

“Having Tasted the Sweets of *Freedom*.” Cato Petitions the Pennsylvania Legislature to Remain Free, 1781

Pressures for abolition of slavery increased in the Revolutionary era; five northern states abolished slavery between 1780 and 1804. Pennsylvania was the first in 1780 when its legislature passed a gradual abolition bill. However, no one was actually freed; all those enslaved when the law went into effect remained enslaved, and all those born after that date were required to provide their mothers' masters with twenty-eight years of servitude before they could obtain their freedom. Despite the law's extreme gradualism, the following year a more conservative legislature attempted to repeal it. Newly freed African Americans petitioned the Assembly to reject such a move. Cato, newly freed with his children, wrote to *Philadelphia's Freeman's Journal*, an African-American newspaper, in 1781, making his case by using the legislature's own words about the promise of universal civilization while adding his own views of the meaning of the Revolution. The legislature voted against repealing the gradual abolition act.

Mr. PRINTER.

I AM a poor negro, who with myself and children have had the good fortune to get my freedom, by means of an act of assembly passed on the first of March 1780, and should now with my family be as happy a set of people as any on the face of the earth, but I am told the assembly are going to pass a law to send us all back to our masters. Why dear Mr. Printer, this would be the cruellest act that ever a sett of worthy good gentlemen could be guilty of. To make a law to hang us all, would be *merciful*, when compared with this law; for many of our masters would treat us with unheard of barbarity, for daring to take the advantage (as we have done) of the law made in our favor.—Our lots in *slavery* were hard enough to bear: but having tasted the sweets of *freedom*, we should now be miserable indeed.—Surely no christian gentlemen can be so cruel! I cannot believe they will pass such a law.—I have read the act which made me free, and I always read it with joy—and I always dwell with particular pleasure on the following words, spoken by the assembly in the top of the said law. "We esteem it a particular blessing granted to us, that we are enabled this day to add one more step to universal civilization, by removing as much as possible the sorrows of those, who have lived in *undeserved* bondage, and from which, by the assumed authority of the kings of Great-Britain, no effectual legal relief could be obtained." See it was the king of Great- Britain that kept us in slavery before.—Now surely, after saying so, it cannot be possible for them to make slaves of us again—nobody, but the king of England can do it—and I sincerely pray, that he may never have it in his power.—It cannot be, that the assembly will take from us the liberty they have given, because a little further they go on and say, "we conceive ourselves, at this particular period, extraordinarily called upon, by the blessings which *we* have received, to make manifest the sincerity of our professions and to give a substantial proof of our gratitude." If after all this, *we*, who by virtue of this very law (which has those very words in it which I have copied,) are now enjoying the sweets of that "substantial proof of gratitude" I say if we should be plunged back into slavery, what must we think of the meaning of all those words in the begining of the said law, which seem to be a kind of creed respecting slavery? but what is most serious than all, what will our great father think of such doings? But I

pray that he may be pleased to tern the hearts of the honourable assembly from this cruel law;
and that he will be pleased to make us poor blacks deserving of his mercies.

CATO

Source: *Freeman's Journal* (Philadelphia, Pennyslvania) September 21, 1781.