

RS#24: Petition of 1779 (Transcript)

Petition of 1779 by Slaves of Fairfield County for the Abolition of Slavery in Connecticut (Transcript)

To the Hon^{ble} General Assembly of the State of Connecticut to be held at Hartford on the Second Thursday of Instant May
The Petition of the Negroes in the Towns of Stratford and Fairfield in the County of Fairfield **Who are held in a State of Slavery** humbly sheweth -

That many of your Petitioners, were (as they verily believe) most unjustly torn, from the Bosoms of their dear Parents, and Friends, and without any Crime, by them committed, doomed, and bound down, to perpetual Slavery; and as if the Perpetrators of this horrid Wickedness, were Conscious (that we poor Ignorant africans, upon the least Glimmering Light. derived from a Knowledge of the Sense and Practice of civilized Nations) should Convince them of their Sin. they have added another dreadful Evil of holding **us** in gross Ignorance, so as to render Our Subjection more easy and tolerable. may it please your Honours, we are most grievously affected, under the Consideration of the flagrant Injustice; Your Honours who are nobly contending, in the Cause of Liberty, whose Conduct excites the Admiration, and Reverence, of all the great Empires of the World, will not resent our thus freely animadverting, on this detestable Practice; altho our Skins are different in Colour, from those who we serve, yet Reason & Revelation join to declare, that we are the Creatures of that God who made of one Blood, and Kindred, all the Nations of the Earth; we perceive by our own Reflection, that we are endowed, with the same Faculties, with our Masters, and there is nothing, that leads us to a Belief, or Suspicion, that we are any more obliged to serve them, than they us, and the more we Consider of this Matter, the more we are Convinced, of our Right (by the Law's of Nature and by the whole Tenor, of the Christian Religion, so far as we have been taught) to be free; we have Endeavoured rightly to understand, what is our Right, and what is our Duty, and can never be convinced, that we were made to be Slaves Altho God almighty, may justly lay this. and more upon us, yet we deserve it not, from the hands of Men. we are impatient under the grievous Yoke, but our Reason teaches us, that it is not best for us, to use violent measures, to cast it off; we are also Convinced, that we are unable to extricate ourselves, from our abject State; but we think we **may** with the greatest Propriety, look up to your Honours, (who are the fathers of the People) for Relief. And we not only groan under our own Burden, but with Concern & Horror, look forward & Contemplate, the miserable Condition, of our Children, who are training up, and kept in Preparation, for a like State of Bondage, and Servitude. we beg leave to submit to your Honours serious Consideration, whether it is Consistent with the Present Claims, of the united States to hold so many Thousands, of the Race of Adam, our Common Father, in perpetual Slavery. Can human Nature endure the Shocking Idea? can your Honours any longer Suffer, this great Evil to prevail, under your Government? we entreat your Honours, let no Considerations of Publick Inconvenience, deter your Honours, from interposing in Behalf **of** your Petitioners; who ask for nothing, but what we are fully persuaded, is ours to

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Claim. we beseech your Honours, to weigh this Matter, in the Scale of Justice, and in your great Wisdom and Goodness, apply such Remedy, as the Evil does require; and let your Petitioners. rejoice with your Honours, in the Participation, with your Honours, of that inestimable Blessing,

Freedom and your Humble Petitioners, as in Duty bound, shall Ever pray &c.

dated in Fairfield the 11th Day

of May AD 1779 -

prime a Negro Man

Servant to Mr. Saml Surges of Fairfield

Prince his X mark Servant of Capt Stephen Jennings

of Fairfield

in Behalf of Themselves and

the other Petitioners

Signed in Presence of

Jonth Surges.

This petition of 1779 is found in the Revolutionary Warpapers in the State Archives collection of the Connecticut State Library, series 1, volume 37, document 232.

It was first published in Herbert Aptheker, A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States, vol. I (New York: The Citadel Press, 1951), pp. 10-12, and subsequently republished in a more detailed transcription in Vincent J. Rosivach, "Three Petitions by Connecticut Negroes for the Abolition of Slavery in Connecticut," Connecticut Review, XVII, no. 2 (Fall, 1995), 79-92. The present hypertext version is based on the Rosivach edition.

The signatories of the 1779 petition are named Prime and Prince. Prime, who was evidently literate, was owned by Samuel Sturges, while Prince, who was illiterate, was owned by Captain Stephen Jenings. Rosivach characterizes the owners as undistinguished members of prominent families in Fairfield, Connecticut. He further speculates that Prince may well have been the sole slave owned by Jenings when Jenings died in 1785, and he probably farmed his owner's estate (most Black slaves in Connecticut at the time were farm labor). Prince may have owned a copy of the book, Sermon on the principal heads on the Christian religion, although he was illiterate. We know nothing of Prime.

It seems that this petition was written by its witness, Attorney Jonathan Sturges. Jonathan Sturges was an important local figure and apparently supported emancipation, but Rosivach cautions us against assuming that the petition's content was simply Sturges' own invention (other petitions, written by slaves themselves, manifest words and ideas comparable to this petition). It is interesting that Jonathan Sturges owned a slave Phyllis, probably his housekeeper, and her children.

Both houses subsequently rejected the petition.

Sturges, Jonathan. "Petition of 1779 by Slaves of Fairfield County." *World History Archive*. Hartford Web Publishing, n.d. Web. 08 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/021.html>>