

 **LETTER TO THE EDITOR**
SLAVERY WRITTEN
INTO THE
CONSTITUTION?
WHAT'S THAT ABOUT?

By Stephen L. Bakke  July 8, 2014



Here's what provoked me:

On the Fourth of July I came across a guest opinion writer explaining some of the intricacies surrounding the founding of our country and creating the United States Constitution. The writer made mention of slavery being written into the Constitution as a compromise between the northern states and the southern slave states. I thought this left a slightly wrong impression so I wrote this brief commentary to try to clarify the record.

Here's my response:

Slavery Written Into the Constitution? What's That About?

Thanks to Gerald Peterson for information on the country's founding - July 4. He pointed out that there was a battle over the issue of slavery and its implication for states' Congressional representation. Peterson stated: "(because) the original goal of the (Constitutional) Convention was to preserve the Union, the northern states yielded to the southern states and slavery was written into the Constitution although not by name."

The Constitution states: "(representation) shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free persons three fifths of all other persons." Some observers declare this is proof of the founders' racism - reducing a slave to less than a full "person." **But the 3/5 provision represents a victory of the anti-slavery north over the slave states.**

The northern states, generally opposed to slavery, didn't want slave states to be benefited by counting slaves in the population for determining representation. The southern slave states wanted each slave to count for a full person in determining representation. Examination of the Federalist Papers and other commentary of the time gives support to the interpretation that elimination of slavery was at least a secondary and long term goal of the anti-slavery politicians of the time.

The 3/5 provision was a useful compromise. While flawed - i.e. it took many decades before slavery was abolished - this was a pragmatic approach to preserve the union and, they hoped, a way to limit the influence of pro-slavery advocates. Notwithstanding the other motives that may have been involved, this moved the U.S. closer to eventual abolition of slavery via the 13th Amendment in 1865.

