



Gregg M. Amore
Secretary of State

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Warren petition for expanded suffrage, 1829

This 1829 petition to expand the right to vote to non-landowners was submitted by residents of Warren, both land owners and non-landowners. 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.

Memorial.

To the Hon. General Assembly of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, to be presented at their May Session, A. D. 1829.

Your Memorialists, Free-holders, and resident non-freeholders, inhabitants of the town of Warren, State of Rhode Island, feeling deeply concerned in the partial and limited operation of the laws regulating the exercise of Suffrage, and being convinced that the legal disabilities which prevent a large portion of them from sharing in the election of officers of Government, are unjust, and in opposition to the spirit and genius of Republican institutions - Do, from a sense of Justice to themselves, and of duty to posterity, Respectfully petition your Honorable Body (to whom alone we can look for redress) to take into consideration the subject of Suffrage, and grant such extension as Justice, and Republican principles demand.

It is well known that a large and respectable portion of the inhabitants of this State, do not enjoy the privilege of voting for civil officers. These citizens are taxed to defray the expenses of Government - They share in the burden of the Military establishment --- and are in many other particulars among the most efficient part of the community. Still, in a political point of view, they are as aliens - enjoying neither the name or privilege of freemen.

Our Ancestors raised the standard of opposition against the mother country, because she taxed them without Representation. They declared that "all men were born free and equal." They defended this doctrine with life and fortune; and in the Federal Constitution transmitted the glorious boon of equal Rights and Privileges to their children.

So it is supposed by any, that the principles of equitable government, are better understood by the proprietors of the soil -- than by those who lack that qualification? Virginia and Rhode Island are the

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

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only states in the Union that require a freehold to constitute a constitute a Voter; and may not these requirements be traced back to an age in which the Rights of man were not so well understood as they are now? Did not these laws emanate from the pen of Royalty, and is it a fact, that these two States manage the concerns of their Government with more wisdom than the other twenty-two members of Confederation? We know that 134 dollars vested in Real Estate, will entitle a man to the Right of Suffrage. So would a freehold in England have given to our fathers a right in the Representation; and the principle Rhode Island holds out to her non-free-holding citizens, it is the same, with which Britain mocked her American colonists.

It is allowed, that indiscriminate Suffrage is attended with evils; - but perhaps when carried to its greatest extent, there can be found nothing connected with it; which so directly violates the principles of Justice - or tending so certainly to anarchy and corruption as the exercise of an exclusive privilege, which gives to the oldest sons of freemen a right of Suffrage. They, whether wise men or fools, are admitted to the Polls. They - whether rich or poor, can dispose of the money they do not pay. But your Petitioners do not ask for an unlimited extension of the Suffrage system. They only desire that the State (first to recognize the sacred rights of conscience) - may still have enough of Justice remaining to allow those who share the burden of government - to share likewise in the Election of its officials. If non-freeholders must be taxed - they only ask a voice in the appropriation of the money taken from them.

Relying on the wisdom and justice of the Legislative Assembly, the Undersigned Petitioners, submit this Memorial - firmly believing, that where Justice and Interest are in opposite scales, the former will ever be suffered to preponderate; - and that on a due consideration of the subject, the Right of Suffrage will be extended to all male citizens, who pay taxes, - perform Military duty, - and have attained the age of twenty-one years.

[Signatures of freeholders and non-freeholders.]

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