

To the Honorable the Speaker and Members of both Houses of the General Assembly of Virginia
The Petition of Ann P. P. Cowper

A distressed and unfortunate female, who has fallen, from prosperity, and affluence humbly represents, unto your honorable body, who she is informed has power to afford her that justice, and redress of her grievances, which humanity requires. She was the only child, of a fond and affectionate parent, the late Col. Josiah Parker, who I hope deserved well of his country, for his life was devoted to her service. He was among the first, who espoused her cause in her greatest difficulty, and danger, and was one of that convention, who formed our State constitution. he entered the Army, drew his sword, and fought in defence of those rights; he had asserted in her councils. He was one of that little band of hero's, who after retreating through the Jerseys; recross'd the Delaware in the night, and obtained the victory at Trenton; I have always understood he received the sword of the expiring British Commander, (Col. Rawle) A few days afterwards, at the same place; when a little Creek seperated the American & British Armies; he commanded a party that defended an important pass over the creek, while engaged with the enemy General Mercer call'd to him "to defend the pass, at every hazard, for the safety of America depended on it." My Father did his duty. He was next day feild officer of the day; at the battle of Princeton, and was in most of the important actions which followed, while he remained in the Army. He retired from the regular service, some time prior to the invasion of Virginia; by Arnold & Cornwallis; during the greater part of this time, he commanded that division of the Melitia; which defended the south side of James River. His military services ceased with the capture of the British Army in York. When the war was ended, he was appointed to an important office, which he fill'd; untill the adoption of the Federal Government—he was then chosen by his fellow citizens their Representative in Congress, which he continued to be during the administration of General Washington and Mr. Adams. (My fathers merits are not mine but I hope they may excite some sympathy for the unfortunate & only offspring of an old soldier) He then retired from publick life, to the bosom of his family, wishing to enjoy in his old age; that happiness which arises from the reflection of a life well spent; sweetened by the endearments of my mother, and myself; of whom he was so dotingly fond, that he spared neither trouble or expence; for my improvement or gratification. Shortly after this in 1802, I married Cap. William Cowper; who had commanded the United States sloop of War Baltimore. Here commences the sad narrative of my misfortunes. In a few months after my marriage, the house of John Cowper & Co failed, in which house my husband was a Joint partner: he made no exertions for my support, and I was left destitute. my father touched with my situation, took me again to his house; where he declared he would support me, and divide with me his last shilling, but insisted Cap. Cowper, should make some exertions for himself, as he had youth, health, and a lucrative profession. by this he was compell'd to resort to his profession, and made two or three voyages to sea, from which, I derived little or no benefit; as my husband was of so thoughtless and extravagant a disposition, that he always expended what he made; during the time he remained



on shore, my fathers residence was his home. About two years and a half after his failure, my husband, left this state for New York; and entered in the St. Domingo trade; he continued absent about sixteen months, & then returned, bringing with him, five thousand dollars. part of this money he laid out in goods, and commenced a retail store. My father furnished him with a store for his goods; and a dwelling house; supplied with Servants and every necessary; and we commenced living together. Untill this time, my husband, had treated me with fondness & affection, for indeed, he had no opportunity of behaving otherwise, while an entire dependant on my father. but now his temper shewed itself with all its enormities, he treated my father with rudeness, and me, with the most unfeeling barbarity. he acted himself in the most dissolute manner, and thinking I might complain; accused me of crimes, at which humanity sickens. finding it impossible to live with him; I implored my fathers protection: he again took me to his house; where I remained 'till his death. In a short time my husband dissipated what he possess'd, and was reduced to indigence. in his distress, he implored, in the most pathetick manner the forgiveness, both of my father and myself: My father never could be prevailed on to forgive him; for independant of his brutal conduct to me; he had written to him, the most insulting and threatening letters. As to myself I was softened, by his distress, concessions, and apparent penitence; and during the life of my father, would send him secretly the greater part of the money; allowed me by father for my expences; and indeed began to hope his misfortunes had taught him prudence; and had corrected his temper. But alas! A very short time discovered, he was only acting a part; to enable him to gratify the most cruel and revengeful disposition. My father died in March 1810. When death deprived me of his protection; he endeavored to extend it to me so far as he could by his Will. To effect this purpose, he bequeathed to me an annuity of an hundred pounds a year; payable quarterly by his executor, to me or my order only; and bequeathed me some other property consisting of slaves &c &c &c and lent me the use of his dwelling house, yard, garden stables &c &c also some slaves; as long as I chose to remain on the place. The residue of his estate he devised and bequeathed to my eldest son; (Josiah) upon the express condition of his taking the sir name of Parker. From the year 1802 'till 1810 when my father departed this life; I had lived only six months, under the entire controul of my husband. He was at sea when I lost my father, he returned the first of June following; On his return he visited me at Macclesfield, (the residence of my late father) remained there a few days; obtained a copy of my fathers Will—submitted it to a gentleman of the Bar for his opinion. On being informed that “should our son die before he complied with the condition contained in his Grandfathers Will; that the whole estate would descend to his mother; as heir at law to the testator, that should he die, after taking the name; intestate and without Issue his father as his heir, would succeed to the estate.” Cap. Cowper, who had always been averse to our Sons taking the name of Parker, after obtaining the above opinion, became extremely anxious, to have the name immediately changed, and proposed to me to Join him in a petition, to the Assembly of Virginia; to have it done and endeavored to persuade me if it was not done immediately; that my Uncle Mr Copeland Parker;

would heir the estate; and said as soon as the Legislature had granted the petition We (meaning he and myself) would take the management; out of the hands of the executor (Mr Baker) and that we, would live on it; that he would send the Boy (our son) to Portugal; and confine him for life! I asked what he meant? he then said confine him in a Convent; untill he came of age; and then if he dared demand a settlement of the estate; he would cut his throat from ear to ear; The shock and horror felt at this inhuman proposition by me; cannot be described; all the instinctive fears of a Mother, rushed at once on my heart; and trembled for the safety of her darling child. My husband discovered my agitation and desisted at that time from urging me farther on the subject; but cited an instance, where such a thing as he said, had been done. About two months after this, Cap. Cowper, went to London, and returned in a few months after. In a short time after his return, he was guilty of irregularities, and immoralities; extremely disagreeable and distressing to a Wife, but which I forbear to state, moritifying and grating as this conduct was; I determind to continue with him; and as the welfare of my poor little children, was at stake; resolved to try every tender, and soothing method; to produce an alteration in his conduct: promised to be obedient to his wishes, provided they did not interfere with the safety and interest, of my eldest son. but all my efforts were vain. About this time I was again pregnant, and his brutality increased to such a degree, that it nearly cost me my life. returning home one evening from Peircevill; he attempted repeatedly to throw me from the Phaeton; but failing in this attempt; he came to me when I went to my chamber; and ordered me to destroy the infant, I was then pregnant with; and threatened to murder me if I did not. I gave him my penknife, and offered my bosom to his stroke; telling him by doing so he might effect his purposes and kill both with one stab. Though he declined this offer; he attempted to effect his purpose in another way; his treatment became so violent, that I was taken very ill; was several weeks confined to my bed; my infant had a premature birth, and my life was dispaired of. I recovered slowly and with difficulty. this was in March 1811. in sixteen days after the birth of my child, my husband came up to my room, knocked me down, draged me by the feet, all over the room; and treated me so cruelly, that I was not able to turn myself in bed; and spit blood for several weeks. he then attempted to starve me to death; and for several days, I was without any thing to eat, except what the servants would bring secretly; when he was out of the house, notwithstanding everything there had been furnished by myself. After this I resolved to quit him, as soon as I was able. this he wished at that time to prevent; and prevailed on my friends to persuade me to a reconciliation. his promises appeared so fair, that I agreed to it. He executed a Deed to Thomas Peirce Esqr by which he conveyed the property bequeathed to me by my father, to Mr Peirce in trust; for my use only; this reconciliation lasted but a short time. on the first of July 1811, Cap. Cowper repeatedly ordered me to leave the house, if I would not destroy the deed in trust (great part of that property he has since made away with) and threatened to kill me if I did not immediately quit. notwithstanding my fears of him, as the weather was very rainy; I did not go, but locked myself in my chamber; on the 3d of July the weather having cleared up, I determined to visit a friend

and relation, and consult with him what I should do, when my husband saw me going off, he determined to accompany me, and did so; when we got in the carriage to return, in the evening, some little altercation took place, my friend desired we would get out and settle it. I got out, and Cap. Cowper immediately drove off, and left me standing in the yard; disregarding of my cries and entreaties to be taken to my poor little infant; who was but little more than three months old; and had been an invalid, from its birth. I was its only nurse; its unnatural father, detained it from me for eight days; and did not give it up, until the poor little creature was near expiring, from having been fed on food, to which it had not been accustomed. A few months after this in consequence of a written agreement entered into by my husband, promising a different treatment, and in order to be with my children; who were suffering very much from their fathers neglect; in Decembr. 1811, I again returned to the home, which was given me by my father, and which I never should have quited but from dire necessity. but in eighteen hours after my return, every article of the agreement was broken by Cap. Cowper. In a few days after, in consequence of a letter received by him, from one of the members of the County of Isle of Wight, reprobating the improper conduct of Cowper, relative to his petition to the Assembly, for changing the name of our said son. He choaked me most violently, and said he would murder me, and I verily believe would have done it; had not a friend who was in the house, ran into the room; when she came in, I was nearly breathless. In a few weeks after Cap. Cowper gave me a most severe whipping with a large carriage whip, after this I determined to apply to the Court of the County, for security of the peace; against my husband; which I accordingly did; and on the evidence produced before the Court; he was bound in a recognisance to keep the peace. I again returned home, under the hope that his regard for the laws of his country, and the situation of his securities, would restrain him from improper conduct towards me. I had been there only a few days, when he applied to me, to authorize him to sell my annuity (left by my father) stating at the same time that he was well convinced he had the power to dispose of it without my consent. I replied if he had the right, it would be unnecessary to put my signature, and he must do as he pleased. He then broke out with more violence than ever, consulted a gentleman, in the neighborhood, to know whether I could be a witness against him, if he were again to whip me; no other white person being present. Notwithstanding his recognisance, he destroyed my furniture, burnt my clothes, gave orders to the servants, to dig up the bones of my Father, Mother, and all my relations, who were buried at Macclesfield, and to scatter them over the marshes. He then sent for a man who lived in the neighborhood, to whom he said he would offer two hundred dollars, to give me two hundred lashes, but the man was from home, and did not come. At night Cap. Cowper came to my door, with a large carving knife, to murder me, as I seriously beleived in my sleep, but having observed his preparations, I kept a light in the room from the stair case; I had observed him secretly fastening up the doors & windows in a peculier manner and sharpening a knife, he had ordered that night, my children to be put to bed, in another room; and previously broken the lock of my chamber door, but after observing his preparations I fastened the door within, with some

furniture. When I heard him (at midnight) pushing against the door, I made use of a stratagem to frighten him, which succeeded. I call'd to him, and told him that I had a pistol, on which he retreated. when he had descended the stairs, I opened the door softly, went in the passage and saw him with the Knife in his hand, enter the dining room. The next day he attempted to procure, a brace of Pistols from a gentleman in Smithfield, being apprised of that circumstance, and beleiving his intentions were hostile to my life, I quited the house. Many years sad experience has convinced me, it is impossible for me ever to live in safety, with Cap. Cowper on account of his intolerable temper, and conduct, for if one of my children or a servant offended him, after correcting them he would punish me; if at a publick place he was slighted by any one, or had a dispute (which often happened) he would on his returning home wreak on me his vengeance. It has been nearly five years since I quited the home bequeathed me by my father; living an exile from it; among my friends and relations; who afforded me an asilum at the hazard of their personal safety; for one of them (Mr Peirce of Smithfield) my husband attempted to assassinate in a small piece of woods, which seperated his house from the town) as he was returning with his lady from a ball. This circumstance added to his known character, and his threats to kill any person who should accompany me home, to see my children, has rendered my friends cautious of being active in my behalf; and forced me to find an assilum; in a more remote part of the country; with my half sister. But the instinctive love of a mother, has often impel'd me to endeavor to see my children; by going privately to the house; at times when I know their father was absent. but this comfort is of late denied me; my remote situation obliges me to be many months, without seeing them: and during that time, they are taught to hate me; and fly from my presence; and my late attempts have been unsuccessful. In addition to my misfortunes, my late friend Mr Joseph B. Baker, the executor of my father; and from whom I expected to reverie my annuity) is dead. No one will administer on the estate, which is rapidly wasting. Cap. Cowper is a Bankrupt, and has lately taken the oath of insolvancy; and being formerly appointed by the court guardian to my eldest son, he is now call'd on by his securities, to give additional security; which he is unable to do. No one will undertake either the administration of my fathers estate; or guardianship of my son; as the turbulent disposition of my husband, is well known; and being a feme Covert prevents me from assisting effectually, either myself or my children. I beg pardon of the House for having so long detained them. my narrative is finished. If I have there-in exposed, the character of the father of my children; impervious necessity has compel'd me to do it. Driven from my home, a wanderer in the world; my principal friend, (Mr Baker) dead; and by that loss deprived of the support, left me by my father. My darling children (three promising Boys) not only brought up in vice, and ignorance; but taught by their unfeeling father, to fly from, and detest the embraces, of their fond and affectionate Mother. I am constrained as my last resort, to throw myself on the Justice, and mercy, of your honorable body. You who have daughters that are blooming, think of my Father. You who have darling infants think of me! My prayer is that you will pass a Law divorcing me a Mensa & Thoro from my husband. Long experience has

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of the General Assembly, 1776-1865, Accession 36121, Library of Virginia.*

convinced me this is my only resort. My life I could resign, but the love I bear my children entwines around my heart, and irresistably impels me to exert myself for them. Your Petitioner puts her trust in God, and in your honorable body, to the first she hopes the prayers of a broken heart, will be heard, before the Throne of Heavenly Grace. From you who are the guardians of the welfare & happiness of the citizens of Virginia, she prays for the comfort of her remnant of life. Her wish is to support and educate her children, to resque them from vice and ignorance, (to which they are now exposed under their father) and bring them up in piety, and virtue. Grant her petition, and your petitioner for the happiness and prosperity of her Country; and for you its guardians; as in duty bound will ever pray.

[Docket:]

Mrs. Cowper's Petition

Novr 20th 1816

Refd to Cts of J [Referred to Committee for Courts of Justice]

Reasonable 21st 1816

Bill drawn 25th Novr 1816

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To the Honorable the Judge of the Chancery District Court of Williamsburg. Humbly complaining sheweth unto your honor, your oratrix Ann Pierce P. Cowper a feme covert suing by Joseph B. Baker her next friend.

That in the year of Lord A D 1802, she intermarried with a certain William Cowper at present a resident of the County of Isle of Wight. That previous to the death of her father (the late Colo. Josiah Parker) her husband had behaved in so cruel and improper a manner to her, and had treated her said father with so much rudeness, that he was compelled to order from his house the said Cowper, but your complainant and her children remained with, and were supported by her father. In fact her husband made no effort to do any thing for her and her children. That every year, notwithstanding the ill treatment she had received from her said husband, part of the money allowed this complainant for her expences by her father was secretly sent by her to the said William Cowper whose distresses were known to her, and it was also known to her, that he was too indolent to support himself by his profession. For a year or two previous to the death of your complainants father, Cowper appeared very penitent for his ill conduct to her, and in his letters to the family, appeared so contrite that she flattered herself his misfortunes had brought him prudence and had corrected his temper—but alas—a very short time discovered to her, that he was only acting a part, to enable him to gratify the most cruel and revengeful disposition. The father of this complainant died in March 1810. When death deprived her of his protection he endeavoured to extend it to her so far as he could by his will. To effect this purpose he bequeathed to her an annuity of an hundred pounds a year payable quarterly by his executor to her or her order only, and bequeathed to her some other property consisting of slaves &c and lent to her the use of his dwelling House, yard, garden, stables &c and the use of two slaves Isaac and Edey as long as she chose to remain on the place. The residue of his estate he devised, and bequeathed to the eldest son of this complt, upon the express condition of his taking the sur name of Parker, as will more fully and at large appear reference being had to an office copy of the said Will, which is hereto annexed and prayed to be taken as a part of this bill. From the year 1802, till the year 1810, when the complts father departed this life, she had lived only six months under the entire controul of her said husband. He was at Sea when she lost father. he returned the first of June following on his return he visited this complt at Macclesfield (the residence of her late father, remained there a short time, obtained a copy of her father Will—submitted it to a gentleman of the bar for his opinion—on being informed that should the son of this complt die before he complied with the condition contained in the will of his Grand father, that the whole estate devised and bequeathed to him would descend to his mother as heir at law to the testator—that should he die after taking the name intestate and without issue, his father would succeed to the estate. the said William Cowper who had always been averse to his Sons taking the name of Parker after obtaining the above opinion became extremely anxious to have the name immediately changed, and proposed to this complainant to join him in a petition to the assembly of Virginia to have it done, and endeavoured to persuade her if it were not done immediately—



that her uncle Mr. Copeland Parker would heir the estate. And said as soon as the Legislature had granted the petition We—meaning he, and your Complt— would take the management of the estate, out of the hands of the executor and that we would live on it—that he would send the boy (our Son) to Portugal, and confine him for life. I asked what he meant. He then said confine him in a convent, untill he came of age, and then if he dared to demand a settlement of this estate he would cut his throat from ear to ear. The shock and horror felt at this inhuman proposition by your complt cannot be described, all the instinctive fears of a mother rushed at once on her heart, she trembled for the safety of her darling child. Her husband discovered her agitation, and desisted at that time from urging her farther on the subject, but cited an instance where such thing (as he said) had been done. About two months after this the said William Cowper went to London, and remained absent about three months. In a short time after his return, he was guilty of irregularities and immoralities extremely disagreeable and distressing to a wife, but which your complt will forbare to state mortifying and greating as this conduct was she determined to continue with him, and as the welfare of her poor little children was at stake resolved to try every tender and soothing method to produce an alternation in his conduct, promised to be obedient to his wishes, if he would make them known in writing, provided they did not interfere with the safety and interest of her oldest son, but all her efforts were vain. About this time your complt was again pregnant, and his brutality encreased to such a degree, that it nearly cost her life. returning home one evening from PierceVille, he attempted repeatedly to throw her from the Phaeton, but failing in this attempt, he came to her when she went to her chamber and ordered her to destroy the infant she was then pregnant with and threatened to put her to death if she did not. Your complt was so shocked that she loaned him her penknife, and offered her bosom to his stroke, telling him by doing so he might effect his purpose and kill both with one stab. Though he declined this offer he attempted to effect his purpose in another way his treatment became so violent that the complt was taken very ill, was several weeks confined to her bed, her infant had a premature birth and her life was despaired of. She recovered slowly and with difficulty. this was in March 1811. in sixteen days after the birth of this complts child her said husband came up stairs knocked her down several times, draged her by the feet all over the room and treated her so cruelly that she was not able to turn herself in bed, and spit blood for several weeks in a week after this he attempted to starve her to death and for several days she was without any thing to eat except what the servants would bring her secretly. when he was out of the house, not withstanding every thing had been furnished by her, after this she resolved to quit him as soon as she was able. This he wished to prevent, and prevailed on her friends to persuade her to a reconciliation. His promises appeared so fair that she agreed to it, He executed a Deed on the 24th of April 1811. to Thomas Pierce by which he conveyed the property bequeathed to this Complt by her father to the said Pierce in Trust for the only use of this complt as will appear reference being had to the said deed, now of record in the County Court of Isle of Wight. This reconciliation lasted but a short time, on the first of July 1811, the said William Cowper

repeatedly ordered this complt to quit the house, and threatened to kill her, if she did not immediately quit, notwithstanding her fears of him, as the weather was very rainy she did not go, but locked herself in her room. On the 3rd of July the weather having cleared up she determined to visit a friend & relation and consult with him, what she should do, when her husband saw her getting into the carriage, he determined to accompany her and did so. When they got into the carriage to return home some altercation took place, her friend requested them to get out, and settle it, she got out and her said husband immediately drove off, and left her in the yard, notwithstanding her cries and entreaties to be taken to her poor little infant, who was but little more than three months old and had been an invalid from its birth. Your complt was its only nurse. its unnatural father detained it from her eight days, and did not give it up, untill the poor little creature was near expiring from having been fed on food to which it had not been accustomed. A few months after this in consequence of a written agreement entered into by her said husband promising a different treatment and in order to be with her poor little children who were suffering very much from their fathers neglect in december last (1811) she returned to the home which was given her by her father and which she never should have quitted but from dire necessity but in eighteen hours after the return of your Complt ever article of the agreement was broken by Capt: Cowper. In a short Time after in consequence of a letter rec'd from one of the members of the county of Isle of Wight reprobating the improper conduct of the said Cowper relative to his petition to the assembly for a change of the name of our said son. He choaked this complainant and threatened to murder her. Stating that it had proceeded from her remonstrance against his petition. A few weeks after because she refused to advise the sale of the Gosport property mentioned in the will of her father he gave her a most severe whipping with a large carriage whip. after this your complainant determined to apply to the court of her county for Security of the peace against her said husband, which she accordingly did, and on the evidence produced before the Court he was bound in a recognizance to Keep the peace. She again returned home under the hope that his regard for the laws of the country and the situation of his securities would restrain him from improper conduct towards her. She had been there but a short time before he broke out with more violence than ever. He consulted several persons to know whether your Complt could be a witness against him if he were again to whip her no other white person being present. Notwithstanding his recognizance, he destroyed the furniture of this complainant burnt her clothes, gave orders to the servants to dig up the bones of her father mother and all her relations who were buried at Macclesfield and to scatter them over the Marshes. He then sent for a Mr. Newman to whom he said he should offer two hundred dollars if he would give you complt: two hundred lashes. At night he the said Cowper came to her chamber door with a large carving knife to murder her in her sleep as she most seriously believes. But having observed his preparations she kept a light in the room. From the stair case she had observed him secretly fastening up the doors in a peculiar manner and sharpening a knife. He had previously broken the lock to her door, but she had fastened it within—when she heard him pushing against the door she

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called to him and told him she had a pistol on which he retreated. When he had descended the stairs, she went out and saw him with the knife in his hand enter the dining room. After this he attempted to procure a brace of pistols from a gentleman in the neighbourhood as soon as your complainant was apprised of that circumstance and believing his intentions were hostile to her life she immediately quitted the house and has remained ever since in exile to her home & her children except her youngist which she has with her fatal experience has convinced her that it will be impossible for her ever again to live in safety with her said husband on account of his intolerable temper and conduct. In Tender Consideration whereof and in as much as she is remediless in the premises save in this Honble Court where adequate relief can alone be extended to her. To the end Therefore she prays that the said William Cowper be made a party defendant to this bill. That he be compelled on his corporal oath full true and perfect answer to make to all and singular the allegations herein contained and as fully and particularly as if the same were here again repeated and he thereto particularly interrogated. That your honor will make such order for her immediate relief as may seem just and proper. That the said William Cowper be enjoined and restrained from interrupting further the property bequeathed to her by her father and subsequently conveyed by the said Cowper to Thomas Pierce for the separate use of your Compl. That you will grant to your complainant a separate maintenance, that she be permitted to reside at Macclesfield the place loaned to her by her father (on the condition of her remaining there and that free from the interruption and abuse of her said husband. And that the said trust estate conveyed to Thomas Pierce or the profits thereof be allowed to her for her separate maintenance. That you will grant to her such other and further relief in the premises as may be deemed meete and consistent with the principles of Equity.

May it please your honor to grant to her the Comths [Commonweaths] writ of Spa [subpoena] & Commanding &c

May it please &c &c

Isle of Wight County to wit

July 16 1812 personally appeared before me a justice of the peace for the said County Ann P. P. Cowper who made oath that the facts contained in the foregoing bill are True so far as she knows or believes

Given under my hand the day and year above written.

THOS. PIERCE J.P.

The deft William Cowper his agents and attorney are restrained from intermeddling with, using or Exercissing any act of ownership over any of the property either real or personal devised and bequeathed to the said plt. Ann P. P. Cowper by Josiah Parker in his will untill the further order of this court.

ROB. NELSON

July 20 1812

A copy Teste

WM T. BANKS. D.C.

