

PRINCE HALL, PETITION TO THE MASSACHUSETTS LEGISLATURE (1777)

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Prince Hall was a free African American living in Boston. He began a petition campaign to end slavery in 1773. But after 1776, he had new authority to draw on—the power of the Declaration of Independence and its commitment to natural rights. In January 1777—six months after Congress issued the Declaration of Independence—Prince Hall presented a new petition for freedom to the Massachusetts Legislature on behalf of seven African Americans. Like the Declaration of Independence itself, Hall rooted his argument in a powerful vision of natural rights, arguing that slavery itself violated the “natural & inalienable right to that freedom, which the great Parent of the Universe hath bestowed equally on all Mankind.” While Hall’s petition failed in 1777, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court declared slavery unconstitutional just six years later in 1783.

Excerpt:

To the Honorable Council & House of Representatives for the State of Massachusetts-Bay . . .

The Petition of a great number . . . who are detained in a state of Slavery, in the Bowels of a free & Christian Country –

. . .

We are entitled to natural rights, and slavery violates natural rights. That your Petitioners apprehend that they have, in common with all other Men, a natural & inalienable right to that freedom, which the great Parent of the Universe hath bestowed equally on all Mankind, & which they have never forfeited by any compact or agreement whatever – But they were unjustly dragged, by the cruel hand of Power, from their dearest friends, & some of them even torn from the Embraces of their tender Parents – From a populous, pleasant, & plentiful Country – & in Violation of the Laws of Nature & of Nations & in defiance of all the tender feelings of humanity, brought hither to be sold like Beasts of Burden, & like them condemned to slavery for Life – Among a People professing the mild religion of Jesus . . .

Slavery is a horrible evil. – 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 even tolerable, is far worse than Non-Existence

We have been patient and used our right to petition to push for change. – In imitation of the laudable example of the good People of these States, your Petitioners have long & patiently

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waited the event of Petition after Petition, by them presented to the Legislative Body of this State & cannot but with grief reflect that their success has been but too similar . . .

Please pass a law ending slavery in Massachusetts. – They therefore humbly beseech your Honors, to give this Petition its due weight & consideration, & cause an Act of the Legislature to be passed, whereby they may be restored to the enjoyment of that freedom which is the natural right of all Men – & 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 & oppose in others) be prospered in their present glorious struggles for Liberty; & have those blessings secured to them by Heaven, of which benevolent minds cannot wish to deprive their fellow-Men.

***Bold sentences give the big idea of the excerpt and are not a part of the primary source.**