

Primary Source

Petition to the Massachusetts Legislature, January 13, 1777



How did the principles of the Declaration of Independence contribute to the quest to end slavery?

- ☐ I can interpret primary sources related to principles of liberty, equality, and justice in the Founding era.
- ☐ I can create an argument using evidence from primary sources.
- ☐ I can analyze issues in history to help find solutions to present-day challenges.

Essential Vocabulary

Petitioning	Officially bringing grievances to requests to a governing body
Detained	Kept
Bowels	The deepest inner parts or areas of something
Bestowed	To give
Forfeited	Willingly gave up

Building Context

Petitioning, or officially bringing grievances or requests to a governing body, was a longstanding tradition in Great Britain that carried over to the North American colonies. The colonists repeatedly petitioned king and Parliament for their constitutional and natural rights during the 1760s and 1770s. Enslaved persons followed the example and petitioned legislatures for their freedom. In 1777, Prince Hall and seven other black men brought their own petition to the Massachusetts Council and the House of Representatives.

Petition to the Massachusetts Legislature, January 13, 1777

Source: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h32t.html>, <https://www.masshist.org/database/557>

<p>To the Honorable Counsel & House of Representatives for the State of Massachusetts Bay in General Court assembled, January 13, 1777:</p> <p>The petition of A Great Number of Blacks detained [kept] in a State of slavery in the Bowels [guts] of a free & Christian Country Humbly show that your Petitioners apprehend that they have in Common with all other men a Natural and Unalienable Right to that freedom which the Great Parent of the Universe Bestowed [gave] equally on all mankind and which they have Never forfeited [willingly gave up] by any Compact or agreement whatever—but that [enslaved people]were Unjustly Dragged by the hand of cruel Power and their Dearest friends and sum of them Even torn from the Embraces of their tender Parents– from A populous Pleasant and Plentiful country and in viola-tion of Laws of Nature and of Nations and in Defiance of all the tender feelings of humanity Brought here Either to Be sold like Beast of Burthen & Like them Condemned to Slavery for Life</p>	<p>Notes</p>
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Comprehension and Analysis Questions

1. To whom was this petition addressed? Who brought the petition?

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2. What are the petitioners asking for?

3. How do they support their request?

4. What does this request illustrate about Founding principles of liberty in equality and justice as understood by African Americans in the Founding era? How were these ideas turned into action?