

# Memorial to the 56 Signers of the Declaration of Independence

National Park Service  
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Constitution Gardens  
National Mall  
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## Honoring the Founding Fathers



*The Declaration of Independence*  
By John Trumbull

### Consensus

Imagine the difficulty of fifty-six members of a group coming together and agreeing on one answer to a question. Imagine fifty-six individuals, all proud, accomplished men, each with his own interests to oversee, representing thirteen unique and individual colonies. Now imagine a unified decision coming from this body at a time of war, when one's personal and colonial rights were threatened. The signers of the Declaration of Independence overcame such concerns and persevered to create a document that served as a foundation for the United States of America.

### Setting the Stage

Many people living in British America in the mid 1700s were content as colonists of Great Britain. They were proud of their British heritage, which included personal liberties. When those individual freedoms were threatened, as a result of British taxes in the 1760s, colonists objected, and some began questioning the governing relationship between Britain and her colonies. Eventually, these questions would lead to a war for independence from Great Britain, with George Washington leading the colonists against the British army.

As Commander in Chief, George Washington realized the need for Britain's thirteen separate colonies to unite, in order to win the war for independence. The colonies also had to work together to support the army and discuss mutual concerns. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania became the site of their forum, with the First Continental Congress meeting there in 1774 to discuss common grievances against the British government. The Congress reconvened in 1775 after the battles of Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. At this time, talk began of separating from Great Britain and forming an independent nation, yet most delegates were still hesitant to make the move.

### Independence

Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* brought the issue of independence to the forefront of discussion in the Second Continental Congress during 1776. Many colonies did not want to consider independence, but as war raged on, a decision seemed inevitable. Richard Henry Lee forced the issue, with a resolution from his colony of Virginia on June 7, 1776, stating, "that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be free and independent states." The delegates debated for weeks. When the vote was finally taken on July 2, 1776, the colonies voted unanimously for independence.



State House, now Independence Hall, in Philadelphia, PA

### The Declaration

During the debate, a committee was created to draft a document explaining the colonies' reasons for declaring independence. Thomas Jefferson, at age thirty-three, known for his fine writing skills, was chosen as the primary author. Also serving on the Declaration Committee were John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston, who, interestingly, never signed the final document, as he was no longer a member of Congress when the Declaration was adopted.

Congress debated Jefferson's draft for a few days and made numerous changes. One of the most significant clauses omitted from Jefferson's original text during this debate addressed slavery. As these men gathered to discuss the equal and inherent rights of all men, many, including Jefferson, owned slaves themselves.



The Declaration Committee on the pediment of the Jefferson Memorial

## The Signing

Only John Hancock, the president of Congress, and Charles Thomson, the Congressional Secretary, signed the first copy of the Declaration of Independence in July, 1776. The embossed copy was not signed by most delegates until August 2, 1776. Thomas McKean of Delaware, present at the vote, but serving in the military in August, was the last to sign the document months later.

William Ellery, a delegate from Rhode Island, wrote after the signing: "I was determined to see how they all looked as they signed what might be their death warrants. I placed myself beside the secretary, Charles Thomson, and eyed each closely as he affixed his name to the document. Undaunted resolution was displayed on every countenance."



The chamber where the Declaration was signed, Independence Hall, Philadelphia, PA

## The Consequences

Signing the Declaration of Independence was considered treason, and involved grave risks for all who put their names to the paper. The British forces paid special attention to those who had signed. Signers' families had to escape to safer locations in some cases, and their property was often looted or destroyed. Three of the delegates from South Carolina were imprisoned, when the British army came through the South.

John Morton, a Pennsylvania delegate, was ostracized by some friends in his community for signing the Declaration, since many were loyal to the British. The first of the signers to die, Morton supposedly said in 1777, on his deathbed, "Tell them, tell them that they will live to see the hour when they shall acknowledge it [the signing] to have been the most glorious service that I ever rendered to my country."

## The Memorial

In 1978, Public Law 95-260 allowed for the creation of a memorial to the 56 Signers of the Declaration of Independence within the park known as Constitution Gardens on the National Mall. This memorial was a gift from the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, who realized the lack of any commemoration within the nation's capital of the Declaration's signers. Dedicated on July 2, 1984, the 56 stones, each with the signer's signature, occupation, and hometown, expresses the strength and dignity of the men who risked all for liberty.

Senator John Warner, at the dedication of the memorial, said, "We sometimes forget the magnitude of their action, the courage and moral strength needed to take that first great step."

Tucked away between Constitution Avenue and the Reflecting Pool, near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and within view of the Washington Monument, this simple memorial honors men who made a decision that was anything but simple.



Memorial to the 56 Signers of the Declaration of Independence, Constitution Gardens, National Mall, Washington, D.C.