

Primary Source:

Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” Speech to Rochester, New York Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, July 5, 1852

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.

Essential Vocabulary

Forbearance	Self-control, patience
Degenerate	Immoral
Ringbolt	Base or foundation
Perpetual	Lasting forever, unchanging
Bondage	Slavery

Building Context

Born enslaved on a Maryland plantation, Frederick Douglass experienced the evils of slavery firsthand. He secretly taught himself to read and later escaped to New York. Douglass’s prominence as an abolitionist grew thanks to his eloquence as a writer and speaker. In this speech, made on July 5, 1852, to a group of abolitionists in upstate New York, Douglass points out that promises of liberty and equality in the Declaration of Independence are incomplete so long as the institution of slavery exists.

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<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july/>

This, for the purpose of this celebration, is the Fourth of July. It is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom. . . . This celebration also marks the beginning of another year of your national life; and reminds you that the Republic of America is now 76 years old. . . .

Your fathers were wise men... They felt themselves the victims of grievous wrongs, wholly incurable in their colonial capacity. With brave men there is always a remedy for oppression. . . .

Citizens, your fathers made good that resolution. They succeeded; and to-day you reap the fruits of their success. The freedom gained is yours; and you, therefore, may properly celebrate this anniversary. The 4th of July is the first great fact in your nation's history—the very **ringbolt** in the chain of your yet undeveloped destiny.

Pride and patriotism, not less than gratitude, prompt you to celebrate and to hold it in **perpetual** remembrance. I have said that the Declaration of Independence is the ringbolt to the chain of your nation's destiny; so, indeed, I regard it. The principles contained in that instrument are saving principles. Stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost. . . .

They [the Founders] were peace men; but they preferred revolution to peaceful submission to **bondage**. They were quiet men; but they did not shrink from agitating against oppression. They showed **forbearance**; but that they knew its limits. They believed in order; but not in the order of tyranny. With them, nothing was “settled” that was not right. With them, justice, liberty and humanity were “final”; not slavery and oppression. You may

Notes

well cherish the memory of such men. They were great in their day and generation. Their solid manhood stands out the more as we contrast it with these **degenerate** times. . . .

Their statesmanship looked beyond the passing moment and stretched away in strength into the distant future. They seized upon eternal principles and set a glorious example in their defense. Mark them!

Fully appreciating the hardship to be encountered . . . reverently appealing to heaven to attest their sincerity, soundly comprehending the solemn responsibility they were about to assume, wisely measuring the terrible odds against them, your fathers, the fathers of this republic, did . . . with a sublime faith in the great principles of justice and freedom, lay deep the corner-stone of the national super-structure, which has risen and still rises in grandeur around you. . . .

I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. . . .

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your

religious parade and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour. . . .

Fellow-citizens! there is no matter in respect to which, the people of the North have allowed themselves to be so ruinously imposed upon, as that of the pro-slavery character of the Constitution. In that instrument I hold there is neither warrant, license, nor sanction of the hateful thing; but, interpreted as it ought to be interpreted, the Constitution is a glorious liberty document. Read its preamble, consider its purposes. Is slavery among them? Is it at the gate way or is it in the temple? It is neither. While I do not intend to argue this question on the present occasion, let me ask, if it be not somewhat singular that, if the Constitution were intended to be, by its framers and adopters, a slaveholding instrument, why neither slavery, slaveholding, nor slave can anywhere be found in it. . . .

Now, take the Constitution according to its plain reading, and I defy the presentation of a single pro-slavery clause in it. On the other hand it will be found to contain principles and purposes, entirely hostile to the existence of slavery. . . .

Allow me to say, in conclusion, notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation, which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery.

“The arm of the Lord is not shortened,” and the doom of slavery is certain. I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope. While drawing encouragement from the Declaration of Independence, the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions, my spirit is also cheered by the obvious tendencies of the age.

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

1. How does Douglass refer to the Declaration of Independence?

2. Why did Douglass mourn on the Fourth of July?

3. What phrases does Douglass use in this speech to refer to the U.S. Constitution?

4. Was Douglass optimistic or pessimistic about the future of slavery?

5. Summarize Douglass's argument in your own words.