

American Declarations – The Declaration of Independence

Educational Resource and Activity

Need more information or have questions? Email MuseumEducation@amphilsoc.org

Anytime we present the Declaration or other founding documents, questions of race, slavery, gender, and sexuality almost always come up. This activity, created in June 2020 during a moment of unrest and uprising, provides space to more closely examine the power of speech, what the Declaration meant then, and what Declarations mean now.

Leading Questions for Activity

- Who were the signers? Who *weren't* the signers? How do their identities get represented in the Declaration?
- What's the lasting legacy of the Declaration of Independence?
- How does a modern lens inform a reading of the Declaration of Independence?
- What is the significance of a declaration or proclamation?

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 (American Declarations)

- Give background on the Declaration of Independence and whichever speeches or proclamations you choose from the supplemental materials list.
 - o If you choose two documents/speeches, break the group into two. If you choose three, break the group up into three. And so on
 - o For upper grades and advanced learners, you can introduce a third document: one essay in John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*. The inclusion of this essay can expand the activity into the legacy of the Enlightenment. Have students compare the Locke essay, the Declaration of Independence, and one other document.
 - o *If you find there are voices and perspectives that have not been included in the list, let us know! We encourage your comments and are more than happy to update and broaden the list.*
- Have students read the Declaration of Independence and their assigned speeches or proclamations
- In their smaller groups have them compare and contrast these documents/speeches
 - o What similarities or differences are there in length, format, composition, time period, tone, and other points?
 - o Have them conduct additional research as needed
- Bring the larger group back together for a conversation on what they've all noticed through their comparing and contrasting exercise
- End the exercise by asking what the purpose of a declaration or proclamation is
 - o Were any of these successful? Unsuccessful? Harmful? Helpful?
 - o When is a declaration or proclamation needed?

Background Information

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.
- Out of the Five, 2 (Franklin and Jefferson) owned enslaved people at some point in their lives. Though he did not own enslaved people, John Adams indirectly, and occasionally, benefitted from enslaved labor. Robert Livingston’s connections to slavery are unclear, though distant relatives profited directly from and participated in the slave trade. Roger Sherman’s ties to slavery are mostly abstract though he opposed slavery, he played a quieter role in later Constitutional debates on the matter.
- 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.
- Of the 56 delegates, the specific number of those who owned enslaved people is hard to calculate. At least 13 did not own enslaved people. However, odds are most, if not all, profited from slavery in one form or another. Consider William Whipple, a sea captain who may have carried enslaved people on his ships. What might be a better focus is how many were or became active abolitionists, how many compromised on the point of slavery, how many were actively in support of slavery, and other more specific questions.
- 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 the “Official” copy, described below, and another declaration or proclamation. For the listing of those documents and speeches, see Supplemental Materials.

- “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.