



# THE DECLARATION IN ITS TIME

The Declaration of Independence is hailed as a founding document and cornerstone of the United States. However, a decade before it was written, independence was not an option that was being seriously considered in the British North American colonies. It was only after over a decade of “a long train of abuses and usurpations,” as it was described in the Declaration, that some American colonists began calling for independence. In the months leading up to that fateful July of 1776, the idea of independence was debated and discussed in the Continental Congress and in **delegates’** personal letters. Congress eventually had the delegates ask their colonies if they should declare independence. In June, delegates from each of the colonies created committees to prepare for running a new country.

One of these committees was tasked with drafting a declaration stating the reasons for independence. That committee probably had little idea that this document would have such a long-lasting impact within their new country and around the world.

## Road to Declaration

By the late fall of 1775, John Adams and Richard Henry Lee began to discuss the possibility of American independence. King George III had removed the 13 colonies from Great Britain’s protection due to their rebellious actions, and the colonies began considering how to ensure their own protection. After months of planning, the result of Adams and Lee’s work led the Continental Congress to recommend the colonies create their own governments in early May 1776. The next month, Lee recommended that the colonies declare independence from Great Britain.

As the colonies created new **state** governments, the debate about independence was still ongoing. By May 1776, several towns, counties, organizations, and even some states officially supported independence from Great Britain. In June, Richard Henry Lee officially proposed that the delegates vote on independence. Congress, in response, created several committees to prepare for independence and a new, American government. One of these committees, later called the **Committee of Five**, was tasked with writing a declaration of independence.

Five men made up the committee that created the Declaration of Independence: Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, and Benjamin Franklin. Today, it is well known that Thomas Jefferson was the main author of the Declaration of Independence. How did this committee of five select a primary author to shoulder this responsibility? There were several reasons for this decision. Jefferson was already a well-established writer, and he was the only one who was not on another committee. This made Jefferson the obvious choice as the author of the Declaration of Independence in the eyes of his fellow committee members.

Jefferson’s draft of the Declaration went through several edits. Before he gave it to the committee for revision, Jefferson first asked Adams and Franklin to review the document. At the end of June, a revised version of Jefferson’s declaration was submitted to Congress. There the delegates made additional edits and ultimately reduced the original submission by 25%.

### DID YOU KNOW?

The Declaration of Independence was inspired by several other texts and writers. Some modern historians argue that it contains ideas and phrasing from at least 15 other documents. Many of these ideas were products of the Enlightenment. In fact, the line “unalienable rights” was molded from the Enlightenment philosopher John Locke and his idea of natural rights.

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The Declaration of Independence would go through a few more light revisions over the following weeks, including a change to the title. On July 2, the Continental Congress voted to declare the United Colonies “Free and Independent States.” They adopted the Declaration on July 4.

## Spreading the Word

The Declaration of Independence was not the first time that the Continental Congress had reached out to the world. Between 1774 and 1775, they sent messages to fellow British colonies: Quebec, the Assembly of Jamaica, and Ireland. These letters had a similar aim to the later Declaration of Independence; the Continental Congress wanted to plead their case regarding the ongoing conflict with Britain.

Once the Declaration was written, it also needed to be shared. During the Revolutionary War, there were no phones, televisions, or social media to spread news. Instead, the Continental Congress relied on other methods to spread the Declaration of Independence. The version of the document that most people are familiar with today is the one created by Timothy Matlack and includes John Hancock’s large signature. This one is an engrossed, or official handwritten, copy of the Declaration of Independence that was signed beginning in August of 1776. It is on display at the National Archives. However, Matlack’s version was not the version that colonists first encountered.

### LEARN MORE

People across the 13 colonies had varying opinions about declaring independence. Explore some of their thoughts in the interactive *Season of Independence*.

<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/interactives/season-of-independence>

## Word of Mouth

For many colonists, the Declaration of Independence was heard rather than read. In the days and weeks following July 4, the Declaration of Independence was read aloud on the steps of the Pennsylvania State House, in town squares, and in military camps. General George Washington had the Declaration read to his troops on July 9 as they prepared to defend New York City against a coming British invasion. In upstate New York, troops stationed at Fort Ticonderoga heard the Declaration read by the end of July. In celebration of the new country, they named a new set of fortifications Mount Independence.

## Broadsides

Public readings were not the only way word spread. Congress authorized John Dunlap, a Philadelphia printer, to publish the first broadsides of the Declaration. From there, Dunlap’s broadsides were sent to each state and General Washington. In fact, it was one of these broadsides that Washington had read to the troops in New York on July 9. Other printers also created their own broadsides to be read in their towns and cities. Dunlap’s original broadsides were also the first to be translated into another language and to be sent to people throughout the Americas and across the Atlantic.

## Newspapers

During the Revolutionary War, dozens of weekly newspapers provided colonists with information from across the colonies and around the world. Newspapers printed the Declaration of Independence before the week was out. Five days after the approval of the Declaration, Henrich Miller printed the first translation in his German-language newspaper *Pennsylvanischer Staatsbote* (*Pennsylvania State-Courier*). For ten years, Miller and his associates had translated events and political journalism into German for a large German speaking population in and around Philadelphia. Miller likely picked up a copy of the Declaration from Dunlap’s shop.

The names of the Declaration’s signers would not be printed as part of the document until the following January. Fearing a British attack on Philadelphia, Congress had moved to Baltimore in December 1776. There they instructed

## TAKE A LOOK

Benjamin Towne presented the first newspaper printing of the Declaration of Independence in his July 6 issue of the *Pennsylvania Evening Post*. Take a closer look in the virtual Timeline of the American Revolution.

<https://timeline.amrevmuseum.org/objects/first-newspaper-printing-of-the-declaration>

Baltimore printer Mary Katherine Goddard to create broadsides with the names of the signers. In a personal show of commitment to the cause for independence, Goddard added her own name below the list of signers. Goddard was also the first printer to include the word “unanimous” in the title. New York delegates did not receive approval for independence until after Dunlap’s original version had been printed.

### Around the World

The Declaration of Independence did not stay within the colonies. It also journeyed out to the rest of the world. Over the course of eight weeks, the Declaration reached London, then Ireland, Scotland, and Holland, and even further still to central, southern, and eastern Europe. By September, the Declaration had reached as far as Warsaw, Poland. Most of this journey was thanks to early French translations of the Declaration, as French was a widely understood language in Europe during the 18th century. Many French translations omitted the grievances of the Declaration and emphasized its ideals. In its various forms, news of the Declaration quickly spread and continued to be translated as it reached new nations.

### Reactions

As news about the Declaration of Independence spread, colonists showed mixed reactions. Some proclaimed joy and excitement for the Declaration, others noted its existence without special emphasis, and still more made no mention of the Declaration within their accounts. Philadelphia Quaker Elizabeth Drinker, who kept a diary much of her life, did not write about the Declaration. Further south, Reverend William Tennent described in his diary the joy and satisfaction of the people in Charleston during a public reading on August 5.

On July 8, free African American James Forten heard the Declaration read aloud when he was nine years old. He would later go on to join the war as a sailor for the United States because he was inspired by its words. Even visitors to the colonies made note of the Declaration. Englishman Nicholas Cresswell commented scornfully about the colonies declaring independence in Virginia on July 9. Cresswell was not alone in his critique. Some colonists believed that independence was a step too far. In New York, one group of Loyalists wrote and signed a Declaration of Dependence in November 1776.

Despite the attention the Declaration received within the 13 colonies themselves and the rest of the world, Britain’s Parliament initially chose to ignore the Declaration in hopes of discrediting the document. By August, Parliament decided to secretly commission British lawyer John Lind to publish a response to the Declaration, which he did in a pamphlet called *Answer to the Declaration of the American Congress*. In October, King George addressed Parliament and noted that the Declaration “renounced all allegiance to the crown, and all political connection with this country,” confirming his feelings from the year before.

**“[The Declaration of Independence] was intended to be an expression of the american mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.”**

- Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825

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Issuing a formalized declaration of statehood was an extraordinary step for its time. The Enlightenment ideals enshrined within the Declaration of Independence helped it become a part of the **ideological** and moral foundation of the United States. However, at the time, the Declaration of Independence was just that: a statement of a group of colonies separating from their mother country to create a new one. The Declaration of Independence was designed to gain recognition as an independent state, which would open the door to securing alliances with other countries.

Most people in the summer of 1776 had no idea of the ripple effects that the document would unleash upon the world and within their new country.