

More than a year after the American Revolution began, the Declaration of Independence was signed in Philadelphia. It gave various reasons why the colonists wanted to separate from England and announced the existence of a new nation. The Declaration was written by Thomas Jefferson and a committee from the Second Continental Congress, which had met in 1775. This meeting of the Second Continental Congress had been provided for at the First Continental Congress. The delegates to the Second Continental Congress had first come hoping for peace, but soon, more and more leaders called for complete separation from Great Britain.

On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia made a motion that "These united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states." On July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was signed and adopted. The words were mostly Thomas Jefferson's, but the ideas were centuries old. The Declaration can be divided into three parts: a statement of principle concerning the rights of a man and why a revolution was necessary, a list of specific grievances against England's King George III, and a formal claim of independence. The most important part of the Declaration comes in its second paragraph:

*"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."*

**The Declaration is Read**

On July 8, 1776, the *Liberty Bell* was rung in Philadelphia to call the people to the first public reading of the Declaration. For the safety of the signers, their names were not made public for six months. When they were revealed, many were seized by the British and thrown into prison, and their homes were burned. This small group had risked their lives for liberty.

Today, in Philadelphia, there stands a tablet that marks the place where Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration. After Congress adopted the Declaration, John Dunlap printed copies of it. These prints are now called *Dunlap Broad-sides*. Twenty-four copies are known to exist, two of which are in the Library of Congress. The original copy was exhibited for many years until light and air threatened its existence. In 1921, it was transferred to the care of the Library of Congress, and in 1952, it was placed in the National Archives building in Washington, D.C. You may see it there and you also may visit the meeting place of the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia.

The important fact is not that the Americans had declared themselves independent, but that they had set down certain principles and beliefs that were new to governments: all men are created equal; all men have rights; and governments are subject to the will of the people.

The Declaration of Independence is not a constitution or form of government. It served to set up principles for a new government. Such principles were used in writing the United States Constitution.

**Historical Note:** When the Declaration of Independence was written, Jefferson wrote of "unalienable rights." Today, it is more common to use the word "inalienable" to mean the same thing. This important word is defined as rights that are unable to be taken away from you.

**QUESTIONS**

- MULTIPLE CHOICE** - Circle the letter of the correct answer.
- Which of the following is NOT an unalienable right of the Declaration?
    - a. life
    - b. liberty
    - c. education
    - d. pursuit of happiness
  - The Declaration was written by:
    - a. Jefferson
    - b. Washington
    - c. Hamilton
    - d. Adams
  - The Declaration was authorized by the:
    - a. Second Continental Congress
    - b. First Continental Congress
    - c. British King
    - d. New England Confederation
  - The Declaration was signed and adopted in:
    - a. 1727
    - b. 1775
    - c. 1776
    - d. 1876

- TRUE OR FALSE?** Write a *T* or *F* in the space provided.
1. The Declaration was written to start the American Revolution.
  2. The Second Continental Congress had the task of carrying out the American Revolution.
  3. The Declaration of Independence is not a constitution.
  4. The Declaration was written in Washington, DC.
  5. The principles of the Declaration of Independence were used in writing the U.S. Constitution.
  6. The Declaration of Independence was signed after the U.S. Constitution was written.

**DEFINE**

- unalienable \_\_\_\_\_
- declaration \_\_\_\_\_