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United States Declaration of Independence

The **Declaration of Independence**, formally **The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America** in the original printing, is the founding document of the United States. On July 4, 1776, it was adopted unanimously by the Second Continental Congress, who convened at Pennsylvania State House, later renamed Independence Hall, in the colonial capital of Philadelphia. These delegates became known as the nation's Founding Fathers. The Declaration explains why the Thirteen Colonies regarded themselves as independent sovereign states no longer subject to British colonial rule, and has become one of the most circulated, reprinted, and influential documents in history.

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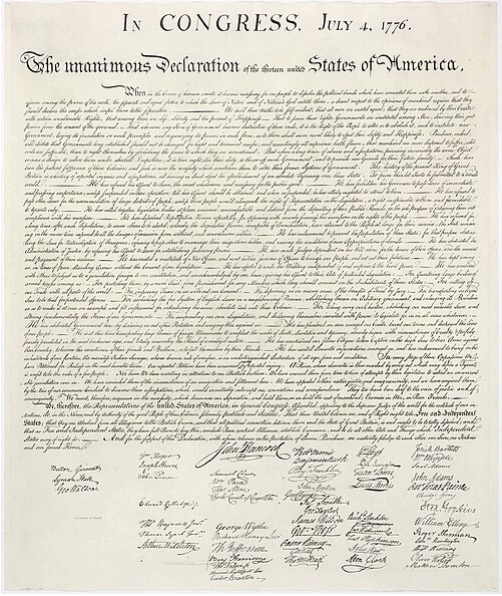


The 1823 facsimile of the engrossed copy of the Declaration of Independence

Created	June–July 1776
Ratified	July 4, 1776
Location	Engrossed copy: National Archives Building Rough draft: Library of Congress
Author(s)	Thomas Jefferson, Committee of Five
Signatories	56 delegates to the Second Continental Congress
Purpose	To announce and explain separation from Great Britain[1]:5

On June 11, 1776, the Second Continental Congress appointed the Committee of Five—John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Robert R. Livingston, and Roger Sherman—who were charged with authoring the Declaration. Adams, a leading proponent of independence, persuaded the Committee to charge Jefferson with writing the document's original draft, which the Second Continental Congress then edited. Jefferson largely wrote the Declaration in isolation between June 11 and June 28, 1776. The Declaration was a formal explanation of why the Continental Congress voted to declare American independence from the Kingdom of Great Britain. It was adopted by the Congress during the American Revolutionary War, which commenced in April 1775 with the Battles of Lexington and Concord. Two days prior to the Declaration's adoption, the Second Continental Congress passed the Lee Resolution, which established the consensus of the Congress that the British had no governing authority over the Thirteen Colonies. The Declaration justified the independence of the colonies, citing 27 colonial grievances against King George III and asserting certain natural and legal rights, including a right of revolution.

The Declaration was unanimously ratified on July 4 by the Second Continental Congress, whose delegates represented each of the Thirteen Colonies. In ratifying and signing it, the delegates knew they were committing an act of high treason against The Crown, which was punishable by torture

and death. Congress then issued the Declaration of Independence in several forms. Two days following its ratification, on July 8, it was published by *The Pennsylvania Evening Post*. The first public readings of the Declaration occurred simultaneously on July 8, 1776, at noon, at three previously designated three locations: in Trenton, New Jersey; Easton, Pennsylvania; and Philadelphia.[2]

The Declaration was published in several forms. The printed Dunlap broadside was widely distributed following its signing. It is now preserved at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.[3] The signed copy of the Declaration is now on display at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and is generally considered the official document; this copy, engrossed by Timothy Matlack, was ordered by Congress on July 19, and signed primarily on August 2, 1776.[4][5]

The Declaration has proven an influential and globally impactful statement on human rights. The Declaration was viewed by Abraham Lincoln as the moral standard to which the United States should strive, and he considered it a statement of principles through which the Constitution should be interpreted.[6]:126 In 1863, Lincoln made the Declaration the centerpiece of his Gettysburg Address, widely considered among the most famous speeches in American history.[7] The Declaration's second sentence, "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", is considered one of the most significant and famed lines in world history.[8] Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Joseph Ellis has written that the Declaration contains "the most potent and consequential words in American history."[9]

Background

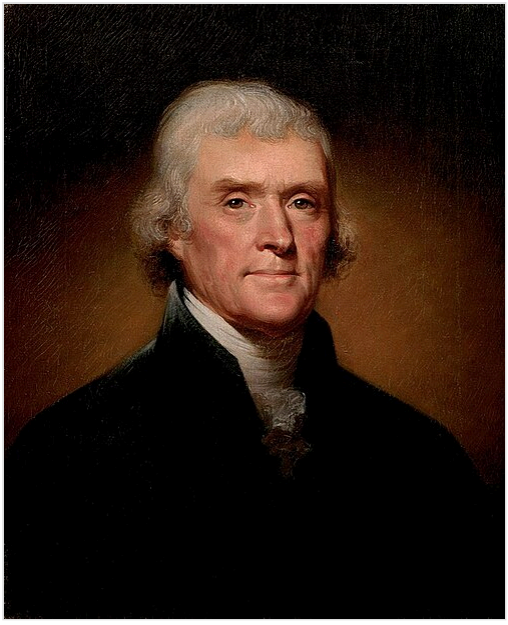
> Believe me, dear Sir: there is not in the British empire a man who more cordially loves a union with Great Britain than I do. But, by the God that made me, I will cease to exist before I yield to a connection on such terms as the British Parliament propose; and in this, I think I speak the sentiments of America.
>
> —Thomas Jefferson, November 29, 1775[10]

By the time the Declaration of Independence was adopted in July 1776, the Thirteen Colonies and Kingdom of Great Britain had been at war for over a year. Relations had been deteriorating between the colonies and the mother country since 1763. In 1767, Parliament enacted a series of measures designed to increase revenue from the colonies, including the Stamp Act of 1765 and the Townshend Acts, which it believed were a legitimate means of having the colonies pay their fair share of the costs of remaining a part of the British Empire.[11]

In the Thirteen Colonies, however, perspectives varied on the British Empire. The colonies were not directly represented in Parliament, and colonists argued that Parliament had no right to levy taxes upon them. This tax dispute was part of a larger divergence between British and American interpretations of the British Constitution and the extent of Parliament's authority in the colonies.[12]:162 The orthodox British view, dating from the Glorious Revolution of 1688, was that Parliament was the supreme authority throughout the empire, and anything that Parliament did was constitutional.[12]:200–202 In the colonies, however, the idea had developed that the British Constitution recognized certain fundamental rights that no government could violate, including

Parliament.[12]:180–182 After the Townshend Acts, some essayists questioned whether Parliament had any legitimate jurisdiction in the colonies.[13] As a result of this ideological shift in the colonies, many colonialists participated in tax protests against the Royal authority such as the Pine Tree Riot in 1772 and the Boston Tea Party in 1773.[14][15]

Anticipating the arrangement of the British Commonwealth, by 1774 American writers such as Samuel Adams, James Wilson, and Thomas Jefferson argued that Parliament was the legislature of Great Britain only, and that the colonies, which had their own legislatures, were connected to the rest of the empire only through their allegiance to the Crown.[12]:224–225[16]



Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration, largely wrote the first draft of the Declaration in isolation over a period of two weeks between June 11, 1776 and June 28, 1776 from the second floor of a three-story home he was renting at 700 Market Street in Philadelphia

Continental Congress convenes

In 1774, Parliament passed the Coercive Acts, known as the Intolerable Acts in the colonies. This was intended to punish the colonists for the Gaspee Affair of 1772 and the Boston Tea Party of 1773. Many colonists considered the Coercive Acts to be in violation of the British Constitution and a threat to the liberties of all of British America. In September 1774, the First Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia to coordinate a formal response. Congress organized a boycott of British goods and petitioned the king for repeal of the acts. These measures were unsuccessful, however, since King George and the Prime Minister, Lord North, were determined to enforce parliamentary supremacy over the Thirteen Colonies. In November 1774, King George, in a letter to North, wrote, "blows must decide whether they are to be subject to this country or independent".[17][18]

The Thirteen Colonies as they existed on July 4, 1776, when the Second Continental Congress unanimously approved the text of the Declaration of Independence. (Most border disputes omitted. Some colonies had already declared independence; see Territorial evolution of the United States § 1776–1784 (American Revolution).)

Most colonists still hoped for reconciliation with Great Britain, even after fighting began in the American Revolutionary War at Lexington and Concord in April 1775.[19][20] The Second Continental Congress convened at Pennsylvania State House, later renamed Independence Hall, in Philadelphia in May 1775. Some delegates supported eventual independence for the colonies, but none had yet declared it publicly, which was an act of treason punishable by death under the laws of the British monarchy at the time.[20]

Many colonists believed that Parliament no longer had sovereignty over them, but they were still loyal to King George, thinking he would intercede on their behalf. They were disabused of that notion in late 1775, when the king rejected Congress's second petition, issued a Proclamation of