Slavery in Boston

Although Faneuil Hall is known as the "Cradle of Liberty," Peter Faneuil built his fortune, in part, by buying and selling enslaved people. He used the money he amassed from slavery to construct the building that stands here today.

When the English colonized the place we now call Boston, they enslaved members of local Native nations. The first ship carrying enslaved Africans arrived in Boston in 1638. In 1641, Massachusetts became the first English colony in North America to codify slavery into law. Legally-sanctioned slavery would continue for nearly 150 years.

The enslavement of Native and African people is an integral part of the Boston's history, and many residents of Boston still experience the aftereffects and legacy of slavery today.

This exhibit confronts Boston's slavery through stories, documents, and objects. The first floor reveals the lives of individual enslaved people: their persistence in their fight for freedom, the creation of their own communities, and how the struggle for freedom continues today.

Downstairs, the exhibit continues by exploring slavery in Boston. It reveals how many Bostonians directly benefited from and were complicit in slavery by tracing the legal, economic, political, and social significance of the institution.

Scan QR code for the web version of this exhibit including additional information on the people and topics discussed here.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This exhibit is the result of a collaborative effort between many groups and individuals.
We would like to thank the following people for their contributions and generosity to this project

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AECOM Project Support

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With deep appreciation for the many Bostonians who contributed their thoughts, comments, concerns, stories, and requests for this exhibit

This exhibit was made possible by the financial support of:

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This property received support from the people of Boston for acquisition, preservation and/or rehabilitation, an administrator through the Community Preservation Fund
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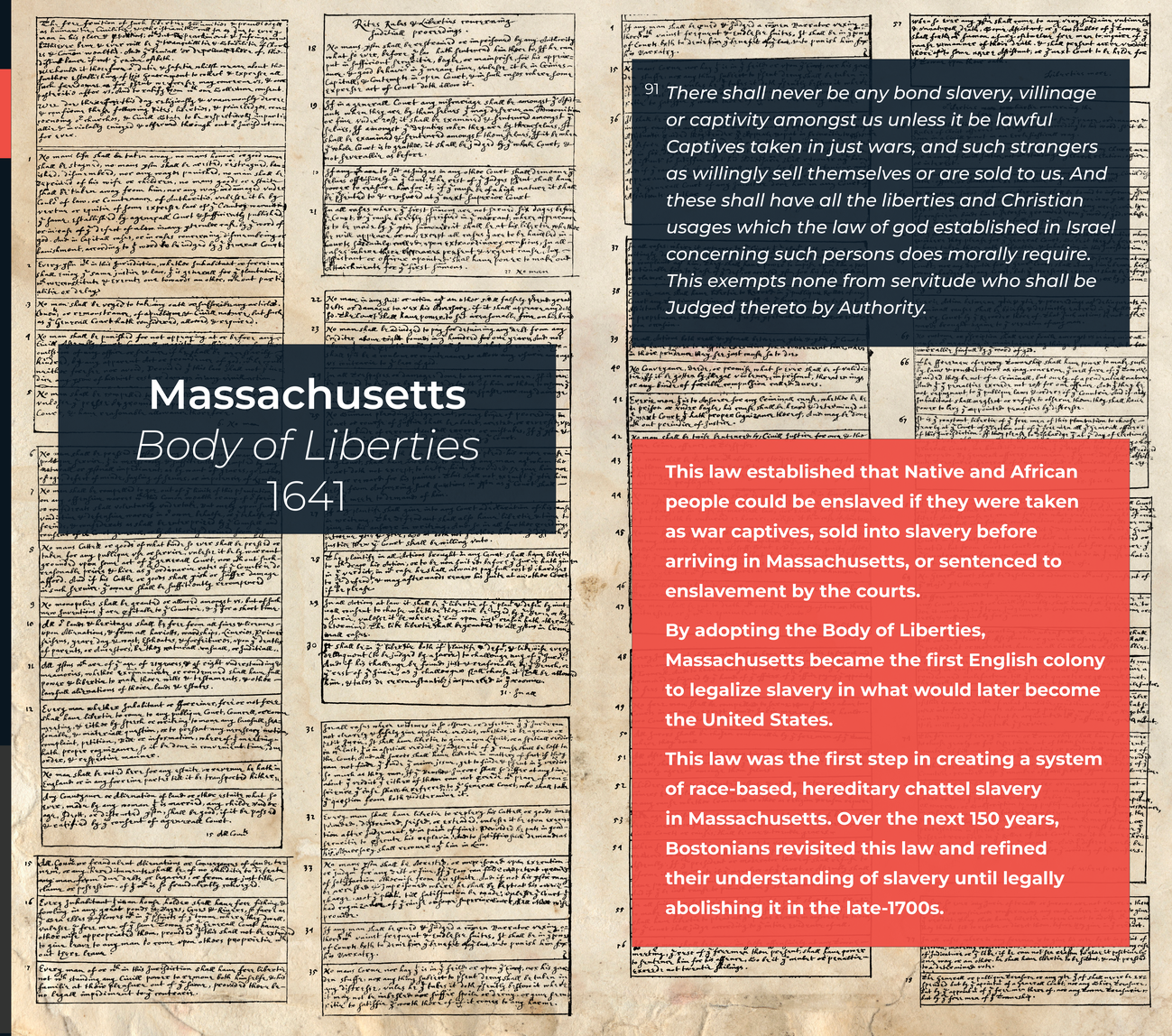

Massachusetts
Body of Liberties
1641

> 91 *There shall never be any bond slavery, villinage or captivity amongst us unless it be lawful Captives taken in just wars, and such strangers as willingly sell themselves or are sold to us. And these shall have all the liberties and Christian usages which the law of god established in Israel concerning such persons does morally require. This exempts none from servitude who shall be Judged thereto by Authority.*

This law established that Native and African people could be enslaved if they were taken as war captives, sold into slavery before arriving in Massachusetts, or sentenced to enslavement by the courts.

By adopting the Body of Liberties, Massachusetts became the first English colony to legalize slavery in what would later become the United States.

This law was the first step in creating a system of race-based, hereditary chattel slavery in Massachusetts. Over the next 150 years, Bostonians revisited this law and refined their understanding of slavery until legally abolishing it in the late-1700s.