

1776

Continental Congress approves the Declaration of Independence

**Slavery
& the
Founding**

BILL of RIGHTS
INSTITUTE

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 of 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

- Watch the video! <https://bit.ly/3vIFXC9> (Left QR)
- Read an excerpt! <https://bit.ly/3kf8W4e> (Right QR)



1777

Prince Hall and African American Men petition the Massachusetts Legislature

**Slavery
& the
Founding**

BILL of RIGHTS
INSTITUTE

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 burthen [burden]” against their consent.

Additional Resource

- Read the primary source! <https://bit.ly/41GoYaX>



1777

Vermont Constitution Bans Slavery

**Slavery
& the
Founding**

BILL of RIGHTS
INSTITUTE

What happened?

During the lead-up to the American Revolution, both New York and New Hampshire claimed territory comprising the modern state of Vermont. In 1777, locals who had emigrated from New Hampshire issued declarations of independence from both the British Empire and New York. Shortly thereafter, delegates created a new constitution for Vermont. This document was notably the first of the former colonies to ban slavery and provided for the protection of a wide variety of individual rights. Vermont remained an independent country until 1791, when it was added as a free state to the United States.

Additional Resource

- Read the primary source! <https://bit.ly/3Fw45GN>



1780

Constitution of Massachusetts claims all men are born free and equal

**Slavery
& the
Founding**

BILL of RIGHTS
INSTITUTE

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

- Read an excerpt! <https://bit.ly/3TlqAUw>



1781

Elizabeth (Mumbet) Freeman successfully sues for her freedom

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

- Watch this video! <https://bit.ly/3xYFyHn>



1782

Virginia allows manumission by law

What happened?

In 1769, Thomas Jefferson introduced in Virginia's colonial assembly a bill that would have made it legal for slaveholders to voluntarily free or **manumit** their slaves, but it was rejected. In 1782, however, Virginia passed a law that allowed slaveholders to emancipate their slaves without the need for a special authorization act by the General Assembly. The law was approved as the Revolutionary War neared an end. During the war and shortly thereafter, some Americans were driven by Revolutionary principles like liberty and equality to manumit, or voluntarily free, their slaves. In the Chesapeake region, which included Virginia and Maryland, slaveholders manumitted as many as 30,000 enslaved persons. As the nineteenth century progressed, many states would place greater restrictions on manumissions.

Additional Resource

- Read an essay! <http://bitly.ws/wqRQ>



1783

Quock Walker successfully sues for his freedom

Slavery
& the
Founding

BILL of RIGHTS
INSTITUTE

What happened?

Talk of independence and natural rights inspired enslaved individuals. Several, such as Quock Walker, used these principles to sue for their own freedom. Sources from Walker are lost to history, so historians must use other clues to consider the implications of his decision to sue for freedom. Quock Walker used the courts to challenge his status as a slave. The 1783 document comes from the notes of Chief Justice William Cushing, who heard Walker's case in the Massachusetts Supreme Court.

Additional Resource

- Read the primary source! <https://bit.ly/Quock-Walker>



1783

Belinda Sutton petitions Massachusetts for an income from her former slaveholder's estate

Slavery
& the
Founding

BILL of RIGHTS
INSTITUTE

What happened?

Belinda Sutton was an enslaved woman in the Royall household, the largest slave-owning family in Massachusetts. The Royall family amassed their fortune by trading sugar, rum, and slaves. During the American Revolution, Isaac Royall was a Loyalist and, therefore, was exiled by Massachusetts in the 1778 Act of Banishment. In 1783, Sutton **petitioned** the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for an income from his estate.

Additional Resource

- Read the primary source! <https://bit.ly/3ZU0998>



1783

Virginia passes law emancipating slaves who served as soldiers in the Revolutionary War

**Slavery
& the
Founding**

BILL of RIGHTS
INSTITUTE

What happened?

During the American Revolution, free and runaway enslaved African Americans chose sides and joined with both the British and American armies. After the war, these soldiers expected their freedom in return for their military service. Many of the enslaved people who fought for the British under promises of freedom were resettled in Nova Scotia, the Caribbean, and elsewhere in the British empire when the British armed forces evacuated. Those who served the Patriot cause also sought to secure their liberty. A year after Virginia allowed slaveholders to free enslaved people, the legislature passed a law granting freedom to slaves who fought for the Patriot side. This law specifically applied to those who served as soldiers with the permission of their slaveholders. It did not apply to those who joined the Patriot army without consent, nor did it apply to those who served as spies, a crucial role played by many African-Americans during the Revolutionary War.

Additional Resource

- Read an excerpt! <http://bit.ly/3K0yP7D>



1784

Land Ordinance proposes to outlaw slavery

**Slavery
& the
Founding**

BILL of RIGHTS
INSTITUTE

What happened?

In the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Revolutionary War, Great Britain ceded most of its territorial holdings east of the Mississippi River. The Confederation Congress appointed a committee led by Thomas Jefferson to create an ordinance that would establish boundaries for future states in the area north of the Ohio River. The committee submitted a proposal that outlawed slavery in this vast expanse of land. It was defeated, however, by a single vote.

Additional Resource

- Read the primary source! <http://bit.ly/3YPNIB7>



1784

Rhode Island and Connecticut pass gradual emancipation plans

What happened?

In 1784, both Connecticut and Rhode Island passed laws that gradually ended slavery within their state borders, where slavery had existed for over 100 years. The principles of the American Revolution, together with factors such as the religious imperative of social reform, pushed many locals to deem slavery an evil. However, statesmen in both states feared that an immediate abolition of slavery would be too drastic and would bring too great of harm to both slaveholders who would be deprived of their property and provided a form of compensation. They were also concerned that the enslaved individuals themselves would be thrown into the world without the skills needed to live as free men and free women. Over the course of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, slavery was slowly phased out in both Connecticut and Rhode Island, along with all other northern states who had either gradual or immediate emancipation plans of their own.

Additional Resources

- Read the primary source for RI! <http://bit.ly/3TkAMws> (L)
- Read the primary source for CT! <http://bit.ly/3li1uJB> (R)



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)
- Watch a video! <https://bit.ly/3LtornK> (right QR)



1789-1815

French Revolution grapples with slavery

What happened?

Inspired in part by the American Revolution, the French Revolution began in 1789. Revolutionaries issued the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen, which asserted, “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights.” In 1792, the French monarchy was abolished, and the king and queen were publicly executed the following year. Rebellion spread beyond France and into French colonies, including Saint-Domingue (Haiti) in the Caribbean. In February 1794, the French republic outlawed slavery in its colonies. In 1799, a young general named Napoleon Bonaparte seized control of the country. By 1802, he reestablished slavery. However, Haiti became independent on January 1, 1804 without slavery.

Additional Resource

- Read the 1791 French constitution (Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen): <http://bit.ly/3JMEpZd>



1790

The Southwest Ordinance is passed by the first Congress

**Slavery
& the
Founding**

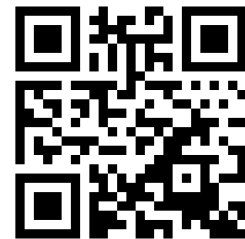
BILL of RIGHTS
INSTITUTE

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

- Read an excerpt! <https://bit.ly/3yGLNin>



1791-1804

Haitian Revolution begins as a slave revolt and creates republic that outlaws slavery

**Slavery
& the
Founding**

BILL of RIGHTS
INSTITUTE

What happened?

The American and French Revolutions inspired revolts in other parts of the Atlantic world. In 1791, a major slave uprising began in the French Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti). French settlers in Saint-Domingue, like many colonies in the Caribbean, grew sugar. Sugar was an extremely labor-intensive crop that relied on massive amounts of enslaved labor. The 1791 rebellion by enslaved Africans and their descendants attracted thousands of followers. Under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture, himself a former slave, the rebellion grew and became a movement for independence from France. In January 1804, Haiti established its independence. Slavery was outlawed in the constitution. Southern plantation owners in the United States pressured the federal government to refuse to recognize Haitian independence. They feared revolts from their own enslaved people and worked to prevent them from learning of the Haitian Revolution.

Additional Resource

- Read the 1805 Haitian constitution:
<http://bit.ly/3ZYGzuf>



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>



1793

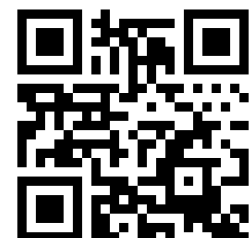
The first Fugitive Slave Law is passed by Congress

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/42mrFig>



1796

Tennessee enters the Union as a slave state

**Slavery
& the
Founding**

BILL of RIGHTS
INSTITUTE

What happened?

In 1796, the Southwest Territory (modern-day Tennessee) applied for and was granted statehood. Delegates met and drafted a state constitution, which was then sent to Congress for ratification. The constitution was unique in that it granted all free adult men over the age of twenty-one, regardless of race, the right to vote, provided they owned property or had resided in a county for at least six months. Tennessee was created out of the land covered by the 1790 Southwest Ordinance. Therefore, although the state constitution never used the term “slavery,” its existence was allowed and would continue in the state until and through the Civil War (1861-1865).

Additional Resource

- See Tennessee’s 1796 Constitution <http://bit.ly/3yLB0Qy>



1799

New York passes gradual emancipation plan

**Slavery
& the
Founding**

BILL of RIGHTS
INSTITUTE

What happened?

In 1799, New York passed a law that would gradually end slavery within its borders. It declared that any children born after July 4, 1799 to an enslaved mother would be born free but would need to serve as an indentured servant for their mother’s slaveholder until reaching 25 for females and 28 for males. Over time, the number of enslaved individuals in New York decreased until the institution fully ended.

Additional Resource

- Read the primary source! <http://bit.ly/3yKvBg0>

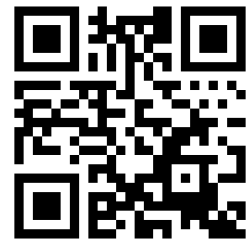


What happened?

In 1800, a literate enslaved man named Gabriel planned a slave uprising in Virginia. He organized a group of other slaves in a plot to march on Richmond and demand their freedom. However, some of the conspirators betrayed Gabriel and his followers. The governor called the militia, which quickly suppressed the slave revolt. Gabriel and many of his conspirators were hanged. In the aftermath, many whites feared that Gabriel's literacy and the autonomy he was given had allowed him to plan the revolt. As a result, slaves were increasingly prevented from being educated and denied many privileges.

Additional Resource

- Read an essay! <http://bit.ly/3Tm0n8o>



1801

Georgia outlaws manumission

What happened?

In the aftermath of the American Revolution, numerous individuals freed their slaves. In Virginia and Maryland, slaveholders manumitted as many as 30,000 enslaved people. However, the numbers were significantly lower in the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. Indeed, some states—especially in the Deep South—moved to stop slaveholders from manumitting their slaves out of fear over the difficulties involved with integrating a large number of free African Americans into society. In 1801, Georgia passed a law outlawing slaveholders from manumitting their slaves except by application to the legislature. That same act fined any slaveholder two hundred dollars if they chose to manumit their slaves and made it illegal for clerks to record a deed of manumission.

Additional Resource

- See the primary source! <https://bit.ly/3UOcMm9>



What happened?

In 1803, the United States acquired a vast stretch of land from France called the Louisiana Territory. The land encompassed modern-day states stretching from Montana all the way to Louisiana. With this territorial expansion, an important and long-lasting debate emerged over whether the institution of slavery would be allowed to spread to new western states created from the territory. This contentious debate dominated national politics from the late 1810s to the 1850s.

Additional Resources

- Read an essay! <http://bitly.ws/wGm4> (Left QR)
- View a map! <http://bit.ly/42IK3sv> (Right QR)



1804 New Jersey passes gradual emancipation plan

What happened?

In 1804, New Jersey passed a law that set slavery on a path to extinction within the state's borders. The law declared children born to enslaved mothers after the symbolically important date of July 4, 1804, to be legally free, but required that girls serve as indentured servants until 21 and boys until 25. Slavery was still prevalent in the state throughout the early nineteenth century due to the large number of enslaved people living there prior to the 1804 law. The final indentured servants would not be freed until the end of the Civil War and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. However, the law meant that thousands of enslaved people gained their freedom over the course of the early nineteenth century.

Additional Resource

- See the primary source! <http://bit.ly/3YRKQyf>



1808

The international slave trade is abolished by an act of Congress

**Slavery
& the
Founding**

BILL of RIGHTS
INSTITUTE

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)



**Slavery
& the
Founding**

BILL of RIGHTS
INSTITUTE

What happened?

