

The Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence of the Thirteen Colonies In CONGRESS, July 4, 1776 The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America, When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain [George III] is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained, and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the meantime exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary Powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people, and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies, without the consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation: For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us: For protecting them by a mock Trial from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:

For depriving us in many cases of the benefits of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences:

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated Government here by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of cruelty and perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms. Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by the 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 represented the new States as follows:

New Hampshire: Josiah Bartlett, William Whipple, Matthew Thornton

Massachusetts: John Hancock, Samuel Adams, John Adams, Robert Treat Paine, Elbridge Gerry

Rhode Island: Stephen Hopkins, William Ellery

Connecticut: Roger Sherman, Samuel Huntington, William Williams, Oliver Wolcott

New York: William Floyd, Philip Livingston, Francis Lewis, Lewis Morris

New Jersey: Richard Stockton, John Witherspoon, Francis Hopkinson, John Hart, Abraham Clark

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

Delaware: Caesar Rodney, George Read, Thomas McKean

Maryland: Samuel Chase, William Paca, Thomas Stone, Charles Carroll of Carrollton

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

North Carolina: William Hooper, Joseph Hewes, John Penn

South Carolina: Edward Rutledge, Thomas Heyward, Jr., Thomas Lynch, Jr., Arthur Middleton

Georgia: Button Gwinnett, Lyman Hall, George Walton

Historical Background:

On July 2, 1776, in Philadelphia, the Continental Congress adopted the resolution, introduced by Richard Henry Lee and John Adams, which actually declared independence from Great Britain. [It declared, in part, ``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.''] The Declaration, which explained why the Colonies (now States) declared their independence, was adopted by the Continental Congress July 4, 1776. [The leading draftsman was Thomas Jefferson, assisted by John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert R. Livingston, and Roger Sherman. The drafting of Declaration of Independence is detailed here.]

Chronology Of Events:

June 7, 1776 to January 18, 1777

1776

June 7 -- Congress, meeting in Philadelphia, receives Richard Henry Lee's resolution urging Congress to declare independence.

June 11 -- Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston appointed to a committee to draft a declaration of independence. American army retreats to Lake Champlain from Canada.

June 12 - 27 -- Jefferson, at the request of the committee, drafts a declaration, of which only a fragment exists. Jefferson's clean, or "fair" copy, the "original Rough draught," is reviewed by the committee. Both documents are in the manuscript collections of the Library of Congress.

June 28 -- A fair copy of the committee draft of the Declaration of Independence is read in Congress.

July 1 - 4 -- Congress debates and revises the Declaration of Independence.

July 2 -- Congress declares independence as the British fleet and army arrive at New York.

July 4 -- Congress adopts the Declaration of Independence in the morning of a bright, sunny, but cool Philadelphia day. John Dunlap prints the Declaration of Independence. These prints are now called "Dunlap Broad­sides." Twenty-four copies are known to exist, two of which are in the Library of Congress. One of these was Washington's personal copy.

July 5 -- John Hancock, president of the Continental Congress, dispatches the first of Dunlap's broadsides of the Declaration of Independence to the legislatures of New Jersey and Delaware.

July 6 -- Pennsylvania Evening Post of July 6 prints the first newspaper rendition of the Declaration of Independence.

July 8 -- The first public reading of the Declaration is in Philadelphia.

July 9 -- Washington orders that the Declaration of Independence be read before the American army in New York -- from his personal copy of the "Dunlap Broadside."

July 19 -- Congress orders the Declaration of Independence engrossed (officially inscribed) and signed by members.

August 2 -- Delegates begin to sign engrossed copy of the Declaration of Independence. A large British reinforcement arrives at New York after being repelled at Charleston, S.C.

1777

January 18 -- Congress, now sitting in Baltimore, Maryland, orders that signed copies of the Declaration of Independence printed by Mary Katherine Goddard of Baltimore be sent to the states.

Drafting the Documents:

Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia behind a veil of Congressionally imposed secrecy in June 1776 for a country wracked by military and political uncertainties. In anticipation of a vote for independence, the Continental Congress on June 11 appointed Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston as a committee to draft a declaration of independence. The committee then delegated Thomas Jefferson to undertake the task. Jefferson worked diligently in private for days to compose a document. Proof of the arduous nature of the work can be seen in the fragment of the first known composition draft of the declaration, which is on public display here for the first time.

Jefferson then made a clean or "fair" copy of the composition declaration, which became the foundation of the document, labeled by Jefferson as the "original Rough draught." Revised first by Adams, then by Franklin, and then by the full committee, a total of forty-seven alterations including the insertion of three complete paragraphs was made on the text before it was presented to Congress on June 28. After voting for independence on July 2, the Congress then continued to refine the document, making thirty-nine additional revisions to the committee draft before its final adoption on the morning of July 4. The "original Rough draught" embodies the multiplicity of corrections, additions and deletions that were made at each step. Although most of the alterations are in Jefferson's handwriting (Jefferson later indicated the changes he believed to have been made by Adams and Franklin), quite naturally he opposed many of the changes made to his document.

Congress then ordered the Declaration of Independence printed and late on July 4, John Dunlap, a Philadelphia printer, produced the first printed text of the Declaration of Independence, now known as the "Dunlap Broadside." The next day John Hancock, the president of the Continental Congress, began dispatching copies of the Declaration to America's political and military leaders. On July 9, George Washington ordered that his personal copy of the "Dunlap Broadside," sent to him by John Hancock on July 6, be read to the assembled American army at New York. In 1783 at the war's end, General Washington brought his copy of the broadside home to Mount Vernon. This remarkable document, which has come down to us only partially intact, is accompanied in this exhibit by a complete "Dunlap Broadside" -- one of only twenty-four known to exist.

On July 19, Congress ordered the production of an engrossed (officially inscribed) copy of the Declaration of Independence, which attending members of the Continental Congress, including some who had not voted for its adoption, began to sign on August 2, 1776. This document is on permanent display at the National Archives.

On July 4, 1995, more than two centuries after its composition, the Declaration of Independence, just as Jefferson predicted on its fiftieth anniversary in his letter to Roger C. Weightman, towers aloft as "the signal of arousing men to burst the chains...to assume the blessings and security of self-government" and to restore "the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion."

These images are from a special exhibition in a series of public previews of unique documents from the collections of the Library of Congress. These previews will culminate in the permanent exhibition, "Treasures of the Library of Congress," funded by the Xerox Foundation, which will open in 1997, the 100th anniversary of the Thomas Jefferson Building.

One of twenty-four surviving copies of the first printing of the Declaration of Independence done by Philadelphia printer John Dunlap in the evening of July 4, 1776. Fragment of George Washington's personal copy of the "Dunlap Broadside" (131k) of the Declaration of Independence, sent on July 6 to George Washington by John Hancock, president of the Continental Congress. The text is broken at lines thirty-four and fifty-four, with the text below line fifty-four missing.

General Washington had the Declaration read to his assembled troops in New York on July 9. Later that night, the Americans destroyed a bronze statue of Great Britain's King George III (77k) which stood at the foot of Broadway on the Bowling Green (The tail of the horse is in the New York Historical Museum).

A contemporaneous print representing the committee of five delegates, chaired by Thomas Jefferson, that was appointed to prepare a declaration of independence. They are shown submitting their draft of the Declaration of Independence to the Continental Congress, June 28, 1776 Edward Savage's engraving (86k) , based on Robert Edge Pine's painting of the presentation of the Declaration of Independence to the Continental Congress, is considered one of the most realistic renditions of this historic event. Jefferson is the tall person depositing the Declaration of Independence on the table. Benjamin Franklin sits to his right. John Hancock sits behind the table. Fellow committee members, John Adams, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston stand (left to right) behind Jefferson.

An 1876 print representing the "Declaration Committee," chaired by Thomas Jefferson, which was charged in June 1776 with drafting a declaration of independence for action by the Continental Congress.

The "Declaration Committee," which included Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Robert R. Livingston of New York, and John Adams of Massachusetts, was appointed by Congress on June 11, 1776, to draft a declaration in anticipation of an expected vote in favor of American independence, which occurred on July 2. Currier and Ives prepared this imagined scene of the writing of the Declaration for the 100th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.