

Half-Freedom Manumission Petitions, February 25th, 1644.

Topic

- New Netherland
- Slavery
- Half-freedom
- Manumission

Skills

- Gathering & Interpreting Evidence
- Civic Participation
- Close Reading

Middle & High School
Level

In a nutshell,
this document
shows...

- The existence of slavery in New Netherland
- The practice of a form of manumission in New Netherland
- A “half-freedom” status for slaves once owned by the Dutch West India Company
- A process in which African and African American agents of the West India Company could petition for their freedom
- That slavery was determined by birth in New Netherland

Essential Question:

What was life like for those living in “half-freedom” and how did it impact the colony of New Netherland?

Historical Context:

During early settlement of New Netherland, the Dutch utilized the Atlantic Slave Trade for colonial ventures in America and elsewhere. West India Company privateers raided Spanish and other European ships in the Atlantic and brought enslaved Africans from these raids to New Netherland to develop the colony. Slaves were forced to construct forts, serve company agents, and even serve as soldiers. Additionally, they could be hired out to Patroons seeking laborers or farmhands in agricultural ventures. In this document, 11 slaves working for the West India Company petition for their freedom, and are granted freedom from the Company, along with their wives, on the grounds that they had earned their freedom through roughly 20 years of service. However, this agreement did not completely free the men from bondage, as they owed crops and cattle to the company annually, could be drafted into compulsory service in the future, and their children would still be born in bondage. This specific form of slavery in New Netherland became known as Half-freedom.

Document Analysis:

1. Introduce the lesson with an image from the New Netherland Institute regarding slavery in New Netherland [located in the bottom right]. <https://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/history-and-heritage/digital-exhibitions/slavery-exhibit/slave-labor/>
2. Note that the images may not be wholly accurate representations of New Netherland, use the image to remind students of the institution of slavery and its role in the development of New Netherland.
3. If applicable, ask students to pull out their responses to the essential question from the prior lesson on the Extraordinary Session held at Fort Orange, August 1st, 1657. Ask students to volunteer some of their responses. Inform students that this lesson will revolve around African born slaves in New Netherland and to keep in mind their responses regarding status in the colony from the prior lesson.
4. Distribute the Half-freedom Petitions from February 25th, 1644. Instruct your students to read along and highlight the document for important facts and key points as you read aloud each article of the petition. Model for students by highlighting the line regarding the number of years the men had served the West India Company.
5. Following each article, allow students a few minutes to complete the accompanying guiding questions. Repeat these steps for each article.
6. Once the class has completed the guiding questions, instruct students to create two columns in their notes, one titled “freedom” and the other titled “slavery.” Then have students place their highlighted facts and key points in either the “freedom” or “slavery” columns.
7. Finally, assign students a short argumentative paper judging on the decision made by the Company and whether or not the men and women discussed in the document would truly live in “half-freedom” or if that term is misleading. The paper should be one full page long, should reference the primary document with citations, twice per article, and should answer the day’s essential question: **What was life like for those living in “half-freedom” and how did it impact the colony of New Netherland?**

Optional Extension Activity:

The following activity could be completed in order to extend students’ thinking and encourage them to make connections.

Task students with writing a short research paper that draws parallels between “half-freedom” in New Netherland and slavery in other colonies and nations during this time or during other periods in history, as well as with similar social justice issues in modern times. Instruct students to take a stance on a specific issue and to advocate for a possible solution. Encourage students to research slavery, manumission, and abolitionist movements in colonial or antebellum America or in other countries around the world.

A.J.F. Van Laer, *New York Historical Manuscripts: Dutch, Volume IV Council Minutes, 1638-1649*, Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1974.

I. The 25th of February [1644]

We, Willem Kieft, director general, and the council of New Netherland, having considered the petition of the Negroes named Paulo Angolo, Big Manuel, Little Manuel, Manuel de Gerrit de Reus, Simon Congo, Antony Portuguese, Gracia, Piter Santomee, Jan Francisco, Little Antony and Jan Fort Orange, who have served the Company for 18 or 19 years, that they may be released from their servitude and be made free, especially as they have been many years in the service of the honorable Company here and long since have been promised their freedom; also, that they are burdened with many children, so that it will be impossible for them to support their wives and children as they have been accustomed to in the past if they must continue in the honorable Company's service...

What reasons do the Director General and the council of New Netherland give for freeing the men listed above? How was this case brought forth to the council?

II.

...Therefore, we, the director and council, do release the aforesaid Negroes and their wives from their bondage for the term of their natural lives, hereby setting them free and at liberty on the same footing as other free people here in New Netherland, where they shall be permitted to earn their livelihood by agriculture on the land shown and granted to them, on condition that they, the above mentioned Negroes, in return for their granted freedom, shall, each man for himself, be bound to pay annually, as long as he lives, to the West India Company or their agent here, 30 schepels of maize, or wheat, pease, or beans, and one fat hog valued at 20 guilders, which 30 schepels and hog they, the Negroes, each for himself, promise to pay annually, beginning from the date hereof, on pain, if any one shall fail to pay the annual recognition*, of forfeiting his freedom and again going back into the servitude of the said Company...

Are the men truly freed from slavery? What has been decided about their life after serving the West India Company? There is more than one answer.

III.

...With the express condition that their children, at present born or yet to be born, shall remain bound and obligated to serve the honorable West India Company as slaves. Likewise, that the above mentioned men shall be bound to serve the honorable West India Company here on land or water, wherever their services are required, on condition of receiving fair wages from the Company. Thus done, the 25th of February 1644, in Fort Amsterdam in New Netherland.

Who else's fate is determined in this document [sections I, II, & III] and who are they?

Vocabulary:

Servitude: Service [in this instance slavery] **Bondage:** Slavery

Schepel: Dutch unit of measurement, just shy of a bushel

Maize: Corn **Guilder:** Dutch dollar

***Recognition:** A specific form of a tax in New Netherland