From the time the Declaration of Independence was written in 1776, people thought great change would be made now that they were granted rights as American citizens. Though this initial appreciation was unquestionable, some of the generalities of the Declaration of the Independence stroke controversy. The line that indicated, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal” sparked the most attention and debate during the course of the 19th century. Despite the conflicting ideologies surrounding impartiality, less people supported transcultural equality in the beginning of the 19th century (1790s to mid-1830s) as they did mid-19th century (1840s-1870s). African American slaves, women, and inferior ethnic minorities experienced the backlash of white supremacists who dominated “American” society.

With slavery being around since the 16th century, African Americans were undoubtedly committed to the fact that “All men are created equal” applied to them, while white American men were not. The Founding Fathers purposely avoided specifically mentioning slavery in the Declaration of Independence because they knew this was much more of a controversial issue socially, and was something that could not just be ended in their political writing.¹ In 1791, Benjamin Banneker, a free black working as an engineer in Maryland, was so angered that he did not see change in slavery once the Declaration of Independence was written that he wrote to Secretary of State at the time, Thomas Jefferson. He explained that all African Americans were children of God as were white men, and Banneker attempted to relate to Jefferson by explaining that how the African Americans felt under the power of the white men was how the white Americans once felt under the rule of the British Empire—having no rights.² Jefferson’s response was that he understood Banneker, but he was not in the position to change how society functioned claiming he was unable to help him.³ Being the Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson had the power to push for abolishing slavery, but he knew it would not be an easy task

¹ Lecture 15 notes.
² Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson (August 19,1791).
³ Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson (August 19,1791).
because there were so many more people in favor of slavery in America than opposed to it. In 1830 another black intellectual, David Walker, stood up for African American equality and was not afraid to call the white men that called themselves Christians as tyrants for taking over the lives of blacks by preventing them from being educated or going to church. He exclaimed, “See your Declaration Americans!!! Do you understand your own language, proclaiming to the world, July 4th, 1776—that ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL!!”⁴ Walker explicitly shared his anger towards white men, and he argued that they were not following the rights granted to African Americans written in the Declaration of Independence as were white men living in America. In the 1850s, Virginia Senator Robert Mercer Taliaferro Hunter not only ignored the personal rights of African American Slaves, but he noted that, “If African slavery [is] abolished all over the world…I ask how such a policy would have operated upon the world at large? No cotton! No sugar! But little coffee, and less tobacco!”⁵ Hunter had no interest in racial equality because he felt it would weaken the U.S. economy because there would be no one to do their outdoor labor, completely ignoring the personal rights of African American slaves as human beings and treating them like property. Other white proslavery writers, such as George Fitzhugh, saw no issue with slavery being considered a form of inequality because he felt slavery was profitable, slaves received food and housing from their slave owners, and it is free from all cares and labors.⁶ Fitzhugh saw slavery as a luxury for African American slaves, and he could not possibly fathom why the slaves themselves would want slavery abolished. Although the Declaration of Independence called for equality for all men, white men living in America did not see that applying to African American slaves throughout the course of the first half of the 19th century.

There were also less people in America that supported women as equals from the beginning to the middle of the 19th century. In 1833, moralistic men, such as John S.C. Abbott only saw women as maternal figures and not leaders of society. Abbott explains that it is not just politics that America needs

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⁴ David Walker, Appeal To the Coloured Citizens of the World (1830).
⁶ George Fitzhugh, Cannibals All! or Slaves without Masters (1857).
to succeed but also maternal influence in the family, and who better to be responsible for upholding that then the women of the house. Although Abbott explains the important role of women at home, he did not see women as contributors of politics or anything else that white men considered useful in society. In 1831, Harriet Robinson saw women working in factories as a great way for them to “earn money, and spend it as they pleased; and [it] could gratify their tastes and desires without restraint, and without rendering an account to anybody.” Although Robinson and many other women saw it as the development of independence and equality, it was actually more of a step back for women because working women then had additional responsibilities outside of tending to the care of their home. From working in the factories, less women were using it to spend on luxury items for themselves, and instead younger women were saving for dowry, married women for household income, and older seeking survival living on their own. The women were also losing independence because factory owners then had control over the women’s hours working, time for leisure, time for socialization, time for eating, time for sleeping, wages, and even safety. As time passed nearing to the middle of the 19th Century, things did not get easier for women. Because of the increasingly exploitative practices of the factories from poor working conditions to wages being cut, women starting forming labor unions and petitions to voice their anger. In 1845, one of the women’s labor unions wrote to the Massachusetts Legislature requesting for shorter hours, better wages, more “wholesome air,” and better lighting in their workspace. The Legislature responded by explaining that their money and support would not be contributed towards bettering their working conditions but to the, “improvement in art and science in a higher appreciation of man’s destiny.” The legislature did not see women as equals to men because they explicitly show their support of men’s higher education over the health concerns of the women working in factories. Over the course of the first half of

7 John S.C. Abbott, The Mother at Home (1833).
8 Harriet Robinson, autobiography (1831-1836).
9 Lecture 16 notes.
10 Lecture 16 notes.
11 New England Factory Protests (1845-1846).
the 19th Century, many men, politicians, and factory owners did not see women as equals and only treated them as housewives in society.

Essentially, anyone that was not a white man born in America was not granted equal protection under the equality clause in the Declaration of Independence over the course of the first half of the 19th century. The 18th century theory highlighted the importance of the physically being in America would shape you to be more “American,” while the 19th century theory explained that the only “true Americans” were the ones born in America (and foreigners were excluded from ever being truly “American”). This can be seen with the rush of Irish immigrants that came to America starting in 1815. “True” Americans saw them as “monkey people,” and their scrutiny of them continued in 1866 when they created physiognomy textbooks depicting Irish women as monkey people compared the beautiful, white “true Americans.” Native Americans received equally harsh treatment and were not grandfathered into the Declaration of Independence nor protected by its sovereignty. After living with and creating a nation together with the white men, the U.S. Congress passed the Indian Removal Act of 1830 throwing the Cherokee out of the what was the at the time the United States so that the “true” Americans had more room to prosper geographically. Andrew Jackson supported this law because not only would it “send [the Native Americans] to a land where their existence may be prolonged and perhaps made perpetual,” but it also because it would benefit the white men in order to “cast off their savage habits and become an interesting, civilized, and Christian community.” Not only is Jackson disrespecting their culture, but he was also supporting a law that did not give the Native Americans the equality to remain in the same nation as the “true” Americans. This led to the Trail of Tears in 1838-1839 where the Cherokee were forced from their homes in Georgia to Oklahoma where nearly half of them died during the journey.

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12 Lecture 18 notes.
13 Lecture 18 notes.
14 Lecture 23 notes.
15 Andrew Jackson and John Ross, annual messages related to Cherokee Removal (1830).
16 Lecture 23 notes.
Irish immigrants and Native Americans were by no means created as equals to the white men born in America from the turn of the 19th century to the mid-19th century.

While slaves, women, and those who did not resemble the white men of America all played a different role in society of the first half of the 19th century, none of them were granted equal protection under the Declaration of Independence as the white men were. Though they strived for equality through letters to important political figures, petitions, and some even leading to riots, none of them were able to gain the equality they were fighting for. When the Founding Fathers wrote the Declaration of Independence, they wanted to peacefully create a way to grant equality for all, but they did not know it would create even more controversy and uprising in America once it was written.