

## The Five Petitions of Belinda Sutton

Belinda Sutton was an African woman taken from her homeland at twelve years old and enslaved by a wealthy Boston family named the Royalls in the 18th century. The patriarch of the Royall plantation, Isaac Royall Jr., was a loyalist to the British crown and was forced to flee the colonies at the start of the Revolutionary War between Britain and the American Patriot forces. This caused the state of Massachusetts to seize the Royal plantation and free the 60 or so enslaved men, women, and children who lived there. After finally gaining her freedom following five decades of enslavement, Sutton would submit numerous petitions to the Massachusetts General Court asking for a pension for herself and her daughter, who was described as sickly, as repayment for the labor she was never paid for.

In 1783, two years after the death of Royall Jr., Belinda Sutton filed her first petition to the Massachusetts General Court. Addressing herself in her petition as “Belinda an Affrican”, Sutton highlighted her once happy life in Africa and how being captured and enslaved had destroyed her life and doomed her into a form of slavery so bad that “death alone was to emancipate her”. The Court would rule in her favor and grant her fifteen pounds and twelve shillings a year. However, this historic victory would not last long and Belinda would only receive one of the payments owed to her in the next few years. This drove her to file a second petition in 1785 for the amount previously authorized by the court. Sutton would be ignored until she filled her third petition in 1787 and was granted one year’s allowance. In 1788 she would petition a fourth time for three years of backed pension. In 1793 Belinda Sutton would file her fifth and final appeal to be repaid for her time on the Royall plantation. Sutton would never get the full repayment of fifteen pounds and twelve shillings a year that she was promised, but she did win some major victories and was compensated for her labor for at least three of the years after her initial petition.

The story of Belinda Sutton is one the earliest accounts of an enslaved person receiving any type of repayment for the harm that slavery did to their lives. That alone would make this story of utter importance, but it does not stop there. Although Isaac Royall Jr aligned with his economic interest and the British during the revolutionary war, he was still very sympathetic to the causes of the American patriots. These sympathies were made apparent in his will in which he gave 900 to 1000 acres of land to Harvard University in order to build a “professorship in law or medicine.”

Eventually, these 1000 acres would be sold and the proceeds used to create the prestigious Harvard Law School that exists today. Meaning Belinda Sutton and the other enslaved Africans on the Royall plantation, toiled the land that would be sold to create the prestigious Harvard Law School that we know today.