

# Frequently Asked Questions About the Declaration of Independence

## WHY WAS THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE WRITTEN?

During the mid- to late 1700s, the British Parliament passed a number of laws that severely limited the freedoms of English colonists in America. As a result, in 1774, delegates from the colonies formed the First Continental Congress to send a list of complaints to King George III. The King ignored the colonists. A Second Continental Congress was formed, and later, in June 1776, they met in Philadelphia and decided it was time to create a document that declared America's independence from Great Britain. Because the King kept ignoring the colonists' complaints, the only choice left was to rebel. (And they did!)

## WHO WROTE THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, AND HOW LONG DID IT TAKE?

The Second Continental Congress appointed a Committee of Five to draw up a declaration of independence. The Committee included Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, and Thomas Jefferson, who was given the task of writing the document. From June 11 to June 28, 1776, he worked on a rough draft, which he presented to the Congress on June 28. The delegates edited Jefferson's draft, from July 2 to July 4. On July 4, they met in the Pennsylvania State House (now Independence Hall), in Philadelphia, and approved the Declaration. John Hancock and Charles Thomson signed it, and it was sent to John Dunlap's print shop a few blocks away.



## WHAT ARE THE DUNLAP BROADSIDES?

The Dunlap broadsides were the first printed copies of the Declaration of Independence. Early on July 5, between 100 and 200 broadsides of the text were printed at John Dunlap's shop. They were rushed to the 13 colonies and to the army to be read aloud to the people. On July 17, the Congress ordered an official, or engrossed, copy on parchment paper to be signed by all the delegates. On August 2, most members signed the Declaration, with others following within the next several months. So that is why the original printing of the Declaration of Independence is called the Dunlap broadside printing. It looks different from the engrossed copy of the Declaration, which was signed later by 56 delegates. That official signed copy resides in the National Archive Building in Washington, D.C.

## HOW MANY COPIES ARE KNOWN TO EXIST? WHERE ARE THEY?

Of the 25 surviving Dunlap broadsides, 21 belong to universities, historical societies, public libraries, and city halls, and the remaining four are in the hands of private owners and foundations. One of the surviving Dunlap broadsides is on view as part of the Declaration of Independence Road Trip (see page 1 for more information).

## WEREN'T THE DELEGATES PUTTING THEIR LIVES AT RISK BY SIGNING SUCH A DECLARATION?

The delegates knew that signing the Declaration would be considered an act of treason and punishable by hanging. That's why it was very important that, in order to show a unified front, they all agree on the contents of the document. It was also very important that the Declaration be an outstanding document to make those great risks worth taking.

## WHEN WAS A COPY OF THE DECLARATION SENT TO KING GEORGE III?

When the Congress ordered the first copies to be rushed to the colonies, it did not include a special delivery to the King and, to this day, we are not sure whether the King ever saw the document. But we know that of the 25 remaining copies of the Declaration, two are in British repositories. According to the National Archives, "...copies were transmitted to England [by] Vice Admiral Lord Richard Howe [who was in the King's Navy] dated 28 July and 11 August 1776 from his post aboard the flagship *Eagle*, off Staten Island."\*\* So it seems that the most important purpose of the Declaration was not so much to tell the King but for the Congress to let the colonists know that their delegates had agreed on independence, and that it was time to get ready really fast to fight for it.

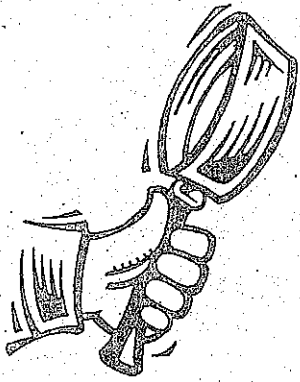
## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR US TO RESPECT AND UNDERSTAND THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE?

The Declaration of Independence is the birth certificate of the United States of America. It declared our commitment to freedom and guaranteed our basic rights. Every freedom we have as Americans comes from the Declaration of Independence. It is the foundation for our other precious documents, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Without the Declaration, our country would not be "the land of the free" as we know it today.

\*\*Dube, Ann Marie, *A Multitude of Amendments, Alterations and Additions: The Writing and Publicizing of the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution of the United States* (Report by the National Park Service: Independence National Historic Park, 1996)

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



# Be a Truth Detective

The Declaration of Independence helped define our rights and liberties as Americans. How much do you know about the document that promises you can pursue happiness on a Saturday night? That says you have the unalienable right to go at a green light and the responsibility to stop when it turns red? That sets the tone that sets bigots on their heels? Because if you don't know your rights and responsibilities, who's to say you've got them?

**DIRECTIONS:** The following essay contains 13 errors. Check out the D.O.I. FAQ on page 3 of *Created Equal*, find the errors in the text below, and write the corrections in the right-hand column.

Imagine his surprise when Great Britain's King Richard II<sup>1</sup> read the Declaration of Independence for the first time in 1774<sup>2</sup>. NEWS FLASH! "First Continental Congress<sup>3</sup> declares Declaration of Independence! Americans go it alone!" Having tried so hard to soothe his colonists—he had caved in on nearly every American demand—the king must have felt like he was dealing with a bunch of ungrateful brats<sup>4</sup>.

Back in Washington, D.C., of course, the Continental Congress didn't see it that way<sup>5</sup>. The delegates applauded Thomas Jefferson's great solo effort in penning the Declaration of Independence<sup>6</sup> (even though he borrowed many concepts of the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, written years earlier<sup>7</sup>). They figured the document was a great bluff—a way to stare down the British and lock in even more benefits from England. The Founding Fathers had no idea Great Britain would take their independence threat seriously<sup>8</sup>. They even joked about how they might have to do some community service hours if they got caught<sup>9</sup>.

The paper document itself has quite a story behind it. At first, Jefferson just wrote out one copy for the king and one for his buddy, George Washington<sup>10</sup>. (The Founding Fathers didn't want news of the Declaration of Independence to leak out before they knew how the British would react. No use getting colonists' hopes up.) But once Congress members knew the British were not happy, they churned out copies as quickly as possible<sup>11</sup>. Jefferson must have gotten a nasty cramp in his writing hand, considering the printing press hadn't been invented yet and he wrote out thousands of copies by hand<sup>12</sup>. The biggest headache must have been getting the signers together to sign all the copies on July 4<sup>13</sup>.

CORRECTIONS	
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