

Reading

Petition for Freedom to the Massachusetts Legislature, 1777

Black activism flourished during and after the American Revolution. Free and enslaved Black people sued or petitioned state legislatures for their freedom, demanding that enslaved people be freed and that the principles of the new nation apply to them. Others chose different routes to freedom, purchasing their liberty from their enslavers or running away at the end of the Revolutionary War.

This 1777 petition to the Massachusetts state legislature was drafted by Prince Hall and eight other Black Bostonians. Hall was a free African American who had served in the Revolutionary War at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Hall and the other signers drafted the petition on behalf of all enslaved people in Massachusetts. Although the petition was ultimately unsuccessful, subsequent petitions and lawsuits from enslaved people in the state contributed to the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts in 1783.

The text of the petition reads:

We understand that we have, in common with all other men, a natural & unalienable right to that freedom, which God has given equally to all and which we have never given up in any contract or agreement.

But we were unjustly dragged, by the cruel hand of power, from our dearest friends, & some of us even torn from the embraces of our tender parents . . . & brought here to be sold like beasts of burden, & like them condemned to slavery for life . . .

Every principle from which America has acted in the course of her unhappy difficulties with Great-Britain, pleads stronger than a thousand arguments in favor of us.

We therefore humbly beg your honors, to consider this petition, & pass a law whereby slaves may be restored to the enjoyment of that freedom 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.

Lancaster Hill

Peter Bess

Brister Slenten

Prince Hall

Jack Purpont (his mark)

Nero Suneto (his mark)

Newport Symner (his mark)

Job Lock