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[The Declaration of Independence: A History](#)

Nations come into being in many ways. Military rebellion, civil strife, acts of heroism, acts of treachery, a thousand greater and lesser clashes between defenders of the old order and supporters of the new--all these occurrences and more have marked the emergences of new nations, large and small. The birth of our own nation included them all. That birth was unique, not only in the immensity of its later impact on the course of world history and the growth of democracy, but also because so many of the threads in our national history run back through time to come together in one place, in one time, and in one document: the Declaration of Independence.

Moving Toward Independence

The clearest call for independence up to the summer of 1776 came in Philadelphia on June 7. On that date in session in the Pennsylvania State House (later Independence Hall), the Continental Congress heard Richard Henry Lee of Virginia read his resolution beginning: "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."

The Lee Resolution was an expression of what was already beginning to happen throughout the colonies. When the Second Continental Congress, which was essentially the government of the United States from 1775 to 1788, first met in May 1775, King George III had not replied to the petition for redress of grievances that he had been sent by the First Continental Congress. The Congress gradually took on the responsibilities of a national government. In June 1775 the Congress established the Continental Army as well as a continental currency. By the end of July of that year, it created a post office for the "United Colonies."

In August 1775 a royal proclamation declared that the King's American subjects were "engaged in open and avowed rebellion." Later that year, Parliament passed the American Prohibitory Act, which made all American vessels and cargoes forfeit to the Crown. And in May 1776 the Congress learned that the King had negotiated treaties with German states to hire mercenaries to fight in America. The weight of these actions combined to convince many Americans that the mother country was treating the colonies as a foreign entity.

One by one, the Continental Congress continued to cut the colonies' ties to Britain. The Privateering Resolution, passed in March 1776, allowed the colonists "to fit out armed vessels to cruize [sic] on the enemies of these United Colonies." On April 6, 1776, American ports were opened to commerce with other nations, an action that severed the economic ties fostered by the Navigation Acts. A "Resolution for the Formation of Local Governments" was passed on May 10, 1776.

At the same time, more of the colonists themselves were becoming convinced of the inevitability of independence. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, published in January 1776, was sold by the thousands. By the middle of May 1776, eight colonies had decided that they would support

independence. On May 15, 1776, the Virginia Convention passed a resolution that "the delegates appointed to represent this colony in General Congress be instructed to propose to that respectable body to declare the United Colonies free and independent states."

It was in keeping with these instructions that Richard Henry Lee, on June 7, 1776, presented his resolution. There were still some delegates, however, including those bound by earlier instructions, who wished to pursue the path of reconciliation with Britain. On June 11 consideration of the Lee Resolution was postponed by a vote of seven colonies to five, with New York abstaining. Congress then recessed for 3 weeks. The tone of the debate indicated that at the end of that time the Lee Resolution would be adopted. Before Congress recessed, therefore, a Committee of Five was appointed to draft a statement presenting to the world the colonies' case for independence.

The Committee of Five

The committee consisted of two New England men, John Adams of Massachusetts and Roger Sherman of Connecticut; two men from the Middle Colonies, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania and Robert R. Livingston of New York; and one southerner, Thomas Jefferson of Virginia. In 1823 Jefferson wrote that the other members of the committee "unanimously pressed on myself alone to undertake the draught [sic]. I consented; I drew it; but before I reported it to the committee I communicated it separately to Dr. Franklin and Mr. Adams requesting their corrections. . . I then wrote a fair copy, reported it to the committee, and from them, unaltered to the Congress." (If Jefferson did make a "fair copy," incorporating the changes made by Franklin and Adams, it has not been preserved. It may have been the copy that was amended by the Congress and used for printing, but in any case, it has not survived. Jefferson's rough draft, however, with changes made by Franklin and Adams, as well as Jefferson's own notes of changes by the Congress, is housed at the Library of Congress.)

Jefferson's account reflects three stages in the life of the Declaration: the document originally written by Jefferson; the changes to that document made by Franklin and Adams, resulting in the version that was submitted by the Committee of Five to the Congress; and the version that was eventually adopted.

On July 1, 1776, Congress reconvened. The following day, the Lee Resolution for independence was adopted by 12 of the 13 colonies, New York not voting. Immediately afterward, the Congress began to consider the Declaration. Adams and Franklin had made only a few changes before the committee submitted the document. The discussion in Congress resulted in some alterations and deletions, but the basic document remained Jefferson's. The process of revision continued through all of July 3 and into the late morning of July 4. Then, at last, church bells rang out over Philadelphia; the Declaration had been officially adopted.

The Declaration of Independence is made up of five distinct parts: the introduction; the preamble; the body, which can be divided into two sections; and a conclusion. The introduction states that this document will "declare" the "causes" that have made it necessary for the American colonies to leave the British Empire. Having stated in the introduction that independence is unavoidable, even

necessary, the preamble sets out principles that were already recognized to be "self-evident" by most 18th-century Englishmen, closing with the statement that "a long train of abuses and usurpations . . . evinces a design to reduce [a people] 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." The first section of the body of the Declaration gives evidence of the "long train of abuses and usurpations" heaped upon the colonists by King George III. The second section of the body states that the colonists had appealed in vain to their "British brethren" for a redress of their grievances. Having stated the conditions that made independence necessary and having shown that those conditions existed in British North America, the Declaration concludes 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."

Although Congress had adopted the Declaration submitted by the Committee of Five, the committee's task was not yet completed. Congress had also directed that the committee supervise the printing of the adopted document. The first printed copies of the Declaration of Independence were turned out from the shop of John Dunlap, official printer to the Congress. After the Declaration had been adopted, the committee took to Dunlap the manuscript document, possibly Jefferson's "fair copy" of his rough draft. On the morning of July 5, copies were dispatched by members of Congress to various assemblies, conventions, and committees of safety as well as to the commanders of Continental troops. Also on July 5, a copy of the printed version of the approved Declaration was inserted into the "rough journal" of the Continental Congress for July 4. The text was followed by the words "Signed by Order and in Behalf of the Congress, John Hancock, President. Attest. Charles Thomson, Secretary." It is not known how many copies John Dunlap printed on his busy night of July 4. There are 26 copies known to exist of what is commonly referred to as "the Dunlap broadside," 21 owned by American institutions, 2 by British institutions, and 3 by private owners. (See Appendix A.)

The Engrossed Declaration

On July 9 the action of Congress was officially approved by the New York Convention. All 13 colonies had now signified their approval. On July 19, therefore, Congress was able to order that the Declaration be "fairly engrossed on parchment, with the title and stile [sic] of 'The unanimous declaration of the thirteen United States of America,' and that the same, when engrossed, be signed by every member of Congress."

Engrossing is the process of preparing an official document in a large, clear hand. Timothy Matlack was probably the engrosser of the Declaration. He was a Pennsylvanian who had assisted the Secretary of the Congress, Charles Thomson, in his duties for over a year and who had written out George Washington's commission as commanding general of the Continental Army. Matlack set to work with pen, ink, parchment, and practiced hand, and finally, on August 2, the journal of the Continental Congress records that "The declaration of independence being engrossed and compared at the table was signed." One of the most widely held misconceptions about the Declaration is that it was signed on July 4, 1776, by all the delegates in attendance.

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. New Hampshire, the northernmost state, began the list, and Georgia, the southernmost, ended it. Eventually 56 delegates signed, although all were not present on August 2. Among the later signers were Elbridge Gerry, Oliver Wolcott, Lewis Morris, Thomas McKean, and Matthew Thornton, who found that he had no room to sign with the other New Hampshire delegates. A few delegates who voted for adoption of the Declaration on July 4 were never to sign in spite of the July 19 order of Congress that the engrossed document "be signed by every member of Congress." Nonsigners included John Dickinson, who clung to the idea of reconciliation with Britain, and Robert R. Livingston, one of the Committee of Five, who thought the Declaration was premature.