From The Memorial of the Non-Freeholders of the City of Richmond (1829)

By the 1820s, as political democracy expanded, only North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Virginia still required property qualifications for voting for white men. When Virginia held a constitutional convention in 1829–1830, “non-freeholders” of Richmond—men who did not possess enough property—petitioned for the right to vote. The major slaveholders who dominated Virginia politics resisted their demand; not until 1850 did the state eliminate the property qualification.

Your memorialists... belong to that class of citizens, who, not having the good fortune to possess a certain portion of land, are, for that cause only, debarred from the enjoyment of the right of suffrage. ... Comprising a very large part, probably a majority of male citizens of mature age, they have been passed by, like aliens or slaves, as if... unworthy of a voice, in the measures involving their future political destiny. ...

The existing regulation of the suffrage... creates an odious distinction between members of the same community, robs of all share, in the enactment of the laws, a large portion of the citizens, ... and vests in a favored class, not in consideration of their public services, but of their private possessions, the highest of all privileges. ... [We] cannot discern in the possession of land any evidence of peculiar merit, or superior title [to] moral or intellectual endowments. ... Such possession no more proves him who has it, wiser or better, than it proves him taller or stronger, than him who has it not. ...

Let us concede that the right of suffrage is a social right; that it must of necessity be regulated by society. ... For obvious reasons, by almost universal consent, women and children, aliens and slaves, are excluded. ... But the exclusion of these classes for reasons peculiarly applicable to them, is no argument for excluding others. ...

They alone deserve to be called free, or have a guarantee for their rights, who participate in the formation of their political institutions, and in control of those who make and administer the law.

From Appeal of Forty Thousand Citizens Threatened with Disfranchisement (1838)

In many states, the expansion of political democracy for white men went hand in hand with the elimination of democratic participation for blacks. In 1837, a constitutional convention in Pennsylvania stripped black men of the right to vote. A large gathering in Philadelphia issued a protest to “fellow citizens” of Pennsylvania.

Fellow Citizens:—We appeal to you from the decision of the “Reform Convention,” which has stripped us of a right peaceably enjoyed during forty seven years under the
Constitution of this commonwealth. We honor Pennsylvania and her noble institutions too much to part with our birthright, as her free citizens, without a struggle. To all her citizens the right of suffrage is valuable in proportion as she is free; but surely there are none who can so ill afford to spare it as ourselves.

Was it the intention of the people of this commonwealth that the Convention to which the Constitution was committed for revision and amendment, should tear up and cast away its first principles? Was it made the business of the Convention to deny "that all men are born equally free," by making political rights depend upon the skin in which a man is born? or to divide what our fathers bled to unite, to wit, TAXATION and REPRESENTATION? . . . It is the safeguard of the strongest that he lives under a government which is obliged to respect the voice of the weakest. When you have taken from an individual his right to vote, you have made the government, in regard to him, a mere despotism; and you have taken a step towards making it a despotism to all. . . . When a distinct class of the community, already sufficiently the objects of prejudice, are wholly, and for ever, disfranchised and excluded, to the remotest posterity, from the possibility of a voice in regard to the laws under which they are to live—it is the same thing as if their abode were transferred to the dominions of the Russian Autocrat, or of the Grand Turk. They have lost their check upon oppression, their wherewith to buy friends, their panoply of manhood; in short, they are thrown upon the mercy of a despotic majority. . . .

It was said in the Convention, that this government belongs to the Whites. We have already shown this to be false, as to the past. Those who established our present government designed it equally for all. It is for you to decide whether it shall be confined to the European complexion in future. Why should you exclude us from a fair participation in the benefits of the republic? . . . We put it to the conscience of every Pennsylvanian, whether there is, or ever has been, in the commonwealth, either a political party or religious sect which has less deserved than ourselves to be thus disfranchised. . . . If we are bad citizens let them apply the proper remedies. . . . Fair protection is all that we aspire to.

QUESTIONS

1. What "obvious reasons" exclude women, children, non-citizens, and slaves from the right to vote?

2. How do the Philadelphia memorialists link their claims to the legacy of the American Revolution?

3. How similar are the definitions of political freedom in the two documents?