

How did the principles of the Declaration of Independence contribute to the quest to end slavery?

1. The Declaration of Independence as approved by the Continental Congress, 1776
2. Petition to the Massachusetts Legislature, January 13, 1777
3. Elizabeth (Mumbet) Freeman portrait, 1811
4. Excerpts from the U.S. Constitution, ratified 1788
 - a. Preamble
 - b. Articles related to slavery
5. Petition from the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery, 1790

Directions: Read the primary sources, making annotations on key ideas as desired. Respond to the comprehension questions as you read to help pull out main ideas. Then, answer the analysis questions at the end of each primary source.

Document 1: The Declaration of Independence

In the years following the Seven Years' War, the relationship between Great Britain and the North American colonies became strained due to a variety of political and economic factors. Attempts at compromise, including an Olive Branch Petition sent to the king, had been unsuccessful. On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee brought what came to be called the Lee Resolution before the Continental Congress. This resolution stated, "these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states ..."

Congress debated independence for several days before giving Thomas Jefferson the job of drafting a formal

Declaration of Independence. Jefferson's draft was influenced by George Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights, as well as by his study of natural rights theory and the writings of John Locke. Benjamin Franklin and John Adams edited Jefferson's draft, and the final document was presented to Congress about two weeks later.

On July 2, 1776, the Continental Congress voted to declare independence from England. Two days later, the Declaration of Independence was adopted. Many consider the Declaration of Independence to be the philosophical foundation of American freedom.

In Congress, July 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America, When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which **impel** [compel or urge] them to the separation.

1. According to the text, what is the purpose of this document?

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain **unalienable Rights** [rights that come from nature and cannot be taken away], that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

2. "Unalienable rights" (or inalienable rights) are rights that come from nature. Everyone is born with them, they cannot be surrendered by an individual, and they cannot be taken away because no authority on Earth has the power to do so. What unalienable rights does the Declaration of Independence claim belong to all humans?

--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,

3. What is the purpose of the government? Where does the government get its power?

--That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

4. If a government becomes destructive of unalienable or natural rights, what two options do the people have?

ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

1. When this document was written, this institution of slavery had existed in the British colonies for more than 150 years and in most societies throughout world history. How is the institution of slavery at odds with the principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence?

2. Does the existence of slavery contradict the idea of unalienable or natural rights put forth in the Declaration of Independence? Why or why not?

Document 2: Petition to the Massachusetts Legislature, January 13, 1777

Petitioning, or officially bringing grievances or requests to a governing body, was a tradition in Great Britain that carried over to the North American colonies. The colonists repeatedly petitioned the king and Parliament for their constitutional and natural rights during the 1760s and 1770s. Enslaved persons followed the example and petitioned legislatures for their freedom. In 1777, Prince Hall and seven other black men brought their own petition to the Massachusetts Council and the House of Representatives.

Source: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h32t.html>; <https://www.masshist.org/database/557>

To the Honorable Counsel & House of Representatives for the State of Massachusetts Bay in General Court assembled, January 13, 1777:

1. According to the text, what is the purpose of this document?

The petition of A Great Number of Blacks **detained** [kept] in a State of slavery in the **bowels** [guts] of a free & Christian County Humbly show that your Petitioners ... have in Common with all other men a Natural and Unalienable Right to that freedom which the Great Parent of the Universe that **Bestowed** [gave] equally on all mankind and which they have Never **forfeited** [willingly gave up] by any Compact or agreement whatever...

2. How do the petitioners argue that slavery is wrong?

...[enslaved people] were Unjustly Dragged by the hand of cruel Power and their Dearest friends and sum of them Even torn from the Embraces of their tender Parents- from A populous Pleasant and Plentiful country and in violation of Laws of Nature and of Nations and in Defiance of all the tender feelings of humanity Brought here Either to Be sold like Beast of Burthen & Like them Condemned to Slavery for Life...

3. What is this last passage describing?

ANALYSIS QUESTION

1. What does this request illustrate about Founding principles of liberty, equality, and justice as understood by African Americans in the Founding era? How were these ideas turned into action?

Document 3: Elizabeth (Mumbet) Freeman portrait, 1811

Enslaved individuals were inspired by the talk of independence and natural rights circulating throughout the colonies in 1776. Several used the language of these principles to sue for their own freedom, such as Elizabeth (Mumbet) Freeman and Quock Walker. Sources written by Freeman and Walker themselves are lost to history, so historians must use other clues to consider the implications of their decisions to sue for freedom.

As is the case for many born into a life of slavery, we know little about their early lives. In 1746, Freeman became the property of a wealthy Sheffield, Massachusetts, resident named John Ashley. With the help of a local abolitionist, Freeman brought her case to court and was granted her freedom and 30 shillings in damages in 1781. She then became a paid domestic servant for the Sedgewick family. Before her death in 1829, she was able to purchase a small home of her own. This miniature portrait of Freeman was done by a member of the Sedgewick family. Miniature portraits were very small and meant to keep the subject's likeness, typically a loved one, nearby.

Like Freeman, Quock Walker used the courts to challenge his status as a slave. The document below comes from the notes of Chief Justice William Cushing who heard Walker's case in the Massachusetts Supreme Court.

Miniature portrait, oil pastel on ivory by Susan Anne Livingston Ridley Sedgewick, 1811 (Public Domain)

Source link: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Freeman#/media/File:Mumbett70.jpg



Elizabeth Freeman ("Mumbet") by Susan Anne Livingstone Ridley Sedgewick, 1811.
Massachusetts Historical Society.

ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

1. In 1781, Elizabeth Freeman became the first enslaved individual to successfully sue the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for her freedom. How could this 1811 portrait of her provide clues for historians studying the lives of free African Americans in the Founding era?

2. How did enslaved individuals count toward counting the population of a state?

Document 4: United States Constitution, ratified 1788

The delegates to the Constitutional Convention held in Philadelphia from May to September 1787 established a system of republican government unique in world history. The final document made no mention of the words slave, race, or color. Yet the debate over slavery exposed divisions among the delegates. North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia refused to commit to a document without some guarantees for slavery. After 17 weeks of deliberation, the Philadelphia convention approved a draft of the Constitution to submit to popular conventions in the states for ratification.

Preamble: We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our **Posterity** [future generations], do **ordain** [decree or command] and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

1. According to the Preamble, what is the purpose of the U.S. Constitution?

Article I, Section 2. [Three-Fifths Clause]

....Representatives and direct Taxes shall be **apportioned** [allocated] among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons.

2. How did enslaved individuals count toward counting the population of a state?

Article I, Section 9. [Slave Trade Clause]

...

The Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight, but a Tax or duty may be imposed on such Importation, not exceeding ten dollars for each Person.

3. What does this section say about the slave trade?

Article IV, Section 2. [Fugitive Slave Clause]

...

No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due.

4. According to this section, what would happen if an enslaved man or woman escaped?

ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

1. Are there phrases in the Preamble that support or challenge slavery? Explain.

2. The Constitution never uses the words slave, slavery, or race. Why do you think the Founders deliberately chose to do this?

3. To what extent is the Constitution a document based on principles? To what extent is the Constitution a document based on the reality of compromise?

Document 5: Petition from the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery, 1790

The Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery was founded largely by Quakers in 1775. The Quakers were a Christian religious group formally known as the Society of Friends. Many became opponents of slavery because they believed in the equality of all men and women. The Society petitioned the First Congress (1789–1791) to end slavery, calling the institution an “inconsistency” in the American character. The petition was signed by Benjamin Franklin, who served as president of the Society. The Senate took no action; the House, after bitter debate, also failed to abolish slavery before adjourning in 1791.

Source: <https://www.ushistory.org/documents/antislavery.htm>

That mankind are all formed by the same Almighty being, alike objects of his Care & equally designed for the Enjoyment of Happiness the Christian Religion teaches us to believe & the Political Creed of America fully coincides with the Position. Your **Memorialists** [petitioners], particularly engaged in attending to the Distresses arising from Slavery, believe it their indispensable Duty to present this Subject to your notice.

1. In the first line of the petition, the memorialists mention the “Political Creed of America.” What is this referencing?

They have observed with great Satisfaction that many important & salutary Powers are vested in you for “promoting the Welfare & Securing the blessings of liberty to the “People of the United States.” And as they conceive, that these blessings ought rightfully to be administered, without distinction of Colour, to all descriptions of People...

2. How do the memorialists connect their argument to the U.S. Constitution?

