2. A Petition for Freedom (1777)

One of the main justifications the American Patriots used to support their claim for independence was that Great Britain, with all its sudden taxes, had allegedly devised a "settled fixed plan for enslaving the colonies." Some Americans realized the hypocrisy in their argument. As Patrick Henry put it, could Americans keep nearly 20 percent of their population in bondage "at a time when the rights of humanity are defended and understood with precision in a country above all others fond of liberty?" Inspired by Patriot rhetoric, blacks began submitting petitions for better treatment to colonial legislatures as early as 1773. In 1777, six months after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, eight African-Americans from Boston petitioned the Massachusetts General Court (the state assembly) to free all the slaves in the state. Unfortunately, the petition was tabled and the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts had to wait until Elizabeth Freeman's 1781 lawsuit.


[In imitation of the Lawdable Example of the Good People of these States your petitioners have Long and Patience waited the Event of petition after petition By them presented to the Legislative Body of this year and cannot but with.Grief Reflect that their Success has been but too similar They cannot but express their A stishment that it has Never bin Considered that Every Principle from which America has Acted in the Course of their unhappy Difficulties with Great Britain Plesab Stronger than a Thousand arguments in favours of your petitioners they therfor humbly Beg you to grant your honour to give this petition its due weight & consideration & cause an act of the Legislature to be past Whereby they may be restored to the Enjoyments of that which is the Natural Right of all men—and their Children who wher Born in this Land of Liberty may not be held as Slaves after they arrive at the age of twenty one years so may the Inhabitant of this State No longer chargeable with the inconsistency of acting themselves the part which they condemn and oppose in others be pros- pered in their present Glorious struggle for Liberty and have those Blessing to them. Sec.]

Prince Hall
Lancaster Hâ'
Peter Bess
Brenton Sense
Jack Pierpont
Neyo Fundo
Newport Sunner
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Questions
1. How does this document reveal the political sophistication and racial consciousness of the African-Americans who wrote it?
2. Given what the petitioners claimed, did colonial American slaveholders have a moral right to maintain African-Americans in bondage? How could slaveholders justify continued enslavement?