

Contextualizing David Walker's Appeal

Name _____ Class _____

Teacher _____ Date _____

This document provides historical context for David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, with an emphasis on the abolition movement and its impact on nineteenth-century politics and society, particularly from 1820 through the 1850s.

During David Walker's life span, attitudes towards slavery and relations between whites and blacks underwent significant changes in the United States.

The Founding Period

In the 1790s, around the time of Walker's birth, the Enlightenment and constitutional ideals of human equality forced many, both Northerners and Southerners, to question the legitimacy of human bondage. Many Southern slaveholders viewed the institution as a regrettable necessity, and expected that it would remain limited to the narrow agricultural sector in the southeast that supported tobacco and rice crops. Some slaveholders, seeing slavery's demise as inevitable, freed their slaves, and many accepted the presence of free blacks in their society. At the turn of the nineteenth century, free blacks, while not fully accorded the rights of citizens, nonetheless established livelihoods and communities, gaining tacit acceptance of their relative freedom from the white population. Some owned property, and even slaves themselves.

The Expansion of Slavery

By the time David Walker had become a young man in 1820 and had seen much of the slaveholding society in which he lived, the expansion of cotton cultivation and the subsequent expansion of slavery forced Americans to confront the enduring presence of this institution in a country devoted to democratic ideals. Many white southern slaveholders abandoned their doubts about slavery and instead voiced strident support for the institution. They also responded with increasing hostility to the Northerners who challenged its morality. Sectional tensions, symbolized by the Missouri Compromise in 1821, revealed how politicized the conflict over the institution had become. At the same time, the reform movement fueled by the emotionalism of the evangelical awakenings turned slavery into a moral issue.

The Rise of the Anti-Slavery Movement

From this era emerged an increasingly urgent antislavery movement, and it gained momentum throughout the 1820s. Initially, antislavery advocates supported the American Colonization Society, formed in 1817, with the objective to end slavery gradually, and with Southern support by sending African Americans back to Africa.

Unfortunately, the American Colonization Society seemed more sympathetic to the Southern slaveholders who wanted to siphon off the troublesome slaves and free blacks from their communities; and it became clear that colonization did not promote racial freedom or equality within the United States.

By the late 1820s, rising distrust of the American Colonization Society efforts and an emerging radical abolition movement was centered in the urban North, particularly Boston. There, a confident, prominent, and vocal minority of free blacks initiated greater discussion about the need to end slavery immediately. By the time Walker had published his *Appeal* in 1829, white abolitionists had largely discounted the value of the American Colonization Society's mission. By 1830, William Lloyd Garrison had published *The Liberator*, which advocated for immediate emancipation. In that same year, Nat Turner triggered a violent slave rebellion in Virginia. Both events hardened the positions of slaveholders and their critics against each other.

The Decades of Conflict

From 1830 to 1860 the conflict between slaveholders in the South and antislavery advocates in the North touched all aspects of the American experience. Sides were drawn up in the social, economic, and religious spheres—and most directly—in the politics of the era. Although Congress had managed to subdue their differences on the topic until the late 1840s, the end of the Mexican War and the subsequent struggle to define the western territories' status regarding slavery, triggered new hostilities and ultimately ruptured the political party system.

As the political crises escalated in the 1850s, Southern governments adopted a siege mentality regarding the presence of African Americans in their midst, both enslaved and free. Liberties upon which free blacks had always relied were now rescinded. Laws passed in numerous states now made it illegal for African Americans to own property or arms, or to travel freely without special passes. Some legislatures pursued a course of enslaving even those who had lived their lives as free. It was in this period that John Day wrote his editorial asserting that the future for racial equality, even for those who had already attained their freedom, looked grim, and that leaving the continent was the best course for those who truly wanted to experience freedom and equality.

In the next five years, free blacks in the South would see their options further circumscribed even the Supreme Court, which, in the case of *Dred Scott*, proclaimed that no person of African descent could ever be free in the United States. By 1860 it had become clear that no emancipation, either gradual or otherwise, would be possible in the United States without violence, and soon after the Civil War began.

Questions

1. What first caused Americans to question the institution of slavery? What impact did this have on the institution?
2. What was the primary cause of slavery's expansion in the early 19th century?
3. Why was colonization first advocated and then rejected by African Americans?
4. What were some of the causes of political conflict over slavery in the three decades before the Civil War?