

## The Declaration of Independence 1776

In 1761, fifteen years before the United States of America burst onto the world stage with the Declaration of Independence, the American colonists were loyal British subjects who celebrated the coronation of their new King, George III. The colonies that stretched from present-day Maine to Georgia were distinctly English in character although they had been settled by Scots, Welsh, Irish, Dutch, Swedes, Finns, Africans, French, Germans, and Swiss, as well as English.

As English men and women, the American colonists were heirs to the thirteenth-century English document, the Magna Carta, which established the principles that no one is above the law (not even the King), and that no one can take away certain rights. So in 1763, when the King began to assert his authority over the colonies to make them share the cost of the Seven Years' War England had just fought and won, the English colonists protested by invoking their rights as free men and loyal subjects. It was only after a decade of repeated efforts on the part of the colonists to defend their rights that they resorted to armed conflict and, eventually, to the unthinkable—separation from the motherland.

The sole governing authority presiding over the tumultuous events of the American Revolution between 1774 and 1789 was a body known as Congress. With no power to regulate commerce or lay taxes, and with little ability to enforce any of its decisions, this group, representing the thirteen colonies, declared independence, conducted a war that defeated one of the greatest military powers of its day, and invented a new political entity that became a sovereign independent nation. Its members pondered everything from the rightness of independence to the number of flints needed by the armies—sometimes with the enemy not far from their doorstep. Asserting their rights, they found themselves labeled as traitors.

The fifty-four men who composed the First Continental Congress represented different interests, religions, and regions; they held conflicting opinions as to how best restore their rights. Most did not know each other; some did not like each other. With no history of successful cooperation, they struggled to overcome their differences and, without any way of knowing if the future held success or nooses for them all, they started down a long and perilous road toward independence.

In June 1776, as Thomas Jefferson composed a draft of the Declaration of Independence from a second floor parlor of a bricklayer's house in Philadelphia, the largest invasion force in British military history was headed for New York Harbor. By the time the last of the fifty-six signers had affixed their names to the final, edited document months later, an invading force of British soldiers had landed at Staten Island, the British had taken New York City, and the American patriots had committed themselves to a long and bloody struggle for liberty and independence.

The Declaration announced to the world the separation of the thirteen colonies from Great Britain and the establishment of the United States of America. It explained the causes of this radical move with a long list of charges against the King. In justifying the Revolution, it asserted a universal truth about human rights in words that have inspired downtrodden people through the ages and throughout the world to rise up against their oppressors.

Jefferson was not aiming at originality. The Declaration articulates the highest ideals of the Revolution, beliefs in liberty, equality, and the right to self-determination. Americans embraced a view of the world in which a person's position was determined, not by birth, rank, or title, but by talent, ability, and enterprise. It was a widely held view, circulated in newspapers, pamphlets, sermons, and schoolbooks; but it was Thomas Jefferson, the 33-year-old planter from Virginia, who put the immortal words to it.

On July 4, 1776, Congress completed its editing of the document that reduced the text by 25 percent ("mutilations" is what Jefferson called it) and formally adopted the Declaration; on July 19, Congress ordered that a formal copy of the Declaration be prepared for members to sign; and on August 2, the final parchment—the one presently displayed in the nearby case—was presented to Congress and the signing began.

Throwing off the British monarchy on July 4, 1776, left the United States with no central government. It had to design and install a new government—and quickly. As early as May 1776, Congress advised each of the colonies to draw up plans for state governments; by 1780, all thirteen states had adopted written constitutions. In June 1776, the Continental Congress began to work on a plan for a central government. It took five years for it to be approved, first by members of Congress and then by the states. The first attempt at a constitution for the United States was called the Articles of Confederation.

This first constitution was composed by a body that directed most of its attention to fighting and winning the War for Independence. It came into being at a time when Americans had a deep-seated fear of a central authority and long-standing loyalty to the state in which they lived and often called their "country." Ultimately, the Articles of Confederation proved unwieldy and inadequate to resolve the issues that faced the United States in its earliest years; but in granting any Federal powers to a central authority—the Confederation Congress—this document marked a crucial step toward nationhood. The Articles of Confederation were in force from March 1, 1781, until March 4, 1789, when the present Constitution went into effect.

The Revolution's ideals of liberty and equality existed side by side with the brutal realities of human slavery. By the time of the Revolution, slavery existed in all the colonies, slaves made up 20 percent of the population, and their labor had become a vital contribution to the physical and economic development of the colonies. The existence of slavery created tensions that would strain the integrity of the United States for many decades to come.

The Society of Friends, a religious group also known as the Quakers, formed the first formal antislavery society in 1775. Throughout the Revolution, as the states struggled to find common ground, the issue of slavery was so divisive that it threatened to shatter their fragile union. Some prominent leaders of the Revolution raised their voices to oppose slavery on moral grounds. Slaves and free Africans embraced the principles of liberty and equality embedded in the Declaration as their own best hope for freedom and better treatment. Many, fighting as soldiers in the American armies, helped to defeat the British, while earning their freedom and gaining the respect and gratitude of some whites. And clinging to their own understanding of "all men are created equal," they pushed the country closer to living out the full promise of its words.

Eleven years after the Declaration of Independence announced the birth of the United States, the survival of the young country seemed in doubt. The War for Independence had been won, but economic depression, social unrest, interstate rivalries, and foreign intrigue appeared to be unraveling the fragile confederation. In early 1787, Congress called for a special convention of all the states to revise the Articles of Confederation. On September 17, 1787, after four months of secret meetings, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention emerged from their Philadelphia meetingroom with an entirely new plan of government—the U.S. Constitution—that they hoped would ensure the survival of the experiment they had launched in 1776.

They proposed a strong central government made up of three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial; each would be perpetually restrained by a sophisticated set of checks and balances. They reached compromises on the issue of slavery that left its final resolution to future generations. As for ratification, they devised a procedure that maximized the odds: the Constitution would be enacted when it was ratified by nine, not thirteen, states. The Framers knew they had not created a perfect plan, but it could be revised. The Constitution has been amended twenty-seven times and stands today as the longest-lasting written constitution in the world.

On September 17, 1787, two days after the final vote, the delegates signed the engrossed parchment shown in the Rotunda's centerpiece case.

Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, the right to a fair and speedy trial—the ringing phrases that inventory some of Americans' most treasured personal freedoms—were not initially part of the U.S. Constitution. At the Constitutional Convention, the proposal to include a bill of rights was considered and defeated. The Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution as the first ten amendments on December 15, 1791.

The fact that the Constitution did not include a bill of rights to specifically protect Americans' hard-won rights sparked the most heated debates during the ratification process. To the Federalists, those who favored the Constitution, a bill of rights was unnecessary because the Federal Government was limited in its powers and could not interfere with the rights of the people or the states; also, most states had bills of rights. To the Anti-Federalists, those who opposed the Constitution, the prospect of establishing a strong central government without an explicit list of rights guaranteed to the people was unthinkable. Throughout the ratification process, individuals and state ratification conventions called for the adoption of a bill of rights.

The First Federal Congress took up the question of a bill of rights almost immediately. Congress proposed twelve amendments to the states. Ten of these were added to the Constitution on December 15, 1791.

The Bill of Rights that is on permanent display here is the Joint Resolution passed by Congress on September 25, 1789, proposing twelve—not ten—amendments. The first article, concerning the ratio of constituents to each congressional representative, was never ratified by the states; the second article listed, concerning congressional pay, was ratified in 1992 as the Twenty-seventh Amendment.

Drafted by Thomas Jefferson between June 11 and June 28, 1776, the Declaration of Independence is at once the nation's most cherished symbol of liberty and Jefferson's most enduring monument. Here, in exalted and unforgettable phrases, Jefferson expressed the convictions in the minds and hearts of the American people. The political philosophy of the Declaration was not new; its ideals of individual liberty had already been expressed by John Locke and the Continental philosophers. What Jefferson did was to summarize this philosophy in "self-evident truths" and set forth a list of grievances against the King in order to justify before the world the breaking of ties between the colonies and the mother country.

The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription

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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 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 mean time 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 harrass 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 compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & 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 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.

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*The 56 signatures on the Declaration appear in the positions indicated:*

Column 1

**Georgia:**

Button Gwinnett

Lyman Hall

George Walton

Column 2

**North Carolina:**

William Hooper  
Joseph Hewes  
John Penn

**South Carolina:**

Edward Rutledge  
Thomas Heyward, Jr.  
Thomas Lynch, Jr.  
Arthur Middleton

Column 3

**Massachusetts:**

John Hancock

**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

Column 4

**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

Column 5

**New York:**

William Floyd  
Philip Livingston

Francis Lewis

Lewis Morris

**New Jersey:**

Richard Stockton

John Witherspoon

Francis Hopkinson

John Hart

Abraham Clark

Column 6

**New Hampshire:**

Josiah Bartlett

William Whipple

**Massachusetts:**

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 Hampshire:**

Matthew Thornton

