

# Thoughts on the Declaration of Independence

Rector's Forum  
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# The Summary of the Law

Book of Common Prayer, p. 324

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

*Matthew 22:37-40*

# Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)

Life in the State of Nature: “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

The people leave the state of nature to create a social contract and government, sacrificing some freedom for security.

The proper result is a Leviathan – an absolute and all-powerful government – to ensure security.

Religion was to be constrained under the civil authority.

# John Locke (1632-1704)

In a state of nature, people are free equal and rational, with each person possessing the right to life, liberty, and estate (property).

People leave state of nature to form civil society through a social contract to protect their inalienable rights to life, liberty, and property.

The people are the sovereign rather than the monarch. When government does not serve its proper function, the people can revolt, abolish, and reconstitute government.

Religious liberty is an inalienable right essential to self-government, with religious pluralism being necessary for proper government.

# Locke and Slavery (Chapter 4, Second Treatise on Government (1690))

“The natural Liberty of Man is to be free from any Superior Power on Earth, and not to be under the Will or Legislative Authority of Man, but to have only the Law of Nature for his Rule.”

Slavery may be allowed when a lawful conqueror enslaves a captive. If an enslaved person could have been lawfully killed by the enslaver, the enslaver could take the enslaved person in lieu of killing the enslaved person.

A person cannot sell self into slavery because a person does not have full power over their own life and cannot sell what the person does not control. However, a person can sell self into drudgery.

# John Wayles (1715-1773)

Wayles and his first wife Martha Eppes were parents to Martha Wayles (Skelton) Jefferson (Thomas Jefferson's wife).

Thrice widowed, Wayles apparently fathered six children with his enslaved woman, Elizabeth (Betty) Hemings (1735-1807), the mixed-race daughter of a white British sea captain and an enslaved African woman, after the death of his third wife. Sally Hemings was the last of the children, born in 1773. Wayles died in 1773 when Sally was an infant.

# Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826)

Jefferson married Martha Wayles Skelton in 1772 (1748-1782) after she was widowed. He inherited Martha's property through coverture after her father died in 1773.

Betty Hemings and her children – aged 11 through infant – moved to Monticello after John Wayles's death. All were enslaved at Monticello.

Jefferson and Martha had two children who lived past infancy Martha Jefferson Randolph (1772-1836) and Mary Jefferson Eppes (1778-1804).

Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

## Jefferson (continued)

“Years after his wife’s death, Thomas Jefferson fathered at least six of Sally Hemings’s children. Four survived to adulthood and are mentioned in Jefferson’s plantation records: Beverly, Harriet, Madison, and Eston Hemings.”

Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, <https://www.monticello.org/encyclopedia/sally-hemings>

Jefferson allowed Beverly and Harriet to leave Monticello in 1822; Madison and Eston were freed in Jefferson’s will in 1826.

# The Continental Army

Some state militia units were integrated before the Continental Army had been established. For example, black and white militiamen served together at Bunker Hill.

When Washington took command of the Continental Army, he briefly ended the enlistment of black soldiers, then quickly reversed course.

The Continental Army, fighting in integrated units, won the war. After a long period of segregation, U.S. Army units were officially desegregated in the late 1940s.

# Declaration of Independence (1776)

“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[.]”

# U.S. Constitution (1788)

The Constitution appears to secure our Creator-given rights, but it still allowed slavery to exist.

“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.”

-Preamble

# Frederick Douglass, What, to the Slave, is the Fourth of July? (1852)

“But the Church of this country it's not only indifferent to the wrongs of the slave, it actually takes sides with the oppressors. It has made itself the bulwark of American slavery, and the shield of American slave hunters.”

“One is struck with the difference between the attitude of the American church towards the anti slavery movement, and that occupied by the churches in England toward a similar movement in that country. There, the church, true to its mission of ameliorating, elevating, and improving the condition of mankind, came forward promptly, bound up the wounds of the West Indian slave, and restored him to his liberty.”

NOTE: The British abolished slavery in the realm in the 1830s.

# Questions

What are our Creator-given rights?

Should we interpret the Declaration to define natural rights to include only those natural rights the founding generation believed to exist, or should we determine what we think natural rights are?

Do Creator-given rights include only specific rights, such as a right to food and clean water, a right to adequate shelter and clothing, a right to an adequate education, or a right to adequate health care?

Do Creator-given rights include a right to those things that are necessary to allow us to flourish and reach the potential that God given us?

# Interpreting Scripture?

Should we interpret Scripture to mean only what it meant when it was written, or should we interpret it to provide us a window regarding how we should live our lives today?