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Declaration of Independence

Scott Stephenson: You're now standing in the center of a Gallery about 1776. This is the year in which a resistance movement that had the goal of restoring British Liberties for British subjects in North America becomes instead a revolutionary movement in which the sovereignty of the King and Parliament is utterly and finally rejected. On July 4th, 1776, the Continental Congress – meeting just two blocks from where you're standing – issues the Declaration of Independence. This is a statement explaining to the world why these 13 British colonies had declared themselves independent and expressing the ideals that would guide the formation of a new nation. Listen to these words from the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence: "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."

This document, the Declaration of Independence, represented a radical "leap in the dark," in the words of a Loyalist writer. It changed American society and ultimately the world forever. So look down at the floor beneath your feet and you see the chain of states, an early representation of the American Republic that was designed by Benjamin Franklin. As you walk around this Gallery, you can explore different aspects of 1776. In the small theater, you can sit in a reproduction Windsor chair and learn about the work of the Continental Congress, as it drafted, debated, edited, and ultimately issued the Declaration of Independence. In the column in the center of the room, there are two cases on opposite sides. On one, you can view an original printing from 1776 of the Declaration of Independence, and on the other side, see a collection of original objects such as a weathervane and a candlestick that reflect the communities of faith in Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania, and more broadly throughout the new United States, and explore the origins of our American commitment to religious toleration. And finally, you'll find yourself beneath the recreated statue of King George III.

You're in the moment where we started our journey, looking up at that gilt statue of the King, torn down by a crowd in New York City after the first reading of the Declaration. Make sure you explore the surprising fate of that statue, and as you look up at that sailor with a rope tied around the neck of the King, about to throw it down to you, reflect on this simple question: What would you have done?

But even as crowds cheered the Declaration of Independence and celebrated their newfound liberties, a British fleet gathered in the waters of New York. The Empire was about to strike back.