

# African American Voices Lesson Plans

**Lesson Plan:** African Americans and the Constitution

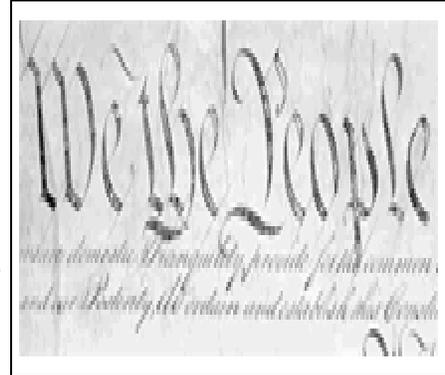
**Subject:** Civics

**Grade:** 7

**NGSSS-SS:** **SS.7.C.1.4-** Analyze the ideas and complaints set forth in the Bill of Rights.

**SS.7.C.2.4-** Evaluate rights contained in the Bill of Rights and other amendments to the Constitution.

**SS.7.C.3.7-** Analyze the impact of the 13th, 14th, 15th, 19th, 24th, and 26th amendments on participation of minority groups in the political process.



**Description/  
Abstract of Lesson:** The students will identify and label Constitutional laws in U.S. history that have affected the lives of Africans/African Americans. The student will formulate a study chart demonstrating competency on the subject.

**Objective(s):**

- Analyze the key democratic concepts found in historical documents including the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution (Preamble and the Bill of Rights); e.g., justice, equality, individual rights, representation and compromises.
- Identify the United States Constitution as the document that describes the structure of government and the rights of individuals under the government.
- Identify the rights contained in the Bill of Rights and other amendments to the United States Constitution and give examples of how rights are applied and limited; e.g., majority rule vs. minority rights.

**Materials:**

- Textbooks/workbook/handouts
- Library/Internet research materials

**Duration:** Several Class Sessions

**Lesson Lead In/  
Opening:**

1. Have the students read aloud a portion of the Declaration of Independence (as provided).
2. After reading, ask the students who they believe Thomas Jefferson (the author of the Declaration of Independence) and "The Founding Fathers" of the United States had in mind when arguing "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..." Have a discussion about this and have the students realize that certain people (i.e. Africans, indigenous people, women) were not meant to be included and possible reasons why.
3. Have the students read the "missing paragraph" of the Declaration of Independence aloud.
4. Discuss the possible reasons why the paragraph was omitted from the final draft of the Declaration, considering that many of the "Founding

Fathers" themselves were slave owners, including Thomas Jefferson.

**Activity 1:**

1. Divide the students in groups and have them write an alternative version to the Preamble that is inclusive of the needs of Africans/African Americans as well as other people (i.e. indigenous peoples, women).
2. Have the groups present to the rest of the class their versions of the Preamble.

**Activity 2:**

1. Discuss with the students how originally, both under the Articles of Confederation and, later, the Constitution, the slavery issue was left for individual states to decide what to do with it.

2. Pass out a chart listing all of the laws passed that have referenced and affected the lives of Africans/African Americans. Explain to the students that as the class covers the different laws in history, they are to write on the dates in which they were passed and how they affected the lives of Africans/African Americans. (RECOMMENDATION: Model filling in the information for the first two laws together as a class to facilitate understanding of how to complete the activity.)

3. Discuss the several compromises that the Northern states made with the Southern states related to slavery in the early Constitutional years. Cover the following laws: (See attached documents)

- 3/5 Compromise
- The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793

4. Discuss with the students how as time progressed, the conflicts over the slavery issue became more heated. As a result, more compromises were made about slavery as it pertained to the law. Cover the following laws: (See attached documents)

- The Missouri Compromise of 1820
- The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850
- Compromise of 1850
- The Kansas-Nebraska Act
- The Dred-Scott Decision (Remind the students that the Supreme Court has the power of judicial review and regarded in the Dred Scott case the Supreme Court decided that since slavery is not mentioned in the Constitution, it can not be banned from any U.S. territory – refer to the *Dred Scott Decision* lesson for details.)

5. Explain how conflicts over slavery led to the Civil War and how after the war three amendments were passed which legally changed the status of Black Americans: (See attached documents)

- 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment
- 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment
- 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment

6. Explain that because of segregation and racial discrimination, laws were passed to protect the rights of African Americans in the 1960s. Discuss the following: (See attached documents)

- Civil Rights Act of 1964
- Voting Rights Act of 1965

7. Have the students complete their charts.

8. Review answers for the chart after student work has been graded and passed back.

**Assessment:**

- Be sure to give individual and group (cooperation and creativity) grades whenever appropriate.
- Evaluate graphs based on accuracy of information, neatness, and format.

**Higher Order**

**Thinking Questions:**

1. Who do you believe was not being considered when Thomas Jefferson wrote "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..." How could you tell?

2. In the missing portion of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson makes strong arguments against the King of England for enslaving African people and now attempting to recruit them into his army in exchange for freedom. Considering that Jefferson himself was a slave owner, do you think he was raising these arguments because he truly believed slavery was wrong? Why do you think this part of the Declaration of Independence was left out?

3. Do some of the slavery laws seem like they contradict each other? How do you believe this made certain people feel?

4. The Voting Rights Act was not meant to be permanent. It was revised and extended in 1970, 1975, 1982 and 2006. Why do you believe certain politicians have been of the opinion that this law should not be permanent and should be reviewed after a certain amount of years?

5. In what way does the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment not truly abolish slavery?

6. How did judicial review affect the Missouri Compromise, the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Compromise of 1850? Why do you believe Southern slave owners were upset when Northerners didn't recognize the decision?

**Suggested Books:  
In Lesson:**

Foner, E. (1990) A Short History of Reconstruction, Harper Perennial

Nash, G. B. (1990) Race and Revolution, Madison House Publishers

Weisbrot, R. (1990) Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement, New York: W. W. Norton

**Web Resources:**

- [www.civilrightsteaching.com](http://www.civilrightsteaching.com)
- <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/exhibit/aopart6.html>
- <http://www.africanaonline.com/2010/08/civil-rights-timeline/>
- <http://academic.udayton.edu/race/03justice/aalaws.htm>

## *The Missing Paragraph Of the Declaration of Independence*

**The final version of the Declaration of Independence did not include the following paragraph, which was written by Thomas Jefferson as a part of the initial draft of the document:**

“He has waged a cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where men should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce; and that this assemblage of horrors might want not fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting these very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he deprived them, by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them; thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.”

# African Americans and the Constitution

Disciplines	What did it do?	Why was it passed?	Why was it repealed?
3/5 Compromise			
Fugitive Slave Act (1793)			
Missouri Compromise (1820)			
Fugitive Slave Act (1850)			
Compromise of 1850			
Kansas-Nebraska Act			
13th Amendment			
14th Amendment			
15th Amendment			
Civil Rights Act (1964)			
Voting Rights Act (1965)			

# *From the Preamble of The Declaration of Independence*

**IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776**

**The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America**

**When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.**

**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.**