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Bristol petition for expanded suffrage, 1829

This 1829 petition to expand the right to vote was submitted by residents of Bristol who did not own land and were therefore not permitted to vote. Land owners were called "freeholders;" those who did not own land were called "non-freeholders." At the writing of this petition, approximately one-half of the white male population was excluded from voting because they did not meet land ownership requirements.

Honorable the General Assembly of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, to be holden at Newport on the first Wednesday in May A.D. 1829.

The Undersigned, Adult Citizens, and nonfreeholders of the town of Bristol, respectfully beg leave to submit their grievances to the wise consideration of this Honorable Assembly: They need not, and trust they shall not trespass on your patience; for the voice of complaint is abroad in every quarter -- its details are before you from other towns -- and a recapitulation of them, therefore, they conceive, would be deemed irksome and unnecessary. They, however, beg leave to make one suggestion, and they owe it to themselves to say that they are not the advocates of an universal, indiscriminate rule of Suffrage. They would not open the gates to such materials as murderous Mobs are made of -- they ask not to admit the Rabble -- They invoke no sympathy for Crime and Misdemeanor; but would rather pray for their entire and eternal exclusion from the rights and privileges of Freedmen. And they submit it to your Honors, that the Law, as it now stands, is unwise and odious in this particular. How many abject wretches, are there in your favored class of the community, whose noses only blush for them, whilst they yield their notes to the influence of Rum!

Your Petitioners ask of you only what our venerated fathers asked of the proud Parliament of Britain -- no more -- no less. And they respectfully submit it to your Honorable Body, that the requisition of Military duty, or, the imposition of Taxes on those excluded from the right of Representation, is anti-Republican, and essentially opposed to the spirit and very letter of our federal Constitution: If you want their money -- they want to be consulted. If you would yoke them for the drudgery of the field -- they want a voice in fashioning the harness.

Your Honors need no assurance that the prayer of your Petitioners is not engendered in the spirit of of Anarchy: Their uniform and prompt conformity to this odious law is the best evidence that they are good citizens, and worthy to participate in the rights and privileges of their neighbors.

This transcript is intended to capture the substance of the document.

For details of capitalization, punctuation, spelling and spacing, we recommend consulting the original document.

They, therefore, pray that the Right of Suffrage be extended to every capable and worthy white male Citizen twenty one years old, who bears his portion of the burden of the People.

This primary source comes from the Rhode Island State Archives, C#0628 – Petitions to the General Assembly, Failed / Withdrawn, folder 1a.