

PETITION SOUGHT SLAVE FREEDOM

Revolution-era document tells of civil rights plight

Editor's note: This is one in a series of stories about the African Burying Ground, and about the history of Africans in Portsmouth.

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PORTSMOUTH — During the Revolutionary War era, it was not just white men in Philadelphia who wrote stirring words of freedom from tyranny.

Three years after the Declaration of Independence was

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penned, in what historians now see as an ironic twist, 20 Portsmouth slaves — including one owned by a Declaration signer — submitted their own petition for freedom. While it was ulti-

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FREEDOM: City slaves petitioned in 1779

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mately unsuccessful — it died in the N.H. General Assembly (the precursor to the Legislature), which then met in Exeter — the petition penned in November 1779 marks a significant moment in the city's black history.

"It asserts that they were born Africans and free, and shows a consciousness of being free Americans," said David Watters, a professor of English at the University of New Hampshire and a board member of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail.

A lengthy, literate and emotional document, the petition was very much in the mold of the Declaration, written at a time when the oral and written buzz throughout the colonies was replete with notions of justice, fairness and liberty for all.

It ultimately asks legislators to "enact such laws and regulations as in your wisdom think proper, whereby

we may regain our liberty and be ranked in the class of free agents and that the name of slave may not more be heard in a land gloriously contending for the sweets of freedom."

The signers were slaves owned by a who's who of Portsmouth's elite, names that ring through the centuries to today — Gardner, Warner, Brewster, Gerrish, Moffat, Odiorne.

One, Prince Whipple, was owned by William Whipple, a New Hampshire representative to the Continental Congress and a Declaration of Independence signer.

Many of these slaves were important in the community in their own right. As detailed in "Black Portsmouth," written by Valerie Cunningham and Mark Sammons, they were members of the "Negro Court."

The Negro Court was in essence a black government that existed side by side with the white government in Portsmouth — as well as in other cities across the Northeast.

The court was chosen by slave members of the Portsmouth community. According to Robert Dishman, a retired Dartmouth College professor who wrote about the petition in a publication of the New Hampshire Historical Society, the "social rank and influence of slaves tended to follow that of the master."

Each June, following elections, they would gather for a procession.

"Arrayed in brilliant clothes, the region's black population assembled, then processed out of the city center to the outskirts and returned some hours later with festive music and boisterous gunfire to a grand celebration of their newly elected monarch and court," Cunningham and Sammons wrote.

The court was led by a king — likely a nod to the royalty of tribes in Africa. In the period when the petition was written, the court consisted of "King" Nero Brewster, owned by Col. William Brewster; Viceroy Willie Clarkson, owned by



According to the city's African Burying Ground Committee, this West African Adinkra symbol, called a sankofa, means "Return and Get It — Learn from the Past." It was found at a burial ground in New York and will be used in Portsmouth's memorial park.

Peirse Clarkson; Sheriff Jock Odiorne and Deputy Pharaoh Shores.

Cunningham and Sammons said the court was "held in high regard" by the slave community and it meted out justice for minor crimes. They mention an incident in which a slave was charged with stealing an axe, was found guilty by the court, and was sentenced to 20 lashes — the punishment dealt in public by Willie Clarkson.

"It was a way within slavery to maintain social order and a sense of community," Watters said. "They replicated the white hierarchy and power structure, and it is obvious that there was at least some cooperation and perhaps even some status within white families of having a slave on the court."

But Watters said it's also the case that slaves, as property, likely couldn't be found guilty and punished in the white judicial system because they weren't free.

It is not known who actually wrote the petition. Dishman, in his article in "Historical New Hampshire," makes the case that it was likely written by Jonathan Mitchell Sewall, an attorney and abolitionist who had recently moved to the Portsmouth area.

Cunningham and Sammons said there is no reason to believe the author was not black, and point to African-born Boston poet Phyllis Wheatley as proof that blacks of the

era had mastered the English language sufficiently to have written the petition.

Watters can see both points of view. "No doubt there were sympathetic whites who would be agreed with this move toward freedom," he said. "But I would not rule out the possibility that this is a black-authored text."

He said the Revolutionary War years were incredibly rich in both oral and written treatises on freedom, and blacks as well as whites were caught up in the fervor of the era.

The language in the petition was "well known. There were similar petitions in other cities. Newspapers were around. And don't forget the oral culture. This was a time when John and Sam Adams were giving speeches," he said.

The petition was not brought before the New Hampshire General Assembly until April 1780. At that time, members ordered it to be published in the New Hampshire Gazette "that any person or persons may then appear and shew (sic) cause why the prayer thereof may not be granted."

The following summer, when it was published in the newspaper, there was "an editorial disclaimer that it was printed 'for the amusement' of its readers," Cunningham and Sammons wrote.

The House postponed a hearing on the petition, and there was never any other legislative action on it.

Tooth or Consequences



Presented by

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ARTFUL RESTORATION

A dental "inlay" is a dental restoration that is often used to repair areas of decay that are too large to support a filling but not so large that a crown is necessary. Inlays generally cover chewing surfaces between cusps in molars, and "onlays" are used to restore fractured cusps. To prepare an inlay, the dentist makes a wax mold of the space left after the damaged portion of the tooth is removed. Then, the mold is sent to a lab, where the custom inlay is created (usually out of gold alloy.) Finally, the inlay is set into place, using cement. The