

The Declaration of Independence

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 Legislature, 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 and 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 attention 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.

John Hancock

Button Gwinnett
Lyman Hall
Geo. Walton

Wm. Hooper
Joseph Hewes
John Penn
Edward Rutledge
Thos. Heyward, Junr.
Thomas Lynch, Junr.
Arthur Middleton

Samuel Chase
Wm. Paca
Thos. Stone
Charles Carroll of Carrollton
George Wythe
Richard Henry Lee
Th. Jefferson
Benja. Harrison
Thos. Nelson, Jr.
Francis Lightfoot Lee
Carter Braxton

Robt. Morris
Benjamin Rush
Benja. Franklin
John Morton
Geo. Clymer
Jas. Smith
Geo. Taylor

James Wilson
Geo. Ross
Caesar Rodney
Geo. Read
Tho. McKean

Wm. Floyd
Phil. Livingston
Frans. Lewis
Lewis Morris
Richd. Stockton
Jno. Witherspoon
Fras. Hopkinson
John Hart
Abra. Clark

Josiah Bartlett
Wm. Whipple
Saml. Adams
John Adams
Robt. Treat Paine
Elbridge Gerry
Step. Hopkins
William Ellery
Roger Sherman
Samuel Huntington
Wm. Williams
Oliver Wolcott
Matthew Thornton

The Magna Carta

Of all the documents that make up the ancestry of the Constitution, one of the oldest is the Magna Carta (also known as the Magna Charta or the Great Charter). It was created in 1215 in England. It was an agreement between King John and the nobility of the day. The King's barons were unhappy with recent defeats at the hands of the French, and an unfavorable peace with the French. To assure the loyalty of the barons, John agreed to certain civil rights for the barons. These rights were encoded in the Magna Carta. These rights were not new or unique - most of the text of the Magna Carta came from the Charter of Liberties, another agreement between King Henry I and his nobility in 1100. The Magna Carta is written in Latin, and several copies were made for the King and for each baron. Several of these copies still exist today. A copy created in 1297 is found within the United States National Archives.

The Mayflower Compact

stories of survival, of relations with American Indians, of the first Thanksgiving, and of religious freedom found, are the stuff of American legend. One of the cornerstones of the Pilgrim ethos is the Mayflower Compact.

The Pilgrims were a small group of people bound by common religious beliefs. They did not believe in the influence over the church that the English king held, and preached separatism. This position did not sit well with the King, and by 1608, many of them left England for Holland, which was more tolerant of religious diversity. Though some of the group prospered, the time in Holland was hard. In particular, the group saw the children assimilating into Dutch culture, and they lamented the lack of opportunity to spread their interpretation of the Gospel to the far corners of the world.

The leaders began to think about moving. The two main proposed destinations were Guiana and Virginia; there was also some thought of going to Dutch America, specifically to settle near the Hudson River. Eventually, though, financing was secured to pay for settlement in New England, an area north of the Virginia settlements. Two ships were hired for the voyage - the Speedwell, to transport the passengers, and the larger Mayflower, to transport cargo and to do exploration. The Speedwell turned out to be unseaworthy (reports arose that its crew sabotaged the ship to get out of their contracts), so the Pilgrims and other colonists brought in by the investors crowded into the Mayflower; about twenty passengers had to be left behind. The ship finally sailed for America in September of 1620.

In November, the Mayflower spotted Cape Cod. They tried to sail south to the Hudson River, but turned back north when they encountered shoals. They anchored at Provincetown Harbor, at the northern tip of Cape Cod. While anchored and awaiting exploration to find a suitable place for colonization, the colonists decided that their contracts with their investors were not valid, not the least reason being that the

promised land grants for New England were incomplete (the grants were finalized while the Mayflower was in transit). The colonists decided to enact a contract among themselves. This contract, later known as the Mayflower Compact, is now seen as one of the first forays into democracy on the North American continent.

The Albany Plan

In late 1753, the London Board of Trade wrote to New York Governor James DeLancey. The Board supervised provincial affairs in the Americas. It was concerned about the French courting of the Iroquois (the Six Nations) and with the actions of some colonies which were antagonizing the Indians. Fearing that the Indians would ally themselves with France, England's principal rival in North America, the Board directed DeLancey to call a meeting of the colonies and of the Indians, to resolve differences and cement ties. Similar letters were sent to the governors of Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Hampshire, Massachusetts (then Massachusetts-Bay), and New Jersey.

Each colony was called to send delegates to Albany, New York, for a grand meeting, to which several Indian tribes would also be invited. The point was to try to enact a treaty to be made in the name of the King, rather than several small, possibly conflicting treaties with the colonies.

James Hamilton, governor of Pennsylvania, chose four people to head the Pennsylvania delegation. Among them was esteemed citizen Benjamin Franklin. Though the Albany Congress was to be about Indian affairs and trade, several of the delegations were sent with instructions to investigate a union of the colonies. The meeting was set for June 14, 1754. Franklin and his fellow delegates left Philadelphia on June 3 and arrived two days later. There was alternately much to do and little to do between their arrival and the time the congress was to start. The delegates met with Indian delegates as they arrived, and also spoke amongst themselves about the possible outcomes of the congress. Again the idea of union arose. The idea was not new to Franklin, who had proposed union as early as 1751.

Franklin drafted several "Short Hints" towards the goal of union, and sent them back to Hamilton. Hamilton had a few concerns about the notion of union, and he transmitted these back to Franklin. The congress did not finally come to order until June 19, after waiting for several Indian tribes and colonial delegates to arrive. Day after day was filled with speeches and negotiation with the Indians, and day after day, the congress met alone and considered the short hints and a plan of union. On July 9, Franklin was appointed to take the results of the debates and compile them into a single draft document. On July 10, the plan was laid before the congress, which accepted it and referred it to the colonial governments and to the King.

The Declaration of Rights

In 1764, the British Parliament passed the Sugar Act, which placed tariffs on sugar, coffee, and other goods imported into the New World. These taxes increased the burden on ordinary citizens at a time of recession in America. It was thought that the Sugar Act would give rise to open rebellion, but it did not.

In 1765, the Stamp Act was passed. This act placed a tariff on virtually every form of printed matter, including newspapers and playing cards. The Stamp Act by itself may not have been a catalyst to revolution, but combined with the previous year's Sugar Act and the subsequent Quartering Act, the effect was to provoke riots and open rebellion, and a boycott of the stamps that were to be affixed to the printed matter. British merchants balked at the Act because of the boycotts, and it was repealed in 1766.

This document is a response to the Stamp Act.

The members of this congress, sincerely devoted, with the warmest sentiments of affection and duty to his majesty's person and government, inviolably attached to the present happy establishment of the protestant succession, and with minds deeply impressed by a sense of the present and impending misfortunes of the British colonies on this continent; having considered, as maturely as time will permit, the circumstances of the said colonies, esteem it our indispensable duty to make the following declarations of our humble opinion, respecting the most essential rights and liberties of the colonists, and of the grievances under which they labour, by reason of several late acts of parliament.

1. That his majesty's subjects in these colonies, owe the same allegiance to the crown of Great Britain, that is owing from his subjects born within the realm, and all due subordination to that august body the parliament of Great Britain.
2. That his majesty's liege subjects in these colonies, are entitled to all the inherent rights and liberties of his natural born subjects, within the kingdom of Great Britain.
3. That it is inseparably essential to the freedom of a people, and the undoubted right of Englishmen, that no taxes be imposed on them but with their own consent, given personally, or by their representatives.
4. That the people of these colonies are not, and, from their local circumstances, cannot be, represented in the House of Commons in Great Britain.
5. That the only representatives of the people of these colonies, are persons chosen therein by themselves; and that no taxes ever have been, or can be constitutionally imposed on them, but by their respective legislatures.

6. That all supplies to the crown being free gifts of the people, it is unreasonable and inconsistent with the principles and spirit of the British constitution, for the people of Great Britain to grant to his majesty the property of the colonists.

7. That trial by jury, is the inherent and invaluable right of every British subject in these colonies.

8. That the late act of parliament, entitled, an act for granting and applying certain stamp duties, and other duties, in the British colonies and plantations in America, &c., by imposing taxes on the inhabitants of these colonies, and the said act, and several other acts, by extending the jurisdiction of the courts of admiralty beyond its ancient limits, have a manifest tendency to subvert the rights and liberties of the colonists.

9. That the duties imposed by several late acts of parliament, from the peculiar circumstances of these colonies, will be extremely burdensome and grievous; and from the scarcity of specie, the payment of them absolutely impracticable.

10. That as the profits of the trade of these colonies ultimately center in Great Britain, to pay for the manufactures which they are obliged to take from thence, they eventually contribute very largely to all supplies granted there to the crown.

11. That the restrictions imposed by several late acts of parliament on the trade of these colonies, will render them unable to purchase the manufactures of Great Britain.

12. That the increase, prosperity and happiness of these colonies, depend on the full and free enjoyments of their rights and liberties, and an intercourse with Great Britain mutually affectionate and advantageous.

13. That it is the right of the British subjects in these colonies, to petition the king, or either house of parliament.

Lastly, That it is the indispensable duty of these colonies, to the best of sovereigns, to the mother country, and to themselves, to endeavour by a loyal and dutiful address to his majesty, and humble applications to both houses of parliament, to procure the repeal of the act for granting and applying certain stamp duties, of all clauses of any other acts of parliament, whereby the jurisdiction of the admiralty is extended as aforesaid, and of the other late acts for the restriction of American commerce.

The Articles of Association

In March, 1774, the British Parliament passed a series of laws they referred to as the Coercive Acts. The Americans called them the Intolerable Acts. The Acts were designed specifically to punish the colony of Massachusetts for defying British policies; specifically, for the Boston Tea Party. Outrage in the Americas over the Intolerable Acts led to the calling of the First Continental Congress in September, 1774. During the First Congress, which included representatives from all of the colonies except Georgia, the delegates decided to take several actions, including a boycott of British goods. It also drafted a declaration to the King and Parliament, outlining the position of the Congress. This work is the Declaration of Rights and Grievances.

The Intolerable Acts, called "impolitic, unjust, and cruel," included the Boston Port Act, the Massachusetts Government Act, the Quartering Act, and the Administration of Justice Act. The Boston Port Act closed the port of Boston to trade; the Massachusetts Government Act significantly changed the colony's charter and forbade town meetings; the Quartering Act required colonists to house British soldiers on demand; and the Impartial Administration of Justice Act removed British officials from the jurisdiction of Massachusetts courts. Another act, the Quebec Act, established Roman Catholicism and a new system of government in the newly acquired colony of Quebec, and played on widespread distrust and even hatred of the Catholic Church.

On Friday, September 30, 1774, Congress appointed a committee to come up with a plan by which all of the colonies would agree, in association, to stop exportation of goods from the colonies to Great Britain, Ireland, and the West Indies. The members of the committee were Thomas Cushing, Isaac Low, Thomas Mifflin, Richard Henry Lee, and Thomas Johnson. The committee was sent various resolutions from the full Congress on October 6, and on October 12, it presented a draft of its plan. The plan was debated on October 15, the day after the Declaration of Rights and Grievances was passed, and for several days thereafter. A final draft was agreed on Tuesday, October 18, 1774. It was signed by the delegates on October 20.

The source for this text is the Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789, Volume 1. The text is as presented in that volume, but has been modified slightly to expand abbreviations and modernize spelling.