

Primary Source

The Declaration of Independence



How did the principles of the Declaration of Independence contribute to the quest to end slavery?

- ☐ I can interpret primary sources related to principles of liberty, equality, and justice in the Founding era.
- ☐ I can create an argument using evidence from primary sources.
- ☐ I can analyze issues in history to help find solutions to present-day challenges.

Essential Vocabulary

Impel	Compel or urge.
Unalienable rights (or inalienable rights)	Rights that come from nature. Everyone is born with them, they cannot be surrendered by an individual, and they cannot be taken away because no authority on Earth has the power to do so.

Building Context

In the years following the Seven Years' War, the relationship between Great Britain and the North American colonies became strained due to a variety of political and economic factors. Attempts at mediation, including an Olive Branch Petition sent to the king, had been unsuccessful. On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee brought what came to be called the Lee Resolution before the Continental Congress. This resolution stated "these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states ..."

Congress debated independence for several days before giving Thomas Jefferson the job of drafting a formal Declaration of Independence. Jefferson's writing was influenced by George Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights, as well as by his study of natural rights theory and the writings of John Locke. Benjamin Franklin

and John Adams edited Jefferson's draft, and the final document was presented to Congress about two weeks later.

On July 2, 1776, the Continental Congress voted to declare independence from England. Two days later, the Declaration of Independence was adopted. Many consider the Declaration of Independence to be the philosophical foundation of American freedom. The Declaration contains three sections: a general statement of natural rights theory and the purpose of government (excerpted below), a list of grievances against the British king, and a declaration of independence from England. Taken together, these three sections of the Declaration form a coherent, logical argument for why the colonies "ought to be Free and Independent States."

The Declaration of Independence

Source: <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/primary-sources/declaration-of-independence>

In Congress, July 4, 1776. The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America, When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel [compel or urge] them to the separation.	Notes
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1. According to the text, what is the purpose of this document?

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights [rights that come from nature and cannot be	Notes
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taken away], that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.	
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2. “Unalienable rights” (or inalienable rights) are rights that come from nature. Everyone is born with them, they cannot be surrendered by an individual, and they cannot be taken away because no authority on Earth has the power to do so. What unalienable rights does the Declaration of Independence claim belong to all humans?

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3. What is the purpose of the government? Where does the government get its power?

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4. If a government becomes destructive of unalienable or natural rights, what two options do the people have? Do you think either of these options would be easy or difficult to implement? Explain.

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5. When this document was written, the institution of slavery had existed in the British colonies for more than 150 years and in most societies throughout world history. How is it at odds with the principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence?

6. Does the existence of slavery contradict the idea of unalienable or natural rights put forth in the Declaration of Independence? Why or why not?

7. Thomas Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence, before it was revised by the other committee members and by Congress, included the following passage describing one of the "injuries and usurpations" the colonists had suffered under King George III.

... has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, capturing & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither... determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold ...

How does Jefferson describe slavery in the first line of this passage?

8. In his [Notes of the Proceedings in the Continental Congress](#) from June 1776, Jefferson wrote of this paragraph:

“the clause..., reprobating the enslaving the inhabitants of Africa, was struck out in complaisance to [to satisfy] South Carolina & Georgia, who had never attempted to restrain the importation of slaves, and who on the contrary still wished to continue it. our Northern brethren also I believe felt a little tender under those censures; for tho’ their people have very few slaves themselves yet they had been pretty considerable carriers of them to others.”

Why was this passage removed, according to Jefferson’s notes?

9. What clues does this passage provide about the differing economies of the northern and southern colonies, their varied participation in slavery, and their views toward slavery?

10. How do these passages support the conclusion that compromises were necessary to achieve a unanimous declaration of independence from the 13 colonies?