

Interpreting the Founding at the Civil War

American Heritage Discussion Series for Learners with Little
Caregivers' Conversation

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 Your Fourth of July"

Abraham Lincoln's
Cooper Union Address

Alexander Stephen's
Cornerstone Address

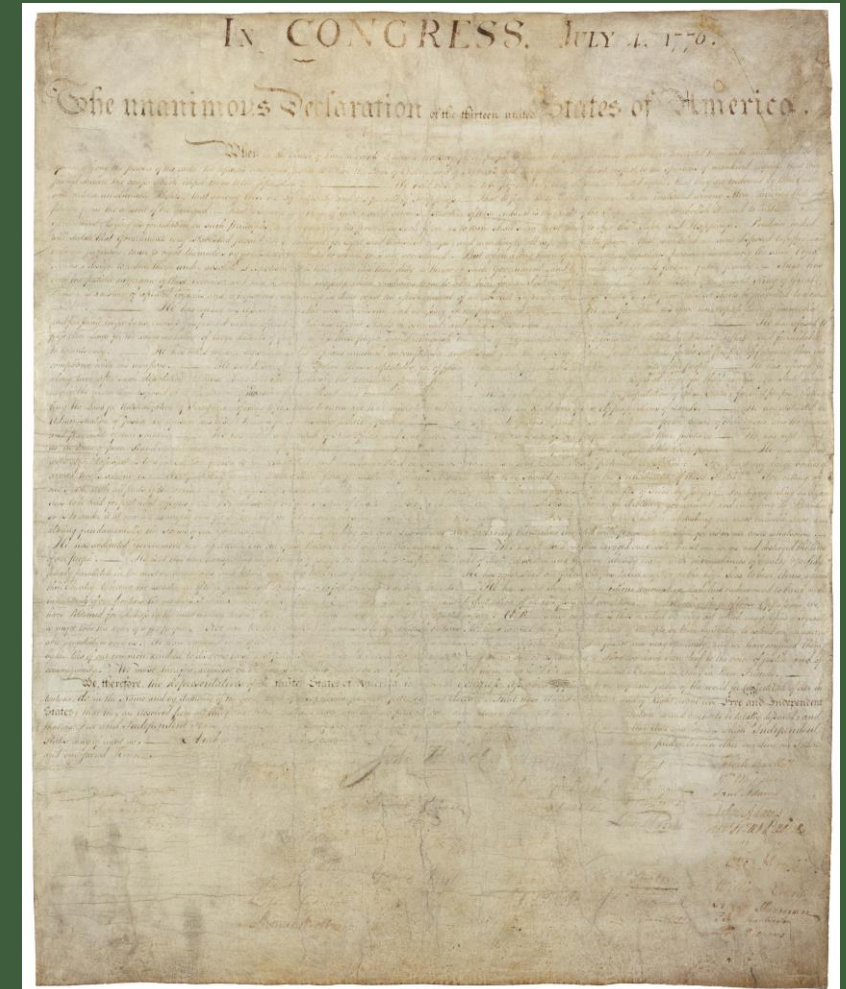
Abraham Lincoln's
Gettysburg Address

Error of “All Men Are Created Equal” Speech

John C. Calhoun 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 reasoning for saying 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”?

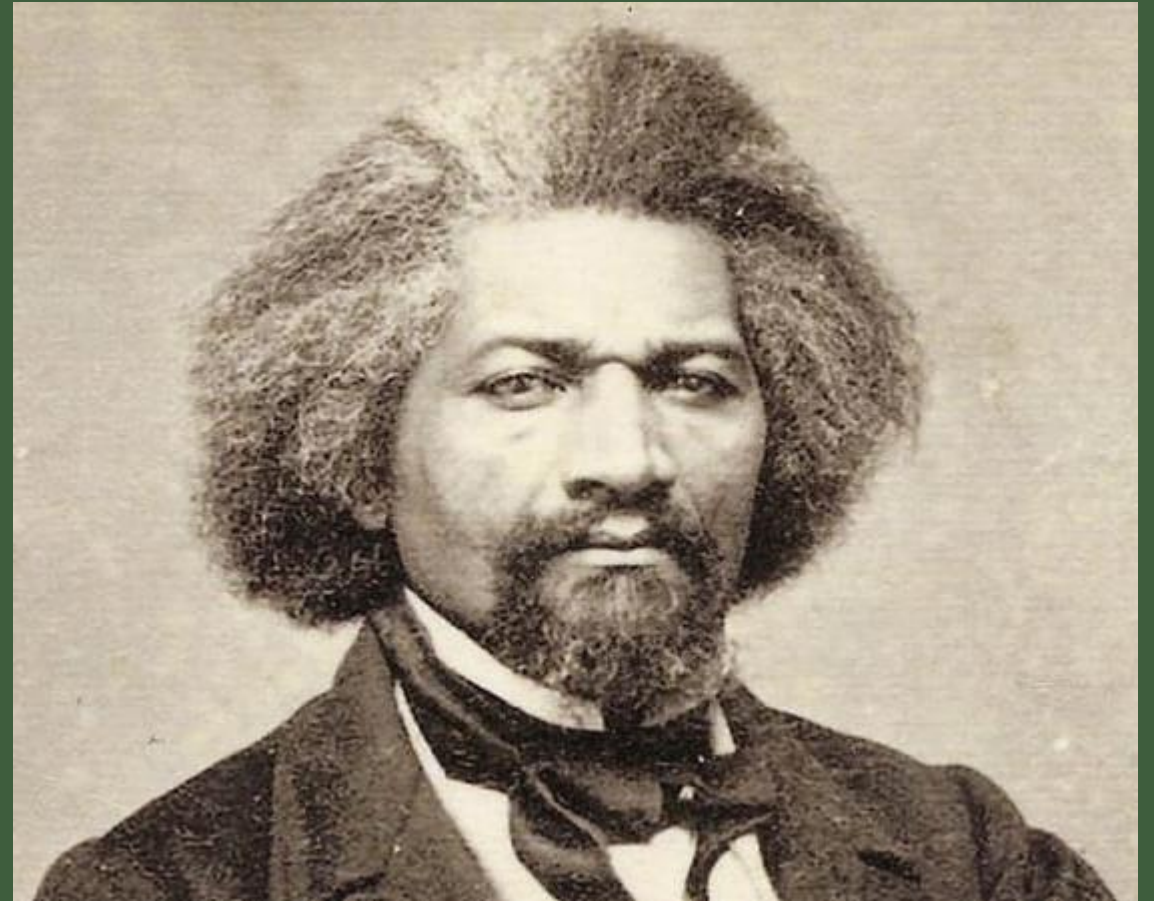


What To The Slave is The Fourth of July?

Frederick Douglass 1852

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

- From where does Douglass say he draws hope regarding the future of slavery?



Cooper Union Address

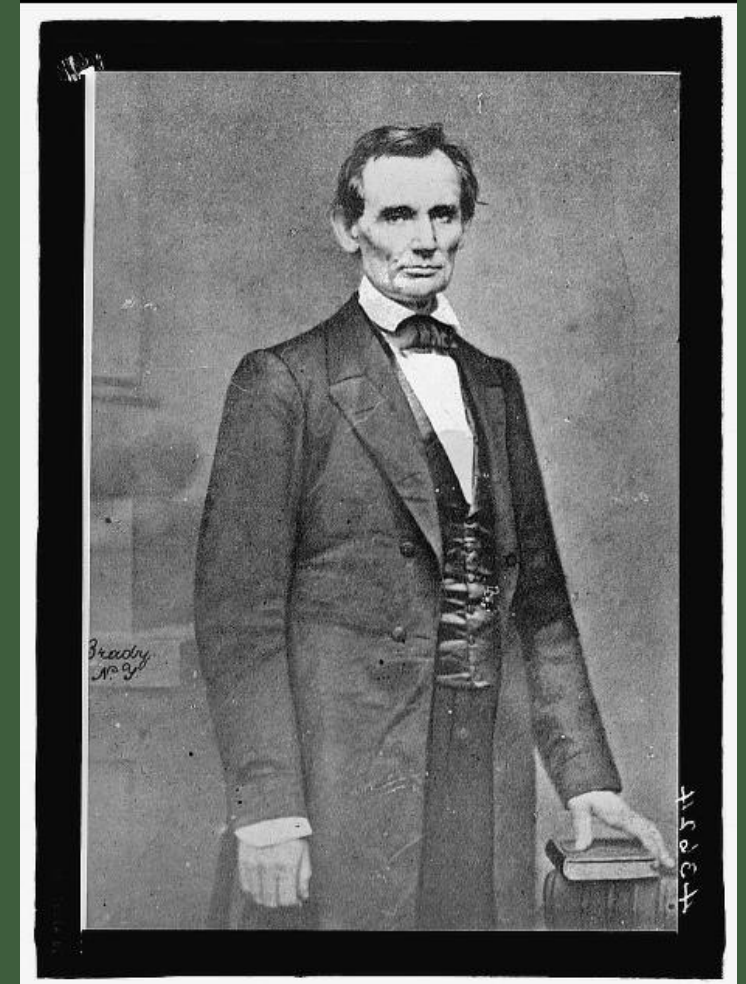
Abraham Lincoln 1860

Essential Question: According to Lincoln, did the Framers in the Constitutional Convention think slavery could be restrained or limited by the federal government?

- How does Lincoln prove his points about whether the federal government has the power to limit slavery in the territories?
- Does Lincoln agree with the Supreme Court's decision Dred Scott that the right to hold a human as enslaved property is in the Constitution?

Cooper Union photo, 1860

National Photo Company Collection (Library of Congress)

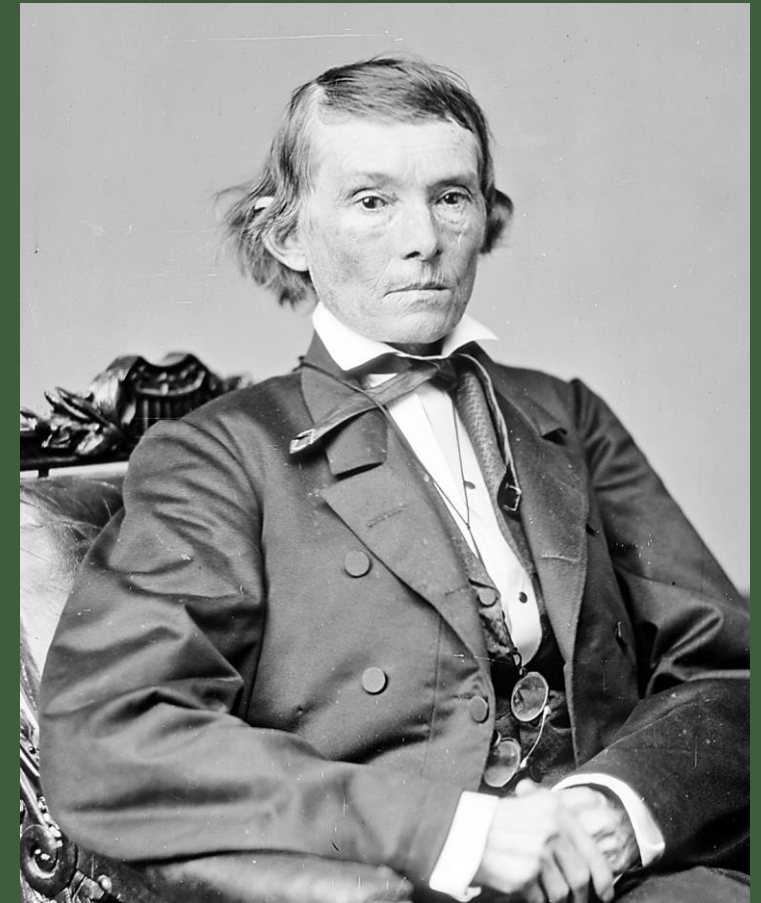


Cornerstone Speech

Alexander Stephens 1861

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

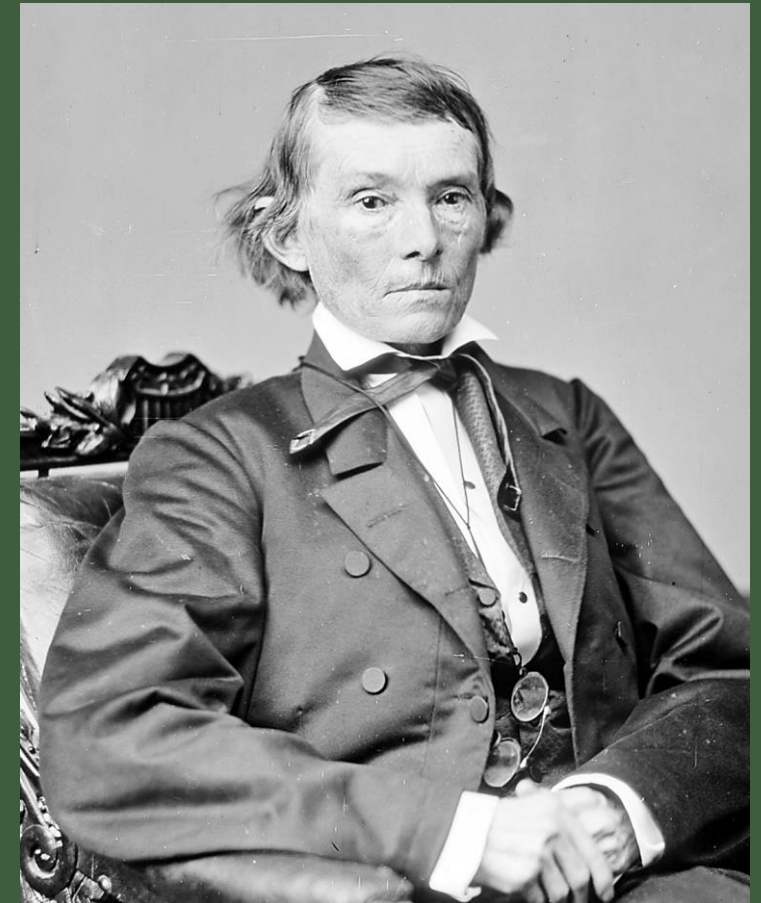
- Stephens called the secession of seven states from the Union to form the Confederate States of America a revolution. How does this line of thinking compare to the American Revolution?
- According to Stephens, what was the “immediate cause” of some states withdrawing from the Union and forming the Confederate States of America?
- When the Confederate States of America seceded, they adopted a new constitution that clearly protected slavery. What does Stephens say about the new constitution?
- According to Stephens, how does the new Confederate constitution improve on the U.S. Constitution?



Cornerstone Speech

Alexander Stephens 1861

- How does Stephens describe how the American founders thought about slavery?
- What does Stephens say the new government (Confederate government) 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.”
- How does Stephens describe the intention of the Creator in creating a superior race and an inferior race?
- When Stephens says, “This stone which was rejected by the first builders “is become the chief of the corner” —the real “cornerstone” —in our new edifice.” What is “this stone”?



Gettysburg Address

Abraham Lincoln 1863

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

- What is the significance of describing the United States as “conceived in liberty”?
- What is the significance of using the word proposition when describing the ideal of human equality in America?
- 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)