

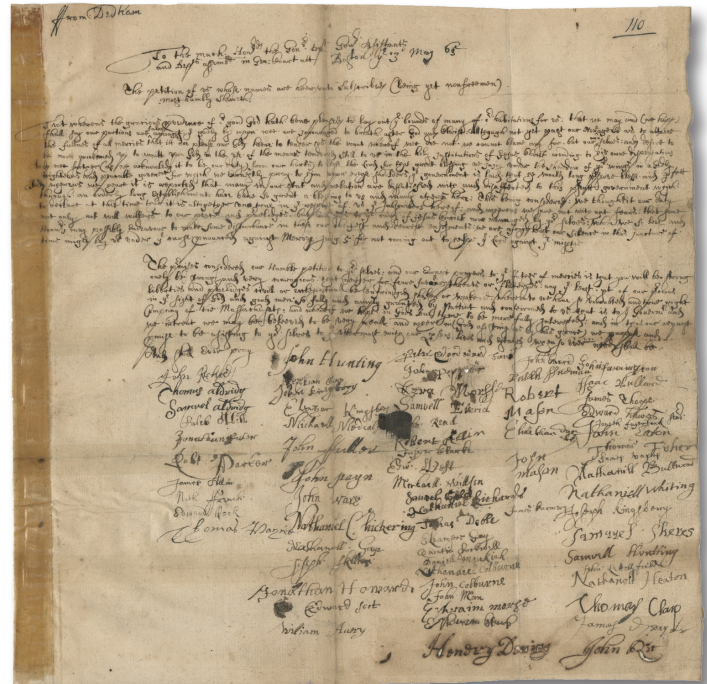
# The 1664-1665 Resistance Petitions

## Introduction

England's puritan-led republican experiment came to an end in 1660, when Charles II restored the monarchy. No one knew whether this new king would allow puritans - activist reformers within the Church of England - to continue governing colonies in North America. Charles II and his brother the Duke of York knew very little about New England, but they questioned whether its English inhabitants were truly loyal to the crown. They eyed its rich forests and minerals as they sought to replenish royal coffers. And they listened to detractors' tales of disgruntled colonists who would welcome direct crown rule.

In the decades after 1620, many puritans fled persecution under the king's father, Charles I. They did not migrate to set up inclusive societies with freedom of worship for all. Rather, they hoped to establish utopian communities that reflected Biblical ideals of pure worship and care for the poor. Colony leaders failed in many ways, especially on protecting Native American long-term land interests. However, they built courts and legislatures that for the most part benefited ordinary people rather than wealthy elites. Town meetings met regularly, allowing heads of household to vote on issues that mattered to them. Poverty and homelessness were rare because towns and churches cooperated to find people jobs and to support the physically and mentally disabled. More families owned small farms than in almost any other European settlement. These puritan-led colonies had developed with little interference from London. Until the reign of Charles II.

By 1662 a new anti-puritan "Cavalier" Parliament in England was criminalizing puritan worship in England and purging local governments of anyone who would not take an oath of absolute loyalty to the crown. Hearing of this legislation, New Englanders - the vast majority of whom enjoyed puritan-style worship - wondered if they would be able to keep the society they had



Dedham Nonfreemen [non-voters] Petition  
3 May 1665  
Massachusetts Archives, 106.110



King Charles II  
John Michael Wright, ca.1660-1665  
National Portrait Gallery London

built. They feared the new king would impose a royal governor and a bishop. They wondered if he would start granting large New England estates to his own favorites among the English nobility.

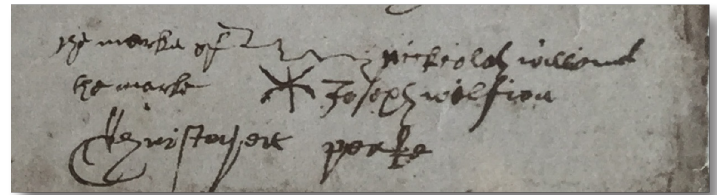
The restored monarchy seemed relatively distant until the summer of 1664 when Charles II sent four royal commissioners on warships across the ocean. These royal commissioners first attacked Dutch New Netherland, turning it into English-controlled New York. Then they traveled to New England. In Boston, they presented their royal commission to Governor John Endicott. Endicott must have struggled to keep his composure when reading the commission. It granted these four men full authority over the colonies' courts and militias. These powers seemed unconstitutional because they contradicted the colony's 1629 patent or charter and threatened to undermine a decades-long tradition of local governance.

The royal commissioners immediately demanded changes to the franchise law. In England, voting rights were linked to wealth, land, guild membership or hereditary privilege, but in the Bay colony they were linked to full church membership. The royal commissioners scoffed at a system in which people with modest incomes, if pious, could vote in colony-wide elections. The commissioners' private instructions from the king told them to secretly influence local elections in order to put royalists in power - perhaps even one of themselves. They toured New England trying to raise a royalist party, setting up meetings on the sabbath when others were at church. Ultimately, they aimed to replace freely elected leaders with those chosen by, and supremely loyal to, the king.

The royal commissioners' actions provoked alarm across the region. In 1664 and 1665 more than a dozen towns in Massachusetts Bay organized petition campaigns to express their concerns to the General Court (their elected leaders). A large number of people participated. Approximately a quarter of Anglo-American voters signed these resistance petitions. Some who could not write their names signed with a mark instead. Two women even signed - Rebeccah (or Reana) Daniell of Cambridge and Johana Chamteyy (or Champney) of



**John Endecott**  
Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony  
Portrait at the Massachusetts State House



**Several Roxbury petitioners sign with a mark, with others filling in their names.**

Boston. In some towns nonfreemen (nonvoters) participated, even organizing their own petitions.

To draft the petitions, inhabitants might have gathered after a town meeting, or before a church service. Some might have had experience with large-scale petitions campaigns in the 1640s in England, when people protested abuses of power by Charles I and his bishops. The Bay colony's 1641 Body of Liberties, its early law code, allowed anyone to petition - even women, Native Americans, and foreigners - for redress of grievances, and colonists had often petitioned the Court regarding local issues such as deciding boundary lines or recruiting



a schoolteacher. The 1664-1665 resistance petitions, however, were different. Many more people participated. And they addressed major constitutional issues about the balance of power between colony and crown.

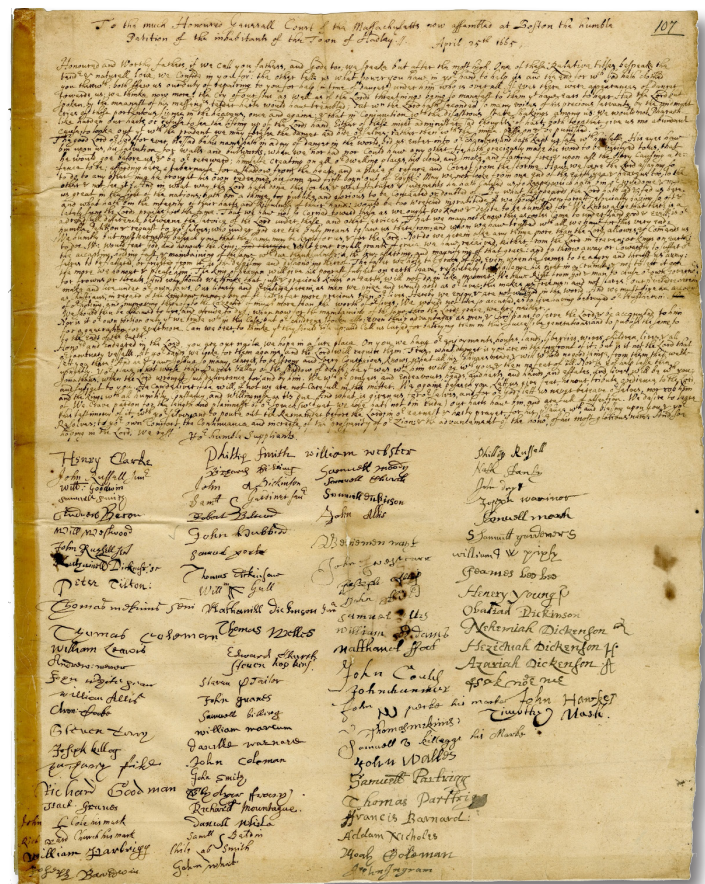
It is tempting to see the petitions as coerced, since they support the colony's leaders. As with any social movement, people might have felt informal pressure to sign. However, there is no evidence that anyone was forced to participate, or that nonsigners experienced repercussions. Most likely, the petitions went through multiple drafts as people debated the wisest and most effective way to respond to the king's demands. Those who signed did so at great risk, as royalist spies could have sent their names to London on charges of sedition.

Overall, the petitioners expressed fear of losing their civil liberties, such as the ability to elect their own leaders without crown interference. And they worried that the king would send a bishop from London who would force them to abandon their puritan worship practices. The petitioners urged their elected leaders to protect local institutions. Many of them pledged their lives and livelihoods to the defense of the society they had built.

Once the petitions were complete, town representatives rolled them up in a scroll, tied them with a string, and brought them to a meeting of the General Court in Boston. They knocked on the door of the Town House, entered, and read the petitions aloud. Most likely Court members listened respectfully and formally thanked the petitioners for their contribution.

The resistance petitions demonstrate the range of constitutional issues at stake as colonists negotiated their relationship to royal authority. And they help us understand how people mobilized politically in early America to make their voices heard. In the end, emboldened by the petitions, the Massachusetts General Court defied the royal commissioners. Bay colonists would not easily succumb to royal pressure to relinquish their liberties.

During this crisis of the 1660s, New Englanders learned to articulate their constitutional commitments. They developed a culture of civic participation and a willing-



**Hadley Petition**  
25 April 1665  
Massachusetts Archives 106.107

ness to sacrifice for communal goals, especially for the privilege of self-government. Passed down through the eighteenth century, these longstanding constitutional sensibilities and practices helped Massachusetts to rapidly mobilize at the time of the American Revolution.

Ten of the petitions survive as manusccripts, and nineteenth century copies provide the text of several others. What follows are short excerpts from three petitions and three discussion questions. For the full text of the petitions, including modernized versions and manuscript images, click here. For more teaching resources, including key words, a full set of beginner and advanced discussion questions, and a video of Dr. Jonathan Chu (University of Massachusetts, Boston) and Dr. Adrian Chastain Weimer (Providence College) discussing the petitions, click here.

# Petition Excerpts

## Medfield Petition, 19 October 1664 [modernized]

To the honored General Court of Massachusetts Colony assembled on the 19th day of [October] 1664, the humble representation of the inhabitants of Medfield:

Forasmuch as we have heard that there have been representations made unto his Majesty [Charles II] concerning divisions amongst us, and dissatisfaction about the present government of this colony, we whose names are underwritten, the inhabitants & householders of the town abovementioned do hereby testify our unanimous satisfaction in adhering to the present government, so long & orderly established, and our earnest desire of the continuance thereof, and of all the liberties pertaining thereunto, which are contained in the charter granted by King James and King Charles the First of famous memory. Under the encouragement & security of which charter, we or our fathers ventured over the ocean into this wilderness through great hazards charges & difficulties. And we humbly desire that our honored General Court would address themselves by humble petition to his majesty for his royal favor in the continuance of the present establishment, and of all the privileges thereof, and that we may not be subjected to the arbitrary power of any, who are not chosen by this people according to their patent. So, earnestly begging the sweet presence and blessing of God on all your faithful endeavors, we shall rest [in] full obedience to support the present Government with our persons and estates. Yours in all humble[ness] & faith,

[45 signatures]

("Medfield Memorial, 1664," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 13 (October 1859): 346) [Manuscript was at one time in the private collection of Charles H. Morse of Cambridgeport.]

## Hadley Petition, 25 April 1665 [modernized]

To the much honored General Court of Massachusetts now assembled at  
Boston:

The humble petition of the inhabitants of the town of Hadley, April 25th, 1665

...

If ever there were appearances of danger towards us, we think now more. The cry of our sins as well of the Lords threatenings being so manifest to them that have ears to hear. Had the Lord but spoken, by the meanest [poorest] of his messengers tender hearts would have trembled. But when the Lord hath seconded so many voices of his precious servants [i.e., ministers], by the midnight cries of those portentous signs in the heavens [e.g., comets], once and again. & that in conjunction with the disastrous state shakings among us [the restoration of the monarchy], we would not Pharaoh-like harden our hearts, or refuse to see the lifting up of the Lords hand. Either of these might administer sad thoughts of heart. Both together give us more abundant cause to look out, that with the prudent we may foresee the danger and hide ourselves, rather than with the simple pass on & be punished [Proverbs 22:3].

We would fear God, and honour the king. Whatever royal grants of grace we have received, either from the Lord in heaven, or kings on earth, the accepting, holding fast, & maintaining of the same with due thankfulness is the true magnifying of that grace. And to throw away or cowardly to suffer ourselves to be flattered, or frightened from it [those grants of grace, i.e. political or religious liberty], is the despising and dishonoring thereof. The faster [tighter] we hold the grace of God, even when he seems to be angry and thrust us away, the more we honour & please him.

The king of heaven will give his poorest subject on earth leave resolutely to challenge his right in a crumb[?]; & not to let it go for frowns or threats. And why should we think that just & gracious kings on earth, will not do in like manner? We have [a] right from God & man to choose our own governors, make and live under our own laws. Our liberty and privilege herein, as men we prize and would hold as our lives. This makes us freemen and not slaves. Our privilege herein as Christians, in regard of the kingdom, name, glory

of our God, is far more precious than our lives. Hereby we enjoy, & are not without God in the world.

And we must give an account of our holding, and improving thereof, to the hazard of much more than the worth of our lives. We would not live so accursed, as to live having betrayed our trust herein. We should then be ashamed to live, and afraid to die, when now through the maintaining of the same, through the Lord's grace, we are neither. Nor is it our own portion only, that we trade with in this case, but our children's stock also, even their advantages as men, & Christians to serve the Lord; & be accounted to him for a generation, forevermore. Can we bear to think that they [our children] should rise up and call us cursed, for betraying them in their successive generations: and to publish the same, to the ends of the earth?

...

We again beseech you, let us give fear, honour, tribute, obedience, to the Lord, and the king [Charles II], with all humility, constancy, and willingness as 'tis due. And what is given us for ourselves, and for our God, let us never bereave ourselves, nor rob him of.

We crave pardon for the length and plainness of our speech (which yet we hope hath not been rude). Our hearts have been, and are, full of affection. We desire to leave this testimony of it, with yourselves, and to pour out the remainder before the Lord, in our earnest & hearty prayer, for his presence with, and blessing upon you & your resolves [decisions], to your own comfort, the continuance and increase of the prosperity of our Zion, & the advancement of the honor of his most glorious name.

And so hoping in the Lord, we rest, your humble suppliants,

[91 signatures]

(Massachusetts Archives 106.107)

## **Boston Nonfreemen Petition, 4 May 1665**

To the honoured General Court now assembled and sitting [at] Boston in the Massachusetts Colony in New

England: The humble petition of us whose names are underwritten being non-freemen [non voters], most humbly shows:

That whereas it hath pleased Almighty God by his all wise counsel to fore appoint & by his gracious providence whereby he governs & over rules [rules over] all things to grant unto us amongst many of his people our beings, habitations, & estates in these remote ends of the earth. Wherein we have lived some longer and some less time enjoying precious liberties and privilege under a pious & peaceable government. Which we together with many others have not so esteemed nor prized as we should.

But since the solemn dispensations [actions] of God in his providences past & present seem to threaten both Church & State wherein God hath been pleased heretofore to gladden the hearts of his people with prosperity & peace, ourselves also have had share therein. And not knowing how the hearts of such as stand in like relation with ourselves [i.e. other nonfreemen] unto the present Government may stand affected, we also being doubtful [i.e. concerned] that our silence at such a time as this might be a discouragement unto mutual proceeding of our honoured Magistrates & Freemen [i.e., the freemen's representatives: the Deputies]. And finally to remove suspicion of unfaithfulness, as well as for the honour & glory of God, we thought it our duty most humbly & freely to declare our real contentment in & with the present Government, many of us having all our lives enjoyed the same & no other. And all of us have great cause to bless God for the happiness we have therein had above other people elsewhere both in civil & ecclesiastical respects.

We do therefore declare hereby our humble and hearty desire that the present Government should stand & be maintained & that unanimously of all if so it might please God. And that for ourselves, as we look at ourselves bound in duty, we shall as God shall enable us be faithfully assistant to your selves to the utmost for the honour of God & with all due respects & allegiance to our Lord the King so far as may concur with the word of God & the Patent [or charter] granted to our ancestors by his Royal Predecessors of happy memory, & now we hope confirmed by his Majesty's own approbation, may be our warrant.



Humbly craving that all grievances or differences that have justly arisen to any persons by any defect or deficiency in point of law may be rectified & prevented for the future.

Thus humbly craving your acceptance of our real, tender, & faithful affection to your prosperity & peace, & the long

continuance thereof, we humbly subscribe ourselves yours, ever bound to pray,

[111 signatures]

(Massachusetts Archives 106.111-111a)

## Keywords:

**General Court:** The elected leadership of the colony, comprised of the Governor, Deputy Governor, and Assistants (together the upper house of the legislature) and Deputies (two sent from each town, forming the lower house).

**The Council:** The Governor, Deputy Governor, and Assistants (sometimes called magistrates), who handled colony business when the General Court was not in session.

**Patent:** The 1629 Charter of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which guaranteed the rights of self-defense and self-government.

**Adhere:** To stick by, to be loyal to.

**Repugnant:** According to the charter, if a colony law was “repugnant” to - or too different from - the laws of England, it would be grounds for the king to change the colony’s leadership and structure of government.

**Ecclesiastical:** related to churches. So “ecclesiastical liberties” means the freedom of churches to operate without kings or governors telling them how to worship.

**Human Inventions:** Supposedly unbiblical additions to Christian worship, such as kneeling, making the sign of the cross, or reciting certain prayers not found in Scripture.

**Nonfreemen:** Colonists who had not yet been admitted to the “freedom of the company” and so could not vote in colony-wide elections (although after 1653 they voted in town elections). In order to become a “freeman” in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, you went before your local church to give a “relation,” or narrative of faith, and the church would vote to make you a “full church member.” Full church members were eligible to become freemen, who had full voting rights. Most colonies (and most places in England) linked voting rights to hereditary privilege or wealth; Massachusetts (and New Haven) were unusual in linking them to piety, or a demonstration of faith.



# Discussion Questions

Instructors might divide students into smaller groups to discuss the following questions.

1. The Medfield petitioners urge their elected leaders, instead of giving in to the king's demands, to ask him to continue their current constitutional arrangement, so "that we may not be subjected to the arbitrary power of any." What was "arbitrary power" and why were these Medfield inhabitants so concerned about it?
2. How do the Hadley petitioners establish a conditional model of loyalty to the crown? On what grounds might colonists resist the king's demands?
3. In their petition, the Boston nonfreemen (nonvoters) include a request that any just "grievances" arising from "any defect or deficiency in point of law" might be made right and prevented from happening in the future. They do not see their colony's government as perfect, and clearly want some things to be changed. However, they also express concern "that our silence at such a time as this might be a discouragement unto mutual proceeding of our honoured Magistrates & Freeman" or deputies. What might "mutual proceeding" mean in this context? What kind of pressure are the nonfreemen putting on the magistrates and deputies?

## Suggested Reading

David D. Hall, *A Reforming People: Puritanism and the Transformation of Public Life in New England* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro/University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

Mark Peterson, *The City-State of Boston: The Rise and Fall of an Atlantic Power, 1630–1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

Adrian Chastain Weimer, *A Constitutional Culture: New England and the Struggle Against Arbitrary Rule in the Restoration Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023).