

Editing the Declaration of Independence

Educational Resource and Activity

This activity covers the timeline and some finer points of how and when the text of the Declaration of Independence was edited. This was initially presented as an educator workshop. If you need more information or have any questions, email MuseumEducation@amphilsoc.org

If you had to edit the Declaration of Independence, could you? Would you search for formatting and grammatical errors or would you focus on the content? Maybe you would do both. Of course, once you edit it, you have to give it back to the writer. Are you ready to deal with an angry author?

Come to think of it, do you know how many versions of the Declaration exist? Which one is the official copy? What are the differences?

Leading Questions for Activity

- Why are edits significant? Are some edits more significant than others?
- Why would Jefferson have been so offended or taken aback by the edits?
- What's the lasting legacy of edits to the Declaration of Independence?
- What does the existence of multiple copies of the Declaration tell us?

Resources used to create this activity:

- *The Declaration of Independence: Four 1776 Versions*, APS 2014
- Declaration Resources Project, <https://declaration.fas.harvard.edu/>
- *The Declaration of Independence: Thomas Jefferson's Manuscript Draft*, APS 2000
- Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/declara/declara4.html#obj33>
- <https://www.loc.gov/resource/ds.05568/>
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Continental-Congress>
- <https://www.amphilsoc.org/exhibits/treasures/declarat.htm>
- <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration>
- <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Jefferson/Declaring-independence>

Activity Outline (Editing the Declaration)

- Give background on Richard Henry Lee's clean copy
- Designate a "Jefferson"
 - o Give your Jefferson the quotes and set the mood for the drafter (see supplemental materials)
- Handout copies of "Clean Copy" text (see supplemental materials)
- Have the rest of the group edit the clean copy
- Present the edits to Jefferson
 - o Have Jefferson respond to the edits – engage in dialogue
- Educators sit back, allow the discussion to unfold. This is their copy of the Declaration!
- Bring the group back together, recap the conversation
- Pass out copies of the Dunlap text (see supplemental materials)
- Compare and Contrast
- Revisit overarching questions

Background Information

Richard Henry Lee

- A delegate from Virginia to the second Continental Congress, Richard Henry Lee was the first person to propose drafting a declaration of independence. He brought forth a resolution on June 7th, 1776, demanding three things: a declaration of independence from Great Britain, a move to begin forming alliances with foreign allies, and the need to create a “plan of confederation.” This proposal prompted the formation of the Committee of Five and the drafting of a Declaration of Independence. Unfortunately, soon after he made his proposal, he was called home to Virginia to care for his wife, who was sick.

Committee of Five

- On June 11th, 1776, the Continental Congress appointed five delegates—Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Robert R. Livingston, and Roger Sherman—to a committee to draft and prepare a Declaration of Independence.
- All except Sherman were Members of the APS.

Continental Congress

- The first Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in 1774 in response to the “Intolerable Acts.”
- Fifty-six delegates made up this first congress, representing every colony except for Georgia. Each state was given one vote.
- The Second Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia on May 10th 1776.
- Some of the important accomplishments of the Second Continental Congress included the establishment of a Continental army with George Washington as its commander-in-chief, the beginning of foreign diplomacy, and the creation and signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Thomas Jefferson

- Thomas Jefferson was born to a wealthy, slaveholding family and educated in Virginia. In 1768, he built his home at Monticello, and entered politics, becoming a part of the Virginia legislature. In 1774, he published “A Summary View of the Rights of British America,” positioning him as an early advocate of American independence from Great Britain. It also made him famous beyond the bounds of his native Virginia and led to his appointment to the second Continental Congress. Though he was not particularly vocal during congressional sessions and debate, he distinguished himself as a drafter of resolutions. In 1776 he was selected to be a member of the committee of five delegates responsible for drafting the Declaration of Independence. John Adams, also a member of this committee, asked him to write the first draft of the document, which was then, much to Jefferson’s dismay, given to the rest of the Committee of Five and to Congress for edits. Jefferson was not recognized as the primary author of the Declaration until the 1790s. He was only thirty-three years old when he wrote the famous text.

Copies referenced in this activity

This activity uses the Dunlap copy and the clean copy by Thomas Jefferson. The comparison afforded between Jefferson's clean copy and the Dunlap text allows the participant to most closely replicate reading the changes between what Jefferson submitted and what was approved. We also provide information on the "Official" copy below.

- Dunlap Copies
 - On July 4th, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was formally accepted by the Continental Congress.
 - A copy of the completed document was brought to the printing shop of John Dunlap on Market Street in Philadelphia. Overnight, Dunlap printed a stack of copies of the document and delivered them to the state house. Though it is unknown how many copies Dunlap printed that day, fewer than 25 survive today. One of those copies was acquired by the American Philosophical Society in 1901 in an exchange with the Library of Congress.
 - In mid-July, Dunlap also printed a small number of copies of the Declaration on vellum, or parchment made from calfskin. It's unclear why Dunlap decided to make these additional copies, but it might have been because he, suspecting the historical significance of the document, wanted to create copies on more durable material. The copy owned by the APS was originally obtained by APS Member David Rittenhouse, who was a friend of Dunlap's. It was passed down in Rittenhouse's family, eventually coming into the possession of James Means, a physician, who donated it to the APS in 1828.

- Clean Copy, Thomas Jefferson Manuscript Draft to Richard Henry Lee
 - Thomas Jefferson wrote the first drafts of the Declaration of Independence in his own hand.
 - He sent one of these copies to Richard Henry Lee, a delegate from Virginia who had first proposed issuing a Declaration of Independence.
 - Richard's brother, Arthur, a diplomat, took the copy and made edits in the margins, changing wording and striking through passages, including one condemning slavery. This copy was donated to the American Philosophical Society by Richard Henry Lee, Jr., the son of the Virginia delegate.

- "Official copy" information
 - The "official copy"—a signed and engrossed version—of the Declaration of Independence (the one featured in the feature film National Treasure) is currently housed in the National Archives.
 - The document was engrossed by Timothy Matlack and was completed by August 2nd 1776. Delegates began signing the document that day and continued over the following several months. Thomas McKean was the last signer.