

## The Idea of America Cont'd--Excerpt #2

In June 1776, Thomas Jefferson sat at his portable writing desk in a rented room in Philadelphia and penned these words: "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." For the last 243 years, this fierce assertion of the fundamental and natural rights of humankind to freedom and self-governance has defined our global reputation as a land of liberty.

Conveniently left out of our founding mythology is the fact that one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery. By 1776, Britain had grown deeply conflicted over its role in the barbaric institution that had reshaped the Western Hemisphere. In London, there were growing calls to abolish the slave trade. This would have upended the economy of the colonies, in both the North and the South. We may never have revolted against Britain if the founders had not understood that slavery empowered them to do so; nor if they had not believed that independence was required in order to ensure that slavery would continue.

Some might argue that this nation was founded not as a democracy but as a slavocracy. Jefferson and the other founders were keenly aware of this hypocrisy. And so in Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration of Independence, he blamed the king of England for forcing the institution of slavery on the unwilling colonists and called the trafficking in human beings a crime. Yet neither Jefferson nor most of the founders intended to abolish slavery, and in the end, they struck the passage. There is no mention of slavery in the final Declaration of Independence.

Similarly, 11 years later, when it came time to draft the Constitution, the framers carefully constructed a document that preserved and protected slavery without ever using the word. The Constitution contains 84 clauses. Six deal directly with the enslaved and their enslavement, and five more hold implications for slavery. The Constitution protected the "property" of those who enslaved black people, prohibited the federal government from intervening to end the importation of enslaved Africans for a term of 20 years, allowed Congress to mobilize the militia to put down insurrections by the enslaved and forced states that had outlawed slavery to turn over enslaved people who had run away seeking refuge.

With independence, the founding fathers could no longer blame slavery on Britain. The sin became this nation's own, and so, too, the need to cleanse it. The shameful paradox of continuing chattel slavery in a nation founded on individual freedom, scholars today assert, led to a hardening of the racial caste system. This ideology, reinforced not just by laws but by racist science and literature, maintained that black people were subhuman, a belief that allowed white Americans to live with their betrayal.

For [a] fleeting moment known as Reconstruction, the majority in Congress seemed to embrace the idea that out of the ashes of the Civil War, we could create the multiracial democracy that black Americans envisioned even if our founding fathers did not. But it would not last. Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country, as does the belief, so well articulated by Lincoln, that black people are the obstacle to national unity.

### Questions

1. Why does the author believe the Declaration of Independence did not apply to Black Americans when written?
2. How did colonial laws strip slaves of rights? Give 3 examples.
3. According to the author, what was one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain? What evidence does she provide for this claim?
4. What happened to the clause decrying slavery in Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration of Independence? Why was this done according to Hannah-Jones? For what other reasons might the drafters have decided to remove it?
5. How does the Constitution deal with the issue of slavery? Why might the drafters of the Constitution have compromised on the issue of slavery rather than outlawing it from the start?
6. The author states that "anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country." Do you agree? Explain.

Now read the following excerpt from THE FIRST EFFORTS TO LIMIT THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE ARISE IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: PARTS 1 AND 2  
by Christian M. McBurney

Journal of the American Revolution  
September 14, 2020

The American Revolution changed the way Americans viewed one of the world's great tragedies: the African slave trade. The long march to end the slave trade and then slavery itself had to start somewhere, and a strong argument can be made that it started with the thirteen American colonies gaining independence from Great Britain, then the world's leading slave trading country.

During the years of the Revolution, there was definite progress, progress which ebbed in the years immediately following the Revolutionary War. Still, some progress had been achieved: by the early 1800s, each Northern state had either prohibited slavery or provided for gradual emancipation, and American participation in the African slave trade was formally banned in most states after the Revolutionary War and in all states by 1808. Tragically, the American Revolution did not end slavery in the South. It would take a Civil War and hundreds of thousands of deaths to end the institution in 1865.

In the first three quarters of the eighteenth century, Great Britain was the leading slave trading country in the world. In the course of four centuries British merchants carried an astounding number of Africans across the Atlantic, estimated at 3,250,000. Taking into account the years 1501 to 1867, when the last slave ship crossed the Atlantic to Cuba, merchants sailing from Great Britain outfitted an estimated thirty-one percent of all slave voyages even though their participation in the trade was stopped by legislation in 1807. Still, that placed them second to the Portuguese, who carried more than 5,800,000 African captives in the Middle Passage, mostly to Brazil. They began a few hundred years earlier than the British, in the 1400s, and ended decades after Britain's 1807 prohibition.

The merchants of what would become the United States played a comparatively small role in the African slave trade. From 1501 to 1860, mainland North American colonial and, later, United States merchants carried an estimated 305,000 slaves across the Atlantic, and outfitted about two and a half percent of the slaving voyages. Comparatively few of the captive Africans carried across the Atlantic Ocean were landed on North American mainland shores. Of the approximately 12,500,000 slaves forced across the Atlantic by Europeans and Americans, fewer than 400,000—just over three percent of the total—were disembarked in what would become the United States. The Caribbean, where sugar cane plantations fueled the insatiable demand for sugar, and South America (mostly Brazil) accounted for ninety-five percent of the captives brought from Africa.

The half-decade leading up to April 1775, when armed hostilities broke out at Lexington and Concord, was a particularly idealistic time in what would become the United States. The conviction that the slave trade and slavery itself were completely wrong took time for most white Americans to realize. Slowly, some voices became louder and more strident in opposing the slave trade and even the institution of slavery itself. This process was unquestionably accelerated by the American Revolution.

As historian David B. Davis has written, “By the eve of the American Revolution there was a remarkable convergence of cultural and intellectual developments which at once undercut traditional rationalizations for slavery and offered new modes of sensibility for identifying with its victims.” The process was advanced by increasing capitalism: as free labor became more common, other labor means—indentured servitude, debt bondage, and slavery—came increasingly to appear antiquated and anomalous. Enlightenment ideas about human equality and shared human nature also played an important part in this process, as did the rapid growth of evangelical Christianity.

The American Revolution itself was a key catalyst to antislavery thought. With American colonists declaring their beliefs in “liberty” and “natural rights” and denouncing a British plot to “enslave” them by taxing them without representation, it is not surprising that some were moved to question the plight of those whom the colonists themselves had actually enslaved. Whigs (also known as Patriots) who favored liberty for all and who opposed slavery realized that before that institution could be ended, importations of enslaved persons first had to cease. They realized it would be too radical for many of their fellow citizens—and for their British rulers—to press for an immediate end to slavery, when the institution had existed for more than a century in their colonies.

The effort to limit the importation of enslaved persons started, not surprisingly, in Massachusetts. The first serious efforts to end slave importations began ten years before the Declaration of Independence. Then, in early March 1774, both houses [of the Massachusetts legislature] passed a bill to prohibit slave imports. The new governor, Gen. Thomas Gage, refused to sign the measure on the ground that he had no authority to do so absent instructions from London. The British government had no interest in threats to limiting or ending its lucrative slave trade.

Those who opposed the African slave trade in colonies ruled by royal governors appointed in London [mainly in the middle and northernmost of the southern colonies] focused on what they could realistically accomplish—reducing or limiting imports of African captives by placing high duties on them. In 1774, a group of New York City rum distillers unanimously voted not to refine molasses intended for the Atlantic slave trade. In 1773, Pennsylvania doubled its already existing tariff on imported Africans in a move designed to tax importations out of existence, but in 1774 the law was disallowed by the Lords of Trade in London. In reviewing the bill, a British trade official in London advised the Board of Trade members that the proposed increase in duties was “manifestly inconsistent with the policy adopted by your Lordships . . . of

encouraging the African trade” especially at a time when “so many of His Majesty’s lands in the West Indies remain understocked with negroes.”

In the Chesapeake Bay region, in Maryland and Virginia, even planters joined in the campaign against importing African captives. In 1771, Maryland imposed a duty of £9 for each enslaved African brought into Maryland. In 1772 the House of Burgesses attempted again to increase the tariff on slave imports to a total of twenty-five percent of the purchase price, which if adopted would have reduced importations to a trickle. In London the effort was accurately portrayed as an attempt “to operate as an entire prohibition to the importation of slaves into Virginia” and therefore was similarly quashed by the Board of Trade as harmful to the “trade and commerce” of the great slave-trading ports of Liverpool, Bristol, and Lancaster.

The issue that by far most increased tensions between the thirteen colonies of mainland North America and the British government was taxation without the consent of colonial legislatures. While the issue of slave importations was not one that drove colonists to break with England, it was part of the overall problem the North American mainland colonies had with the British empire: colonial legislatures could not control their own trade or destinies. The colonies would have to declare their independence from Britain in order to rule themselves. Only then could they address contentious points in colonial administration, among them the issue of importing slaves.

In October 1774, in a stunning and radical move, delegates of the First Continental Congress signed a pledge for the thirteen mainland colonies not to participate in the African slave trade. Perhaps equally astounding, Americans largely complied, turning the pledge into an outright ban. Congress’s ban and widespread compliance with it during the Revolutionary War years has been underappreciated even by historians of the American antislavery movement. It should not be.

Revealingly, Congress went further than mere nonimportation, prohibiting any participation by North American merchants and sea captains in the slave trade. This by itself indicates that moral and humanitarian opposition to the slave trade must have been a persuasive factor.

These were steps, albeit relatively small ones, towards the formal end of the African slave trade and abolition of slavery in the North. Of course, stopping violations of the slave trade ban and ending slavery in the South were more intractable problems that would take longer to resolve.

## Questions

1. What is McBurney’s position on what role the American Revolution played in ending slavery?
2. What two European countries were the leading participants in the slave trade? What percentage did U.S. merchants play in the slave trade?

3. What factors converged in pre-Revolutionary America that undercut the justification for slavery?
4. Why was the Revolution a catalyst for antislavery thought according to McBurney?
5. Why did Whigs focus on ending slave importation first rather than banning slavery altogether?
6. Where did the movement to ban importation of slaves start? What was the response of the British colonial governor to the bill passed by the colonial legislature banning importation of slaves?
7. What actions did middle and southern colonies take prior to the Revolution to curb slavery? What was the British reaction to these moves?
8. What pledge regarding slavery did the delegates to the First Continental Congress sign?

Finally, read this excerpt from:

I Helped Fact-Check the 1619 Project. The Times Ignored Me.

The paper's series on slavery made avoidable mistakes. But the attacks from its critics are much more dangerous.

By LESLIE M. HARRIS  
03/06/2020 05:10 AM EST

Leslie M. Harris is professor of history at Northwestern University.

On August 19 of last year I listened in stunned silence as Nikole Hannah-Jones, a reporter for the New York Times, repeated an idea that I had vigorously argued against with her fact-checker: that the patriots fought the American Revolution in large part to preserve slavery in North America.

Weeks before, I had received an email from a New York Times research editor. She wanted me to verify a statement for the project: "One critical reason that the colonists declared their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery in the colonies, which had produced tremendous wealth." I vigorously disputed the claim. Although slavery was certainly an issue in the American Revolution, the protection of slavery was not one of the main reasons the 13 Colonies went to war.

Despite my advice, the Times published the incorrect statement about the American Revolution anyway, in Hannah-Jones' introductory essay.

Here is the complicated picture of the Revolutionary era that the New York Times missed: White Southerners might have wanted to preserve slavery in their territory, but white Northerners were much more conflicted, with many opposing the ownership of enslaved people in the North even as they continued to benefit from investments in the slave trade and slave colonies. More importantly, slavery in the Colonies faced no immediate threat from Great Britain, so colonists wouldn't have needed to secede to protect it.

Far from being fought to preserve slavery, the Revolutionary War became a primary disrupter of slavery in the North American Colonies. A British military strategy invited enslaved people to flee to British lines, propelling hundreds of enslaved people off plantations and turning some Southerners to the patriot side. Most of the 13 Colonies also armed and employed free and enslaved black people, with the promise of freedom to those who served in their armies. Thousands of enslaved people were freed as a result.

The ideals gaining force during the Revolutionary era also inspired Northern states from Vermont to Pennsylvania to pass laws gradually ending slavery. And most Northern enslavers freed slaves ahead of the time mandated by law. Among Northern—and even some Southern—white people, the push to end slavery during this time was real. The new nation

almost faltered over the degree to which the Constitution supported the institution. In the end, Northern Colonies conceded a number of points to the protection of slavery.

The 1619 Project became one of the most talked-about journalistic achievements of the year—as it was intended to. But it has also become a lightning rod for critics, and that one sentence about the role of slavery in the founding of the United States has ended up at the center of a debate over the whole project.

### Questions

1. What historical error did the author attempt to correct before the 1619 Project was published? What evidence does Professor Harris provide to prove her point?
2. Why do you think the Times and Hannah-Jones continued to stand by this assertion, even in the face of criticism from one of its fact checkers?
3. How was the Revolutionary War a disrupter of slavery according to Professor Harris?
4. How did the ideals that permeated the colonies during the Revolutionary War help force change to slavery laws?
5. Based on the arguments presented in these three articles, do you think the American Revolution was fought in part to preserve slavery or did the Revolution help begin its downfall? Cite two pieces of evidence to support your conclusion.