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a former slave who achieved renown in the era of the American Revolution by laying claim to a portion of the wealth of her former master's estate, was born in the region of West Africa known as the Gold Coast (later Ghana). Her early years were spent in a village on the Volta River. According to her later memories, it was an Edenic existence. However, when she was about age twelve, the Atlantic slave trade shattered this bucolic world. She was captured in a slaving raid, permanently separated from her parents, marched overland to the coast, and sold to European slave traders. For several weeks she endured the horrific Middle Passage with some three hundred other Africans in chains, who were "suffering the most excruciating torment" (Carretta, 143).

In about 1732, after six or seven years in North America, Belinda became the slave of Isaac Royall Jr., a member of a prominent family of sugar planters on the Caribbean island of Antigua. She would serve him in bondage for nearly five decades. Royall had recently moved his family and slaves to Medford, Massachusetts, where he became the largest slaveholder in the colony. Belinda lived in his sizeable slave quarters in Medford, a rare experience for a New England slave. As the American Revolution neared, Royall became an outspoken Loyalist, an unpopular stance in radical Massachusetts. Fearing for his safety, he fled the colonies for Britain in April 1775, a few days after the battles of Lexington and Concord. With her master gone Belinda became the property of the state of Massachusetts, which manumitted her in 1778; unfortunately it appears that a son, Joseph, was sold away from her at the time of her manumission. She left Medford for Boston, where she and an invalid daughter, Prine, were living in 1783, when the Massachusetts courts finally declared slavery unconstitutional in the case of *Commonwealth v. Jennison*.

In February 1783, as Massachusetts was ending slavery and the Revolution was coming to an end, Belinda petitioned the Massachusetts legislature, assembled as a general court, for a portion of the rents and profits of the Royall estate. PRINCE Hall, a local black abolitionist who had personally petitioned the legislature on several occasions, probably helped her author the petition. It is unclear what other individuals or ideas may have influenced her action, although Boston blacks and a local Patriot pamphleteer named James Swan had promoted biblical justifications for restitution to the slaves in the years before the Revolution. After recounting her suffering as a result of slavery and the slave trade, and noting her advanced age and extreme poverty, she used the bulk of the petition to explain her reasons for seeking a pension, noting that she had labored in slavery for Royall for nearly half a century. Drawing on emerging capitalist notions, she observed that, despite her years of unpaid labor, she was "denied the enjoyment of one morsel of that immense wealth, a part whereof hath been accumulated by her own industry, and the whole augmented by her servitude" (Carretta, 143). She pleaded with the legislature to grant her a pension out of the wealth of the Royall estate. Moved by her argument, the legislature granted her a £15 annual pension. In 1787, after the estate had failed to

continue payment of the pension, she again petitioned the legislature to order that the payments be resumed. Her request was granted. Finally, in 1790, the executor of the Royall estate refused to continue payment “without a further interposition” by the legislature. Belinda petitioned a third time and a legislative committee determined the pension was still in “full force.” Nothing further is known of Belinda's life after 1790.

Belinda's initial petition had a separate life in the public sphere, reaching readers on both sides of the Atlantic. It was reprinted verbatim in the 18 June 1783 issue of the *New Jersey Gazette*, a popular newspaper in the Middle Atlantic states. Two months later it circulated through a few British periodicals under the heading “The Complaint of Belinda, an African.” Rewritten into a first-person slave narrative for use in the emerging British antislavery campaign, the latter version added a tale of rape to the list of sufferings in the original petition. There was another flurry of interest in Belinda's case when Matthew Carey published the petition in his widely-circulated *American Museum* magazine in 1787.

The petition has been remembered and reinterpreted by writers as diverse as the pioneering historian William Cooper Nell in his *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855) and the former U.S. poet laureate Rita Dove in her 1982 poem entitled “Belinda's Petition.” Both of these writers and others have viewed the petition as a suit for freedom. By the early twenty-first century, however, scholars increasingly understood the petition as an early call for personal restitution for time spent in bondage. The anthropologist Stephanie Shaw labeled it “perhaps the earliest example of reparations for the slave trade and slavery” (Finkenbine, 96).

Further Reading

Carretta, Vincent, ed. *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (1996).

Finkenbine, Roy E. “Belinda's Petition: Reparations for Slavery in Revolutionary Massachusetts,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 54 (Jan. 2007): 95–104.

See also

Dove, Rita Frances <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34353>>

Hall, Prince <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34429>>

Nell, William Cooper <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34610>>