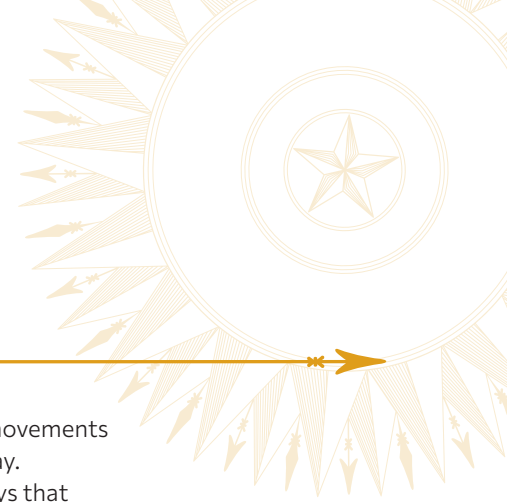


# THE DECLARATION IN 20<sup>TH</sup> AND 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY UNITED STATES



The purpose of this unit is to examine how the Declaration of Independence and historical movements influenced and supported rights movements during the 20th century and into the present day. Students will examine primary source documents, photographs, and objects and explore ways that movements expressed their beliefs and advocated for their causes in art.

All activities and resources are available online on the Museum of the American Revolution’s Teacher Resource Guides page.

## MATERIALS

### Primary Sources

**Transcript:** Declaration of Independence

**Painting:** *Free and Independent States* by Faith Ringgold  
(Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts)  
<https://www.pafa.org/museum/collection/item/free-independent-states>

**Object:** Garrison Antislavery Banner  
(Massachusetts Historical Society) Art Card A

**Object:** Glass Seal “Am I Not A Woman And A Sister”  
(Massachusetts Historical Society)  
<https://www.masshist.org/database/1661>

**Photograph:** *Sanitation Workers Strike, Memphis, Tennessee, March 28, 1968*  
(High Museum of Art)  
<https://high.org/collection/sanitation-workers-strike-memphis-tennessee-march-28-1968/>

**Print:** *Am I not a man and brother?*  
(Library of Congress)  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2008661312/>

**Document Packet:** Labor Movements’ Declarations

Art Card B - Buttons:

**Object:** Harvey Milk Button  
(Private Collection)

**Object:** “Equality for Homosexuals” Button  
(Private Collection)

**Object:** “Gay Rights Now” Button  
(Private Collection)

**Object:** “I’m Gay and Vote” Button  
(Private Collection)

## AIMS/OBJECTIVES

The modular activities and extensions in this unit provide opportunities for students to:

- Examine strategies and techniques used by a variety of groups as they fought for their rights within the United States, and how these changed over time.
- Examine how different rights movements used the words and ideals of the Declaration of Independence to support their causes.
- Explore how rights movements have used art to advocate for their causes.

### Other Sources

**Big Idea 5:** The Declaration in 20th and 21st Century United States

**Virtual Tour:** *The Declaration’s Journey*  
(Available January 2026)  
<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/the-declaration-s-journey-virtual-tour>

**Virtual Museum Tour**  
<https://museumvirtualltour.org/>

**Worksheet:** Label Template

*A virtual version of this exhibit will appear online in January 2026.*

# PROCEDURES

## Engagement Activities

These activities can be used as hook activities, introductions to concepts, or shorter lessons.

### Pairing Portraits

**Objective:** Examine strategies and techniques used by a variety of groups as they fought for their rights within the United States, and how these changed over time.

Explore how rights movements have used art to advocate for their causes.

**Time:** 5-10 minutes

**Teacher Preparation:** Prepare to project or display the painting [Free and Independent States by Faith Ringgold](#).

Ask students to look at the image closely for a few moments. Then ask students to describe what they are looking at. The follow up question “What do you see that makes you say that?” is useful for encouraging students to support their responses with visual evidence. Use the following questions as guides for student looking:

- Who are the two figures in this image?
- What is the setting of each figure?
- What is happening in this image?
- In what two time periods does this image seem to be set?

Students should come to understand that the figures are Thomas Jefferson (left) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (right). Jefferson is shown writing the Declaration of Independence in 1776. King is pictured in 1963, writing his Letter from Birmingham Jail, in which he explains his reasoning for being in Birmingham, the problem with being told to wait for a better time to act, and his views on the role of the Christian church in promoting racial justice.

Next, discuss why the artist, Faith Ringgold, decided to pair these two men in her painting. Ask: What message might Ringgold be trying to present with her painting? What makes you say that?

**EXTEND:** Allow students to explore the first section of [The Declaration's Journey virtual tour](#) (available online in January 2026). Ask: What connections does the exhibit make between Thomas Jefferson and Martin Luther King, Jr.?

### Buttons | Then and Now

**Objective:** Explore how rights movements have used art to advocate for their causes.

Examine strategies and techniques used by a variety of groups as they fought for their rights within the United States, and how these changed over time.

**Time:** 10 minutes

**Teacher Preparation:** Prepare to project, display, or provide student access to [Art Card B - Buttons](#) which contains the images of the collection of 20th-century buttons from the [Gay Rights Movement](#).

Allow students time to examine the buttons, then have them share their observations on imagery, text, colors, size, etc.

Next, have students research and examine buttons that show support for the modern LGBTQ+ movement. Invite students to share their own if they have any.

Ask students to then compare the two sets while thinking about the purpose and audience of each set. What do they think is similar between the two? Different? What, if anything, do these buttons tell us about changes in the movement over time?

**EXTEND:** Explore other ways people have used buttons as visual support for a movement or group. You may wish to use the [Museum Virtual Tour](#) and examine the first USA buttons. These can be found in the section [The March to Valley Forge under The Darkest Hour](#). Turn the view around to find the case titled [The First USA](#).

**EXTEND:** Have students create their own buttons supporting a cause they believe in.

## Development Activities

These activities are suitable for diving deeper into a particular concept and can be used for an entire class period.

### Workers' Declarations

**Objective:** Examine how different rights movements used the words and ideals of the Declaration of Independence to support their causes.

**Time:** 1-2 days (50-minute classes)

**Teacher Preparation:** Review [Workers' Rights](#) section of [Big Idea 5: The Declaration in 20th and 21st Century United States](#). Print enough copies of the [Workers' Rights](#) section of [Big Idea 5](#) or ensure students have access to computers, tablets, or other devices with working internet connections to access it online. Print enough copies of the documents from the document packet [Labor Movement Declarations](#) for each group.

Have students read the section [Workers' Rights](#) in [Big Idea 5](#) in class or for homework. You may choose to have students discuss the key ideas from the section as an entrance ticket.

Divide students into groups and assign them to one of the following declarations:

- New York Mechanics Declaration of Independence (1776)
- The Working Men’s Declaration of Independence (1829)
- Declaration of Independence of the American Working Class (1923)
- United Steel Workers Declaration of Independence (1936)

Tell them to use a highlighter to highlight key ideas from their assigned declaration and create a short 2-3 sentence summary about the purpose or goals of their declaration.

Then have them research the time period in which their declaration was written and the status of workers’ rights within it using the following questions as guides:

- What was happening during the historical moment in which your declaration was written?
- Did anything specific trigger the writing of your declaration at the specific moment (month, year) that it was written? If so, what?
- How does your declaration help us to understand the era in which it was written?

Next, mix the students up so that each group has at least one student who has researched each declaration. Have students teach their new group about their declaration of workers’ rights. Close with a discussion of what students noticed about changes over time and how their declarations are similar to and different from each other.

### Protest Echoing Through the Ages

**Objective:** Examine how different rights movements used the words and ideals of the Declaration of Independence to support their causes.

**Time:** 20-25 minutes

**Teacher Preparation:** Prepare to project or display the images of the Garrison Antislavery Banner (Art Card A), the [glass seal “Am I Not a Woman And A Sister,”](#) the photograph from the [Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike](#), and the [Am I not a Man and Brother? print](#).

Have students examine the Garrison Antislavery Banner and ask: How does this banner use the Declaration of Independence to advocate for abolition?

Then have students examine the *Am I not a Man and Brother?* print and the photograph from the Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike side by side. You may also wish to include the image of the glass seal “Am I not a Woman and a Sister.” Explain that the first print comes from an

1837 broadside based on the 1780s seal of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in England and that the photograph comes from a 1968 strike by Black sanitation workers protesting dangerous conditions and the lack of a response by the city to their concerns. Explore the following questions with students:

- Why might participants in the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike have chosen to use the language on their sign that they did?
- How does that language connect to the abolition image from the 1780s?
- How might the sanitation workers have seen themselves as similar to people who were fighting for the end of slavery?

Wrap up by discussing how activists use the past to help support their causes. You may wish to have students find a modern example as an exit ticket.

**EXTEND:** Have students create a “museum” of protest signs from different movements or decades. Have them select images of these signs and create museum labels using the Label Template worksheet.

## Culmination Activities, Research Projects, and Group Projects

### Equality and the Arts

**Objective:** Examine strategies and techniques used by a variety of groups as they fought for their rights within the United States, and how these changed over time.

Explore how rights movements have used art to advocate for their causes.

**Time:** Multiple day research and gallery project

**Teacher Preparation:** Print enough copies of *Big Idea 5: The Declaration in 20th and 21st Century United States* or ensure students have access to computers, tablets, or other devices with working internet connections to access it online. Create a list of rights movements from the 20th century or begin class by having students create a list of rights movements from the 20th century.

Have students read Big Idea 5 in class or for homework. As a class, discuss ways the movements pushed for equal rights. Then explain that many movements used art to help promote their causes.

Assign, or have students choose, one of the 20th century rights movements from the list that you or they have created. Tell them that they will be creating an art gallery for their movement using a presentation program (PowerPoint, Prezi, Canva, etc.) or poster.

Students should research their assigned movement and

find five pieces of art that were created to support their movement. Students should use the Label Template worksheet for each piece of art. They should also include their reason for choosing that piece and how it represents their movement.

Give students time to present their galleries to the class or allow students to move about the class and view their classmates' work.

## More About a Movement

**Objective:** Examine strategies and techniques used by a variety of groups as they fought for their rights within the United States, and how these changed over time.

**Time:** Multiple day research and presentation project

**Teacher Preparation:** Review *Big Idea 5: The Declaration in 20th and 21st Century United States*. Ensure students have access to computers, tablets, or other devices with working internet connections to read *Big Idea 5* or print out enough copies for each student. Have the students read *Big Idea 5* for homework.

After students have read *Big Idea 5* for homework, divide students into groups and assign them one of the rights movements from the 20th century below or allow students to choose from other rights movements:

- Civil Rights Movement
- Chicano Rights Movement
- Women's Rights Movement
- Gay Rights Movement
- Asian American Rights Movement
- Disability Rights Movement

Have students create a presentation of their choice (PowerPoint, Prezi, Canva, tri-fold, performance, etc.) answering the following questions:

- What were the primary goals of your movement?
- Who were some key figures of your movement? What did they accomplish?
- What were some key events within your movement?
- Was your movement divided or different based on geography, or did it have different phases over time?
  - Who were key figures from those places or eras?
  - What were key events from those places or eras?
- How does your movement continue today? In what ways, if any, has it changed?

Schedule a day where students can present their research. At the end of class, have students consider how their movement could have worked with another one from the list. For homework, or as an exit ticket, have students

explain why they feel these two movements would have worked together and the benefits of their hypothetical collaboration.

**EXTEND:** Have students examine the real-life partnerships between different movements.

## Extension Activities

### 1,000 Words

**Objective:** Examine strategies and techniques used by a variety of groups as they fought for their rights within the United States, and how these changed over time.

**Time:** 10-15 minutes

**Note:** This activity uses the [virtual tour of \*The Declaration's Journey\*](#), which will become available in January 2026.

Tell students to use the virtual tour of *The Declaration's Journey* to find a photograph that interests them within the exhibit. Once they have made their selection, have them analyze their photograph using the following Close Looking questions:

- Where is the setting of the image?
- When does it seem to take place? What time of day? What season of the year? What year, era, or century?
- Who is present?
- What are they doing? What do they appear to be feeling?
- What objects do you see?
- What else do you notice?  
**Note:** This question is designed to encourage students to look beyond the central figures and into the sides or background of an image.
- What small details did you observe? What significance might they have?
- What can we learn from this sort of observation?

Then discuss the question: what does this photograph tell you about the movement or event being pictured? How might movements use photographs to help their cause? What can a photograph tell us as a primary source?

**EXTEND:** Ask students to consider whether photographs served a new function for social and political movements when they were invented, or if other forms of media — political cartoons, music, paintings, etc. — served the same purpose in the time before photography. Did protest change with the invention of photography? If so, how?