In Thomas Jefferson’s original draft of the Declaration of Independence of 1776, slavery was condemned as an evil most abhorrent and destructive as King George III was charged with “wag[ing] cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty . . . .” Citing the important principles of natural rights to liberty, equality, and justice, the founders based their revolutionary doctrine and their reasons leading to war with Britain on these ideals, defining them as “self-evident truths” that should be neither ignored nor violated.

Similarly embracing the theory of natural rights and the principle of liberty extended to all, enslaved Americans spoke out in their own defense, formally petitioning the Massachusetts governor and the state legislature to stand in firm opposition to the practice of slavery. They argued that human bondage violated every provision of natural law and rights protecting human freedom and as it further usurped Christian doctrine, slavery must be recognized as an evil abhorrent to all humankind.

Enslaved people’s pleas for justice failed to stir change toward abolishing slavery during the revolutionary period. In the next decade, however, a series of cases revolving around the ambiguous status of Quock Walker, an enslaved man who had been promised freedom by an owner who later died, led the Massachusetts Supreme Court to rule that slavery was incompatible with the rights to freedom and equality set out in the state Constitution of 1780.

**Petition of Slaves in Boston (June 23, 1773)**

PROVINCION OF 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 respecter of persons, that he hath lately put it 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 to 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 others 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 that number have there been, and now are, in this province, who had every day of their lives embittered with this most intolerable reflection, that, let their behavior 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! we have no children! we have no city! no country! But we have a Father in heaven, and we are determined, as far as his grace shall enable us, and as far as our degraded condition and 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 such relief only, which by no possibility can ever be productive of the least wrong or injury to our masters, but to us will be as life from the dead.

Second Petition of Massachusetts Slaves (January 13, 1777)

The petition of a great number of negroes, who are detained in a state of slavery in the very bowels of a free and Christian country, humbly showing—

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 cruel hand of 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 the laws of nature and of nations, and in defiance of all the tender feelings of humanity, brought hither to be sold like
beasts of burthen, and, like them, condemned to slavery for life—among a people possessing the mild religion of Jesus—a people not insensible of the sweets of national freedom, nor without a spirit to resent the unjust endeavors of others to reduce them to a state of bondage and 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 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 her unhappy difficulties with Great Britain, bears stronger than a thousand arguments in favor of your humble petitioners. They therefore humbly beseech Your Honors to give their petition its due weight and consideration, and 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, 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 glorious struggles for liberty, and have those blessings secured to them by Heaven, of which benevolent minds cannot wish to deprive their fellow-men.

And your petitioners, as in duty bound, shall ever pray:—
LANCASTER HILL,
PETER BESS,
BRISTER SLENFEN,
PRINCE HALL,
JACK PIERPONT, [his X mark.]
NERO FUNELO, [his X mark.]
NEWPORT SUMNER, [his X mark.]

Petition of Poor Negroes and Mulattoes in Dartmouth
(February 10, 1780)

To the Honorable Council and House of Representatives, in General Court assembled, for the State of the Massachusetts Bay, in New England:

The petition of several poor negroes and mulattoes, who are inhabitants of the town of Dartmouth, humbly showeth,—

That we being chiefly of the African extract, and by reason of long bondage and hard slavery, we have been deprived of enjoying the profits of our labor or the advantage of inheriting estates from our parents, as our neighbors the white people do, having some of us not long enjoyed our own freedom; yet of late, contrary to the invariable custom and practice of the country, we have been, and now are, taxed both in our polls and that small pittance of estate which, through much hard labor and industry, we have got together to sustain ourselves and
families with all. We apprehend it, therefore, to be hard usage, and will doubtless (if continued) reduce us to a state of beggary, whereby we shall become a burthen to others, if not timely prevented by the interposition of your justice and power.

Your petitioners further show, that we apprehend ourselves to be aggrieved, in that, while we are not allowed the privilege of freemen of the State, having no vote or influence in the election of those that tax us, yet many of our colour (as is well known) have cheerfully entered the field of battle in the defence of the common cause, and that (as we conceive) against a similar exertion of power (in regard to taxation), too well known to need a recital in this place.

We most humbly request, therefore, that you would take our unhappy case into your serious consideration, and, in your wisdom and power, grant us relief from taxation, while under our present depressed circumstances; and your poor petitioners, as in duty bound, shall ever pray, &c.

JOHN CUFFE,
ADVENTUR CHILD,
PAUL CUFFE,
SAMUEL X GRAY, his mark.
PERO X HOWLAND, his mark.
PERO X RUSSELL, his mark.
PERO COGESHALL.
Dated at Dartmouth, the 10th of February, 1780.


Headnote: Diana Jonmarie