The Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal…endowed by their creator…life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” At the time of its drafting, American society was not overly concerned with the idea of equality. American women had very few rights, African Americans were enslaved, and there existed a significant economic and social gap among white American men. The increasing dedication of these groups to the attainment of their inherent rights tested the validity of the promised freedoms and equality that the United States built itself upon. The American public realized that the equality that they were promised had not been established, leading to an escalation of the commitment to equality throughout the first half of the 19th century.

The increased dedication to the preservation and expansion of equality was reflected by the growth of democracy in the United States. In the beginning of the 19th century, many of the nation’s great leaders did not look favorably upon Democracy. In 1790, John Adams, one of the “Founding Fathers,” believed that “were magistrates to be chosen…by a universal suffrage, dissensions and venality would be endless.” Over time though, lower and working class Americans became dissatisfied with the unequal distribution of political influence and representation, calling for a more equal roles in the political system. In 1829, the Working Man’s Advocate (New York) stated that “The history of the political parties in this state, is a history of political iniquities, all tending to the enacting and enforcing oppressive and unequal laws.” In response, American political leaders became weary of appearing superior to the general public,

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1 Continental Congress, declaration (July 4, 1776)
2 Oct. 28 Lecture Notes
4 Northern working men’s declarations (1829-1844)
instead presenting a façade of equality to their constituents.⁵ “By the 1840s, urban politicians built…boxing matches to appeal to rough-and-tumble working class voters.”⁶ By connecting with the general public, politicians were able to reduce the unpopular political boundaries that previously existed between the upper and lower class citizens.⁷ This equalizing of political representation added to the commitment of equality seen in the Americans over the course of the 19th century.

Economic and social equality became a new goal for many white males by the end of the mid-19th century. Public figure Horace Mann was fearful of the great inequality present in the Americas, believing that education provided the only pathway to economic equality.⁸ Widespread approval for this idea led to the creation of universal public education for white Americans in 1838.⁹ Unhappy with existing American social status differences, some groups decided to target and attack those of higher status than themselves. After deciding that a local storekeeper was “being of an overbearing turn of mind”, William Otter and his gang of friends “put him where he ought to be” by physically abusing him and destroying his property.¹⁰ Some valued economic equality so highly that they wished to implement utopianism. Robert Owen embodied the ideas of complete equality with his creation of New Harmony in 1826, in which he attempted to create a world where he would “introduce an entire new state of society; to change it from the ignorant, selfish system, to an enlightened, social system, which shall gradually unite all interests into one, and remove all cause for contest between individuals.”¹¹ Many others took advantage of the increasingly common desire for equality in America, leading to the creation of

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⁵ October 28 Lecture Notes
⁶ Kenneth Cohen The Manly Sport of American Politics Or, How We Came to Call Elections “Races”
⁷ October 28 Lecture Notes
⁸ November 6th lecture Notes
⁹ Nov. 6th lecture notes
¹⁰ William Otter (1787-1856), autobiography (1807).
¹¹ Robert Owen, critique of individualism (1825-1826)
hundreds more “utopias” throughout the United States. The white American public’s desire to break down the existing social and economic differences resulted from the increasing commitment to equality that was present during the 19th century.

The push of equality for white women in the United States emerged and gained significant public popularity during the mid-19th century. The construction of female operated factories allowed many American white women to experience a new sense autonomy, leading to the development of women’s rights activism. One of the first examples of the growing dissatisfaction among white women in America was seen with a strike among cotton-factory workers in 1836. After the Lowell Cotton-Factory cut wages, fifteen hundred girls responded by walking through the streets, demanding for a repeal of the wage reduction. This assertive strike among the female operators marked the beginning of the fight for white women’s equality in the Americas, which slowly gained momentum throughout the mid-19th century. Twelve years later in 1848, many Americans attended the Seneca Falls Convention, the first major women’s suffrage event to be organized by women in the Western world. During the convention, they drafted a Declaration of Sentiments, demanding that women “have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States.” The women’s insistent fight for equal and fair treatment largely contributed to the overall American commitment to equality.

12 November 6th Lecture Notes
13 October 28th Lecture Notes
14 Harriet Robinson, autobiography (1831-1836)
15 Harriet Robinson, autobiography (1831-1836)
16 Nov. 6th Lecture Notes
17 Woman’s Rights Convention, Seneca Falls NY (July 19-20, 1848)
18 Woman’s Rights Convention, Seneca Falls NY (July 19-20, 1848)
As the 19th century progressed, equality for African Americans gained popularity among many Americans. In 1835, only 225 anti-slavery chapters existed in the United States. In only three years, that number grew to 1600 chapters. The increase of public disapproval of slavery led to the emergence of outspoken abolitionists and large antislavery campaigns and conventions. Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, David Walker, and Ralph Waldo Emerson were all revered abolitionists that grew in popularity in response to the new public demand for abolitionism. In 1843, abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet called enslaved African Americans into action by voicing the fact that approval for slavery was slowly fading in the Americas, giving slaves an unprecedented chance to succeed in a rebellion. The combined efforts of abolitionists pushed the question of black citizenship to the United States Supreme Court in the 1857 court case, Dred Scott v. Sandford. Although the court ruled against the naturalization of blacks, the case revealed that the fight against the unequal treatment of blacks was gaining momentum among Americans throughout the course of the 19th century.

The United States was built on the concept of equality, which was promised to all United States citizens in the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights. However, white women, blacks, and the white male working class did not believe that they possessed the promised equalities, causing them to protest for more social and economic liberties. Although these groups differed in their specific goals, all of their actions illustrate the increased commitment to equality among all Americans throughout the first half of the 19th century.

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19 November 6th lecture notes
20 November 6th lecture notes.
21 Henry Highland Garnet, speech before the National Negro Convention, Buffalo NY (August 1843)
22 United States Supreme Court (7-2), Dred Scott v. Sandford (1857)