

Versions & Timelines – 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 (Versions & Timeline)

- Set the scene, give background and context on the Declaration of Independence and the Committee of Five
- Present the timeline (see supplemental materials, timeline information)
 - o Have learners fill-in as much information as possible
- Reveal the filled in timeline (see supplemental materials, timeline information)
- Discuss the differences between copies of the Declaration
 - o Focus on both content and the history of the copies themselves
 - o For example, the APS draft
- Discuss what small and large details mean in the copies
 - o Why would the names only appear in public copies after 1777?
 - o What is the significance of publication location, material, and media?
 - o What is the significance of ownership, now and then?

Background Information

For more information regarding the timeline, see the supplemental information. It provides a blank copy of the timeline, a semi-filled in copy, and a full version with all of the relevant information needed.

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.

What the Declaration is

- An official, written proclamation of the independence of the colonies from Great Britain.
- A statement of the grievances against the British King and Parliament and a proclamation of the principles of individual human rights.
- “The Declaration of Independence states the principles on which our government, and our identity as Americans, are based. Unlike the other founding documents, the Declaration of Independence is not legally binding, but it is powerful.” – quote from the National Archives
- More on the theoretical meaning of the Declaration can be found [here](#).

What the Declaration is *not*

- The Declaration of Independence is not the same as the Articles of Confederation or the Constitution. These documents required approval from the colonies, whereas the Declaration only had to be approved by the Continental Congress.
- The Declaration of Independence did not establish a system of government
- The Declaration of Independence is not legally binding

Differences between select copies of the Declaration

- 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.
- Dunlap Copies (paper and vellum)
 - 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.
- Benjamin Towne’s newspaper printing
 - Benjamin Towne published a tri-weekly newspaper called the Pennsylvania Evening Post. On July 2nd, 1776, he printed an announcement reading "This day the CONTINENTAL CONGRESS declared the UNITED COLONIES FREE and INDEPENDENT STATES."
 - In the next few days, Towne was able to obtain a copy of the document, and printed a copy of it in the July 6th edition of his newspaper, before John Dunlap was able to publish the text in his own paper, the Pennsylvania Packet. Towne’s was the first newspaper to print the document, though other papers soon followed suit. Most Americans would have first read the document in this format.
- 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.