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“Slavery & the Declaration: Voices of Conflict” Reading Packet

1776 & Beyond: Understanding the Declaration through American History

February 7th, 2026

Panelists

- Jason Stevens, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Ashland University
- Cara Rogers Stevens, Associate Professor of History, Ashland University
- Eric Sands, Assistant Professor of Government, Berry College

Reading List

- Jefferson’s Draft of the Declaration
- Notes on the State of Virginia: Query 18
- Letter to Henri Gregoire
- On the Constitution and Union
- Reply to Dred Scott
- Corner Stone Speech
- Fragment on the Constitution and Union

Link to Webinar: <https://crowdcast.io/c/y9e1xq0lkdzc>. Expires August 1, 2026

Draft of the Declaration

Thomas Jefferson | June–July, 1776

A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress assembled

. . . He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of INFIDEL powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce. And that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die,¹he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people on whom he also obtruded them: thus paying off former crimes committed against the LIBERTIES of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the LIVES of another. . . .

In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress in the most humble terms: our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injuries. . .

Source: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/draft-of-the-declaration-of-independence-2/>

¹ Possibly a stamp or mark, as on an official document, or an alternative spelling for dye, a spelling that was not unknown in the eighteenth century.

Notes on the State of Virginia: Query 18

Thomas Jefferson | 1781

"Manners: The particular customs and manners that may happen to be received in that state?"

It is difficult to determine on the standard by which the manners of a nation may be tried, whether catholic, or particular. It is more difficult for a native to bring to that standard the manners of his own nation, familiarized to him by habit. There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. This quality is the germ of all education in him. From his cradle to his grave he is learning to do what he sees others do. If a parent could find no motive either in his philanthropy or his self-love, for restraining the intemperance of passion towards his slave, it should always be a sufficient one that his child is present. But generally it is not sufficient. The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities. The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances. And with what execration should the statesman be loaded, who permitting one half the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots, and these into enemies, destroys the morals of the one part, and the *amor patriae* of the other. For if a slave can have a country in this world, it must be any other in preference to that in which he is born to live and labour for another: in which he must lock up the faculties of his nature, contribute as far as depends on his individual endeavours to the evanishment of the human race, or entail his own miserable condition on the endless generations proceeding from him. With the morals of the people, their industry also is destroyed. For in a warm climate, no man will labour for himself who can make another labour for him. This is so true, that of the proprietors of slaves a very small proportion indeed are ever seen to labour. And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest. -- But it is impossible to be temperate and to pursue this subject through the various considerations of policy, of morals, of history natural and civil. We must be contented to hope they will force their way into every one's mind. I think a change already perceptible, since the origin of the present revolution. The spirit of the master is abating, that of the slave rising from the dust, his condition mollifying, the way I hope preparing, under the auspices of heaven, for a total emancipation, and that this is disposed, in the order of events, to be with the consent of the masters, rather than by their extirpation.

Source:

https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduates/modules/fulllist/second/en213/syllabus2017-18/jefferson_manners.pdf



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Letter to Henri Gregoire

Thomas Jefferson | 1809

Dear Sir, — I have received the favor of your letter of August 17th, and with it the volume you were so kind as to send me on the "Literature of Negroes." Be assured that no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts I have myself entertained and expressed on the grade of understanding allotted to them by nature, and to find that in this respect they are on a par with ourselves. My doubts were the result of personal observation on the limited sphere of my own State, where the opportunities for the development of their genius were not favorable, and those of exercising it still less so. I expressed them therefore with great hesitation; but whatever be their degree of talent it is no measure of their rights. Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others. On this subject they are gaining daily in the opinions of nations, and hopeful advances are making towards their re—establishment on an equal footing with the other colors of the human family. I pray you therefore to accept my thanks for the many instances you have enabled me to observe of respectable intelligence in that race of men, which cannot fail to have effect in hastening the day of their relief; and to be assured of the sentiments of high and just esteem and consideration which I tender to yourself with all sincerity.

Source: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/letter-to-henri-gregoire/>



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On the Constitution and Union

William Lloyd Garrison | 1832

INTRODUCTION

During the sectional conflict over slavery, advocates of slavery threatened to dissolve the Union if it threatened slavery (See James Tallmadge, Jr.'s "Speech to Congress" (1819)). William Lloyd Garrison wished it dissolved because it did not threaten slavery enough. Indeed, according to Garrison, the Union was tainted by the presence of slavery and was not worth saving. The Constitution was a pact with the devil that Americans ought to discard immediately for its unjust and unnecessary compromises with slavery.

*Such views expressed without compromise in *The Liberator*, a newspaper that Garrison started in Boston in 1831, earned Garrison the reputation, especially in the South, as a dangerous fanatic and agitator. In his newspaper and speeches, Garrison denounced not only slavery but everyone and everything that supported it, including the U.S. Constitution and the Union. Garrison's unflinching abolitionism propelled him to the forefront of the anti-slavery movement thirty years before the Civil War, a position he occupied until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 ended slavery.*

—David Tucker

DOCUMENT

... There is much declamation about the sacredness of the compact which was formed between the free and slave states, on the adoption of the Constitution. A sacred compact, forsooth! We pronounce it the most bloody and heaven-daring arrangement ever made by men for the continuance and protection of a system of the most atrocious villainy ever exhibited on earth. Yes, we recognize the compact, but with feelings of shame and indignation; and it will be held in everlasting infamy by the friends of justice and humanity throughout the world. It was a compact formed at the sacrifice of the bodies and souls of millions of our race, for the sake of achieving a political object, an unblushing and monstrous coalition to do evil that good might come. Such a compact was, in the nature of things and according to the law of God, null and void from the beginning. No body of men ever had the right to guarantee the holding of human beings in bondage. Who or what were the framers of our government, that they should dare confirm and authorize such high-handed villainy, such a flagrant robbery of the inalienable rights of man, such a glaring violation of all the precepts and injunctions of the gospel, such a savage war upon a sixth part of our whole population? They were men, like ourselves—as fallible, as sinful, as weak, as ourselves. By the infamous bargain which they made between themselves, they virtually dethroned the Most High God, and trampled beneath their feet their own solemn and heaven-attested Declaration, that all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They had no lawful power to bind themselves, or their posterity, for one hour—for one moment—by such an unholy alliance. It was not valid then—it is not valid now. Still they persisted in maintaining it, and still do their successors, the people of Massachusetts, of New England, and of the twelve free states, persist in maintaining it. A sacred compact! a sacred compact! What, then, is wicked and ignominious?

This, then, is the relation in which we of New England stand to the holders of slaves at the south, and this is virtually our language toward them—"Go on, most worthy associates, from day to day, from month to month, from year to year, from generation to generation, plundering two millions of human beings of their liberty and the fruits of their toil, driving them into the fields like cattle, starving and lacerating their bodies, selling the husband from his wife, the wife from her husband, and children from their parents, spilling their blood, withholding the Bible from their hands and all knowledge from their minds, and kidnapping annually sixty thousand infants, the offspring of



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pollution and shame! Go on, in these practices, we do not wish nor mean to interfere, for the rescue of your victims, even by expostulation or warning; we like your company too well to offend you by denouncing your conduct—although we know that by every principle of law which does not utterly disgrace us by assimilating us to pirates, that they have as good and as true a right to the equal protection of the law as we have; and although we ourselves stand prepared to die, rather than submit even to a fragment of the intolerable load of oppression to which we are subjecting them—yet, never mind, let that be—they have grown old in suffering and we in iniquity, and we have nothing to do now but to speak peace, peace, to one another in our sins. We are too wicked ever to love them as God commands us to do. We are so resolute in our wickedness as not even to desire to do so—and we are so proud in our iniquity that we will hate and revile whoever disturbs us in it. We want, like the devils of old, to be let alone in our sin. We are unalterably determined, and neither God nor man shall move us from this resolution, that our colored fellow subjects never shall be free or happy in their native land. Go on, from bad to worse iniquity—add link to link to the chains upon the bodies of your victims—add constantly to the intolerable burdens under which they groan—and if, goaded to desperation by your cruelties, they should rise to assert their rights and redress their wrongs, fear nothing—we are pledged, by a sacred compact, to shoot them like dogs and rescue you from their vengeance! Go on—we never will forsake you, for “there is honor among thieves” We pledge you our physical strength, by the sacredness of the national compact—a compact by which we have enabled you already to plunder, persecute and destroy two millions of slaves, who now lie beneath the sod; and by which we now give you the same piratical license to prey upon a much larger number of victims and all their posterity. Go on—and by this sacred instrument, the Constitution of the United States, dripping as it is with human blood, we solemnly pledge you our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor, that we will stand by you to the last.

People of New England, and of the free states! Is it true that slavery is no concern of yours? Have you no right even to protest against it, or to seek its removal? Are you not the main pillars of its support? How long do you mean to be answerable to God and the world, for spilling the blood of the poor innocents? Be not afraid to look the monster slavery boldly in the face. He is your implacable foe—the vampire who is sucking your life-blood—the ravager of a large portion of your country, and the enemy of God and man. Never hope to be a united, or happy, or prosperous people while he exists. He has an appetite like the grave—a spirit as malignant as that of the bottomless pit—and an influence as dreadful as the corruption of death. Awake to your danger! The struggle is a mighty one—it cannot be avoided—it should not be, if it could.

It is said that if you agitate this question, you will divide the Union. Believe it not; but should disunion follow, the fault will not be yours. You must perform your duty, faithfully, fearlessly and promptly, and leave the consequences to God: that duty clearly is, to cease from giving countenance and protection to southern kidnappers. Let them separate, if they can muster courage enough—and the liberation of their slaves is certain. Be assured that slavery will very speedily destroy this Union, if it be let alone; but even if the Union can be preserved by treading upon the necks, spilling the blood, and destroying the souls of millions of your race, we say it is not worth a price like this, and that it is in the highest degree criminal for you to continue the present compact. Let the pillars thereof fall—let the superstructure crumble into dust—if it must be upheld by robbery and oppression.

Source: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/on-the-constitution-and-the-union-3/>



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Reply to *Dred Scott*

Abraham Lincoln | 1857

...“Chief Justice Taney, in his opinion in the *Dred Scott* case, admits that the language of the Declaration is broad enough to include the whole human family, but he and Judge Douglas argue that the authors of that instrument did not intend to include negroes, by the fact that they did not at once, actually place them on an equality with the whites. Now this grave argument comes to just nothing at all, by the other fact, that they did not at once, or ever afterwards, actually place all white people on an equality with one or another. And this is the staple argument of both the Chief Justice and the Senator, for doing this obvious violence to the plain unmistakable language of the Declaration. I think the authors of that notable instrument intended to include all men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness, in what respects they did consider all men created equal—equal in “certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” This they said, and this meant. They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the right, so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit. They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere. The assertion that “all men are created equal” was of no practical use in effecting our separation from Great Britain; and it was placed in the Declaration, nor for that, but for future use. Its authors meant it to be, thank God, it is now proving itself, a stumbling block to those who in after times might seek to turn a free people back into the hateful paths of despotism. They knew the proneness of prosperity to breed tyrants, and they meant when such should reappear in this fair land and commence their vocation they should find left for them at least one hard nut to crack.

I have now briefly expressed my view of the meaning and objects of that part of the Declaration of Independence which declares that “all men are created equal.”

Now let us hear Judge Douglas’ view of the same subject, as I find it in the printed report of his late speech. Here it is:

“No man can vindicate the character, motives and conduct of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, except upon the hypothesis that they referred to the white race alone, and not to the African, when they declared all men to have been created equal—that they were speaking of British subjects on this continent being equal to British subjects born and residing in Great Britain—that they were entitled to the same inalienable rights, and among them were enumerated life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The Declaration was adopted for the purpose of justifying the colonists in the eyes of the civilized world in withdrawing their allegiance from the British crown, and dissolving their connection with the mother country.”

My good friends, read that carefully over some leisure hour, and ponder well upon it—see what a mere wreck—mangled ruin—it makes of our once glorious Declaration.

“They were speaking of British subjects on this continent being equal to British subjects born and residing in Great Britain!” Why, according to this, not only negroes but white people outside of Great Britain and America are not spoken of in that instrument. The English, Irish and Scotch, along with white Americans, were included to be sure,



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but the French, Germans and other white people of the world are all gone to pot along with the Judge's inferior races.

I had thought the Declaration promised something better than the condition of British subjects; but no, it only meant that we should be equal to them in their own oppressed and unequal condition. According to that, it gave no promise that having kicked off the King and Lords of Great Britain, we should not at once be saddled with a King and Lords of our own.

I had thought the Declaration contemplated the progressive improvement in the condition of all men everywhere; but no, it merely "was adopted for the purpose of justifying the colonists in the eyes of the civilized world in withdrawing their allegiance from the British crown, and dissolving their connection with the mother country." Why, that object having been effected some eighty years ago, the Declaration is of no practical use now—mere rubbish—old wadding left to rot on the battle-field after the victory is won.

I understand you are preparing to celebrate the "Fourth," tomorrow week. What for? The doings of that day had no reference to the present; and quite half of you are not even descendants of those who were referred to at that day. But I suppose you will celebrate; and will even go so far as to read the Declaration. Suppose after you read it once in the old fashioned way, you read it once more with Judge Douglas' version. It will then run thus: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all British subjects who were on this continent eighty-one years ago, were created equal to all British subjects born and then residing in Great Britain."

And now I appeal to all—to Democrats as well as others,—are you really willing that the Declaration shall be thus frittered away?—thus left no more, at most, than an interesting memorial of the dead past? thus shorn of its vitality, and practical value; and left without the germ or even the suggestion of the individual rights of man in it?

Source: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/reply-to-the-dred-scott-decision/>



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Corner Stone Speech

Alexander H. Stephens | 1861

INTRODUCTION

Alexander Stephens (1812–1883) served in various offices in the Georgia state government and also in the House of Representatives in Washington, DC. For most of his career Stephens was a Whig, the party to which Abraham Lincoln belonged, and the two served together in the same Congress. While he was a congressman, Lincoln praised a speech that Stephens gave against the war with Mexico. But the two men disagreed strongly on the issue of slavery. Stephens, like Lincoln, was a Unionist, but he was also a supporter of slavery. When forced to choose between the Union and slavery, Stephens went over to the secession movement and became the vice president of the Confederate States of America.

Speaking before a raucous crowd in Savannah, Georgia, a few weeks after Lincoln's inauguration, Stephens passionately declared that the Confederacy was explicitly founded on slavery and white supremacy, thereby forever undercutting the view still espoused by many southerners, and some northerners, that the Civil War was fought to preserve not slavery but states' rights, and to oppose northern tyranny. Stephens' speech is noteworthy for two other reasons. First, he acknowledged that Thomas Jefferson and the other Founders believed that all men, including Africans, were equal, but argued that that they had been mistaken. Second, the Founders were wrong because inequality was in accord not just with the Bible and God's providence, but with the scientific understanding of the world. The Confederacy, Stephens claimed, was the first government based on this "physical, philosophical, and moral truth." Jefferson, in his final letter (1826), declared that "the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God." In making his contrary claim, Stephens was apparently swayed by the studies of race that gained influence in the years after Jefferson's death. This scientific racism remained influential in the United States and the world well into the twentieth century.

The text of the speech reprinted here is from a newspaper reporter's account and opens and closes with the reporter's comments.

—David Tucker

DOCUMENT

At half past seven o'clock on Thursday evening, the largest audience ever assembled at the Athenaeum was in the house, waiting most impatiently for the appearance of the orator of the evening, Hon. A. H. Stephens, Vice President of the Confederate States of America. The committee, with invited guests, were seated on the stage when, at the appointed hour, the Hon. C. C. Jones, Mayor, and the speaker entered, and were greeted by the immense assemblage with deafening rounds of applause. . . .

. . . [W]e are passing through one of the greatest revolutions in the annals of the world. Seven states have within the last three months thrown off an old government and formed a new. This revolution has been signally marked, up to this time, by the fact of its having been accomplished without the loss of a single drop of blood.

This new constitution, or form of government, constitutes the subject to which your attention will be partly invited. In reference to it, I make this first general remark: it amply secures all our ancient rights, franchises, and liberties. All the great principles of Magna Charta are retained in it. No citizen is deprived of life, liberty, or property, but by the judgment of his peers under the laws of the land. The great principle of religious liberty, which was the honor and pride of the old Constitution, is still maintained and secured. All the essentials of the old Constitution, which have endeared it to the hearts of the American people, have been preserved and perpetuated. Some changes have been made. Some of these I should have preferred not to have seen made; but other important changes do meet



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my cordial approbation. They form great improvements upon the old Constitution. So, taking the whole new constitution, I have no hesitancy in giving it as my judgment that it is decidedly better than the old.

Allow me briefly to allude to some of these improvements . . .

But not to be tedious in enumerating the numerous changes for the better, allow me to allude to one other though last, not least. The new constitution has put at rest, forever, all the agitating questions relating to our peculiar institution—African slavery as it exists amongst us—the proper status of the negro in our form of civilization. This was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution. Jefferson in his forecast, had anticipated this, as the “rock upon which the old Union would split.”¹ He was right. What was conjecture with him, is now a realized fact. But whether he fully comprehended the great truth upon which that rock stood and stands, may be doubted. The prevailing ideas entertained by him and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old Constitution, were that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically. It was an evil they knew not well how to deal with, but the general opinion of the men of that day was that, somehow or other in the order of Providence, the institution would be evanescent and pass away. This idea, though not incorporated in the Constitution, was the prevailing idea at that time. The Constitution, it is true, secured every essential guarantee to the institution while it should last, and hence no argument can be justly urged against the constitutional guarantees thus secured, because of the common sentiment of the day. Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error. It was a sandy foundation, and the government built upon it fell when the “storm came and the wind blew.”²

Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth. This truth has been slow in the process of its development, like all other truths in the various departments of science. It has been so even amongst us. Many who hear me, perhaps, can recollect well that this truth was not generally admitted, even within their day. The errors of the past generation still clung to many as late as twenty years ago. Those at the North, who still cling to these errors, with a zeal above knowledge, we justly denominate fanatics. All fanaticism springs from an aberration of the mind from a defect in reasoning. It is a species of insanity. One of the most striking characteristics of insanity, in many instances, is forming correct conclusions from fancied or erroneous premises; so with the antislavery fanatics. Their conclusions are right if their premises were. They assume that the negro is equal, and hence conclude that he is entitled to equal privileges and rights with the white man. If their premises were correct, their conclusions would be logical and just, but their premise being wrong, their whole argument fails. I recollect once of having heard a gentleman from one of the northern states, of great power and ability, announce in the House of Representatives, with imposing effect, that we of the South would be compelled, ultimately, to yield upon this subject of slavery, that it was as impossible to war successfully against a principle in politics, as it was in physics or mechanics. That the principle would ultimately prevail. That we, in maintaining slavery as it exists with us, were warring against a principle, a principle founded in nature, the principle of the equality of men. The reply I made to him was, that upon his own grounds, we should, ultimately, succeed, and that he and his associates, in this crusade against our institutions, would ultimately fail. The truth announced, that it was as impossible to war successfully

¹ This does not appear to be a direct quote from Jefferson.

² Stephens was alluding to Matthew 7:27. He built his speech on the images in Matthew 7:24–27: “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”



against a principle in politics as it was in physics and mechanics, I admitted; but told him that it was he, and those acting with him, who were warring against a principle. They were attempting to make things equal which the Creator had made unequal.

In the conflict thus far, success has been on our side, complete throughout the length and breadth of the Confederate states. It is upon this, as I have stated, our social fabric is firmly planted; and I cannot permit myself to doubt the ultimate success of a full recognition of this principle throughout the civilized and enlightened world.

As I have stated, the truth of this principle may be slow in development, as all truths are and ever have been, in the various branches of science. It was so with the principles announced by Galileo [and] it was so with Adam Smith and his principles of political economy. It was so with Harvey, and his theory of the circulation of the blood. It is stated that not a single one of the medical profession, living at the time of the announcement of the truths made by him, admitted them. Now, they are universally acknowledged. May we not, therefore, look with confidence to the ultimate universal acknowledgment of the truths upon which our system rests? It is the first government ever instituted upon the principles in strict conformity to nature, and the ordination of Providence, in furnishing the materials of human society. Many governments have been founded upon the principle of the subordination and serfdom of certain classes of the same race; such were and are in violation of the laws of nature. Our system commits no such violation of nature's laws. With us, all of the white race, however high or low, rich or poor, are equal in the eye of the law. Not so with the negro. Subordination is his place. He, by nature, or by the curse against Canaan,³ is fitted for that condition which he occupies in our system. The architect, in the construction of buildings, lays the foundation with the proper material—the granite; then comes the brick or the marble. The substratum of our society is made of the material fitted by nature for it, and by experience we know that it is best, not only for the superior, but for the inferior race, that it should be so. It is, indeed, in conformity with the ordinance of the Creator. It is not for us to inquire into the wisdom of His ordinances, or to question them. For His own purposes, He has made one race to differ from another, as He has made “one star to differ from another star in glory.”⁴ The great objects of humanity are best attained when there is conformity to His laws and decrees, in the formation of governments as well as in all things else. Our confederacy is founded upon principles in strict conformity with these laws. This stone which was rejected by the first builders “is become the chief of the corner”⁵ the real “corner-stone” in our new edifice. I have been asked, what of the future? It has been apprehended by some that we would have arrayed against us the civilized world. I care not who or how many they may be against us, when we stand upon the eternal principles of truth, if we are true to ourselves and the principles for which we contend, we are obliged to, and must triumph.

Thousands of people who begin to understand these truths are not yet completely out of the shell; they do not see them in their length and breadth. We hear much of the civilization and Christianization of the barbarous tribes of Africa. In my judgment, those ends will never be attained, but by first teaching them the lesson taught to Adam, that “in the sweat of his brow he should eat his bread,”⁶ and teaching them to work, and feed, and clothe themselves. . . .

Reporter's Note.—*Your reporter begs to state that the above is not a perfect report, but only such a sketch of the address of Mr. Stephens as embraces, in his judgment, the most important points presented by the orator.*—G.

Source: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/the-corner-stone-speech/>

³ Genesis 9:20–27. Noah cursed Ham's son Canaan to be a servant because Ham saw Noah naked when Noah was drunk. This was taken by some Christians to justify the enslavement of Africans, although the Bible does not mention skin color.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:41.

⁵ Psalm 118:22.

⁶ Genesis 3:19.



Fragment on the Constitution and Union

Abraham Lincoln | 1861

INTRODUCTION

Nestled among the complete speeches and writings of Abraham Lincoln are several fragments, or brief notes, that represent Lincoln's thoughts on a variety of issues. Some of these carefully prepared fragments eventually found their way into major speeches, while others did not. Likely written sometime during the four months between his election on November 6, 1860 and his inauguration on March 4, 1861, this particular fragment expresses what must have been on Lincoln's mind as the nation stood on the precipice of Civil War. Drawing inspiration from the Bible, specifically Proverbs 25:11, Lincoln reflects that the Union and the Constitution are a "picture of silver" framed around the principle of liberty to all, or an "apple of gold," from the Declaration of Independence. From this, Lincoln seems to have chartered his course for the coming struggle. In focusing on the connection between the Declaration and Constitution, Lincoln was focusing on what was in the deepest sense the cause of the Civil War. The nation was divided over how to understand the connection between its two founding documents, the Declaration and Constitution. Was the latter and popular sovereignty or the will of the people an authority in its own right? Or did its authority derive from the Declaration's assertion of human equality and thus liberty for all?

—Jason W. Stevens

DOCUMENT

All this is not the result of accident. It has a philosophical cause. Without the Constitution and the Union, we could not have attained the result; but even these are not the primary cause of our great prosperity. There is something back of these, entwining itself more closely about the human heart. That something is the principle of "liberty to all"—the principle that clears the path for all—gives hope to all—and by consequence, enterprise, and industry to all.

The expression of that principle, in our Declaration of Independence, was most happy and fortunate. Without this, as well as with it, we could have declared our independence of Great Britain; but without it, we could not, I think, have secured our free government and consequent prosperity. No oppressed people will fight and endure, as our fathers did, without the promise of something better than a mere change of masters.

The assertion of that principle, at that time, was the word "fitly spoken" which has proved an "apple of gold" to us. The Union and the Constitution are the picture of silver, subsequently framed around it. The picture was made not to conceal or destroy the apple but to adorn, and preserve it. The picture was made for the apple—not the apple for the picture.

So let us act, that neither picture or apple shall ever be blurred or bruised or broken.

That we may so act, we must study, and understand the points of danger.

Source: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/fragment-on-the-constitution-and-union-2/>



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