

2015

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Recommended Citation

Morgan, L. Claire (2015) "Slavery in Massachusetts: Did Its Peculiar Nature Contribute to the Rise of Antislavery Advocates before 1776?," *Bound Away: The Liberty Journal of History*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/ljh/vol1/iss2/5>

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Slavery in Massachusetts: Did Its Peculiar Nature Contribute to the Rise of Antislavery Advocates before 1776?

Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to discover whether slavery in Massachusetts was distinct from that institution in the South. Slavery in this colony was an admixture of servitude and bondage due to several factors. Massachusetts physical environment, climate, and township system precluded the implementation of plantation type slavery. Secondly, Puritan ideas about the family and education resulted in slaves living with and becoming a part of the families they served, as well as receiving a rudimentary education in religious, academic, and occupational fields. Lastly, slaves in Massachusetts, unlike those in the South, had access to the same courts as whites, a fact that eventually led to their freedom in 1780. Thus, slavery was a unique and “peculiar” institution in Massachusetts.

Slavery in Massachusetts was certainly a “peculiar” institution. It was an “admixture of servitude and bondage”¹ in which the slave was considered as property and as a person. Many factors contributed to this admixture. In the first place, Massachusetts’s physical environment, climate, and township system of land allocation did not foster the plantation style of slavery found in the South. Secondly, the Puritan religious ideas about the family ensured that slaves lived in close relationship to their masters and masters’ families. Also, because education was essential to Puritans, slaves received a rudimentary education in religious, academic, and occupational fields. Furthermore, slaves had legal rights because they were not just property but persons. These four factors not only contributed to the unique character of slavery in Massachusetts but also helped foster pre-Revolutionary economic and moral antislavery advocates, black and white.

The development of plantation style slavery was hampered by Massachusetts’s physical environment, climate, and township system. First, Massachusetts possessed rocky, rolling hills with sandy soil. These traits, coupled with a short growing season, precluded the planting of any cash crops like tobacco, indigo, or rice. Thus, massive numbers of slaves were unnecessary to the agricultural economy of the colony.

Furthermore, the Puritan township system required that communities, not individuals, settle the land; that is, the colony’s leadership grouped families together to form a town, each town partitioning the land around it among the respective families. The acreage size, from ten to two hundred acres, depended upon the status of the family. This resulted in small farms worked by the family, a situation that again precluded the need for large numbers of workers.

After the Great Migration, which ended in 1640, Massachusetts had almost twenty thousand inhabitants, but the poor soil “could not permanently support the growing numbers of colonists.”² Other industries, such as fishing, shipbuilding, and trading, became far more important to the colony economically than farming. These industries were full blown by 1660 and resulted in a demand for laborers, but immigration to Massachusetts had dropped off significantly after 1640. However, Massachusetts’s population increased naturally, thus providing much of the needed labor itself, but not all of it. Bound labor became the answer to the labor shortage. Thus, Massachusetts became the first colony to legalize slavery in 1641. The Body of Liberties, section 91, stated,

There shall never be any bond slavery, villenage, or captivity among us unless it be lawful captives taken in just wars, and such strangers as willingly sell themselves or are sold to us. And these shall have all the liberties and Christian usages which the law of God established in Israel concerning such persons doeth morally require.³

The Puritans had Indian slaves in the colony as a result of the Pequot War of 1636, a war considered a “just war.” Other bound laborers were the indentured servants or apprentices, but few of these came to Massachusetts. African slaves made up the third type of bound labor brought into the colony. According to John Winthrop’s *Journal*, the first African slaves arrived

¹Lorenzo Greene, “Slave-Holding New England and Its Awakening,” *The Journal of Negro History* 13, no. 4 (Oct., 1928): 492-533.

²“Maritime Commerce,” *Maritime History of Massachusetts*, accessed March 10, 2016, <http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/maritime/commerce.htm>.

³Max Farrand, ed., *The Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929), 4.

in the colony in 1638 when the *Desire* docked with “salt, cotton, tobacco, and Negroes.”⁴ Whether bondmen were indentured servants, apprentices, or slaves, “distinctions within the class [of bondmen] were blurred even though in the end an apprentice or other white servant became a free man, while the Negro and his offspring remained in bondage.”⁵

As Massachusetts began to diversify its economy, some enterprising men saw Massachusetts’s road to prosperity in the lucrative trans-Atlantic slave trade. As early as 1644, Boston traders started going to the east coast of Africa, and even Madagascar, to buy slaves, but not for Massachusetts. Very few slaves, in fact, came to the colony until after 1700 because there was as yet no real market. Farmers were too poor to buy slaves. Instead, the traders sold the slaves in the West Indies and brought back molasses to Boston, where it was made into rum. Traders then took the rum to Africa to trade it for slaves. Although the slave trade boosted other industries like shipbuilding and rum distilling, few black slaves were brought to the colony. In 1708, Governor Joseph Dudley told the Board of Trade that there were only 550 Negroes in the colony, 400 of which were in Boston.⁶ Nevertheless, Boston merchants amassed great wealth being couriers in the slave trade.

In the eighteenth century, now that the economy had become more complex, the demand for labor increased precipitately. Laborers were needed for fishing, whaling, the lumbering industry, rum distilleries, iron forging, shipbuilding, and much more. Free labor was scarce, thus the push for slave labor increased. In fact, black slaves could now be found in every occupation in Massachusetts.

The busiest period of slave importing in the history of Massachusetts occurred in the late 1720s and the early 1730s.⁷ Most of the slaves came from the West Indies where they had been “seasoned,” that is, taught some English and acclimated to the environment and slave life. However, after 1740, the peak years of slave importing in Massachusetts had passed.

It is significant that though Massachusetts played an important role in slave-trading and that this trading contributed to the economic wealth of the colony, at no time did the slave trade assume the proportions that it did in the southern colonies. Furthermore, although Boston was a key slave-trading port, black slaves never made up more than ten percent of its population at any time during the colonial period. This is in marked contrast to cities like Charleston, South Carolina, where the slave population outnumbered whites four to one by 1765.

Another way that slavery in Massachusetts was peculiar concerned the relationship between slave and master, a relationship heavily influenced by the Puritan views of the family. For the Puritan, the family was the basic economic and social unit in society. Consequently, “slave management was part of a system of ‘family government’ that was characterized by an intimate cohabitation of masters and slaves.”⁸ Slaves lived, ate, and worked with the family. Perhaps this explains why slaves tended to be treated more humanely in Massachusetts than in most colonies

⁴ John Winthrop, *History of New England, 1630-1649*, ed. James Kendall Hosmer (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), 10.

⁵ Lawrence William Towner, *A Good Master Well Served: Masters and Servant in Colonial Massachusetts, 1620-1750* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 3.

⁶ George H. Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 50.

⁷ Robert E. Desrochers, Jr., “Slave-for-Sale Advertisements and Slavery in Massachusetts, 1704-1781,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 59, no. 3, *Slaveries in the Atlantic World* (July, 2002): 623-664.

⁸ Dominik Nagl, “The Governmentality of Slavery in Colonial Boston, 1690-1760,” *American Studies* 58, no. 1 (2013): 13.

of the colonial South, where masters often lived in fear of slave rebellions.⁹ Furthermore, because of the Puritan work ethic, slaves and masters usually worked and rested the same number of hours.¹⁰

Famous preachers like John Eliot, Cotton Mather, and Samuel Willard constantly exhorted masters to care for and nurture slaves as part of their families and reminded them that God would hold them accountable if they did not. These men did not just preach the word but set an example by educating slaves, teaching them the Bible to win them to Christ, and treating them kindly. Magistrates like Samuel Seward did the same. Cotton Mather, quoting the Levitical law, told masters, “‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’ Man, thy Negro is thy neighbor... They are men, and not beasts that you have bought, and they must be used accordingly.”¹¹ Mather also reminded masters that these slaves may be some of the Elect and that they were not to be “overwrought” but have their lives made comfortable.¹² Due to the influence of Puritan religious teaching, most slaves were well fed, well clothed, and well housed, usually living in the house with the master. If they became ill, they were taken care of just like other members of the family. They were even inoculated against smallpox.¹³ The slaves were not just an economic investment to be protected. They were also family members.

Slaves also worked right along with their masters in the field or in the shop. This was unlike the southern colonies where the masters eschewed work because they believed it was something slaves did. This “spatial proximity contributed to the slave’s social integration into their master’s family and the larger society.”¹⁴ Thus, close relationships often developed between slaves and masters, who often bequeathed their slaves land or small sums of money in their wills. Lorenzo Greene cited several situations where slaves protected family members from rape, beatings, or Indian attacks.¹⁵ Sometimes slaves, because of their faithful service, were freed in their masters’ wills.

A third aspect of slavery in Massachusetts that distinguished it from the slavery practiced in the plantation colonies was that slaves received a rudimentary education. Because Puritans valued education, primarily to read the Bible and the laws of the colony, slaves were educated along with the members of the family with whom they lived. Masters, ministers like Cotton Mather, who ran a night school for slaves for a short while, and religious organizations educated slaves to read, write, and do some basic arithmetic. For economic reasons, “it was to the interest of the masters to impart to the slaves some of the rudiments of learning, for ignorant workmen were at a disadvantage in the diversified economy of New England.”¹⁶ This is a very different attitude than that of colonies like Georgia and North Carolina that passed laws forbidding slaves to be taught to read. No wonder it was Massachusetts that produced a poet such as Phillis Wheatley, the first black poet in America, and not one of the southern slave colonies.

Education also included learning the trade of the master, but, as Lorenzo Greene pointed out, the slave “had to be more skilled and more versatile... He [had to] be prepared not only to

⁹ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776*, 219.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 105

¹¹ Cotton Mather, “The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity (1706),” *Electronic Texts in American Studies*, Paper 28 (Boston, 1706), 4, 15, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/28>.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2, 3.

¹³ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776*, 226.

¹⁴ Nagl, 11.

¹⁵ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776*, 255-256.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 237.

care for stock, to act as servant, repair a fence, serve on board ship, shoe a horse, print a newspaper, but even to manage a master's business." Greene also noted that newspaper advertisements often reflected the versatility of slaves that were for sale. For example, one advertisement in the January 15, 1754, *Boston Gazette* described a slave for sale who was skilled in "all sorts of housework, used to the cooper's business, and a very good sailor."¹⁷ Such advertisements demonstrated that many slaves were jacks-of-all-trades, the class to which most slaves belonged.¹⁸ Many slaves learned their trade so well that they were given positions of responsibility, managing ships, shops, warehouses, and farms.

Religious education was considered crucial in the overall scheme of a slave's learning. Clergymen like Samuel Willard, John Eliot, and Cotton Mather challenged masters that they "had a Christian duty to tend to the souls of their bondmen."¹⁹ John Eliot warned masters that God would wreak vengeance on those who used slaves for economic benefit yet neglected to bring them to the Lord.²⁰ Cotton Mather was even more explicit in his charge to masters.

Suppose that language were heard from the mouth of a master concerning a servant: 'If I have the labor of the slave, that's all I care for. Let his soul go and be damned for all time!' Would not every Christian say, 'This were the language for the mouth of a devil, rather than for the mouth of a Christian!' Would not every Christian cry out, 'Let him not be called a master, but a monster that shall speak so.'²¹

About three to four percent of Negro slaves became Christians and were baptized into the Puritan churches. What is important about this is that these slaves were exposed to biblical concepts of freedom and equality. Although slaves were taught to accept their lot in life, a Puritan concept, they were also told that they had "spiritual freedom" now and would have physical freedom when they got to heaven. Concepts of equality before God and Scriptures like John 8:36 ("If the Son set you free, you shall be free indeed.") that were learned in churches were used in black antislavery rhetoric before the Revolution. An example of such rhetoric is found in Caesar Sarter's "Essay on Slavery" published by the *Essex Journal and Merrimack Packet*, August 17, 1774. This jeremiad, addressed to the state legislature, states, "Why will you not pity and relieve the poor, distressed, enslaved Africans? Let that excellent rule given by our Saviour, to do to others as you would that they should do to you, have its due weight with you."²²

Occupational training expanded slaves' economic opportunities. When masters did not need them, slaves were hired out and allowed to keep a portion of the proceeds of that hiring. Slaves in Massachusetts were not hired out on a "hiring day," a feature that developed in the southern colonies after the Revolution. Instead, masters in the Bay Colony advertised their slaves for hire in local newspapers like the *Boston News-Letter* or contracted with someone they knew. The ability to be hired out contributed to slaves quasi-independence and elevated standard of living.²³ Thus, occupational training, which gave them a livelihood, and religious and

¹⁷ Ibid., 119.

¹⁸ Ibid., 119.

¹⁹ Christopher Cameron, "The Puritan Origins of Black Abolitionism in Massachusetts," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, 39, 1 & 2 (Summer, 2011): 82.

²⁰ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776*, 263.

²¹ Cotton Mather, 8.

²² Caesar Sarter, "Essay on Slavery," *Essex Journal and Merrimack Packet*, August 17, 1774, 1.
<http://www.rethinkingschools.org>.

²³ Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1973), 49.

academic education, which introduced them to important ideas and rhetorical skills, prepared them to eventually voice their opposition to slavery.

The fourth trait of Massachusetts's slavery that sets it apart from that practiced in the South is that the slaves had legal rights. From slavery's beginning in Massachusetts, slaves had a dual status: they were regarded as property and as persons. In no other colony was this the case. As property, slaves were "bought or hired as personal property, and regular bills of sale were executed to affect the transfer of title."²⁴ Also, slaves were taxable, just like domestic animals. In 1692, when Massachusetts wanted to raise taxes for the defenses of Boston Harbor, "Negro, Indian, and Mulatto slaves were placed in the same category as horses, sheep, and swine."²⁵ As property, they could be seized or sold to satisfy legal claims, as happened in Boston in 1706 when a doctor successfully petitioned the court to have a patient's slave sold to pay that patient's medical bill.²⁶ They also were counted as property in wills and could be sold as part of the estate after the death of the owner.

However, slaves were also regarded as persons. Therefore, they had many legal rights in Massachusetts. For one, slaves had the right to life. No master had the right to kill his slave. In fact, the murder of a slave was a capital offense just as it was in the case of a freeman.²⁷ In fact, an inquest was held to determine the cause of death. Few masters wanted the notoriety of an inquest. This fact put a check on the mistreatment of slaves by their masters. How different this was than in the South, where masters could kill, maim, or mutilate their slaves with impunity and suffer no consequences!

Also, slaves in Massachusetts had a right to property. They could inherit it from their masters, buy it themselves and sell it, or bequeath it to others. Masters who illegally took their slave's property could be sued in court because "the master's property in the slave did not automatically entitle him to the property of the slave. This distinction was peculiar to Northern slavery."²⁸

Furthermore, slaves had the same rights in court as freemen, and their courts were not slave courts, as in the South, but the same courts as those for whites. They could testify, even against whites, something not permitted in the South. Suffolk County Court Records indicate that "the testimony of Negroes against whites was accepted by the courts in both civil and criminal cases."²⁹ Slaves could also sue their masters for mistreatment or breach of contract and had the right of appeal to a higher court. Slaves had the right to trial by jury after formal indictment, and the right to pass on their jurors. They could not sit as jurors but, overall, had the same access to judicial procedures and protections in criminal cases as whites.

One of the most famous instances of this involved Judge John Saffin's slave Adam. Judge Saffin had contracted with Adam to free him after he had been hired out to serve Thomas Shepard for seven years. Saffin did not free Adam, saying he had not completed his term faithfully. Adam sued and eventually won his freedom in 1703.

Another interesting legal fact about slaves is that slave marriages had to be announced in public banns, solemnized, and recorded just the same as freemen's marriages. Up to 1686, they were married by magistrates but afterward by either clergy or magistrates. Furthermore, slaves

²⁴ McManus, 62.

²⁵ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776*, 169.

²⁶ *Massachusetts Archives: Domestic Relations, 1643-1774*, IX, Massachusetts Archive Collection Database, 161, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://www.sec.ma.us>.

²⁷ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776*, 177.

²⁸ McManus, 62.

²⁹ McManus, 68.

could sue for divorce in the courts. In 1742, Jethro Boston successfully sued his wife for infidelity.³⁰

Although slaves had all of the legal rights mentioned, they were still slaves and came under certain restrictions. “Massachusetts felt it necessary to civilize slaves because, unlike the South, slaves were primarily domestics who lived in the homes of their masters.”³¹ A 1693 law stated that slaves could not drink in inns or taverns. A 1703 law forbade them from being out at night after nine o’clock. Another law that same year would not allow a master to free his slave unless the master posted a bond of £50 to take care of the slave should he not be able to support himself. Another law in 1705 forbade black slaves to marry whites and required a slave be whipped if he struck a white man. Also, by 1728, no slave could carry a stick or cane because many had used these in public quarrels.

In spite of these restrictions, Massachusetts never “codified a comprehensive slave code,” like the Middle and Southern colonies, an action “which created a space for legal ambiguity and slave action.”³² Lorenzo Greene admitted that “oppressive as were these controls..., they were much milder than similar codes governing Negroes in New York and in the tobacco colonies.”³³ He also noted that the restrictions were not vigorously enforced.

Because slaves had access to the courts, the number of freedom suits increased after 1760. Jenny Slew successfully sued for her freedom in 1762. A slave named Margaret won her freedom in 1768. Caesar gained his freedom in 1769.³⁴ These cases, along with about twenty others, may be few in number, but they illustrate how different things were for slaves in Massachusetts. The right to sue for one’s freedom eventually led to a freedom suit that ended slavery in that state in 1780. This could not have happened had slaves not had access to the courts.

Although antislavery activity was minimal in Massachusetts from 1630 until right before the Revolution, people, for both economic and moral reasons did begin to speak out against slavery. In fact, a debate about the validity of slavery was developing between the profit-oriented merchants and the Puritan leaders. Perhaps the earliest person to voice his concerns about slavery was Judge Samuel Sewall. Sewall, along with Cotton Mather and many other ministers were slaveholders. They saw the slaves as people who had been brought to them providentially to hear the Gospel. But, these men were also very conflicted about the issue. That is why they challenged masters to treat their slaves humanely and teach them about God, although never directly condemning the institution of slavery itself and calling for its abolishment. In his essay “The Selling of Joseph, A Memorial,” which he wrote in 1700, Sewall’s unease is palpable.

The numerousness of slaves at this day in the province, and the uneasiness of them under slavery, hath put many upon thinking whether the foundation of it be firmly and well laid so as to sustain the vast weight that is built upon it. It is most certain that all men, as they are sons of Adam, are coheirs, and have equal right unto liberty, and all other outward comforts of life...’And [God] had made of on

³⁰ Matthew Johnson, “Timeline of the Events Relating to the End of Slavery,” *Massachusetts Historical Timeline*, http://www.masshist.org/education/loc-slavery/essay.php?entry_id=504 (2010).

³¹ Jared Ross Hardesty, “An Ambiguous Institution: Slavery, the State, and the Law in Colonial Massachusetts,” *Journal of Early American History* 3 (2013): 172.

³² *Ibid.*, 159.

³³ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776*, 142.

³⁴ Cameron, 96.

blood all nations of men...’ Originally, and naturally, there is no such thing as slavery...[For] men to persist in holding their neighbors and brethren under the rigor of perpetual bondage seems to be no proper way of gaining assurance that God had given them spiritual freedom.”³⁵

Sewall’s pamphlet was the first one in Massachusetts that began to question the validity of slavery and the slave trade. Sewall suggests that “it would conduce more to the welfare of the province to have white servants for a term of years than to have slaves for life.”³⁶ This pamphlet sparked a debate with another judge, John Saffin, who issued a response justifying slavery. The same month that Sewall printed and distributed his essay, colonists petitioned the legislature to pass a law requiring an import duty on all black slaves brought into the colony, with a fine for those captains who failed to report. Such a law was passed in 1705 and strengthened in 1728 and again in 1739. In 1702, Sewall and his friends influenced their “Boston representatives [to urge] the General Court to promote the importation of white indentured servants and ‘put a period to Negroes being slaves,’ but nothing came of the measure.”³⁷ James Allegro noted that in 1706 the *Boston News-Letter* ran an article that opined, “The importing of Negroes into this or the neighboring provinces is not so beneficial either to the crown or country as white servants would be.”³⁸ The paper made the point that whites could help be part of the militia to help the colony in fights against enemies. Slaves were barred by law from being armed or being part of the militia.

The topic of ceasing the slave trade came up again when Cotton Mather spoke to the General Court in 1709, challenging them to suspend the slave trade. He said,

To go as pirates, and catch up poor negroes...that have never forfeited life or liberty and to make them slaves and sell them is one of the worst kinds of thievery in the world; and such persons are to taken for the common enemies of mankind; and they that buy them, and use them as beasts for their mere commodity, and betray or destroy or neglect their souls, are fitter to be called incarnate devils than Christians, though they be no Christians whom they so abuse.³⁹

Although the General Court did not suspend the slave trade, the debate over slavery continued. Due to an economic downturn in Massachusetts after Queen Anne’s War, an anonymous tract on currency policy appeared in 1716. In the essay “Some Considerations upon the Several Sorts of Banks Proposed as a Medium of Trade,” the writer exhorted “his fellow colonists to reconsider African slavery’s impact on local prosperity and stability.”⁴⁰ The tract included a plan to eliminate the slave trade in twenty years. In 1718, the *Boston News-Letter*

³⁵ Samuel Sewall, “The Selling of Joseph, A Memorial” (Boston, 1700): 1.
<http://www.masshist.org/objects/queryz.cfm?queryID=57>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁷ Mark A. Peterson, “The Selling of Joseph: Bostonians, Antislavery, and the Protestant International,” *Massachusetts Historical Review* 4, Race and Slavery (2002): 8.

³⁸ James Allegro, “Increasing and Strengthening the Country’: Law, Politics, and the Anti-Slavery Movement in Early-Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts Bay,” *The New England Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (Mar., 2002): 9.

³⁹ Cotton Mather, *Theopolis Americana: An Essay on the Golden rule of the Holy City 1710*, *Electronic Texts in American Studies* 21-22.

⁴⁰ “Some Considerations upon the Several Sorts of Banks Proposed as a Medium of Trade” in *Colonial Currency Reprints, 1682-1751*, ed. Andrew McFarland Davis, 4 vols., rev. ed. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1964), 1:344-346.

again ran an article that showed the financial benefit of buying white indentured servants instead of slaves. These articles and legislative actions demonstrate the rise of antislavery attitudes among secular and religious colonists. Furthermore, slaves would have known about and been encouraged by the calls for the end of slavery that came from both secular and religious sources.

Other preachers like Elihu Coleman in Nantucket continued to speak against slavery. In 1737, he published *A Testimony against that anti-Christian Practice of Making Slaves of Men*, which urged Christians to free their slaves because they, too, were made in the image of God. "In 1755, the town of Salem authorized a petition to the General Court against the importation of negroes."⁴¹ By 1761, James Otis also urged in "Writs of Assistance" the immediate liberation of all slaves, saying, "The colonists are by law of nature free born as indeed all men are white or black."⁴²

During the 1760s, as already mentioned, several slaves, because they had access to the courts, sued successfully for their freedom. In 1766, "Boston, which at the time contained almost as many slaves as the rest of Massachusetts, instructed its representatives to vote for the total abolition of slavery. . . . Some of the smaller towns even voted to have no slaves at all."⁴³ Nathaniel Appleton, in 1767 (the year that Massachusetts tried to abolish slavery but was prevented by the Crown) anonymously published *Considerations of Slavery*. His treatise attacked the economic arguments in support of slavery and exposed the moral injustice of Christian society that sought to redeem slaves' souls without emancipating their bodies.

Finally, we come to the slaves themselves. All of the preaching and the political activity was not lost on the slaves of Massachusetts. In January, 1773, a committee of slaves petitioned the governor, council, and House of Representatives for their freedom. They petitioned again in April stating, "We expect great things from men who have such a noble stand against the designs of their fellow-men to enslave them. We cannot but wish and hope. . . that you will have the same grand object, we mean civil and religious liberty."⁴⁴ When nothing happened, they petitioned two more times in 1774. The General Court did not act on this petition but did pass a bill to stop the slave trade. The governor dissolved the legislature without signing it. A few months later, Caesar Sarter, a slave near Boston, wrote in protest of those who supported slavery. His "Essay on Slavery" is considered the first black jeremiad. He stated,

As this is a time of great anxiety and distress among you, on account of the infringement not only of your Charter right; but of the natural rights and privileges of freeborn men; permit a poor, though freeborn African, who, in his youth, was trepanned into slavery and who has born the galling yoke of bondage for more than twenty years; though at last, by the blessing of God, has shaken it off, to tell you, and that from experience, that as slavery is the greatest, and consequently most to be dreaded, of all temporal calamities: So its opposite, Liberty, is the greatest temporal good, with which you can be blest! Why will you not pity and relieve the poor, distressed, enslaved Africans?⁴⁵

⁴¹ Moore, 109.

⁴² James Otis, "Writs of Assistance," *Constitution Society*, http://www.constitution.org/bor/otis_against_writs.htm.

⁴³ Greene, "Slave Holding New England and Its Awakening," 525.

⁴⁴ "Petitions of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 20 April 1773," Massachusetts Historical Society, 5th Series 3 (Boston, IB77), 432ff, accessed March 10, 2016, <http://www.masshist.org>.

⁴⁵ Sarter

Phillis Wheatley, the slave poetess, wrote similarly to Indian Pastor Samson Occum, stating, “In every human breast, God has implanted a principle, which we call love of freedom; it is impatient of oppression, and pants for deliverance; and by the leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert that the same principle lives in us.”⁴⁶ Phillis Wheatley’s ability to write poetry well and her resultant fame both in America and Britain aided the abolitionist cause. She proved that black slaves were as intelligent and perceptive as any white man. What she and the petitioners and Caesar Sarter had in common was their education, their exposure to Christianity from their masters, and the right to access the courts and the colonial authorities.

Slavery in Massachusetts was indeed different than that in the Southern colonies because of environment, climate, township laws, master-slave relationships, education, and legal status. But, slavery was still slavery. Nevertheless, the slaves’ religious training, education, and access to the courts enabled them ultimately to gain their freedom in the unique environment that was Massachusetts.

⁴⁶ Phillis Wheatley to Reverend Samson Occum, 11 February, 1774, *Africans in America*, accessed March 11, 2016, http://pbs.org/wghh/aia/part_2/2h19t.html.