

# Lesson Plan

## Petition of 1779 from Twenty Slaves in Portsmouth

This is an adaptation by Patricia Pflanz of a lesson plan prepared by William Kellogg. The adaptation is included as a sample lesson plan in the *New Hampshire History Curriculum, Book II* (1999).

### What Students Learn

Students should understand how a group of black slaves tried to affect change in New Hampshire's colonial government. Students should be able to explain the issue of slavery, as it existed in colonial Portsmouth. Students should be able to read and explain the meaning of the primary documents used in the lesson.

### Procedures

Explore the following questions: What inspired the writing of the petition? What other events influenced the black slaves? How did the established government react? What are the main ideas of each document, similarities, and differences? How might the writers of each primary document have influenced each other?

**Students will work in groups and read the “Petition from Twenty Slaves of Portsmouth, N.H.” After they read the petition, they will answer the primary source questions:**

- What is this document?
- Who produced it?
- When was it produced?
- Where was it produced?
- For what purpose was the petition produced?
- For whom was the petition produced?

**Students participate in a full-class discussion using the primary source questions to discover the purpose of this document. The teacher asks additional questions:**

- What do you feel inspired the slaves to write this document?
- What other events had occurred recently that might have influenced them?
- What do you think was the reaction of the members of the council?

**Students and teacher will read aloud the excerpts from the proposed New Hampshire Constitution of 1779. The teacher will use the following questions to lead a discussion to compare the two documents:**

- What are the chief, main, and essential ideas (philosophical, legal, social, economic, etc.) behind each document?
- What are the major similarities and differences between the documents?
- In what ways might the writers of the document have influenced each other?

**Students will learn more about the black slaves who lived in Portsmouth at this time. They will read excerpts from Valerie Cunningham and Mark Sammon's history of the first blacks of Portsmouth. (In addition to the materials that follow, see also [www.seacoastnh.com](http://www.seacoastnh.com).) As they read, they should complete the following reading guide questions:**

- How was the first known black person in Portsmouth captured?
- Why were the merchants ordered to return this person to his home in Africa?
- How many slaves worked in Richard Cutts' shipyard in Kittery?
- How many slaves were in New Hampshire in 1775?
- Where were many of the slave sales held?
- Describe the "slave court" of Portsmouth.
- According to the information packet, was any action taken on the slave petition of 1779?

## Lesson Materials

Background Sheet — “Slavery in New Hampshire”

Handout: Passages from the Proposed New Hampshire Constitution, 1779

“Petition from Twenty Slaves of Portsmouth, N.H. to the Council and House of Representatives of Said State”

## Bibliography

Sammons, Mark J., and Valerie Cunningham. *Black Portsmouth: Three Centuries of African-American Heritage (Revisiting New England)*. University of New Hampshire Press: Lebanon, N.H., 2004.

SeacoastNH.com. *Black History*. Internet site last accessed 9/19/2007.

[http://seacoastnh.com/b/Black\\_History](http://seacoastnh.com/b/Black_History).

*Too Long in the Shadows: The Black Presence in New Hampshire*, an issue of *Historical New Hampshire* (Vol. 61, no.1 [2007]) devoted entirely to the subject.

## Assessment Tools and Techniques

Students take an open-note test that based on class discussion and materials received during the unit:

- What was unique about the group that produced the petition of 1779?
- In your opinion, what was the most compelling argument given by that group for their emancipation?
- As per our discussion in class, what two documents most likely inspired the writing of the petition?
- What action did the New Hampshire assembly take concerning the petition?
- True or False. Justify your answer. The New Hampshire Assembly approved the proposed Constitution for the State of New Hampshire in 1779.

## Petition from Twenty Slaves of Portsmouth, N.H. to the Council and House of Representatives of Said State

State of New Hampshire

To the Hon<sup>ble</sup> the Council and House of Representatives of said State now sitting at Exeter in and for said State —

The petition of Nero Webster, Pharaoh Rogers, Romeo Rindge, Cato Newmarch Cesar Gerrish, Zebulon Gardner, Quam Sherburne, Samuel Wentworth, Will Clarkson, Jack Odiorne, Cipio Hubbard Seneca Hall, Peter Warner, Cato Warner, Pharaoh Shores Winsor Moffatt, Garrott Colton, Kittindge Tuckerman, Peter Frost & Prince Whipple, 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 the Terms of lthe 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 Will of Individuals, and to dispose of their Persons and Properties, consists the compleatest 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, to obtain that Blessing of Freedom, which they are justly intitl'd to from the Donation of the beneficent Creator; That thro' Ignorance and brutish Violence of their native Countrymen, and by the sinister Designs of others (who ought, to have taught them better), and by the Avarice of both, They, while but Children, and incapable of Self-Defence, whose Infancy might have promoted Protection, were seized, imprisoned, and transported from their native Country, where, (tho' Ignorance and Inchristianity prevail'd) They were born free, to a Country, where (tho' Knowledge, Christianity and Freedom, are their Boast) They are compelled & thier unhappy Posterity to drag on their Lives in miserable Servitude! — Thus, often is the Parent's Cheek wet for the Loss of a Child, torn by the cruel hand of Violence from her aking Boosom! Thus, often, and in vain, is the Infant's Sigh for the nurturing Care of its bereaved Parent, and thus do the Ties

of Nature and Blood, become Victims, to cherish the Vanity and Luxery of a Fellow Mortal! Can this be Right? — Forbid it gracious Heaven! —

Permit again your humble Slaves to lay before this Honorable Assembly some of those Grievances which They dayly experience and feel; Tho' Fortune hath dealt out our Portions with rugged hand, Yet hath She smiled in the Disposal of our Persons to those who claim us as thier 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? Where we believe it is not to be found! but here hath the cruel hand of Slavery made us incompetent Judges, hence Knowledge is hid from our Minds! Is it from the Volumes of the Laws? Of these also Slaves cannot be Judges, but those, we are told founded in Reason and Justice; it can not be found there! Is it from the Volumes of Nature? No! Here we can read with others! of this Knowledge Slavery cannot wholly deprive us; Here we know that we ought to be free Agents; here we feel the Dignity of Humman 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 thier Authority assumed from Custom? 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 to 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 Interprize, and as Justice and Humanity are the Result of your Deliberations; we fondly Hope that the Eye of Pitty and the Heart of Justice may Commiserate our Situation and put us upon the Equality of Freemen and give us an Oppertunity 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 long injuriously inslaved —

Therefore your humble Slaves most devoutly Pray, for the Sake of injured Liberty, for the Sake of Justice, Humanity and the Rights of Mankind; for the Honour of Religion, and by all that is dear, that your Honours would graciously interpose in our Behalf, and enact such Laws and

Regulations, as you in your Wisdom think proper, whereby we may regain our Liberty & Be rank'd in the Class of free Agents, and that the Name of Slave may not 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 November 12<sup>th</sup> 1779

|                     |                |                  |
|---------------------|----------------|------------------|
| Seneca Hall         | Peter Frost    | Zebulon Gardner  |
| Peter Warner        | Prince Whipple | Quam Sherburne   |
| Cato Warner         | Nero Brewster  | Samuel Wentworth |
| Pharaoh Shores      | Pharoah Rogers | Will Clarkson    |
| Winsor Moffatt      | Romeo Rindge   | Jack Odiorne     |
| Garrett Colton      | Cato Newmarch  | Cipio Hubbard    |
| Kittindge Tuckerman | Cesar Gerrish  |                  |

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## Key Passages from the Proposed New Hampshire Constitution, 1779

### A DECLARATION

Of Rights, and Plan of Government for the State of New Hampshire

Whereas by tyrannical Administration of the Government of the King and Parliament of Great-Britain, this State of New Hampshire, with the other United States of AMERICA, have been necessitated to reject the British Government; and declare themselves INDEPENDENT STATES: all which of more largely set forth by the CONTINENTAL CONGRESS, in the Resolution of Declaration of the fourth of July A.D. 1776.

AND WHEREAS, it is recommended by said CONTINENTAL CONGRESS to each and every of the said United States to establish a FORM OF GOVERNMENT most conducive to the Welfare thereof. We the DELEGATES of the said State of NEW HAMPSHIRE chosen for the purpose of forming a permanent Plan of Government subject to the Review of our CONSTITUENTS, have composed the following DECLARATION OF RIGHTS, and PLAN OF GOVERNMENT; and recommend the same to our CONSTITUENTS for their Approbation.

### A DECLARATION of the RIGHTS of the PEOPLE of the STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

First, We declare, that we the people of the State of New Hampshire, are free and Independent of the Crown of Great Britain.

Secondly, We the People of this State, are entitled to Life, Liberty, and Property: and all other immunities and Privileges which we heretofore enjoyed.

# Slavery in New Hampshire

From Valerie Cunningham, <http://www.seacoastNH.com> (1999). Used with permission.

## First Known Black

The first known black person in Portsmouth, N.H. came from the west coast of Africa 1645. He was captured one Sunday when slave merchants attacked his village in Guinea, killing about a hundred persons and wounding others. Upon arrival in Boston, the slave was bought by a Mr. Williams "of Piscataqua." When the General Court of the colony learned of the raid and kidnapping, it ordered the merchants to return the African to his home. Slavery was not the issue of concern, for human bondage was legal in the region. The court was "indignant" that raiders had violated the Sabbath and that they had committed "ye haynos and crying sin of man stealing."

The size of the black population in 17th-century New Hampshire was small and, therefore, easily overlooked. However, surveys of wills and inventories show that slaves were included in the estates of several prominent early Portsmouth families. For instance, eight slaves who worked in Richard Cutts' Kittery shipyard at mid-century were among the earliest blacks in the region; five of the eight were eventually willed to Widow Cutts in 1675.

## Determining Black Population

Published census figures for slaves and free blacks during the colonial period are known to be inaccurate and inconsistent. For instance free blacks sometimes were counted with slaves or not counted at all, and at other times, they were included with whites. The number of black people reported in provincial New Hampshire was only:

70 in 1707  
160 in 1715  
656 in 1775

## Prince Whipple

Prince Whipple was born in Amabou, Africa, of comparatively wealthy parents. When about ten years of age, he was sent by them, in company with a cousin, to America to be educated. An elder brother had returned four years before, and his parents were anxious that their child should receive the same benefits. The captain who brought the two boys over proved a treacherous villain, and carried them to Baltimore, where he exposed them for sale, and they were both purchased by Portsmouth men, Prince falling to General Whipple. He was emancipated during the [Revolutionary] war, was much esteemed, and was once entrusted by the General with a large sum of money to carry from Salem to Portsmouth. He was attacked on the road, near Newburyport, by two ruffians; one was struck with a loaded whip, the other he shot.... Prince was beloved by all who knew him. He was the "Caleb Quotom" of Portsmouth where he died at the age of thirty-two leaving a widow and children.

As was customary, Prince took the surname of his owner, William Whipple who would later represent N.H. by signing the Declaration of Independence. Like many prominent whites, north and south, William Whipple was a slave owner. He married Catherine Moffatt and they

lived in her father's mansion on the river in downtown Portsmouth, today one of the city's surviving historic houses. The slave quarters, where Prince, his cousin (or brother) Cuffy, and others likely lived, can still be seen.

When William Whipple joined the revolution as a captain, Prince accompanied him and was in attendance to General Washington on Christmas night 1776 for the legendary and arduous crossing of the Delaware. The surprise attack was a badly needed victory for America, and for Washington's sagging military reputation.

In 1777 Prince's white owner was summoned to Exeter, promoted to Brigadier General and ordered to drive British General Burgoyne out of Vermont. According to the story popularized by Portsmouth reporter Charles Brewster in the mid-1800s, Prince Whipple protested. "You are going to fight for our liberty," he reportedly said to his master, "but I have none to fight for." General Whipple agreed to free Prince after the military campaign. Historians differ on whether William Whipple made good on his promise. Local researcher Valerie Cunningham asserts that Prince was kept in service to the Whipple family for another seven years before his release.

## The Negro Court

Whatever problems they may have faced, Portsmouth blacks were able to participate in political and community-wide events. The Negro Court provides ample evidence of political activity among Portsmouth's black community. Much is unclear about this institution, but based on the available information, this "court", in existence during the latter half of the 18th century, seems comparable to others located in black communities elsewhere. These courts—sometimes called "slave courts"—were based on African and European traditions, blended in a governing body that set the standards of behavior among its black constituency. Officers were elected annually by their peers. Apparently, officers consisted of men who not only were respected for the conduct of their own lives, but who also could be trusted to negotiate with white community leaders?

Too little is known about the actual jurisdiction of the Court in Portsmouth but it appears that the body tried and punished blacks who committed minor offenses; one man who was tried for theft was prosecuted by the county court when he repeated the crime. Those who sat on the Negro Court were elected, by their peers, and Election Day for the Court was a particularly festive occasion. Servants, excused from work, dressed in their finest clothing and gathered at Portsmouth plains to celebrate and vote. A regular convening of the Court was an occasion for exchanging news about friends and loved ones who lived outside the town; blacks also discussed the activities of white families with whom they had close contact. This kind of communication network was essential in slave societies for relaying vital information about their safely individually and as a community.

The known leaders of the Negro Court in Portsmouth were among nineteen slaves who submitted a petition to the New Hampshire Council and House of Representatives in 1779.

## Curriculum Information

Information relating to the *New Hampshire History Curriculum* refers to the K-12 resource in two volumes developed by the New Hampshire Historical Society in partnership with Public Service of New Hampshire, the New Hampshire Department of Education, and the New Hampshire Council for the Social Studies. The K-6 volume is available on-line through the school programs section of the Society's Web site (<http://www.nhhistory.org>).

### Grade Level

High School

### New Hampshire Social Studies Standards

Civics 1, 2, 4; US/NH History 1, 3, 5

### *New Hampshire History Curriculum Focus Topics*

Cultures, Races, and Ethnic Groups

Politics

Self-Expression

### *New Hampshire History Curriculum Eras*

1763–1820: Revolution and the New Nation