

Writing the Declaration of Independence

Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence

In June 1775, the Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia. Delegates came from each colony. (A delegate is a person chosen to meet with others to make decisions.) The Revolutionary War had just broken out. The British and the colonists had fought in battles. But most in Congress did not want to break away from England. They wanted the colonies to remain English.

The Americans had sent appeals to England. They had many complaints about what the British government was doing. Colonists also wanted the British people to elect new members of Parliament. They hoped that would change the way the British treated them. But British voters did not do this. They continued to support members of Parliament who opposed colonial rights.

Parliament and King George did not want to bargain with the colonists. In August 1775, King George declared that the Americans were in open revolt. A few months later, Parliament passed a law that allowed seizing American ships. It also allowed burning colonial towns.

King George sent warships and troops to stop the revolt. The king's governor of Virginia offered to free slaves who joined with the British. All these actions angered Americans. More people joined the revolution.

What Is the Declaration of Independence?

Independence was important to the colonists. By 1776, most colonies already had declarations of independence. Many towns, counties, and even private groups made their own declarations, too. The declarations listed British abuses of power. They demanded self-rule.

On June 8, 1776, Congress voted to write a declaration of independence. It named men to form a writing committee. One of these men was Thomas Jefferson. He was a lawyer from Virginia. He was a respected leader there. Virginia had elected him to be a delegate to Congress. The others on the committee were too busy with the revolution to work on the declaration. So, Jefferson wrote it alone.

He finished the writing in just a few days. The declaration's opening words were "When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another . . ." Jefferson went on to say that breaking from England was a serious step. It needed an explanation.

In the second paragraph of the declaration, Jefferson stated his key ideas. He wrote that "all men are created equal." And they have "unalienable rights." In other words, every person has the same God-given rights. And these rights should never be taken away.

Jefferson wrote that these rights are “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Other writers had used the phrase “pursuit of happiness” before. It meant that all persons should be free to find their own way in life. It also meant that they had a duty to help those in need.

Jefferson wrote that governments should protect these rights. Governments get “their just powers from the consent of the governed.” In other words, the people run the government. The goal of government should be to guard everyone’s freedom.

In the rest of the declaration, Jefferson listed the ways the king had abused Americans’ rights. He claimed that the king was “unfit to be the ruler of a people.” He blamed the king for the slave trade, too. He called slavery “cruel.”

Jefferson also attacked the British people. He said that they had voted for a Parliament that was destroying the colonists’ rights. He said they were “deaf to the voice of justice.”

Jefferson stated that the colonies were now “Free and Independent states. . . .” He ended the declaration with these words: “for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”

Jefferson gave his draft to Congress on June 28. Congress did not change much in the first two paragraphs. Today, they are the most famous parts of the Declaration of Independence.

The members did cut out most of Jefferson’s attack on the British people. They took out all of his attack on slavery and the slave trade. Members who owned slaves wanted this part removed. In all, they took out about 25 percent of Jefferson’s words.

Jefferson was angry. He watched while members debated his words. He later wrote that the Congress “mangled” his writing.

On July 2, 1776, Congress voted to declare independence. On the Fourth of July, it approved the Declaration of Independence. There would be no turning back now.

For Discussion and Writing

1. In 1775, most members of Congress did not want to break away from England. What happened to change their minds?
2. Why did Jefferson say Congress “mangled” his writing? Do you agree?
3. At the end of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson wrote “we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.” What would you pledge your life, fortune, and honor to support today? Why?