

Then: Voices for Freedom

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about slavery. The United States wasn't the first nation in history to recognize slavery as a legitimate institution. Slavery in the Americas, though, was the first time slavery was based on race. Elsewhere in the world, slavery was generally based on conquest. Slavery in ancient Rome, for example, happened when Roman soldiers defeated their enemies but spared their lives. The defeated soldiers became enslaved; their children did not. This lesson will focus on the early stages of trying to end slavery. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Civil War
2. Speaking Out Against Slavery
 - a. Benjamin Banneker
 - b. Frederick Douglass



BEFORE YOU START

How did abolitionists use communication to fight against slavery?

1. Civil War

The basic historical cause of racial inequality in U.S. history is the system of slavery that endured from the colonial era until its abolition, or ending, during the Civil War. Another major cause of modern racial inequality is the postwar passing of laws designed to segregate society on the basis of race. On this page and the next, we'll look at these time periods and at activists who raised their voices against inequality and injustice.



Five generations of enslaved people at a plantation in Beaufort, South Carolina, 1862

The system of slavery began in many of the American colonies in the early 1600s. It continued through the American Revolution—despite the Declaration of Independence’s famous assertion that “all men are created equal”—and it lasted until the end of the Civil War. Enslaved African and African American men, women, and children were considered the property of slaveholders. They were usually forced to work grueling hours in terrible conditions, and slaveholders controlled every aspect of their lives, from their family arrangements to

their living conditions to their education.

During the third year of the Civil War, on January 1st, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation which declared that slavery in the southern states was abolished. As the war was still going on and the Southern states did not recognize the authority of the United States government, the Emancipation Proclamation wasn't enforced. Slavery endured in the United States until the 13th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified in 1865, declaring that "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude... shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction" (National Archives, 1865).

It wouldn't be until June 19th, 1865, two and half years after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, that the last enslaved men, women, and children were legally freed. Millions today celebrate June 19th as Juneteenth in recognition of this new legal status even if this improvement was, as was often the case, a legal change that wasn't accompanied by significant social changes.

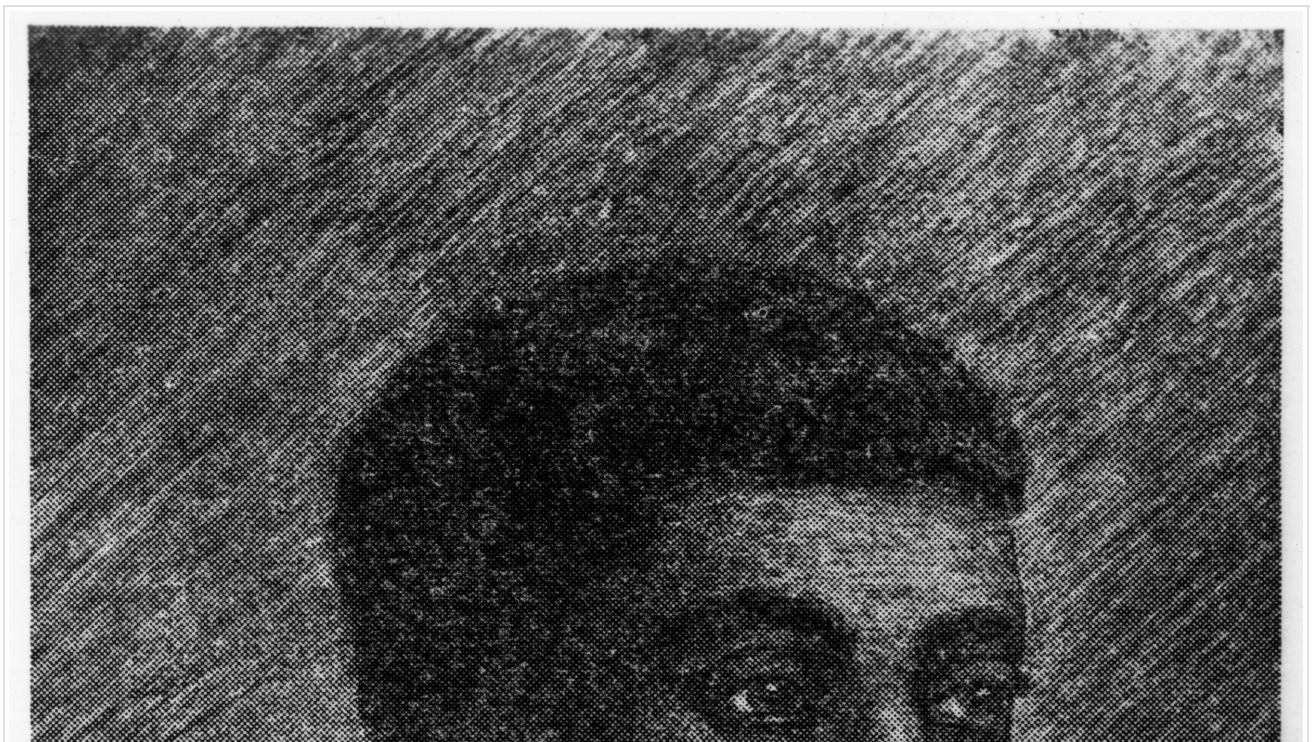
2. Speaking Out Against Slavery

Even before the Civil War, African Americans found ways to resist the inhumane system of slavery. Some enslaved men and women fought back. Others ran away or even joined uprisings, despite the threat of violent reprisal from white authorities. One example of resistance occurred soon after the United States won independence from Britain, when enslaved people in Massachusetts successfully petitioned the courts for their freedom, essentially ending slavery in that state.

Some free African Americans also raised their voices to speak out against slavery. Let's look at two examples.

2a. Benjamin Banneker

Benjamin Banneker was born free in 1731 on his family's Maryland farm. He grew up to be a skilled mathematician and astronomer. He successfully predicted an eclipse, and he published an almanac every year from 1791 to 1802.





BENJAMIN BANNEKER

Portrait of Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806)

When his first almanac was finished in 1791, he sent a copy to Thomas Jefferson with a letter. Jefferson, who would be elected president in 1800, was not only the author of the Declaration of Independence; he was also a slaveholder. In this excerpt from his letter, Banneker reminds Jefferson of the struggles of the American Revolution and criticizes him for the inconsistency of his ideas about liberty (Banneker, 1791):

Primary Source Excerpt

Type: Letter

Author: Benjamin Banneker

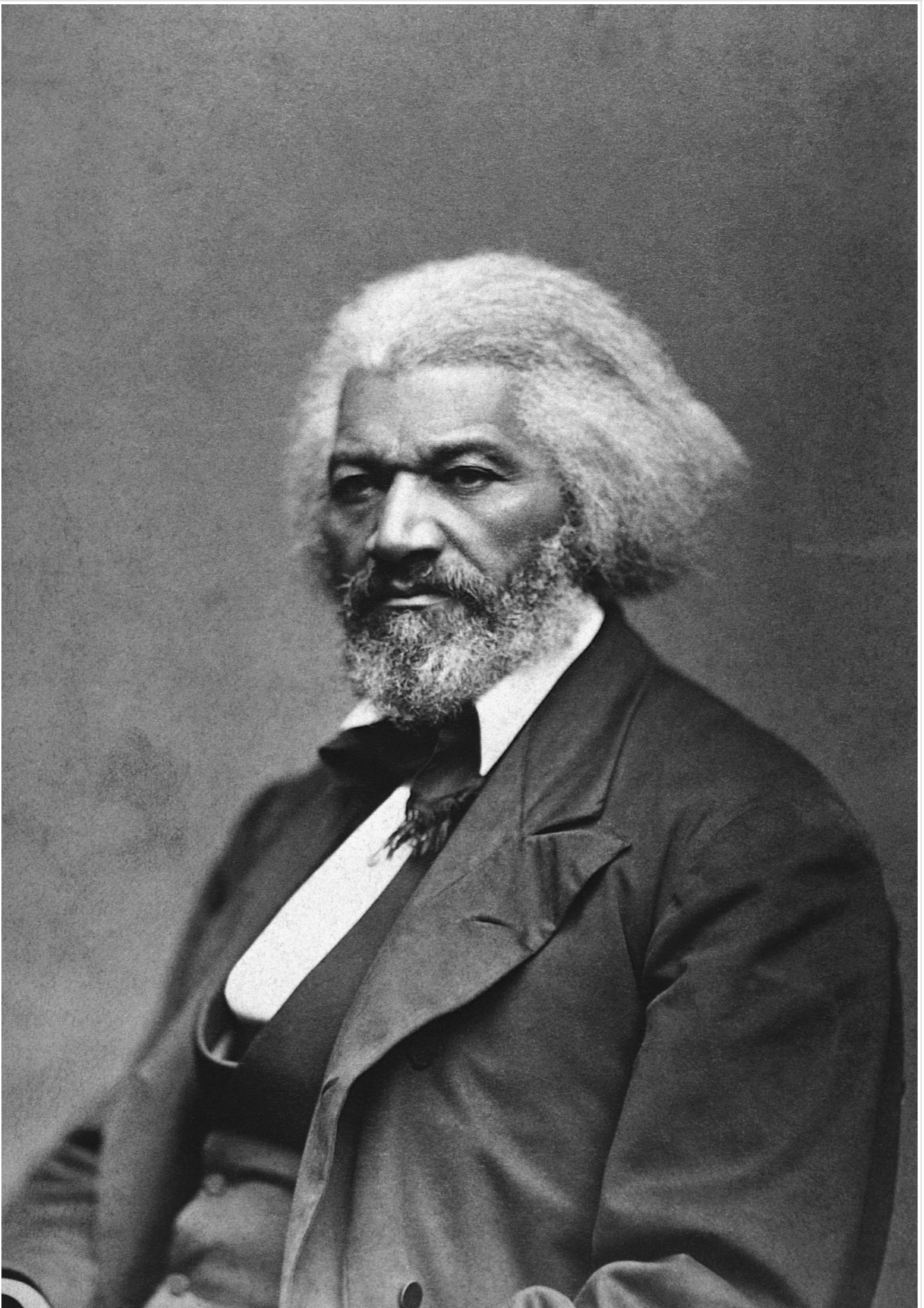
Date: 1791

Sir, Suffer me to recall to your mind that time in which the Arms and tyranny of the British Crown were exerted with every powerful effort in order to reduce you to a State of Servitude...

This Sir, was a time in which you clearly saw into the injustice of a State of Slavery, and in which you had just apprehensions of the horrors of its condition, it was now Sir, that your abhorrence thereof was so excited, that you publickly held forth this true and invaluable doctrine, which is worthy to be recorded and remember'd in all Succeeding ages. "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, and the pursuit of happyness."

2b. Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) was born into slavery on the Eastern Shore of Maryland and sent to live in Baltimore as a young boy. Although educating enslaved people was illegal in Maryland, Douglass secretly learned to read, first from his master's wife and then from neighborhood schoolboys. For Douglass, education was a powerful weapon against oppression. He escaped north in 1838 and became a well-known speaker and abolitionist. He is remembered today for his richly detailed accounts of his experiences both as a slave and then a free man, captured in the autobiographies *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave and My Bondage and My Freedom*, and for his tireless advocacy on behalf of abolition and equality.



Portrait of Frederick Douglass (1818-1895)

On July 5, 1852, Douglass gave a speech to a ladies' antislavery society in Rochester, New York. He forcefully stated that, while freedom and independence were being celebrated by white Americans, a large part of the population in the United States was forced to live in slavery. Douglass's skill and passion as a speaker are evident in this excerpt of that speech, now known as "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" (River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester, n.d.):

Primary Source Excerpt

Type: Speech

Author: Frederick Douglass

Date: 1852

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 sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, 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 these United States, at this very hour....



BIG IDEA

Benjamin Banneker's letter and Frederick Douglass's speech are notable examples of how some abolitionists relied on the power of words to inspire those who agreed with them and to persuade more Americans to support their cause. Next, we'll look at the period after the Civil War, when slavery had ended but the struggle for civil rights continued.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the history of slavery in the United States. The **Civil War**, which lasted from 1861-1865, ended the practice of slavery in the country after 250 years. Before the Civil War, however, there were a number of voices **speaking out against slavery**. You read primary source excerpts from two of these voices: **Benjamin Banneker** and **Frederick Douglass**.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Strategic Education, Inc. 2020. Learn from the Past, Prepare for the Future.

REFERENCES

13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Abolition of Slavery. (1865). National Archives.

www.archives.gov/historical-docs/13th-amendment

Banneker, Benjamin. (1791, August 19). *Letter to Thomas Jefferson* Founders Online: National Archives. wwwFOUNDERS.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-22-02-0049

Frederick Douglass Project: 5th of July Speech (n.d.). River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester. rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/2945



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