

Primary Source Set

Slavery or Anti-Slavery?

Guiding Question

- How did the expansion of slavery into new territories intensify sectional tensions?

Objectives

- ☐ I can analyze primary source documents to determine the author's perspective on slavery and the U.S. Constitution.
- ☐ I can distinguish between pro-slavery and anti-slavery arguments presented in historical texts.
- ☐ I can evaluate how historical figures interpreted the Constitution in relation to the institution of slavery.
- ☐ I can cite textual evidence to support claims about a document's stance on slavery and the Constitution.

Directions: Read the background information carefully, then examine each primary source. For each one, write a brief summary of what the source is saying. Next, explain whether the source supports a pro-slavery or anti-slavery interpretation of the Constitution. Identify specific words or phrases from the source to support your choice. Finally, respond to the source by sharing your personal reaction or writing a question that it raises for you.

Background Information

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, Americans fiercely debated whether slavery should continue, expand, or be abolished altogether. These debates often centered around the U.S. Constitution—some argued it protected slavery, while others believed it offered a path to end it. Politicians, abolitionists, slaveholders, and formerly enslaved people all used the Constitution to justify their beliefs.

William Lloyd Garrison, *The American Union*, 1845

Source: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/the-american-union/>

Text	Vocabulary and Context
To secure the adoption of the Constitution of the United States, it was agreed, first, that the African slave trade—till that time, a feeble, isolated colonial traffic—should for at least twenty years be prosecuted as a national interest under the American flag, and protected by the national arm; secondly, that a slaveholding oligarchy, created by allowing three-fifths of the slave population to be represented by their taskmasters, should be allowed a permanent seat in Congress; thirdly, that the slave system should be secured against internal revolt and external invasion, by the united physical force of the country; fourthly, that not a foot of national territory should be granted, on which the panting fugitive from Slavery might stand, and be safe from his pursuers—thus making every citizen a slave-hunter and a slave-catcher. To say that this “covenant with death” shall not be annulled, that this “agreement with hell” shall continue to stand, that this “refuge of lies” shall not be swept away, is to hurl defiance at the eternal throne, and to give the lie to Him who sits thereon. It is an attempt, alike monstrous and impracticable, to blend the light of heaven with the darkness of the bottomless pit, to unite the living with the dead, to associate the Son of God with the prince of evil.	adoption- approval prosecuted- treated as oligarchy- a small group of people having control taskmasters- slave owners panting fugitive- runaway slave covenant- a formal, binding agreement, promise annulled- cancelled, invalid

1. Summary:
2. Does this quote present the Constitution as Pro-Slavery or Anti-Slavery?
3. Words or phrases to support that view:
4. Reaction or Question:

Frederick Douglass, What to the Slave is the Fourth of July, 1852

Source: <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/frederick-douglass-what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july-1852>

Text	Vocabulary and Context
Fellow-citizens! there is no matter in respect to which, the people of the North have allowed themselves to be so ruinously imposed upon, as that of the pro-slavery character of the Constitution. In that instrument I hold there is neither warrant, license, nor sanction of the hateful thing; but, interpreted as it ought to be interpreted, the Constitution is a glorious liberty document. Read its preamble, consider its purposes. Is slavery among them? Is it at the gate way or is it in the temple ? It is neither. While I do not intend to argue this question on the present occasion, let me ask, if it be not somewhat singular that, if the Constitution were intended to be, by its framers and adopters, a slaveholding instrument, why neither slavery,	warrant, license, nor sanction - official paperwork examples gate way or is it in the temple: Douglass states that support for slavery is not demonstrated in the Constitution in any way

slaveholding, nor slave can anywhere be found in it. . .

Now, take the Constitution according to its plain reading, and I defy the presentation of a single pro-slavery clause in it. On the other hand it will be found to contain principles and purposes, entirely hostile to the existence of slavery.

1. Summary:

2. Does this quote present the Constitution as Pro-Slavery or Anti-Slavery?

3. Words or phrases to support that view:

4. Reaction or Question:

Chief Justice Roger Taney, Dred Scott v. Sandford (1857)

Source: <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/dred-scott-v-sandford>

Text	Vocabulary and Context
“They [Black people] are not included, and were not intended to be included, under the word 'citizens' in the Constitution, and can therefore claim none of the rights and privileges under that instrument....The right of property in a slave is distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution... the duty [of the Court is] of guarding and protecting the owner in his rights.”	

1. Summary:
2. Does this quote present the Constitution as Pro-Slavery or Anti-Slavery?
3. Words or phrases to support that view:
4. Reaction or Question:

Abraham Lincoln, Address at Cooper Union, 1860

Source: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/address-at-cooper-institute/>

Text	Vocabulary and Context
“... [N]either the word “slave” nor “slavery” is to be found in the Constitution, nor the word “property” even, in any connection with language alluding to the things slave, or slavery; and that wherever in that instrument the slave is alluded to, he is called a “person;”... was employed on purpose to exclude from the Constitution the idea that there could be property in man.”	alluding- to suggest exclude- to leave out

1. Summary:
2. Does this quote present the Constitution as Pro-Slavery or Anti-Slavery?
3. Words or phrases to support that view:
4. Reaction or Question: