

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights are often referred to as our Founding Documents. These documents may be seen at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Although, they are equally important, the Declaration came first and contains the ideas that eventually brought forth a new nation — the United States of America.



In 1776, what is now the United States of America was an area that belonged to several nations in Europe, mainly England, France and Spain. In the area along the Atlantic Ocean, there were 13 colonies (they later became states) ruled by the King of England, George III.

Most colonies had their own government for two reasons:

- ★ Travel between the colonies and England took months.
- ★ Most importantly, the colonists had left England because they wanted to make their own laws. They wanted more freedom than a king allowed.

Although each colony had its own government, they were similar. Each colony had people they elected who made the laws, a governor to make sure that people followed the laws, and courts where people who broke the law got a fair trial.

King George did not like that the colonists had set up their own governments and found ways to take away some of their freedoms. This made the colonists mad and each colony sent representatives, called delegates, to Philadelphia to meet about their concerns. Their meeting was called the **Continental Congress**.

The Continental Congress asked Thomas Jefferson to write something they could send to the king expressing their anger. He wrote the Declaration of Independence with suggestions from others, like John Adams and Benjamin Franklin.

On July 4, 1776, the Congress approved the Declaration. Fifty-six of the delegates signed the Declaration in August 1776 and it was sent to King George. The 56 signers knew that by

signing the document, King George could charge them with treason, a crime that could be punished by death.

The King of England was very upset when he received the Declaration of Independence so he sent his soldiers to force the colonists to obey him.

The colonists fought back in what we now call the **Revolutionary War**. The colonists won the war and then formed a new country, the United States of America.

TIMELINE

June 11, 1776

Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman and Robert R. Livingston appointed to a committee to draft a declaration of independence.

June 12-27

Jefferson drafts a declaration. Jefferson's "original Rough draught," is reviewed by the committee.

June 28

A draft of the Declaration of Independence is read in Congress.

July 1-4

Congress debates and revises the Declaration of Independence.

July 2

Congress declares independence as the British fleet and army arrive at New York.

July 4

Congress adopts the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia. John Dunlap prints the Declaration of Independence. These prints are now called "Dunlap Broadside."

July 5

John Hancock, president of the Continental Congress, dispatches the first of Dunlap's Broadside of the Declaration of Independence to the legislatures of New Jersey and Delaware.

July 6

Pennsylvania Evening Post prints the first newspaper rendition of the Declaration of Independence.

July 8

The first public reading of the Declaration is in Philadelphia.

July 9

Washington orders that the Declaration of Independence be read before the American army in New York.

July 19

Congress orders the Declaration of Independence engrossed (officially inscribed) and signed by members.

August 2

Delegates begin signing engrossed copy of the Declaration of Independence. A large British reinforcement arrives at New York after being repelled at Charleston, S.C.

January 18, 1777

Congress, now sitting in Baltimore, Md., orders that signed copies of the Declaration of Independence printed by Mary Katherine Goddard of Baltimore be sent to the states.

THE DECLARATION STATED THAT A GOOD GOVERNMENT WAS ABOUT THESE IDEAS:

- 1 All people are equal. No one is better than anyone else, including the king.
- 2 People are born with certain rights. They are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These cannot be taken away by anybody, including the king.
- 3 A government is made up of the people who have to live with the rules the government makes so all power is with the people, not a king.
- 4 Everyone, even the king, has to obey the laws that the people make.

LINKS TO LEARNING

Visit ushistory.org to learn more about the Declaration of Independence, the signers, Dunlap Broadside and George Washington. Orations and newspaper clippings to help provide historical perspectives on the Declaration of Independence also can be found there, including:

- ★ *America Seated Among The Nations (1780)*, by Jonathan Mason
- ★ *Americans Will Celebrate 1775 As A "Glorious Era,"* by John Wilkes
- ★ *Independence: A Solemn Duty*, by Richard Henry Lee
- ★ *A Nation Born in a Day*, by John Quincy Adams, July 4, 1821
- ★ *"The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro,"* by Frederick Douglass, July 4, 1852
- ★ *Thomas Jefferson Selected as the Author Because Richard H. Lee Was Absent, The New York Times*, 1917

UNALIENABLE / INALIENABLE

Is the word in the Declaration of Independence unalienable or is it inalienable?

The final version of the Declaration uses the word "unalienable."

Some earlier drafts used the word "inalienable," which is the term our modern dictionaries prefer. The two words mean precisely the same thing.

According to "The American Heritage Guide to Contemporary Usage and Style:"

The unalienable rights that are mentioned in the Declaration of Independence could just as well have been inalienable, which means the same thing. Inalienable or unalienable refers to that which cannot be given away or taken away.

