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This February, the Bill of Rights Institute invites you to celebrate [Black History Month](#) by recognizing the extraordinary individuals who have appealed to the promises of liberty, equality, and justice in the Declaration of Independence.

As we look forward to commemorating the 250th anniversary of this rich document in July of 2026, we are drawn to reflect on the Founding ideals. Yet, for African Americans, these promises were often denied, leading to generations of advocacy and struggle to make these ideals a

reality.

[Explore our curated collection](#) of lessons, videos, and primary sources or deepen your understanding and bring these important stories into the classroom, through [BRI's Black History Timeline](#) that ranges from 1796 to 2020.

EXPLORE THE TIMELINE

How did African Americans challenge the nation to live up to its ideals throughout the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries?



Ideals of a Nation

How did African Americans challenge the nation to live up to its ideals throughout the 18th and 19th century?

From the earliest days of the republic, African Americans, like [Prince Hall](#) and [Elizabeth "Mumbet" Freeman](#), used natural rights arguments to fight for freedom.

Following on their heels, leaders like [Frederick Douglass](#), [David Walker](#), and [Sojourner Truth](#) exposed the contradiction



The Lost Promise of Reconstruction

By the late 19th century, a wave of new state laws and court rulings stripped away these hard-won rights. [Jim Crow laws](#) enforced racial segregation, [Black Codes](#) restricted economic and social mobility, and voter suppression tactics - such as literacy tests, poll taxes, and grandfather clauses - effectively disenfranchised African Americans across the South.

Despite the efforts made during [Reconstruction](#) to create a more equal society, the promise of full



Civil Rights Act and Beyond

The federal government, which had once protected African American rights during Reconstruction, retreated from its commitments, allowing white-dominated state governments to [roll back progress](#). It wasn't until the [Civil Rights Movement](#) of the 1950s and 1960s—nearly a century after Reconstruction—that these injustices were directly confronted at a national level.

With the passage of the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) and the Voting Rights Act of 1965,

between America's Founding principles and the reality of slavery and discrimination.

Through abolitionist writings, legal battles, and acts of resistance, African Americans forced the country to confront its failures and pushed for a more just society.

Their fight for freedom reached a turning point during the Civil War, when nearly 200,000 [African American soldiers](#) joined the Union Army, proving their commitment to the nation and its ideals.

citizenship for African Americans was a struggle that would continue for another century. The period following the Civil War offered a glimpse of what true equality could look like—the [14th Amendment](#) granted birthright citizenship and equal protection under the law, while the [15th Amendment](#) ensured African American men the right to vote. These were met with fierce resistance from white supremacists and political leaders determined to maintain racial hierarchy.

African Americans finally secured the legal protections that had been promised but denied for generations.

However, the fight for true equality did not end there. Despite these landmark victories, African Americans continued to [face systemic barriers](#) in education, employment, housing, and voting rights.

Where Do We Go from Here?

As we look forward to celebrating America's 250th birthday, we have an opportunity reflect on how far we have come and recognize the work that still lies ahead. The principles of liberty, justice, and equality—enshrined in the [Declaration of Independence](#)—have guided generations of Americans in their pursuit of a more perfect union.

History teaches us that progress is never inevitable—it is the result of persistent activism and the courage to challenge injustice. The Civil Rights Movement dismantled legal segregation and expanded voting rights, but [systemic inequalities and racial disparities](#) still persist. The ideals of the Declaration of Independence are not just words on a document—they are a call to action.

This month, we hope you will honor those who fought for justice by committing ourselves to continue to build a nation that truly lives up to its [Founding principles](#).

What steps will we take today to ensure that liberty and justice are more than just ideals, but a lived reality for every American?

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