



## Signing the Declaration of Independence

The Revolutionary War broke out at Lexington and Concord) on April 19, 1775.

For the first few months of the conflict, the Patriots had carried on their struggle in an ad-hoc and uncoordinated manner. On Sept 13, 1775, the Second Continental Congress reconvened and assumed leadership of the war effort. They resolved to prepare for war but continued to seek reconciliation.

On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee, ranking delegate from Virginia, formally proposed independence to Congress. It is the earliest form and draft of the Declaration of Independence.

After approving the Lee resolution, the Congress felt they needed to draft a document explaining the move to the public. On June 10, Congress appointed a committee of five to draft a statement of independence for the colonies.

The committee included Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert R. Livingston, and Roger Sherman, with the actual writing delegated to Jefferson.

Officially, the Congress declared its freedom from Great Britain on July 2, 1776, when it approved a resolution in a unanimous vote. In the late morning of July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence had been officially adopted by the Continental Congress.

Under the supervision of the Jefferson committee, the approved Declaration was printed on July 5th and a copy was attached to the "rough journal of the Continental Congress for July 4th."

These printed copies, bearing only the names of John Hancock, President, and Charles Thomson, secretary, were distributed to state assemblies, conventions, committees of safety, and commanding officers of the Continental troops.

One of the most widely held misconceptions about the Declaration of Independence is that it was signed on July 4, by all the delegates in attendance.

The engrossed document is itself largely responsible for the erroneous views which have been held respecting the date of the signing. Being headed by the legend, "In Congress, July 4, 1776," and ending with the fifty-six signatures, the natural inference to be made, until better information was obtainable, was that this official document was signed on that day.

It is further misinforming, not only as regards the date of signing, but in its title, "The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States," under the date July 4. For on that day, New York's delegates had no authority to vote, so that unanimity was procured by their silence, but twelve colonies, therefore, taking part in the final ballot."

Actually, on August 2, 1776, John Hancock, the President of the Congress, was the first to sign the sheet of parchment measuring 24¼ by 29¾ inches. He used a bold signature centered below the text.

In accordance with prevailing custom, the other delegates began to sign at the right below the text, their signatures arranged according to the geographic location of the states they represented. Eventually 56 delegates signed, although all were not present on August 2.

Some of the signers were not present during the July 4 vote; different members made up several of the State delegations. Some of the delegates who voted for declaration of independence did not sign the actual document, and several of those that signed had not voted on July 4. In addition, not all of the delegates were in Philadelphia on August 2. (Thomas McKean, the 56th (and last) signer, signed sometime after January 1777.)

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This broadsheet is dedicated to the 250th Anniversary Celebration of the Declaration of Independence for more information visit the National Society Sons of the American Revolution website at: [www.sar.org](http://www.sar.org)

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