



### American Revolution Overview

The Revolutionary War (1775-1783) began as a conflict between Great Britain and her North American colonies. It ended as a global war, pitting European powers against each other in a time of intense imperial rivalry. In the end, the American colonies gained their independence, ruling themselves under the “firm league of friendship” known as the Articles of Confederation. In 1789, the U.S. Constitution—establishing the legislative, executive, and judicial branches - superseded the Articles of Confederation.

Timeline of major American Revolution actions:

- **April 19, 1775:** First shots fired at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. No one knows who fired first – the British troops or the colonists.
- **May 10, 1775:** Second Continental Congress convenes in the Pennsylvania State House (now known as Independence Hall).
- **July 2, 1776:** Second Continental Congress approves the resolution for independence.
- **October 17, 1777:** British General Burgoyne and 6,000 British troops surrender to the Americans at Saratoga, New York.
- **February 6, 1778:** The United States and France enter into an alliance.
- **May 12, 1780:** Fighting shifts south as the British take Charleston, SC, capturing a large patriot army.
- **March 2, 1781:** Articles of Confederation adopted.
- **October 19, 1781:** British General Cornwallis surrenders after American and French forces surround his troops on land and sea.
- **November 30, 1782:** British and American forces sign preliminary Articles of Peace.
- **September 3, 1783:** U.S. and British sign the Treaty of Paris, ending the war and recognizing American independence.
- **September 17, 1787:** Delegates to the Federal (Constitutional) Convention sign the U.S. Constitution.
- **April 30, 1789:** George Washington sworn in as first President of the United States.

### The Second Continental Congress and the Declaration of Independence

The Second Continental Congress met inside Independence Hall beginning in May 1775. It was just a month after shots had been fired at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts, and the Congress was preparing for war. They established a Continental army and elected George Washington as Commander-in-Chief, but the delegates also drafted the Olive Branch Petition and sent it to King George III in hopes of reaching a peaceful resolution. The king refused to hear the petition and declared the American colonies in revolt.

On June 7, 1776, Virginia delegate Richard Henry Lee put forth the resolution for independence: “Resolved, that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states...” Voting was postponed while some of the delegates worked to convince others to support independence, but a committee of five men was assigned to draft a document of independence: John Adams (MA), Benjamin Franklin (PA), Thomas Jefferson (VA), Roger Sherman (CT), and Robert R. Livingston (NY). Jefferson did most of the work, drafting the document in his lodgings at 7<sup>th</sup> and Market Street.

On July 2, 1776, the Second Continental Congress voted to adopt Lee's resolution for independence. This is the day that John Adams thought should be celebrated with "Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more." (John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776)

Between July 2 and July 4, Congress argued over every word in Jefferson's draft of the declaration, making numerous changes. On July 4, Congress voted again – this time to approve the wording of the Declaration of Independence. They didn't actually sign the document that day. After New York's delegates received instructions from home to vote for independence (they had initially abstained), the document was sent to Timothy Matlack to be engrossed (handwritten). Fifty of the 56 men signed the engrossed Declaration of Independence inside Independence Hall on August 2, 1776.

### **The Declaration of Independence as an Argument**

Looking back on the Declaration of Independence almost 50 years later, Thomas Jefferson explained that the document's purpose was never meant to be thoroughly original; its purpose wasn't to articulate anything that hadn't be said before, but to make the case for the American colonies in plain terms and persuade the world to see common sense. "It was intended to be an expression of the American mind," Jefferson explains. He goes on to claim that "[the Declaration's] authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day." (Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825)

Jefferson finished his timeless defense of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" in little more than two weeks, and like most writers, he was no stranger to the revision process. Between the Committee of Five and the Second Continental Congress, there were 86 edits to the document. The Second Continental Congress removed whole sections. Jefferson was most angered by the removal of one particular clause, a clause blaming the King for forcing the slave trade upon the American colonies.

The final draft of the Declaration of Independence contains a preamble, a list of grievances, a formal declaration of independence, and signatures.

#### Preamble

This first of the Declaration contains an assertion of individual rights. Perhaps the most famous line states, "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." This part goes on to say that if the government tries to take these rights away, the people have the right to form a new government. Jefferson also addresses a counterclaim in this section, acknowledging that "Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes..." He counters by reminding his audience of the "long train of abuses and usurpations" that makes it "...their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security."

#### Grievances

The longest part of the Declaration lists the unfair actions of the British king and Parliament. In their complaints, the colonists make it clear that they are angry with the British king and government for taking away their rights as English citizens. They point out that the king has ignored or changed their colonial governments, as well as their rights to a trial by jury. The colonists accuse the king of sending a hired army to force them to obey unjust laws. They say the king is "unfit to be the ruler of a free people."

**Note:** Because the norms and structure of argumentative writing in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were different than they are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, students might be confused about why the Declaration does not use the kind of evidence they are required to present in an essay (statistics, citations, etc). After all, the list of grievances that serves as the Declaration’s evidence seems largely anecdotal by today’s standards. To minimize confusion, we recommend focusing on the Declaration’s claim and underlying assumption (big idea), which are especially applicable to the writing standards of 21<sup>st</sup>-century classrooms.

### Formal declaration of independence

This part affirms that the 13 colonies are free and independent states. It breaks all ties with the British government and people. As independent states, they can make trade agreements and treaties, wage war, and do whatever is necessary to govern themselves. This formal declaration of independence ends with important words. The words tell us what the signers of the Declaration of Independence were willing to give up for freedom: “...we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”

### Signatures

There are 56 signatures on the Declaration of Independence. Fifty men from 13 states signed the document on August 2 in 1776. The other six signed over the course of the next year and a half. As the President of the Second Continental Congress, John Hancock signed first. He wrote his name very large. Some of the men abbreviated their first names, like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. All of the signers risked their lives when they signed the Declaration of Independence.

### **Legacy of the Argument**

Contrary to popular belief, the words of the Declaration of Independence did not gain immediate prominence. In fact, they remained obscure for decades. And yet the spirit of the Declaration caused ripples almost immediately, most famously with the French Revolution in 1789. The Haitian Revolution followed soon after, and the subsequent decades would see many Latin American countries continuing the fight for independence from colonial powers.

Within the U.S., the women’s suffrage movement adapted the Declaration of Independence for their cause, asserting in the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments that “all men and women are created equal.” Meanwhile, the country’s celebrations of independence haunted enslaved people and abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, whose 1852 speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” pondered the nation’s shortcoming despite its dedication to values like liberty. As Douglass said, “This Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*. You may rejoice, I must mourn.”

### **Quotes from the Founders about the Declaration**

#### Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, 8 May 1825 (abridged)

“When forced, therefore, to resort to arms for redress, an appeal to the tribunal of the world was deemed proper for our justification. 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 are compelled to take. Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion...All its authority rests then on the

harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, &c. ...”

Benjamin Rush to John Adams, 20 July 1811 (excerpt from first paragraph)

“Do you recollect your memorable speech upon the Day on which the Vote was taken? Do you recollect the pensive and awful silence which pervaded the house when we were called up, one after another, to the table of the President of Congress, to subscribe what was believed by many at that time to be our own death warrants? The Silence & the gloom of the morning were interrupted I well recollect only for a moment by Col. Harrison of Virginia who said to Mr. Gerry at the table, “I shall have a great advantage over you Mr. Gerry when we are all hung for what we are now doing. From the size and weight of my body I shall die in a few minutes, but from the lightness of your body you will dance in the air an hour or two before you are dead.” This Speech procured a transient smile, but it was soon succeeded by the Solemnity with which the whole business was conducted.”

Letter from John Adams to H. Niles, 13 February 1818 (excerpt)

“But what do we mean by the American Revolution? Do we mean the American war? The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations... This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people, was the real American Revolution.”

### **Declaration of Independence Fact Sheet**

- **June 7, 1776:** Richard Henry Lee of VA puts forth the resolution for independence.
- **June 10, 1776:** Consideration of the resolution postponed until July 1 (so moderates could build a coalition)
- **June 11, 1776:** Revolutionaries persuade Congress to appoint a committee to draft a declaration of independence. The committee consisted of John Adams (MA), Benjamin Franklin (PA), Thomas Jefferson (VA), Roger Sherman (CT), and Robert R. Livingston (NY). Jefferson takes the lead on the project. Adams and Franklin make a few edits. Jefferson’s rough draft is in the Library of Congress.
- **July 1, 1776:** Vote on the resolution for independence. Nine colonies vote for it, 2 against it (PA and SC), 1 abstained (NY), and one was deadlocked (DE). Vote to be retaken the next day.
- **July 2, 1776:** 12 of the 13 colonies vote for the resolution, with NY abstaining. Congress declares the resolution to be in effect.
- **July 2-4, 1776:** Congress debates the content of the Declaration of Independence.
- **July 4, 1776:** Congress approves the Declaration of Independence and orders it printed. Philadelphia printer John Dunlap prints about 200 copies. Fewer than 30 survive today.
- **July 19, 1776:** Congress ordered the Declaration engrossed for signatures. Title is changed from “A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America in General Congress Assembled” to “The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America.”
- **August 2, 1776:** Declaration signed by (most likely) 50 of the 56 signers. Five more signed later in 1776. Thomas McKean, the 56<sup>th</sup> signer, signed sometime after January 1777. There is only one handwritten, signed Declaration of Independence. It is on display in the National Archives in Washington D.C.
- **January 18, 1777:** Congress authorizes the printing of the Declaration with the names of the signers (first time names of signers are printed).

## Learn More

- The Declaration of Independence is in the collection of the National Archives:  
<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/301684>
- Jefferson's original drafts are gone, but the rough draft he shared with Benjamin Franklin and John Adams survives in the Library of Congress. One can see their handwritten edits on the document: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/declara/images/draft1.jpg>
- The Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution were signed in the Assembly Room of the Pennsylvania State House, now known as Independence Hall:  
<https://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/historyculture/places-independencehall-assemblyroom.htm>
- Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams about independence celebrations, 3 July 1776, can be found here: <https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17760703jasecond>
- See an image and read more about Declaration engrosser Timothy Matlack:  
<http://museum.nps.gov/ParkObjdet.aspx?rID=INDE%20%20%2011869%26db%3Dobjects%26dir%3DCR%20INDE%26page%3D1>
- Excerpt from the letter to Henry Lee in which Jefferson calls the Declaration "an expression of the American mind" can be found here:  
<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/letter-to-henry-lee>
- Letter from Benjamin Rush to John Adams about the signing of the Declaration of Independence, 20 July 1811, can be found here:  
<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5659>
- Letter from John Adams to H. Niles about the definition of the American Revolution, 13 February 1818, can be found here: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/john-adams-to-h-niles/>
- Timeline of the American Revolution:  
[https://www.nps.gov/revwar/about\\_the\\_revolution/timeline\\_of\\_events.html](https://www.nps.gov/revwar/about_the_revolution/timeline_of_events.html)
- The 1848 Declaration of Sentiments, which asserts that "all men *and women* are created equal"  
<https://www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/declaration-of-sentiments.htm>
- Frederick Douglass' 1852 speech, "What to a Slave is the 4<sup>th</sup> of July?"  
<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july/>