

N.H. must give slaves freedom

Therefore, your humble slaves most devoutly pray, for the sake of insured liberty, for the sake of justice, humanity and the rights of mankind; for the honor of religion and by all that is dear, that your honors would graciously interpose on our behalf and enact such laws and regulations as in your wisdom we may regain our liberty and be rank'd in the class of free agents, and that the name of SLAVE may no more be heard in a land gloriously contending for the sweets of freedom; and your humble slaves as in duty bound will ever pay."

On Wednesday, 234 years after these words were written in a petition for freedom signed by 20 Portsmouth slaves, the state Legislature finally took up the case. Following a hearing, the Senate Committee of Public and Municipal Affairs unanimously agreed in favor of a bill that would posthumously grant the signers of the 1779 petition their freedom. The last names on the petition are literally a who's who of Portsmouth's 18th-century elite, names that ring through the centuries to today — Gardner, Warner, Brewster, Gerrish, Moffat, Odiorne. The petition is breathtaking in its scope, when seen through the 18th-century eyes of a slave. It posits the unheard-of notion that they were born African and free and — just three years after the Declaration of Independence was ratified — therefore by rights should be free Americans. It was originally submitted to the N.H. General Assembly — the precursor to the Legislature — where it languished. The assembly postponed a hearing on it and it faced no further legislative action. The New Hampshire Gazette published the petition in the summer of 1780 with "an editorial disclaimer that it was printed 'for the amusement of its readers,'" wrote Valerie Cunningham and Mark Sammons in their book "Black Portsmouth."

State Sen. Martha Fuller Clark, D-Portsmouth, submitted the bill after learning about the petition from members of the African Burying Ground Committee. The committee is raising funds to erect a memorial over the Chestnut Street site where the remains of more than a dozen Africans were found in 2003. They are among 200 believed to be buried in that area of Portsmouth that was once known as the Negro burying ground. City Councilor Chris Dwyer, a member of the committee, said when she talks to people about the burying ground, "one of the parts of the story that is most compelling is the petition — the wording and the timing." Clark said she was honored to be able to submit the bill. "This is a piece of legislation I would like to think most people in the state and in the Legislature would want to support," she said.

The bill now heads to the full Senate for action, perhaps as early as next week. If successful there, it will go to the House. We have every confidence that the Legislature's action will mirror that of the public and municipal affairs committee. Truly, we can think of no reason why a legislator from any political party in any part of the Granite State would vote against this bill. It simply and correctly rights a wrong.

As Fuller Clark says, "Why wouldn't we want to posthumously give these African Americans their freedom?"