

Declaration of Independence Intro Readings and Questions
U.S. History

Name:) _____ Hour:) _____

Learning Target: After reading several primary and secondary source documents, I can explain background information and impact of the Declaration of Independence.

A. Read "20-Declaring Independence" & "21-Signing Up", From Colonies to Country. Answer the following questions and take 5 additional notes/ah-hahs/observations/interesting facts from the reading.

1. Why was it a risk to sign the Declaration of Independence?

2. Why did John Adams and Ben Franklin want Thomas Jefferson to write the document?

3. What did Thomas Jefferson believe was the role of government?

4. How did Thomas Jefferson describe slavery in the Declaration of Independence?

5. Why did they take out the portion that Jefferson wrote about slavery? Do you agree or disagree with the reason? Why/why not? What did it take to eventually remove slavery from our country? (complete sentences)

6-10. Take 5 additional notes/ah-hahs/observations/interesting facts from the reading.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

B. Read/listen/watch "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro" by Frederick Douglass and answer the following questions.

1. How does Frederick Douglass answer the question: What to the slave is the Fourth of July? (complete sentences.

2. Douglass declares to the audience that, "This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine." What does he mean in this statement? (complete sentences)

C. Read "I Hear America Singing" by Walt Whitman. He wrote this poem several years after the Declaration of Independence (1855), but the "idea" of independence shows in his work. Answer the following questions.

1. Summarize what Walt Whitman is writing about in this poem. (complete sentences)

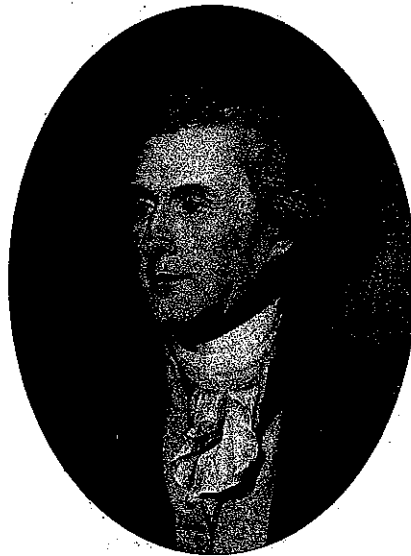
2. Consider other perspectives: how might the American experience depicted in this poem differ from that of immigrants, or of African-Americans (remember, slavery was abolished in 1865 - 10 years after this poem was published)? (complete sentences)

3. Compare this poem with your vision of America today. Using supporting evidence, answer the following question: How has America changed over time? (complete sentences)

20 Declaring Independence

**Resistance to tyrants
is obedience to God.**

—MOTTO ON THOMAS JEFFERSON'S
SEAL, CIRCA 1776



John Adams said that Jefferson should write the Declaration. "Well," said Jefferson, "if you are decided, I will do as well as I can."

Unless you like to memorize dates, there aren't many that you need to remember. But here are a few that are important:

1215
1492
1607
1620

What happened in those years? You can't remember? Go ahead and try. You might be surprised and find there is more in your brain than you realize. (Then, if you need to check, look at the end of this chapter.)

Now I have another date for you to remember, and this one is the most important of all. Something happened on that day that changed America—it even changed the whole world. (It was a day that King George III didn't think important. He would find out how wrong he was.)

The date is July 4, 1776. That was the day the members of the Second Continental Congress approved a Declaration of Independence. It was a year after the Battle of Bunker Hill, and, finally, the Americans had made up their minds to be free of Great Britain.

But that wasn't why the world was changed. It was the words they used in that declaration that made all the difference.

The delegates believed that if they were going to vote for independence, they should have a good reason. They knew that when they signed the declaration they became traitors to England. They would each be hanged if England captured them.

FROM COLONIES TO COUNTRY

If they were going to take that big risk, they wanted to make it worthwhile. And it would be worthwhile if they could help create a free nation, a great nation, a nation run by its citizens—something that had never before been done.

So they thought it important to explain exactly what they were doing and why it was necessary to be free of English rule.

That's why they asked Thomas Jefferson, one of the members of the congress, to write a paper—called a declaration—that would:

- *tell their beliefs about good government,
- *tell what King George had done wrong, and
- *announce that the colonies were now free and independent states.

Some people thought it surprising that Thomas Jefferson was asked to write the declaration. Jefferson was one of the youngest members of the Continental Congress. He was a tall, shy redhead who loved to read, run, ride horseback, and play the violin. He had a reputation for writing well. John Adams said of him, "Though a silent member in Congress, he was so prompt, frank...and decisive upon committees and in conversation—not even Samuel Adams was more so—that he soon seized upon my heart."

Jefferson had left his wife behind on his Virginia farm, and he missed her. He wasn't sure he could write a good declaration. But John Adams and Benjamin Franklin had faith in him. They talked Thomas Jefferson into trying. Adams told him, "You can write ten times better than I can."

Adams and Franklin were right. Thomas Jefferson knew just what to say, and he said it in a way that inspired people all over the world.

The whole declaration is something to read and think about, but one part will ring in your ears with its greatness. Jefferson wrote:

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. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

That was plain language in the 18th century, but you might have to

Declaration by the Representatives of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in General Congress assembled.

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's god entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, & the pursuit of Happiness; that to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any Form of Government shall become destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, & to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such Principles & organizing its Powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety & Happiness. Prudence indeed will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light & transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed; but when a long train of abuses & usurpations, beginning at a distant period of time & running continually & growing more oppressive, evinces a design to reduce them to absolute Tyranny, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, & to provide new Guards for their future Security; such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies, & such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States; to prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world, for the truth of which we pledge a faith yet unshaken by falsehood.

He has refused his assent to Laws the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governour a power of suspending important Laws, unless suspended in their operation till his assent should be obtained, and when suspended, he has refused to attend to them.

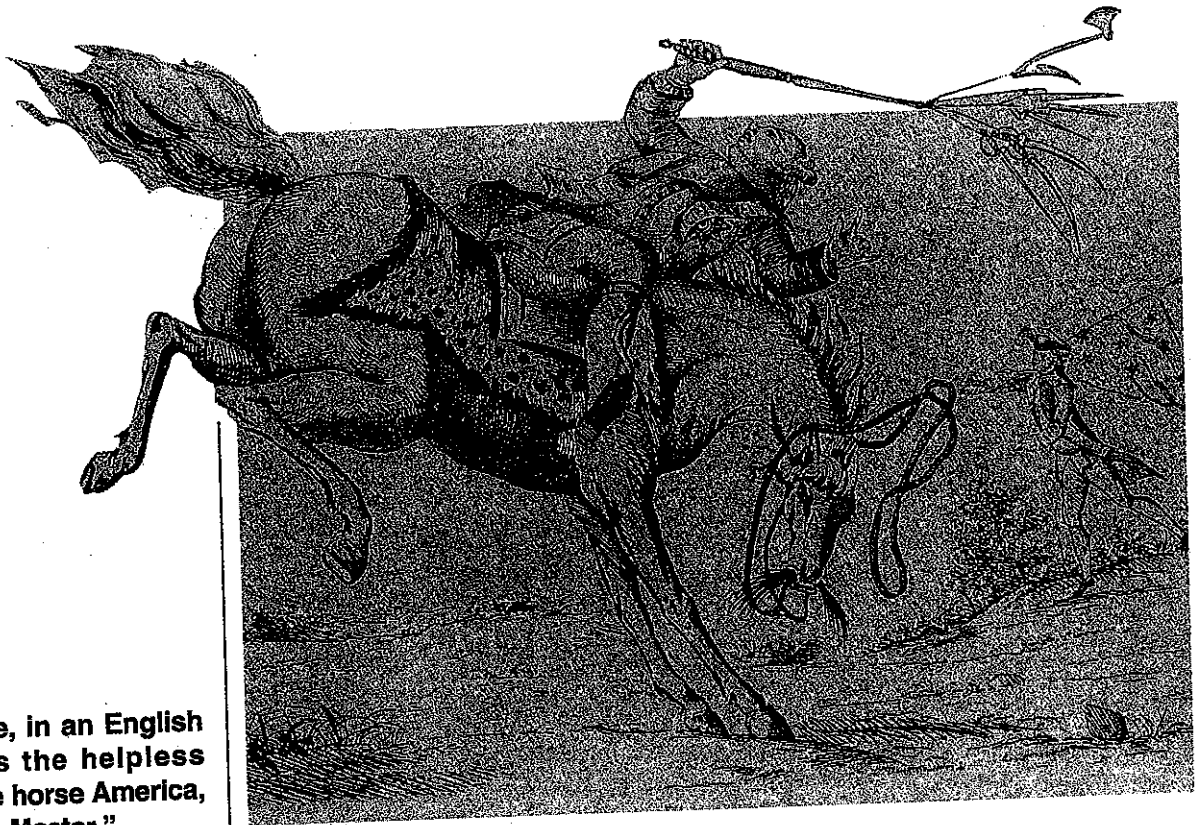
He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people unless those people would renounce the rights of Englishmen, a right inalienable to them, & formidable to Tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies in places unusual, uncomfortable, & distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time to assent to new Laws, & to cause others to be elected.

The first draft of the Declaration of Independence, in Jefferson's handwriting.



King George, in an English cartoon, as the helpless rider of "The horse America, throwing his Master."

read it a few times to understand it. It is worth doing. Those words are worth memorizing.

All men are created equal.

Just what does "equal" mean?

Are we all the same? Look around you. Of course we aren't. Some of us are smarter than others, and some of us are better athletes, and some of us are better looking, and some are nicer. But none of that matters, said Jefferson. We are all equal in the eyes of God, and we are all entitled to equal rights: the right to live, the right to be free, the right to be able to try to find the kind of life that will make us happy.

And that is the whole reason for having governments, he said. Governments are not made to make kings happy. They are for the benefit of the people who are being governed. Governments should have "the consent of the governed."

Sometimes, when ideas are written down, they take on meanings that go beyond what the writers intended. Jefferson's Declaration of Independence was great from the moment he wrote it, but it has grown even greater with the passing of time. He said "all men are created equal." He didn't mention women. Did he mean to include women? No one knows. Perhaps not. We do know that in the 18th century the words "men" and "mankind" included men and women. But very few people, except for Tom Paine, thought much about women's

Dates to Remember—or Else!

1215: Magna Carta
1492: Columbus sails to America
1607: Jamestown settled
1620: the Pilgrims land at Plymouth
1776: the Declaration of Independence

Here's another date for your memory bank:
1610: when Spanish speakers founded Santa Fe, New Mexico.

rights. It was the 20th century before women in America had the right to vote.

Did Thomas Jefferson mean to include black men when he said "all men"? Historians sometimes argue about that. You'll have to decide for yourself.

In 1776, when Jefferson wrote the Declaration, he included a long section in which he described slavery as a "cruel war against human nature." Yet Jefferson lived in a slave society and owned slaves himself.

He thought slavery was wrong, and he said so. "Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free," wrote Jefferson. Many congressmen agreed. John Adams spoke out strongly against slavery. Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush founded the first antislavery society in the New World. But South Carolina and Georgia would not sign the Declaration if it contained the antislavery section. So Jefferson's antislavery words were taken out. The delegates compromised.

Should they have gone ahead without those southern colonies? That would have meant that the Deep South would not have joined in the fight against England. It might have meant defeat for the proposed union of states.

Jefferson and Adams and Franklin and others thought the Union was more important than the issue of slavery. They knew that staying with England would not bring freedom to the slaves. They thought slavery could be dealt with later. Do you agree with them?

Those were tough decisions the delegates were making.

It took a civil war to end slavery. Do you think that war could have been avoided? Do you think the delegates should have acted differently in 1776?

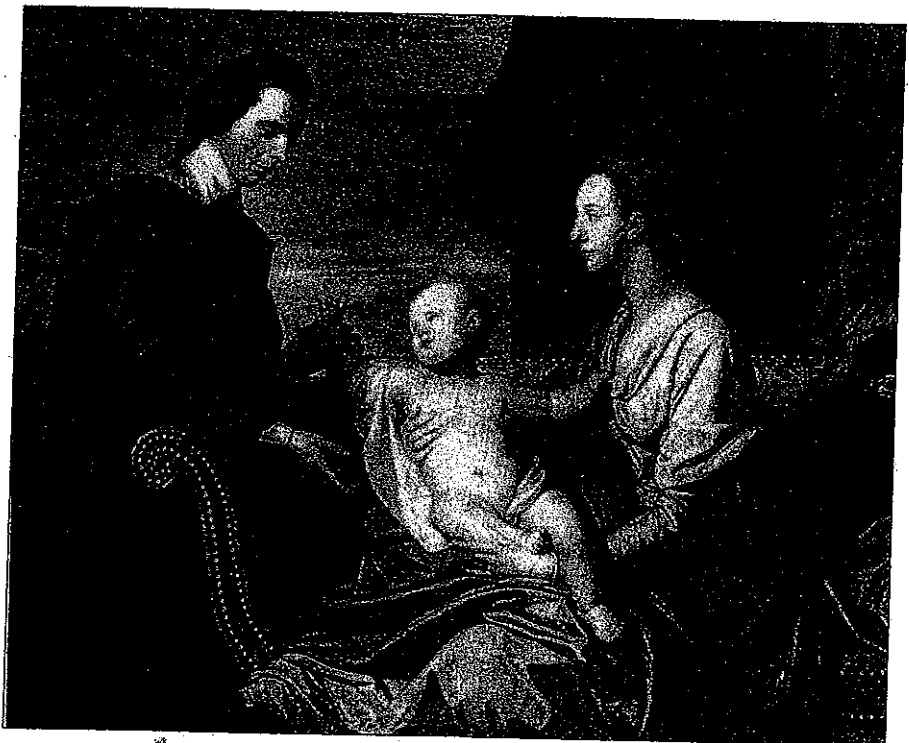
Of one thing you can be sure. Today, when people all over the world read Jefferson's words, they understand them to mean all people—men, women, and children—of all colors and beliefs.

The appointment of a woman to office is an innovation for which the public is not prepared, nor am I.

—THOMAS JEFFERSON TO ALBERT GALLATIN, 1807

Nature has given to our black brethren talents equal to those of the other colours of men.

—THOMAS JEFFERSON TO BENJAMIN BANNEKER, SLAVE-BORN INVENTOR, 1792



In 1776 Arthur Middleton (left), of South Carolina, owned more than 50,000 acres and 800 slaves. He also signed the Declaration of Independence.

21 Signing Up



Fifty-six men signed the Declaration of Independence. John Hancock (above) was the first.

It took courage to sign that Declaration. John Hancock was first to put his name down. He did it with a big, bold signature. "So the king doesn't have to put on his glasses," he is supposed to have said. (Because of that, today, when you sign a document, people sometimes call your signature a "John Hancock.")

John Dickinson of Pennsylvania wouldn't sign. He believed the Declaration was foolhardy. He thought the colonists should work to gain the rights of free citizens within the British Empire. "I had rather forfeit popularity forever, than vote away the blood and happiness of my countrymen," he said. Independence! To Dickinson that was "like destroying our house in winter...before we have got another shelter." But he loved America dearly, so after he refused to sign the Declaration of Independence, he enlisted in the Continental army as a private and fought for his country. And he was right, he did lose his popularity.

The citizens outside the red-brick Pennsylvania State House, where the delegates voted, were now screaming for independence. That didn't make it easy for the men inside. They knew they would pay with their lives if the colonial army was squashed by Britain. And all the power seemed on Great Britain's side.

When the Declaration was read in New York, a mob pulled down the statue of George III in Bowling Green. It was made of 4,000 pounds of lead, from which it was estimated that 42,000 bullets could be cast.

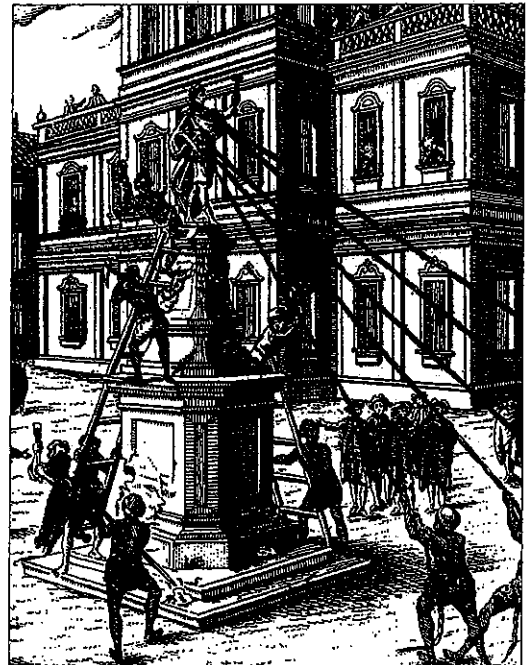
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The Pennsylvania State House was soon to be called Independence Hall. Why?

On July 4, 1776, the Declaration was officially approved by the delegates.



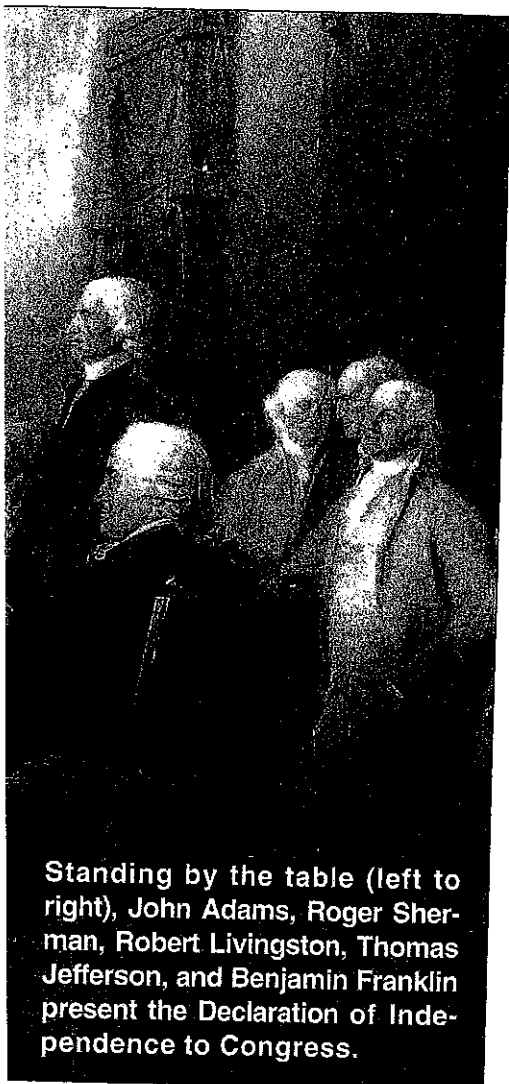


After independence came, Adams went to England as ambassador, wrote a book on government that the Constitution makers read, and became the second president of the United States.

It was John Adams, perhaps more than anyone else, who got the delegates to sign the Declaration. Adams was a talker as well as a thinker. At the Second Continental Congress he kept talking and talking and talking until finally he convinced the delegates.

Then John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail:

Yesterday, the greatest question was decided which ever was debated in America, and a greater, perhaps, never was nor will be decided among men. A Resolution was passed without one dissenting Colony, "that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States...." You will see, in a few days, a Declaration setting forth the causes which have impelled us to this mighty revolution, and the reasons which will justify it in the sight of God and man.



Standing by the table (left to right), John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin present the Declaration of Independence to Congress.

Copies of the Declaration were still warm from the printing press when they were put on coastal vessels or stuffed into saddlebags so they could be sped on their way to each of the 13 colonies. On July 9, the document reached New York and was read to General Washington's troops, who shouted hurrah and tossed their hats in the air. That night a gilded statue of George III on horseback was pulled down from its pedestal on Manhattan's Bowling Green. (The statue was soon melted down and turned into bullets.)

On July 19, the Declaration arrived in Boston, and Tom Crafts, a house painter, stepped out on a small square balcony in front of the Massachusetts State House

and read it aloud. "When, in the course of human events," he began in his flat New England tone. When he finished a voice rang out, "God save the American States," and the crowd cheered mightily. Two days later Abigail Adams wrote a letter to John.

The bells rang, the privateers fired the forts and batteries, the cannon were discharged, the platoons followed, & every face appeared joyful. ...After dinner the King's [coat of] Arms were taken down from the State House & every vestige of him from every place in which it appeared, & burnt....Thus ends royal Authority in this State. And all the people shall say Amen.

An Awful Silence

Benjamin Rush was one of the first doctors in America to have an interest in psychiatry, which is the study of illnesses of the mind. After the Revolution was over, Dr. Rush remembered the "fears and sorrows and sleepless nights" of those who signed the Declaration. Here is part of what he wrote in a letter to John Adams:

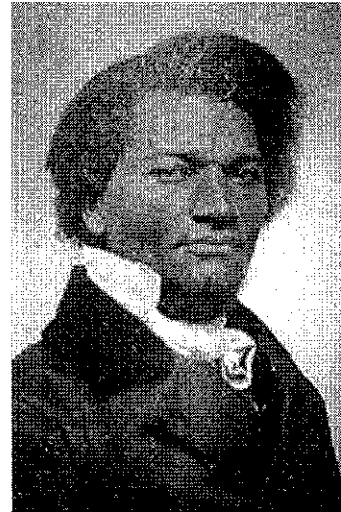
Dear Old Friend...Do you recall your memorable speech upon the day on which the vote was taken? Do you recall the pensive and awful silence which pervaded the house when we were called up, one after another, to the table of the President of Congress to subscribe what was believed by many at that time to be our own death warrants? The silence and gloom of the morning were interrupted, I well recollect, only for a moment by Colonel [Benjamin] Harrison of Virginia [who was heavy], who said to Mr. [Elbridge] Gerry [who was skinny] at the table: I shall have a great advantage over you, Mr. Gerry, when we are all hung for what we are now doing. From the size and weight of my body I shall die in a few minutes, but from the lightness of your body you will dance in the air an hour or two before you are dead." This speech procured a transient smile, but it was soon succeeded by the solemnity with which the whole business was conducted....Benjn. Rush

Frederick Douglass: "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro" (July 5, 1852)

"The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro," a speech given by Frederick Douglass in Rochester, NY on July 5, 1852, is read by James Earl Jones.

In this famous speech, Douglass says:

"What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sound of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants brass fronted impudence; your shout of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanks-givings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him; mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour." Read full speech [here](#).



WATCH THE VIDEO:

<https://youtu.be/8tTkHJWxfP0>

"Fellow-citizens; above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions! whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are, to-day, rendered more intolerable by the jubilee shouts that reach them. If I do forget, if I do not faithfully remember those bleeding children of sorrow this day, "may my right hand forget her cunning, and may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth!" To forget them, to pass lightly over their wrongs, and to chime in with the popular theme, would be treason most scandalous and shocking, and would make me a reproach before God and the world. My subject, then fellow-citizens, is AMERICAN SLAVERY. I shall see, this day, and its popular characteristics, from the slave's point of view. Standing, there, identified with the American bondman, making his wrongs mine, I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July! Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting. America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future. Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is fettered, in the name of the constitution and the Bible, which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery — the great sin and shame of America! "I will not equivocate; I will not excuse;" I will use the severest language I can command; and yet not one word shall escape me that any man, whose judgment is not blinded by prejudice, or who is not at heart a slaveholder, shall not confess to be right and just."



I HEAR AMERICA SINGING

by Walt Whitman 1855

"Walt Whitman Steel Engraving" by Samuel Hollyer (1826-1919) of a daguerreotype by Gabriel Harrison (1818-1902) is in the public domain.

Walt Whitman is a famous American poet, often called the father of "free verse," who wrote during the time of urbanization in America.

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or at noon intermission or at
sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

I Hear America Singing by Walt Whitman is in the public domain.

All Definitions Footnotes

1. **Blithe** (adjective): - carefree, joyous
2. Someone who builds with stone
3. A boy who guides work animals across a farm, drawing a plough
4. **Robust** (adjective): - strong and healthy; vigorous

Walt Whitman is writing about the "spirit" of America. He wrote this poem several years after the Declaration of Independence, but the "idea" of independence shows in his work. Answer the following questions: