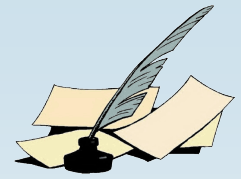




THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE



What is it? The Declaration of Independence is one of America's founding documents. It stated that the American colonies were free from British rule and would no longer be part of Great Britain.

How was it created?

1 In the spring of 1776, the 13 American colonies were already at war with Great Britain. Their armies had been fighting for over a year. But the colonies were still part of the British Empire. In June 1776, a man from Virginia named Richard Henry Lee brought a proposal to the Continental Congress, which was meeting in Philadelphia. The congress was the government formed by the 13 colonies to lead the Americans. Lee proposed that the colonies should stop being part of Britain and declare their independence.

2 The Continental Congress organized a committee of five men to write up a declaration that would explain to the world why the Americans had to break away from British rule. The five men were John Adams of Massachusetts, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, Robert Livingston of New York, and Thomas Jefferson of Virginia. Jefferson wrote most of the Declaration, but the other men on the committee helped him revise it.



A **declaration** is another word for a statement.
Independence means to be free from the control of anyone else.

Lee's resolution to the congress stated, *"That these united Colonies are 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."*

3 The Continental Congress voted to accept the Declaration on July 2. The next day, they made a few changes to the Declaration. Then, the day after that, on July 4, 1776, they voted to adopt it, calling it the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration announced to the world that the American colonies were no longer ruled by Great Britain. That's why July 4 is considered America's birthday.

JULY 4, 1776

The Declaration of Independence Has Four Parts

(not counting the heading at the top and the signatures at the bottom)

The first part is called the **preamble**. It explains the goal of the document, which is to tell the world why America had to rebel against British rule.

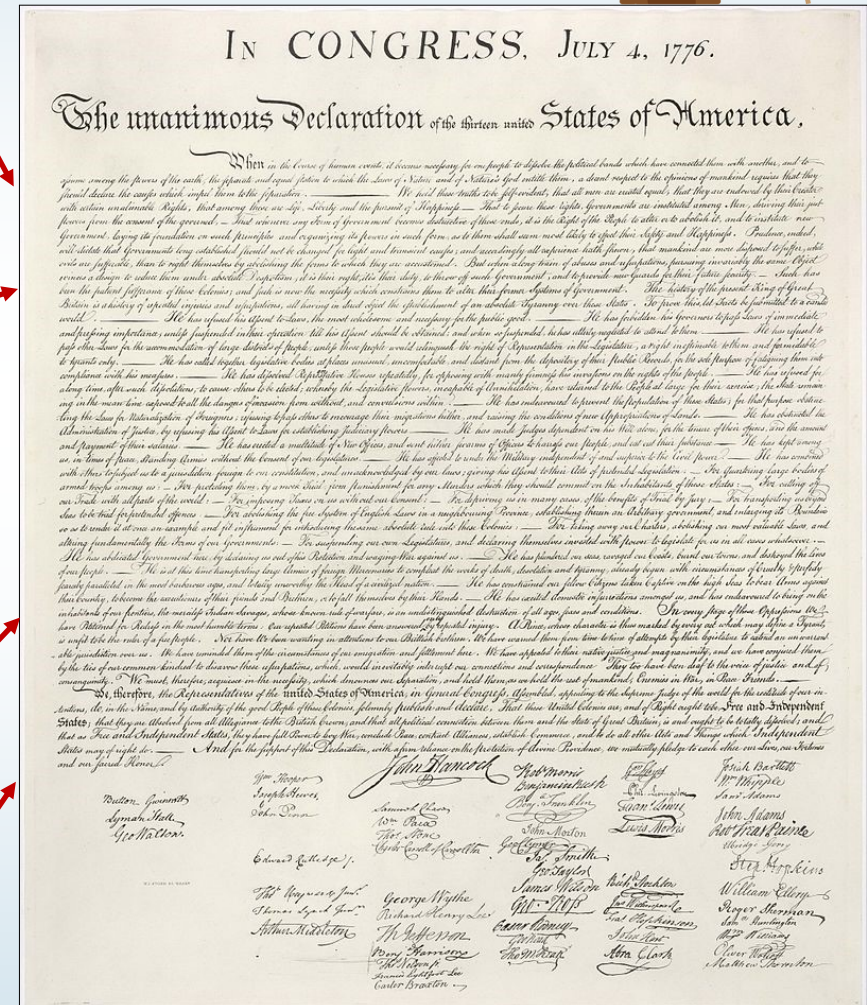
The second part is sometimes called the **statement of human rights**. It says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

These words mean that America should be a place where everyone had the same rights to work for their own happiness and that no one could take those rights away from us.

This is the part of the Declaration that most people remember.

The third part is a list of reasons why the king of England, George III, should not rule over America anymore. This is called the **list of grievances**.

The fourth part is the **resolution**. It explains what the American colonies are going to do, which is throw off British rule and declare themselves independent from Great Britain.



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Signing the Declaration

4

It was a big deal to be one of the people to sign the Declaration of Independence. The men who served in the Continental Congress had been picked by their colonies to represent the people of America, so it was an honor to be chosen. But if America lost the war, the British might have captured the men who signed the Declaration and charged them with treason, so it was dangerous as well.

It was also brave. No colony had ever become independent before in the history of the world. And no country had ever written a document to explain to the world why the people deserved to be free.



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This painting by artist John Trumbull shows the members of the Continental Congress getting ready to sign the Declaration of Independence.



The first person to sign the Declaration of Independence was the president of the Continental Congress, who was named John Hancock. He was from Massachusetts. When he signed his name, he wrote it in big letters because he said he wanted the king to be able to read it! His big signature became famous, which is why people sometimes call someone's signature their "John Hancock."

56

Signers of the Declaration
of Independence

13

American Colonies
Represented

3

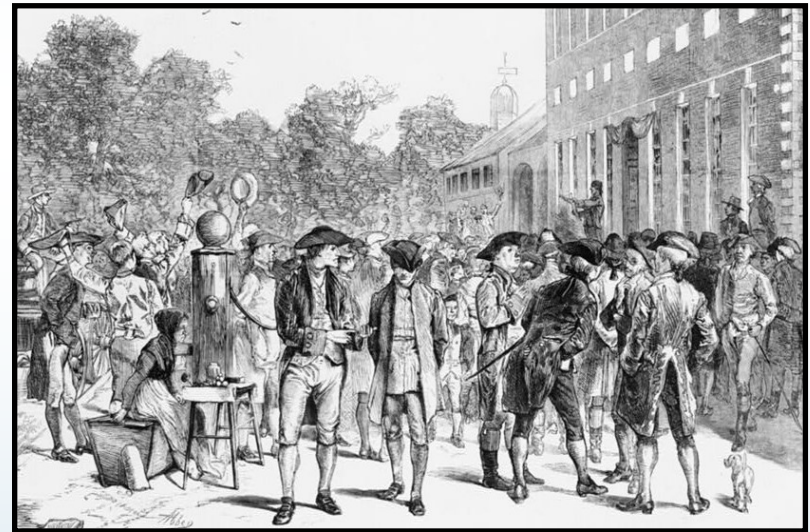
Signers from New Hampshire: Josiah Bartlett,
Matthew Thornton, and William Whipple

How Did the People Learn about the Declaration?

5 After the Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence, they gave it to a Philadelphia printer named John Dunlap. Dunlap made about 200 copies of the Declaration. These copies are known as the Dunlap Broad­sides. There are only 26 Dunlap Broad­sides that have survived today. There is one in New Hampshire at the American Independence Museum in Exeter.



6 The Dunlap Broad­sides were sent all over America so that the people would know that America was not part of Great Britain anymore. People gathered together in town halls, churches, marketplaces, town squares, and town commons to listen while the Declaration was read aloud to them. One Dunlap Broadside was put on a ship and sent to Great Britain so King George could read it.



7 Today, the official copy of the Declaration of Independence is at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., where all Americans can see it.

Why Is the Declaration of Independence Still Important Today ?

Thomas Jefferson said he wanted the Declaration of Independence to be an “*expression of the American mind*,” which meant that he wanted the Declaration to state ideas or beliefs that would shape the country America would become. Many people believe that the Declaration does exactly that. The Declaration of Independence promotes the ideas of liberty and equality, which are two of the founding principles of the United States.

**BUT
WAIT!**

Since the Declaration said that all men are created equal, was everyone treated equally in America? At the time the Declaration was created, no place in the world offered as much freedom and equality as America did, but not everyone in America was treated equally. Black people, women, and indigenous people did not have the same rights as most white men did when the Declaration of Independence was adopted. People in these groups had to fight for a long time to have their rights recognized. Some people believe that treating all people equally is a goal Americans will never reach but that we should always try to live up to the ideas of the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration makes a promise of the way all people should be treated.



This mural of the Continental Congress debating the Declaration of Independence was created in 1936 by a New Hampshire artist named Barry Faulkner, who was from Keene. It is at the National Archives with the original Declaration that the members of the congress signed.