

Memorial of the Free Citizens of Color in Pittsburgh and its Vicinity Relative to the Right of Suffrage

(the Pittsburgh memorial)

To the Honorable Convention assemble[d] for the purpose of proposing to the people of Pennsylvania, amendments to the existing constitution of Pennsylvania.

The Memorial of the undersigned from citizens of color, residing in Pittsburgh and its vicinity, respectfully represents: That they have heard, with surprise and alarm, of an intention seriously expressed by some of the members of your honorable body, so to amend the Constitution as to make the right of suffrage depend not on the fact of being a freeman and a tax-payer, but on the complexion, whether dark or fair, which it may have pleased God to confer on the good people of the Commonwealth.

That such an attempt should be mediated by a single individual in the year eighteen hundred and thirty seven, may well be regarded as a matter of astonishment.

It has been deemed both at home and abroad, a matter of just sarcasm, that, whilst the Declaration of Independence boasts of the universal equality of men, in many of the States, one half of the community is the absolute property of the other subject to the despotic will, nay to the passion, caprice, and cruelty of a master. In Pennsylvania, public sentiment has triumphed over this glaring inconsistency. [T]he brave spirits who achieved the Revolution, laid the foundation of a system by which slavery has been extinguished. The preamble of the noble act of the first of March, 1790, breathes a spirit which surely cannot have departed from the land. We beg leave to recall its imperishable language:

“When we contemplate our abhorrence of that condition to which the arms and tyranny of Great Britain were exerted to reduce us, when we look back on the variety of dangers to which we have been exposed, and how miraculously our wants in many instances have been supplied, and our deliverance wrought, when even hope and human fortitude had become unequal to the conflict we are unavoidably led to a serious and grateful sense of the manifold blessings which we have deservedly received from the hand of that Being, from whom every good and perfect gift cometh. Impressed with these ideas, we conceived that it is our duty, and we rejoice that it is in our power, to extend a portion of that freedom to others, which hath been extended to us, and release from that state of thralldom to which we ourselves were doomed and from which we have now every prospect of being delivered. It is not for us to inquire why, in the creation of mankind, the inhabitants of the several parts of the earth were distinguished by a difference in feature and complexion. It is sufficient to know that all are the work of an Almighty hand. We find in the distribution of the human species, that the most fertile as well as the most barren parts of the earth are inhabited by men of complexions different from ours and from each other, from whence we may reasonably as well as religiously infer, that he who placed them in their various situations, hath extended equally His care and

protection to all, and that it becometh not us to counteract His mercies. We esteem it a peculiar 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. Weaned by a long course of experience from those narrow prejudices and partialities we have imbibed, we find our hearts enlarged with kindness and benevolence toward men of all conditions and nations; and we conceive ourselves at this particular period extraordinarily called upon, by the blessings which we have received, to manifest the sincerity of our profession, and give a substantial proof of our gratitude.”

Such were the sentiments promulgated fifty-seven years ago, by the fathers of the Commonwealth: The undersigned cannot but believe that to discard these now and to fall back upon barbarous prejudices, would not be less impolite than unjust and cruel. The danger under which some of our sister states is now trembling is, that they hold within their bosom a population cut off from social rights, and looking with sullen discontent or eager hostility on all around them. In Pennsylvania, the colored man, under her liberal and enlightened policy, has been taught to feel that he has an interest in common with the white man in sustaining her free institutions. He has felt that he shared in the blessing of her condition; and it has been his pride to show by his conduct as a citizen, that he is not unworthy of having been restored to the rights of humanity.

Believing that information would be interesting, we beg leave to submit to your honorable body, certain statements which accompany this memorial, (marked respectively A, B, and F.) They show our present condition, the stand that has been taken in the useful pursuits of life, in the requisition of property, and the efforts made to ameliorate the condition of our race.

And your memorialists will ever pray, etc.* Signed at Pittsburgh, Penn., June 26, 1837

*[Many petitioners, being illiterate, endorsed the memorial by marking an “X” by their printed name- Author]

John B. Vashon
George Powell
H. Vashon
A. D. Lewis
C. R. Lewis
R.L. Hopkins
George Powell
Robert Bailey
Otho Matthews

J. W. Brown
James McKnight
Zelicher Newman
Daniel Smith
Henry Anderson
Othello Darsey
Samuel Collins
Samuel Berry
Charles Cook

| | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| George Parker | John M. Mitchell |
| C. S. Williamson Jr. | Samuel Ranyolds |
| B. J. Colder | Chambers Peters |
| Thomas Morris | Benjamin Jones |
| Samuel Sanders | Charles Clark |
| Peter Ennis | William O. Krow |
| Va. Johnston | James F. Douglass |
| George Woods | Henry Myers |
| Matthew Jones | Richard Bryans |
| S. Morris | Joseph Manks |
| Samuel Bruce | Lewis Davis |
| John Graham | Abraham Strawdeo |
| Owen Barrett | George W. Boler |
| Henry Woods | Edward Talbert |
| John Cook | Thomas Knox |
| Solomon Phillips | Henry Seaton |
| James Gillard | George Speares |
| Charles Weddly | Robert Bowen |
| B. W. Wilkins | Lewis Woodson |
| James Parker | John Newton |
| A. Bell | George Carney |
| Peter Starks | Benjamin Russell |
| E. Sears | George Wheeler |
| Edward R. Parker | David Body |
| Steven McGill | Robert Henderson |
| Issac Sheldon | Joseph Mahonney |
| A. Bedfort | Reuben Farmer |
| Hugh Tanner | James Coleman |
| Samuel Johnston | Nathaniel Dixon |
| Henry M. Collins | Ebenezer Findlay |
| | John Peck |

Statement A

The committee appointed by the free colored citizens of the city of Pittsburgh, at their next public meeting on the thirteenth of June 1837, to make certain inquiries concerning the moral, social, and political condition of the colored population of Pittsburgh, and its vicinity, have performed the duty assigned them and beg leave to submit the following report:

The number of colored population of the city of Pittsburgh, and villages immediately adjacent, is supposed to be about two thousand five hundred. Their manner of living is generally the same as that of those among whom they are located. The sacred obligations and duties of the family relation are respected and practiced among them, as it is among all Christian people. They are believers in the doctrines of the Bible and the worshippers of that God whose attributes and character it more fully unfolds. They are the decided friends of good order, and the supremacy of the laws under which they live; and feel a warm interest in the peace, safety, honor and prosperity of the Commonwealth.

The colored population of the city of Pittsburgh have under their exclusive government, one African Methodist Episcopal Church of two hundred and five members. The house in which they worship belongs to them, and is a substantial brick building,

newly enlarged and repaired, and furnished with comfortable pews, carpets, venetian window blinds, and opaque lamps, and is valued at ten thousand dollars. The congregation is large, orderly, and well attended. Their doors are always open to all well-behaved people; and no person has [been] excluded from the best of their seats, on account of the complexion which it may have pleased the Almighty to give him. Besides these, there are a number of colored persons assigned to the Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Baptist, and Catholic congregations of the city.

They have a very flourishing Sunday School of ninety-seven scholars and fifteen teachers; furnished with a Library, selected chiefly from the publications of the American Sunday School Union. This school is exerting a most happy influence on the moral character of the rising youth.

They have a common day school, taught by a young colored man, a graduate of Ohio University. The number of scholars now in regular attendance is eighty-five, many of whom are making rapid progress in their studies, and are preparing for future usefulness and respectability in society. The house in which it is taught and the lot on which it stands, both belong to the colored people, and is valued at two thousand dollars; and the school is supported entirely by the colored people.

They have a Temperance Society of about one hundred and seventy members. This society is now in active operation; and no institution ever exerted a more happy influence on the moral character of any people than this has done on the moral character of the colored people of Pittsburgh. They have purchased with their own funds, and distributed gratuitously, three hundred copies of the Temperance Almanac; besides a considerable number of Temperance tracts. And they are now regularly taking eighty copies of the Pennsylvania Temperance Recorder.

They have a moral reform and literary society, whose object is the improvement of morals, the promotion of the mechanic arts, and the diffusion of useful knowledge among all classes of the colored people.

They have among them four benevolent societies, male and female; the oldest of which has in its treasury, a fund of two hundred and twenty dollars. And the treasuries of the others are solvent and well-supported. The object of these societies is to relieve the wants of their members and friends; when in sickness or distress; thereby preventing the disgrace of their becoming chargeable to the State as paupers, or going to the common poorhouse.

The amount of property and poll tax paid by the colored citizens of Pittsburgh, amounts to about four hundred and twenty-two dollars, according to the reports of the City Collector, which accompanies this report and is marked F. The amount of water tax paid by them is about four hundred dollars. And the amount of real estate owned by them is about ten thousand dollars. And the amount of real estate owned by them is valued at ____ [sic] thousand dollars.

In the city of Pittsburgh there are colored mechanics embracing the following trades viz: carpenters, blacksmiths, bricklayers, stone masons, boot and shoemakers, plasterers, painters, tanners

and curriers, coppersmiths and shipwrights; and in the vicinity of the City there are several farmers. All these are constantly, and some of them very successfully employed in their several avocations. It has been frequently remarked by impartial observers, that there is less idleness and drunkenness among the colored people who actually live in the City than among any other class of her population. The amount of pauperism among them is extremely small and, according to the report of the overseers of the poor, which accompanies this report, and is marked B, does not average more than three in a year (his own language was "perhaps only a little over two; and the annual expense of these is about \$75 each.)

In the village of Arthurville, immediately adjacent to the City on the east side, about seventy-one colored families reside. Thirty-six of these are the owners of real estate; the very lowest estimate of which is thirty-six thousand dollars. For some of the lots as much as two thousand five hundred dollars has been offered. The remaining thirty-five families are tenants, at from three to four dollars a month rent; amounting in the aggregate to about fourteen hundred and twenty-eight dollars. The people of this village have erected for themselves a small church, in which divine service is celebrated every Sabbath day. They have a Sunday School of from eighty to eighty-five scholars; and also a very full common school. The people of this village have done much to acquire the property they possess — to improve and make their dwellings comfortable — to educate their children, and to prepare them for future usefulness and respectability.

In the borough of Allegheny town, lying immediately west of the City, twenty-seven colored families reside. Seven of these are the owners of real estate, some of which is highly valuable, lying near the center of the business part of the borough. Eight are the owners of valuable leases and twelve are tenants, whose aggregate rent is four hundred and fifty-eight dollars. The property tax of some of them is ten dollars and forty cents, whilst some is as low as three dollars seventy cents. All the others pay the usual poll tax.

The Committee has not had time to pursue their investigations further. They believe, however, that enough has been exhibited, to satisfy any unprejudiced mind that the colored population appreciates their present privileges; and are endeavoring to sustain themselves honorably, and respectably in the community in which they live. Whatever of ignorance or degradation there is among us, owes its existence chiefly to our former condition in life. Slavery, that unrighteous, and unnatural state in which many of us were raised, deprived us of every means of moral cultivation, and caught in its own sordid interest in shutting out every ray of intellectual light. The fathers of this Commonwealth abolished this wicked system; and the wisdom of their deed is evinced in the fact that as we further recede from the fetters of the slave, we are better prepared to sustain the honors and high responsibilities of freemen.

In conclusion, the Committee would say: Let it be the chief pride of our existence to render ourselves worthy of the land of William Penn.

Signed at Pittsburgh June 19, 1837 by

The Committee:

John B. Vashon of Pittsburgh
Joseph Mahonney of Alleghenytown
Samuel Ranyolds of Pittsburgh
Thomas Knox of Arthursville
Lewis Woodson of Pittsburgh

[To whom it may concern:]

The foregoing report was read and unanimously adopted in the public meeting of the free colored citizens of Pittsburgh, and ordered to accompany their memorial to the Convention for proposing amendments to the existing constitution of Pennsylvania, now met at Harrisburg.

Lewis Woodson, Secretary
Pittsburgh, June 28, 1837

Statement B

The colored population of the City [of Pittsburgh] averages three persons chargeable, or something like \$75.00 per year per person.

Charles Craig, Overseer
Pittsburgh, July 3, 1837

Statement F

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| J. B. Vashon | pays | \$130.00 |
| Ch. Richards | pays | \$ 46.00 |
| Geo. Gardner | pays | \$ 24.00 |
| Frone Logan | pays | \$ 22.00 |
| A. Lewis | pays | \$ 30.00 |
| J. Mitchell | pays | \$ 20.00 |
| T. Morris | pays | \$ 18.00 |
| Mrs. Lewis | pays | <u>\$ 7.00</u> |
| | | \$297.00 |

The above named persons pay the [respective] amount of city and poor tax, and there are at least one hundred men who pay a poll tax of \$1.25 each.

Thos. Dickson, City Collector
Pittsburgh