

# N.H. moves to symbolically free Colonial slaves

## Lawmakers set petition aside in 1779

By [Meghan E. Irons](#) | GLOBE STAFF APRIL 24, 2013

PORTSMOUTH, N.H. — As cannons and mortars roared, 20 Africans, in the grip of the Revolutionary War, made an impassioned plea to their state government to abolish slavery for the sake of justice and humanity.

“Enact such laws,” they pleaded, “whereby we may regain our liberty and be ranked in the class of free agents and that the name of slave may not be heard in a land gloriously contending for the sweets of freedom.”

Their eloquence linking a slave’s freedom to the ideals upon which the revolution was based was denied in the New Hampshire General Assembly. Lawmakers instead pledged to address the Nov. 12, 1779, petition at a more convenient time.

That time has come, some 233 years later, as the New Hampshire House of Representatives prepares for a vote Wednesday that would posthumously and symbolically give the slaves their freedom and shine a light on a forgotten chapter of black history in one of the whitest states.

“I’m pleased about this, because for too long New Hampshire has not been known for any kind of color and has ignored the fact that there has been black history here from the beginning,” said Valerie Cunningham, a local historian and author of the book “Black Portsmouth,” which chronicles three centuries of African-American heritage in New England.

It is easy to forget about this history in New Hampshire, where the black population is just 1 percent of the total. And it is easy to forget, in the popular tourist city filled with cafes, boutiques, and brick sidewalks near the banks of the

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*Freedom is an inherent right of the human species not to be surrendered.*

Piscataqua River, that long ago, slaves lived here, too.

“Forgetting is interesting,” said state Senator David Watters, an English professor and a sponsor of the bill. “A lot of historians have said that the North did not want to acknowledge its own slave past. It became part of our inconvenient history.”

New Hampshire has been coming to terms with that legacy over the years, as local preservationists and history buffs have been poring over old documents to research and highlight the African-American story.

In the past two decades, the city has seen the opening of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail and the Seacoast African American Cultural Center, the state’s first black cultural center. Over the decade, a city effort has been underway to raise \$1.2 million to erect a memorial park on the African Burying Ground, where the remains of at least 200 Africans, including some who signed the 1779 petition, are buried beneath pristinely paved roads, businesses, and homes on Chestnut and State streets.

The burial ground, unearthed by a city construction crew, and the bill are part of a continuing drive to never forget New Hampshire’s role in black history, said Vernis Jackson, an 81-year-old who taught fourth graders and founded the Seacoast center and now chairs the burying ground committee.

Hoping to raise awareness for the effort, a burying ground committee member asked State Senator Martha Fuller Clark to revive the slaves’ petition. She introduced it in January, and the Senate signed it overwhelmingly in March.

The time was right. “Lincoln,” the movie, was a hit, and the nation was marking the 150th year since the Emancipation Proclamation.

“The bill and the burying ground — they were overlooked over the years,” Jackson said as she stood on Chestnut Street and envisioned a marker there. “They were stepped on, run over, and built on until that accidental discovery.”

Cunningham spotted the slave petition on the front page of a 1779 New Hampshire Gazette and documented her findings in her book. It was well documented that Portsmouth merchant William Wipple, who would become one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, had fought in the Revolutionary War and had taken his slave, Prince Wipple, along with him.

Prince Wipple was among the 20 who signed the petition; he and five others were eventually given their freedom. The other Africans died enslaved.

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that helped to build Portsmouth. They were educated and had served alongside their owners in business and in war, said Cunningham.

“The African-Americans in New Hampshire were aware of what was happening around them,” said Cunningham. “They were not down South picking cotton. They were here building boats, in discussions, and serving in the Revolutionary War.”

The men wrote that “freedom is an inherent right of the human species not to be surrendered, but by consent, for the sake of social life.”

“Here we can read with others, of this knowledge slavery cannot wholly deprive us,” they wrote. “Here we know that we ought to be free agents! Here we feel the dignity of human nature. . . . Here we feel a just equality.”

The lawmakers responded: “The House is not ripe for a determination in this matter: Therefore ordered that the further consideration and determination be postponed till a more convenient opportunity.”

Listing the names of men like Zebulon Gardner, Cipio Hubbarb, and Kittindge Tuckerman, the bill set for a vote Wednesday reads: “The following men are hereby declared emancipated freed men in gratitude for their service to the Colonial foundations of New Hampshire.”

“It’s very easy for that history to get lost,” said Fuller Clark. “This bill would make this history visible for a long time.”

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