

Declaration of Independence

Throughout the 1760s and early 1770s, the North American colonists found themselves increasingly at odds with British imperial policies regarding taxation and frontier policy.

When repeated protests failed to influence British policies, and instead resulted in the closing of the port of Boston and the declaration of martial law in Massachusetts, the colonial governments sent delegates to a Continental Congress to coordinate a colonial boycott of British goods.

Britain began to prepare for war in early 1775. The first fighting broke out in April in Massachusetts. In August, the King declared the colonists “in a state of open and avowed rebellion.” For the first time, many colonists began to seriously consider cutting ties with Britain.

When fighting broke out between American colonists and British forces in Massachusetts, the Continental Congress worked with local groups, originally intended to enforce the boycott, to coordinate resistance against the British. British officials throughout the colonies increasingly found their authority challenged by informal local governments, although loyalist sentiment remained strong in some areas.

Despite these changes, colonial leaders hoped to reconcile with the British Government, and all but the most radical members of Congress were unwilling to declare independence.

However, in late 1775, Benjamin Franklin, then a member of the Secret Committee of Correspondence, hinted to French agents and other European sympathizers that the colonies were increasingly leaning towards seeking independence.

While perhaps true, Franklin also hoped to convince the French to supply the colonists with aid. Independence would be necessary, however, before French officials would consider the possibility of an alliance.

The colonists elected delegates to attend the Second Continental Congress that eventually became the governing body of the union during the Revolution. Its second meeting convened in Philadelphia in 1775. The delegates to Congress adopted strict rules of secrecy to protect the cause of American liberty and their own lives. In less than a year, most of the delegates abandoned hope of reconciliation with Britain.

Throughout the winter of 1775–1776, the members of the Continental Congress came to view reconciliation with Britain as unlikely, and independence the only course of action available to them.

When on December 22, 1775, the British Parliament prohibited trade with the colonies, Congress responded in April of 1776 by opening colonial ports - this was a major step towards severing ties with Britain.

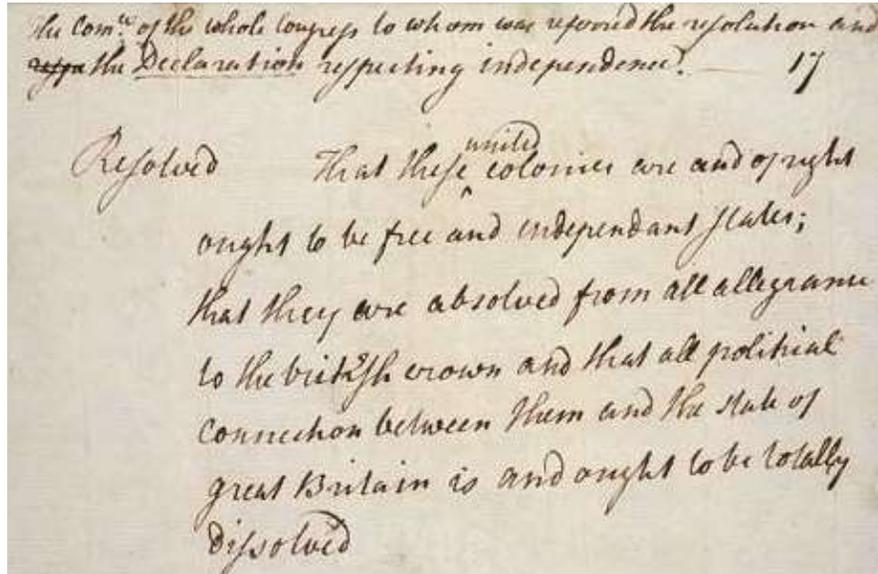
The colonists were aided by the January publication of Thomas Paine’s pamphlet *Common Sense*, which advocated the colonies’ independence and was widely distributed throughout the colonies.

By February of 1776, colonial leaders were discussing the possibility of forming foreign alliances and began to draft the Model Treaty that would serve as a basis for the 1778 alliance with France.

Leaders for the cause of independence wanted to make certain that they had sufficient congressional support before they would bring the issue to the vote.

On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee introduced a resolution "that these united colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent states," acting under the instruction of the Virginia Convention. The Lee Resolution contained three parts: a declaration of independence, a call to form foreign alliances, and "a plan for confederation."

Resolved, That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.



That it is expedient forthwith to take the most effectual measures for forming foreign Alliances.

That a plan of confederation be prepared and transmitted to the respective Colonies for their consideration and approbation

Other members of Congress were amenable but thought some colonies not quite ready. However, Congress did form a committee to draft a declaration of independence and assigned this duty to Thomas Jefferson.

The publication of Thomas Paine's stirring pamphlet Common Sense in early 1776 lit a fire under this previously unthinkable idea. The movement for independence was now in full swing.

On June 11, 1776, the Congress appointed three concurrent committees in response to the Lee Resolution: one to draft a declaration of independence, a second to draw up a plan "for forming foreign alliances," and a third to "prepare and digest the form of a confederation."

John Adams, in a letter to Timothy Picking on August 6, 1822, explains on how Thomas Jefferson was selected to write the first draft of the Declaration of Independence (LOC),

You enquire why so young a man as Jefferson was placed at the head of the Committee for preparing a declaration of Independence?

I answer, it was the Frankfort advice, to place Virginia at the head of everything.

Mr: Richard Henry Lee, might be gone to Virginia, to his sick family, for aught I know, but that was not the reason of Mr: Jefferson's appointment.

There were three Committees appointed at the same time. One for the declaration of Independence; another for preparing Articles of Confederation; and another for preparing a Treaty to be proposed to France.

Mr Lee was chosen for the Committee of confederation, and it was not thought convenient that the same person should be upon both.

Mr Jefferson came into Congress in June 1775. and brought with him a reputation for literature, science, and a happy talent at composition. Writings of his were handed about remarkable for the peculiar felicity of expression.

Though a silent member in Congress, he was so prompt, frank, explicit and decisive upon Committees, not even Saml Adams was more so, that he soon seized upon my heart, and upon this occasion I gave him my vote and did all in my power to procure the votes of others.

I think he had one more vote than any other, and that placed him at the head of the Committee. I had the next highest number and that placed me the second.

The Committee met, discussed the subject, and then appointed Mr: Jefferson & me to make the draught; I suppose, because we were the two highest on the list.

The Sub-Committee met; Jefferson proposed to me to make the draught. I said I will not; You shall do it. Oh No! Why will you not? You ought to do it. I will not. Why?

Reasons enough. What can be your reasons? Reason 1st. You are a Virginian, and Virginia ought to appear at the head of this business.

Reason 2d. I am obnoxious, suspected and unpopular; You are very much otherwise. Reason 3d: You can write ten times better than I can.

"Well," said Jefferson, "if you are decided I will do as well as I can."

Very well, when you have drawn it up we will have a meeting.

They appointed a Committee of Five to write an announcement explaining the reasons for independence. Thomas Jefferson, who chaired the committee and had established himself as a bold and talented political writer, wrote the first draft.

On June 11, 1776, Jefferson holed up in his Philadelphia boarding house and began to write. Jefferson's writing was influenced by George Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights, as well as by his study of natural rights theory and the writings of John Locke, including Two Treatises of Government.

Jefferson later explained that "he was not striving for originality of principal or sentiment." Instead, he hoped his words served as an "expression of the American mind."

Jefferson became more and more concerned that people understand the principles in and the people responsible for the writing and adoption of the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson wrote:

“this was the object of the Declaration of Independence. not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we [were] compelled to take.”

On the eve of the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, in a letter to Roger Weightman on June 24, 1836, Thomas Jefferson wrote,

[O]ur fellow citizens, after half a century of experience and prosperity, continue to approve the choice we made. may it be to the world, what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all,)

the Signal of arousing men to burst the chains, under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings & security of self-government.

that form which we have substituted, restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. all eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man.

the general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view. the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of god.

these are grounds of hope for others. for ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them.

The draft went to the committee. John Adams noted (letter to Timothy Picking on August 6, 1822 (LOC)),

A meeting we accordingly had and conn'd the paper over.

I was delighted with its high tone, and the flights of Oratory with which it abounded, especially that concerning Negro Slavery, which though I knew his Southern Brethren would never suffer to pass in Congress, I certainly never would oppose.

There were other expressions, which I would not have inserted if I had drawn it up; particularly that which called the King a Tyrant.

I thought this too personal, for I never believed George to be a tyrant in disposition and in nature; I always believed him to be deceived by his Courtiers on both sides the Atlantic, and in his Official capacity only, Cruel.

Through the many revisions made by Jefferson, the committee, and then by Congress, Jefferson retained his prominent role in writing the defining document of the American Revolution and, indeed, of the United

States. Jefferson was critical of changes to the document and was justly proud of his role in writing the Declaration of Independence and skillfully defended his authorship of this hallowed document. (LOC)

Less than three weeks after he'd begun, the draft went to Congress. He was not pleased when Congress "mangled" his composition by cutting and changing much of his carefully chosen wording. He was especially sorry they removed the part blaming King George III for the slave trade, although he knew the time wasn't right to deal with the issue.

On July 2, 1776, Congress voted to declare independence. Two days later, it ratified the text of the Declaration.

John Dunlap, official printer to Congress, worked through the night to set the Declaration in type and print approximately 200 copies. These copies, known as the Dunlap Broadside, were sent to various committees, assemblies, and commanders of the Continental troops. The Dunlap Broadside weren't signed, but John Hancock's name appears in large type at the bottom.

One copy crossed the Atlantic, reaching King George III months later. The official British response scolded the "misguided Americans" and "their extravagant and inadmissible Claim of Independency".

On July 19, once all 13 colonies had signified their approval of the Declaration of Independence, Congress ordered that it be "fairly engrossed on parchment." (To "engross" is to write in a large, clear hand.) Timothy Matlack, an assistant to the Secretary of the Congress, was most likely the penman.

On August 2, the journal of the Continental Congress records that "The declaration of independence being engrossed and compared at the table was signed."

John Hancock, President of the Congress, signed first. The delegates then signed by state from north to south. Some signed after August 2. A few refused. George Washington was away with his troops. Ultimately, 56 delegates signed the Declaration.

The signers of the Declaration of Independence, those who,

"do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States;

that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and

that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.

And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."

The signers of the Declaration of Independence,

Georgia:

Button Gwinnett
Lyman Hall
George Walton

North Carolina:

William Hooper
Joseph Hewes
John Penn

South Carolina:

Edward Rutledge
Thomas Heyward, Jr.
Thomas Lynch, Jr.
Arthur Middleton

Connecticut:

Roger Sherman
Samuel Huntington
William Williams
Oliver Wolcott

Delaware:

Caesar Rodney
George Read
Thomas McKean

Massachusetts:

Samuel Adams
John Adams
Robert Treat Paine
Elbridge Gerry
John Hancock

Virginia:

George Wythe
Richard Henry Lee
Thomas Jefferson
Benjamin Harrison
Thomas Nelson, Jr.
Francis Lightfoot Lee
Carter Braxton

Pennsylvania:

Robert Morris
Benjamin Rush
Benjamin Franklin
John Morton
George Clymer
James Smith
George Taylor
James Wilson
George Ross

Maryland:

Samuel Chase
William Paca
Thomas Stone
Charles Carroll of Carrollton

New York:

William Floyd
Philip Livingston
Francis Lewis
Lewis Morris

New Jersey:

Richard Stockton
John Witherspoon
Francis Hopkinson
John Hart
Abraham Clark

New Hampshire:

Josiah Bartlett
Matthew Thornton
William Whipple
Rhode Island:
Stephen Hopkins
William Ellery

Unlike the other founding documents, the Declaration of Independence is not legally binding, but it is powerful. Abraham Lincoln called it “a rebuke and a stumbling-block to tyranny and oppression.” It continues to inspire people around the world to fight for freedom and equality.

The Declaration of Independence was designed for multiple audiences: the King, the colonists, and the world. It was also designed to multitask. Its goals were to rally the troops, win foreign allies, and to announce the creation of a new country.

The introductory sentence states the Declaration’s main purpose, to explain the colonists’ right to revolution. In other words, “to declare the causes which impel them to the separation.” Congress had to prove the legitimacy of its cause. It had just defied the most powerful nation on Earth. It needed to motivate foreign allies to join the fight.

These are the lines contemporary Americans know best: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of happiness.” These stirring words were designed to convince Americans to put their lives on the line for the cause.

Separation from the mother country threatened their sense of security, economic stability, and identity. The preamble sought to inspire and unite them through the vision of a better life.

The list of 27 complaints against King George III constitute the proof of the right to rebellion. Congress cast “the causes which impel them to separation” in universal terms for an international audience. Join our fight, reads the subtext, and you join humankind’s fight against tyranny.

The most important and dramatic statement comes near the end: “That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States.” It declares a complete break with Britain and its King and claims the powers of an independent country.

About the Signers

Fifty-six men from each of the original 13 colonies signed the Declaration of Independence - they mutually pledged “to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.”

Nine of the signers were immigrants, two were brothers and two were cousins. Eighteen of the signers were merchants or businessmen, 14 were farmers and four were doctors. Twenty-two were lawyers and nine were judges.

The average age of a signer was 45. Benjamin Franklin was the oldest delegate at 70. The youngest was Thomas Lynch Jr. of South Carolina at 27.

American Revolutionary War

By the time the Declaration of Independence was adopted in July 1776, the Thirteen Colonies (New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia) and Great Britain had been at war for more than a year.

That war lasted from April 19, 1775 (with the Battles of Lexington and Concord) to September 3, 1783; it lasted 8 years, 4 months, 2 weeks and 1 day.

The war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Paris. The treaty document was signed by John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and John Jay (representing the United States) and David Hartley (a member of the British Parliament representing the British Monarch, King George III).

Then, the sovereignty of the United States was recognized over the territory bounded roughly by what is now Canada to the north, Florida to the south, and the Mississippi River to the west.

The British captured five signers during the war. Edward Rutledge, Thomas Heyward and Arthur Middleton were captured at the Battle of Charleston in 1780. George Walton was wounded and captured at the Battle of Savannah; Richard Stockton was incarcerated at the hands of British Loyalists.

Eleven signers had their homes and property destroyed. Francis Lewis’s New York home was razed and his wife taken prisoner. John Hart’s farm and mills were destroyed when the British invaded New Jersey, and he died while fleeing capture.

Fifteen of the signers participated in their states’ constitutional conventions, and six - Roger Sherman, Robert Morris, Benjamin Franklin, George Clymer, James Wilson and George Reed - signed the US Constitution.

Here are a couple myths about the 4th of July and the Declaration of Independence:

#1 Independence Was Declared on the Fourth of July

America's independence was actually declared by the Continental Congress on July 2, 1776. The Lee Resolution, also known as the resolution of independence, ...

... was an act of the Second Continental Congress declaring the United Colonies to be independent of the British Empire. Richard Henry Lee of Virginia first proposed it on June 7, 1776; it was formally approved on July 2, 1776.

So what happened on the Fourth? The document justifying the act of Congress - Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence - was adopted on the fourth, as is indicated on the document itself.

#2 The Declaration of Independence Was Signed July 4

Hanging in the grand Rotunda of the Capitol of the United States is a vast canvas painting by John Trumbull depicting the signing of the Declaration.

Both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams wrote, years afterward, that the signing ceremony took place on July 4. When someone challenged Jefferson's memory in the early 1800s Jefferson insisted he was right.

However, David McCullough remarks in his biography of Adams, "No such scene, with all the delegates present, ever occurred at Philadelphia."

So when was it signed? Most delegates signed the document on August 2, when a clean copy was finally produced by Timothy Matlack, assistant to the secretary of Congress. Several did not sign until later. And their names were not released to the public until January 1777.

John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and Charles Carroll were the longest surviving signers of the Declaration of Independence. Adams and Jefferson both died on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence; Carroll was the last signer to die - in 1832 - at the age of 95.

Information here is primarily from National Archives; State Department; Library of Congress

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young