

Massachusetts Antislavery Petition

by Prince Hall, a free black man, and seven other African Americans on behalf of people in Massachusetts who remained enslaved

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Introduction

The ideas of the American Revolution could not be contained—a fact made clear by this 1777 petition signed by Prince Hall (ca. 1735–1807), a free black man, and seven other African Americans on behalf of people in Massachusetts who remained enslaved. Hall’s appeal made clear his awareness of the central tenets of the Declaration of Independence (1776): it was sent to the state’s legislature less than six months after the Declaration insisted that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,” and that “to secure these rights, governments are instituted by men.” Like others in the new country who adopted the freedom argument of the Declaration, Africans made themselves Americans in doing so. Repeatedly, in the decades to come, African Americans would appeal to the principles of the Declaration.

Although the Massachusetts legislature ignored the petition, the inconsistency between slavery and America’s founding principles did not go unnoticed. Vermont abolished slavery in its 1777 constitution, while New Hampshire’s 1783 frame of government—which declared that “all men are born equal and independent” with natural rights to

the enjoyment and defense of “life and liberty”-preceded a decline in slavery so steep that in 1800 only eight slaves were counted in the census. Meanwhile, a 1783 court case ended slavery in Massachusetts. Pennsylvania adopted a gradual emancipation law in 1780, as did Connecticut and Rhode Island in 1784, New York in 1799, and New Jersey in 1804.

Even in the upper South, the principles of the Declaration worked against slavery, leading to some manumissions. Some slaves also fled their masters during the disruptions of the war for independence. As they had in the decades leading to independence, slaves and free Blacks who could earn money as farmers and skilled artisans continued to buy their freedom or the freedom of family members still enslaved. Masters also manumitted slave children they had fathered and the women who bore them. Manumission and self-manumission also happened in the lower South (South Carolina and Georgia), although was less frequent there.

On the national level, Thomas Jefferson proposed for the Ordinance of 1784 a clause banning slavery in all land west of the Appalachians and east of the Mississippi River. The provision failed by a single vote in the Confederation Congress, setting the stage for the eventual expansion of slavery into the future states of Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi-and later Louisiana, Missouri, and Texas. “Thus we see the fate of millions unborn hanging on the tongue of one man,” Jefferson observed, “and heaven was silent in that awful moment.”

—*David Tucker*

Source: *"To the Honorable Counsel & House of [Representa]tives of the State of Massachusetts Bay in General Court assembled,"* Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 5th ser., 3 (1877): 436–

37. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101076467586;view=1up;seq=454>

The petition of a great number of blacks detained in a state of slavery in the bowels of a free and Christian country humbly shows that 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 they 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 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 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 nonexistence.

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 and cannot but with grief reflect that their success has been but too similar. 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 [be] no longer chargeable with the inconsistency of acting themselves the part which they condemn and oppose in others. Be prospered in the present glorious struggle for liberty

<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/massachusetts-antislavery-petition-2/>