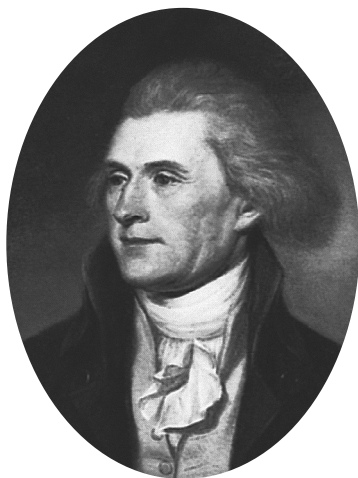


20 Declaring Independence



Thomas Jefferson thought John Adams should write the document about independence. This is how Adams remembered their conversation:

“Why will you not?” Jefferson asked. “You ought to do it.”

“Reasons enough.”

“What can be your reasons?”

“Reason 1st. You are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason 2d. I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular. You are very much otherwise. Reason 3d. You can write ten times better than I can.”

John Adams said that Jefferson should write the Declaration. “Well,” said Jefferson, “if you are decided, I will do as well as I can.”

Unless you like to memorize dates, there aren’t many that you need to remember. But here are a few that are important:

1215

1492

1607

1620

What happened in those years? You can’t remember? Go ahead and try. You might be surprised and find there is more in your brain than you realize. (Then, if you need to check, look on page 100.)

Now I have another date for you to remember, and this one is the most important of all. Something happened on that day that changed America—it even changed the whole world. (It was a day that King George III didn’t think important. He would find out how wrong he was.)

The date is July 4, 1776. That was the day the members of the Second Continental Congress approved a Declaration of Independence. It was a year after the Battle of Bunker Hill, and, finally, the Americans had made up their minds to be free of Great Britain.

But that wasn’t why the world was changed. It was the words they used in that declaration that made all the difference.

The delegates believed that if they were going to vote for independence, they should have a good reason. They knew that when they signed the declaration they became traitors to England. They would each be hanged if England captured them.

If they were going to take that big risk, they wanted to make it worthwhile. And it would be worthwhile if they could help create a free nation, a great nation, a nation run by its citizens—something that had never before been done.

So they thought it important to explain exactly what they were doing and why it was necessary to be free of English rule.

That's why they asked Thomas Jefferson, one of the members of the Congress, to write a paper—called a “declaration”—that would:

- tell their beliefs about good government;
- tell what King George had done wrong; and
- announce that the colonies were now free and independent states.

Some people thought it surprising that Thomas Jefferson was asked to write the declaration. Jefferson was one of the youngest members of the Continental Congress. He was a tall, shy redhead who loved to read, run, ride horseback, and play the violin. He had a reputation for writing well. John Adams said of him, “Though a silent member in Congress, he was so prompt, frank...and decisive upon committees and in conversation—not even Samuel Adams was more so—that he soon seized upon my heart.”

Jefferson had left his wife behind on his Virginia farm, and he missed her. He wasn't sure he could write a good declaration. But John Adams and Benjamin Franklin had faith in him. They talked Thomas Jefferson into trying. Adams told him, “You can write ten times better than I can.”

Adams and Franklin were right. Thomas Jefferson knew just what to say, and he said it in a way that inspired people all over the world.

The whole Declaration is something to read and think about, but one part will ring in your ears with its greatness. Jefferson wrote:

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 was plain language in the 18th century, but you might have

A Declaration by the Representatives of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in General Congress assembled.

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.

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 & 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, & to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles & organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety & happiness. Prudence indeed will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light & transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown 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 & usurpations, begun at a distinguished period & pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them to absolute Tyranny, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, & to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies, & such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former system of Government. The history of the present United States is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct or indirect purpose the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world. For the truth of which we pledge a faith yet unshaken by falsehood.

He has refused his assent to laws the most wholesome & necessary for the public good.

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

He has refused to pass other laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation, a right inalienable to them, & formable to Tyranny only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable & distant from the public resort, 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, to assent to new Laws, & to suspend for a longer time, to cause others to be decreed.

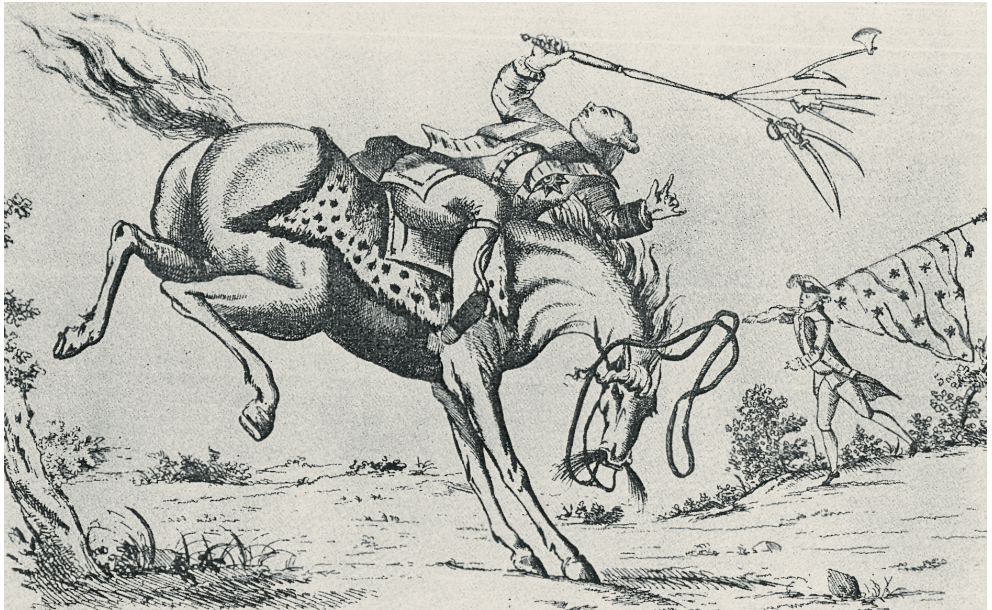
The first draft of the Declaration of Independence, in Jefferson's handwriting.

You can find the complete text of the Declaration of Independence on page 190.

Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God.

—MOTTO ON
THOMAS JEFFERSON'S
SEAL, CIRCA 1776

King George, in an English cartoon, as the helpless rider of “The horse America, throwing his Master.”



Dates to Remember—or Else!

1215: Magna Carta
1492: Columbus sails to America
1607: Jamestown settled
1620: the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth
1776: the Declaration of Independence!

Here's another date for your memory bank:
1610: when Spanish speakers founded Santa Fe, New Mexico.

to read it a few times to understand it. It is worth doing. Those words are worth memorizing.

All men are created equal.

Just what does “equal” mean?

Are we all the same? Look around you. Of course we aren't. Some of us are smarter than others, and some of us are better athletes, and some of us are better looking, and some are nicer. But none of that matters, said Jefferson. We are all equal in the eyes of God, and we are all entitled to equal rights: the right to live, the right to be free, the right to be able to try to find the kind of life that will make us happy.

And that is the whole reason for having governments, he said. Governments are not made to make kings happy. They are for the benefit of the people who are being governed. Governments should have “the consent of the governed.”

Sometimes, when ideas are written down, they take on meanings that go beyond what the writers intended. Jefferson's Declaration of Independence was great from the moment he wrote it, but it has grown even greater with the passing of time. He said “all men are created equal.” He didn't mention women. Did he mean to include women? No one knows. Perhaps not. We do know that in the 18th century the words “men” and “mankind” included men and women. But very few people, except for Tom Paine, thought much about

women's rights. It was the 20th century before women in America had the right to vote.

Did Thomas Jefferson mean to include black men when he said "all men"? Historians sometimes argue about that. You'll have to decide for yourself.

In 1776, when Jefferson wrote the Declaration, he included a long section in which he described slavery as a "cruel war against human nature." Yet Jefferson lived in a slave society and owned slaves himself.

He thought slavery was wrong, and he said so. "Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free," wrote Jefferson. Many congressmen agreed. John Adams spoke out strongly against slavery. Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush founded the first antislavery society in the New World. But South Carolina and Georgia would not sign the Declaration if it contained the antislavery section. So Jefferson's antislavery words were taken out. The delegates compromised.

Should they have gone ahead without those southern colonies? That would have meant that the Deep South would not have joined in the fight against England. It might have meant defeat for the proposed union of states.

Jefferson and Adams and Franklin and others thought the Union was more important than the issue of slavery. They knew that staying with England would not bring freedom to the slaves. They thought slavery could be dealt with later. Do you agree with them?

Those were tough decisions the delegates were making.

It took a civil war to end slavery. Do you think that war could have been avoided? Do you think the delegates should have acted differently in 1776?

Of one thing you can be sure. Today, when people all over the world read Jefferson's words, they understand them to mean all people—men, women, and children—of all colors and beliefs.

The appointment of a woman to office is an innovation for which the public is not prepared, nor am I.

—THOMAS JEFFERSON TO ALBERT GALLATIN, 1807



In 1776 Arthur Middleton (left), of South Carolina, owned more than 50,000 acres and 800 slaves. He also signed the Declaration of Independence.

All Men Are Created Equal

The words of the Declaration of Independence are so clear—*all men are created equal*—that they leave no way to explain slavery. No one anticipated that.

The Declaration was meant to tell why we were breaking away from England. But it did much more than that. Jefferson's words had a power that no one at the time foresaw.

For Benjamin Banneker they spoke in a special way. Banneker was an African-American, but he was not a slave. He grew up on a small tobacco farm in Maryland and learned to read and write at a nearby Quaker school. After that, he borrowed books from a neighbor and eventually taught himself calculus and trigonometry and astronomy and surveying (an incredible feat of self-education). When he was 21, he designed and built a wooden clock—even though he had never seen one up close. He carved it with a knife and it worked accurately for 50 years.

Like Jefferson, he played the violin and was an Enlightenment thinker, which means he had broad interests and a lot of curiosity. All his life, Banneker kept reading and learning. He published yearly almanacs—calendars—with weather predictions, projections of tides, information on the moon and stars, and daily comments. Almanacs were popular; Benjamin Franklin

had become wealthy as the writer and publisher of one.

Fifteen years after the Declaration was proclaimed, Banneker sent Thomas Jefferson a copy of his almanac, along with a letter reminding Jefferson of his now famous words—*all men are created equal*. Then he said he had heard that Jefferson was friendly toward blacks and not inflexible in his thinking. Here is part of Banneker's letter:

Now, sir, if this is founded in truth, I apprehend you will readily embrace every opportunity to eradicate that train of absurd and false ideas and opinions, which so generally prevails with respect to us [blacks], and that your sentiments are concurrent with mine, which are that one universal Father hath given Being to us all, and that he hath not only made us all of one flesh, but that he hath also without partiality afforded us all the same sensations, and endued us all with the same faculties, and that however variable we may be in society or religion, however diversified in situation or color, we are all of the same family, and stand in the same relation to him.

And here is Thomas Jefferson's reply:

Sir,—I thank you sincerely for your letter of the 19th instant, and for the Almanac it contained. Nobody wishes more

than I do to see such proofs as you exhibit, that nature has given our black brethren talents equal to those of other colours of men, and that the appearance of a want of them is owing only to the degraded condition of their existence, both in Africa and America. I can add with truth that no one wishes more ardently to see a good system commenced for raising the condition both of their body and mind to what it ought to be.

I am, with great esteem, Sir, your most obedient humble servant,

Th: Jefferson

In 1791, Benjamin Banneker sent Thomas Jefferson a copy of his first almanac, in which he argued against ideas of black inferiority. This is the title page from Banneker's Almanac of 1795.

