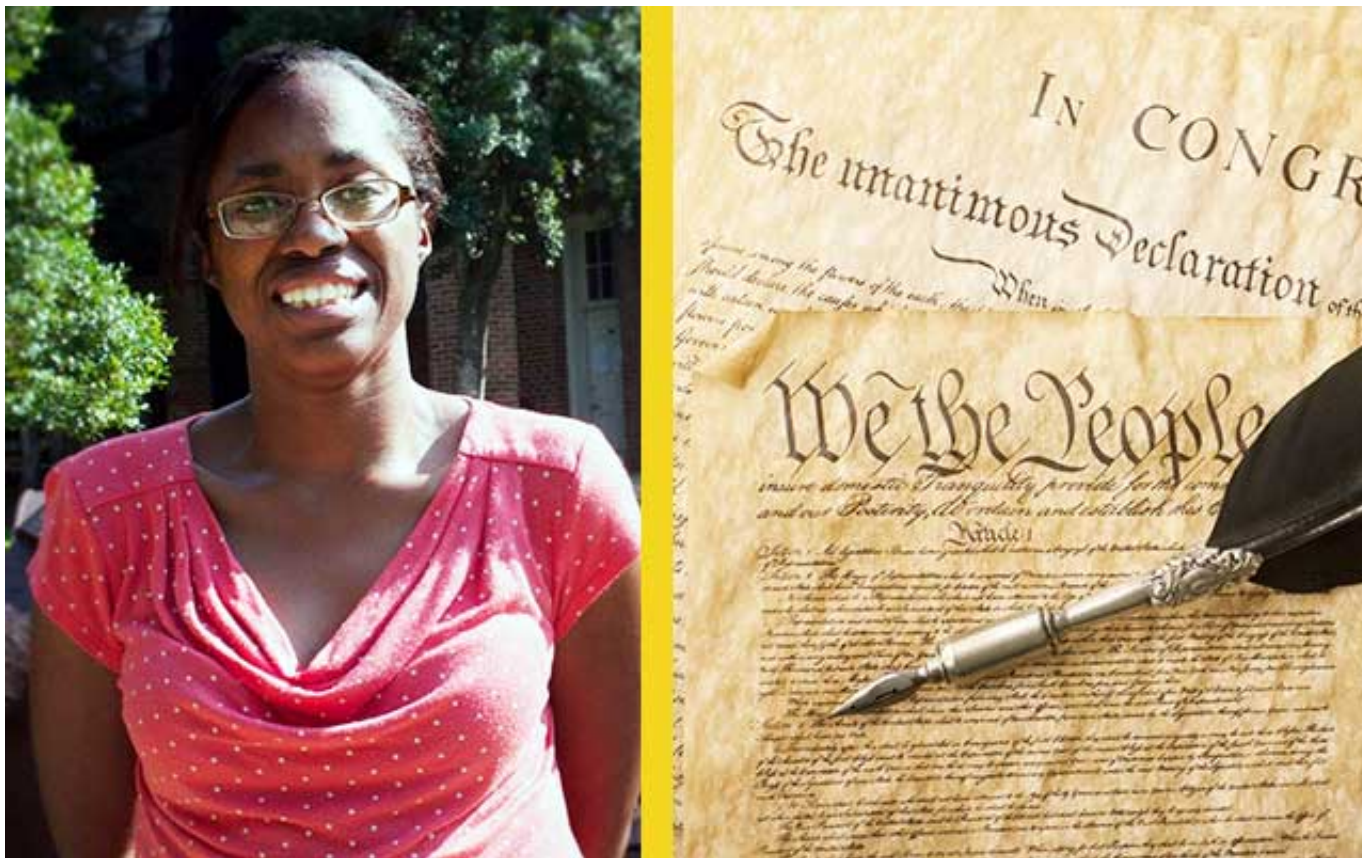


# 150 Years of Equal Protection

*The 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution turns 150.*



History professor Dr. Hilary Green

America has many rules to make sure everyone is treated fairly. But one may be the most important of them all. It's the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The government ratified the rule on July 9, 1868. Then on July 28, U.S. Secretary of State William Seward announced that it was official. That means the amendment is now 150 years old.

The 14th Amendment says that every U.S. citizen has “equal

protection of the laws.” But what does that mean, and why does it still matter 150 years later? To understand that, we have to go all the way back to the U.S. Civil War.

In 1861, the northern and southern parts of America began fighting over the issue of slavery. After the war ended in 1865, slavery was no longer legal. This period of U.S. history is called the Reconstruction era. No one was allowed to own men and women and force them to work for free anymore. The 14th Amendment answered the question of what would happen to the former slaves. It begins:

*“All persons born ... in the United States ... are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside.”*

Dr. Hilary Green is a professor of history and race relations at the University of Alabama. “The 14th Amendment was established as a way to extend constitutional rights to African Americans,” Green told *News-O-Matic*. “But its reach has included protections for all Americans regardless of race, gender, and class.”

The text of the 14th Amendment has come up a *lot* in major court cases. “The equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment has allowed for the some of the greatest civil rights victories,” Green explained.

In *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, judges used the Amendment to end segregation in schools. The 14th Amendment was used in the 1967 case *Loving v. Virginia*, which allowed people of any race to get married. As recently as 2015, the *Obergefell v. Hodges* case used the 14th Amendment to make same-sex marriage legal.

Today, the amendment still offers protection for people. For example, one important part of the 14th Amendment is the “due process clause.” This says that the government must respect the legal rights of every citizen.

The 14th Amendment has helped improve equality in America. Green called the 150th anniversary “the perfect opportunity” to learn all the ways it shaped — and continues to shape — our history.

Updated July 30, 2018, 5:03 P.M. (ET)

***By Hannah Kahn***

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