

Change Through Time: Slaves and Liberty

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In the early nineteenth century, the United States of America was a newly founded country still working to resolve some issues within the Constitution and government. Although the United States was thriving in multiple victories over Great Britain and becoming more patriotic, political issues within the country began growing. Religion played a large role in political views due to the Second Great Awakening changing the views and reasoning behind slavery. During the Antebellum period, slavery became a major argument of disagreement between the Northern and Southern states due to ethical and political reasons. The main issues regarding African Americans revolved around northern migration, the right to vote, and unequal constitutional rights.

During this time period, African American's were raised in a culture of slavery and changing laws lead to more instances of discrimination. America was seen as the "land of bondage." According to Joseph Taper, Canada was the true "land of liberty" designed by God. There was a "wholesome law" where all were treated as equal and newfound freedoms were discovered.<sup>1</sup> Higher education opportunities were available, such as the ability for an African American child to learn to read. Canada held a more ethical society in comparison to the United States of America because African Americans felt that there was not a single person that could assault them or cause fear in their lives. For example, Joseph Taper escaped to Pennsylvania then moved to Canada two years later, seeking better opportunities for his family. Within that time frame, the Queen of England offered fifty acres of land and minimal supplies to African Americans permanently settling in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

In 1837, there was a new document signed into law stripping African Americans the right to vote in Pennsylvania, causing an opposing statement to be released in 1838 called "*Appeal of*

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Taper, *Letter by a Fugitive Slave*, ed. Eric Foner (Norton Press).

<sup>2</sup> Taper, *Letter by a Fugitive Slave*.

*Forty Thousand Citizens.*”<sup>3</sup> Alongside of Pennsylvania, many other states were either outlawing voting privileges or creating new laws and regulations making it more difficult to vote. Many African Americans felt that their right to participate in a democratic government was taken away. An argument mentioned is that “colored men have hazarded their lives” in order to defend the United States of America’s independence.<sup>4</sup> Many African American slaves were promised freedom after the Revolutionary War had been won, which they were granted. However, there were not enough economic opportunities for them to start a new life effectively, leading to employment with white plantation owners once again. The cycle allowed for African Americans to continue to be mistreated. In this protest, reasoning supporting African American voting rights are listed, such as, the fact that they pay taxes amidst white folks.<sup>5</sup> The employers of these African Americans were making a profit off of them because they were receiving part of their pay, possible rent if they lived on the plantation, and someone doing all of the hard-manual labor for them. These arguments led to the belief that political rights were based on skin color rather than socioeconomic status.

The United States no longer offered the freedoms and rights offered in the Constitution to African Americans, leading to the celebration of independence being a challenge to celebrate as an enslaved citizen. Frederick Douglass portrays Independence Day as a celebration meant for white people because he felt that African Americans did not have equal opportunities and not as much of a reason to celebrate. It was a day to “mourn” as he could hear the cries of slaves grieving the loss of their own personal freedoms. Another assertion made was that people need to be informed and “the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake” is necessary to make change.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Unknown Author, *Appeal of Forty Thousand Citizens*, ed. Eric Foner (Norton Press).

<sup>4</sup> Unknown Author, *Appeal of Forty Thousand Citizens*.

<sup>5</sup> Unknown Author, *Appeal of Forty Thousand Citizens*.

<sup>6</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Frederick Douglass on the Fourth of July*, ed. Eric Foner (Norton Press).

The nation must be woken to support a change in rights and matters of freedom concerning African Americans. Douglas believed that the United States had strayed away from the original ideas of freedom and liberty written by the Founding Fathers because African Americans were still enslaved. This further stretched the gap between whites and colored people in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

African American leaders during the early nineteenth century pursued informing the people about the issues regarding slavery and unequal opportunities. Other African Americans began seeking better, more ethical opportunities outside of the United States or in more western areas. As the United States was expanding in land, many people changed their beliefs about slavery towards it not being divine, as well as, a crime against God. The unethical actions were seen as disgraceful and deceitful of the United States of America, originally portrayed as free with plenty of opportunities.

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<sup>7</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Frederick Douglass on the Fourth of July*, ed. Eric Foner (Norton Press).

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