

# How Declaration of Independence Was Drafted

## Thomas Jefferson Selected as the Author Because Richard H. Lee Was Absent—The 141st Anniversary Next Wednesday

**I**NDPENDENCE DAY this year will witness the unique spectacle of seeing the Stars and Stripes and the flag of Great Britain intertwined in a bond of friendship, the United States allied with her old mother country in fighting the world battles of democracy. In that memorable document which was proclaimed to the inhabitants of the original thirteen Colonies 141 years ago on the coming Fourth of July (next Wednesday) is a sentence which seems fitting today as an indictment of the European monarch against whom America is at war. It is this:

Our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injury.

And then follows this severe arraignment of the last of the English Kings who maintained the divine right of rule:

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.

That is the sentence to which John Adams referred when he said that had he drawn up the paper he would not have inserted it.

"I thought this too personal," he explained, "for I never believed George to be a tyrant in disposition or in nature."

Prior to the revolutionary struggle, the sentiment in all the Colonies for ten years and more from the time of the first Stamp act troubles was powerfully against a severance of relations with the parent country. Paul Revere's ride and the battle of Lexington and Concord in April, 1775, memorable as those events are as the forerunners of the great conflict, failed to arouse any widespread enthusiasm for independence. It is even significant to note that just a year before the Declaration of Independence was unanimously approved by all of the thirteen Colonies, the Continental Congress that had appointed Washington Commander in Chief of the Army, drew up on July 6, 1775, a declaration of the causes for taking up arms in which it was said:

We mean not to dissolve that union which has so long and so happily subsisted between us and which we sincerely wish to see restored.

Even Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, two months after the battle of Bunker Hill, wrote that he was "looking with fondness toward a reconciliation with Great Britain."

It has been said that the colonists were the conservatives, and George III. and the English Parliament the radicals in starting the American Revolution. A few far-sighted leaders, like Benjamin Franklin, Samuel and John Adams, and Patrick Henry, had felt at a comparatively early date that a break was inevitable. The historic declaration of the citizens of Mecklenburg County, N. C., in May, 1775, was one of several local events indicating that public opinion was tending toward independence, but not until the appearance of Thomas Paine's stirring pamphlet "Common Sense," early in January, 1776, was there any appreciable public sentiment in its favor. With all

its faults and illogical reasoning, "Common Sense" explained the situation to the common people as none of the more eminent political writers or statesmen had done. It brushed aside the technicalities of constitutional pre-rogatives which many of the more scholarly leaders had been fond of discussing, and in the plain language of the day presented the facts so simply that all could understand. This "phenomenon," as John Adams styled Paine, suddenly found himself transformed from obscurity to fame. The Pennsylvania Legislature voted him \$2,500, and a Southern legislator suggested that a statue of

order the Secretary to omit their names from the journal. The next day Congress went into a Committee of the Whole to discuss the resolutions. The delegates from Pennsylvania, New York, and one or two other Colonies objected on the ground that the Middle Colonies were not yet ready for so radical a step, although personally expressing a friendly attitude.

Unanimous action by all the Colonies on so momentous a question was regarded by Congress as of paramount importance. Some of the delegates had not been instructed to go so far as voting for independence, New York and New Jersey being among them. The majority

giving, as he says in his autobiography, the following reasons:

(1) That he was a Virginian and I a Massachusettsian. (2) That he was a Southern man and I a Northern one. (3) That I had been so obnoxious for my early and constant zeal in promoting the measure that every draft of mine would undergo a more severe scrutiny and criticism in Congress than of his composition. (4) And lastly, and that would be reason enough if there were no other, I had a great opinion of the elegance of his pen and none at all of my own. I therefore insisted that no limitation should be made on his part. He accordingly took the minutes, and in a day or two produced to me his draft.

Jefferson's version, written in 1823, differs slightly in detail from some of the reminiscences of John Adams. Jefferson says that the entire committee urged him to make the draft. He showed it first to Franklin and Adams "because they were the two members of whose judgments and amendments I wished most to have the benefit." They made a few minor alterations in their handwriting. This original draft was given by Jefferson to Richard Henry Lee, the dean of the Virginia delegation, and in 1825 his grandson presented it to the American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia.

Jefferson, having made another copy, with the changes suggested, presented it to the committee, which reported it unaltered to Congress. On July 1 Philadelphia was on the qui vive of expectation, and contemporary accounts have left us a stirring picture of the eagerness with which the citizens awaited definite news of the most important act which the colonists had been called upon to decide in the long chain of disputes with the mother country. The original resolutions of Richard Henry Lee came before the body as a Committee of the Whole. They were approved by a two-thirds vote, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina being on the negative side, while the New York delegates, having received no instructions, were unable to vote. On the following day, when the formal vote of Congress was taken, the resolutions were approved by twelve Colonies—all except New York. The original Colonies, therefore, became the United States of America on July 2, 1776. The next two days were spent in discussing the draft of the Declaration as drawn by Jefferson. The debate was animated, but when it was all over, the draft was adopted with surprisingly few changes, a tribute to the ability with which the author had expressed to the world the causes which had made it necessary for "one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another."

Of the twenty-eight specific charges brought against George III., only one, the last in the list, was cut out, and that was the one accusing the King of "piratical warfare" in permitting the capture and enslavement of human beings.

It was not a charge that could justly be made, for the slave trade had been carried on long before the reign of George III. One more paragraph, near the close, was omitted. Besides these two paragraphs, barely twenty lines were stricken out, and the minor changes in wording altered in no way the meaning as expressed by Jefferson, and not a single addition of fact was made.

The Declaration of Independence was then unanimously adopted by the twelve Colonies whose delegates were instruct-

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### 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, & independent, that from that equal original source they derive 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

Opening Lines of Jefferson's Original Draft. The Full Text of the Declaration Is Reproduced in Today's Pictorial Section of The Times.

Paine in gold would not be too high an honor.

Things moved rapidly in the Colonies after that, and it is a tribute to the influence of Paine's pamphlet that in less than six months after its initial publication Richard Henry Lee of Virginia rose in the Continental Congress at Philadelphia, on June 7, 1776, and presented his famous resolutions which quickly led to the Declaration of Independence. The resolutions, in Lee's handwriting, and now one of the treasured papers in the Library of Congress, were:

Resolved, 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;

That it is expedient forthwith to take the most effectual measures for forming foreign alliances;

That a plan of confederation be prepared and transmitted to the respective Colonies for their consideration and approbation.

Here, in fact, was the Declaration of Independence in a nutshell, proposed by one of the most eminent men of the most influential Colonies at that time and promptly seconded by John Adams of Massachusetts. It was deemed wise to

had been authorized to take any action that might be deemed wise, Virginia having gone so far as actually to instruct her delegates to propose a declaration of independence to Congress, and Richard Henry Lee was simply obeying the legislative voice of his Colony when he presented his resolutions.

On June 10 Congress postponed final consideration for three weeks, and on the following day appointed a committee of five to draw up the Declaration. Richard Henry Lee, as the proposer of the plan, would surely have been on the committee and, possibly, its Chairman, had he not in the meantime been hurriedly summoned home at the illness of his wife. But for that Lee might have been the author of the Declaration instead of his younger Virginia colleague, Thomas Jefferson, then but 33 years of age.

Jefferson had brought to Congress the reputation of wielding a facile pen, and in the balloting for the committee he received a majority of votes and became its Chairman. The others were John Adams of Massachusetts, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, and Robert R. Livingston of New York.

How did Jefferson come to be selected to write the Declaration, "the one American state paper" as has been said, "that has reached to supreme distinction in the world and that seems likely to last as long as American civilization lasts"?

The most interesting account is given by John Adams, who says that he and Thomas Jefferson were designated by the committee to prepare the rough minutes in a proper form. Mr. Jefferson first proposed that Adams prepare the draft of the Declaration. Adams declined,

Two Sections Omitted from the Original Draft When the Declaration of Independence Was Finally Adopted on July 4, 1776.

we must endeavor to forget our former love for them, and to hold them as we hold the rest of mankind enemies in war, in peace friends we might have been a free & a great people together, but a common recitation of grandeur & of freedom it seems to belittle their dignity, be it so since they all have it. the road to strength & happiness is open to us too. we will stand it on equal terms with them. and acquiesce in the necessity which denounces our severance from them. ~~and acquiesce in the necessity which denounces our severance from them.~~

he has waged civil war against human nature itself, violating it's most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian King of Great Britain determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold. he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce, and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms against him, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them. thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.]

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ed to vote in its favor, on July 4, which henceforth became the recognized birthday of the new nation. The old bell ringer of Philadelphia, who had been patiently waiting for the news in the steeple of the historic State House, was the first to peal out the message of American independence on the bell ever since honored as the Liberty Bell. No longer was there any doubt that public opinion was ready for the step, for, as the news spread, it was everywhere received with the liveliest exultation.

On July 9 word came to George Washington at his headquarters in New York that the Declaration was ratified, and it was at once read to the soldiers and citizens. On the same day the New York Assembly, in session at White Plains, gave its formal vote for independence, and the thirteen Colonies were then united in their common cause.

Perhaps the drafters of the Declaration did not realize its supreme importance at the time, or the honors paid to Thomas Jefferson piqued some of them, notably Richard Henry Lee and John Adams, in after years, for both, unfortunately, attempted to belittle its literary and political value as lacking in originality, a charge which has also been made by other critics. Lee sneered at it as being copied from Locke's treatise on

government, while Adams in 1822 wrote, "There is not an idea in it but what had been hackneyed in Congress for two years before." Jefferson, in replying to Adams's strictures three years before his death, said with a certain calm dignity:

Whether I had gathered my ideas from reading or reflection I do not know. I know only that I turned to neither book nor pamphlet while writing it. I did not consider it as any part of my charge to invent new ideas altogether and to offer no sentiment which had ever been expressed before.

Perhaps the best answer to the criticism of non-originality has been made by Moses Coit Tyler in his "Literary History of the American Revolution." He says:

Jefferson gathered up the thoughts and emotions and even the characteristic phrases of the people for whom he wrote, and these he perfectly incorporated with what was already in his own mind and then, to the music of his own keen, rich, passionate, and enkindling style, he mustered them into that stately and triumphant procession wherein, as some of us still think, they will go marching on to the world's end.

John Hancock, President of the Congress, was the only member who signed the Declaration on July 4. An engrossed copy on parchment was ordered for all the delegates to sign. This was completed on Aug. 2 and signed by fifty-four delegates. Two others signed later, Thomas McKean of Delaware, who was absent with his regiment in August, and Matthew Thornton of New Hampshire,

who was not elected to Congress until the Fall, but was permitted to sign the document in November, making the total number of the famous "signers" fifty-six.

Of all the signers, Jefferson and Adams bear a deeper personal relation to the Declaration than any others. Adams was its most vigorous supporter in Congress and Jefferson bears testimony to his valuable aid. In after years both received the highest honors that the citizens could bestow. They were permitted to witness the growth of their country for half a century from the first Independence Day. The day of their death, July 4, 1826, was the fiftieth anniversary of the memorable Fourth of July. It was the most remarkable coincidence ever recorded in American history. Jefferson was 83 years old and John Adams 91 years.

Charles Carroll, one of the Maryland signers, who made himself famous by adding to his signature "of Carrollton," so that he could be readily found if any hanging were to be done, survived the two Declaration leaders by six years. He died in 1832 at the age of 94 years, the last survivor of the fifty-six creators of the United States of America. There were eminent men among them, including Samuel Adams, Robert Treat Paine, and Elbridge Gerry from Massachusetts, Oliver Wolcott from Connecticut, Philip Livingston and Lewis Morris from New York, John Witherspoon and Francis

Hopkinson from New Jersey, Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, and Robert Morris from Pennsylvania, Thomas McKean from Delaware, Richard Henry Lee, Francis Lightfoot Lee, and Benjamin Harrison from Virginia, and, little known to history but famous among autograph collectors for the rarity of their signatures, Thomas Lynch, Jr., of South Carolina and Button Gwinnett of Georgia. Of Lynch and Gwinnett no autograph letters are known and very few signatures. Gwinnett's is the rarest autograph of all the signers. He was killed in a duel a few years after he signed the document, and Lynch was lost at sea in the Fall of 1776 while going to the West Indies for his health.

The fifty-six signers were distributed among the thirteen new States in the following proportion: Pennsylvania, 9; Virginia, 7; Massachusetts, 5; New Jersey, 5; Connecticut, 4; Maryland, 4; New York, 4; South Carolina, 4; New Hampshire, 3; Delaware, 3; Georgia, 3; North Carolina, 3; Rhode Island, 2.

Jefferson's draft of the Declaration as presented to Congress and the signed copy on parchment are in the Department of State at Washington, the latter having been replaced for public exhibition several years ago by a facsimile. Copies of the Declaration in Jefferson's handwriting, made after its adoption, are owned by the New York Public Library and the Massachusetts Historical Society.