

From Revolution to Independence

On June 7, 1776, more than a year after the Revolution began, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia introduced this resolution to the Second Continental Congress:

"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 resolution proposed independence for the American colonies. The delegates agreed to the Lee Resolution on July 2 following a spirited debate. A couple of days later, on July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was adopted. As a result, this date is celebrated as *Independence Day*. It gave various reasons why the colonists wanted to separate from England and announced the existence of a new nation.

Thomas Jefferson and a committee from the Second Continental Congress wrote the Declaration. While the words were mostly Thomas Jefferson's, the ideas were centuries old. The Declaration can be divided into three parts:

1. A statement of principle concerning the rights of a man and why a revolution was necessary;
2. A list of specific grievances against England's King George III;
3. A formal claim of independence.



Thomas Jefferson

The most important part of the Declaration comes in its second paragraph:

"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."

The Declaration is Read to the Public

On July 8, 1776, church bells were rung throughout Philadelphia to call the people to the first public reading of the Declaration. For the safety of the delegates, their names were not made public for six months. When they were revealed, many were seized by the British and thrown into prison, and their homes were burned. This small group had risked their lives for liberty.

Nearly a month would pass before the document was signed. New York's officials did not officially give their support until July 9. Also, it took two weeks for the Declaration to be "engrossed" or the process of writing on parchment paper. Most of the delegates signed on August 2, but several signed on a later date, along with two representatives never signing at all.

Today, in Philadelphia, there stands a tablet that marks the place where Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration. After Congress had adopted the

Declaration, John Dunlap printed copies of it. These prints are now called *Dunlap Broadsides*. Twenty-four copies are known to exist, two of which are in the Library of Congress. The original copy was exhibited for many years until light and air threatened its existence. In 1921, it was transferred to the care of the Library of Congress. In 1952, it was placed in the National Archives building in Washington, D.C. You may see it there, and you also may visit the meeting place of the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia.

The important fact is not that the Americans had declared themselves independent, but that they had set down certain principles and beliefs that were new to governments: all men are created equal; all men have rights; and governments are subject to the will of the people.

The Declaration of Independence is not a constitution or form of government. It served to set up principles for a new government. Such beliefs were used in writing the United States Constitution.

QUESTIONS

MULTIPLE CHOICE: Circle the letter of the correct answer.

1. Which of the following is NOT an unalienable right of the Declaration?
 - life
 - liberty
 - education
 - pursuit of happiness
2. The Declaration of Independence was written by:
 - Thomas Jefferson
 - Alexander Hamilton
 - George Washington
 - John Adams
3. The Declaration was authorized by the:
 - Second Continental Congress
 - First Continental Congress
 - British King
 - New England Confederation
4. The Declaration of Independence included:
 - statements concerning the rights of individuals
 - a list of specific grievances against England
 - a formal claim of independence from England
 - all of the above

TRUE OR FALSE? Write a **T** or **F** in the space provided.

1. The Second Continental Congress had the task of carrying out the American Revolution.
2. The Declaration of Independence is not a constitution.
3. The Declaration was written in Washington, D.C.
4. The principles of the Declaration of Independence were used in writing the U.S. Constitution.
5. Richard Henry Lee wrote a resolution that would allow England more authority over the colonists.

EVENTS IN ORDER. Write the numbers **1-4**, indicating which historical event happened first (1), second (2), third (3), or fourth (4).

- Declaration displayed in Washington, D.C.
- Boston Tea Party occurred.
- Second Continental Congress met.
- First public reading of the Declaration