

A portrait of Thomas Jefferson, showing him from the chest up. He has light-colored, wavy hair and is wearing a dark coat over a white cravat. He is looking slightly to the left of the viewer.

12.4 Writing the Declaration of Independence

The success of *Common Sense* helped convince the Continental Congress to move toward independence. On June 7, 1776, delegates from Virginia introduced a resolution (a statement for Congress to vote on). The resolution declared that “these United Colonies are, and by right ought to be, free and independent States.”

Congress agreed to take a few weeks to think over this dramatic step. In the meantime,

Thomas Jefferson wrote the first draft of the Declaration of Independence.

it asked a committee to write a document explaining why the colonies were announcing their independence. John Adams and Benjamin Franklin were on the committee. So was a shy, red-headed Virginian named Thomas Jefferson.

Jefferson was only 33 years old, but he was already known as a fine writer and thinker. Adams and Franklin asked him to write the first draft of the colonies’ declaration of independence.

Setting up a folding desk in his room in Philadelphia, Jefferson went to work. For almost two weeks, he wrote and rewrote the document, working by candlelight late into the night. After Adams and Franklin made a few changes, the committee presented their document to Congress.

For several days, Congress argued about independence for the last time. Then, on July 2, the delegates voted to separate from Britain.

Congress spent the next two days discussing every word of the declaration and voting on changes. Delegates from two southern colonies, where slaves worked on huge plantations, insisted on taking out Jefferson’s statement that slavery was a “cruel war against human nature.” Several other delegates agreed. Some of the changes angered Jefferson, but everyone realized that all the colonies had to agree in order for them to become a united country. Finally, on July 4, 1776, Congress voted to approve the Declaration of Independence.

12.5 Signing the Declaration of Independence

After the Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence, a handwritten copy was prepared for the delegates to sign. The delegates knew that signing the declaration was an act of **treason** toward the king, and the punishment for treason was death. John Hancock, the president of the Congress, warned the delegates that they must stay united and “all hang together.” Benjamin Franklin replied, “Yes, we must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately.”

John Hancock signed first, writing his name in bold letters. Hancock’s signature became so famous that to this day people call their signature a “John Hancock.”

After Jefferson and the other delegates signed the declaration, Congress sent copies to the governments of each colony and to the Continental Army. People throughout the colonies celebrated when they heard the news. A crowd in Philadelphia cheered when the declaration was read for the first time in public on July 8. George Washington had the declaration read to his troops the next day. Afterward, soldiers tore down a statue of King George. Later, the statue was melted to make bullets for the Continental

treason: the crime of disloyalty toward a ruler or government

Jefferson and other committee members presented the Declaration of Independence to the Continental Congress.





Colonists celebrated the news that independence from Britain had been declared.

Army. When news of the declaration reached Boston, troops there fired guns and cannons in celebration.

Everywhere, church bells rang, and there were parades and bonfires. Even today, Americans celebrate in a similar way on the Fourth of July, the anniversary of the

signing of the Declaration of Independence.

12.6 The Declaration of Independence

The delegates to the Second Continental Congress wanted to explain why they wished to be a separate nation. The following excerpts from the Declaration of Independence are part of this explanation. The entire Declaration of Independence begins on page 216.

The first excerpt explains why the colonists felt it was necessary to write the document.

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another... a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

The second excerpt describes the rights all people should have.

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.

The third excerpt explains why governments are established and describes the citizens' rights if the government acts unfairly.

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.

