

“Petition of an African slave, to the legislature of Massachusetts.” From *The American Museum, or Repository of Ancient and Modern Fugitive Pieces, Prose and Poetical*. For June, 1787. Volume 1. Number 6. Philadelphia: Mathew Cary, 1787.

To the honorable the senate and house of representatives, in general court assembled:

The petition of Belinda, an African,

Humbly shews,

That seventy years have rolled away, since she, on the banks of the Rio de Volta,<sup>1</sup> received her existence. The mountains, covered with spicy forests—vallis, loaded with the richest fruits spontaneously produced—joined to that happy temperature of air, which excludes excess, would have yielded her the most complete felicity, had not her mind received early impressions of the cruelty of men, whose faces were like the moon, and whose bows and arrows were like the thunder and lightning of the clouds. The idea of these, the most dreadful of all enemies, filled her infant slumber with horror, and her noon-tide moments with cruel apprehensions! But her affrighted imagination, in its most alarming extension, never represented distresses equal to what she has since really experienced: for before she had twelve years enjoyed the fragrance of her native groves, and ere she had realized that Europeans placed their happiness in the yellow dust,<sup>2</sup> which she carelessly marked with her infant foot-steps—even when she, in a sacred grove, with each hand in that of a tender parent, was paying her devotion to the great Orisa, who made all things, and armed band of white men, driving many of her countrymen in chains, rushed into the hallowed shades! Could the tears, the sighs, the supplications, bursting from the tortured parental affection, have blunted the keen edge of avarice, she might have been rescued from agony, which many of her country's children have felt, but which none have ever described. In vain she lifted her supplication voice to an insulted father, and her guiltless hands to a dishonoured deity! She was ravished from the bosom of her country, from the arms of her friends, while the advanced age of her parents rendering them unfit for servitude, cruelly separated them from her forever.

Scenes which her imagination had never conceived of, a floating world, the sporting monsters of the deep, and the familiar meeting of billows and clouds, strove, but in vain, to divert her attention from three hundred Africans in chains, suffering the most excruciating torment; and some of them rejoicing that the pangs of death came like a balm to their wounds.

Once more her eyes were blessed with a continent: but alas! how unlike the land where she received her being! Here all things appeared unpropitious. She learned to catch the ideas, marked by the sounds of language, only to know that her doom was slavery, from which death alone was to emancipate her. What did it avail her, that the walls of her lord were hung with splendor, and that the dust trodden under foot in her native country, crouded his gates with sordid worshippers! The laws rendered her incapable of receiving property: and though she was a free moral agent, accountable for her own actions, yet never had she a moment at her own disposal! Fifty years her faithful hands have been compelled to ignoble servitude for the benefit of an Isaac Royall,<sup>3</sup> until, as

---

<sup>1</sup> The Volta River flows through present-day Ghana, known in the eighteenth century as the Gold Coast

<sup>2</sup> Yellow dust: gold. Belinda remembers the type of African paradise—fruitful, temperate, and where minerals precious to Europeans have no real value—often described in abolitionist literature.

<sup>3</sup> Isaac Royall (1719?–1781) was one of the wealthiest and most prominent Loyalists in Massachusetts. He and his brother Jacob, both born in the West Indian colony of Antigua, were slave dealers as well as major slave owners in Massachusetts. Isaac Royall fled from Medford, Massachusetts, to Boston just days before the battle of Lexington in April 1775. After the battle, he sought refuge in England, where he

if nations must be agitated, and the world convulsed, for the preservation of that freedom, which the Almighty Father intended for all the human race, the present war commenced. The terrors of men, armed in the cause of freedom, compelled her master to fly, and to breathe away his life in a land, where lawless dominion sits enthroned, pouring blood and vengeance on all who dare to be free.

The face of your petitioner is now marked with the furrows of time, and her frame feebly bending under the oppression of years, while she, by the laws of the land, is 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.

Wherefore, casting herself at the feet of your honours, as to a body of men, formed for the extirpation of vassalage, for the reward of virtue, and the just returns of honest industry—she prays that such allowance may be made her, out of the estate of colonel Royall, as will prevent her, and her more infirm daughter, from misery in the greatest extreme, and scatter comfort over the short and downward path of their lives: and she will ever pray.

BELINDA.

Boston, February, 1782. (538–40).<sup>4</sup>

---

died. Like many colonial soldiers, he had two military ranks, one in the colonial service, in which he was Brigadier-General of the Artillery Company of Boston, and the other in the Royal Army, in which he was a colonel. Significantly, in Belinda's petition he is later called Colonel Royall, to emphasize his Loyalist position. After he fled, his property was declared forfeited and confiscated by the state, which did not sell the Royall estate until 1805.

<sup>4</sup> *The American Museum* frequently published antislavery pieces. For example, the essay that immediately follows Belinda's petition is entitled "Address to the Heart, on the Subject of African Slavery." In 1787 the magazine printed Belinda's original petition of 1783 because she had repitioned the legislature in spring 1787 for the resumption of payment of the pension of £15 per year she had been awarded out of the rents and profits from her former master's expropriated estate but which had ceased to be paid her after the first year. In November 1787, Belinda was granted her pension for another year, in response to "The Memorial of Belinda, an African, formerly a Servant to the late Isaac Royall Esq an Absentee." We do not what became of Belinda, her daughter, or the pension.