children who wher Born in this Land of Liberty may not be heald as Slaves after they arrive at the age of twenty one years so may the Inhabitance of this Stats No longer chargeable with the inconsis- tancey of acting themselves the part which they con- dem and oppose in others Be prospered in their pres- ent Glorious struggle for Liberty and have those Bless- ing to them, &c.

Prince Hall
Lancaster Hill
Peter Bess
Brister Slenser
Jack Pierpont
Nero Funelo
Newport Sumner
Job Look