

The Declaration of Independence

In today's lesson, we are going to learn about a very old handwritten document called The Declaration of Independence. We are going to explore why this document still matters and discuss the big, bold, and brave ideas that it includes.

You may be wondering, why is a nearly 250-year-old document with a lot of scribbles and splashes so important? Well, we must go to the year 1775 to find out!

Recall from our discussion about the Boston Tea Party that at this time, America was made up of 13 colonies that were under British rule. The colonists were angry with King George III for imposing taxes without giving them representation in government and not recognizing their freedoms and liberties.

By 1775, the American colonists had enough. King George III ordered that the rowdy and rebellious colonists get put back in their place and stop stirring up trouble. So, the British sent 700 troops to steal the colonists' weapons and ammunition in Concord, Massachusetts (which was near Boston).¹

The colonists were alerted to the oncoming British troops by Paul Revere and other midnight riders, so when the Redcoats arrived in Lexington, in the early morning hours of April 19, 1775, they clashed with at least 70 minutemen (the elite forces of the colonial militia who were ready in a minute's notice).² ³ The British troops continued to Concord, where they found that the American colonists had moved much of the military supplies the British were looking to seize.⁴ It was here that the British were bombarded by the armed colonists and were forced to retreat to Boston.⁵

It was on this day that the "shot heard 'round the world" was fired and that the American Revolution began.

After the Battles of Lexington and Concord, in which both sides suffered casualties, the Second Continental Congress met in May 1775, at which time the delegates set up a Continental Army and elected its Commander-in-Chief, George Washington.

However, the American colonists still didn't want a war with Britain. Keep in mind that Britain at the time was a major global military power. In a war scenario, the colonists were the underdogs—they were outmanned and outgunned. Going to war was a last resort.



The Second Continental Congress sent the king a petition for peace, but instead of considering a peaceful resolution, King George III declared that the colonies were in a state of rebellion.⁶

But what really convinced the American colonists to support the case for independence from Britain was a 47-page pamphlet—essentially a softcover book—by Thomas Paine called *Common Sense*. It was first published in January 1776 and argued in favor of a new, free, independent government in America. Just like videos, memes, and posts go viral on the internet today, Thomas Paine’s pamphlet went viral throughout the colonies and generated a lot of support for American independence.⁷

In the summer of 1776, the colonial delegates of the Second Continental Congress decided to put forward a resolution (which is essentially an official idea) for independence from Britain. A committee of five men, which included Thomas Jefferson from Virginia, Benjamin Franklin from Pennsylvania, John Adams from Massachusetts, Roger Sherman from Connecticut, and Robert R. Livingston from New York, set to work on writing up a document that would explain why the colonies wanted independence and declare America a free nation, separate from Britain’s rule.⁸

Thomas Jefferson, who was just 33-years old, took the lead in drafting the Declaration of Independence—and did the majority of the work. Jefferson was born in Virginia and was a man of curiosity, creativity, imagination, and intelligence. He spent his life learning and wore many hats as a lawyer, inventor, gentleman, scientist, architect, politician, diplomat, writer, and farmer.⁹

(Discussion Point For Parents and Teachers: It is true that Jefferson did own slaves who labored and toiled at his home, Monticello. For context, this was during a time when the unity between the colonies was tenuous and fragile. At the time, Jefferson and other Founders were against slavery but were concerned that the fight over this horrific evil would divide the colonies. Although he was a slave owner, Jefferson had revolutionary ideas for his time about the institution of slavery and the treatment of those who were enslaved.)

Consider some of Jefferson’s ideas:

- Jefferson called slavery a “moral and political depravity” and an “abominable crime.”
- In 1792, he wrote, “My first wish is that the labourers may be well treated...the second that they may enable me to have that treatment continued by making as much as will admit it.”
- Jefferson also affirmed that the whip, “must not be resorted to but in extremities,” and a former slave at Monticello, recalled that “slaves were seldom punished, except for stealing and fighting.”)¹⁰

In June 1776, Thomas Jefferson began to write the draft of the Declaration of Independence on a mahogany lap desk, which he designed himself!

Jefferson drew inspiration from the ideas of the Enlightenment and from the Virginia Declaration of Rights. Jefferson wasn't trying to create something entirely new, because to him, the Declaration of Independence "was intended to be an expression of the American mind" for the king, the colonists, and the world.^{11 12}

On July 2, 1776, delegates voted in favor of independence. Then, they spent days editing and debating the draft of the Declaration of Independence. In all, 86 changes were made to the original draft.

(Note for parents and teachers: Among these 86 changes, the edit that most enraged Jefferson was the removal of a clause that blamed the king for forcing the colonies to participate in the slave trade.)¹³

On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress agreed upon a final version of the Declaration of Independence.

Let's look at some of the most important passages and what they mean. There are some big words here, but don't worry – we'll break them down together.

1. "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."¹⁴

First, let's look at "all men are created equal." In this line, the Founders declared that no one person is better than anyone else, no one is more or less important, and no one is valued more or less. You may be wondering, "The Declaration only says 'men,' so what about women and children?" Some interpret this to mean that enslaved men, women, and children were excluded.¹⁵ Looking at the time that this document was written, which, as we know, was a long time ago we can determine that the phrase "all men" was simply another way of saying "humanity." In this sense, yes, men, women, and children are all equal.¹⁶

Now, taking a look at the second part, that says our Creator "endows" people with "unalienable" rights. Those sound like funny words, right? And to be clear, Thomas Jefferson was not talking about aliens. Rather, he was talking about the rights that all human beings have that come from God. The government doesn't give us our rights—God does. This means they can never be taken away. What rights does God give to humans? The right to live (life), the right to live freely, and choose what you want to think and what you want to believe (liberty), and the right to decide how you want to make your life as amazing and fun as it can be (pursuit of happiness).

As human beings with rights given to us by God, we have a lot of freedom! However, with great freedom comes great responsibility—people must follow the law, but no law and no person can violate anyone’s freedom.

2. “That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”¹⁷

Here’s what is important about this phrase: the job of the government is not to give the people their rights—we know that God already does that! The government’s job is instead to protect these rights from being encroached on.

Also, this statement declares that the government gets its authority from the people. The government can’t have power without the people agreeing to give it power, which is the opposite of how the kings and queens derived their authority. The government works on behalf of the people and with the people’s permission. This is why we have elections. If the people don’t like what a president or a member of Congress is doing, they vote the officials out of office. If the people aren’t happy, government officials will lose their job and their authority. The power, therefore, comes from the American people.

3. “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.”¹⁸

But what if a government overall is not doing its job to protect the people’s God-given rights? What if the government starts behaving like King George III and the British parliament and takes away the freedom, the voices, and the rights of the people? Well, the Declaration of Independence included this phrase to ensure that the people have the right to fix the problems with the government, or if it is beyond repair, create a new government in its place. The people decide when it’s time for a change, because remember—the people are the decision makers!

Although the delegates agreed to the Declaration of Independence on July 4, they didn’t actually begin signing it until August 2, 1776. In total, there were 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, including John Hancock, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams.¹⁹

Did you know that the day the Declaration of Independence was agreed to is often referred to as America’s birthday? To celebrate the significance of this historic day, we now have a holiday known as the Fourth of July.

On the Fourth of July, Americans often celebrate our country’s independence with parades and firework shows.

People wear red, white, and blue and host barbecues to enjoy hot dogs and hamburgers.

Do you have any special traditions that you enjoy with your family, friends, or community on the Fourth of July?

The Fourth of July is a day of celebration because it is the day that our great country was born. The next time you celebrate July 4th, remember the bravery, vision, and determination of our Founders and the American colonists who brought the United States to life.

Footnotes

1. <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/april-19/>
2. <https://www.nps.gov/mima/learn/historyculture/the-militia-and-minute-men-of-1775.htm>
3. <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/battles-of-lexington-and-concord>
4. <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/battles-of-lexington-and-concord>
5. <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/april-19/>
6. <https://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/historyculture/resources-declaration-secondcontinentalcongress.htm>
7. <https://www.history.com/news/thomas-paine-common-sense-revolution>
8. <https://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/historyculture/resources-declaration-secondcontinentalcongress.htm>
9. <https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/brief-biography-of-jefferson/>
10. Monticello: The Official Guide to Thomas Jefferson's World
11. <https://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/education/classrooms/resources-declarationoverview.htm>
12. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration/what-does-it-say>
13. <https://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/education/classrooms/resources-declarationoverview.htm>
14. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>
15. <https://www.monticello.org/slavery/paradox-of-liberty/thomas-jefferson-liberty-slavery/jefferson-and-the-enlightenment/the-declaration-of-independence/>
16. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/creating-the-united-states/interactives/declaration-of-independence/equal/index.html>
17. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>
18. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>
19. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/signers-factsheet>

Additional Resources

- <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/april-19/>
- <https://www.nps.gov/mima/learn/historyculture/the-militia-and-minute-men-of-1775.htm>
- <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/battles-of-lexington-and-concord>
- <https://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/historyculture/resources-declaration-secondcontinentalcongress.htm>
- <https://www.history.com/news/thomas-paine-common-sense-revolution>
- <https://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/historyculture/resources-declaration-secondcontinentalcongress.htm>
- <https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/brief-biography-of-jefferson/>
- Monticello: The Official Guide to Thomas Jefferson's World
- <https://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/education/classrooms/resources-declarationoverview.htm>
- <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration/what-does-it-say>
- <https://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/education/classrooms/resources-declarationoverview.htm>
- <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>
- <https://www.monticello.org/slavery/paradox-of-liberty/thomas-jefferson-liberty-slavery/jefferson-and-the-enlightenment/the-declaration-of-independence/>
- <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/creating-the-united-states/interactives/declaration-of-independence/equal/index.html>
- <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/signers-factsheet>