



On July 2, 1776, after months of deliberation and while directing battle in the colonies and Canada, the Second Continental Congress voted to declare the “united States of America” separate and independent from Britain. On July 4, the Congress approved the final wording of the Declaration, written primarily by Thomas Jefferson. Copies were immediately printed and distributed throughout the colonies and the continental troops. On July 9, with the approval of the last colony, New York, the Declaration became the “unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.” On August 2, 1776, the printed Declaration was signed by most of the congressional delegates, the final signature affixed in 1781 by the New Hampshire delegate.

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

[grievances annotated]

IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.¹

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, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. — Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.²

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¹ Jefferson based much of the Declaration’s text on his preamble to the Virginia constitution and on Virginia’s Declaration of Rights (composed by George Mason), both written in June 1776. Scholars still debate the relative influence on Jefferson from other documents, including Locke’s 1689 treatises on government, yet it is clear that the Enlightenment concepts of “natural law” and the “natural rights of mankind” found an early forceful expression in the 1776 declaration of the “thirteen united States of America.”

² Twenty-seven grievances are given, many in vague or overstated language for the purpose of persuasion and dramatic intensity. All relate to Britain’s increase of imperial control after the French and Indian War (1754-1763), which ended the relative autonomy long valued by the colonies.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the accomodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

1 Colonial laws had to be approved by the British monarch, and Parliament could ban colonial initiatives. For example, the king blocked several colonies' attempts to tax the slave trade, and Parliament banned colonies from printing their own paper money, which colonists felt was essential to their commercial vitality.

2 In several instances, the king instructed royal governors to block pending colonial legislation. At times, months or years would pass before the king addressed a colonial enactment, if ever.

3 The British officials feared large legislative bodies as parochial and democratic, so they sought to restrict their growth. This restriction left many new frontier communities poorly represented in their colonial assemblies.

4 In retribution for their resistance to British authority, the assemblies of Massachusetts, Virginia, and South Carolina were ordered for periods of time to convene at a site other than their normal meeting places where all their critical papers and records were kept.

5 By 1776, nearly all the colonial assemblies had been dissolved at some point, for weeks or months, due to their stands against British authority.

6 With their assemblies dissolved and unable to elect new representatives, colonists were in effect without local government.

7 King George III considered limiting emigration to the colonies of non-British Europeans, especially Germans, partly because they would not bring with them a traditional allegiance to the Crown. Americans, however, valued the increase of independent settlers (rather than of freed prisoners from British jails). In addition, the king in 1763 had virtually banned American settlement in the Ohio River Valley, a region long coveted by the expanding colonies (the ban was lifted in 1768).

8 From 1773 to 1776 North Carolina had no superior courts due to a stalemate between its assembly and the governor over the assembly's insistence on allowing "attachments" (similar to garnishment) to seize British debtors' property, a practice banned by Parliament.

9 In 1767 the king removed one essential power of the colonies—paying the salaries of royal officials. Without the "power of the purse," the assemblies could wield little influence over governors, judges, customs commissioners, and other British officials.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harrass our people, and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

10 Of the new offices created after 1763, the most unpopular were the British customs agents (tax collectors) who arrived in 1767 with expanded authority to conduct searches of ships and warehouses for goods smuggled into the colonies (a practice, long ignored by Britain, to avoid British import taxes). [*The 1789 Bill of Rights bans "unreasonable searches and seizures" (Fourth Amendment).*]

11 In 1768 the first British troops sent to the colonies for the sole purpose of enforcing British authority arrived in Boston. The escalating hostility led to the Boston Massacre of 1770 and other violent confrontations.

12 In 1774 the British appointed a general, Thomas Gage, to double as the civil governor of Massachusetts. This offended the Patriots, who wanted a strict separation of the military and civil authority. [*The U.S. Constitution assigns the role of commander-in-chief of the military forces to a civil official, the President.*]

13 After 1763, the king assented to laws of Parliament that many colonists considered illegitimate, coercive, and punitive ("pretended legislation"), one creating a new colonial Board of Trade (a "jurisdiction foreign to our Constitution") that enforced new trade laws and taxes.

14 In 1764 Parliament required the colonial assemblies to provide funds for food, drink, provisions, and housing (in unoccupied buildings) for British troops in America. [*The 1789 Bill of Rights places strict limits on the government's authority to house soldiers in private dwellings (Third Amendment).*]

15 In 1774 Parliament authorized that British soldiers accused of murder could be sent to Britain for trial instead of being tried in America with a jury of colonists.

16 In 1774, Parliament closed the port of Boston and in 1775, with the outbreak of war, ordered the total blockade of American shipping.



original Declaration of Independence
National Archives, Washington, DC

one of many broadside editions
printed in July 1776

the 1823 engraving by William J. Stone
(most frequently reproduced version)

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:

17 “Taxation without representation” became a rallying cry against British rule. In 1765 Parliament began imposing direct taxes on the colonies, which had no elected representation in Parliament. [*In the U.S. Constitution, money-related bills must begin in the House of Representatives which is directly elected by the people (as is the Senate since 1913, when the 17th Amendment ended senatorial election by state legislatures).*]

For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:

18 New colonial courts created in 1768 provided for trials of accused smugglers with no jury—the judge alone delivering the verdict—thus removing a right long valued by British subjects. [*The 1789 Bill of Rights guarantees trial by jury and other due process rights.*]

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences

19 In 1772, after colonists attacked the *Gaspée*, a British ship patrolling for smugglers, Parliament held that Americans suspected of crimes against the Crown could be transported to Britain for trial. [*The 1789 Bill of Rights guarantees that an accused’s trial be held “in the state and district” where the crime was committed.*]

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:

20 In 1774, Parliament allowed French civil law and official religion (Roman Catholicism) to be maintained in Quebec, Canada, and extended its boundaries to include the Ohio River Valley. The Patriots disliked Catholicism as an authoritarian faith, and they resented the loss of western lands to a province that lacked an elected assembly.

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

21 In 1774 Parliament revoked the 1691 charter for the colonial government of Massachusetts. That unilateral revocation infuriated the Patriots as a complete centralization of power in the hands of Parliament.

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

22 In 1766, on the same day Parliament repealed the Stamp Act, it passed the Declaratory Act, sternly reminding the colonies that it held supreme authority to legislate for them “in all cases whatsoever.”

He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

23 By waging war on the colonies, the king rescinded his promise to protect his subjects and renounced his authority to govern them.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

24 Since the Battle of Lexington and Concord in April 1775 (over a year before the Declaration of Independence was adopted), the British had destroyed Norfolk, Virginia, Charlestown, Massachusetts, and Falmouth, Massachusetts (now Portland, Maine).

He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy [treachery] scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

25 King George III arranged with German princes to send soldiers to fight for Britain in the Revolution, a move deeply resented by Patriots fighting for independence. Up to 30,000 “Hessian mercenaries” fought in the war.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

26 With the outbreak of war in 1775, Britain permitted the “impressment” of Americans on captured ships, whereby they were forced to serve in the British navy against the Patriots.

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

27 In late 1775 the governor of Virginia offered freedom to slaves who would fight with the British, leading to numerous rumors of British-incited slave revolts (“domestic insurrections”) in the southern colonies. Royal governors also incited Indian attacks on back-country settlers.

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

We, therefore, *the representatives of the* united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, 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; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

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|--|--|---|--|---|
| [GEORGIA]
Button Gwinnett
Lyman Hall
George Walton | [MARYLAND]
Samuel Chase
William Paca
Thomas Stone
Charles Carroll
of Carrollton | [PENNSYLVANIA]
Robert Morris
Benjamin Rush
Benjamin Franklin
John Morton
George Clymer
James Smith
George Taylor
James Wilson
George Ross | [NEW YORK]
William Floyd
Philip Livingston
Francis Lewis
Lewis Morris | [MASSACHUSETTS]
John Hancock*
Samuel Adams
John Adams
Robert Treat Paine
Elbridge Gerry |
| [NORTH CAROLINA]
William Hooper
Joseph Hewes
John Penn | [VIRGINIA]
George Wythe
Richard Henry Lee
Thomas Jefferson
Benjamin Harrison
Thomas Nelson, Jr.
Francis Lightfoot Lee
Carter Braxton | [DELAWARE]
Caesar Rodney
George Read
Thomas McKean | [NEW JERSEY]
Richard Stockton
John Witherspoon
Francis Hopkinson
John Hart
Abraham Clark | [RHODE ISLAND]
Stephen Hopkins
William Ellery |
| [SOUTH CAROLINA]
Edward Rutledge
Thomas Heyward, Jr.
Thomas Lynch, Jr.
Arthur Middleton | | | [NEW HAMPSHIRE]
Josiah Bartlett
William Whipple | [CONNECTICUT]
Roger Sherman
Samuel Huntington
William Williams
Oliver Wolcott |
| | | | | [NEW HAMPSHIRE]
Matthew Thornton |

*As president of the Congress, Hancock signed first, at top center.

