



The Declaration of Independence

The Second Continental Congress

As the American colonies became more and more incensed by British efforts to impose taxes and exercise authority over them, some colonists were beginning to believe that only a complete separation from Great Britain would be acceptable. The Second Continental Congress met in May 1775 with the colonies in a state of crisis. The Intolerable Acts had inflamed American anger not only in Boston but also throughout all of the colonies.

The tea parties in Boston and elsewhere had demonstrated colonial resolve to avoid paying British taxes, but the battles at Lexington and Concord had stiffened British resolve to teach the colonists a lesson. Armed men in all of the colonies organized into militias to prepare for the coming conflict. The Continental Congress attempted to ward off the impending conflict by sending a petition to King George III suggesting a peaceful solution, but he refused to even read it. In June of 1775 at the suggestion of John Adams, the Congress appointed George Washington as commander in chief of the Continental Army.

The Committee of Five

In June 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia presented a resolution in the Congress seeking full independence from Great Britain. At the time only seven colonies

voted to support it. Some colonies needed the approval of their legislatures, and others were undecided. On June 11, 1776, five members of Congress were appointed to draft a declaration of independence to be voted on by the full Congress. John Adams of Massachusetts and Roger Sherman of Connecticut represented the northern colonies. Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania and Robert Livingston of New York represented the middle colonies. Thomas Jefferson of Virginia represented the southern colonies.

Jefferson Chosen to Write the Document

The Committee of Five had several meetings and chose Thomas Jefferson to write the original draft. He was well known as a gifted writer and a strong supporter of independence. Adams was particularly blunt in his reasons for supporting Jefferson. He was a Virginian, and they needed southern support for the resolution. Jefferson was also popular and well liked, as opposed to Adams who characterized himself as “obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular.” Thirdly, Adams said that Jefferson could write 10 times better than he could.





The Declaration of Independence *(cont.)*

The Author

Thomas Jefferson had long been a student of government. He had read widely about the various forms of government and had especially been influenced by the theory of natural rights proposed by John Locke, who argued that men are born with natural rights and that governments should be run for the benefit of all people, not just rulers and the wealthy.

Jefferson spent about two-and-a-half weeks writing his draft, mostly in the evenings. He had other congressional sessions and committee meetings to attend during the day. Jefferson showed his final draft to the other committee members, in particular Franklin and Adams, who made a few suggestions and changes. The document was submitted to Congress on June 28, 1776.

The Lee Resolution

On July 1, the Continental Congress met to debate the Lee Resolution that the colonies become independent of Great Britain. An official vote on July 2 ended with 12 votes for independence. New York's delegation still did not have authorization from their legislature, although it would come a few days later.

For two days the Congress discussed Jefferson's draft. About 80 changes were made in the text, sometimes changes in wording or punctuation and sometimes deletion of entire paragraphs. Jefferson, a slaveholder himself, wanted to declare an end to slavery, but some southern representatives would not accept this.

The Signing

In late afternoon on July 4, the delegates were satisfied with the Declaration and ready to sign it. John Hancock signed the document as president of the Continental Congress, and that made it legal. He wrote in a very large script, he claimed, so that King George could read it without his spectacles. The document was quickly printed and proclaimed throughout the colonies. General Washington had it read to the troops. Later 55 other members of Congress signed the document pledging their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to secure their liberty.





The Declaration of Independence Quiz

Directions: Read pages 20 and 21 about the Declaration of Independence. Answer the questions below by circling the correct answer. Then underline the sentence in the article where the answer is found.

1. Who introduced a resolution in the Continental Congress calling for independence from Great Britain?
 - a. George Washington
 - b. John Hancock
 - c. Thomas Jefferson
 - d. Richard Henry Lee
2. Which member of the committee was chosen to write the Declaration of Independence characterized himself as “obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular”?
 - a. John Adams
 - b. Thomas Jefferson
 - c. John Hancock
 - d. Benjamin Franklin
3. How many changes in Jefferson’s draft of the Declaration did Congress make?
 - a. none
 - b. 2
 - c. about 80
 - d. about 12
4. How long did Jefferson take to write the draft of the Declaration?
 - a. 4 years
 - b. 2 days
 - c. 2 months
 - d. 2½ weeks
5. How many members of Congress signed the Declaration of Independence?
 - a. 300
 - b. 56
 - c. 80
 - d. none
6. Who wrote his signature in a large script so that King George could read it without his spectacles?
 - a. Thomas Jefferson
 - b. George Washington
 - c. Benjamin Franklin
 - d. John Hancock
7. What are militias?
 - a. writers
 - b. public speakers
 - c. citizen soldiers
 - d. legislators
8. What would southern representatives in the Continental Congress not accept as part of the Declaration?
 - a. the idea of natural rights
 - b. separation from Great Britain
 - c. an end to slavery
 - d. taxes on tobacco
9. Which colony did Roger Sherman represent on the Committee of Five?
 - a. Connecticut
 - b. Rhode Island
 - c. Pennsylvania
 - d. Virginia
10. What were the signers of the Declaration prepared to pledge?
 - a. their children
 - b. their futures
 - c. their sacred honor
 - d. their land

Answer Key

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1. d
2. a
3. c
4. b
5. c
6. b
7. b
8. a
9. c
10. a

Page 29

1. b
2. c
3. c
4. d
5. c
6. c
7. a
8. d
9. b
10. b

Page 30

1. b
2. a
3. c
4. b
5. a
6. c
7. a
8. b
9. c
10. d

Page 31

1. b
2. c
3. a
4. b
5. a
6. a
7. b

8. c
9. a
10. b

Page 32

1. d
2. a
3. c
4. d
5. b
6. d
7. c
8. c
9. a
10. c

Page 33

1. b
2. c
3. d
4. a
5. b
6. d
7. a
8. d
9. b
10. b

Page 34

1. c
2. b
3. a
4. c
5. d
6. b
7. c
8. a
9. c
10. d

Page 37

1. j
2. f
3. a
4. h

5. i
6. c
7. d
8. l
9. r
10. b
11. m
12. n
13. q
14. e
15. o
16. s
17. t
18. p
19. k
20. g

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1. necessary, dissolve, assume, separate, station, easy, persons, themselves, most, distempers, color, favorite, music, mathematics
2. Answers will vary

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Answers will vary. Accept reasonable responses.

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1. Lucy cut her hair to get money.
2. Lucy's parents had her head shaved and would not let her wear a bonnet.
3. The Fitzgerald boys fell through the ice.
4. Soldiers lacked food, clothing, and supplies.
5. Papa was a cobbler.
6. Quakers were against the war because of their religious beliefs.
7. Sir Billy was General William Howe.