



FOUNDATION  
AGAINST  
INTOLERANCE  
& RACISM

**Lesson Title:** The Declaration of Independence and the Problem of Slavery

**Recommended Grade Level:** 8-11

**Recommended Pacing:** 90 minutes

**FAIR Standards and Objectives:**

HM.9-12.1, US.9-12.11, US.9-12.12, US.9-12.13, FR.9-12.20

**Era:** Revolutionary

**Ethnicities Explored:** Black Americans

**Objectives:**

1. Students will increase their understanding of the Declaration of Independence and its relationship to the problem of slavery.
2. Students will increase proficiency in debating alternative interpretations of historical events.

**Teacher Instructions:**

1. Give students time (in class or as homework) to read the Background Essay and the five sources for the lesson.
2. Hand out copies of the Student Worksheet Assignment.
3. Ask students to read the two conflicting “Point of View” paragraphs and take brief notes on them in the spaces provided.
4. Have students use these notes in a guided discussion in which they are encouraged to defend their own views while listening carefully to and considering the views of others.

## The Declaration and Slavery: Background Essay

In 1776, thirteen British colonies along the coast of North America reached a breaking point. Attempts to settle matters had failed. It was time to end all political ties to Great Britain. The colonies decided that no longer would the British King or Parliament govern them or set rules for them in any way. In that year, colonial leaders gathered for the second time in a Continental Congress. There, they gave birth to a new nation, the United States of America. They still had to fight a long revolutionary war to win their independence. But on July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress approved the final draft of the Declaration of Independence. A group of five delegates helped write it. The Declaration's main writer was Thomas Jefferson.

Jefferson and the other leaders of this revolution felt a need to do more than merely announce their decision and assert their independence. They also wanted to explain why they were acting as they were. The Declaration was their explanation. The colonists had many complaints to make about British treatment of its colonies. Most of the Declaration was a list of those complaints. By itself that list only sums up an argument between two lands and two groups of people. By itself it might not have meant much to anyone else.

Something else made the Declaration far more important – to the colonists and the British, but also to the entire world. That “something else” was this passage from the second paragraph of the Declaration's introductory remarks.

*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, 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.*

These stirring words make a universal claim. That is, they claim a truth for all of humanity, not just for themselves as British subjects. What's interesting is that the colonists did not need to do this. They did not need to make such a universal statement in breaking with Great Britain. They could have merely described what the British had done wrong. That is, they could have limited themselves to that list of the ways the British had violated their rights as British subjects. Instead, they began the Declaration by describing a universal principle of equality and liberty. The statement was dramatic and far-reaching. It has echoed around the world ever since. It is usually all that people really know about the Declaration.

Did the colonial rebels mean it? Were they determined to create a society based on these universal principles? After all, many people in the colonies were not actually enjoying this equality and liberty. Women, indentured servants, Native Americans and others did not enjoy equal civil and political rights. And of course, the most glaring form of inequality was slavery. One fifth of Americans were Africans brought as slaves to America against their will. The form of chattel slavery imposed on Africans in the colonies and throughout the Americas was cruel in the extreme. Their fate was to labor for slaveholders and obey their every command, usually for life. It is true slaveholders could and did sometimes free some of them. However, enslaved people had no legal recourse to demand such freedom. And those who were freed still faced many unfair limits on the kind of life they could enjoy.

Did the nation's founders not see this? Did they not see that slavery undercut and denied the noble principles of equality and liberty? In fact, they did see this. Many of the founders were in fact themselves slaveholders, including Jefferson. Some of them defended slavery. However, many of them, including Jefferson, did not defend it. Some of them expressed in no uncertain terms their sense of horror and shame about the practice.

Were they serious about this? To some degree, Jefferson seems to have been. In his original rough draft of the Declaration, he included slavery as one of the grievances against King George III. Jefferson's paragraph sharply contrasted slavery with the ideals of equality and liberty expressed in the Declaration. He clearly understood the way these things clashed. So also did many other delegates. However, the biggest change the Continental Congress made to Jefferson's draft was to remove his long paragraph against slavery and the transatlantic slave trade.

Why did the delegates remove the passage? Why did they miss the chance to condemn a practice that totally violated the ideals they chose to fight for? Judging past actions is often easy. Understanding why people in the past acted as they did is much harder. It is hard in this case first of all because the delegates left no record of their discussions of Jefferson's slavery passage. We don't know what they said when they took it out. It is hard because many of the nation's founders, like Jefferson, were slaveholders yet condemned slavery in forceful ways. Were they simply fooling themselves when they did this? Were they secretly in favor of slavery? Did they not care because they weren't the ones suffering from the practice? Or did they have other competing interests in or reasons for avoiding the issue and for removing a passage about it from the Declaration of Independence?

The materials included in this lesson will help you better understand this difficult question. They invite you to think about, discuss and debate the relationship between the American Founding's ideals and the horrors of the enslavement of African men, women and children.

## Sources for this Lesson:

**Source 1.** The final version of the Declaration of Independence.

[Declaration of Independence - July 4, 1776 | Teaching American History](#)

**Source 2.** Thomas Jefferson's original rough draft of the Declaration.

[Rough Draft of the Declaration of Independence - Teaching American History](#)

**Source 3.** Prince Hall, [Petition to the Massachusetts Legislature](#) (1777)

**Source 4.** A passage from Jefferson's "Notes of Proceedings in the Continental Congress." In this passage, he expresses his views as to why his slavery passage was not included in the Declaration.

[Extract from Thomas Jefferson's Notes of Proceedings in the Continental Congress, 2 July 1776 \[Quote\] | Jefferson Quotes & Family Letters \(monticello.org\)](#)

**Source 5.** A set of four comments about slavery by some of the founders attending the Constitutional Convention of 1787. This Convention took place several years after the Revolution, but those who attended it were part of the same founding generation that helped establish the United States.

### Four Leaders During the Revolutionary Era Comment on Slavery

All quotes are from James Madison's *Notes on the Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787*. Available for the dates indicated after each quotation at: [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject\\_menus/debcont.as](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/debcont.as)

1. "We have seen the mere distinction of colour made in the most enlightened period of time, a ground of the most oppressive dominion ever exercised by man over man." James Madison, delegate from Virginia, in the Constitutional Convention, June 6, 1787.

2. "Every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant. They bring the judgment of heaven on a Country. As nations cannot be rewarded or punished in the next world, they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes & effects providence punishes national sins, by national calamities." -- George Mason, delegate from Virginia, in the Constitutional Convention, August 22, 1787.

3. "If slavery be wrong, it is justified by the example of all the world. . . . In all ages one half of mankind have been slaves." -- Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, delegate from South Carolina, in the Constitutional Convention, August 22, 1787.

4. "Let us not intermeddle. As population increases poor laborers will be so plenty as to render slaves useless. Slavery in time will not be a speck in our Country. Provision is already made in Connecticut for abolishing it. And the abolition has already taken place in Massachusetts. As to the danger of insurrections from foreign influence, that will become a motive to kind treatment of the slaves." Oliver Ellsworth, delegate from Connecticut, in the Constitutional Convention, August 22, 1787.

## **Student Worksheet Assignment**

### **Student Instructions**

Please read the Background Essay for this lesson. Also read the entire set of five source documents provided. Finally, read the two "Point of View" paragraphs below. Then write out brief answers to the questions asked about these paragraphs. Use your answers as notes for a class discussion about Jefferson's slavery paragraph and the decision to take it out of the Declaration.

### **Point of View I: "They Were Hypocrites Who Did Not Care"**

The founders acted to protect their own interests. That meant protecting slavery, too. Yes, many of them saw how evil slavery was. Their own "enlightened" views told them that. They did believe that every individual was entitled to liberty and equality before the law. But slavery was already built into the economy and society. The Southern colonies depended on slave labor entirely. Other colonies had some slaves. Many of them traded the goods that slaves produced and also took part in the transatlantic slave trade. Economic interests led the founders to put aside their qualms. Also, many of them saw Africans as inferior. They may have opposed slavery and talked about equality. But few of them believed Africans really could be equal. As to Jefferson's proposed paragraph, they may have laughed about it. Jefferson blamed slavery on the British. Yet everyone knew the colonists themselves had fully supported slavery and mostly still did. The high ideals of the Declaration sounded nice. But Americans were perfectly happy to set them aside. They would do so for a long time yet to come.

### **Point of View II: "They Did What They Could"**

To fight the British, the biggest problem facing the colonists was disunity. They were after all 13 separate colonies. They had often bickered. They had rarely cooperated on much. Now they declared their independence. But they still saw themselves as individual states. Barely cooperating, they faced off against the mightiest empire on earth. Could they unite enough to win? Taking a stand against slavery might well have kept that from happening. South Carolina and Georgia especially depended on slave labor almost entirely. Had they refused to fight, the revolution might well have failed. Slavery in the South especially would have remained as strong as ever. Slavery had

existed in many other societies for most of human history. That had only barely begun to change in the Enlightenment era of the 1700s. Anti-slavery ideas were just starting to take organized form. The Declaration's ideals alone actually gave this early anti-slavery thinking a big boost. The founders could not go further in that direction themselves. But they did what they could. In the long run it was a lot.

### **Clarify Your Views and Discuss Them with Others**

Take a few brief notes in response to each of the following questions. Use your notes to help you take part in an all-class discussion about Jefferson's proposed paragraph about slavery.

1. Which of the two "Point of View" statements do you agree with most? Why?
2. What do you think is the weakest part of the argument supporting this Point of View? Why?
3. Which of the two "Point of View" statements do you agree with least? Why?
4. What do you think is the strongest part of the argument supporting that Point of View? Why?

### **Extension Activities:**

1. Show this [video](#) entitled "Declaration Descendants" and ask students the following question: Is your general response to this video positive or negative? Can you explain why?
2. Ask students to write down two column headings: (1) Honesty and (2) Optimism. Explain that "Honesty" refers to true but painful facts about American history and traditional American heroes, and "Optimism" refers to reasons for hope that American history can represent progress towards aspirational ideals. Then give students 5-10 minutes to write down as much as they can under both columns from their readings and discussion in this lesson. Then spend 10 minutes discussing the students' lists as a class.