

Petition to the Assembly of Pennsylvania against the Slave Trade (March 1780)

*African Americans, both free and enslaved, fought in the armies of both sides of the American Revolution and desired, in turn, to benefit from such service. Others had not joined in the military fight, but they also hoped that the rhetoric of the Revolution would translate into freedom and rights for blacks. "A Black Whig" wrote a sermon in 1782 glorifying American independence. As he focused on America's righteousness, he slipped in a request that Americans remember the slaves: "And now my virtuous fellow citizens, let me intreat you, that, after you have rid yourselves of the British yoke, that you will also emancipate those who have been all their life time subject to bondage."**

As Americans created new state constitutions and legislation, they grappled with the issue. Although not all acted immediately, nor provided for immediate emancipation, states from the Middle Atlantic region to New England did move to abolish slavery. Pennsylvania, for instance, passed an act for gradual emancipation in 1780 that allowed owners to retain the slaves they already had, but stipulated that children born to a slave mother after the act's passage would be servants until the age of twenty-eight and then be freed. To retain the slaves they already had, owners had to register them by November 1780; if they did not, they could lose their slaves (and a number of unregistered slaves did gain immediate freedom). Furthermore, slaves brought into the state could not be held in servitude longer than seven years unless they came in under the age of twenty-one; then they could be kept until they were twenty-eight. Finally, the act nullified laws that discriminated against blacks, stating that blacks were to be judged and punished just like other inhabitants. States south of Pennsylvania, however, did not accept general emancipation though most did relax manumission laws that allowed owners to liberate slaves individually.

"Petition to the Assembly of Pennsylvania against the Slave Trade, March 1780," Historical Society of Pennsylvania. *Sermon, *On the Present Situation of the Affairs of America and Great-Britain*. Written by a Black, and printed at the Request of several Persons of distinguished Characters (Philadelphia: T. Bradford and P. Hall, 1782) Library Company of Philadelphia.

To the Representatives of the Freemen of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, in General Assembly met,

The Representation and Petition of the Subscribers, Citizens of Pennsylvania.

Your Petitioners have observed, with great satisfaction, the salutary effects of the Law of this State, passed on the first day of March, 1780, for the "gradual abolition of slavery."—They have also seen, with equal satisfaction, the progress which the humane and just principles of that Law have made in other States.

They, however, find themselves called upon, by the interesting nature of those principles, to suggest to the General Assembly, that vessels have been publicly equipt in this Port for the Slave Trade, and that several other practices have taken place which they conceive to be inconsistent with the spirit of the Law abovementioned; and that these, and other circumstances relating to the afflicted Africans, do, in the opinion of your Petitioners, require the further interposition of the Legislature.

Your Petitioners, therefore, earnestly request that you will again take this subject into your serious consideration, and that you will make such additions to the said Law, as shall effectually put a stop to the Slave Trade being carried on directly or indirectly in this Commonwealth, and to answer other purposes of benevolence and justice to an oppressed part of the human species.

1688 signatures

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why, given that the state had just passed an act providing for gradual emancipation, did Pennsylvania citizens again petition their assembly about slavery in March 1780?
2. What was their argument?
3. Pennsylvania did not pass legislation complying with their request until 1788. Why do you think it took so long?

TITLE

MAIN IDEA

DETAILS

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Summary:

Include the main idea and the details in your own words.