



Negro Prime's Petition to the New Jersey Legislature, 1786.

The humble and earnest petition of Negro Prime shows:
That your petitioner heretofore belonged to Absalom Bainbridge. . . .

That the said Absalom Bainbridge adhered to the enemies of this state and of the United States in the month of December 1776, in consequence of which defection his estate became forfeited.

That your petitioner remained for some time at Princeton and was sometime in the family of Mr. John Taylor of Monmouth, father to the wife of the said Absalom Bainbridge, whence he was taken over to Long Island where the family of the said Absalom Bainbridge resided within the enemy's lines, but from which place your petitioner escaped and returned to the neighborhood of his former residence in the year 1778.

That your petitioner, having with other parts of the estate of the said Absalom Bainbridge, come into the possession of Jacob Bergen, Esquire, one of the Commissioners of Foreitures for the County of Somerset, he humanely declined setting up your poor petitioner for sale like a beast of the stable, and applied to . . . the legislature then sitting at Princeton who seemed to be of the opinion that though no law provided for cases of this kind, there was something very inconsistent in contending for liberty under an appeal to heaven and at the same time selling, for account of the public, the bodies and service of human beings into perpetual bondage. In the result Mr. Bergen told your petitioner he might go into the public service, which he did and served as a wagoner in the American army for a long time during the late troubles.

That in the month of June 1784, your petitioner being then in the neighborhood of Trenton earning his bread as a day laborer under the pleasing persuasion that he was a free subject of the state, he was seized and forcibly carried off by Mr. John Vanhorne. . . under pretext of a purchase from the aforesaid John Taylor, who alleged that he purchased your petitioner from the wife of the said Absalom Bainbridge in the year 1777. . . .

Your petitioner having obtained a Habeas Corpus, his case was argued before the Supreme Court, when the Justices were of the opinion that the law would not authorize the manumission of your petitioner. But Moore Furman, Esquire, agent

of forfeiture for the County of Hunterdon, having in the meantime applied to the court . . . claiming your petitioner as the property of the state, the court ordered that your petitioner should remain in custody of the law, until an issue could be tried between the state and the said John Vanhorne.

That in the term of May 1786 . . . a verdict and judgment passed in favor of the state, and your petitioner, by order of the court, was delivered into the hands of Mr. Furman.

Thus is your poor petitioner the slave of the state of New Jersey and liable to be sold as their property. But he earnestly implores that he may be delivered from a situation so distressing, and by the compassion and munificence of the . . . legislature, entitled to that liberty to defend, secure, and perpetuate which the fields of America have been dyed in the blood of her citizens. . . .

Were your poor petitioner to be sold, his price would scarcely amount to the fifth part of a copper penny to each taxable in the state and your poor petitioner can not believe that one person can be found who would not willingly contribute the fifth part of a penny to release a human being from a bondage which must otherwise continue until his eyes are closed in death. . . .

Your petitioner, therefore, most humbly prays that the . . . legislature, being ascertained of the truth of the facts set forth in his petition, will grant him leave to present a bill for his emancipation.

[Negro Prime signed his mark to the end of the document]

Editor's Note: The New Jersey state legislature manumitted Prime in November 1786.

Source: Howard L. Green, ed. *Words that Make New Jersey History: A Primary Source Reader* (Trenton, 1995), 62-64.