

# N.H. Senate passes bill to free 14 slaves

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CONCORD — The full Senate on Thursday afternoon unanimously voted to pass a bill that will posthumously free 14 Portsmouth slaves.

On a voice vote, the Senate agreed to honor a 1779 petition for freedom submitted to the state Legislature by the slaves.

“I’m thrilled,” said the bill’s sponsor, state Sen. Martha Fuller Clark, D-Portsmouth. She said that while other states are looking to recognize their slave history, New Hampshire “is the only state that has decided to amend history.”

The petition was signed by 20 Portsmouth slaves on Nov. 12, 1779, just over three years after the Declaration of Independence was signed. Submitted to the N.H. General Assembly, the precursor to the Legislature, the bill mirrored much of the same language of the Declaration.

“The petition (of the slaves, who are individually named), natives of Africa, now forcibly detained in slavery in said State most humbly sheweth that the God of Nature have them Life and Freedom upon terms of the most perfect Equality with other men,” the bill reads.

The bill freed 14 slaves because six were subsequently freed by their owners after the petition was submitted.

Fuller Clark said she thought it was especially timely that the bill was filed this year, in light of the 150th anniversary of the signing of

the Emancipation Proclamation freeing slaves.

In addition, she said the film “Lincoln” has spurred interest in the proclamation, which was ratified as the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865.

Portsmouth African-American historian Valerie Cunningham applauded the Senate’s actions Thursday.

“I’m very pleased and proud of my home state and my hometown, especially my hometown,” she said. It was Cunningham who first found the petition in state archives 30 years ago.

The posthumous freeing of the slaves who lived so long ago “is symbolic, but symbolism is very important,” Cunningham said.

New Hampshire, she said, “takes a while to come around” — giving as another example the 20-year effort to make Martin Luther King Day a holiday — “but it gives us an opportunity to raise awareness about black history.”

“You could say, ‘Yeah, it’s late,’ but it’s a good thing it’s happening now because we need to have this moment of reflection,” she said.

Sen. Nancy Stiles, R-Hampton, said she had the “privilege” as a member of the Public and Municipal Affairs Committee to bring the bill to the floor. That committee unanimously passed the bill last week. Stiles is also a cosponsor of the bill.

She said she was struck by the language used by the General Assembly that the petition “‘was not ripe and further consideration be postponed until a more convenient opportunity.’ I said that this is a ripe and convenient opportunity to get it passed.”

The bill now heads to the House. Fuller Clark said she is pleased with the Senate vote and anticipates no problem with House passage, either.

“I’m proud to have sponsored this legislation that allows us to right an injustice in our past,” she said.



Clark



Cunningham