

ARE ALL MEN CREATED EQUAL

As Anthony Johnson's story illustrates, the concept of race had not fully developed in the colonies before the beginning of Africa slavery in North America. Yet, after permanently enslaving people of African descent proved to be profitable and popular, many white Americans not only considered people of the "Negro race" alien but also began to claim that they were naturally inferior to the "white race." Claiming that those of African descent were from a naturally inferior race made it easier to justify their enslavement and their status as property. Nearly 200 years after Anthony Johnson's death, the concept of race and the idea that black people are naturally inferior to whites was commonly accepted among most white Americans from both the North and the South, despite the words enshrined in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal." In fact, several of the founders who endorsed these words were aware of the contradiction, but they were not sure what to do about it.

On the eve of the Civil War, Confederate vice president Alexander Stephens gave a speech asserting that the new Confederate government was founded upon "exactly the opposite idea" from the equality asserted in the Declaration of Independence:

[I]ts foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth...

Many governments have been founded upon the principle of the subordination and serfdom of certain classes of the same race; such were and are in violation of the laws of nature. Our system commits no such violation of nature's laws. With us, all of the white race, however high or low, rich or poor, are equal in the eye of the law. Not so with the negro. Subordination is his place. He, by nature, or by the curse against Canaan, is fitted for that condition which he occupies in our system.¹

Two months after Stephens' Confederate government was defeated in the Civil War, the editor of a Georgia newspaper wrote:

The different races of man, like different coins at a mint, were stamped at their true value by the Almighty in the beginning. No contact with each other – no amount of legislation or education – can convert the negro into a white man. Until that can be done – until you can take the kinks out of his wool and make his skull thinner – until all of these things and abundantly more have been done, the negro cannot claim equality with the white race.²

Slavery was abolished as a result of war, but the belief of many Americans in white supremacy did not change.

¹ Excerpted from Alexander Stephens's "Corner-Stone Speech" in Henry Cleveland, *Alexander H. Stephens, in Public and Private: With Letters and Speeches, Before, During, and Since the War* (Philadelphia, 1886), 717-729, available at <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/cornerstone-speech/> (accessed Jan. 23, 2014).

² E. Merton Coulter, "Slavery and Freedom in Athens, Georgia, 1860-1866," in *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 49, No. 3 (September 1965), Georgia Historical Society, 264-293, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40578502>

Comprehension Questions:

1. Does Alexander Stephens agree with the statement in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal”?
2. What evidence does Alexander Stephens present to justify his claim that slavery of African Americans is “natural”? Why might his arguments appeal to white Southerners at the time? How would you respond to his comments?
3. How does the word choice of the Georgia editor support his claim that blacks and whites are not equal? How do his words dehumanize African Americans?
4. How do you think Stephens and the editor might respond to attempts to provide freedpeople with new rights and opportunities to create a more equal society?