

Introduction: Transcripts from the “Freedom Petitioners” Campaign

The following transcribes and collects, for the first time, all the extant documents produced by a group of Black men in Boston who petitioned for the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts during the American Revolution. This includes four petitions and a memorial formally submitted to the Massachusetts General Court between 1773 and 1777; a circular letter sent to individual representatives and towns throughout the colony in April 1773; and four draft petition copies – one produced in the summer 1773, two in the summer 1774, and one in January 1777.

Additionally, two acts of legislation proposed by representatives in the General Court in response to the petitioners’ appeals have been included below, along with a letter the Court addressed to the Continental Congress in 1777 endorsing abolition. These documents are contextualized and discussed in Grant Stanton “The Freedom Petitioners: Black Patriotism, Black Politics, and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts, 1773-1783,” *Early American Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2024).

Each document is transcribed without spelling, capitalization, or grammatical correction. Editorial marks made by contemporaries in the draft documents have not been noted (e.g. where a line or sentence has been deleted, or when a mark is made indicating a word or phrase was added).

Document 1: First Freedom Petition, January 6, 1773.¹

Province of the MASSACHUSETTS BAY To his Excellency THOMAS HUTCHINSON, Esq; GOVERNOR; To the Honorable His Majesty's COUNCIL, and To the Honorable House of REPRESENTATIVES in General Court assembled at BOSTON, the 6th Day of January, 1773. The humble PETITION of many Slaves, living in the Town of BOSTON, and other Towns in the Province is this, namely,

THAT your EXCELLENCY and Honors, and the Honorable the Representatives would be pleased to take their unhappy State and Condition under your wise and just Consideration.

We desire to bless GOD, who loves Mankind, who sent his Son to die for their Salvation, and who is no Respector of Persons; that he hath lately put into the Hearts of Multitudes on both Sides of the Water, to bear our Burthens, some of whom are Men of great Note and Influence; who have pleaded our Cause with Arguments which we hope will have their weight with this Honorable Court.

We presume not to dictate your EXCELLENCY and Honors, being willing to rest our Cause on your Humanity and Justice; yet would beg Leave to say a Word or two on the Subject.

ALTHOUGH some of the Negroes are vicious, (who doubtless may be punished and restrained by the same Laws which are in Force against other of the King's Subjects) there are many others of a quite different Character, and who, if made free, would soon be able as well as willing to bear a Part in the Public Charges; many of them of good natural Parts, are discreet, sober, honest, and industrious; and may it not be said of many, that they are virtuous and religious, although their Condition is in itself so unfriendly to Religion, and every moral Virtue except *Patience*. How many of the Number have there been, and now are in this Province, who have had every Day of their Lives imbittered with this most intollerable Reflection, That, let their Behaviour be what it will, neither they, nor their Children to all Generations, shall ever be able to do, or to possess and enjoy any Thing, no, not even *Life itself*, but in a Manner as the *Beasts that perish*.

We have no Property! We have no Wives! No Children! We have no City! No Country! But we have a Father in Heaven, and we are determin'd, as far as his Grace shall enable us, and as far as our degraded contemptuous Life will admit, to keep all his Commandments: Especially will we be obedient to our Masters, so long as God in his sovereign Providence shall *suffer* us to be holden in Bondage.

It would be Impudent, if not presumptuous in us, to suggest to your Excellency and Honors any Law or Laws proper to be made, in relation to our unhappy State, which, although our greatest Unhappiness, is not our *Fault*; and this gives us great Encouragement to pray and hope for such Relief as is consistent with your Wisdom, Justice, and Goodness.

We think ourselves very happy, that we may thus address the Great and General Court of this Province, which great and good Court is to us, the best Judge, under GOD, of what is wise, just, and good.

We humbly beg Leave to add but this one Thing more: We pray for Relief only, which by no Possibility can ever be productive of that least Wrong or Injury to our Masters; but to us will be as Life from the dead.

Signed, FELIX

¹ *The Appendix, or, Some observations on the expediency of the petition of the Africans, living in Boston, &c. lately presented to the General Assembly of this province* (Boston, Mass.: Ezekiel Russell, 1773).

Document 2: Freedom Circular, April 20, 1773.²

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 satisfacton [sic]. 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 fellowmen, we mean the *Africans*, whom they have purchased with their money; therefore they allow them one day in a week to work for themselves [sic], 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 appraizment 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 joynt labours 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.

² Three copies of the circular are extant and signed by the district of Stoughtonham, the town of Taunton, and "Thompson;" "George A. Plimpton Papers," Box 52, Folder 9, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library; "Boston, April 20th, 1773. Sir, The efforts made by the legislative [sic] of this province ..." *Collections Online*, Massachusetts Historical Society, last accessed April 19, 2024, at: https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=443; "Boston, April 20th, 1773," Library of Congress, last accessed April 19, 2024 <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.03701600/?st=text>.

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

For the REPRESENTATIVE of the District of Stoughtonham.

[On back:]

To the Clerk of the District of Stoughtonham.

For the use of the present Representative, and his successor.

Document 3: Partial Draft Freedom Petition, Damaged, June 1773.³

June, 1773

The recent Petition sent in by [. . .]

To his Excellency Thomas Hutc[hinson Gov]ernor of said Provnce, to the Honorable his Majestys [Council, and] Honourable House of Representatives in General court assembled June 1773 —

The Petition of us the subscribers in behalf of all thous 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 comon with other men a naturel right to be free and without molestation to injoy such Property, as thay may acquire by their industry, or by any other means not detrimetal to their fellow men, and that no Person can have any just claim to their services unless

³ “Petition for freedom to Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson, His Majesty's Council, and the House of Representatives, June 1773,” *Collections Online*, Massachusetts Historical Society, last accessed April 19, 2024, https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=558.

Document 4: Second Freedom Petition, June 1773.⁴

To his Excellency THOMAS HUTCHINSON, Esq; Governor of said province [Massachusetts]; to the Honourable his MAJESTY'S COUNCIL, and the Honourable HOUSE of REPRESENTATIVES in General Court assembled, June, A.D. 1773.

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 every thing that has a tendency to make life even tolerable. The endearing ties of husband, wife, parent, child and friend, we are generally strangers to: And whenever any of those connections are formed among us, the pleasures are imbittered by the cruel consideration of our slavery. By our deplorable situation we are rendered incapable of shewing our obedience to the supreme governor of the universe, by conforming ourselves to the duties, which naturally grow out of such relations. How can a slave perform the duties of husband or parent, wife or child? 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 hindered 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 informed, 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 he, who happens to have a white skin is intitled to. We are not insensible, that if we should be liberated, and allowed by law to demand pay for our past services, our masters and their families would by that means be greatly damnified, if not ruined: But we claim no rigid justice: Yet as we are honestly entitled to 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 otherways 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 Honours would be pleased to give and grant 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 own labour.

“This scheme we apprehend, will remove all rational objections to our freedom; and promises so much good to your oppressed petitioners, as well as future advantage to the province that we cannot but hope, that your Excellency and Honours will give it its due weight and consideration; and that you will accordingly cause an act of the legislative to be passed, enabling all the slaves throughout this province, to demand and obtain their freedom from their masters

⁴ Reprinted in the *Massachusetts Spy*, July 29, 1773, and *Essex Gazette*, August 3, 1773.

and mistresses, and at the same time prohibiting any being sent out of the province, previous to the said act's taking place.

‘But if your Excellency and Honours cannot in wisdom adopt this plan of relief for us, we humbly and earnestly request, that you would release us from bondage by causing us to be transported to our native country within a short time; or by such other way or means as to your Excellency and Honours shall seem good and wise upon the whole. And your petitioners, as in duty bound, shall ever pray.’

Document 5: Freedom Memorial, January 20, 1774.⁵

To the honourable his Majesty's Council and the honourable House of Representatives of the Province of Massachusetts-Bay, in General Court assembled, at Boston, the 20th day of January, 1774.

The many stedfast resolutions made by this large province, to maintain their liberties and privileges, wherewith God hath made them free (without which no man, even the meanest of them can be happy in this life, for what is life without the enjoyment of it?) gives us who are unhappily, and unjustly deprived of that blessing, so great expectations of your taking up our last petition which we laid before your Honours the last sessions, and give us the thousands of poor unhappy Africans their freedom, which we as men, and by nature have a right to demand of your Honours in such a way, and in such a manner as your Honours would expect from such a body of fellowmen, professing the gospel of *our* Lord and *Saviour* JESUS CHRIST; we ask nothing from your Honours but what you would desire yourselves, were you in our situation : Nay even the very dumb beasts groan under the heavy load of slavery, and try all manner of ways to get rid of it; much more men who are made after the image of God, and have the sense of feeling, cannot but groan under this unjust burden laid upon us, without any colour of justice, but pleasure and custom, and against the wills or consents of our forefathers, or us their children: But since the all-wise God hath seen fit to permit it to be so for a number of years past, his will be done, we desire to submit to his will in all things; yet from the first settling of this province It was not so; But yet we can sincerely hope and pray, that God would preserve your liberties and privileges as at the beginning, and that peace and love may again be restored between the mother country and the provinces, and that his Majesty would hear your prayers, and that you would hear ours, and grant us an answer of peace, that we may rejoice when you rejoice, as well as mourn when you mourn, as we do this day; and as we are not void of fellow-feeling, we conclude we must be men.

⁵ Reprinted in the *Massachusetts Spy*, September 1, 1774.

Document 6: Proposed Legislation Against the Slave Trade.⁶

Anno Regni Regis Georgii Tertii &c. Decimo Quarto.

An Act to prevent the importation of Negroes or other Persons as Slaves into this Province; and the purchasing them within the same.

Whereas the Importation of Persons as Slaves into this Province has been found detrimental to the interest of his Majesty's subjects therein; and it being apprehended that the abolition thereof will be beneficial to the Province,

Be it therefore Enacted by the Governor, Council, and House of Representatives that whosoever shall after the Tenth Day of April next import or bring into this Province by Land or Water any negro or other Person or Persons whether Male or Female as a Slave or Slaves shall for each and every such Person so imported or brought into this Province forfeit and pay the sum of one hundred Pounds to be recovered by presentment or indictment of a Grand Jury and when so recovered to be to his Majesty for the use of this Government; or by action of debt in any of his Majesty's Courts of Record and in case of such recovery the one moiety thereof to be to his Majesty for the use of this Government the other moiety to the Person or Persons who shall sue for the same.

And be it further Enacted that from and after the Tenth Day of April next any Person or Persons that shall purchase any Negro or other Person or Persons as a Slave or Slaves imported or brought into this Province as aforesaid shall forfeit and pay for every Negro or other Person so purchased Fifty Pounds to be recovered and disposed of in the same way and manner as before directed.

And be it further Enacted that every Person concerned in importing or bringing into this Province, or purchasing any such Negro or other Person or Persons as aforesaid within the same; who shall be unable, or refuse, to pay the Penalties or forfeiture, ordered by this Act; shall for every such offence suffer Twelve Months imprisonment without Bail or Mainprise

Provided always that nothing in this Act contained shall extend to subject to the Penalties aforesaid the Masters, Mariners, Owners or Freighters or any such Vessell or Vessells, as before the said Tenth Day of April next shall have sailed from any Port or Ports in this Province for any Port or Ports not within this government for importing or bringing into this Province any Negro or other Person or Persons as slaves who in the prosecution of the same voyage may be imported or brought into the same. Provided he shall not offer them or any of them for sale.

Provided also that this Act shall not be construed to extend to any such Person or Persons, occasionally hereafter to reside within this Province, or passing thro' the same, who may bring such Negro or other Person or Persons as necessary servants unto this Province provided that the stay or residence of such Person or Persons shall not exceed Twelve months or that such Person or Persons within said time send such Negroes or other Person or Persons out of this Province

⁶ Massachusetts Archives Collections, Vol. 9, Boston, 457-8.

there to be and remain, and also that during said residence such Negro or other Person or Persons shall not be sold or alienated within the same.

[Paragraph Inserted by Council] further Enacted and declared that nothing in this Act contained shall extend or be construed to extend for detaining or holding in perpetual servitude any Negro or other Person or Persons now inslaved within this Province such that every such Negro or other Person or Persons shall be intitled to all the Benefits such Negro or other Person or Persons might by Law have been intitled to, in case this Act had not been made

In the House of Representatives March 2, 1774

Read a first & second time

March 3, 1774 Read a Third time & passed to be Engrossed.

Sent up for Concurrence

[Signed] T Cushing Spk^r

In Council March 3. 1774 Read a first time

[March] 4. Read a second time and passed a Concurrence to be Engrossed with the Amendment [inserted as the last paragraph]

Sent down for Concurrence.

[Signed] Tho. Flucker, Sec.y

In the House of Representatives March 4. 1774

Read & [Concurred] T Cushing Spk^r

[On back] Negro Bill Mar[ch] 4, 1774

Document 7: Draft Freedom Petition, May 25, 1774.⁷

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

To the Honourable his Majestys Council and the Honourable House of Representatives in General Court assembled May 25 1774

The Petition of a Grate Number of Blackes 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 naturel right to our freedoms without Being depriv'd of them by our fellow men as we are a freeborn Pepl and have never forfeited this Blessing by aney compact or agreement whatever. But we were unjustly dragged by the cruel hand of power from our dearest frinds and sum 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 every thing 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 Mestreses thinkes proper marred or unmarred. Our Children are also taken from us by force and sent maney miles from us wear we seldom or ever see them again they to be made slaves of fore Life which sumtimes is verey short by Reson of Being dragged from their mothers Breest Thus our Lives are imbittered to us on these accounts

By our deplorable situation we are rendered incapable of shewing 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 there Husbands in all things. How can the child obey thear parents in all things. There is a grat number of us Members Sencear thou once of the members of the Church of Christ how can the master and the Slave be said to fullfil that command Live in love let Brotherly Love continew and abound Beare yea onenothers Bordenes How can the master be said to Beare my Borden when he Beares me down, with the Have chanes of slavery and operson aganst my will and How can we fullfill our parte of duty to him whilst in this Condition and as we cannot searve our god as we ought whilst in this situation Nither can we reap an equal benefet from the laws of the Land which doth not justyfi but condemes Slavery or if there had bin aney Law to hold us in Bondege we are Humbely of the opinon ther never was aney to inslave our children for life when Born in a free Countrey.

We therfor Bage your Excellency and Honours will give this it its deu weight and consideration and that you will accordingly cause an act of the legislative to be pessed that we may obtain our Natural right our freedoms and our Children be set at lebet by the yeare of

⁷ "Petition for freedom to Massachusetts Governor Thomas Gage, His Majesty's Council, and the House of Representatives, 25 May 1774," *Collections Online*, Massachusetts Historical Society, last accessed April 19, 2024, https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=549.

Twenty One for whoues sekcs more Pelequeley [Peculiarly] your Petitioners is in Duty ever to
Prey.

Document 8: Draft Freedom Petition, Damaged, June 1774.⁸

To his Excellency Thomas Gage Governor: --

To the Honourable, His Majesty's Council, and 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 every thing that has a tendency to make life even tol[erable.] Whenever any social connections are formed among [. . .] [emb]ittered by the cruel consideration of, [. . .] [d]eprived of enjoying life in the same agre-[eable] [. . .] [fel]low 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 hope 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 otherways unable to support themselves, may be libe-rated and made free men of this community, and be en-titled to all the privileges and immunities of its free and natural born subjects. Further humbly ask that your Excellency and Honours 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 —

⁸ "Petition for freedom to Massachusetts Governor Thomas Gage, His Majesty's Council, and the House of Representatives, June 1774," *Collections Online*, Massachusetts Historical Society last accessed April 19, 2024, <https://www.masshist.org/database/550>.

Document 9: Third Freedom Petition, June 1774.⁹

The Petition of the African Slaves residing in the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay.

To his Excellency THOMAS GAGE, Esquire, Governor of the Province of Massachusetts-Bay, in New-England; to the Honourable his Majesty's Council, and the Honourable House of Representatives, in General Court assembled at Salem, A.D. 1774. The Petition being the Third 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 without their consenting by contract to become servants; we were dragged by the cruel hands 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 every thing that has a tendency to make life even tolerable. The endearing ties of husband, wife, parent, children, friends; children did we say? Alas! No sooner are they born, but they are either sold or given away helpless, without our consent, whereby we are rendered ignorant of them and they of us; and whenever any of those connections are formed amongst us, the pleasures are embittered by the cruel consideration of our slavery. By our deplorable situation we are rendered incapable of shewing our obedience to the Supreme Governor of the Universe, by being obliged to conform ourselves to the duties which naturally grow out of such relations, how can a slave perform the duties of husband or parent, wife or child? We are often under the cruel necessity of obeying man, not only in the omission of, but frequently in opposition to the laws of God, so inimical is slavery to religion! As we are hindered 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.

There is no law of Great-Britain, nor yet in this province, whereby we can be held in slavery without our consent. We are sensible that many objections have, and may be objected against our liberation; but we with gratitude to those honourable gentlemen who spoke so much in our favor last sessions though some may say we were amused, these with many other grievances we feel, we your humble petitioners hope your Excellency and Honours will again take up this our third petition, and cause an act or resolve to be passed to give your petitioners redress.

The candor and humanity of your Excellency, and the trust we put in the honourable House, encourage us to hope, that same [*sic*] method will be fallen upon to grant such a number of his Majesty's subjects, and useful members of society effectual relief.

And your petitioners as in duty bound, shall ever pray.

⁹Reprinted in the *Massachusetts Spy*, September 8, 1774, and the *Salem Gazette*, September 16, 1774.

Document 10: Draft Fourth Petition, January 13, 1777.¹⁰

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

The petition of A Great Number of Blackes detained in a State of Slavery in the Bowels of a free & christian Country Humbly shuwith that your Petitioners Apprehend that They have in Common with all other men a Natural and Unaliable Right to that freedom which the Grats [Great] - Parent of the Unavese hath Bestowed equalley on all menkind and which they have Never forfeuted by Any Compact or Agreement whatever -- but they wher Unjustly Dragged by the hand of cruel Power from their Derest frinds and sum of them Even torn from the Embraces of their tender Parents -- from A popolous Plasant And plentiful cuntry And in Violation of Laws of Nature and off Nations And in defiance of all the tender feelings of humanity Brough hear Either to Be sold Like Beast of Burthen & Like them Condemnd to Slavery for Life -- among A People Profesing the mild Religion of Jesus A people Not Insensible of the Secrets of Rationable Being Nor without spirit to Resent the unjust endeavours of others to Reduce them to A state of Bondage and Subjection your honouer Need not to be informed that A Life of Slavery Like that of your Petioners Deprived of Every social Priviledge of Every thing Requisite to Render Life Tolable is far worse then Nonexistence --

[In imita]tion of [the] Lawdable Example of the Good People of these States your petitioners have Long and Patiently waited the Evnt of petition after petition By them presented to the Legislative Body of this state And cannot but with Grief Reflect that their Sucess hath ben but too similar they Cannot but express their Astonisments that It has Never Bin Considered that Every Principle from which Amarica has Acted in the Cours Of their unhappy Deficultes with Great Briton Pleads Stronger than A thousand arguments in favowrs of Your petioners thay therfor humble Beseech your Honours to give this petion its due weight & consider-ration and cause an act of the Legislatur to be past Wherby they may Be Restored to the Enjoyments of that Which is the Naturel Right of all men -- and their -- Children who wher Born in this Land of Liberty may not be heald as Slaves after they arive at the age of Twenty one years so may the Inhabitance of thes State No longer chargeable with the inconsistancy of acting themselves the part which thay condem and oppose in Others Be prospered in their present Glorious Struggle for Liberty and have those Blessing to them &c.

¹⁰ "Petition for freedom (manuscript copy) to the Massachusetts Council and the House of Representatives, [13] January 1777," *Collections Online*, Massachusetts Historical Society, last accessed April 19, 2024, https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=557.

Document 11: Fourth Freedom Petition, January 13, 1777.¹¹

To the Honorable Council & House of Representatives for the State of Massachusetts-Bay in
General Court assembled January 13th 1777 —

The Petition of a great number of Negroes who are detained in a state of Slavery in the Bowels
of a free & Christian Country
Humbly Shewing—

That your Petitioners apprehend that they have, in common with all other Men, a natural & unalienable 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 Burthen, & like them condemned to slavery for Life — Among a People professing the mild Religion of Jesus — A People not insensible of the sweets of rational freedom — Nor without spirit to resent the unjust endeavors of others to reduce them to a State of Bondage & Subjection — Your Honors need not to be informed that a Life of Slavery, like that of your petitioners, deprived of every social privilege, of every thing requisite to render Life even tolerable, is far worse than Non-Existence — In imitation of the laudable example of the good People of these States, your Petitioners have long & patiently waited the event of Petition after Petition by them presented to the Legislative Body of this State, & can not but with grief reflect that their success has been but too similar — They can not but express their astonishment, that it has never been considered, that 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 your Petitioners — 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 can not wish to deprive their fellow Men.

And your Petitioners, as in Duty Bound shall ever pray.

[On Back:]

Lancaster Hill
[X] Peter Bess
Brister Slenser
Prince Hall

¹¹ “Petition of Lancaster Hill,” Massachusetts Archives Collections: v. 212-Revolutionary Resolves, Boston, 132, viewable at [https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:50257750\\$1i](https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:50257750$1i).

Jack his X mark Pierpont
Nero his X mark Funelo
Newport his X mark Sumner
Job Look

Negroes' Petition to the Hon^{ble}
Gen^l Assembly – Massachusetts –

Mar[ch.] 18
Judge Sergeant
Mr. Dalton
Mr. Appleton
Coll. Brooks
Mr. Stone
Mr. Lovel
& to consider the matter at Large
Mr. Davis –

Document 12: Bill for Abolition and Civil Equality, prepared by Nathaniel Peaslee Sargeant, March (?) 1777.¹²

State of Massachusetts Bay in the Year of Our Lord 1777

An Act for preventing the practice of holding persons in Slavery ---

Whereas the practice of holding Africans & the children born of them, or any other persons in Slavery is unjustifiable in a civil governments, at a time when they are asserting their natural freedom.

Wherefore for preventing such a practice is for the future, & establishing to every Person residing within this State the invaluable blessing of Liberty – Be it enacted by the Council & House of Representatives in General Court assembled by the Authority of the same, That all persons whether Black or of other complexion, above 21 years of age now held in Slavery, shall from after the day next be free from any subjection to any master or mistress who have claimed their servitude by right, or purchase, heirship, free gift, or otherwise, they are hereby intitled to all the freedom Rights, privileges, & immunities that do, or of right ought to, belong to any other subjects of this State , any usage or custom to the contrary notwithstanding –

And be it enacted by the Authority aforesaid that all written Deeds, Bargains, slaves, or conveyances, or contracts without writing whatsoever for conveying or transferring any property in any person or to the service & labor of any person whosoever, of more than twenty one years of age, to a third person except by order of some Court of record, for some crime or by their own voluntary Contract for a term not exceeding seven years shall be & hereby is declared null & void.

And whereas diverse persons now have in their service Negroes, mulattoes, or others who have been deemed their slaves or property & are now incapable of earning their living, by reason of age, or infirmities, & may be desirous of continuing in the service of their masters or mistresses – be it therefore enacted by the authority aforesaid that whatever negro or molatto who shall be desirous of continuing in the service of his master of mistress & shall voluntarily declare the same before two Justices of the Courts in which said master of mistress resides, shall have a right to continue in the service, & to a maintenance from this master or mistress, and if they are incapable of earning their living shall be supported by the said master of mistress or their Heirs during the lives of said servants anything in this act to the Contrary notwithstanding.

Provided nevertheless that nothing in this act shall be under stood to prevent any master of Vessel, or other person from bringing into this State any persons, not Africans, from any other part of the world except the United States of America, & selling their service for a term of time not exceeding 5 years, if 21 years of age, or if under 21 not exceeding the time when he or she so brought into the state shall be 26 years of age, to pay for & in consideration of the transportation and other charges said master of vessel or other person may have been at, agreeable to contracts made with the persons so transported, or their Parents or Guardians in their behalf, before they are brought from their own Country

¹² Massachusetts Archives Collection: Revolutionary Resolves, Vol. 212, Boston, 130-1.

Bill, Negroes
Wednesday [illegible] 29th

Ordered to Lie till the Second Wednesday of the next session of the Gen Court

Document 13: Letter to Congress respecting freeing y^e negroes, June 1777.¹³

To the Honb^l American Congress now setting at Philadelphia.

May it Please your Honours.

The House of Representatives of the State of Massachusetts Bay Beg leave to Represent to your Honours, that they have now under their consideration the justice & propriety of abolishing Slavery in this State & liberating the Negroes held in Servitude here. This question has at different times for many years past been a subject of debate in former Houses, without any decision on the main principle, and although they have generally appeared as individuals convinced of the rectitude of the measure nothing further has been done than to have a Bill before them, which after some debate, from various circum-stantial obstacles & embarrassments has subsided. The last House resumed this question in consequence of a petition from a number of Africans, & ordered a Bill to be brought in, which after one reading was referred over to this House & is now before us, & has been considered in a first & second reading. Convinced of the justice of the measure, we are restrained from passing it only from an apprehension that our Brethren in the other Colonies should conceive there was an impropriety in our determining on a question which may in its nature & operation be of extensive influence, without previously consulting your Honours. We therefore have ordered the Bill to lay & ask the attention of your Honours to this matter, that if consistent with the Union & Harmony of the United States, we may follow the dictates of our own understandings & feelings, at the same time assuring your Honours that we have such a sacred regard to the Union & Harmony of the United States, as to conceive ourselves under obligations to suspend what were we unconnected we should suppose Justice to individuals refrain from every measure that should have a tendency to injure that Union which is the basis & foundation of our defence and happiness.

¹³ Massachusetts Archives Collection, Vol. 197, Boston, 125.