
36. Petition of Slaves to the Massachusetts Legislature (1777)

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The revolutionary generation's emphasis on liberty inevitably raised questions about the future of slavery in the new republic. The first concrete steps toward emancipation were "freedom petitions"—arguments for liberty presented to New England's courts and legislatures in the 1770s by enslaved African-Americans. As the petition that follows indicates, the slaves used the language of the Declaration of Independence—unalienable rights, the laws of nature, etc.—in the cause of abolition. Many slaves did gain their freedom during the era of the Revolution. The northern states enacted laws modeled on the one proposed by these petitioners (freeing the children of slaves after they reached adulthood). Far more slaves became free by running away to British lines. But the stark fact is that slavery survived the Revolution and, because of the natural increase of the

slave population, continued to grow. The first national census, in 1790, revealed that despite all those who had become free through state laws, voluntary emancipation, and escape, the number of slaves in the United States was 700,000—200,000 more than in 1776.

TO THE HONORABLE Council and House of Representatives for the State of Massachusetts Bay in General Court assembled, January 13, 1777

The petition of a great number of blacks detained in a state of slavery in the bowels of a free and Christian country. . . . Your petitioners apprehend that they have in common with all other men a natural and unalienable right to that freedom which the Great Parent of the Universe has bestowed equally on all mankind and which they have never forfeited by any compact or agreement whatever, but . . . were unjustly dragged by the hand of cruel power from their dearest friends and some of them even torn from the embraces of their tender parents, from a populous, pleasant, and plentiful country and in violation of laws of nature and of nations and in defiance of all the tender feelings of humanity brought here either to be sold like beasts of burden and like them condemned to slavery for life, among a people professing the mild religion of Jesus, a people not insensible of the secrets of rational being nor without spirit to resent the unjust endeavors of others to reduce them to a state of bondage and subjection. Your honors need not to be informed that a life of slavery like that of your petitioners, deprived of every social privilege, of everything requisite to render life tolerable is far worse than non-existence.

In imitation of the laudable example of the good people of these states your petitioners have long and patiently waited the event of petition after petition by them presented to the legislative body of this state. . . . They cannot but express their astonishment that it has never been considered that every principle from which America has acted in the course of their unhappy difficulties with Great Britain pleads stronger than a thousand arguments in favor of your

petitioners. They therefore humbly beseech your honors to give this petition its due weight and consideration and cause an act of the legislature to be passed whereby they may be restored to the enjoyments of that which is the natural right of all men—and their children who were born in this land of liberty may not be held as slaves after they arrive at the age of twenty-one years. So may the inhabitants of this state no longer [be] chargeable with the inconsistency of acting themselves the part which they condemn and oppose in others....