

FOUR FREEDOM PETITIONS, 1773-1777

Spelling has been standardized for easier reading.

PETITION 1

20 April 1773

Circular Letter signed "In behalf of our fellow slaves in this province, and by order of their committee ..."

<https://www.masshist.org/database/443>

In March 1773 the Virginia House of Burgesses proposes the creation of an intercolonial committee of correspondence. The Massachusetts Assembly seconds Virginia's proposal and creates a committee of its own in May. Samuel Adams—an active member of the Boston Committee of Correspondence—becomes chair of the Massachusetts committee. As colonists and committees debate the notions of political freedom and slavery, their discussions only occasionally address the literal slavery of Africans and others throughout the colonies.

In April, four enslaved men in Taunton, Massachusetts, Peter Bestes, Sambo Freeman, Felix Holbrook, and Chester Joie, with possible assistance from Samuel Adams¹, draft a circular letter appealing to the representatives of the General Court for their freedom.

BOSTON, APRIL 20th, 1773.

SIR,

THE efforts made by the legislative of this province in their last sessions to free themselves from slavery, gave us, who are in that deplorable state, a high degree of satisfaction.

We expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their *fellow-men* to enslave them. We cannot but wish and hope Sir, that you will have the same grand object, we mean civil and religious liberty, in view in your next session. The divine spirit of *freedom*, seems to fire every humane breast on this continent, except such as are bribed to assist in executing the execrable plan.

WE are very sensible that it would be highly detrimental to our present masters, if we were allowed to demand all that of *right* belongs to us for past services; this we disclaim. Even the *Spaniards*, who have not those sublime ideas of freedom that English men have, are conscious that they have no right to all services of their fellow-men, we mean the *Africans*, whom they have purchased with their money; therefore they allow them one day in a week to work for themselves, to enable them to earn money to purchase the residue of their time, which they have a right to demand in such portions as they are able to pay for (a due

¹ At this time, Samuel Adams was an active member of the Boston Committee of Correspondence and became chair of the Massachusetts committee at its formation.

appraisement of their services being first made, which always stands at the purchase money.) We do not pretend to dictate to you Sir, or to the honorable Assembly, of which you are a member : We acknowledge our obligations to you for what you have already done, but as the people of this province seem to be actuated by the principles of equity and justice, we cannot but expect your house will again take our deplorable case into serious consideration, and give us that ample relief which, *as men*, we have a natural right to.

BUT since the wise and righteous governor of the universe, has permitted our fellow men to make us slaves, we bow in submission to him, and determine to behave in such a manner, as that we may have reason to expect the divine approbation of, and assistance in, our peaceable and lawful attempts to gain our freedom.

WE are willing to submit to such regulations and laws, as may be made relative to us, until we leave the province, which we determine to do as soon as we can from our joint labors procure money to transport ourselves to some part of the coast of *Africa*, where we propose a settlement. We are very desirous that you should have instructions relative to us, from your town, therefore we pray you to communicate this letter to them, and ask this favor for us.

In behalf of our fellow slaves in this province,

And by order of their Committee.

PETER BESTES,
SAMBO FREEMAN,
FELIX HOLBROOK,
CHESTER JOIE.

For the REPRESENTATIVE of the town of Taunton.

PETITION 2

25 May 1774

**Petition for Freedom to MA Governor Thomas Gage,
His Majesty's Council, and the House of Representatives**

<https://www.masshist.org/database/549>

In this document a group of enslaved people from Massachusetts petitions the colonial governor General Thomas Gage, the Council, and the Massachusetts House of Representatives, asserting that they share a common and natural right to be free with white citizens.

Thomas Gage was appointed military governor of Massachusetts in 1774. He arrived in Boston to replace Governor Hutchinson on May 13, 1774. He received this petition only 12 days after his arrival, signaling that the petitioners were attuned and responsive to the quickly shifting political climate in Massachusetts.

To his Excellency Thomas Gage Esq Captain General and Governor in Chief in and over This Province

To the Honourable his Majesty's Council and the Honourable House of Representatives in General Court assembled may 25 1774

The Petition of a Great Number of Blacks of this Province who by divine permission are held in a state of Slavery within the bowels of a free and Christian Country Humbly Shewing That your Petitioners apprehend we have in common With all other men a natural right to our freedoms without Being deprived of them by our fellow men as we are a freeborn People and have never forfeited this Blessing by any compact or agreement whatever. But we were unjustly dragged by the cruel hand of power from our dearest friends and some of us stolen from the bosoms of our tender Parents and from a Populous Pleasant and plentiful country and Brought hither to be made slaves for Life in a Christian land Thus are we deprived of everything that hath a tendency to make life even tolerable, the endearing ties of husband and wife we are strangers to for we are no longer man and wife then our masters or Mistresses think proper married or unmarried. Our Children are also taken from us by force and sent many miles from us where we seldom or ever see them again there to be made slaves of for Life which sometimes is very short by Reason of Being dragged from their mothers Breast Thus our Lives are embittered to us on these accounts

By our deplorable situation we are rendered incapable of showing our obedience to Almighty God how can a Slave perform the duties of a husband to a wife or parent to his child How can a husband leave master and work and Cleave to his wife How can the wife submit themselves to

their Husbands in all things. How can the child obey their parents in all things. There is a great number of us Sincere though once [\[ov the?\]](#) members of the Church of Christ how can the master and the Slave be said to fulfill that command Live in love let Brotherly Love continue and abound Bear yea one another Burdens How can the master be said to Bear my Burden when he Bears me down, with the Have chains of slavery and oppression against my will and How can we fulfill our part of duty to him whilst in this Condition and as we cannot serve our god as we ought whilst in this situation Neither can we reap an equal benefit from the laws of the Land which doth not justify but condemns Slavery or if there had been any Law to hold us in Bondege we are Humbly of the opinion there never was any to enslave our children for life when Born in a free Country. We therefore Beg your Excellency and Honors will give this it its due weight and consideration and that you will accordingly cause an act of the legislative to be passed that we may obtain our Natural right our freedoms and our Children be set at liberty at the year of Twenty one for whose sakes more Particularly your Petitioners is in Duty ever to Pray.

PETITION 3

June 1774

Petition for Freedom to MA Governor Thomas Gage, His Majesty's Council, and the House of Representatives

<https://www.masshist.org/database/550>

Declaring that enslaved people have "in common with other men, a natural right to be free!" and that slavery itself is "inimical to religion!," a group of Black Massachusetts petitioners writes to Governor Thomas Gage, the Council, and the House of Representatives asking for freedom by any means. This was the second freedom petition sent to Gage within the space of a month.

To his Excellency Thomas Gage Governor: --

To the Honourable, His Majesty's Council, and The Honourable House of Representatives of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay in General Court assembled; June -- Anno Domini 1774. --

The Petition of us the Subscribers, in behalf of all those, who, by divine permission, are held in a State of Slavery, within the Bowels of a Free Country. Humbly Sheweth, That Your Petitioners apprehend, they have in common with other men, a natural right to be free, and without molestation, to enjoy such property, as they may acquire by their industry, or by any other means not detrimental to their fellow men; and that no person can have any just claim to their services unless by the laws of the land they have forfeited them, or by voluntary compact become servants; neither of which is our case; but we were dragged by the cruel hand of power, some of us from our dearest connections, and others stolen from the bosoms of tender parents and brought hither to be enslaved. Thus are we deprived of everything that has a tendency to make life even tolerable. Whenever any social connections are formed among

[. . .] embittered by the cruel consideration of,

[. . .] deprived of enjoying life in the same agreeable [. . .] fellow men, who were made by the

[. . .] Inherit the like Salvation with us.

[. . .] tion, we are rendered incapable of

[. . .] the Supreme Governor of the Universe,

[. . .] to the duties, which are due unto him.

[. . .] an intolerable grievance. We

are often under the necessity of obeying man, not only in omission of, but frequently in opposition to the Laws of God. So inimical is Slavery to religion! As we are hinder'd by our situation from an observance of the Laws of God, so we cannot reap an equal benefit from the Laws of the Land with other Subjects. We are inform'd, there is no law of this Province, whereby our masters can claim our Services; mere custom is the tyrant that keeps us in bondage, and deprives us of that use of the Law, which our fellow men, who we believe under God are no

better than us, are entitled to, & do enjoy. We do not claim rigid justice: but as we are deserving like other men, of some compensation for all our toils and sufferings; we would therefore in addition to our prayer, that all of us, excepting such as are now infirm through age, or otherwise unable to support themselves, may be liberated and made free men of this community, and be entitled to all the privileges and immunities of its free and natural born subjects. Further humbly ask that your Excellency and Honors would be pleased to give and grant to us some part of the unimproved land, belonging to the province, for a settlement, that each of us may there quietly sit down under his own fig tree [and enjoy] the fruits of his labour. We humbly [...]

Honours, will give this sch [...]
consideration; and Pray [...]
cause an act of the Legislative [...]
the Slaves throughout this [...]
obtain their freedom from [...]

at the same time Prohibiting any being sent out of the Province, previous to the said acts taking place; or, at least to declare, that there is no Law whatever for keeping us in Bondage.

But if your Excellency & Honours cannot in Wisdom adopt this plan of relief for us, we humbly & earnestly request, that you would release us from bondage, by such other ways or means, as to your Excellency & Honours shall seem good and wise upon the whole. And your Petitioners, as in duty bound shall ever Pray –

PETITION 4

Petition for Freedom (manuscript copy) to the Massachusetts Council and House of Representatives, [13] January 1777

<https://www.masshist.org/database/557>

In this petition, "A Great Number of Blacks" of Massachusetts state their case for freedom, suggesting that such is the natural right of all people. This is a manuscript copy of a petition. The official copy that was submitted to the legislature (and is part of the Massachusetts Archives) dated 13 January 1777 has been attributed to Prince Hall (1735-1807) and signed by Hall and seven other free Black men. It is possible that this document was based on an earlier draft petition from 1773.

To the Honorable Counsel & House of Representatives for the State of Massachusetts Bay in General Court assembled, Jan 13 1777 --

The petition of A Great Number of Blacks detained in a State of Slavery in the Bowels of a free & christian Country Humbly sheweth that your Petitioners Apprehend that They have in Common with all other men a Natural and Inalienable Right to that freedom which the Great - Parent of the Universe hath 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 Either to Be sold Like Beast of Burthen & Like them Condemned to Slavery for Life -- among A People Profesing the [mild?] Religion of Jesus A people Not Insensible of the Secrets of Rational Beings Nor without spirit to Resent the unjust endeavors of others to Reduce them to A state of Bondage and Subjection your honor 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 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 hath been but too similar they Cannot but express their [Astonishments 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 favors of Your petitioners they therefore humbly Beseech your Honours to give this petition its due weight & 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 chargeable with the inconsistency of acting themselves the part which they condemn and oppose in Others Be prospered in their present Glorious Struggle for Liberty and have those Blessing to them &c.