

## **Declaration of Independence**

On July 4, 1776, the members of the Continental Congress assembled at the State House in Philadelphia to take up a matter of vital importance. Two days earlier the Congress had voted to declare the 13 American colonies to be “free and independent states,” with no ties to Great Britain. Now they were considering how to announce that fact to the world. By the end of the day, the final wording had been determined and the Congress voted to adopt one of history's greatest documents—the Declaration of Independence.

Several years of armed combat secured international recognition of what the Declaration had proclaimed: the American colonies became independent of Great Britain and formed the United States of America. The Declaration has since become a source of pride for the American people, who have embraced it as an enduring symbol of the nation's founding principles.

### **Movement toward Independence**

When war broke out between Britain and the colonists at Lexington and Concord, on April 19, 1775, few colonists desired independence. Most of them wanted only a larger measure of self-government within the British Empire. In June 1775 Gen. George Washington promised to work for “peace and harmony between the mother country and the colonies.” As late as September, Thomas Jefferson “looked with fondness towards a reconciliation.” Although the war ultimately became known as the American Revolution, the conflict began as a civil war.

Most of the colonies wanted to remain in the British Empire but insisted that they have the right of self-government. As the year 1775 wore on, however, it became clear that both of those goals could not be achieved. The British Parliament would not repeal the “intolerable acts,” measures that imposed stricter British control over the colonies in response to their acts of defiance, or agree that only local assemblies would be able to tax the colonists. In August the British king declared that the colonies were in a state of rebellion. By the end of the year, he had removed them from his protection and blockaded their ports.

The ravages of war made the colonists more and more bitter. In October 1775 the British burned the town of Portland, Me., destroying the homes of a thousand people just at the approach of winter. The siege of Boston inflicted severe hardships on its people. Then came the news that Britain had hired 20,000 German troops to put down the revolt. “The king,” wrote Jefferson, “has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed our people.” The German mercenaries were intended “to complete his works of death, desolation, and tyranny.”

If the colonists had to preserve their rights by fighting, then they had to have the means of making war and trading with other nations. They could not, however, secure aid abroad so long as they were British subjects, nor could they make a treaty of commerce with a foreign state.

### **Resolution for Independence**

The time was ripe. In January 1776, Thomas Paine wrote a forceful and highly influential pamphlet called *Common Sense*. How, he asked, could the people at once fight against the king and profess their loyalty to him? The day of compromise had passed. “The blood of the slain, the weeping

voice of Nature cries, 'Tis time to part'. Here is the vast continent of North America, suited to become the home of a race of free men; let it no longer lie at the feet of an unworthy king." Thousands of people read this challenge and accepted the idea of complete separation from Great Britain.

In the spring of 1776 North Carolina was the first of several states to direct its delegates in Congress to declare for independence. As a result, on June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia introduced the dramatic resolution. It declared that "these United Colonies are, and of a 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 Great Britain is and ought to be totally dissolved."

### **Framing of the Declaration**

The resolution could not be adopted immediately because not all the states had yet told their delegates to vote for independence. Therefore a committee was appointed to prepare a statement of the American case. It was made up of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston. Jefferson was chosen to draw up the necessary declaration.

Jefferson began the document by proclaiming a set of natural rights held by all and the responsibility of the government to protect those rights. He then cited the specific ways in which King George III had violated the colonists' rights, which formed their justification for seeking independence.

### **Natural Rights**

The ideas in the Declaration were not new. Jefferson drew heavily on the political theories that English philosopher John Locke had outlined in his book *On Civil Government*, a defense of the English Revolution of 1688. The Declaration of Independence states three basic ideas: (1) God made all men equal and gave them the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (instead of Locke's "pursuit of property"); (2) the main business of government is to protect these rights; (3) if a government tries to withhold these rights, the people are free to revolt and to set up a new government.

### **Charges against the King**

The colonists had good reasons for taking their stand of protest against the king. If the Declaration had attacked the British Parliament, the colonists would be attacking the representatives of the British people, particularly in the elected House of Commons. The Americans, therefore, leveled their charges against the person of the king. It was George III, they said, who had no real power over the American colonies. Thus they sought to gain the sympathy of the British people.

The king had powerful enemies at home who might help the colonists if they believed that the Americans were fighting solely against the monarch. To foreigners the Revolution would not seem to be a revolt against the authority of the British Parliament, but a revolt against the tyranny of the British king. It would seem to be only a defense of rights long enjoyed and impossible to give up.

## **Adoption of the Declaration**

The committee added to Jefferson's list of charges against the king and made a few other minor revisions. Their final draft was brought to the floor of Congress on June 28, 1776. On July 2 the Lee resolution was adopted and debate on Jefferson's declaration began. In the list of charges against King George III, Jefferson had attacked slavery and the slave trade. Representatives from southern slaveholding colonies refused to accept this clause, and after heated debate it was dropped.

The Declaration of Independence was adopted on July 4, a date subsequently celebrated in the United States as Independence Day. An official copy of the Declaration was written out on parchment. This formal document was signed on August 2 by members of Congress present on that date. Those who were absent signed later.

The Declaration did not establish the independence of the American colonies. It only stated an intention and the cause for action. Complete separation would have to be accomplished by force. Once the Declaration had been adopted, however, there was no turning back.

When the Declaration was adopted, racing horsemen and the noise of cannon fire carried the news far and wide. General Washington had the document read to the army, and its ringing sentences strengthened the morale of his troops. On July 8, 1776, the people of Philadelphia gathered at the State House (later renamed Independence Hall) to hear a reading of the Declaration of Independence. They were called together by the ringing of the Liberty Bell in the belfry of the building. (It has been said that the bell cracked on that joyful occasion. This is not true, however.)