

# 234 years later, N.H. Legislature might answer slaves' plea for freedom

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On Nov. 12, 1779, 20 black slaves in Portsmouth sent a petition to New Hampshire's General Assembly. Amid the rhetoric and battles of the Revolutionary War, they asked lawmakers to free them and make sure "that the Name of Slave may not more be heard in a Land gloriously contending for the Sweets of Freedom."

The appeal fell flat. The legislature, according to its official proceedings, held a hearing but decided to postpone any action until "a more convenient opportunity."

Now, state Sen. Martha Fuller Clark thinks Nero Brewster, Pharaoh Rogers, Prince Whipple and the 17 other men who signed the petition deserve some measure of closure. Fuller Clark, a Portsmouth Democrat, has introduced a bill at the Legislature to act on the petition and posthumously free the 20 slaves.

"It's more to really honor the request of those petitioners, and not . . . to leave it unresolved," she said. "It's a gesture of goodwill that we should all be proud to support in the 21st century."

### The forgotten

There were several hundred slaves living in New Hampshire at the end of the colonial era. After the colonies won their independence from Great Britain, the state Constitution adopted in 1783 declared that "all men are born equally free and independent." But slavery apparently continued to exist on a small scale – the 1800 federal census found eight slaves living in New Hampshire, out of a total population of 183,858.

It wasn't until 1857 that the Legislature enacted a law stating that skin color did not bar any person from the full rights of citizenship. At the

time, tensions were rising between the northern and southern states over abolition and the expansion of slavery, and the Civil War began a few years later. At the war's end in 1865, New Hampshire ratified the 13th Amendment that at last ended slavery in the United States.

New Hampshire remains one of the country's whitest states, but attention has been focused in recent years on the history of local African Americans.

In October 2003, what was identified in historical maps as a "Negro Burying Ground" was rediscovered under Portsmouth's Chestnut Street. The next year, the city appointed a committee to commemorate the site, which is estimated to contain as many as 200 graves, and a fundraising effort is under way to create a memorial park there.

The 1779 petition is part of the community's history, and Fuller Clark said her bill was filed at the request of the organizers of the African Burying Ground Memorial Park.

"It's long overdue," said Vernis Jackson, chairwoman of the African Burying Ground Committee and the founder and president of the Seacoast African American Cultural Center. "But not only is it important for the petitioners, but for the people who are interred at the burial ground site in Portsmouth. It's important to recognize their contributions not only to the community and to the state, but to the building of this country."

The theme of the memorial park project is "We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten," Jackson said, and the petitioners were forgotten, too.

'The most perfect Equality'

According to the text as recorded in state records, the petition was written in the name of 20 men: Brewster, Rogers, Whipple (who was present at the 1777 Battle of Saratoga with owner William Whipple, a signer of the Declaration of Independence), Seneca Hall, Peter Warner, Cato Warner, Pharaoh Shores, Winsor Moffatt, Garrett Colton, Kittindge Tuckerman, Peter Frost, Romeo Rindge, Cato Newmarch, Cesar Gerrish, Zebulon Gardner, Quam Sherburne, Samuel Wentworth, Will Clarkson, Jack Odiorne and Cipio Hubbard.

Addressed to New Hampshire's state government, then known as the General Assembly and meeting in Exeter, the petition describes the signers as "Natives of Africa, now forcably detained in Slavery in said State," who declared "That the God of Nature, gave them, Life, and Freedom, upon the Terms of the most perfect Equality with other men."

After detailing the indignities of their enslavement, the petition asks that legislators "enact such Laws and Regulations, as you in your Wisdom think proper, whereby we may regain our Liberty & Be rank'd 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; And your humble Slaves as in Duty bound will ever Pray."

The petition was read in the House of Representatives on April 25, 1780, and ordered published in the New Hampshire Gazette for public consumption. The House took up the petition again on June 9, 1780, when it was "read, considered and argued by Counsel on behalf of the Petitioners," according to the assembly's published proceedings.

But the House decided to punt.

"It appears to this house, That at this time the House is not ripe for a Determination in this matter: Therefore ordered that the further consideration & determination of the matter be postponed till a more convenient

opportunity," the proceedings state.

It would be another 85 years before slavery was banned in the country as a whole. And while Fuller Clark said it wouldn't be appropriate to re-abolish slavery at this point, legislative action on the 1779 petition could help draw attention not only to the 20 long-dead slaves, but to their broader historical context as well.

"As we're trying to fit all the pieces together about the history of African Americans in New Hampshire, it makes good public policy to actually act upon this request," she said.

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