

Fourth of July Proclamation

On July 4th, the United States celebrates the formal adoption of the Declaration of Independence. America embraces three political ideas: natural rights, political equality, and sovereignty of the people. Referred to as “these truths” by Thomas Jefferson the ideas are as old as Genesis. The Declaration of Independence demonstrates the language of reason, enlightenment, inquiry, and history.

In June 1776 Congress recognized the importance of “the rights of man” but domestic politics and international relations dominated the discussions. Delegates were hesitant to declare independence for fear of losing the support of the middle colonies for the American cause. Jefferson warned that if the colonies were no longer unified, “foreign powers would either refuse to join themselves to our fortunes or having us so much in their power...they would insist on terms proportionately more hard and prejudicial.”

A compromise was reached and the vote for independence was postponed until July 1. During the postponement three committees were formed and charged with specific tasks. Specifically, to draft a declaration, prepare plans for a minimal new government, and to set guidelines for the negotiation of foreign alliances.

Thomas Jefferson’s purpose was, “not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of...but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject: in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we were compelled to take.” He sought to satisfy the concerns of undecided Americans, soldiers in arms, and potential global allies.

Borrowing from George Mason’s “Virginia Declaration of Rights” where the right of revolution exists if certain conditions are met, Jefferson listed grievances and charges against the king, providing evidence of those conditions.

The Declaration of Independence states that all people possess certain “inalienable rights” including “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Jefferson omitted identifying property but believed the right to own property was supported in the Declaration. Life, liberty, and happiness were shared by all but not property. The southern colonies saw the enslaved as property while the north did not. Independence held the promise to Americans with little or no property that the country’s new form of government would help them become property owners.

On Friday, June 28, 1776 the Declaration of Independence was introduced into Congress and on Monday, July 1 delegates began their debates. While the preamble remained untouched, about a quarter of the declaration was cut that censured the people of England so as not to give offense. Accusations aimed at King George III and Parliament were softened, and additional references were made to God.

Jefferson's longest statement blamed King George III for African slavery and charged the king with waging "cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery." This passage within the Declaration was eliminated and the denunciation of slavery was omitted. Jefferson reached the conclusion that his efforts would fall short to move public opinion on slavery.

The following day, July 2, 1776 the delegates voted to adopt the resolution and two days later July 4, 1776 they ratified the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration of Independence that Congress adopted was an act of extraordinary political courage. Delegates were aware that their signatures were not that of an individual but representative of their state. Yet together they mutually pledged to each other "our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honour."

Writing the Declaration taught Jefferson "the power of language in the art of leadership. To project a vision of what might be and to inspire people to share that vision was, and is, an essential element of statesmanship."

On the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence Thomas Jefferson, in failing health, wrote Roger C. Weightman to decline his invitation to come to Washington, D.C. to celebrate. Jefferson says of the Declaration:

"May it be to the world, what I believe it will be... the signal of arousing men to burst the chains...and to assume the blessings and security of self-government. That form, which we have substituted, restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man, ... For ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them.

At the Sons of the American Revolution we recognize the contributions our Patriot ancestors made to the principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence. As you celebrate America's founding may you inspire others to share in the SAR mission.