1776
Continental Congress approves the Declaration of Independence

What happened?

In the middle of the eighteenth century, the relationship between Great Britain and the North American colonies became strained due to multiple political and economic factors. A Continental Congress was called to discuss the best course of action for the 13 American colonies. Congress met in Philadelphia in the summer of 1776 and debated independence for several days before giving a committee the job of drafting the Declaration of Independence. The final document was presented to Congress about two weeks later. On July 2, 1776, the Continental Congress voted to declare independence from Great Britain, and on July 4, 1776, Congress officially adopted the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration provides the philosophical foundation of American freedom. By asserting that all men are born equal with natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the Declaration set forth principles that challenged the institution of slavery. These Founding principles of liberty and equality are ideals that are at the heart of the American system of government and provided the basis for calls to end slavery beginning in the Founding era.

Additional Resources
- Read an excerpt! [https://bit.ly/3kf8W4e](https://bit.ly/3kf8W4e) (Right QR)

1777
Prince Hall and African American Men petition the Massachusetts Legislature

What happened?

Petitioning, or officially bringing grievances or requests to a governing body, was a longstanding 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 people followed that example and petitioned legislatures for their freedom. In 1777, Prince Hall and seven other African-American men brought their own petition to the Massachusetts Council and the House of Representatives. The petitioners stated that slavery violated the natural rights of all men, and that enslaved people were held like “beasts of burden” against their consent.

Additional Resource
What happened?

After declaring independence from Great Britain with the formal adoption of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the former colonies wrote new state constitutions outlining the role and framework of government, the rights of their citizens, and the way they would function as independent states. Some states addressed slavery directly, while others omitted it. The Massachusetts Constitution, like the Declaration, asserted that all men are born free and equal with unalienable rights. This statement would have tremendous implications for slavery in the coming years, particularly as it created opportunities for enslaved people to challenge the institution of slavery in the courts.

Additional Resource

What happened?

Talk of independence and natural rights inspired enslaved individuals. Several, including Elizabeth (Mumbet) Freeman, used these principles to sue for their own freedom. Little is known about Freeman’s early life, but 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 in 1781 and argued that the institution of slavery contradicted the Massachusetts Constitution’s assertion that all men are born free and equal. Freeman was granted her freedom by the court as well as 30 shillings in damages. She became a paid domestic servant for the family of Theodore Sedgewick, who was one of her lawyers. Before her death in 1829, she was able to purchase a small home of her own.

Additional Resource
1787
U.S. Constitution is signed by 38 of the 41 delegates attending the Constitutional Convention

What happened?
Held in Philadelphia from May to September, the Constitutional Convention established a system of republican government. The final document made no mention of the words slave, race, or color because the Constitution did not recognize property in humans. However, the debate over the institution of slavery exposed divisions among the delegates. Two of the most contentious issues at the convention — counting state populations for representation in Congress and continuing the international slave trade — sparked intense debate. North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia refused to commit to a document without the Three-Fifths Clause and at least limited protection of the international slave trade for a 20-year period. After 17 weeks of deliberation, delegates approved a draft of the Constitution to submit to the states, where popularly-elected conventions would decide on ratification. The delegates agreed that the document would not be binding on states that had ratified it until nine of the 13 existing states approved it, which occurred in 1788.

Additional Resource
- Read excerpts in the Constitution related to slavery!
  https://bit.ly/38AcYle

1787
The Northwest Ordinance is passed by the Confederation Congress banning slavery

What happened?
After the end of the American Revolution, the United States gained authority over a vast territory north and west of the Ohio River. This ordinance, or law, set guidelines for how this new land should be governed. It set the rules for creating new states and banned slavery in any future states to be created in this territory. The Northwest Ordinance was passed by the Confederation Congress — the one-house legislature operating under the Articles of Confederation — and is considered one of its most important legislative acts.

Additional Resources
- Read an excerpt! https://bit.ly/3yGLNin (left QR)
1790
The Southwest Ordinance is passed by the first Congress

What happened?

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 promised republican self-government to the inhabitants of the developing territory lying between the Great Lakes and the Ohio River. It also set the rules for creating new states and banned slavery in any future states to be created in that territory. The Southwest Ordinance was similar in its purpose but applied to land south of the Ohio River. Additionally, and crucially, the Southwest Ordinance not only permitted slavery in this territory but also stated that no law could be passed that would emancipate slaves.

Additional Resource


1793
Invention of the cotton gin

What happened?

In 1793, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin. The gin separated sticky seeds from cotton fiber, which was a time-intensive task that previously had to be done by hand. While historians debate if slavery was on the decline in southern states prior to the invention of the cotton gin, the device drastically increased the amount of cotton that a plantation could produce and made it an economically viable crop. The demand for slaves in the South drastically increased in the decades after the invention of the cotton gin as plantations were able to export massive amounts of cotton fibers to textile factories in Great Britain and the North. By the beginning of the Civil War, a large majority of the world’s cotton supply came from the South.

Additional Resource

- Read an essay on the cotton gin! [http://bitly.ws/wtHV](http://bitly.ws/wtHV)
1793
The first Fugitive Slave Law is passed by Congress

What happened?

Article IV of the United States Constitution contains the Fugitive Slave Clause, which stated that a slaveholder had the right to reclaim escaped slaves who crossed state lines. In 1793, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law, which allowed people to recapture escaped slaves in other states even if they had outlawed slavery. As anti-slavery sentiment grew throughout the nineteenth century, northern states increasingly found ways to circumvent the law and interfere with slave catchers within their state lines.

Additional Resource
- Read the primary source! http://bit.ly/42mrFjg

1808
The international slave trade is abolished by an act of Congress

What happened?

Delegates at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 fiercely debated the issue of slavery and the international slave trade. As a matter of compromise, they agreed that Congress could end the slave trade, but not before the year 1808 (twenty years from the date of the ratification of the Constitution). In 1807, President Thomas Jefferson signed into law the "Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves." The law ended U.S. participation in the international slave trade and took effect in 1808, the earliest date permitted by the Constitution. Although the legal supply of slaves from Africa ended, the enslaved population in the U.S. rose to four million by the time of the Civil War due to natural increase.

Additional Resources
- See the primary source! http://bit.ly/3YWan9z (Left QR)
- Read the excerpts in the Constitution relevant to slavery! https://bit.ly/38AcYle (Right QR)