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Brian Flanagan
Grand Valley State University

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America's Declaration of Independence

Did You Know?

By Brian Flanagan

"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 -- That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it...."

Independence Day is often associated with three American presidents: Thomas Jefferson and John Adams passed away July 4, 1826, and Calvin Coolidge was born on July 4, 1872. But what we most remember on the Fourth of July, of course, is our nation's Declaration of Independence.

Did you know that Thomas Jefferson, at the age of 33, drafted the Declaration of Independence alone, in the upstairs parlor of his Philadelphia home, without the aid of his books? Of course there is much more to the story than that. Jefferson, in fact, used numerous sources in drafting the Declaration -- only they were stored in his mind rather than on his bookshelf. He borrowed from his own previous writings, from newly drafted state constitutions, especially Virginia's, from revolutionary pamphlets published in towns and counties across the colonies, and from Enlightenment philosophers in America, France, Scotland, and the very nation he was declaring independence from -- England. The Declaration of Independence may have been written by Thomas Jefferson, but it was the work of a nation, indeed of western civilization.



Did you know...?

- Richard Henry Lee, great uncle of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, moved to declare independence during the Second Continental Congress. He said, "That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown; and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved." John Adams seconded Lee's motion.
- Although Jefferson was the author of the Declaration of Independence, responsibility for its contents fell to a Committee of Five assembled from the Second Continental Congress. The committee included Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston.
- Benjamin Franklin and John Adams would have been the top two choices to draft the Declaration had they not turned down the opportunity. Their time was invested in "more important" business, so the honor fell to the young Virginian.
- The Declaration of Independence may have been plagiarized. It has been charged that Thomas Jefferson used language from the earlier Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, Declaration of Independence, which reputedly stated in May 1775. "We the citizens of Mecklenburg County do hereby dissolve the political bands which have connected us to the mother country. ... We do hereby declare ourselves a free and independent people ... to the maintenance of which independence, we solemnly pledge to each other our mutual cooperation, our lives, our fortunes, and our most sacred honor."

How ever, an original copy of the Mecklenburg Declaration does not exist (the earliest surviving iteration of the document was published in 1819), and there is no reference to the document in newspapers of the time. The authenticity of the document is inconclusive.

- The declaration of American independence from England was inspired, in part, by the English Magna Carta -- a document written in 1215 to confront the despotic rule of the King, and demand recognition of the rights of counties. Jefferson also borrowed heavily from English philosopher John Locke who taught in his *Second Treatise on Government* that men have a natural right to "life, liberty and property."
- Jefferson used ideas, and even phrases, from a draft of Virginia's new constitution, and the declaration of rights for Virginia, which stated, "All men are, by nature equal and free: no one has a right to any authority over another without his consent: all lawful government is founded on the consent of those who are subject to it."
- Several changes were made to Jefferson's draft of the Declaration when it was reviewed by the Committee of Five. In fact, Benjamin Franklin co-authored the famous opening, "We declare these truths to be self-evident...." He suggested the term "self-evident" to replace Jefferson's original wording, "sacred and undeniable."
- After the committee approved the Declaration of Independence, more than 80 changes were made to it during the Second Continental Congress's debate. In the end, one quarter of the original draft was cut entirely.
- July 4, 1776, was neither the day the Declaration was authored, nor the date it was signed by members of the congress. (That process wouldn't begin until August 2, and the last members wouldn't sign until November 19.) The fourth of July wasn't even the day congress voted to declare independence from England -- that happened two days earlier. On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress voted to adopt Thomas Jefferson's language with the congress's revisions.
- Fifty years after the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams -- the Declaration's author and greatest supporter -- died on the same day, July 4, 1826.

Important Documents for American Independence

[Declaration of Colonial Rights](#), resolutions of the first continental congress, October 14, 1774

Thomas Paine's [Common Sense](#), January 1776

[Preamble and Resolution of the Virginia Convention](#), May 15, 1776

Richard Henry Lee's [Lee Resolution](#) in the second continental congress, June 7, 1776

Thomas Jefferson's "[original Rough draught](#)" of the Declaration of Independence

Thomas Jefferson's [Declaration of Independence](#)

Abraham Lincoln's [Gettysburg Address](#), November 19, 1863

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YouTube: [John Adams Interview](#)

YouTube: [Richard Norton Smith on Thomas Jefferson](#)

YouTube: [Richard Norton Smith on John Adams](#)

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[The Constitution of the United States with the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation](#). New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2004

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