

Must Know Primary Documents in US History

Directions: read the excerpt for each document. Describe why this document is significant in our study of US History, then put the document in context (what else is happening at this time?). Finally, include a synthesis point that connects this document to another moment/event in US History.

Articles of Confederation

“Articles of Confederation and perpetual Union between the states of New Hampshire, Massachusetts-bay Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia...

Each state retains its sovereignty, freedom, and independence, and every power, jurisdiction, and right, which is not by this Confederation expressly delegated to the United States, in Congress assembled...

The said States hereby severally enter into a firm league of friendship with each other, for their common defense, the security of their liberties, and their mutual and general welfare, binding themselves to assist each other, against all force offered to, or attacks made upon them, or any of them, on account of religion, sovereignty, trade, or any other pretense whatever.”

March 1, 1781

Significance of document:

Contextualization:

Synthesis:



Civil Rights Act of 1964

“All persons shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, facilities, and privileges, advantages, and accommodations of any place of public accommodation, as defined in this section, without discrimination or segregation on the ground of race, color, religion, or national origin.”

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Enacted July 2, 1964



Significance of document:



Contextualization:



Synthesis:






<p style="text-align: center;">Compromise of 1850</p> <p>It being desirable, for the peace, concord, and harmony of the Union of these States, to settle and adjust amicably all existing questions of controversy between them arising out of the institution of slavery upon a fair, equitable and just basis: therefore,</p> <p>1. Resolved, That California, with suitable boundaries, ought, upon her application to be admitted as one of the States of this Union, without the imposition by Congress of any restriction in respect to the exclusion or introduction of slavery within those boundaries.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- January 29, 1850</p>	<p>Significance of document:</p> <hr/> <p>Contextualization:</p> <hr/> <p>Synthesis:</p>
	
<p style="text-align: center;">The Preamble to the U.S. Constitution</p> <p>“We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- September 17, 1787</p>	<p>Significance of document:</p> <hr/> <p>Contextualization:</p> <hr/> <p>Synthesis:</p>
	
<p style="text-align: center;">Declaration of Independence</p> <p>“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.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">We hold these truths to be self-evident:</p> <p>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...”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- July 4, 1776</p>	<p>Significance of document:</p> <hr/> <p>Contextualization:</p> <hr/> <p>Synthesis:</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Emancipation Proclamation</p> <p>“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.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- September 22nd, 1862</p>	<p>Significance of document:</p> <hr/> <p>Contextualization:</p> <hr/> <p>Synthesis:</p>
	
<p style="text-align: center;">Kansas-Nebraska Act</p> <p>“Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That all that part of the territory of the United States included within the following limits, except such portions thereof as are hereinafter expressly exempted from the operations of this act...when admitted as a State or States, the said Territory or any portion of the same, shall be received into the Union with without slavery, as their constitution may prescribe at the time of the admission: Provided, That nothing in this act contained shall be construed to inhibit the government of the United States from dividing said Territory into two or more Territories, in such manner and at such time as Congress shall deem convenient and proper, or from attaching a portion of said Territory to any other State or Territory of the United States...”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- May 30, 1854</p>	<p>Significance of document:</p> <hr/> <p>Contextualization:</p> <hr/> <p>Synthesis:</p>
	
<p style="text-align: center;">Northwest Ordinance</p> <p>“So soon as there shall be five thousand free male inhabitants of full age in the district, upon giving proof thereof to the governor, they shall receive authority, with time and place, to elect a representative from their counties or townships to represent them in the general assembly: Provided, That, for every five hundred free male inhabitants, there shall be one representative, and so on progressively with the number of free male inhabitants shall the right of representation increase, until the number of representatives shall amount to twenty five; after which, the number and proportion of representatives shall be regulated by the legislature.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- July 13, 1787</p>	<p>Significance of document:</p> <hr/> <p>Contextualization:</p> <hr/> <p>Synthesis:</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Positive Good Speech</p> <p>“I hold that in the present state of civilization, where two races of different origin, and distinguished by color, and other physical differences, as well as intellectual, are brought together, the relation now existing in the slaveholding States between the two, is, instead of an evil, a good—a positive good. I feel myself called upon to speak freely upon the subject where the honor and interests of those I represent are involved. I hold then, that there never has yet existed a wealthy and civilized society in which one portion of the community did not, in point of fact, live on the labor of the other.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- John C. Calhoun, February 06, 1837</p>	<p>Significance of document:</p> <hr/> <p>Contextualization:</p> <hr/> <p>Synthesis:</p>
	
<p style="text-align: center;">Seneca Falls Declaration</p> <p>“We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of a 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.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- The Declaration of Sentiments, Seneca Falls Conference, 1848</p>	<p>Significance of document:</p> <hr/> <p>Contextualization:</p> <hr/> <p>Synthesis:</p>
	
<p style="text-align: center;">Thirteenth Amendment</p> <p>“Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- January 31, 1865</p>	<p>Significance of document:</p> <hr/> <p>Contextualization:</p> <hr/> <p>Synthesis:</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Washington's Farewell Address</p> <p>“As avenues to foreign influence in innumerable ways, such attachments are particularly alarming to the truly enlightened and independent patriot. How many opportunities do they afford to tamper with domestic factions, to practice the arts of seduction, to mislead public opinion, to influence or awe the public councils. Such an attachment of a small or weak towards a great and powerful nation dooms the former to be the satellite of the latter.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- September 17, 1796</p>	<p>Significance of document:</p> <hr/> <p>Contextualization:</p> <hr/> <p>Synthesis:</p>
	
<p style="text-align: center;">Fourteenth Amendment</p> <p>All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- July 8, 1868</p>	<p>Significance of document:</p> <hr/> <p>Contextualization:</p> <hr/> <p>Synthesis:</p>
	
<p style="text-align: center;">Fifteenth Amendment</p> <p>The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- February 3, 1870</p>	<p>Significance of document:</p> <hr/> <p>Contextualization:</p> <hr/> <p>Synthesis:</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Wilson's Fourteen Points</p> <p>“It will be our wish and purpose that the processes of peace, when they are begun, shall be absolutely open and that they shall involve and permit henceforth no secret understandings of any kind. The day of conquest and aggrandizement is gone by; so is also the day of secret covenants entered into in the interest of particular governments</p> <p>We entered this war because violations of right had occurred which touched us to the quick and made the life of our own people impossible unless they were corrected and the world secure once for all against their recurrence. What we demand in this war...is that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- January 8, 1918</p>	<p>Significance of document:</p> <hr/> <p>Contextualization:</p> <hr/> <p>Synthesis:</p>
	
<p style="text-align: center;">Scott v. Sandford</p> <p>4. A free negro of the African race, whose ancestors were brought to this country and sold as slaves, is not a "citizen" within the meaning of the Constitution of the United States.</p> <p>5. When the Constitution was adopted, they were not regarded in any of the States as members of the community which constituted the State, and were not numbered among its "people or citizen." Consequently, the special rights and immunities guaranteed to citizens do not apply to them. And not being "citizens" within the meaning of the Constitution, they are not entitled to sue in that character in a court of the United States, and the Circuit Court has not jurisdiction in such a suit.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- DECEMBER TERM, 1856</p>	<p>Significance of document:</p> <hr/> <p>Contextualization:</p> <hr/> <p>Synthesis:</p>
	
<p style="text-align: center;">Plessy v. Ferguson</p> <p>“By the Louisiana statute the validity of which is here involved, all railway companies (other than street-railroad companies) carry passengers in that state are required to have separate but equal accommodations for white and colored persons, 'by providing two or more passenger coaches for each passenger train, or by dividing the passenger coaches by a partition so as to secure separate accommodations.' Under this statute, no colored person is permitted to occupy a seat in a coach assigned to white persons; nor any white person to occupy a seat in a coach assigned to colored persons.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- May 18, 1896</p>	<p>Significance of document:</p> <hr/> <p>Contextualization:</p> <hr/> <p>Synthesis:</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Brown v. Board of Education</p> <p>We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. This disposition makes unnecessary any discussion whether such segregation also violates the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- May 17, 1954</p>	<p>Significance of document:</p>
	<p>Contextualization:</p>
	<p>Synthesis:</p>
	
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>The Jungle</i></p> <p>“There were men who worked in the cooking rooms, in the midst of steam and sickening odors, by artificial light; in these rooms the germs of tuberculosis might live for two years, but the supply was renewed every hour. There were the beef-luggers, who carried two-hundred-pound quarters into the refrigerator-cars; a fearful kind of work, that began at four o'clock in the morning, and that wore out the most powerful men in a few years. There were those who worked in the chilling rooms, and whose special disease was rheumatism; the time limit that a man could work in the chilling rooms was said to be five years. There were the wool-pluckers, whose hands went to pieces even sooner than the hands of the pickle men; for the pelts of the sheep had to be painted with acid to loosen the wool, and then the pluckers had to pull out this wool with their bare hands, till the acid had eaten their fingers off...”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- Upton Sinclair, 1906</p>	<p>Significance of document:</p>
	<p>Contextualization:</p>
	<p>Synthesis:</p>