The Declaration of Independence, Natural Rights, and Slavery

What is natural rights theory and how is it at the foundation of the Declaration of Independence?

How does natural rights theory and the Founding principles at the heart of the Declaration of Independence challenge slavery?
The Declaration of Independence asserted revolutionary principles of natural rights, self-government, and human equality.

Though the country was built on these ideals, those were not fully realized at the time of the Founding.

However, these principles positioned the American republic to challenge slavery.

Examining this paradox is an important responsibility of citizenship.
At its core, the Declaration of Independence holds that all humans are equal in the possession of certain natural rights. Natural rights or universal truths are part of human nature and cannot be violated by government or other individuals. The equality of human beings means they have equal right to consent to the form of government, and that only government based on consent was legitimate. The people had the right to overthrow a government that violated their rights after a long series of abuses. Therefore, the people had a right of resistance or revolution against an unjust government.
The Moral Problem of Slavery

- Slavery contradicted the natural rights principles at the core of the Declaration of Independence.
- Slavery was a system of unfree and coerced labor that violated the enslaved person’s natural rights of liberty and consent.
- Slavery stripped away human dignity from the enslaved and violated the principles of equality by making one person subordinate to another.
Challenges to Slavery

- Benajmin Banneker's Letter to Thomas Jefferson, 1791

...how pitiable is it to reflect, that although you were so fully convinced of the benevolence of the Father of mankind, and of his equal and impartial distribution of those [natural] rights and privileges which he had conferred upon them, that you should at the Same time counteract his mercies, in detaining by fraud and violence so numerous a part of my brethren under groaning captivity and cruel oppression . . .
Some White Americans manumitted or privately freed their slaves, and some African Americans appealed to Founding principles in petitioning legislatures or suing in court for freedom.

Yet tragically, slavery endured for decades.

Liberty and slavery, equality and inequality, co-existed in the American republic.

By the time of the Civil War, the country was half-slave, half-free.
The activities and primary sources in this lesson will help you answer the following questions:

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