SIGNING THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

The Declaration of Independence was the first formal statement by a nation's people asserting their right to choose their own government.

When armed conflict between bands of American colonists and British soldiers began in April 1775, the Americans were ostensibly fighting only for their rights as subjects of the British crown. By the following summer, with the Revolutionary War in full swing, the movement for independence from Britain had grown, and delegates of the Continental Congress were faced with a vote on the issue. In mid-June 1776, a five-man committee including Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin was tasked with drafting a formal statement of the colonies' intentions. The Congress formally adopted the Declaration of Independence—written largely by Jefferson—in Philadelphia on July 4, a date now celebrated as the birth of American independence.

Most Americans did not know Thomas Jefferson was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence until the 1790s; before that, the document was seen as a collective effort by the entire Continental Congress.

THE CONTINENTAL CONGRESS VOTES FOR INDEPENDENCE

The Continental Congress reconvened on July 1, and the following day 12 of the 13 colonies adopted Lee's resolution for independence. The process of consideration and revision of Jefferson's declaration (including Adams' and Franklin's corrections) continued on July 3 and into the late morning of July 4, during which Congress deleted and revised some one-fifth of its text. The delegates made no changes to that key preamble, however, and the basic document remained Jefferson's words. Congress officially adopted the Declaration of Independence later on the Fourth of July (though most historians now accept that the document was not signed until August 2).

The Declaration of Independence became a significant landmark in the history of democracy. In addition to its importance in the fate of the fledgling American nation, it also exerted a tremendous influence outside the United States, most memorably in France during the French Revolution. Together with the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence can be counted as one of the three essential founding documents of the United States government.

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