

Explore: Slavery and the United States Constitution

Scaffolded Version

Slavery
& the
Founding

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Was the Constitution a pro-slavery document or an anti-slavery document?

- I can interpret primary sources related to slavery and the Founding.
- I can create an argument using evidence from primary sources.

Background: What facts do we have to consider before we look at our two sources?

- The Constitution never uses the words slave, race, or color,
- Counting state populations for representation in Congress and how to count enslaved people and continuing the international slave trade sparked intense debate at the Constitutional Convention.
 - The convention settled on a Three-Fifths Compromise: three enslaved persons would count for every five white persons for the purpose of representation to appease southern states.
 - The Committee of Detail banned Congress from ever interfering with the international slave trade. The Committee on the Slave Trade severely curtailed the previous ban and offered that Congress could not interfere with the institution until 1800. The delegates of the Lower South (North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia) bargained hard to get the convention to approve pushing the date back to 1808.
- The Constitution was ratified in 1788 and became the law of the land. The Constitution did not end slavery, and it continued to grow and spread.
- The Constitution's stance on slavery continued to be debated long after its ratification. In the following two sources, William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass argue opposing interpretations of the U.S. Constitution.

Was the Constitution a pro-slavery document or an anti-slavery document?

Source A: William Lloyd Garrison, "The American Union." *The Liberator*, January 10, 1845

Source B: Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" Speech to Rochester, New York Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, July 5, 1852

Shrink the text: Write Garrison's central argument in one sentence.

Shrink the text: Write Douglass's central argument in one sentence.

Major Points:

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Consensus Statement: