

AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT  
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Supplementary Material

Chapter 3: The Founding Era – Equality and Status

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*Prince Hall, Petition to the Massachusetts Legislature (1777)*<sup>1</sup>

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*The American Revolution created new opportunities, resources, and dangers for the abolition of slavery. The spirit of revolution was in the air, and the streets and assemblies were filled with talk of the natural rights of men. Slaves and their advocates were not slow to turn such rhetoric to the advantage of the abolitionist cause.*

*Prince Hall was among those who tried to marshal revolutionary ideals to the antislavery cause. Hall was brought as a slave from England to the Massachusetts colony, trained as a leatherworker, and joined the Congregational Church. Having been rejected by the Boston freemasons, Hall organized African Lodge No. 1, which was eventually recognized by the English freemasons. He became a prominent leader of the antislavery cause in Massachusetts and an early proponent of recolonization to Africa. As the American Revolution began, Hall joined the cause and argued that blacks should be allowed to fight for American independence alongside the other colonists. He organized a number of petitions to the Massachusetts legislature urging the abolition of slavery and the promotion of civil rights for African Americans. Slavery was eventually abolished in Massachusetts a few years after the Revolution but by a court decision rather than by the legislature.*

To the Honorable Council & House of Representatives for the State of Massachusetts-Bay . . .

The Petition of a great number of Negroes, who are detained in a state of Slavery, in the Bowels of a free & Christian Country—

Humbly Showing—

That your Petitioners apprehend that they have, in common with all other Men, a natural & inalienable right to that freedom, which the great Parent of the Universe hath bestowed equally on all Mankind, & 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, & some of them even torn from the Embraces of their tender Parents—From a populous, pleasant, & plentiful Country—& in Violation of the Laws of Nature & of Nations & in defiance of all the tender feelings of humanity, brought hither to be sold like Beasts of Burden, & 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 & subjection—Your Honors need not to be informed that a Life of Slavery, like that of your petitioners, deprived of every social privilege, of everything 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 & patiently waited the event of Petition after Petition, by them presented to the Legislative Body of this State & cannot but with grief reflect that their success has been but too similar—They cannot but express their astonishment, that it has never been considered, that every

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt taken from *Proceedings of the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Granting of Warrant 459 to African Lodge* (Boston: Franklin Press, 1885), 12–13.

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 & consideration, & 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—& 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 part which they condemn & oppose in others) be prospered in their present glorious struggles for Liberty; & have those blessings secured to them by Heaven, of which benevolent minds cannot wish to deprive their fellow-Men.

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