

# THE DECLARATION'S FIRST CENTURY AT HOME

The Declaration of Independence reverberated throughout the colonies from the moment it was first heard. Many colonists focused on the phrases “all men are created equal,” “**unalienable rights**,” and “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” For them, these ideas became the promise of the Declaration. Movements that sprouted during the Revolutionary War grew rapidly in the 19th century, built upon that promise. However, questions about the Declaration lingered and grew louder. Were certain **rights** more important than others? Who had access to those rights? **Abolitionists** and defenders of slavery disagreed on the answers to these questions, ultimately leading to the Civil War. Native American **nations** also weighed in on the Declaration as they were increasingly pushed onto reservations and their rights were restricted. The interpretation of the Declaration of Independence evolved with time as people debated its deeper meanings.

## Rights for Women, Freedom for Enslaved People

Several political and social reform movements in the 19th century used the Declaration of Independence’s ideals of equality and freedom to advocate for the rights of specific groups of people. Some, like the Abolitionist Movement and the Women’s Suffrage Movement, even created their own declarations in support of those rights.

### Women’s Rights and Suffrage

During the Declaration of Independence’s conception, Abigail Adams called on her husband John Adams, a **delegate** to the Continental Congress, to “Remember the Ladies.” She argued that if attention was not given to the rights of women, they would rebel against their lack of representation in government. Though this was written privately, it was one of the earliest arguments for women’s rights as citizens of the developing United States.

In the 19th century, approximately 300 advocates for women’s rights gathered for the Seneca Falls Convention, the first women’s rights convention. There, women’s rights **activist** and **suffragist** Elizabeth Cady Stanton presented the Declaration of Sentiments.

This document closely imitated the Declaration of Independence. However, it declared that “all men and women are created equal” and included a list of women’s **grievances** towards men in the place of the American colonists’ grievances toward King George III. The document’s call for women’s **suffrage** helped merge small local movements into a national one and marked the Seneca Falls Convention as the official start of the national women’s suffrage movement.

In the decades that followed, women and their male allies pushed for women’s rights at the local, state, and federal levels. These efforts led to the 19th Amendment in 1920, which recognized women’s right to vote nationwide. However, it would be decades before all women were able to benefit from it.

### Abolition

Early **abolitionists** pointed out the contradiction between the institution of slavery and the idea that “all men are created equal.” Lemuel Haynes’s sermon “Liberty Further Extended: Or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave Keeping” called out the Continental Congress’s fight for liberty while many of its members kept people as slaves. In

### DID YOU KNOW?

In New Jersey, some women were able to vote from 1776-1807, well before the passage of the 19th Amendment. For more information on the roles of women during the Revolutionary era and the long battle for women’s rights, explore our *When Women Lost the Vote* online exhibit.

<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/virtualexhibits/when-women-lost-the-vote-a-revolutionary-story>

Massachusetts, an **enslaved** woman called Bet went to court for her freedom. She and her lawyer used words from the state's **constitution**, which echoed the Declaration, to successfully argue she should never have been considered property. When she gained her freedom, she changed her name to Elizabeth Freeman. Her case helped lead to the end of slavery in Massachusetts. Haynes, Freeman, and others urged Americans to embrace equality on a greater scale and laid the foundation for the Abolition Movement.

The movement grew during the 19th century and continued to use the Declaration as grounding for its efforts. The American **Anti-Slavery Society** described the line “all men are created equal” as the “cornerstone upon which they [Revolutionary Americans] founded the Temple of Freedom.” Frederick Douglass, the most influential Black abolitionist and **civil rights** leader in the 1800s, cherished the Declaration’s principles of liberty and equality. Enslaved at birth, Douglass had escaped his enslavers and claimed his freedom in the North. In his work, he championed the Declaration, calling its words the “saving principles” of the country. Yet, like the other abolitionists, Douglass also brought attention to the hypocrisy of slavery and inequality in American society. In his most famous speech he asked, “What, to the American Slave, is your 4th of July?” He continued, “Are the great principles of political freedom and natural justice embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us?”

Abolitionists asked the nation to consider whether the Declaration of Independence was simply a wartime political document or a statement of true American ideals. That debate came to a head in the 1860s.

## The Civil War

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, people loudly debated the meaning and purpose of the Declaration of Independence. Was it a promise of equality for all Americans, a document that protected all rights, regardless of what they were, a document for liberty, or a document that justified secession?

### The Confederacy

In his farewell address from the United States Senate, Mississippi politician Jefferson Davis told his colleagues that the Declaration of Independence was not meant to be used in pursuit of racial equality. Because the Declaration stated that governments required the “Consent of the Governed” and that it was the “Right of the People to alter or abolish” a government if it no longer protected the rights of the people, Davis argued that the Declaration justified secession. During his first inaugural address as President of the Confederate States of America, he invoked the Declaration in the same way. Several southern states mirrored the Declaration in their Declarations of Secession. Like Davis, they emphasized their concern that the government was denying them their rights – particularly the right to have enslaved laborers. The Confederate States of America declared independence because Abraham Lincoln, now President of the United States, and the northern states were hostile to the institution of slavery.

### The Union

Though Lincoln was willing to let slavery in the south continue if it prevented a war, he continued to believe that the Declaration’s promise of equality should extend to enslaved people. His support for this idea can be seen in many of his writings and speeches, including the Gettysburg Address. During the war, Lincoln signed the

**“If you have been inclined to believe that all men are not created equal in those inalienable rights enumerated by our chart of liberty, let me entreat you to come back...come back to the truths that are in the Declaration of Independence.”**

- Abraham Lincoln, 1858

## LEARN MORE

For more information about early abolitionists, explore the virtual exhibit *Black Founders*.

<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/exhibits/black-founders-the-forten-family-of-philadelphia>

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Emancipation Proclamation, which stated that all enslaved people in Confederate territory were free and allowed Black Americans into the United States Army.

After the Civil War, the Reconstruction Amendments went on to support the idea that the Declaration of Independence was a promise of equality and rights. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery, except as punishment for a crime. The 14th granted citizenship to most people born on American soil, including those who had been enslaved and those born to them. The 15th recognized the right to vote for Black men. These, however, were just first steps. It would take another century for many of the promises of these amendments to be enforced equally.

## Native Americans and the Declaration

Native American nations were the first foreign powers to recognize the newly independent United States, when the Wolastoqiyik (also called Maliseet) and the Mi'kmaq acknowledged the Declaration of Independence. Wolastoqiyik chief Ambrose Bear commented “we like it well.” Despite the final grievance in the Declaration of Independence, denoting **Indigenous** nations on America’s western frontiers as “merciless indian savages,” several nations — including these, the Oneida, Stockbridge, and others — joined the Continental Army in the fight against Great Britain.

**“We appeal to the magnanimity of the American Congress for justice, and the protection of the rights, liberties, and lives of the Cherokee people... we expect it from them under that MEMORABLE DECLARATION, ‘that all men are created equal...”**

- Cherokee Delegation, April 15, 1824

As with many communities, the Declaration represented complicated ideas for Native peoples. It represented a nation that continually expanded onto their ancestral lands and challenged their cultural identities by forcing **assimilation** upon many of them. However, it also contained powerful ideals that supported their own rights and **sovereignty**.

Indigenous nations embraced the promises and language of the Declaration of Independence to protect their ancestral lands and **self-government**. In 1824, a delegation from the Cherokee Nation quoted the Declaration in a **petition** to Congress against the Indian Removal Act. The act planned to forcibly remove the Cherokee from their land in Georgia and resettle them in present-day Oklahoma. Similarly, the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe petitioned the Massachusetts government for their right to self-government. Echoing the Declaration, the Mashpee resolved, “that we, as a tribe, will rule ourselves, and have the right to do so; for all men are born free and equal.” Native Americans would continue to invoke the Declaration in their fight for rights, self-government, and citizenship for years to come.

### DID YOU KNOW?

During the late 19th century, many Native nations used Fourth of July commemorations to celebrate their own unique cultures and languages. This is one of many ways Indigenous communities have fought to preserve their ways of life for the present and future.

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For the Continental Congress, the Declaration of Independence may have been simply a step towards an independent nation. However, the words of the Declaration became a promise of freedom and equality. This promise remained out of reach for many during the 19th century, but freedom and equality were worth fighting for. They carried that fight throughout the century and into the years beyond.