

James Mars

1790-1880 | Writer & Community Leader

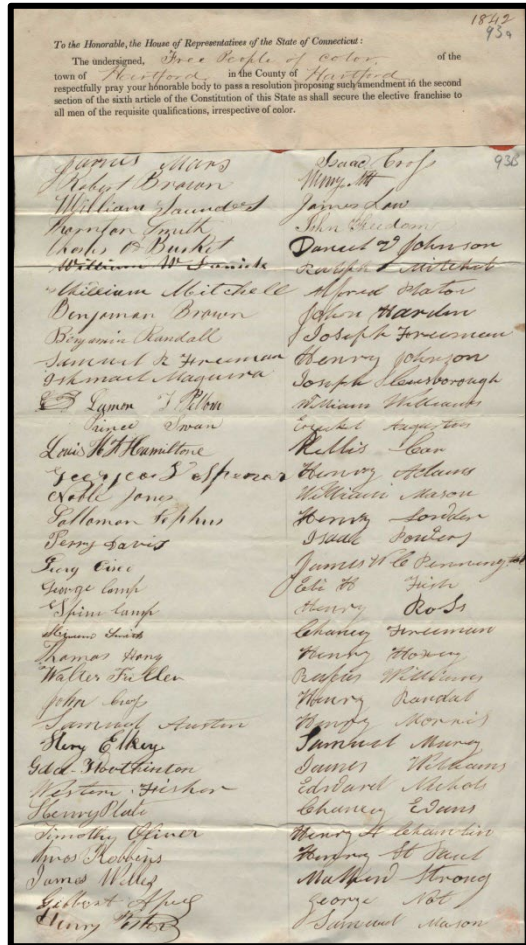
James Mars helped people understand the cruelty of slavery and fought for equal rights. He was born into slavery in Canaan, Connecticut in 1790. James, his parents, and siblings were considered the property of the town's minister. At that time, the law in Connecticut said that when James turned 25 years old, he would automatically become free. The minister wanted to move to Virginia and take James and his family with him, so James and his family fled to the neighboring town, where people helped hide them.

After several years, the minister tracked down the Mars family. James' parents and sister were set free, but James and his brother were sold. The new slaveholder, named Munger, worked James very hard and beat him frequently. When James was 21 years old, Munger finally agreed that James could buy his freedom for \$90.

James got married and had two children. The family moved to Hartford. James worked in a grocery store and became a leader in the free black community. In 1837, when slavery was still legal in most states, James helped an enslaved woman from Georgia named Nancy Jackson win her freedom in a Connecticut court.



James Mars, courtesy Connecticut Historical Society



James Mars' petition to the General Assembly, courtesy Connecticut State Library

It did not seem fair to James that he could not vote because of the color of his skin, despite being free. In 1842, he sent a petition signed by many men to the Connecticut General Assembly (the part of the state government that makes laws) asking that black men be given the right to vote. That petition failed, but James lived long enough to get the right to vote. He proudly voted for Abraham Lincoln for President of the United States.

James moved to Massachusetts, but he returned to Norfolk, Connecticut in 1864. A few years later, he wrote an autobiography: *Life of James Mars: A Slave Born and Sold in Connecticut*. Although he was old and had a bad leg, James traveled around selling his small book door-to-door. One reason that he wrote the book was that some people had told him they did not know slavery had ever been allowed in Connecticut. He wanted to make sure that the cruel treatment of enslaved people was never forgotten, even after slavery became illegal throughout the United States.

For more information, visit:

<https://connecticuthistory.org/james-mars-words-illuminate-the-cruelty-of-slavery-in-new-england/>

<https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/mars/mars.html>