



Interpreting the Founding at the Civil War

American Heritage Discussion Series for Learners with Littles

Essential Question

How were American founding ideals and the U.S. Constitution interpreted at the Civil War?

John C. Calhoun's Error of "All Men Created Equal" Speech

Frederick Douglass' What to a Slave is the Fourth of July

Alexander Stephens' Cornerstone Address

Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

Calhoun's Error of "All Men Are Created Equal" speech (1848)

Essential Question: Why does Calhoun reject the principles of natural liberty and natural equality as articulated in the Declaration of Independence?

- What is Calhoun's motivation for arguing that the phrase "all men are created equal" is an error?
- What does Calhoun mean, exactly, when he says that liberty is a "reward" or a "prize to be won"?



Douglass' What to a Slave is the Fourth of July? (1852)

Essential Question: What is Douglass' interpretation of the Constitution regarding slavery?

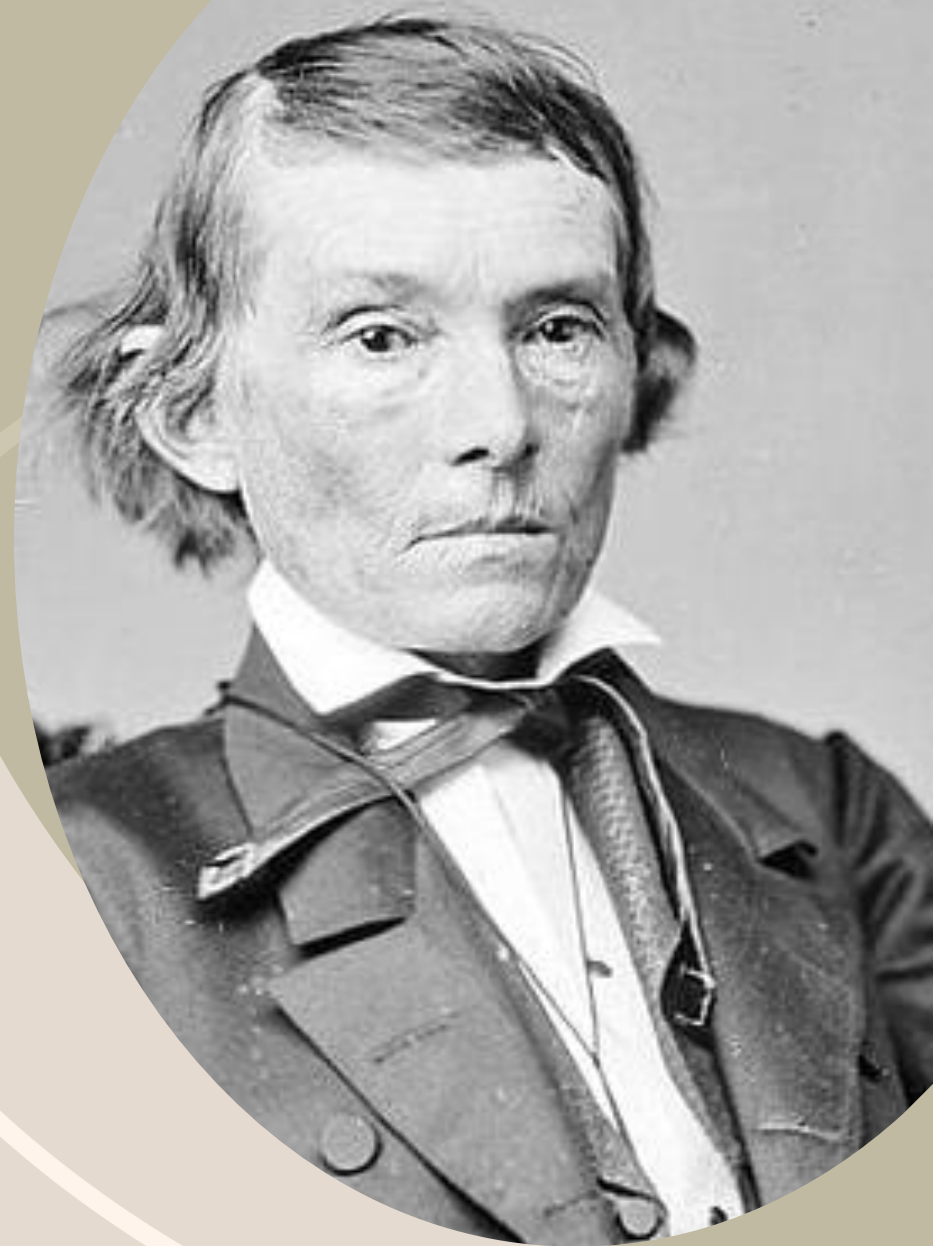
- How does Douglass interpret American founding ideals to oppose slavery?
- What does Douglass think of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution?



Stephens' Cornerstone Speech

Essential Question: Alexander Stephens believes the American founders were wrong about slavery. What does he say to support his position?

- How does Alexander Stephens describe the views of the American founders concerning slavery?
- What does Alexander Stephens say the new government (Confederate States of America) is founded upon? In other words, what is the cornerstone?
- What does Stephens mean when he says, “They were attempting to make things equal which the Creator had made unequal.”



Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

Essential Question: How does Lincoln interpret the meaning of founding ideals at the time of the Civil War?

- What is the significance of using the word proposition when describing the ideal of human equality in America?
- What is the significance of describing the United States as “conceived in liberty”?
- What does Lincoln say will happen if the Union does not win the Civil War? Do you agree with this assertion?



Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, Gettysburg
(Library of Congress)