



Chicago Historical Society



# DOCUMENTS OF FREEDOM

## Are We the People?

**Grade level:** Middle school through high school

**Estimated time:** Three class periods

**Specific topic:** Examining public opinion at the time of the issuing of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Emancipation Proclamation

**Subtopic:** Document analysis of the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Emancipation Proclamation

### Teacher background information

**T**he Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and Bill of Rights, and the Emancipation Proclamation are often referred to collectively as the Documents of Freedom. As a group, these documents demonstrate the evolution of American democracy and freedoms. This lesson focuses on the public reaction to the publishing of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Emancipation Proclamation. It is best used after students are familiar with the events that led to the writing of these documents. Students should have a basic knowledge of the Revolutionary War, early American government, slavery, and the Civil War.



*The Chicago Historical Society's copy of the Declaration of Independence*



**Key concept**

Changes in government impact individuals differently.

**Key questions**

What was the reaction of the American public to these documents when they were issued? Did race, gender, geographic location, and class affect responses to these documents?

**Goal of this lesson**

To contemplate the impact the Documents of Freedom had on representative groups of Americans in 1776, 1787, or 1863.

**Objectives**

1. Students will read an excerpt from one of the Documents of Freedom.
2. Students will write a response to their assigned Document of Freedom based on the provided profile. Responses should consider the economic and social statuses of the American profiled.
3. Students will share their responses with the class.
4. Students will then check their work for historical accuracy through a mini-research assignment that compares their fictional American with the real individual on whom their profile is loosely based.

**Materials**

Master copies of all student handouts are provided.

1. Worksheets for the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Emancipation Proclamation (one copy per student)  
Each worksheet contains:
  - a. Directions
  - b. Profile
  - c. Document excerpt
  - d. Vocabulary list
2. Scroll stationery for letters (one per student)
3. Mini-research assignment worksheet (one per student)
4. Full copies of the original versions of the Documents of Freedom (placed on display, optional)
5. Reliable age-appropriate resources for researching Frederick Douglass, Samuel Adams, and Abigail Adams (optional)

**Procedures**

1. On the board write the names of the following Documents of Freedom: “Declaration of Independence,” “Constitution,” and “Emancipation Proclamation.” Begin by brainstorming about these documents with the class. Sample brainstorming questions: What did these documents mean to people at the time they were issued? Did these documents impact some people more than others? If so, why? Were some people guaranteed rights while others were not? Did one’s wealth, sex, and race affect the meaning of the document from person to person?
2. Distribute one document worksheet to each student. Ask the students to carefully read their character profile and document excerpt. Remind students to read the excerpts not as themselves but as their character.
3. After students have read their character description and document excerpt, ask them to write a response, in the form of a letter, to a friend or relative on a piece of scroll stationery. In the letter, students should state their character’s opinions and reactions to the document based on the information in their document and on their profile sheet. Provide ample time for students to craft their response.
4. Reconvene the class and have students share some of their responses.
5. Distribute the mini-research assignment as homework. Inform the students that they will now have a chance to evaluate their own work. Ask them to briefly research the real individual on whom their character was based. Students should write a short statement summarizing their research and the real individual’s view on the document and analyzing whether or not their letter was historically accurate.
6. Ask students to share the results of their research during the following class session.
7. Conclude the lesson by asking how race, sex, economic status, and geographic location played a role in the public response to these documents in 1776, 1787, and 1863.



*The Chicago Historical Society's copy of the Constitution*

### Suggestions for student assessment

The students' written responses should serve as the primary assessment tool for this assignment. Encourage students to evaluate their own work. Did they accurately understand the document? How did it impact the people living in America at that time? How did the person they researched view this document?

### Additional resources

Foner, Eric. *The Story of American Freedom*.  
New York: W. W. Norton, 1998.

Hakim, Joy. *From Colonies to Country: A History of Us*.  
Vol. 3. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

O'Connell, Libby Haight, ed. "Save Our History:  
The Declaration of Independence,"  
[www.historychannel.com](http://www.historychannel.com)

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States  
1492–Present*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1980.

National Archives website, [www.nara.gov](http://www.nara.gov)



*The Chicago Historical Society's copy of the Emancipation Proclamation*

### Extension activities

Encourage students to come to class dressed as or pretending to be their historical figure. Students could discuss their views on their document and share biographical information about their historical figure.

### This lesson fulfills the following Illinois Learning Standards:

#### English Language Arts

State Goal 1: Read with understanding and fluency.

State Goal 3: Write to communicate for a variety  
of purposes.

State Goal 5: Use the language arts to acquire, assess,  
and communicate information.

#### Social Science

State Goal 14: Understand political systems, with  
an emphasis on the United States.

State Goal 16: Understand events, trends, individuals, and  
movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United  
States, and other nations.

State Goal 18: Understand social systems, with an  
emphasis on the United States.

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Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE WORKSHEET****Directions**

The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Emancipation Proclamation held different meanings for different Americans. In this activity, you will attempt to read the Declaration of Independence not as yourself but as a person from the time period when it was written.

Once you have read the excerpt from the Declaration of Independence, you will write a one-paragraph letter to a friend or relative stating your opinions and reactions to the Declaration of Independence. If you are confused about a word in the excerpt, consult the vocabulary list. (Words that are in bold can be found on the vocabulary list.) If you cannot find a word on the vocabulary list, ask your teacher.

**Profile: A Fiery Boston Patriot**

You hate the British government, because it interferes with your business and your life. You consider this completely ridiculous since the government that is trying to control you is across an ocean. Recently the British involved far too many Bostonians (people from Boston) in a costly war with France. You are now paying for this war through high taxes on sugar, coffee, and tea. At times, it feels as if the British are not helping you run your business but instead trying to run you out of it. You were overjoyed to join the local Boston militia (army) in the fight against the British. More than anything, you want the British to leave the people of Massachusetts to their own affairs. What is your reaction to the Declaration of Independence?

**Excerpt from the Declaration of Independence**

*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 whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to **institute** new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. **Prudence**, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and **transient** causes; and accordingly all Experience hath shewn, 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 and **Usurpations**, pursuing **invariably** the same Object **evinces** a Design to reduce them under absolute **Despotism**, it is their Right, it is their Duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future Security. Such has been the patient Sufferance of these Colonies; and 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.*

**Vocabulary List**

**constrains** . . . . . restrains or confines  
**derive** . . . . . to make  
**despotism** . . . . . a cruel and absolute leadership style  
**disposed** . . . . . likely to  
**evinces** . . . . . to show clearly  
**institute** . . . . . to begin or start

**invariably** . . . . . not changing  
**prudence** . . . . . good judgment  
**transient** . . . . . occasional, not lasting  
**tyranny** . . . . . cruel and harsh government  
**unalienable** . . . . . incapable of being surrendered or transferred  
**usurpations** . . . . . taking over

**Your response as a Fiery Boston Patriot**

Write a letter to a friend or relative about the Declaration of Independence on a piece of scroll stationary. Remember to give names to yourself and the recipient of your letter, to date your letter, and to open with a greeting. The body of your letter should be at least one paragraph and should state your opinions about and reactions to the Declaration of Independence. Conclude your letter with a closing and a signature.

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**CONSTITUTION WORKSHEET****Directions**

The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Emancipation Proclamation held different meanings for different Americans. In this activity, you will attempt to read excerpts from the Constitution not as yourself but as a person from the time period when it was written.

Once you have read the excerpts from the Constitution, you will write a one-paragraph letter to a friend or relative stating your opinions and reactions to the Constitution. If you are confused about a word in the excerpt, consult the vocabulary list. (Words that are in bold can be found on the vocabulary list.) If you cannot find a word on the vocabulary list, ask your teacher.

**Profile: A Philadelphia Merchant's Wife**

Things have changed for you since the Revolution began. When your husband left to serve as an officer in the Continental Congress's army, it was your job to oversee his rather large silver shop. At first, it was challenging to give orders to many of the workmen, balance the accounts, and earn the respect of your husband's primarily male customers. But as time passed, you became comfortable in your new role as a businesswoman, and the shop began to show a larger profit under your leadership than it had under your husband's. You have heard the news that the Continental Congress has reconvened to draft a Constitution for the new United States. You see the problems with the previous Articles of Confederation, but you also wonder how this new Constitution will impact you as a woman. You consider yourself as intelligent and able-bodied as any man, and you hope that this Constitution will grant women some specific rights. You would rather not give each state the power to decide what women can and cannot do, especially in regard to voting. What is your reaction to the Constitution?

**Excerpt from the Constitution***ARTICLE 1.**Sect. 4.*

*The Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives, shall be **prescribed** in each State by the Legislature thereof; but the Congress may at any time by Law make or **alter** such Regulations, except as to the Places of [choosing] Senators.*

*The Congress shall assemble at least once in every Year, and such Meeting shall be on the first Monday in December, unless they shall by Law appoint a different Day.*

**Constitution Vocabulary List**

**alter** . . . . . change  
**prescribed** . . . . . decided

**Your response as a Philadelphia Merchant's Wife**

Write a letter to a friend or relative about the Constitution on a piece of scroll stationary. Remember to give names to yourself and the recipient of your letter, to date your letter, and to open with a greeting. The body of your letter should be at least one paragraph and should state your opinions about and reactions to the Constitution. Conclude your letter with a closing and a signature.

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION WORKSHEET****Directions**

The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Emancipation Proclamation held different meanings for different Americans. In this activity, you will attempt to read excerpts from the Emancipation Proclamation not as yourself but as a person from the time period when it was written.

Once you have read the excerpts from the Emancipation Proclamation, you will write a one-paragraph letter to a friend or relative stating your opinions and reactions to the Emancipation Proclamation. If you are confused about a word in the excerpt, consult the vocabulary list. (Words that are in bold can be found on the vocabulary list.) If you cannot find a word on the vocabulary list, ask your teacher.

**Profile: A Prominent Abolitionist**

You escaped from enslavement to freedom in the North. Since your self-liberation, you have earned a good amount of money as a speaker about the horrors of slavery and through the publication of your memoirs, which outline your journey from enslavement to freedom. You have become a leader among the free African Americans in the North and have even met President Lincoln on a few occasions. You consider the current war to be centered around only one issue—slavery. You are eager for President Lincoln to make a strong stand against slavery and to allow former slaves and free African Americans to play a role in liberating those still suffering from enslavement. What is your reaction to the Emancipation Proclamation?

**Excerpt from the Emancipation Proclamation**

*That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or **designated** part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to **repress** such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.*

*And I further declare and make known, that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to **garrison** forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.*

**Emancipation Proclamation Vocabulary List**

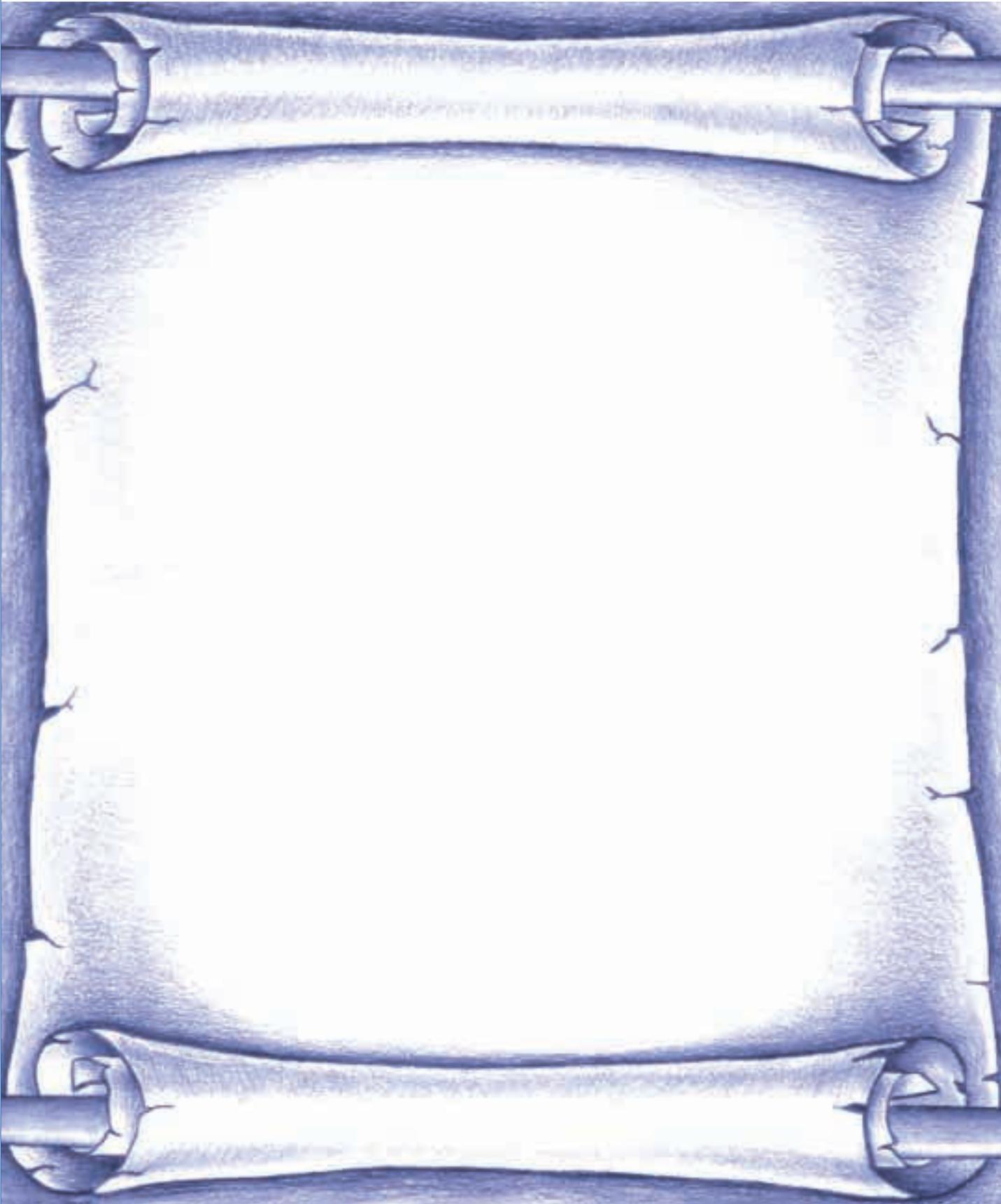
**designate** . . . . . to single out  
**garrison** . . . . . to supply with troops  
**repress** . . . . . to hold back or restrain

**Your response as a Prominent Abolitionist**

Write a letter to a friend or relative about the Emancipation Proclamation on a piece of scroll stationery. Remember to give names to yourself and the recipient of your letter, to date your letter, and to open with a greeting. The body of your letter should be at least one paragraph long and should state your opinions about and reactions to the Emancipation Proclamation. Conclude your letter with a closing and a signature.

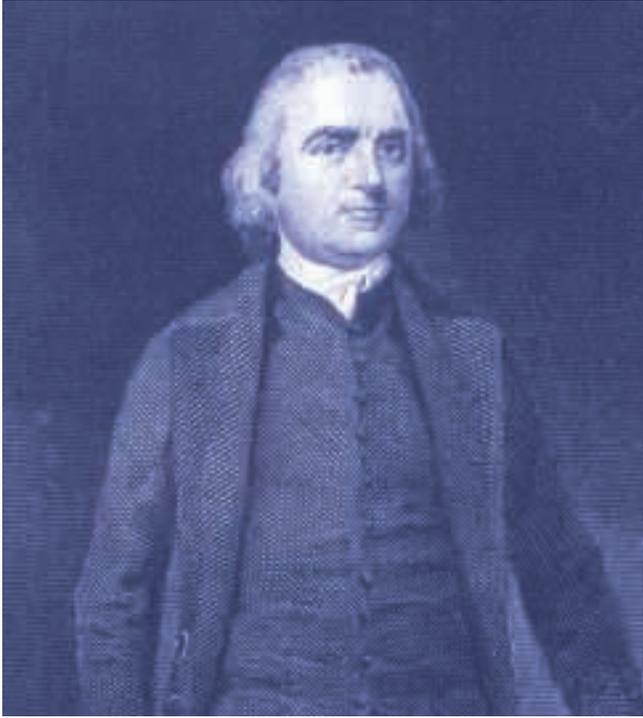
**DOCUMENTS OF FREEDOM | ARE WE THE PEOPLE?**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



### MINI-RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT

The profiles we discussed in class are all based on actual individuals from history.



If you wrote a response to the Declaration of Independence as a fiery Boston patriot, you should research **Samuel Adams**.



If you wrote a response to the Constitution as a Philadelphia merchant's wife, you should research **Abigail Adams**.



If you wrote a response to the Emancipation Proclamation as a prominent abolitionist, you should research **Frederick Douglass**.

#### Directions

Research your historical figure to determine whether your letter accurately reflects his or her opinions. Remember that you might not find a direct quote from your historical figure about his or her opinions of the document. Instead you might have to reach your own conclusions about the historical figure's opinions based on your research.

On a separate piece of paper, write a short essay about your historical figure. Include biographical information about him or her and his or her opinions about the document. Remember to site your sources.

On a second piece of paper, write an evaluation of the letter you wrote in class. In your evaluation, answer the following questions: Did your letter accurately reflect the opinions and ideas of the historical individual your profile was based on? Now that you know about the real person, what did you do well and what would you have done differently?

