

Slavery Grievance (Modified)

Thomas Jefferson was born to a slave-owning family, and he himself owned slaves. As chairman of the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson wrote a paragraph condemning slavery in his first draft of the Declaration. He included this paragraph in his list of complaints against King George III. Before the final version of the Declaration was adopted, this paragraph was deleted.

Read the grievance below and answer the questions that follow:

Excerpt from Jefferson's Slavery Grievance:

King George III has waged cruel war against human Nature itself. He has taken away the most sacred rights of Life and Liberty from a distant people who never offended him. He did this by captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere if they did not die a miserable death in their transportation to this new world. These disgraceful practices are the Warfare of the *Christian* King of Great Britain.

He has stopped every attempt to prohibit or to restrain the disgusting business of slavery. He is determined to keep open a market where men are bought and sold.

Guiding Questions:

1. How does the Slavery Grievance describe slavery? Who does Jefferson blame for the continuation of the slave trade?
2. Why does Jefferson *italicize* the word 'Christian' at the end of the first paragraph?
3. Why do you think that Thomas Jefferson wrote a paragraph about slavery when he wrote the Declaration of Independence?

Central Historical Question:

Why did the Constitution allow slavery to continue, if the Declaration of Independence claimed that “all men are created equal”?

Philadelphia Constitutional Convention of 1787 (Modified)

The Philadelphia Constitutional Convention was where the Founding Fathers gathered to write the Constitution. They had many debates over what the new government should look like. This is where they decided to KEEP SLAVERY. As you read the documents below, try to see if they thought slavery was a major contradiction.

Mr. RUTLEDGE: Religion and humanity have nothing to do with this question. The true question at present is whether the Southern states shall or shall not be a part of the Union. If the Northern states think about their interest, they will not oppose the increase of slaves because they will profit by selling the goods that slaves produce.

Mr. ELLSWORTH: Let every state do what it pleases. The morality or wisdom of slavery are decisions belonging to the states themselves. What enriches a part enriches the whole.

Mr. WILLIAMSON: Southern states could not be members of the Union if the slave trade ended. It is wrong to force any thing that is not absolutely necessary, and which any state must disagree to.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: I agree to this Constitution with all its faults because I think a federal (national) government necessary for us. When you assemble a large group of men, you will inevitably find that they will disagree with each other about their local interests, and their selfish views. We have to accept some of these disagreements in order to build a national government.

Historian Interpretation #1 (Modified)

The men at the Constitutional Convention never considered getting rid of slavery. The Revolutionary talk of freedom and equality had been left behind; Americans in general and the men at the Convention in particular wanted a united, well-ordered, and prosperous society in which private property—including slave property—would be secure.

Source: John P. Kaminski, *A Necessary Evil?* Madison, Wisconsin: Madison House, 1995. p.42

Historian Interpretation #2 (Modified)

The Founding Fathers' racism [was] a barrier to antislavery. Here again Jefferson typified the age. Jefferson suspected that blacks had lower intellectual abilities than did whites. These suspicions, together with Jefferson's fear that free blacks and free whites could not live harmoniously in America, made him and others think that the only way Africans could be free was if they were sent back to Africa.

Source: William Freehling, "The Founding Fathers and Slavery." In Kermit Hall, Ed., *The Law of American Slavery*. New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1987. p. 221.

Historian Interpretation #3 (Modified)

Slavery hung over the Philadelphia Convention, threatening to divide northern and southern delegates. Even though slavery existed by law in some of the northern states in 1787, most people there favored its end. Southerners were more unsure about whether to end slavery, both because they had significantly greater numbers of slaves to deal with and because an end to [slavery] had important economic implications. The result was compromise. The Founding Fathers were more determined to fashion a new nation than they were to bring an end to slavery.

Source: Kermit Hall, *The Law of American Slavery*. New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1987. p. xi.