

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.

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 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 whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such Principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, 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 and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object wins a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. — Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world. — He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good. — He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly 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 in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to Tyrants only. — He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their Public Records, 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, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise, the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within. — He has endeavoured to prevent the Population of these States, for that purpose obstructing the Law for Naturalization of Strangers; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands. — He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers. — He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries. — He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our People, and eat out their substance. — He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our Legislatures. — He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power. — He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation: — For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us: — For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from Punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States: — For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world: — For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent: — For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by jury: — For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences: — For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies: — For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments: — For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever. — He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us. — He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our People. — He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation. — He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands. — He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions. In every stage of these Oppressions We have petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered by repeated injury. 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. Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their Legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends. — We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, 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; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. — And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

Buttont Gwinnett
Lynch Hall
Geo Walton.

John Hooper
Joseph Hewes
John Penn

Edward Rutledge

Thos Heyward, Junr
Thomas Lynch Junr
Arthur Middleton

Samuel Chazy
Wm Paro
Thos Stone
Charles Carroll of Carrollton

George Wythe
Richard Henry Lee
Th Jefferson
Wm Harrison
Th Nelson Jr
Francis Lightfoot Lee
Carler Braxton

John Hancock

Mo Morris
Benjamin Rush
Ben Franklin

John Morton
Geo Mercer
Jas Smith

Geo Taylor
James Wilson
Geo Wob
Cesar Rodney
Gov Mifflin
Th Mifflin

Ed Shays
Chas Livingston
Joan Lewis
Lewis Morris

Rich Stockton
Geo Wickham
Fra Chapman
John Ross
Abra Clark

Josiah Bartlett
Wm Whipple
Sam Adams

John Adams
Robt Treat Paine

Elbridge Gerry

Step Hopkins
William Ellery
Roger Sherman
John Huntington
Wm Williams
Oliver Wolcott
Mathew Thornton

The Declaration of Independence: How Did It Happen? What Does It Say/Mean?

In the early 1700s, more and more colonists became convinced that Parliament intended to take away their freedom. In fact, Americans saw a pattern of increasing oppression and corruption happening all around the world. Parliament was determined to bring its unruly American subjects to heel.

Britain began to prepare for war in early 1775. The first fighting broke out in April in Massachusetts. In August, the King declared the colonists “in a state of open and avowed rebellion.” For the first time, many colonists began to seriously consider cutting ties with Britain.

The publication of Thomas Paine’s stirring pamphlet *Common Sense* in early 1776 lit a fire under this previously unthinkable idea. The movement for independence was now in full swing.

The Declaration of Independence was designed for multiple audiences: the King, the colonists, and the world. It was also designed to multitask. Its goals were to rally the troops, win foreign allies, and to announce the creation of a new country. The underlying message in the Declaration encourages others to join the cause, and, by doing that, they join humankind’s fight against tyranny.

The introductory sentence states the Declaration’s main purpose, to explain the colonists’ right to revolution. In other words, “to declare the causes which impel them to the separation.” Congress had to prove the legitimacy of its cause. It had just defied the most powerful nation on Earth. It needed to motivate foreign allies to join in.

On July 2, 1776, Congress voted to declare independence. Two days later, July 4, 1776, it ratified the text of the Declaration of Independence. John Dunlap, official printer to Congress, worked through the night to set the Declaration in type and print approximately 200 copies.

These copies, known as the Dunlap Broad sides, were sent to various committees, assemblies, and commanders of the Continental troops. The Dunlap Broad sides weren’t signed, but John Hancock’s name, as President of the Congress, appears in large type at the bottom.

The first official British response came from Vice Admiral Lord Richard Howe and his brother General William Howe, Commander of British forces in North America, who scolded the “misguided Americans” and “their extravagant and inadmissible Claim of Independence”.

Preamble

The following is the line of the Declaration contemporary Americans know best: “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.”

These stirring words were designed to convince Americans to put their lives on the line for the cause. Separation from the mother country threatened their sense of security, economic stability, and identity. The preamble sought to inspire and unite them through the vision of a better life.

List of Grievances

The longest part of the Declaration begins with “He has refused his Assent to Laws” and goes on to list the unfair actions of the British king and Parliament. (NPS) The list of 27 complaints against King George III (although he is not named) constitute the proof of the right to rebellion. Congress cast “the causes which impel them to separation” in universal terms for an international audience.

Formal Declaration of Independence

The most important and dramatic statement comes near the end: “That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States.” It declares a complete break with Britain and its King and claims the powers of an independent country. (All here is from National Archives)

Declaration's Spirit, Principles, & Values (Abridged Text & Added Headings)

“The Declaration of Independence states the principles on which our government, and our identity as Americans, are based.” (National Archives) (Abridged text of the Declaration follows.)

Preamble - Rights of Individuals; Government's Powers are from the Consent of the Governed

“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 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”.

List of 27 Grievances (the proof of the right to rebellion) Against King George III – Then ...

“That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes”.

Colonists' Prior Attempts at Reconciliation

“In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. 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.”

“Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our Brittish brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here.”

“We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence.”

Ending Allegiance to British Crown - Formal Declaration of Independence

“They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.”

“We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, 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; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”

Declaration of Independence (Full Text)

In Congress, July 4, 1776

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That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and

accordingly all experience hath shewn, 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 and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.—

Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly 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 in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

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He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

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He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

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He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:

For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

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solemnly publish and declare, 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; and

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And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

Signers of the Declaration of Independence (56) - Sorted by States, in Order of Statehood (when each Ratified the Constitution):

Name	State	Date of Birth	Birthplace	Age in 1776	Occupation	Date of Death	Age at Death
McKean, Thomas	DE	3/19/1735	Chester Co., PA	42	Lawyer	6/24/1817	83
Read, George	DE	9/18/1733	Northeast MD	42	Lawyer	9/21/1798	65
Rodney, Caesar	DE	10/7/1728	Dover, DE	47	Plantation Owner, Military Officer	6/29/1784	55
Clymer, George	PA	3/16/1739	Philadelphia, PA	37	Merchant	1/24/1813	73
Franklin, Benjamin	PA	1/17/1706	Boston, MA	70	Scientist, Printer	4/17/1790	84
Morris, Robert	PA	1/31/1734	Liverpool, England	42	Merchant, Land Speculator	5/8/1806	72
Morton, John	PA	c. 1724	Ridley Township, PA	52	Farmer	c. 1777	53
Ross, George	PA	5/10/1730	New Castle, DE	46	Lawyer	7/14/1779	49
Rush, Benjamin Dr.	PA	1/4/1746	Philadelphia, PA	30	Physician	4/19/1813	67
Smith, James	PA	c. 1719	Northern Ireland	57	Lawyer	7/11/1806	87
Taylor, George	PA	c. 1716	Ireland	60	Merchant	2/23/1781	65
Wilson, James	PA	9/14/1742	Carskerdo, Scotland	33	Lawyer	8/21/1798	55
Clark, Abraham	NJ	2/15/1726	Elizabethtown, NJ	50	Lawyer, Surveyer	9/15/1794	68
Hart, John	NJ	c. 1711	Hunterdon Co., NJ	65	Land owner	5/11/1779	68
Hopkinson, Francis	NJ	10/2/1737	Philadelphia, PA	38	Lawyer, Musician	5/9/1791	53
Stockton, Richard	NJ	10/1/1730	Princeton, NJ	45	Lawyer	2/28/1781	50
Witherspoon, John	NJ	2/5/1723	Gifford, Scotland	53	Minister	11/15/1794	71
Gwinnett, Button	GA	c. 1735	Gloucester, England	41	Merchant, Plantation Owner	5/15/1777	42
Hall, Lyman	GA	4/12/1724	Wallingford, CT	52	Physician, Minister	10/19/1790	66
Walton, George	GA	c. 1741	Cumberland Co., VA	35	Lawyer	2/2/1804	63
Huntington, Samuel	CT	7/3/1731	Windham, CT	45	Lawyer	1/5/1796	64
Sherman, Roger	CT	4/19/1721	Newton, MA	55	Lawyer	7/23/1793	72
Williams, William	CT	4/18/1731	Lebannon, CT	45	Merchant	8/2/1811	80
Wolcott, Oliver	CT	11/20/1726	Windsor, CT	49	Lawyer	12/1/1797	71
Adams, John	MA	10/30/1735	Quincy, MA	40	Lawyer	7/4/1826	90
Adams, Samuel	MA	9/27/1722	Boston, MA	53	Merchant	10/2/1803	81
Gerry, Elbridge	MA	7/17/1744	Marblehead, MA	32	Merchant	11/23/1814	70
Hancock, John	MA	1/12/1737	Quincy, MA	40	Merchant	10/8/1793	56
Paine, Robert Treat	MA	3/11/1731	Boston, MA	45	Lawyer, Scientist	5/12/1814	83

Name	State	Date of Birth	Birthplace	Age in 1776	Occupation	Date of Death	Age at Death
Carroll, Charles of Carrollton	MD	9/19/1737	Annapolis, MD	38	Merchant, Plantation Owner	11/14/1832	95
Chase, Samuel	MD	4/17/1741	Somerset Co., MD	35	Lawyer	6/19/1811	70
Paca, William	MD	10/31/1740	Abington, MD	35	Lawyer, Plantation Owner	10/13/1799	58
Stone, Thomas	MD	c. 1743	Charles Co., MD	33	Lawyer	10/5/1787	44
Heyward Jr., Thomas	SC	7/28/1746	St. Helena Parish, SC	30	Lawyer, Plantation Owner	3/6/1809	62
Lynch Jr., Thomas	SC	8/5/1749	Prince George's Parrish, SC	26	Lawyer	c. 1779	30
Middleton, Arthur	SC	6/26/1742	Charleston, SC	34	Plantation Owner	1/1/1787	44
Rutledge, Edward	SC	11/23/1749	Christ Church Parish, SC	26	Lawyer, Plantation Owner	1/23/1800	50
Bartlett, Josiah	NH	11/21/1729	Amesbury, MA	46	Physician	5/19/1795	65
Thornton, Matthew	NH	c. 1714	Ireland	62	Physician	6/24/1803	89
Whipple, William	NH	1/14/1730	Kittery, ME	46	Merchant	11/28/1785	55
Braxton, Carter	VA	9/10/1736	Newington, VA	39	Plantation Owner	10/10/1797	61
Harrison, Benjamin	VA	4/7/1726	Charles City Co., VA	50	Plantation Owner, Farmer	4/24/1791	65
Jefferson, Thomas	VA	4/13/1743	Albemarle Co., VA	33	Lawyer, Plantation Owner, Scientist	7/4/1826	83
Lee, Francis Lightfoot	VA	10/14/1734	Mt. Pleasant, VA	41	Plantation Owner	1/11/1797	62
Lee, Richard Henry	VA	1/20/1732	Stratford, VA	44	Plantation Owner, Merchant	6/19/1794	62
Nelson Jr., Thomas	VA	12/26/1738	Yorktown, VA	37	Merchant, Plantation Owner	1/4/1789	50
Wythe, George	VA	c. 1726	Elizabeth City Co., VA	50	Lawyer	6/8/1806	80
Floyd, William	NY	12/17/1734	Brookhaven, NY	41	Land Speculator	8/4/1821	86
Lewis, Francis	NY	3/21/1713	Llandaff, Wales	63	Merchant	12/30/1802	89
Livingston, Philip	NY	1/15/1716	Albany, NY	60	Merchant	6/12/1778	62
Morris, Lewis	NY	4/8/1726	West Chester Co., NY	50	Plantation Owner	1/22/1798	71
Hewes, Joseph	NC	7/9/1730	Kingston, NJ	46	Merchant	10/10/1779	49
Hooper, William	NC	6/17/1742	Boston, MA	34	Lawyer	10/14/1790	48
Penn, John	NC	5/6/1740	Carolina Co., VA	36	Lawyer	9/14/1788	48
Ellery, William	RI	12/22/1727	Newport, RI	48	Lawyer, Merchant	2/15/1820	92
Hopkins, Stephen	RI	3/7/1707	Providence, RI	69	Merchant	4/13/1785	78

(Information here is from the National Archives.)

For information on "Sharing the Spirit of America":
Peter T. Young, Chair
Hawai'i America250 Commission
Contact@HawaiiAmerica250.org

