The Declaration of Independence

Biography / Overview

The Declaration of Independence was drafted primarily by Thomas Jefferson and the Committee of Five (revisions made by John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, while committee support was given by Robert R. Livingston and Roger Sherman) between June 11 and June 28, 1776, in Philadelphia under the auspices of the Second Continental Congress. On July 2, 1776, Congress voted in favor of independence. The final declaration was approved and adopted on July 4, 1776[12]. With the given purpose of articulating the American colonies' reasons for severing political ties with Great Britain, the declaration asserted universal principles of natural rights and consensual government.

Jefferson wrote the initial draft ("rough draught") in mid-June, drawing heavily on prior sources such as the Virginia Declaration of Rights (June 12, 1776) and Enlightenment ideas of natural law[3]. He circulated it to Adams and Franklin for edits, then the Committee of Five presented the draft to Congress on June 28, 1776[4]. Congress debated and edited Jefferson's text from July 2 to July 4, removing roughly 25 percent of the original content (including an antislavery passage) to secure unanimity[5]. Congress formally adopted the final text on July 4, 1776[6].

The Declaration was engrossed on parchment by Timothy Matlack and signed by 56 delegates between August 2 and August 19, 1776 (though many signatures were made later)[7]. The parchment resides in the Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom at the National Archives, Washington, DC[8]. Meanwhile, Dunlap broadsides—the first printed copies—were produced the night of July 4–5, 1776, by John Dunlap (official printer to Congress) and distributed to colonial assemblies, military commanders, and newspapers[9]. These printed copies circulated widely, helping solidify colonial consensus and public support for independence[10]. The Declaration's eloquent articulation of "unalienable Rights" and popular sovereignty framed subsequent American political identity[1], influencing revolutions and constitutions worldwide[11].

Key Drafting Timeline

June 7, 1776: Richard Henry Lee's motion for independence prompts drafting[2].

June 11–28, 1776: Committee of Five drafts the Declaration (Jefferson writes, Adams and Franklin edit)[3].

June 28, 1776: Draft presented to Congress (depicted in Trumbull's 1818 painting)[4].

July 2, 1776: Congress votes for independence; many anticipated this as the defining date[3].

July 2–4, 1776: Congress revises Jefferson's draft substantially, omitting slavery references and refining language[5].

July 4–5, 1776: Final text adopted. Dunlap broadside printed and distributed[6].

July 8, 1776: First public readings in Philadelphia and other cities[4].

August 2–19, 1776: Engrossed parchment signed by most delegates[7].

Bibliography / Primary Sources

Footer 1

Engrossed Parchment Copy (Original Manuscript)
Located in the Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom at the National Archives Building, Washington, DC. Signed by 56 members of the Continental Congress between August 2 and August 19, 1776[7]. High-resolution facsimiles and transcripts available via NARA's "America's Founding Documents" digital exhibit: https://archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration[12].

Dunlap Broadside (First Printed Copies)
Printed by John Dunlap (official printer to Congress) in Philadelphia the night of July 4–5, 1776[9]. Disseminated to colonial governments and military leaders on July 5, 1776. Available via the National Archives digital collection[12].

William J. Stone Copperplate Engraving (1823 Reproduction)
Commissioned by Secretary of State John Quincy Adams; completed and printed in 1823. Used to produce facsimiles of the original, including all signatures and text. Digitally accessible and explored through a Harvard blog post: https://declaration.fas.harvard.edu/blog/exact-facsimiles[12].

Transcripts and Early Print Editions
Present-day facsimile editions reproduce the engrossed text, published by various academic and archival presses (e.g., Liberty Fund, Library of Congress Editions). The National Archives provides high-resolution digital transcripts and facsimiles online: "America's Founding Documents" exhibit[1].

Birth Date / Death Date (Publication Date)

Adopted: July 4, 1776 (Second Continental Congress, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)[12].

First Printed: July 4–5, 1776 (Dunlap broadside)[9].

First Signed (Engrossed Parchment): August 2–19, 1776[7].

Notable / Best-Known For

Declaration of Natural Rights: Asserting that "all men are created equal," endowed with "unalienable Rights" including "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"[11].

Justification for Independence: Providing a detailed list of grievances against King George III—27 specific complaints documenting violations of colonial rights, from taxing without consent to denying fair trials—to legitimize the break from British rule[4].

Universal Appeal: Serving as an enduring statement of democratic principles, later influencing revolutions and constitutional movements worldwide, including the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) and various Latin American independence declarations[11].

Foundational Document: Forming one of the three Charters of Freedom (alongside the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights) permanently housed in the National Archives. Its phrases serve as moral touchstones in U.S. civic and legal culture[8].

Famous Quotes

"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."
– Preamble, Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776)[1]

"Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes…"
– Preamble, Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776)[1]

"That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed…"
– Preamble, Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776)[1]

Major Works / Textual Contents

The Declaration's text can be divided into four principal sections.

Preamble (Opening Statement):
Articulates the philosophical foundation of natural rights and legitimate government[4]. Establishes that when a government becomes destructive of these rights, people have the authority to alter or abolish it.

Declaration of Rights (Natural Rights & Principle of Government):
Asserts that governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed"[1]. Emphasizes life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as fundamental entitlements.

Footer 3

List of Grievances (Charges Against King George III):
Consists of 27 specific complaints detailing how the British Crown violated colonial rights (e.g., "He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good," "For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent")[4]. Demonstrates why the colonies felt compelled to declare independence.

Resolution of Independence (Formal Declaration):
Concludes by officially dissolving political ties with Great Britain and declaring the American colonies to be "Free and Independent States"[2]. Asserts the right to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and perform other acts and things independent states may rightfully do.

Influences / Intellectual Context

John Locke (1632–1704):
Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* (1690) introduced concepts of natural rights and social contract theory that directly influenced Jefferson's wording on life, liberty, and property (adapted to "pursuit of happiness")[11].

Enlightenment Philosophers:
Ideas from Montesquieu (separation of powers), Voltaire (civil liberties), and Rousseau (general will) shaped the ideological environment in which the Declaration was formulated[11]. Participation in European print culture meant the Declaration's themes were immediately accessible to a transatlantic audience.

Virginia Declaration of Rights (June 12, 1776):
Drafted by George Mason, this precursor influenced Jefferson's phrasing on inherent human rights and government's responsibility[3].

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (January 1776):
Provided a compelling case for independence and republican government, galvanizing public opinion and informing the Declaration's tone[11].

Biblical Allusions and English Common Law:
Jefferson's text echoes scriptural references (e.g., "nature's God," "Creator") and notions of English constitutionalism (e.g., rights to trial by jury, no taxation without representation). These references helped convey moral and legal legitimacy to English—and international—readers[4].

Legacy and Modern Significance

Catalyst for the American Revolution (1776–1783): Served as the formal proclamation that mobilized colonial militias, justified the Revolutionary War effort, and signaled a break from monarchy-based governance[11].

Influence on Subsequent Constitutions and Declarations: The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) drew heavily on its language and principles; later, Latin American independence movements (e.g., Venezuela 1811, Argentina 1816) echoed its themes[11]. Over 100 declarations of independence worldwide were issued in its wake, forming a distinct rhetorical genre[4].

Foundation for U.S. Constitutional Framework (1787–1789): Though not a legally binding charter, the Declaration's moral authority shaped debates during the Constitutional Convention and influenced the Bill of Rights (1791)[11]. Leaders like George Washington and James Madison referred to its principles when framing the new government.

Source of Civil Rights and Abolitionist Rhetoric (19th Century): Abraham Lincoln invoked Jefferson's ideals in the Gettysburg Address (1863), describing the Declaration as "a rebuke and stumbling-block to tyranny and oppression"[11]. Frederick Douglass used the Declaration's assertion of equality to challenge slavery, notably in his Fourth of July Oration (1852): "Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us"[11].

Symbol of Universal Human Rights (20th Century): The United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) echoes the Declaration's emphasis on inherent human dignity and rights, later codified in international law[12].

Flagship Exhibit in the Charters of Freedom: Together with the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, the Declaration is housed in a specially designed Rotunda at the National Archives, reinforcing its role as a cultural and democratic touchstone. The 2003 rededication ceremony underscored its ongoing reverence[5].

Modern Political and Legal Discourse: The Declaration is frequently cited by U.S. leaders and courts as an ethical foundation (e.g., Lincoln's "promissory note" metaphor for American equality) but is not legally binding. Supreme Court opinions occasionally invoke it rhetorically to frame debates on equality and liberty[13]. Debates continue among constitutional scholars about the extent to which its natural-rights philosophy informs modern jurisprudence.

Modern Moments / Impact on 21st-Century Society

September 17, 2003: President George W. Bush participated in the rededication ceremony unveiling the newly re-encased Declaration of Independence (alongside the Constitution and Bill of Rights) in the renovated Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom at the National Archives Building, Washington, DC[5].

2003: UNESCO inscribed the Charters of Freedom (Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution, and Bill of Rights) on the *Memory of the World International Register,* recognizing them as documentary heritage of global importance[22].

Footer 6

July 1, 2009: The National Archives exhibited a rare 1823 copy of the Declaration of Independence (William J. Stone facsimile) as part of its Fourth of July festivities in the Rotunda, marking the first time in the agency's 75-year history that four versions of the Declaration were displayed simultaneously (original, Dunlap broadside, Stone engraving's copper plate, and 1823 facsimile)[6].

Ongoing (2009–Present): The National Archives website ("America's Founding Documents") provides high-resolution digital facsimiles, transcripts, and educational resources related to the Declaration, accessible to the public at no cost[12]. Every July 4th, the National Archives and local historical societies hold public readings of the Declaration in Washington, DC, and across the country; many schools include the Declaration in classroom curricula, and online platforms livestream readings from the Rotunda[12]. Annual commemorative events (e.g., 235th anniversary in 2011, 240th in 2016, 245th in 2021) are documented via National Archives press releases, underscoring the Declaration's continuing cultural resonance[5].

21st-Century Scholarly Perspectives and Historiographical Context

Re-evaluating Authorship and Intent

Recent scholarship emphasizes that the original intent behind "all men are created equal" was collective equality—that the American people, as a unified nation, were equal to other nations—and not necessarily a universal guarantee of individual rights[31]. Over time, abolitionists and later reformers reinterpreted this phrase to demand racial and gender equality[11]. Jack Rakove argues that in 1776, Congress viewed the Declaration primarily as a statement of sovereign equality among nations; only later did Americans read it as an individual-rights charter[31]. Maier shows that Jefferson's antislavery clause was deleted for political unity, highlighting the compromise needed to bind northern and southern colonies[5].

Textual Nuances and Grammar

Danielle Allen's analysis of the missing period after "pursuit of Happiness" reveals how early printers introduced a period, altering the Declaratory argument's flow. Without that period, the Preamble's assertion of rights is inextricably linked to government's purpose[15]. Allen contends that grammatical details shape our understanding of the Declaration as an argument for forming governments to secure rights[15].

Footer 7

Archival Discoveries: The Sussex Declaration
In 2017, Emily Sneff and Danielle Allen discovered the Sussex Declaration, a second engrossed parchment likely from the 1780s. Its unusual arrangement of signatures (ungrouped by state) suggests an early attempt to emphasize national unity over state divisions[14]. This find sheds light on how the Declaration was copied, circulated, and reinterpreted soon after independence.

Global Reception and Genre Formation
David Armitage traces the Declaration's global impact. He identifies four waves of declarations of independence that followed the 1776 example. Late 18th/Early 19th Centuries: French (1789), Haitian (1804), Spanish American (1811). Mid-19th Century: European revolutions (Belgium 1830), Texas (1836). Post-World War I: Czechoslovakia (1918), etc. Decolonization Era: Vietnam (1945), Israel (1948), African nations (1960s)[12]. Armitage notes that while many adopted the rhetorical template (preamble + grievances + resolution), few copied Jefferson's natural-rights preamble verbatim. Rather, international declarations often focused on national self-determination[12].

U.S. Legal and Political Scholarship
Although not a binding law, the Declaration's principles continue to inform American legal and political thought. Frederick Douglass (1852) and Martin Luther King Jr. (1963) invoked the Declaration as a "promissory note" for equality[13]. Debates persist about whether the Declaration's natural-rights philosophy should guide Supreme Court decisions (e.g., *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* [1886]; *Dred Scott v. Sandford* [1857] shows how Taney misapplied its equality principle). Some modern jurists argue for "Declaration-informed originalism," while others caution against treating it as legal precedent[13]. Alexander Tsesis, *For Liberty and Equality: The Life and Times of the Declaration of Independence* (2012), charts how successive movements leveraged the Declaration's ideals for social reform[14]. Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (2014), stresses its enduring relevance to modern debates on justice and civic engagement[15]. Legal debates on unenumerated rights (e.g., right to privacy) sometimes invoke the Declaration's emphasis on "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" as background moral principles, though courts generally resist granting it the status of enforceable law[13].

Suggested Reading & Resources

Secondary Literature (Scholarship)
Maier, Pauline. *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence.* Vintage, 1998. Comprehensive analysis of the political, intellectual, and historical processes behind the Declaration's creation and adoption[11].

Beeman, Richard R. *Plain, Honest Men: The Making of the American Constitution.* Random House, 2009. Contextualizes the Declaration's influence on Constitutional debates and the framing process.

Ellis, Joseph J. *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation.* Vintage, 2002. Explores interpersonal dynamics among Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, and other framers during the Revolution.

Wolf, Edwin H., and M. P. Holt. *Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence: The Mark of Freedom.* University Press of Virginia, 1997. Examines Jefferson's role and rhetorical craftsmanship within the broader Enlightenment tradition.

Armitage, David. *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History.* Harvard University Press, 2007. Traces the global reception of the Declaration and the four waves of independence proclamations it inspired[12].

Allen, Danielle. *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality.* Liveright, 2014. Offers a close reading of the Declaration's language and argues for its ongoing relevance **Footer 9** to equality and civic life[15].

Tsesis, Alexander. *For Liberty and Equality: The Life and Times of the Declaration of Independence.* Yale University Press, 2012. Chronicles how successive movements (abolition, women's rights, civil rights) leveraged the Declaration's ideals[14].

Rakove, Jack. "The Declaration of Independence as a Global Event." *Journal of American History* 106, no. 3 (2019): 485–503. Reassesses Jefferson's intent and the Declaration's early international circulation.

Major Scholarly Editions

The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Vol. 1–12. Princeton University Press / University of Virginia Press, 1950–present. Includes original draft versions of the Declaration and extensive editorial annotations.

The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas, edited by Leonard W. Labaree and Harry N. Scheiber. W. W. Norton, 1986. Scholarly critical edition with historical context, comparative texts, and bibliographical apparatus.

The Adams Papers: Diaries, Correspondence, and Public Papers of John Adams, Massachusetts Historical Society, digital edition. Documents Adams's role in the Committee of Five and his subsequent reflections on the Declaration.

Archival & Online Sources

National Archives & Records Administration (NARA): "Declaration of Independence" page: https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration[12]. "America's Founding Documents" digital exhibit: https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs[12].

Library of Congress (LOC): High-resolution images and scholarly commentary: https://www.loc.gov/item/2005616761/[10].

Footer 10

Founders Online (National Archives): Database of correspondence to/from Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, Madison, Washington, including drafts and notes: https://founders.archives.gov/[13].

Yale Avalon Project: Full text of the Declaration (including early drafts and related documents): http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/declare.asp[14].

UNESCO Memory of the World Programme: Listing of the Charters of Freedom (Declaration, Constitution, Bill of Rights), recognized as documentary heritage: https://www.unesco.org/en/memory-world/register[22].

Internet Archive: Digitized scans of 18th- and 19th-century editions of the Declaration (search "Declaration of Independence 1776"): https://archive.org/details/texts?q=Declaration+of+Independence+1776[23].

HathiTrust Digital Library: Digitized public-domain editions from partner institutions worldwide: https://www.hathitrust.org[24].

Adams Papers Digital Edition (Massachusetts Historical Society): John Adams's diaries and correspondence, detailing his role in the Committee of Five and reflections on the Declaration: https://www.masshist.org/adams[25].

National Portrait Gallery (Smithsonian): Digital portraits of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and other key figures: https://npg.si.edu/[26].