

Analyzing Slave Petitions in the Revolutionary Period

Lesson Plan

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Objective: Students will use their knowledge of the Declaration of Independence and the ideals of the American Revolution to analyze the petitions of enslaved people to determine if the enslaved used Revolutionary principles in seeking freedom.

Time Frame: 1 class period

Anticipatory Set: As a class we will review what we had learned about the basic principles of the American Revolution as outlined in the Declaration of Independence. These principles include that “all men are created equal”, men have natural rights to life, liberty and property (pursuit of happiness), legitimate government gets its power from the consent of the governed, governments exist to protect men’s natural rights, and when government fails to protect those natural rights it is up to the people to revise or replace the government.

Introduction:

1. After the review of the basic principles of the American Revolution, split the class into 6 small groups and assign each group a slave petition.
2. Ask students to select a recorder and presenter for their group. The recorder will use the “Revolutionary War Slave Petition Analysis” worksheet to record the answers of the group and the presenter will present the group’s findings to the class.

Procedures:

1. In groups students will read their assigned slave petition and discuss the questions found on the “Revolutionary War Slave Petition Analysis” worksheet. The group recorder will record the group’s answers on the worksheet. As groups are working, the teacher will walk around the room assisting students with reading and analyzing the slave petitions.
2. When all groups have read and discussed their slave petition the class will come back together to discuss each group’s petition. The presenter for each group will describe their petition (who wrote it, where it was written, date and who it was submitted to), explain what the petition is asking, whether it discusses the conflict between Great Britain and the colonies or uses any of the language or basic principles of the American Revolution, then will discuss the merits of the petition and whether they believe it should be granted.
3. After every group presenter has told the class about their assigned slave petition the class will discuss the similarities and differences of it, how the Revolution may have

influenced the petitioners and whether the institution of slavery is consistent with the basic principles of the American Revolution.

Homework: Students will read and analyze Frederick Douglass' speech "What to a Slave is the 4th of July".

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july/>

Group Members: _____ Block: _____

Revolutionary War Slave Petitions Analysis

Introduction: The Founders were united in their unequivocal denunciations of slavery. Consider, for example, Thomas Jefferson's forceful condemnation of the evils of slavery in his original draft of the Declaration of Independence: the king "has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty" by condoning the slave trade. The principles of equality and liberty also inspired the slaves' own eloquent pleadings. Particularly striking is their embrace of natural rights as the basis of their liberty. Natural rights, the rights all possess simply by being human, protect conscience, property, and self-government, as stated in the Declaration of Independence.

Document: _____

Directions: In your group read the Introduction and the slave petition out loud and discuss what it said. Select one person to be the recorder for the group. Then as a group answer the following questions about your document.

1. Who is the petition addressed to?
2. What is the date of the petition? Is this before or after the Declaration of Independence was approved?
3. Describe what the petition is asking or demanding.
4. Does the petition offer anything in exchange for their demands? If yes, please explain what it is willing to exchange.

"FELIX" (UNKNOWN) SLAVE PETITION FOR FREEDOM (JANUARY 6, 1773)¹

Province of the Massachusetts Bay To His Excellency Thomas Hutchinson, Esq; Governor; To The Honorable His Majesty s Council, and To the Honorable House of Representatives in General Court assembled at Boston, the 6th Day of January, 1773.

The humble PETITION of many Slaves, living in the Town of Boston, and other Towns in the Province is this, namely That your Excellency and Honors, and the Honorable the Representatives would be pleased to take their unhappy State and Condition under your wise and just Consideration.

We desire to bless God, who loves Mankind, who sent his Son to die for their Salvation, and who is no respecter of Persons; that he hath lately put it into the Hearts of Multitudes on both Sides of the Water, to bear our Burthens, some of whom are Men of great Note and Influence; who have pleaded our Cause with Arguments which we hope will have their weight with this Honorable Court.

We presume not to dictate to your Excellency and Honors, being willing to rest our Cause on your Humanity and justice; yet would beg Leave to say a Word or two on the Subject. Although some of the Negroes are vicious, (who doubtless may be punished and restrained by the same Laws which are in Force against other of the Kings Subjects) there are many others of a quite different Character, and who, if made free, would soon be able as well as willing to bear a Part in the Public Charges; many of them of good natural Parts, are discreet, sober, honest, and industrious; and may it not be said of many, that they are virtuous and religious, although their Condition is in itself so unfriendly to Religion, and every moral Virtue except Patience. How many of that Number have there been, and now are in this Province, who have had every Day of their Lives embittered with this most intolerable Reflection, That, let their Behaviour be what it will, neither they, nor their Children to all Generations, shall ever be able to do, or to possess and enjoy any Thing, no, not even Life itself, but in a Manner as the Beasts that perish.

We have no Property. We have no Wives. No Children. We have no City. No Country. But we have a Father in Heaven, and we are determined, as far as his Grace shall enable us, and as far as our degraded contemptuous Life will admit, to keep all his Commandments: Especially will we be obedient to our Masters, so long as God in his sovereign Providence shall suffer us to be holden in Bondage.

It would be impudent, if not presumptuous in us, to suggest to your Excellency and Honors any Law or Laws proper to be made, in relation to our unhappy State, which, although our greatest Unhappiness, is not our Fault; and this gives us great Encouragement to pray and hope for such Relief as is consistent with your Wisdom, justice, and Goodness.

We think Ourselves very happy, that we may thus address the Great and General Court of this Province, which great and good Court is to us, the best judge, under God, of what is wise, just and good.

We humbly beg Leave to add but this one Thing more: We pray for such Relief only, which by no Possibility can ever be productive of the least Wrong or Injury to our Masters; but to us will be as Life from the dead.

Signed,

FELIX

PETER BESTES AND OTHER SLAVES PETITION FOR FREEDOM (APRIL 20,1773)²

Sir,

The efforts made by the legislative of this province in their last sessions to free themselves from slavery, gave us, who are in that deplorable state, a high degree of satisfaction. We expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their fellow-men to enslave them. We cannot but wish and hope Sir, that you will have the same grand object, we mean civil and religious liberty, in view in your next session. The divine spirit of freedom, seems to fire every humane breast on this continent, except such as are bribed to assist in executing the execrable plan.

WE are very sensible that it would be highly detrimental to our present masters, if we were allowed to demand all that of right belongs to us for past services; this we disclaim. Even the Spaniards, who have not those sublime ideas of freedom that English men have, are conscious that they have no right to all the service of their fellow-men, we mean the Africans, whom they have purchased with their money; therefore they allow them one day in a week to work for them-selve[s], to enable them to earn money to purchase the residue of their time, which they have a right to demand in such portions as they are able to pay for (a due appraizment of their services being first made, which always stands at the purchase money). We do not pretend to dictate to you Sir, or to the honorable Assembly, of which you are a member: We acknowledge our obligations to you for what you have already done, but as the people of this province seem to be actuated by the principles of equity and justice, we cannot but expect your house will again take our deplorable case into serious consideration, and give us that ample relief which, as men, we have a natural right to.

BUT since the wise and righteous governor of the universe, has permitted our fellow men to make us slaves, we bow in submission to him, and determine to behave in such a manner, as that we may have reason to expect the divine approbation of, and assistance in, our peaceable and lawful attempts to gain our freedom.

WE are willing to submit to such regulations and laws, as may be made relative to us, until we leave the province, which we determine to do as soon as we can from our joynt labours procure money to transport ourselves to some part of the coast of Africa, where we propose a settlement. We are very desirous that you should have instructions relative to us, from your town, therefore we pray you to communicate this letter to them, and ask this favor for us.

In behalf of our fellow slaves in this province, And by order of their Committee.

PETER BESTES

SAMBO FREEMAN

FELIX HOLBROOK

CHESTER JOIE

**"PETITION OF A GRATE NUMBER OF BLACKES" TO THOMAS GAGE
(MAY 25, 1774)³**

The Petition of a Grate Number of Blackes of this Province who by divine permission are held in a state of Slavery within the bowels of a free and christian Country

Humbly Shewing

That your Petitioners apprehend we have in common with all other men a naturel right to our freedoms without Being depriv'd of them by our fellow men as we are a freeborn Pepel and have never forfeited this Blessing by aney compact or agreement whatever. But we were unjustly dragged by the cruel hand of power from our dearest frinds and sum of us stolen from the bosoms of our tender Parents and from a Populous Pleasant and plentiful country and Brought hither to be made slaves for Life in a Christian land. Thus are we deprived of every thing that hath a tendency to make life even tolerable, the endearing ties of husband and wife we are strangers to for we are no longer man and wife then our masters or mestreses thinkes proper marred or on marred. Our children are also taken from us by force and sent maney miles from us wear we seldom or ever see them again there to be made slaves of for Life which surnames is vere short by Reson of Being dragged from their mothers Breest[.] Thus our Lives are imbittered to us on these accounts [.] By our deplorable situation we are rendered incapable of shewing our obedience to Almighty God[.] [H]ow can a slave perform the duties of a husband to a wife or parent to his child [?] How can a husband leave master and work and cleave to his wife[?] How can the wife submit themselves to there husbands in all things[?] How can the child obey thear parents in all things[?]

...

How can the master be said to Beare my Borden when he Beares me down whith the Have chanes of slavery and operson [oppression] against my will and how can we fulfill our parte of duty to him whilst in this condition [?] [A]nd as we cannot searve our God as we ought whilst in this situation Nither can we reap an equal benefet from the laws of the Land which doth not justifi but condemns Slavery or if there had bin aney Law to hold us in Bondege we are Humbely of the Opinon ther never was aney to inslave our children for life when Born in a free Countrey. We therefor Bage your Excellency and Honours will give this its deu weight and consideration and that you will accordingly cause an act of the legislative to be pessed that we may obtain our Natural right our freedoms and our children be set at lebety [liberty].

"PETITION OF A GREAT NUMBER OF NEGROES" TO THE MASSACHUSETTS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES (JANUARY 13, 1777)⁴

To the Honorable Council and House of Representatives for the State of Massachusetts-Bay in General Court assembled January 13th[,] 1777.

The Petition of a great number of Negroes who are detained in a state of Slavery in the Bowels of a free and Christian Country Humbly Shewing:

That your Petitioners apprehend that they have, in common with all other Men, a natural and unalienable right to that freedom, which the great Parent of the Universe hath bestowed equally on all Mankind, and which they have never forfeited by any compact or agreement whatever—But they were unjustly dragged, by the cruel hand of Power, from their dearest friends, and some of them even torn from the embraces of their tender Parents, from a populous, pleasant and plentiful Country—and in Violation of the Laws of Nature and of Nation and in defiance of all the tender feelings of humanity, brought hither to be sold like Beasts of Burden, and like them condemned to slavery for Life—Among a People professing the mild Religion of Jesus—A People not insensible of the sweets of rational freedom—Nor without spirit to resent the unjust endeavors of others to reduce them to a State of Bondage and Subjection.

Your Honors need not to be informed that a Life of Slavery, like that of your petitioners, deprived of every social privilege, of every thing requisite to render Life even tolerable, is far worse than Non-Existence—In imitation of the laudable example of the good People of these States, your Petitioners have long and patiently waited the event of Petition after Petition by them presented to the legislative Body of this State, and can not but with grief reflect that their success has been but too similar.

They can not but express their astonishment, that it has never been considered, that every principle from which America has acted in the course of her unhappy difficulties with Great-Britain, pleads stronger than a thousand arguments in favor of your Petitioners.

They therefore humbly beseech your Honors, to give this Petition its due weight and consideration, and cause an Act of the Legislature to be passed, whereby they may be restored to the enjoyment of that freedom which is the natural right of all Men—and their Children (who were 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 Inhabitants of this State (no longer chargeable with the inconsistency of acting, themselves, the pan which they condemn and oppose in others) be prospered in their present glorious struggles for liberty; and have those blessings secured to them by Heaven, of which benevolent minds can not wish to deprive their fellow Men.

And your Petitioners, as in Duty Bound shall ever pray.

Petition of Belinda Sutton, 1783

Commonwealth of Massachusetts

To the Honourable the Senate and House of Representatives in General Court assembled.

The Petition of Belinda an Affrican, humbly shews:

That seventy years have rolled away, since she on the banks of the Rio de Valta received her existence—the mountains Covered with spicy forests, the valleys loaded with the richest fruits, spontaneously produced; joined to that happy temperature of air to exclude excess; would have yielded her the most compleat felicity, had not her mind received early impressions of the cruelty of men, whose faces were like the moon, and whose Bows and Arrows were like the thunder and the lightning of the Clouds. — The idea of these, the most dreadful of all Enemies, filled her infant slumbers with horror, and her noontide moments with evil apprehensions! — But her affrighted imagination, in its most alarming extension, never represented distresses equal to what she hath since really experienced — for before she had Twelve years enjoyed the fragrance of her native groves, and e'er she realized, that Europeans placed their happiness in the yellow dust which she carelessly marked with her infant footsteps — even when she, in a sacred grove, with each hand in that of a tender Parent, was paying her devotions to the great Orisa who made all things — an armed band of white men, driving many of her Countrymen in Chains, ran into the hallowed shade! — could the Tears, the sighs and supplications, bursting from Tortured Parental affection, have blunted the keen edge of Avarice, she might have been rescued from Agony, which many of her Country's Children have felt, but which none hath ever described, — in vain she lifted her supplicating voice to an insulted father, and her guiltless hands to a dishonoured Deity! She was ravished from the bosom of her Country, from the arms of her friends — while the advanced age of her Parents, rendering them unfit for servitude, cruelly separated her from them forever!

Scenes which her imagination had never conceived of — a floating World — the sporting Monsters of the deep — and the familiar meetings of Billows and clouds, strove, but in vain to divert her melancholly attention, from three hundred Affricans in chains, suffering the most excruciating torments; and some of them rejoicing, that the pangs of death came like a balm to their wounds.

Once more her eyes were blest with a Continent — but alas! how unlike the Land where she received her being! here all things appeared unpropitious — she learned to catch the Ideas, marked by the sounds of language only to know that her doom was Slavery, from which death alone was to emancipate her. — What did it avail her, that the walls of her Lord were hung with Splendor, and that the dust troden underfoot in her native Country, crowded his Gates with sordid worshipers — the Laws had rendered her

incapable of receiving property –and though she was a free moral agent, accountable for her actions, yet she never had a moment at her own disposal!

Fifty years her faithful hands have been compelled to ignoble servitude for the benefit of an Isaac Royall, untill, as if Nations must be agitated, and the world convulsed for the preservation of that freedom which the Almighty Father intended for all the human Race, the present war was Commenced – The terror of men armed in the Cause of freedom, compelled her master to fly – and to breathe away his Life in a Land, where, Lawless domination sits enthroned – pouring bloody outrage and cruelty on all who dare to be free.

The face of your Petitioner, is now marked with the furrows of time, and her frame feebly bending under the oppression of years, while she, by the Laws of the Land, is denied the enjoyment of one morsel of that immense wealth, apart whereof hath been accumulated by her own industry, and the whole augmented by her servitude.

WHEREFORE, casting herself at the feet of your honours, as to a body of men, formed for the extirpation of vassalage, for the reward of Virtue, and the just return of honest industry – she prays, that such allowance may be made her out of the estate of Colonel Royall, as will prevent her and her more infirm daughter from misery in the greatest extreme, and scatter comfort over the short and downward path of their Lives – and she will ever Pray.

Boston 14th February 1783

the mark of Belinda

1779 Freedom Petition submitted by slaves to the New Hampshire state legislature, published in the New Hampshire Gazette, July 15, 1780 (Vol. XXIV, No. 1233) Original in New Hampshire Historical Society. Published in the New-Hampshire Gazette, July 15, 1780 (Vol. XXIV, No. 1233):

The following is a copy of the petition of a number of the Negroes now detained in slavery at Portsmouth, &c. lately presented the General Assembly of this State, who accordingly granted them a hearing; but, we hear, the further consideration thereof is postponed . . . The petition of Nero Brewster, and others, natives of Africa, now forcibly detained in slavery, in said state, most humbly sheweth, That the God of Nature gave them life and freedom, upon terms of the most perfect equality with other men; that freedom is an inherent right of the human species, not to be surrendered, but by consent, for the sake of social life; that private or public tyranny and slavery, are alike detestable to minds conscious of the equal dignity of human nature; that in power and authority of individuals, derived solely from a principle of coercion, against the wills of individuals, and to dispose of their persons and properties, consists the completed idea of private and political slavery; that all men being amenable to the Deity for the ill improvement of the blessings of his providence, they hold themselves in duty bound, strenuously to exert every faculty of their minds, . . . ; that thro' ignorance & brutish violence of their native countrymen and by similar designs of others, (who ought to have taught them better) & by the avarice of both, they, while but children, and incapable of self defense, whose infancy might have prompted protection, were seized, imprisoned, and transported from their native country, where (tho' ignorance and in christianity prevailed) they were born free to a country, where (tho' knowledge, christianity and freedom, are their boast) they are compelled, and their unhappy posterity, to drag on their lives in miserable servitude. . . . Permit again your humble slaves to lay before this honorable Assembly, some of those grievances which they daily experience and feel; tho' fortune hath dealt out our portions with rugged hand, yet hath she [kindled?] in the disposal of our persons to those who claim us as their property; of them, as masters, we do not complain; but, from what authority they assume the power to dispose of our lives, freedom and property, we would wish to know.—Is it from the sacred volumes of christianity? There we believe it not to be found! but here hath the cruel hand of slavery made us incompetent judges; but those, we are told, are founded in reason and justice; it cannot be found there! It is from the volumns of nature? No, here we can read with others! Of this knowledge, slavery cannot wholly deprive us; here, we know we ought to be free agents! here, we feel the dignity of human nature! here, we feel the passions and desires of men, tho' check'd by the rod of slavery! here, we feel a just equality! here, we know that the God of Nature made us free! Is their authority assumed from customs? If so, let that custom be abolished, which is not founded in nature, reason nor religion. Should the humanity and benevolence of this honorable Assembly restore us of that state of liberty of which we have been so long deprived we conceive that those, who are our present masters, will not be sufferers by our liberation, as we have most of us spent our whole strength and the prime of our lives in their service; and as freedom inspires a noble, confidence, and gives the mind an emulation to vie in the noblest efforts of enterprize, and as justice and humanity are the result of your deliberations, we fondly hope that the eye of pity and the heart of justice may commiserate our situation and put us upon the equality of free-men, and give us an opportunity of evincing to the world our love of freedom, by exerting ourselves in her cause, in opposing, the efforts of tyranny and oppression over the country in which we ourselves have been so injuriously enslaved. 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 in 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 pray.

Portsmouth. Nov. 12, 1779