

“A Natural & Unalienable Right”: The 1777 Prince Hall Petition and African American Emancipation in New England.

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On January 13, 1777, Prince Hall and seven other African American men submitted a petition to the Massachusetts General Court, which at that time consisted of the Massachusetts Revolutionary Council and the House of Representatives. They sought freedom for “a great number of Negroes who are detained . . . in the Bowels of a free & Christian Country.” Their petition was not unique: it was the fifth that African Americans in Massachusetts had submitted since 1772. But this one was distinctive because it directly challenged the commonwealth of Massachusetts’s government to live up to the principles of liberty and rights which had been set forth less than a year before in the Declaration of Independence.

The Massachusetts legislature failed to pass any laws in response to this petition; however, four years later a jury in the *Quock Walker* case ruled in favor of an African American had filed a claim of unjust enslavement, and in 1783 an upper-court ruling spelled the end of slavery in the commonwealth. In the coming years, other Northern states passed laws that ended slavery gradually and thus avoided what many whites viewed as the socioeconomic chaos that could have been brought on by immediate abolition. While these governmental actions are usually credited with having ended slavery above the Mason-Dixon Line, the petition of January 1777 and similar formal appeals played critical foundational roles in the process. Perhaps just as importantly, these petitions also represent the starting point for the establishment of organized African American communities in New England.

To the Honorable Council & House of Representatives  
for the State of Massachusetts - Now, in general Court assembled  
January 13<sup>th</sup> 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  
whatsoever - But they were unjustly dragged by the cruel hands of  
Power, from their dearest & best Friends 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 Nation  
& in defiance of all the tender feelings of humanity, brought hither  
to be sold like Beasts of Burthen, & like them condemned to a long  
hard life - Among a People professing the most religious of Jesus  
a People not insensible of the sweets of rational freedom - Nor without  
spirit to resent the unjust endeavours of others to reduce them to a  
state of Bondage & subjection - Your Honors need not 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 Nonexistence - 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  
make 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  
twenty one Years - In many <sup>the Inhabitants</sup> their case (no longer chargeable with the  
inconsistency of acting themselves, the part which they concern for  
others) be proper in their present glorious struggle for Liberty, &  
we hope blessings secured to them by Heaven, of which we need not  
undesign'dly wish to deprive their fellow Citizens -  
And your Petitioners as in Duty bound, shall ever pray

The number of Africans and their descendants in southern New England rose from about a one thousand in 1700 to around eleven thousand by the middle of the eighteenth century, largely because prominent merchants in the region had become deeply involved in the slave trade. These merchants sold most of their slaves to owners in the West Indies, but they processed and routed slaves through Boston as well as Newport, Rhode Island, and other New England ports. Also, some slaves were sold within New England to meet the demand for domestic servants and skilled laborers. Most slaves probably had come directly from Africa, but some were from the West Indies or the southern American colonies. The percentage of American-born blacks grew throughout the eighteenth century, and the demographic balance between men and women began to even out—although even in 1765 most of the twenty-seven hundred adult African Americans living in Massachusetts were men. About a one-third lived resided in Boston, the region’s center of commerce and government.<sup>1</sup>

Although most blacks in colonial New England were slaves, a significant number were free. The situation of blacks in New England, regardless of their status, was markedly different from that of blacks in other colonies. Most lived in port towns and worked in semiskilled or unskilled jobs for which Anglo-American labor was scarce. The few who resided in rural villages were probably slaves and served as status symbols for their masters. Rural slaves also provided a pool of menial labor for the local elites, particularly ministers. Of those African Americans who already were free, very few became successful. For example, Emmanuel, after having gained freedom from his master, Gabriel Bernon, in 1736, opened a popular oyster house

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<sup>1</sup>Lorenzo J. Greene, *The Negro In Colonial New England* (New York: Columbia University, 1942), 72-99; William D. Piersen, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 1-19, 59-61.

in Providence, Rhode Island, and when he died in 1796 left an estate worth £569.<sup>2</sup>

Like indentured white servants and apprentices, all slaves and nearly all free blacks in colonial New England lived as dependents in the homes of Anglo-Americans and were considered members of extended households. As dependents, they lacked individual autonomy and were expected to adapt quickly to the dominant culture and community. But even under these circumstances there were opportunities for betterment. Slaves in this region were usually taught to read so that they could understand the Bible. Many slaves were able to hire themselves out to work for other employers and potentially could even buy their freedom. Those living in port towns worked alongside free, apprenticed, and indentured laborers and often caroused with them in pubs after work. In Massachusetts, even slaves had many civil rights, including trial by jury as well as the right to enter into contracts, to sue for abuse or fraud, and to sue if they considered themselves unjustly enslaved.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, blacks and also indentured whites were subject to special laws designed to exert an extra measure of control over potentially dangerous adult dependents. Blacks could not marry whites, and in many towns slaves and indentured whites had to carry passes from their masters if they were moving about after dark. Townspeople were often on edge about the potential for disorder. In Boston in 1753, groups of blacks and poor whites were accused of parading through streets, building bonfires, and abusing pedestrians. In response, the colonial Massachusetts Assembly passed laws that barred three or more men from parading in

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<sup>2</sup>Greene, *Negro In Colonial New England*; Piersen, *Black Yankees*; Robert J. Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees: Providence's Black Community in the Antebellum Era* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 17-29.

<sup>3</sup>Piersen, *Black Yankees*, 14-16, 165; James C. Garman, "Viewing the Color Line Through the Material Culture of Death," *Historical Archaeology* 28 (1994): 77.

the streets, and blacks who disobeyed this law were to be punished with ten stripes.<sup>4</sup>

But there was one yearly event when blacks were allowed to take collective action: the so-called Negro election festivals, which had begun in the mid-eighteenth century and continued until after emancipation. These festivals served several purposes. Blacks in a given locale would elect a man who would serve as their representative with Anglo-American community leaders and might be called upon to judge disputes between slaves. Those elected were often from African noble families. These events were also carnival-like events where the social restrictions were set aside, which provided a release from repressive social norms but paradoxically also reaffirmed them. Whites and Native Americans also partook in these festivals.<sup>5</sup>

While servitude and racism were facts of life in eighteenth-century New England, as elsewhere in colonial America, the region's culture also nurtured a nascent opposition to the slave trade. This opposition was rooted in the Puritan view that permitted the enslaving of war captives but frowned on "man stealing." In 1700 Massachusetts chief justice Samuel Sewall published *The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial*, which began, "It is most certain that all Men, as they are the Sons of *Adam*, are Coheirs; and have equal Right unto Liberty, and all other outward

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<sup>4</sup>Piersen, *Black Yankees*, 165; *Acts and Resolves . . . of Massachusetts*, vol. 13, 1741-1747, (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1905), Acts of 1744-45, chap. 176, Feb. 2, 1745; Greene, *Negro in Colonial New England*, 134-142; *Boston Selectmen's Minutes, 1736-1742* (Boston: Boston Record Commissioners, 1890), 241-42; Mass. Acts and Resolves, 1742-56, 3: 645-48; *Boston Selectmen's Minutes, 1769-1775* (Boston: Boston Record Commissioners, 1892), 45.

<sup>5</sup>Shane White, "'It Was a Proud Day': African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741-1834," *Journal of American History* 81 (1994), 13-34; Joseph P. Reidy, "'Negro Election Day' and Black Community Life in New England, 1750-1860," *Marxist Perspectives* (Fall 1978): 102-14; Cottrol, *Afro-Yankees*, 23; James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 39.

Comforts of Life.”<sup>6</sup> It is therefore perhaps not surprising that slaves, with the support of sympathetic whites, began in 1765 to file a series of lawsuits challenging their status. Three decades later, John Adams remarked that he “never knew a Jury, by a Verdict to determine a Negro to be a slave -- They always found them free.”<sup>7</sup> Juries became more sympathetic to the cause of slaves as popular opposition to Britain’s measures intensified in the colonies.

Many colonists began to contemplate the apparent contradiction between democratic ideals and the existence slavery in their midst. Boston attorney James Otis, in his famed pamphlet *The Rights of British Colonies* (1764), wrote: “The Colonists are by the law of nature free born, as indeed all men are, white or black. . . . Does it follow that ’tis right to enslave a man because he is black?” Slavery, Otis noted, “is the most shocking violation of the law of nature, has a direct tendency to diminish the idea of the inestimable value of liberty, and makes every dealer in it a tyrant. . . . those who every day barter away other men’s liberty, will soon care little for their own.”<sup>8</sup>

Not surprisingly, African Americans became involved the cause for freedom from British rule. One of the more famous examples occurred on March 2, 1770, when the mulatto sailor Crispus Attucks was the first man killed in the Boston Massacre, a violent skirmish between dockworkers and British military forces. Along with the others slain, Attucks was feted as a

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<sup>6</sup>Samuel Sewall, *The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial* (Boston: Bartholomew Green and John Allen, 1700), 1.

<sup>7</sup>John Adams to Jeremy Belknap, 21 March 1795, Mass. Historical Society (reproduced in *Collections*). See also ; Timothy H. Breen, “Making History: The Force of Public Opinion and the Last Years of Slavery in Revolutionary Massachusetts,” in *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America*, eds. Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredricka J. Teute (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 81-82.

<sup>8</sup>James Otis, *The Rights of British Colonies Asserted and Proved* (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1764).

martyr. Phillis Wheatley, born in West Africa in 1753 or 1754 and sold to John Wheatley in Boston at the age of seven, gained fame in the late 1760s as a teenage poet prodigy. Although some of her most famous works gave thanks for being brought to a Christian America, her public view shifted in the revolutionary environment. In 1772 Phillis wrote a long work that linked her love of the emerging concept of American freedom to her “cruel fate” of being “snatch’d from Afric’s fancy’d happy seat.”<sup>9</sup> But the most important embrace by blacks of revolutionary goals came in a series of petitions beginning a year later.<sup>10</sup>

This first plea was submitted to colonial Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson, the Governor’s Council, and the House of Representatives, on January 6, 1773. The petitioner was a black man named Felix (probably Felix Holbrook, who also signed subsequent petitions), who made his appeal on behalf of “many Slaves” in Boston and elsewhere in Massachusetts. He began with an appeal to Christianity and then referred in an oblique way to the then-recent *Somerset* decision by invoking God, who “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.” In the *Somerset* case, the Chief Justice of the King’s Bench had ruled in June 1772 that slavery could not exist in England or its colonies unless it was explicitly established by written law. In his petition Felix bowed to popular prejudice by noting that “some of the Negroes are vicious,” but he insisted that most slaves would be industrious if they were

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<sup>9</sup>Phillis Wheatley, “To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth,” in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: A. Bell, 1773).

<sup>10</sup>All of the petitions discussed in this paper with the exception of the one submitted in June 1774 and the one in New Hampshire in 1779 were reprinted in Herbert Apthetker, ed., *Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, 6 vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1951), 1: 5-12. Some of these lack the signatories of the originals. Below I cite the original publications or the Massachusetts Historical Society’s digitized version of the manuscripts.

freed. He also pointedly observed that although male slaves were deprived of everything considered proper for men (wives, property, and children), they would obey their masters as long as they remained slaves. According to Felix, they wanted only “such Relief” that would cause the “least Wrong or Injury to our Masters.” Felix clearly advocated freedom for slaves yet did not mention the word. While he was the only signatory, on the same day an individual known as Hume wrote a letter in support of Felix’s petition to the governor and the House of Representatives. That letter, published in the *Massachusetts Spy* on January 28, brought up the *Somerset* ruling, moral arguments against slavery, and broader movements in the colony for the recognition of human rights.<sup>11</sup>

Three and a half months later on April 20, there came a very different petition from Felix Holbrook, Peter Bestes (or Bess), Sambo Freeman, and Chester Joe. Addressed to delegates in the House of Representatives, it was printed so that it could be distributed widely. The petition began by noting with considerable irony that the House’s recent efforts “to free themselves from slavery”—i.e., the colony’s opposition to the Sugar Act, Stamp Act, and Townshend Duties—“gave us, who are in that deplorable state, a high degree of satisfaction” and then added: “We expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their *fellow-men* to enslave them.” As in Felix’s earlier petition, the signatories assured their readers that they were not demanding all that was due to them by “right,” because that would harm their masters. Nor did they want to “dictate” policy to the House of Representatives, but they expected that the delegates, motivated by “principles of equity and justice,” would take their “deplorable

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<sup>11</sup>[Anonymous], *The Appendix: or, Some Observations on the Expediency of the Petition of the Africans, Living in Boston, &c.* (Boston: E. Russell, 1773), 9-11, 13-15. These pages include Felix, petition to Mass. Assembly, January 6, 1773, and “Hume” [pseud.], letter to Mass. House and Governor [untitled], originally in the *Massachusetts Spy*, January 28, 1773.

case” into consideration. This time, the petitioners asked for their “natural right” to “freedom” and offered to submit to whatever laws and regulations were imposed until they could earn enough money to return to the coast of Africa—a goal not mentioned in the petition of January 1773.<sup>12</sup>

Approximately one year later, on May 25 and again in June, two more petitions from African Americans were submitted, this time to British Governor Thomas Gage and the military government that had just been imposed in Massachusetts in response to popular unrest. There is no surviving record of signatories for either petition. The May petition referenced the *Somerset* decision and asserted that blacks were held in slavery “by divine permission,” which implied that the laws of Massachusetts had not permitted their enslavement. This petition stated that “the laws of the Land . . . doth not justify but condemns Slavery” and that those held in bondage had “a natural right” to freedom. It also included an extended discussion of how slaves had been prevented from acting as husbands, wives, or even parents. The petitioners concluded with requests to be “liberated and made free men” and to be given land for farms. The petition of June 1774 pointed to the *Somerset* decision and noted that no laws or contracts had made blacks slaves; it also put more emphasis on religion and even hinted at a connection between the forced servitude of African Americans and that of the Israelites in Egypt. This petition asked for recognition of the “Natural rights or freedoms” of slaves and for their children to be freed at age twenty-one, but it made no request for land and did not mention Africa, apart from the reference

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<sup>12</sup>Bestes, Peter, et al, *Boston, April 20th, 1773: Sir, The Efforts made by the Legislative [sic] of This Province in Their Last Sessions to Free Themselves from Slavery* (Boston: s.n., 1773).

to the Israelites' bondage.<sup>13</sup>

As the politics of the region spun toward revolution and war, some African Americans sided with the colonists while others developed ties with the British authorities. Perhaps this was because many slaves were seeking the best opportunity for freedom. On September 22, 1774, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, the future president John Adams, that she had heard in Boston of "a conspiracy of the negroes," who had offered Governor Gage their military service if he armed and freed them.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps this rumor was connected to the May and June petitions, but the colonists would have been particularly fearful given Parliament's imposition of the Coercive Acts in punishment for the Boston Tea Party. Those measures not only blockaded Boston, required the colonists to house British soldiers, and exempted British officials from local courts, but repealed the Massachusetts charter and put the province under martial law directed by Gage. On March 6, 1775, as angry colonists moved to resist these measures, fifteen free black men, including Peter Best and Prince Hall, become members of the Masonic lodge that was affiliated with a British army regiment quartered in Boston.<sup>15</sup> About three weeks later, African Americans

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<sup>13</sup>"Petition for freedom to Massachusetts Governor Thomas Gage, His Majesty's Council, and the House of Representatives, 25 May 1774," *African Americans and the End of Slavery*, Massachusetts Historical Society, from the Jeremy Belknap papers, image at [http://www.masshist.org/database/onview\\_full.cfm?queryID=589](http://www.masshist.org/database/onview_full.cfm?queryID=589), transcription at [http://www.masshist.org/database/transcription.cfm?transcriptDir=masshist&transcript=lst\\_a\\_477\\_9.xml&queryID=589](http://www.masshist.org/database/transcription.cfm?transcriptDir=masshist&transcript=lst_a_477_9.xml&queryID=589), accessed January 4, 2010; "Petition for freedom to Massachusetts Governor Thomas Gage, His Majesty's Council, and the House of Representatives, June 1774," *African Americans and the End of Slavery*, Massachusetts Historical Society, from the Jeremy Belknap papers, image at [http://www.masshist.org/database/onview\\_full.cfm?queryID=590](http://www.masshist.org/database/onview_full.cfm?queryID=590), transcription at [http://www.masshist.org/database/transcription.cfm?transcriptDir=masshist&transcript=lst\\_a\\_478\\_0.xml&queryID=590](http://www.masshist.org/database/transcription.cfm?transcriptDir=masshist&transcript=lst_a_478_0.xml&queryID=590), accessed January 4, 2010.

<sup>14</sup>Abigail Adams to John Adams, September 22, 1774, *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. L.H. Butterfield, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963-), 1: 162.

<sup>15</sup>Sidney Kaplan and Emma Nogrady Kaplan, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution*, rev. ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1989), 203-5.

in Bristol and Worcester counties asked the revolutionary committees of correspondence in Worcester County to help them gain freedom. On April 19 came the outbreak of war at Lexington and Concord. Free and enslaved African Americans fought with town militias at those engagements. They were among the forces of colonists at Charlestown that besieged Boston and tried to hold the line on June 17 at the Battle of Bunker Hill. By that time, General Gage was indeed considering enlisting African Americans, if only to entice them away from helping the American forces.

Congress appointed George Washington commander of American forces on June 15, 1775. When he arrived in Massachusetts in July, with British troops still besieged in Boston, he and his staff were scandalized to find blacks in the ranks. On October 8, his council tried to eject slaves and free blacks from the Continental Army. But the protests of militia officers and shortfalls in recruiting—plus the willingness of the British to enlist blacks—forced Washington to change course. He first tolerated, then encouraged free blacks to enlist and finally asked Congress to permit slaves to enlist with their owners' permission. While a few black units were formed—most notably the Bucks of America, a Massachusetts company singled out after the war for special honors—most African American soldiers served in integrated units. British and Hessian observers noted that New England companies in particular contained very high percentages of blacks. It would not be until the Korean War during the early 1950s, over one hundred seventy years later, that African Americans would again serve their country in integrated units.<sup>16</sup>

On March 17, 1776, the British Army evacuated Boston; before the units left, black members of the Masonic lodge sponsored by the army were granted a limited dispensation to

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<sup>16</sup>Kaplan and Kaplan, *Black Presence*, 34-35, 64-65, *passim* 34-73.

maintain their group. On July 4, 1776, Congress declared independence. Five months later, on January 13, 1777, a group of eight African Americans submitted a petition to the Massachusetts General Court on behalf of “a great number of Negroes” that called for an end to slavery.

The petition began by stating that it was an appeal on behalf of not only the signatories but also “a great number of Negroes,” many then living in a “state of slavery.” The three previous petitions for freedom submitted between January 1773 and May 1774 had begun similarly. But the 1777 petition was the first effort by African Americans to improve their situation after the country had declared itself free of British rule. The petition relied heavily on concepts that emerged with the European Enlightenment in the late seventeenth century, particularly the notion first expressed by the English political philosopher John Locke in 1690 that all humans were born with the “natural” rights of life, liberty, and property. Locke and later Enlightenment thinkers also held that government was not something imposed by God on sinful humans, but a contract created by people long ago in order to protect their natural rights from greed or passion, and that if a government violated those rights the people had the right to change the government. These concepts would become foundations of the American Revolution and were carefully chosen by Thomas Jefferson to open the Declaration of Independence—published just six months before the eight Boston blacks presented their petition for liberty and freedom to the Massachusetts House. This argument was quite different from that advanced in the other four petitions, all of which made only passing nods at Enlightenment thought and had instead emphasized Christian morality, the “unmanly” situations of the petitioners, and the *Somerset* decision.

Although the document is not divided into sections, it may be considered in three parts.

In the first part, the petitioners called forth concepts cherished by political leaders in the state (and country) and condemned the international slave trade as a violation of those values. They declared that blacks have “a natural & unalienable right” to the freedom granted to all mankind, “which they have never forfeited by any compact or agreement.” This phrasing is significant not only because of the reference to natural rights but also because the giver of freedom is described not as Christ or God but as the “great Parent of the Universe”—a phrase in tune with Enlightenment notions of the universe as a machine that God created with predictable rules understandable by humans. The opening perhaps also retains the scent of a reference to the *Somerset* decision. The next clause invokes the emerging Euro-American notion of sentimentalism, that citizens in a republic needed to develop the virtuous and benevolent moral *feelings* that could only be fostered within a loving family and by the manly bonds of friendship. Thus the petitioners decried the “cruel hand” of the slave traders, who “unjustly dragged” blacks “from their dearest friends,” some “even torn from the embraces of their tender Parents.” These practices are condemned as being in violation of the “Laws of Nature & of Nation”—a reference to both Locke and the *Somerset* ruling as well as “in defiance of all the tender feelings of humanity.” In perhaps the most unexpected clause, the petitioners associate their lost happiness with “a populous, pleasant and plentiful Country,” rather than an African continent more usually depicted (even by Phillis Wheatley) as barbaric, savage, and dark.

The next part first offers flowery praise, then bitter criticism. Here, the petition extolled New Englanders for “professing the mild Religion of Jesus” (the tone of the word *professing* is perhaps mildly scolding) and being “not insensible of the sweets of rational freedom.” By commending the “spirit” by which the American colonists had resisted “the unjust endeavors of others to reduce them to a State of Bondage & Subjection,” this section makes the connection

between the ideals of the American Revolution and freedom from slavery. The petitioners then pointedly noted that the leaders of the state “need not to be informed” that a life of slavery without any rights was “far worse than Non-Existence”—that is, even harsher than life under British military rule and Parliament’s authority. The petitioners voiced their bewilderment and “grief” at how, “in imitation of the laudable example” of American democratic practices, they had submitted “petition after petition” to the state legislature. Yet their efforts had been to no avail, much as the efforts of colonial American leaders had failed to gain a sympathetic ear in Parliament. There is no indication that this rebuke was meant to threaten a potential uprising by Massachusetts slaves, but a veiled hint at the level of their collective frustration would not have been amiss. The petitioners then expressed “their astonishment” that their fellow Americans had not yet conceded that the principles upon which the Revolution was grounded pleaded “stronger than a thousand arguments” in support of freedom for slaves.

The third and last part of the petition was its most substantive section. It called on the House of Representatives to pass a measure ending slavery, although the petitioners were, they wrote, willing for their children born in America to remain slaves until the age of twenty-one. They observed that ending slavery would not be giving slaves new rights but restoring them “to the enjoyment of that freedom which is the natural right of all Men.” Again, the petitioners called attention to the principle of natural rights. Unlike previous requests, this petition did not propose that any consideration should be given to slave owners, nor does it ask for land on which former slaves could start farms, nor was there any suggestion of blacks returning to Africa. If the legislature were to grant the petition’s request, the petitioners noted, it would free the people of Massachusetts from “the inconsistency of acting, themselves, the part which they condemn & oppose in others.” And the people of Massachusetts would therefore “certainly be prospered in

their present glorious struggles for Liberty.”

The eight men addressed their petition to the Massachusetts legislature, which consisted of the House of Representatives and the Revolutionary Council—this Council functioned as the upper legislative house before the state constitution of 1780 took effect. Of course it would be that body which would or would not pass the measures that might ameliorate or even eliminate slavery in the new state. But the petition was also clearly directed at various community leaders (ministers, merchants, lawyers), the general public, and African Americans throughout New England. The petitioners knew that their request would be reported and circulated widely.

The first response to the petition came from the Massachusetts legislature, which drafted and considered a bill that would have outlawed slavery, declaring it “unjustifiable in a civil government at a time when [the former colonies] are asserting their national freedom.” It also would have given freedmen “all the freedom, rights, privileges and immunities” of white adult males living in the state, which would have included the right to vote and hold office for those who also met the property-ownership requirement. The bill would have barred any agreements that conveyed or transferred ownership of any person aged twenty-one or older. It also would have tried to avoid adding to the tax burden of towns by “allowing” slaves who were “incapable of earning their living by reason of age or infirmities” to remain in service to their owners (and supported by said owners) if they “voluntarily declared the same before two justices of the county.” The bill also would have allowed ship owners to import indentured servants who were “not from Africa or any other country outside the U.S.” The measure did not become law, however, apparently because the state assembly was reluctant to be the first in the union to take such an action. Instead, the question of emancipation was referred to the Continental Congress,

which did nothing.<sup>17</sup>

In a less direct fashion, the petition may have influenced the wording of the Massachusetts constitution and the outcome of two pivotal legal cases in which slaves had brought suit against their owners. Several Massachusetts towns rejected the draft of the state constitution of 1778 partly because it contained no explicit condemnation of slavery. Although the state constitution of 1780 also lacked a ban on slavery, its first article declared that “all men are born free and equal”—a statement that indeed led to the end of slavery in Massachusetts. In 1781 Elizabeth Freeman, a slave owned by John Ashley of Sheffield, cited the first article of the state constitution in her lawsuit asking for her freedom. A local jury decided in her favor. That same year, Quock Walker sued his owner, Nathaniel Jennison; during this trial Chief Justice William Cushing instructed the court that the first article had effectively banned slavery in the state. While there is no direct connection between the petition of January 1777 and these developments, certainly this petition and others like it helped lay the ideological groundwork for the abolition of slavery.<sup>18</sup>

The Boston petition apparently inspired groups of blacks in other parts of New England to take similar steps. In May 1779, several Connecticut men asked the state legislature for freedom: like those in Boston, they bemoaned how they had been “unjustly torn, torn from the Bosom of their dear Parents, and Friends,” and then doomed without trial or law to slavery and ignorance. They saluted the state’s leaders “who are nobly contenting, in the Cause of Liberty,” and flattered them that given those efforts they “will not resent” the petition against the

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<sup>17</sup>Draft legislation, 1777 [no month or day given], SC1 45X, Mass. Archives, vol. 212, pp. 130-31, Massachusetts Archives, Boston.

<sup>18</sup>“The Legal End of Slavery in Massachusetts,” *African Americans and the End of Slavery*, Massachusetts Historical Society, <http://www.masshist.org/endofslavery/?queryID=54>, accessed January 14, 2010.

“detestable Practice” of slavery. While the petitioners were aware that their skin had a different color than that of their owners.

Reason & Revelation join to declare, that we are the Creatures of that God, who made of one Blood, and Kindred, all the Nations of the Earth; we perceive by our own Reflection, that we are endowed with the same Faculties with our masters., and there is nothing that leads us to a Belief, or Suspicion, that we are any more obliged to serve them, than they us, and the more we Consider of this matter, the more we are Convinced of our Right (by the Laws of Nature and by the whole Tenor of the Christian Religion, so far as we have been taught) to be Free.

They challenged the state assembly to consider “whether it is consistent with the present Claims, of the united States, to hold so many Thousands, of the Race of Adam, our Common Father, in perpetual Slavery.”<sup>19</sup> This language seems somewhat more moderate than that in the Boston petition.

Just five months later, in November 1779, twenty New Hampshire “natives of Africa” went beyond their compatriots in Boston in their perception of why the state legislature had to free them. They began by insisting that “the God of Nature gave them life and freedom, upon terms of the most perfect equality with other men; that freedom is an inherit right of the human species, not to be surrendered, but by consent, for the sake of social life, that private or public tyranny and slavery, are alike detestable.” In ever more strident language, the petitioners noted

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<sup>19</sup>Prime “a Negro man,” et al, Fairfield, Conn., to the Connecticut Assembly, May 4, 1779, Connecticut Archives, Revolutionary War, 1<sup>st</sup> Ser., 30:232a-d, transcript in Gary Nash, ed., *Race and Revolution* (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1990), 174-75.

that neither Christianity, nor “reason and justice,” nor the “volumes of Nature” justified those “who claim us as their property.” The radical language of the petitioners, particularly their claim to “perfect equality with other men,” may have reflected the confident anger of one man in particular: Prince Whipple, who in the winter of 1776-1777 had served in the Continental Army and even helped row General Washington across the Delaware River.<sup>20</sup>

Another impact of the Boston petition was the role that it played in helping to forge a black community in that city. Because African Americans lived scattered around the city and mostly within white-headed households until the 1820s, the petitions submitted before, during, and soon after the American Revolution were not simply requests or demands for legislative action; just as importantly, they served to unify and organize the African American community. The 1777 petition seems to have served a particularly important role, not only in its language, concepts, demands, and results, but because it was the first one signed and probably directed. As the war ended, Hall became the first leader of Boston’s African American community—the largest in New England—and continued in that role until his death at the turn of the century, helping to organize and direct its first critical social, religious, and educational institutions. Hall’s subsequent speeches and petitions were written a similar style to this petition, which indicates that he may have also been its author.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Nero Brewster, et al., Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to New Hampshire assembly, November 12, 1779, printed in *The New Hampshire Gazette*, July 15, 1780, p. 1, cols. 1-3, reprinted in Kaplan and Kaplan, *Black Presence*, 30. On Whipple see Kaplan and Kaplan, *Black Presence*, 29, 49-50.

<sup>21</sup>The ideological and social context of the petitions through 1777 are examined briefly in Thomas J. Davis, “Emancipation, Rhetoric, Natural Rights, and Revolutionary New England: A Note on Four Black Petitions in Massachusetts, 1773-1777,” *New England Quarterly* 62 (1989): 248-63. Davis does not, however, discuss the effects of these petitions, either upon the institution of slavery in the region nor in the establishment of African American communities. I

Little has been documented of Hall's life before the American Revolution. There are conflicting stories, but the most generally accepted one is that he was born in 1735, where we don't know, and first appeared in Boston in the 1740s as a slave belonging to William Hall. In support of this version, Hall himself had testified just before his death in 1807 that he was about seventy years old. In 1756 he fathered a son named Primus, whose mother was Delia, a servant in another household. In 1770 Hall was given freedom by his master one month after the Boston Massacre. It is unknown whether Hall fought during the American Revolution. Besides this petition, the only documents about Hall that date from the war years are records that he owned property and paid taxes. There is also a bill that he submitted on April 24, 1777, for five drumheads, which shows that his trade was a leather-dressing.<sup>22</sup>

Hall's leadership role among African Americans in Boston became clear when he kept that 1775 Masonic lodge alive after the British left Boston and white Masons in the United States refused to recognize the now all-black organization. In March 1784, Hall asked the leaders of the fraternal order of Free and Accepted Masons in London for a charter that would give the African American lodge in Boston the same powers as other lodges, including the ability to initiate new Masons. That charter was granted in the spring of 1787, officially recognizing African Lodge No. 1 with Prince Hall as Master. The lodge provided services to black Bostonians: free firewood, periodic food drives for those in need, weekly "sick dues," and loans for members and their families. It later became known as the Prince Hall Lodge, and today,

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also see the 1777 petition as more distinct from its predecessors and more significant from a political and ideological standpoint.

<sup>22</sup>Kaplan and Kaplan, *Black Presence*, 202-3.

there are forty-seven Prince Hall Lodges that have grown out of the original Boston lodge.<sup>23</sup>

Hall sought to strengthen political bonds between African Americans and Massachusetts political leaders. In late November 1786 Hall offered Governor James Bowdoin seven hundred African American men to help put down Shays's Rebellion. Farmers and gentry in the poorer, rural western part of the state, angered at their inability to pay high state taxes imposed to meet Revolutionary War debts held mostly by wealthy Bostonians, had taken up weapons and forced the county courts to close in order to stop foreclosures. Boston merchants helped pay for an army assembled in the east, since more local militia seemed untrustworthy; that force confronted and dispersed the "rebels" and arrested many. But the governor turned down Hall's offer, probably because he and other Boston elites feared placing weapons in the hands of so many African American men.<sup>24</sup>

One month later, perhaps in part because of the governor's rebuff, Hall submitted a petition from the African Lodge to the General Court that complained about society's poor treatment of blacks and the lack of opportunity for them; the petition also sought assistance in returning blacks to Africa. In October 1787, Hall submitted a petition with many signatories that charged that since African Americans paid district taxes their children had the right to be educated in the city's schools. A few months later, he organized a petition signed by twenty-two Masons for the return of three free Boston African Americans who had been kidnapped and subsequently sold as slaves. On March 26, 1788, the General Court responded with an act that banned the slave trade and gained relief for blacks kidnapped from Massachusetts and resold into

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<sup>23</sup>George Crawford, *Prince Hall and His Followers; Being a Monograph on the Legitimacy of Negro Masonry* (1914; New York, AMS Press, 1971); Kaplan and Kaplan, *Black Presence*, 202-5.

<sup>24</sup>Kaplan and Kaplan, *Black Presence*, 205-6.

slavery. The return of the three men in July 1788 was celebrated at the African Lodge.<sup>25</sup>

During the 1790s Hall was instrumental in the creation of organizations to meet the needs of Boston's African American community. In 1792 he delivered a speech in Charlestown in which he criticized Massachusetts towns for taxing African Americans while refusing to allow their children to attend local schools. The speech was published that year "at the Request of the Lodge" as *A Charge Delivered to the Brethren of the African Lodge on the 25th of June, 1792* and sold in Boston by T.J. Fleet. Four years afterward, he brought up this same issue with the Boston selectmen (city administrative officials) but again failed to gain admittance of black children to area schools. Hall then established an independent black school at the Boston African Meeting House, with his son, Primus, as teacher. In 1796 Hall helped found the African Society of Boston, which provided various forms of assistance to Boston-area blacks who were not Masons. Society members were required to live according to an upright moral code and emulate then-emerging middle-class social values, even though the majority of blacks were of very limited means and unable to attain a middle-class living standard. Hall's last public address was to the African Masonic Lodge on June 24, 1797, in which he celebrated the success of the Haitian slave revolt of 1791 and urged his brothers to exercise patience despite their regular abuse in Boston. He died ten years later.<sup>26</sup>

While many people of color continued in servitude, particularly indentured children, and limited emancipation laws in Rhode Island and Connecticut kept many African descendants in slavery, the emergence of a free black community was undeniable. The slave population in southern New England declined from about 10,000 in 1775 to about 3,500 in 1790. Perhaps the

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 206-11.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 211-14.

most noteworthy characteristic of this emerging free black community was its urbanity. Most African Americans in the region already lived in port towns, particularly Boston, Newport, New Haven, and Providence, but with emancipation many who had lived in rural villages with white households joined them. In 1795, Jeremy Belknap, founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society, told a Virginian correspondent that former slaves in the state “have generally, though not wholly, left the country, and resorted to the maritime towns.” Between 1790 and 1800 the black population of Boston rose 53 percent; between 1790 and 1820, it increased 125 percent. But freedom and new opportunities did not mean social and economic independence; in Providence, for example, it was not until 1810 that a majority lived in black-headed households.<sup>27</sup>

The development of Boston’s African American community was paralleled in other New England cities, and Prince Hall’s Masonic lodge became a model for similar organizations elsewhere. Some were Masonic lodges—many of which still exist today—but others were more widely aimed charitable societies. Initially, these groups stressed their African roots. In the early 1780s, blacks in Newport formed the Free African Union Society as a self-help fraternity to “improve” themselves and their community; when they invited those in Providence to form a chapter, they addressed their letter “To All the Africans in Providence.” In 1820, the Providence

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<sup>27</sup>Horton and Horton, *In Search of Liberty*, 81-83. Precise numbers are impossible to determine because free blacks tended to avoid (and were sometimes ignored by) census takers, and apparently some whites still owned slaves in Massachusetts where it was illegal, and had every reason to lie about it. Of course it was very easy to tell the census taker that a *slave* was an indentured *servant*. John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 248-49; Belknap to Tucker, 21 April 1795, in “Judge Tucker's Queries Respecting Slavery, with Doctor Belknap's Answers,” MHSC, 1st ser., 4 (1795), 206; Cottrol, *Afro-Yankees*, 48; “The Lives of African Americans in Massachusetts after the End of Slavery,” *African Americans and the End of Slavery*, Massachusetts Historical Society, <http://www.masshist.org/endofslavery/?queryID=53> , accessed January 15, 2010.

African Union Meeting House became the first black church in the city—and its dedication drew some of the most prominent whites in Rhode Island. These organizations required their members to conduct themselves in ways that mirrored the emerging Anglo-American virtues of sobriety, punctuality, and industry, and they labored to inculcate those values in the black community even as they insisted on civil if not political equality with their white neighbors.<sup>28</sup>

The January 1777 petition from Prince Hall and the other eight Boston blacks played a critical role in the movement towards emancipation and the development of the New England African American community. It recast pleas for freedom into modern Enlightenment and sentimentalist language, connected the desire of blacks for liberty with the fight for American independence, and represented a rallying point for the leadership that built the African American community in Boston. This petition also highlights how African Americans at the time, slave and free, realized the broader ideological and political issues involved in the Revolution—that it could and should have meaning for them as well—and were ready and able to make that connection clear to the powerful, their current and former masters. True, the intellectual and social climate in the region was generally shifting, but their energy and initiative was also critical. This petition also points to how Emancipation was not primarily the result of whites wanting to grant more liberty to blacks, but because blacks were pushing emancipation as a clear corollary of Revolutionary ideas and language. The 1777 petition – its words, historical context,

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<sup>28</sup>Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 142-43, 169-93; James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1979); Julian Rammelkamp, “The Providence Negro Community, 1820-1842,” *Rhode Island History* 7 (1948): 20-33; William Robinson, ed., *The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society; Newport, Rhode Island, 1780-1824* (Providence, 1976).

and signatories-- are therefore not only critical to understanding the road to abolition in the United States, but also critical to understanding one of the more radical aspects of the Revolution.

