



Myth: They Didn't Know Better

In 2019, South Bend, Indiana, mayor and presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg was criticized for the following comment, originally made on a children's television show in 2014: "It's an embarrassing thing to admit, but the people who wrote the Constitution did not understand that slavery was a bad thing and did not respect civil rights." Though his intentions may have been positive, Buttigieg was rightly called out for continuing the myth that people during the time of slavery didn't know better. The difficult truth is that people did know better, and many participated in the enslavement of others anyway.

The enslavement of indigenous and Black people in the Americas began almost from the moment Christopher Columbus and other colonizers set foot on the Caribbean islands in the 1490s, and so did protest against its cruelty. One Spanish missionary, Bartolomé de las Casas, gave up his land and the enslaved people he had been granted after about a decade of witnessing the brutality of enslaved labor. In 1514, he begged the Spanish Crown to end the abuses of slavery, later writing that the treatment of Taíno natives forced to mine gold and perform other labor amounted to atrocities "to which no chronicle could ever do justice."¹ Over the next 300 years, thousands of other priests, journalists, politicians and ordinary citizens would speak out against the evils of slavery. By the time the Founding Fathers envisioned a new country and a new constitution,

they were very much aware of and involved in debates about this cruel and inhuman practice.

In his first draft of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote a 168-word passage about slavery in which he called it an "assemblage of horrors." Blaming slavery in the American colonies on the British king, he wrote: "He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred



Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams review a draft of the Declaration of Independence.

rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither." The passage was debated and dropped by the Second Continental Congress, attended by John Hancock, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams. The final declaration included the famous phrase, "all

men are created equal," but did not recognize the inequality of slavery. Jefferson himself enslaved over 600 human beings in his lifetime.

The Founding Fathers differed on the subject of slavery. Like Jefferson, James Madison felt the practice was "dishonorable to the National character," yet he enslaved over 100 people on his Virginia plantation and in the White House. Benjamin Franklin and John Jay also enslaved people, but freed them as their anti-slavery positions grew stronger. Franklin founded the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and Jay fought to outlaw the slave trade in New York. George Washington became a supporter of abolition later in his life, but only freed the enslaved people he owned in his will. John Adams, Samuel Adams, Thomas Paine and Alexander Hamilton were always against slavery and didn't own enslaved people (though Samuel Adams and Alexander Hamilton may have held title to enslaved people for a time). Hamilton was involved in efforts to abolish slavery and supported the African Free School, which educated the children of enslaved and free Black people.

Slavery was a hotly contested subject in the U.S. in the 18th and 19th centuries, and at the forefront of public discourse. Some people may have closed their eyes to its cruelty, explained it away or defended it out of greed or convenience; but it would have been impossible for them to not know better because of the times they lived in.

¹ Peter Nabokov, "Indians, Slaves, and Mass Murder: The Hidden History." *The New York Review of Books*, November 24, 2016, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/11/24/indians-slaves-and-mass-murder-the-hidden-history>.



Roundtable Discussion

MYTH: THEY DIDN'T KNOW BETTER

- 1 After reading about this myth in more depth, how would you respond (in your own words) to someone who said, "Many supporters of slavery didn't know better—it was a different time?"

- 2 Do you know about people or groups, in addition to those in the reading, who fought against slavery? If so, who? If not, why do you think this is a knowledge gap?
- 3 Did it surprise you to learn that the first draft of the Declaration of Independence addressed slavery? Why do you think this passage was dropped, even though many of the Founding Fathers acknowledged slavery was wrong?
- 4 Based on the Founding Fathers' behaviors, do you think it would have been possible for average people in those times to be *unaware* of arguments for and against slavery? Explain.
- 5 Are there activities we engage in today that may be looked at as immoral or wrong by people in the future?
- 6 How has this reading made you think about how you have been taught about slavery in the U.S.?

SOURCES:

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