WE THE PEOPLE IN PLAIN ENGLISH

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

in Plain English



THE FULL TEXT | LINE BY LINE | REVIEW QUESTIONS | GLOSSARY

The Original Text, Explained Line by Line

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We the People in Plain English

The Declaration of Independence in Plain English

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The Declaration of Independence in Plain English: The Original Text, Explained Line by Line

Part of the series We the People in Plain English.

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Chapter 1: The Story Behind the Declaration

Most of us know the Declaration of Independence by a single line: "all men are created equal." Fewer of us have read the whole thing. That's a shame, because it isn't long, and once you know the story behind it, it reads less like a museum piece and more like what it was: a letter written by people who knew they could hang for signing it.

This chapter tells that story in plain words. You don't need to know any history to follow it. By the end you'll know who wrote the Declaration, why they wrote it, and what happened in the weeks around July 4, 1776.

Thirteen Colonies Under a King

In the middle of the 1700s, the thirteen colonies along the Atlantic coast belonged to Great Britain. Each colony had its own elected assembly that made local laws, but each also had a governor, and in most colonies the king appointed that governor. Laws the assemblies passed could be rejected by the governor or by the king's officials in London.

For a long time this arrangement worked well enough. Then Britain fought and won a long, expensive war against France, which Americans call the French and Indian War. It ended in 1763. Britain came out of it with more land and a lot of debt, and Parliament began looking to the colonies to help pay for the empire.

Taxes, Troops and Tempers

Over the next twelve years Parliament passed a string of laws aimed at the colonies. The Stamp Act of 1765 required a government stamp on legal papers and other printed goods. Colonists protested so strongly that delegates from nine colonies met in October 1765 to petition against Parliament's power to tax them, and Parliament repealed the act. In 1767 the Townshend Acts brought new taxes and new protests.

You might ask, "Was it really about a few pennies of tax?" It's simple: no. The colonists' complaint was about who had the right to tax them. They had no members in Parliament. In their view, only their own elected assemblies could tax them. People often sum this up as "no taxation without representation."

In 1773 Parliament gave the East India Company a special deal on tea that hurt colonial tea merchants. On December 16, 1773, colonists dressed as Indians dumped the company's tea into Boston Harbor. We call it the Boston Tea Party.

Parliament answered in 1774 with laws the colonists called the Intolerable Acts (the British called them the Coercive Acts). One closed the port of Boston. Another took away much of Massachusetts's self-government, and General Thomas Gage was made the colony's military governor.

The Continental Congress

The colonies decided they needed to act together. In September 1774 delegates from the colonies met in Philadelphia as the First Continental Congress. They agreed to stop buying British goods and sent a petition to King George III.

The petition didn't fix anything. On April 19, 1775, British soldiers and colonial militia fought at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. The war had started, even though nobody had yet declared independence.

From Loyal Subjects to Independent States

This next part surprises a lot of readers. For more than a year after the fighting started, most members of Congress still did not want to break away from Britain. Many hoped the king would step in and set things right with Parliament.

Several things changed their minds. On December 22, 1775, Parliament banned all trade with the colonies. In January 1776, Thomas Paine published a pamphlet called *Common Sense* that argued for independence in plain, punchy language, and it was read all over the colonies. Leaders in Congress also wanted help from France, and the French were not going to make a formal alliance with British colonies that still claimed to be loyal to the British king.

June 7 to July 4, 1776

On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia stood up in Congress and offered a resolution that the colonies "are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States." Congress was not ready to vote on it yet. On June 11 it put off the vote, but first it named five men to write a statement explaining the decision in case it passed. This group is known as the Committee of Five: John Adams of Massachusetts, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Robert R. Livingston of New York and Thomas Jefferson of Virginia.

The committee gave the writing job to Jefferson. He wrote a draft, and Adams and Franklin made only a few changes before the committee handed it to Congress.

On July 2, 1776, Congress voted for independence. Twelve colonies voted yes. New York's delegates did not vote. The next day John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail, that "the Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America," and that it would be "celebrated, by succeeding Generations." He was off by two days.

Congress then spent July 2, 3 and part of July 4 going over Jefferson's draft line by line. They made changes and cut some passages, though the basic document remained Jefferson's. The best-known cut was a long passage blaming King George III for the slave trade. Jefferson later wrote that the passage was struck out to please South Carolina and Georgia, which wanted to keep bringing in enslaved people, and that he believed some northern delegates were uncomfortable with it too, because northern ships had carried enslaved people to other colonies. Chapter 6 comes back to this.

Late in the morning of July 4, 1776, Congress approved the final wording. That's the date printed at the top, and that's the day we celebrate.

Getting the Word Out

That night a Philadelphia printer named John Dunlap printed copies on large single sheets. Printed sheets like these were called broadsides. The next morning riders started carrying them to the colonies and to the army. Nobody knows how many Dunlap printed, but 26 copies are known to survive today.

On July 9 the New York convention approved independence, which made the decision unanimous. On July 19 Congress ordered a fancy copy written out by hand on parchment, titled "The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America." Writing out an official copy by hand like this is called engrossing.

When Did They Sign?

Here's a common mix-up. Most of the signers did not sign on July 4. The record of Congress shows the parchment copy was signed on August 2, 1776, with John Hancock, the president of Congress, signing first. Some members signed later. In the end 56 men signed. A few leading members never signed at all, including John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, who still hoped to make peace with Britain, and Robert R. Livingston of New York, who served on the Committee of Five but thought the Declaration came too soon.

Signing was dangerous. In British eyes these men were committing treason, a crime punished by death. When they pledged "our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor" in the last line, they meant it.

What Happened to the Paper

The signed parchment had a rough life. It traveled with Congress as it moved from city to city during the war. In August 1814, when British troops attacked Washington, D.C., it was carried out of the city to Leesburg, Virginia, and saved. For decades it hung where sunlight faded the ink. In 1952 it moved to the National Archives in Washington, D.C., where you can see it today with the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

What Kind of Document Is It?

The Declaration did not create a government, and it doesn't set out any rules for running one. It does three things. It states a belief about where the power of government comes from. It lists the colonists' complaints against the king. And it announces that the colonies are now free and independent states.

It also had a practical job overseas. Being an independent nation made it possible for the United States to form an alliance with France, which it did in 1778. Britain itself formally recognized American independence in the Treaty of Paris in 1783.

In a Nutshell

- After 1763 Parliament taxed and tightened control over the colonies, and the colonists argued only their own assemblies could tax them.
- Fighting began in April 1775, but Congress did not vote for independence until July 2, 1776.
- Thomas Jefferson wrote the draft for a Committee of Five, and Congress edited it and approved it on July 4, 1776.

- Most of the 56 signers signed the parchment copy on August 2, 1776, not on July 4.
- The Declaration explains and announces independence. It does not set up a government.

Review Questions

1. Why did the colonists object to taxes passed by Parliament?
2. What did Richard Henry Lee propose on June 7, 1776?
3. Who were the members of the Committee of Five, and who wrote the first draft?
4. On what day did Congress vote for independence, and on what day did it approve the Declaration's wording?
5. When did most of the signers actually sign the parchment copy?
6. Name one practical reason Congress wanted to declare independence.

Chapter 2: Why Explain Yourself?

The Declaration opens with a heading and one long sentence. That sentence answers a question you might not expect: if you're going to break away from your country, why bother explaining it to anyone? Congress believed the rest of the world deserved an explanation, and it also knew the new nation would need friends.

How to Read the Original Text

Before we start, a word about the old wording. The original text in this book is printed exactly as the National Archives gives it, with the spelling, capital letters and punctuation of 1776. Writers back then capitalized many nouns for emphasis, so you'll see "Course," "Laws" and "Nature" with capital letters. Some spellings look odd to us today, like "Brittish." None of that is a typo in this book. It's how the document reads.

After each passage you'll find it restated in plain words, then an explanation of what it meant and why it mattered.

The Heading

> In Congress, July 4, 1776
> The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,

In plain words: *In the Continental Congress, July 4, 1776. This is the declaration that all thirteen united States of America agreed to.*

Notice the word "unanimous." On July 2, New York's delegates didn't vote, so the vote was twelve to nothing. New York's convention approved independence on July 9, and on July 19 Congress ordered the official copy to carry this title. The word "unanimous" was added because, by then, it was true.

Notice also that "united" has a small "u" in the heading, as the National Archives transcription prints it. People still debate how much to read into that small letter. Either way, the heading speaks of thirteen states acting together.

The First Sentence

> 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.

In plain words: *Sometimes in history one people has to cut the political ties that bind them to another people and take their own place as an equal nation among the nations of the world, a place*

that the laws of nature and of God give them. When that happens, decent respect for what the rest of humanity thinks means they should explain why they are separating.

That's one sentence. Let's take it a piece at a time.

"When in the Course of human events" sets the tone. Jefferson is not starting with anger. He's starting the way a philosopher or a judge might, talking about history in general. The message is: what we're about to do is serious, it doesn't happen often, and it follows rules.

"one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another" is a careful choice of words. To dissolve something is to undo it. The "political bands" are the ties of government between the colonies and Britain. Notice the Declaration calls the Americans "one people" and the British "another." That's a big claim in itself. A year earlier, most colonists thought of themselves as British subjects living in America.

"the separate and equal station" means an independent place among the countries of the world, equal in standing to Britain, France or Spain. A station is a position or rank.

"the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" points to the idea that some rules are built into the world itself, and that they stand above any king or parliament. The Declaration doesn't explain the phrase further. What we can say plainly is that Congress claimed the right to independence came from a higher law, not from Parliament's permission.

"a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes" is the reason for the whole document. Congress felt it owed the world an explanation. There was also a practical side. The colonies needed help, especially from France, and a country that wants allies has to show it isn't just a mob.

You might ask, "Who was the Declaration really written for?" It's simple: several audiences at once. On July 5, printed copies went out to the colonies' assemblies and committees and to the commanders of the army. It was sent overseas to be read in Europe. And it spoke to the British people, whose government the colonists were leaving. Each of those readers heard something a little different.

In a Nutshell

- The heading calls the Declaration "unanimous," which became true once New York approved on July 9, 1776.
- The first sentence says that when a people must separate from another, they should explain why.
- It claims the right to be an equal, independent nation comes from "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God," not from Parliament.
- Congress wanted to win the respect and help of other nations, especially France.

Review Questions

1. Why does the heading say "unanimous" if New York did not vote on July 2?
2. What does "dissolve the political bands" mean in plain words?
3. What does "separate and equal station" mean?

4. According to the first sentence, why should the colonies explain their reasons?
5. Name two audiences the Declaration was written for.

Chapter 3: The Truths They Held

The second paragraph of the Declaration is the part most Americans can quote. It's also the heart of the whole document. In a few lines it lays out a theory of government: where rights come from, why governments exist, and what people may do when a government turns against them.

If you only have time to understand one part of the Declaration, make it this one.

Truths Everyone Should See

> 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, --

> **In plain words:** *We believe these truths are plain to see and need no proof: all people are created equal, and their Creator has given them certain rights that can't be taken away or given up. Among these rights are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Governments are set up among people to protect these rights, and a government gets its rightful power from the agreement of the people it governs.*

"Self-evident"

A self-evident truth is one you can see is true just by thinking about it, the way you know a straight line is the shortest path between two points. Jefferson didn't try to prove the ideas in this paragraph. He presented them as starting points that any reasonable person would accept.

Jefferson later wrote, in an 1825 letter to Henry Lee, that the Declaration "was intended to be an expression of the American mind." In other words, he wasn't trying to invent new ideas. He was putting into words what many colonists already believed.

Where did those ideas come from? Just a few weeks earlier, on June 12, 1776, Virginia adopted a Declaration of Rights written by George Mason. It said people are by nature "equally free and independent" and have rights that include "the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property," and pursuing happiness and safety. The National Archives notes that Jefferson drew on it for the opening paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence. Behind both documents stood a long tradition of English political writing. The English philosopher John Locke, for one, wrote in his Second Treatise of Government that people join together under government "for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name, property."

"All men are created equal"

This is the most famous line in American history, and also one of the most argued over.

What did it mean in 1776? Most readers then understood it to mean that no person is born with a natural right to rule over another. A king is not born better than a farmer. Nobody is born a master by nature. In a world of kings and nobles, that was a bold claim.

At the same time, the men who approved it lived in a country where hundreds of thousands of people were enslaved. Many of the signers enslaved people themselves, including Jefferson, who enslaved more than 600 people over the course of his life and freed only ten. Women could not vote in most places, and the line said nothing about Native Americans' place in the new nation. The words were bigger than the country that wrote them.

You might ask, "So were they lying?" Historians answer that in different ways. Some say the signers meant the words as a universal principle they knew they were failing to live up to. Others say most of them meant the words more narrowly than we read them today. What isn't in dispute is what happened next. People who were left out began holding the country to its own words.

In 1848, at the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, the Declaration of Sentiments echoed this paragraph almost word for word, but said "all men and women are created equal." One hundred women and men signed it. On July 5, 1852, Frederick Douglass, who had escaped slavery, spoke in Rochester, New York. He called himself a supporter of the Declaration's principles and asked his audience what their Fourth of July meant to an enslaved person. And on November 19, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln opened the Gettysburg Address by pointing back to 1776, "Four score and seven years ago," to a nation "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

"Endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights"

Endowed means given. Unalienable means it can't be taken away, sold or given up. (You'll also see the spelling "inalienable." Same meaning.) The claim here is that these rights don't come from the king, from Parliament or even from the new American government. They come with being human. Government doesn't hand them out, so government can't rightfully take them back.

The Declaration names the source of those rights as "their Creator." Many readers in 1776 and today understand that as God. Others read it more broadly as whatever brought human beings into existence. Either way, the point the Declaration is making is that rights come before government, not from it.

"Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"

Notice the word "among." These three are examples, not a complete list.

Life is the right to stay alive and not be killed without just cause. Liberty is freedom, being able to live and act without someone else controlling you, within fair laws. The pursuit of happiness is the hardest of the three to pin down. In the 1700s "happiness" often meant more than a good mood. It meant living well: being safe, being able to make a living, owning property, and living a decent life. The Declaration doesn't promise anyone happiness. It protects the right to chase it.

You might ask, "Why didn't Jefferson say 'property' like Locke did?" Nobody knows for certain, and historians have offered several explanations. Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights had included both property and happiness. Jefferson's version kept happiness.

"Governments are instituted among Men"

Instituted means set up or established. Here's the purpose of government in one line: to secure these rights. Government exists for the people, not the other way around.

"Deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed" means a government's rightful power comes from the agreement of the people. The word "just" matters. A king with an army has power, but the Declaration says power is only rightful when the people have agreed to it. This idea, that government rests on the consent of the governed, runs through everything that came after, including the Constitution, which opens with "We the People."

When a Government Goes Wrong

> 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.

> **In plain words:** *Whenever any kind of government starts to destroy these goals, the people have the right to change it or get rid of it, and to set up a new government. They should build the new government on the principles and arrange its powers in the way that seems most likely to keep them safe and happy.*

This is the right of revolution. If the whole point of government is to protect rights, then a government that destroys rights has lost its reason to exist. The people can "alter" it, meaning change it, or "abolish" it, meaning end it.

Notice that the people don't just tear down. They "institute new Government." The goal is a better government, not no government.

But Not for Small Reasons

> 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.--

> **In plain words:** *Common sense says that governments that have been around a long time shouldn't be changed for minor or short-term reasons. And experience shows that people would rather put up with problems they can stand than throw out the government they're used to. But when a long string of abuses and power grabs, all aimed the same way, shows a plan to put the people under total, unchecked rule, then the people have the right, and the duty, to throw off that government and set up new protections for their future safety.*

Prudence means good judgment. After claiming a right to overthrow a bad government, the Declaration immediately puts limits on it. Don't do it over "light and transient causes," meaning small and passing problems.

"A long train of abuses and usurpations" is the key phrase. A usurpation is taking power you have no right to. One bad law doesn't justify revolution. A long chain of them, all pointing the same direction, does. That direction is "absolute Despotism," which means one ruler with unlimited power.

Here's where the Declaration turns a right into a duty. When things reach that point, the people don't just have the right to act. "It is their duty." Throwing off a tyrant becomes an obligation people owe to themselves and their children.

Our Turn to Explain

> 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.

> **In plain words:** *The colonies have suffered patiently under this kind of rule, and now they have no choice but to change their old form of government. The current King of Great Britain has a history of repeated harm and power grabs, all aimed at setting up total tyranny over these states. To prove it, here are the facts for a fair-minded world to judge.*

Sufferance means putting up with something. Constrains means forces. The colonies are saying they've been patient and are now being forced to act.

Notice who gets the blame: "the present King of Great Britain," George III. For years, colonists had aimed their complaints mostly at Parliament. Now the Declaration points at the king. Why? Colonial assemblies had been denying Parliament's authority to tax them since 1765. The Declaration never even names Parliament. It says only that the king "combined with others" against the colonies. Breaking away from Britain meant making the case against the king himself.

"Let Facts be submitted to a candid world" sets up the next section. Candid here means fair and honest. Having laid out the principle, the Declaration now does what a lawyer does in court. It presents the evidence. That evidence, a list of 27 complaints, takes up most of the document. The next three chapters walk through them.

In a Nutshell

- The Declaration says some truths are self-evident: all people are created equal and have rights that can't be taken away.
- Those rights include life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and they come before government, not from it.

- Governments exist to protect rights, and they get their rightful power from the consent of the governed.
- When a government destroys those rights through a long train of abuses, the people have the right and the duty to change or replace it.
- "All men are created equal" did not match how the country treated enslaved people, women or Native Americans in 1776, and later Americans used these same words to demand change.

Review Questions

1. What does "self-evident" mean?
2. What does "unalienable" mean, and where does the Declaration say these rights come from?
3. According to this paragraph, why are governments set up?
4. Where does a government get its "just powers"?
5. Does the Declaration say people should overthrow a government for any reason? Explain.
6. Name one group that later used the Declaration's words to argue for its own rights.

Chapter 4: The Case Against the King, Part 1: Lawmaking and the Courts

Now the Declaration presents its evidence. There are 27 complaints in all, usually called the grievances. Most begin with "He has," and "He" is King George III.

A few things will help as you read them. First, the grievances don't name any dates, places or laws. Readers in 1776 knew what they meant, but we have to fill in the background. In each case I'll tell you what historians usually connect the complaint to. Second, the list is an argument, not a neutral report. It was written to make the strongest case possible, and some historians point out places where it stretches the facts. I'll mention those too.

This chapter covers the first nine. They're about two things the colonists cared about deeply: their right to make their own laws, and their right to fair courts.

Blocking Good Laws

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

In plain words: *He has refused to approve laws that are very good and necessary for the public.*

Laws passed by a colony's assembly could be blocked. The National Park Service describes this grievance as referring to any time colonial legislatures passed laws for their own affairs that Britain refused to approve. The colonists' point is that the king was using this power to block laws they badly needed, not just bad laws.

> 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.

In plain words: *He has forbidden his governors to pass laws that were urgent and important unless the laws were held back until he approved them. And once they were held back, he completely ignored them.*

This one describes a frustrating trick. Royal governors were appointed in England, and they were sometimes told to hold back their approval of colonial laws. A law could be "suspended in their operation," meaning put on hold, until the king approved it, and then left waiting.

> 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.

In plain words: *He has refused to pass other laws to serve large areas full of people unless those people would give up their right to be represented in the legislature. That right is priceless to them and threatening only to tyrants.*

As settlers moved west, new counties and districts formed. The colonists wanted those new areas to send representatives to their assemblies. This grievance says the king would only allow laws organizing those districts if the people there gave up their right to representation. "Inestimable" means too valuable to measure. "Formidable to tyrants only" is a sharp line: the only people who fear fair representation are tyrants.

Bullying the Assemblies

> 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.

In plain words: *He has called lawmaking bodies to meet in unusual, uncomfortable places far from where their public records are kept, for the sole purpose of wearing them out until they go along with what he wants.*

Historians usually connect this to Massachusetts. The Massachusetts Government Act of 1774 made General Thomas Gage the military governor and let him force the legislature to meet wherever he wanted. Imagine having your state legislature moved to another town, away from its offices and records, as a way to pressure it. That's the complaint.

> He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

In plain words: *He has shut down representative assemblies again and again for standing up firmly and boldly against his attacks on the people's rights.*

To dissolve an assembly means to send its members home and end that session of the legislature. Royal governors did this when an assembly protested British policy. New York's legislature was dismissed in 1767 and 1769 after it refused to go along with the law on housing British troops.

> 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.

In plain words: *After shutting them down, he refused for a long time to let new assemblies be elected. Because the power to make laws can never be destroyed, it went back to the people as a whole. Meanwhile the colonies were left open to every danger of invasion from outside and violence from within.*

The point here is subtle but important. If the king shuts down an assembly and won't allow a new one, who makes the laws? The Declaration says the power goes back "to the People at large." The king, in their view, had left them without a lawful government at a dangerous time.

Holding Back Growth

> He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

> **In plain words:** *He has tried to stop these states from growing in population. To do that, he blocked the laws for welcoming and naturalizing people from other countries, refused to pass laws that would encourage them to move here, and made the terms for getting new land harder.*

Naturalization is the legal process that makes someone from another country a citizen, or in colonial terms, a British subject. A 1740 act of Parliament let colonies naturalize immigrants. The Journal of the American Revolution notes that this right was taken away in 1773, which angered colonists who wanted more settlers.

"New Appropriations of Lands" refers to land rules. A royal proclamation in 1763 set aside the lands west of the mountains for Native peoples and barred colonists from settling or buying land there. A boundary treaty followed in 1768. Colonists who wanted to move west, and land companies that wanted to sell to them, saw this as the king holding them back.

Controlling the Courts

> He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

> **In plain words:** *He has gotten in the way of justice by refusing to approve laws setting up courts.*

Courts need laws to create them and set their powers. When a colony's court law was rejected in London, the colony could be left without working courts. The National Park Service connects this grievance to Massachusetts, where in 1774 Parliament took away the colony's right to choose its own judges.

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

> **In plain words:** *He has made judges depend on him alone for how long they keep their jobs and how much they get paid.*

This is about independent judges. The grievance says the king made judges depend on his will alone, both for how long they kept their jobs and for their pay. In the early 1770s the Crown began paying some colonial judges directly, instead of the judges getting their salaries from the colony. Colonists feared that a judge who owes his job and his paycheck to the king will rule the way the king wants.

You'll see this idea again. When Americans wrote the Constitution, they gave federal judges their jobs "during good Behaviour" and said their pay could not be cut while they serve. The Constitution book in this series explains that in Article III.

In a Nutshell

- The first nine grievances are about the right to make laws and the right to fair courts.
- The king and his governors blocked colonial laws, held them up, and pressured assemblies by moving or shutting them down.
- When assemblies were shut down, the Declaration says lawmaking power returned to the people.
- Colonists complained that the king blocked immigration and western settlement.
- They feared judges who depended on the king for their jobs and pay could not be fair.

Review Questions

1. What is a grievance?
2. Who is "He" in the grievances?
3. In grievance 2, what happened to laws that were "suspended in their operation"?
4. According to grievance 6, where does lawmaking power go when the legislature is shut down and no new one is elected?
5. What is naturalization, and why did colonists want it?
6. Why did colonists worry about judges who depended on the king for their jobs and pay?

Chapter 5: The Case Against the King, Part 2: Soldiers, Officials and Outside Rule

The next set of grievances moves from lawmaking to control. They complain about officials sent from Britain, soldiers kept in the colonies, and laws made by a Parliament the colonists never elected.

Pay attention to grievance 13. It's different from the others. Instead of one complaint, it opens a list of nine laws, each starting with "For." Those nine are really complaints about acts of Parliament, but the Declaration blames the king for approving them.

Officials and Soldiers

> He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harrass our people, and eat out their substance.

In plain words: *He has created a lot of new government jobs and sent swarms of officials here to harass our people and eat up what they own.*

After 1763 Britain worked harder to collect taxes and enforce trade laws in the colonies. That meant new customs officers, tax collectors and other officials. The colonists saw them as an expensive burden, paid for out of colonial pockets, and as a source of constant hassle. "Eat out their substance" is a vivid way of saying these officials lived off the colonists' hard work.

> He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.

In plain words: *He has kept standing armies among us in peacetime without the approval of our legislatures.*

A standing army is a permanent, professional army kept ready even when there's no war. English-speaking people of that time were deeply suspicious of standing armies. They had seen how a ruler could use soldiers to control his own people. After the French and Indian War ended in 1763, Britain kept thousands of troops in North America. The colonists' complaint is that their own assemblies were never asked.

To be fair to the other side, some historians point out that the king had a legal duty to defend his whole empire, and that colonists didn't object when British troops fought on the frontier.

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

In plain words: *He has tried to make the military independent of, and above, the civilian government.*

In a free country the military answers to the elected civilian government, not the other way around. In 1774 General Thomas Gage, the commander of British forces in North America, was also made governor of Massachusetts. To the colonists, that looked like military rule.

This principle stuck. The Constitution makes the elected President the Commander in Chief and gives Congress, not the army, the power to fund the military.

Rule From Outside

> 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:

> **In plain words:** *He has joined with others to put us under a system of rule that doesn't fit our constitution and isn't recognized by our laws, and he has approved their so-called laws:*

"Others" means Parliament. This is the colonists' core legal argument stated as plainly as it ever got. "Our constitution" here doesn't mean a written document like the one Americans wrote in 1787. It means the colonies' own system of government. In their view Parliament had no rightful power over them at all, so its laws were only "pretended Legislation." The nine complaints that follow are those laws.

Soldiers in our homes

> For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

> **In plain words:** *For housing large groups of armed soldiers among us:*

Parliament's Quartering Act of 1765 required colonies to house and supply British troops. Another act in 1774 let a governor take over empty houses, barns and other buildings to house soldiers if the colony didn't provide quarters within 24 hours. The Americans remembered this. The Third Amendment to the Constitution says no soldier can be quartered in a house in peacetime without the owner's consent.

Soldiers above the law

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

> **In plain words:** *For protecting the soldiers with fake trials from being punished for any murders they commit against the people of these states:*

Historians often connect this to two events. The Journal of the American Revolution notes that the trials after the 1770 Boston Massacre are the likely reference, though one historian there argues those trials were genuine. In fact, John Adams himself defended the soldiers in court. The other is the Administration of Justice Act of 1774. It let the governor of Massachusetts send certain officials and soldiers accused of crimes there to be tried in another colony or in Great Britain.

Cutting off trade

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

In plain words: *For cutting off our trade with every part of the world:*

For a long time British trade laws limited which countries the colonies could trade with. Then, as the conflict grew, Parliament went further. The Boston Port Act of 1774 closed Boston Harbor. On December 22, 1775, Parliament banned all trade with the colonies.

Taxes without consent

> For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:

In plain words: *For taxing us without our agreement:*

This is the shortest grievance and the one most people remember. It goes back to the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts and the tea tax. Notice where it sits in the list: number 17, not number 1. By 1776 the argument had grown far beyond taxes.

No jury

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

In plain words: *For taking away, in many cases, our right to a trial by jury:*

A jury is a group of ordinary citizens who decide the facts in a trial. Englishmen had treasured trial by jury for centuries. But cases about trade and tax laws were often sent to vice-admiralty courts, where a judge decided the case alone with no jury. Colonists believed this was done because local juries kept siding with local people.

The Constitution and the Bill of Rights later protected jury trials in criminal cases and in many civil cases.

Shipped overseas for trial

> For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences:

In plain words: *For taking us across the ocean to be tried for made-up crimes:*

Being tried thousands of miles from home meant no friendly witnesses, no neighbors on the jury, and months of travel. In this period, people accused of certain crimes could be sent to another colony, or even to England, to stand trial. In 1772 colonists in Rhode Island burned a British customs ship, the Gaspee. The Crown set up a royal inquiry. In the end, nobody was charged.

The Quebec Act

> 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:

> **In plain words:** *For getting rid of the free system of English law in a neighboring province, setting up an unchecked government there, and stretching its borders, so that it could be both an example and a handy tool for bringing the same total rule into these colonies:*

The "neighbouring Province" is Quebec, in what is now Canada, which Britain took from France in 1763. The Quebec Act of 1774 kept French civil law there, let the Catholic Church keep its established place, and put lawmaking in the hands of the governor and an appointed council, with no elected assembly. It also pushed Quebec's borders south to the Ohio River, land colonists in Virginia, Pennsylvania and elsewhere wanted for themselves. The colonists' fear was simple: if the king could rule Quebec without an assembly, he could do it to them next.

Charters taken away

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

> **In plain words:** *For taking away our charters, getting rid of our most valuable laws, and changing the basic forms of our governments:*

A charter was the founding document of a colony, issued by the Crown, that set out how it would be governed. Colonists treated their charters as protections of their rights. The Massachusetts Government Act of 1774 rewrote the Massachusetts charter, gave the royal governor more power, and banned town meetings without the governor's written permission, except the yearly meeting to elect town officers. If the Crown could rewrite one colony's charter, no colony's charter was safe.

Lawmaking taken over

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

> **In plain words:** *For shutting down our own legislatures and declaring that Parliament has the power to make laws for us in every case whatsoever.*

This points to the Declaratory Act of 1766. When Parliament repealed the Stamp Act, it passed this act on the same day to make clear it still claimed power to make laws for the colonies "in all cases whatsoever." The grievance borrows those very words. It also points to the 1767 New York Restraining Act and to royal governors suspending colonial legislatures.

In a Nutshell

- Grievances 10 through 12 complain about officials and soldiers sent to the colonies, and about military power placed above civilian government.
- Grievance 13 says Parliament had no rightful power over the colonies and introduces nine of its laws.
- Those laws included housing troops, cutting off trade, taxes without consent, trials without juries, trials overseas, the Quebec Act, rewriting charters and suspending assemblies.
- Several of these complaints show up later as protections in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Review Questions

1. What is a standing army, and why did colonists distrust one?
2. Who are the "others" in grievance 13?
3. What does quartering mean? Which later amendment deals with it?
4. Why did colonists object to vice-admiralty courts?
5. What was the Quebec Act, and why did it frighten the colonists?
6. Why does grievance 17, taxation without consent, matter even though it's so short?

Chapter 6: The Case Against the King, Part 3: War on the Colonies

The last five grievances are the angriest. By the summer of 1776 the war had been going on for more than a year, and these complaints read like a charge sheet for that war. They accuse the king of giving up his role as protector and turning his armies, his navy and his allies against his own subjects.

This chapter also covers the hardest grievance in the Declaration to read today, and the passage Congress cut out of it.

The King Walks Away

> He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

> **In plain words:** *He has given up governing here by declaring that we are no longer under his protection and by making war on us.*

To abdicate means to give up a throne or an office. In the thinking of that time, a king and his subjects had a two-way bargain: the people owed the king loyalty, and the king owed the people protection. In a proclamation in August 1775, and again in a speech to Parliament that October, King George III declared the colonies to be in rebellion. To Congress, that meant the king had broken his side of the bargain. If he would not protect them, they no longer owed him loyalty.

Not everyone agrees the king "abdicated." One historian writing in the Journal of the American Revolution argues that Britain never actually withdrew its protection and that this claim was mainly a way to justify the break. Either way, it was the legal heart of the colonists' argument.

Attacks on the Coast

> He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

> **In plain words:** *He has robbed us at sea, attacked our coasts, burned our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.*

This wasn't a figure of speech. In October 1775 a British naval force under Captain Henry Mowat bombarded and burned the town of Falmouth, which is now Portland, Maine. In Virginia, the royal governor, Lord Dunmore, attacked towns along the coast and rivers.

Hired Soldiers

> He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat 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.

> **In plain words:** *Right now he is bringing over large armies of foreign hired soldiers to finish the work of death, destruction and tyranny he has already started, with cruelty and betrayal hardly matched in the most savage times, and totally unworthy of the head of a civilized nation.*

Mercenaries are soldiers who fight for pay for a country that isn't their own. In 1776 Britain hired German troops from several small German states. Most came from Hesse-Cassel and Hesse-Hanau, so Americans called all of them Hessians. Over the course of the war Britain used more than 30,000 German soldiers, about a quarter of its army in America. Nearly 8,000 arrived in New York in August 1776, just weeks after the Declaration.

Hiring foreign troops was common in European wars. What made it so bitter for the colonists was that their own king was paying foreigners to fight his own subjects.

Forced to Fight Their Own

> 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.

> **In plain words:** *He has forced our fellow citizens who were captured at sea to fight against their own country, to become the killers of their friends and family, or to die at their hands.*

In December 1775 Parliament authorized seizing American ships. Sailors captured on those ships could be forced to serve in the Royal Navy. Forcing men into naval service was called impressment. For an American sailor, it could mean being made to fire on American ships.

The Last and Hardest Grievance

> 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 plain words:** *He has stirred up rebellions inside our communities, and he has tried to bring down on the people living on our frontiers the Native American warriors, whom the Declaration calls "merciless Indian Savages," whose known way of war is to destroy people of every age, sex and condition.*

This grievance has two parts, and both need careful explaining.

"Domestic insurrections"

An insurrection is an uprising. "Domestic insurrections" here points mainly to one event. On November 7, 1775, Lord Dunmore, the royal governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation promising freedom to enslaved people and indentured servants of rebels who were able and willing to fight for the British. Nearly 800 Black men served in his unit, called the Ethiopian Regiment. Over the whole war, at least 20,000 Black loyalists fled to the British.

Think about what that means. To the men in Congress, the king was stirring up a revolt. To the enslaved people who answered Dunmore's call, it was a chance at the very liberty the Declaration talked about. The same event looked completely different depending on where you stood. Historians across the spectrum have pointed out that tension.

The passage Congress cut

Jefferson's draft had gone much further. In a long paragraph he blamed King George III for the transatlantic slave trade itself. He called it "execrable commerce," meaning a hateful trade, and accused the king of keeping open a market where "MEN should be bought & sold," while also stirring up enslaved people to rise against the colonists.

Congress cut nearly all of it and kept only the short phrase about "domestic insurrections." In his autobiography, written in 1821, Jefferson said the passage was removed to please South Carolina and Georgia, which had never tried to stop importing enslaved people and still wanted to continue. He added that he believed some northern delegates were uncomfortable too, because northern ships had carried many enslaved people to other colonies.

You might ask, "How could a slaveholder write that?" Jefferson himself enslaved hundreds of people. Historians have long debated how to understand him. Some see a man who knew slavery was wrong and failed to act on it. Others see the deleted passage mainly as a way to shift blame for slavery onto the king. The draft itself is a real document, held today by the Library of Congress, and you can read it and judge for yourself.

"Merciless Indian Savages"

The second part of grievance 27 uses a phrase that stops modern readers cold. It calls Native Americans "merciless Indian Savages." It's printed in this book exactly as written, because that's what the Declaration says, and you can't understand the document honestly if you skip the parts that are hard to read.

Here's the background. Britain did seek alliances with Native nations, and frontier warfare during the Revolution was brutal on all sides. But the grievance tells only one side. Native nations were not one group. They made their own choices based on their own interests, and many were trying to protect their lands from colonial settlers. Some, such as the Oneida, the Catawba and the Stockbridge-Mohican, supported the revolutionaries. Others, such as the Muskogee (Creek), the Shawnee and the Delaware, did not. In fact, by April 1775 a company of Stockbridge Indians was serving with the American forces outside Boston.

The phrase reflects how many colonists saw Native peoples in 1776. Today it's widely recognized as a slur. Knowing that helps us read the Declaration as what it is: a powerful statement of ideals, written by people who did not apply those ideals to everyone.

In a Nutshell

- The last five grievances accuse the king of making war on his own subjects.
- Grievance 23 argues the king gave up his right to rule by declaring the colonists rebels and withdrawing his protection.
- The colonists pointed to burned towns, hired German soldiers, and captured sailors forced to fight Americans.
- "Domestic insurrections" refers mainly to Lord Dunmore's 1775 offer of freedom to enslaved people who fought for Britain.
- Congress cut Jefferson's long passage blaming the king for the slave trade. Jefferson said it was cut to please South Carolina and Georgia.
- The phrase "merciless Indian Savages" reflects one-sided wartime views. Native nations fought on both sides.

Review Questions

1. What does "abdicate" mean, and why did Congress say the king had abdicated?
2. Who were the Hessians?
3. What was impressment?
4. What did Lord Dunmore's Proclamation of November 7, 1775, offer?
5. What did Jefferson's deleted passage say, and what reason did he later give for its removal?
6. Did all Native nations side with Britain? Give an example.

Chapter 7: We Asked, and We Warned

After 27 grievances, you might expect the Declaration to jump straight to its conclusion. Instead it pauses for two short paragraphs. They answer a question any fair-minded reader would ask: did you try to work this out peacefully first?

The answer the Declaration gives is yes, twice. Once with the king, and once with the British people.

We Petitioned the King

> 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.

> **In plain words:** *At every step of this mistreatment we asked for things to be set right, in the most humble words. Our repeated requests were answered only with more harm. A ruler whose character shows every sign of a tyrant is not fit to rule a free people.*

A petition is a formal written request to someone in power. Redress means setting a wrong right. The colonists had sent many petitions over the years. The best known came from Congress itself. On July 8, 1775, nearly three months after the fighting began, Congress signed what we call the Olive Branch Petition, written mainly by John Dickinson of Pennsylvania. It asked King George III for a "happy and permanent reconciliation." The king refused to formally receive it. On August 23, 1775, he declared the colonies to be in "open and avowed Rebellion."

The last sentence of this paragraph is the conclusion of the whole case. Remember, the Declaration said back in its second paragraph that people may throw off a government that shows "a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism." Now, having laid out the evidence, it gives the verdict. George III is a tyrant, and a tyrant "is unfit to be the ruler of a free people."

You might ask, "Was the king really a tyrant?" Many British people at the time, and many historians since, would say no. Much of what the colonists complained about came from acts of Parliament, not from the king acting alone. But as we saw in Chapter 3, the Declaration never even names Parliament. To break away from Britain, Congress made the case against the king personally.

We Warned the British 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. 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.

> **In plain words:** *We have not ignored our British brothers and sisters either. Again and again we warned them that their Parliament was trying to stretch an unjustified power over us. We reminded them of how and why we came here and settled. We appealed to their natural sense of justice and generosity, and we begged them, by the ties of the family we share, to reject these power grabs, which were bound to break our connections and communication. They also refused to listen to justice and to family. So we have to accept that separation is necessary, and treat them as we treat the rest of the world: enemies in war, friends in peace.*

"Brittish" with two t's is the spelling in the original. Wanting means lacking here, so "Nor have We been wanting in attentions" means "we haven't failed to pay attention" to the British people.

This paragraph speaks to ordinary people in Britain, not their government. Congress had in fact written to them directly, in an Address to the People of Great Britain that it approved on October 21, 1774. The tone is hurt more than angry. It talks about family, using words like "brethren" and "kindred."

A few words need explaining:

- Unwarrantable means without any good reason or right.
- Magnanimity means generosity of spirit, being big-hearted toward others.
- Conjured here doesn't mean magic. It means begged or pleaded with solemnly.
- Consanguinity means being related by blood. Many colonists had family in Britain.
- Acquiesce means to accept something quietly, even if you don't like it.

The last line is one of the best in the document: "Enemies in War, in Peace Friends." It says the quarrel isn't permanent. Once the war ends, the British people will be treated like any other nation, as friends. That turned out to be true. Britain and the United States became close allies in the centuries that followed.

In a Nutshell

- The Declaration says the colonists asked the king again and again to fix their complaints, and got only more harm in return.
- Congress's Olive Branch Petition of July 1775 asked for reconciliation. The king refused to receive it and declared the colonies in rebellion.
- The Declaration's verdict is that a king who acts like a tyrant is unfit to rule a free people.
- It also says the colonists appealed to the British people, who didn't listen.

- It promises to treat Britain as an enemy in war and a friend in peace.

Review Questions

1. What is a petition, and what does "redress" mean?
2. What was the Olive Branch Petition, and how did King George III respond?
3. According to the Declaration, what kind of ruler is unfit to rule a free people?
4. Who are the "Brittish brethren" in the second paragraph?
5. What does "Enemies in War, in Peace Friends" mean?

Chapter 8: Free and Independent States

Everything so far has been the explanation. This last paragraph is the act itself. It's the part where Congress actually declares independence, and it ends with the pledge that put every signer's neck on the line.

The Declaration Itself

> 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.

> **In plain words:** *So we, the representatives of the united States of America, meeting together in Congress, call on the highest Judge of the world to witness that our intentions are right. In the name of the good people of these colonies, and by their authority, we solemnly announce and declare that these United Colonies are, and by right ought to be, free and independent states. They are released from all loyalty to the British Crown, and every political tie between them and Great Britain is, and ought to be, completely ended. As free and independent states, they have full power to make war, make peace, form alliances, set up trade, and do everything else independent states have the right to do. And to support this Declaration, trusting firmly in the protection of God's care, we pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.*

Let's walk through it.

Who is speaking

"The Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled" are the members of the Continental Congress. They speak "in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies." That ties back to Chapter 3. Governments get their just powers from the consent of the governed, so Congress claims to be acting for the people, not on its own say-so.

"Appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world"

Rectitude means rightness or honesty. Congress asks the "Supreme Judge of the world" to witness that its intentions are honest. Most readers understand this as an appeal to God, the same way a person swearing an oath in court might ask God to witness that they're telling the truth. The Declaration doesn't say more than that, and neither will I.

"Free and Independent States"

Here's the heart of it. "That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States." Those words come almost straight from the resolution Richard Henry Lee offered on June 7, 1776, which Congress passed on July 2.

Notice "are, and of Right ought to be." Congress is claiming two things at once. First, that it's a fact: as of now, these are independent states. Second, that it's right: they deserve to be.

Also notice that "Free and Independent States" is plural. In 1776 each former colony became its own state. They were acting together, but each saw itself as having the powers of a state. How much power those states would give to a central government was a question left for later. The Articles of Confederation in Plain English picks up that story.

"Absolved from all Allegiance"

Absolved means set free from a duty. Allegiance means loyalty owed to a ruler or country. Until this moment, colonists were legally subjects of the British king and owed him their loyalty. This line ends that.

What an independent state can do

The Declaration lists the powers of an independent state: to "levy War" (make war), "conclude Peace" (make peace treaties), "contract Alliances" (make agreements with other countries), and "establish Commerce" (set up trade). These are exactly the powers a colony did not have. They also point to why Congress needed independence so badly. Without the power to "contract Alliances," the United States couldn't sign a treaty with France. In 1778, it did.

"A firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence"

Providence here means God's care and guidance over the world. Many Americans of that time spoke of Providence often, whatever their particular beliefs. Congress says it is counting on that protection as it takes this risk.

"Our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor"

This is the most moving line in the document, and it was no exaggeration. In British eyes the signers were traitors, and treason could be punished by death. They were pledging their lives. Many were wealthy men, so they were also pledging their fortunes. And they were pledging their "sacred Honor," their good name and their word to each other.

Notice the word "mutually." They made this promise to each other. If the Revolution failed, they would all go down together.

Many signers paid a real price. During the war, the British captured Richard Stockton of New Jersey. Thomas Heyward Jr. and Edward Rutledge of South Carolina were taken prisoner when Charleston fell in 1780. Other signers saw their homes burned. At least 14 served in the army or the state militias. Chapter 9 tells more about the men who signed.

In a Nutshell

- The last paragraph is the actual declaration: the United Colonies are free and independent states.
- Congress speaks in the name of the people and asks God, as the Supreme Judge of the world, to witness that its intentions are honest.
- It ends all loyalty to the British Crown and all political ties with Great Britain.
- As independent states, they claim the power to make war and peace, form alliances and trade.
- The signers pledge their lives, fortunes and sacred honor to each other.

Review Questions

1. In whose name does Congress say it is acting?
2. What does "Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown" mean in plain words?
3. Name three powers the Declaration says independent states have.
4. Why was the power to "contract Alliances" so important in 1776?
5. What did the signers pledge, and to whom?

Chapter 9: The Signers

Fifty-six men signed the Declaration of Independence. You know a few of their names. Most of the others you've probably never heard of. This short chapter lists them all as the National Archives gives them, and tells you a little about who they were as a group.

The Signers by State

> Georgia: Button Gwinnett, Lyman Hall, George Walton
> North Carolina: William Hooper, Joseph Hewes, John Penn
> South Carolina: Edward Rutledge, Thomas Heyward, Jr., Thomas Lynch, Jr., Arthur Middleton
> Massachusetts: John Hancock
> Maryland: Samuel Chase, William Paca, Thomas Stone, Charles Carroll of Carrollton
> Virginia: George Wythe, Richard Henry Lee, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Harrison, Thomas Nelson, Jr., Francis Lightfoot Lee, Carter Braxton
> Pennsylvania: Robert Morris, Benjamin Rush, Benjamin Franklin, John Morton, George Clymer, James Smith, George Taylor, James Wilson, George Ross
> Delaware: Caesar Rodney, George Read, Thomas McKean
> New York: William Floyd, Philip Livingston, Francis Lewis, Lewis Morris
> New Jersey: Richard Stockton, John Witherspoon, Francis Hopkinson, John Hart, Abraham Clark
> New Hampshire: Josiah Bartlett, William Whipple
> Massachusetts: Samuel Adams, John Adams, Robert Treat Paine, Elbridge Gerry
> Rhode Island: Stephen Hopkins, William Ellery
> Connecticut: Roger Sherman, Samuel Huntington, William Williams, Oliver Wolcott
> New Hampshire: Matthew Thornton

John Hancock, the president of Congress, signed first, with a bold signature centered below the text. The others signed in columns below the text, grouped by state. The list above follows the order of the National Archives transcription, which starts with the Georgia column on the far left and ends with the New England states on the right. Massachusetts and New Hampshire each appear twice because their delegates' names fall in more than one column.

Who They Were

The signers were not a random sample of Americans. They were mostly well-off and well-educated men who were leaders in their colonies. According to the National Archives, 24 of them were lawyers, four were physicians and one was a printer. Most of the rest were merchants or plantation owners. Two were clergymen: John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister, and Lyman Hall of Georgia, who was a pastor, teacher and physician.

The oldest signer was Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, who was 70. The youngest was Edward Rutledge of South Carolina, who was 26. Their average age was about 44.

What Became of Them

Two signers became President of the United States: John Adams, the second President, and Thomas Jefferson, the third. In one of the strangest coincidences in American history, both died on the same day, July 4, 1826, exactly fifty years after the Declaration was approved.

The last signer to die was Charles Carroll of Carrollton, Maryland, who died in 1832 at age 95.

Not all of them lived to see victory. John Morton of Pennsylvania died in April 1777, the first of the signers to die. Button Gwinnett of Georgia was killed in a duel. Several signers were captured, had their homes destroyed, or served in the war, as Chapter 8 described.

Those Who Didn't Sign

A few important men in Congress did not sign. John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, who had written the Olive Branch Petition, still hoped to make peace with Britain. Robert R. Livingston of New York served on the Committee of Five but thought the Declaration came too soon, and never signed it. And not every signer was there on August 2. Some, such as Elbridge Gerry, Oliver Wolcott and Matthew Thornton, added their names later.

In a Nutshell

- Fifty-six men signed the Declaration, most of them on August 2, 1776.
- They were mostly lawyers, merchants and plantation owners, and leaders in their colonies.
- Benjamin Franklin was the oldest at 70, and Edward Rutledge the youngest at 26.
- John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both later became President and both died on July 4, 1826.
- Some leading members of Congress, including John Dickinson and Robert R. Livingston, never signed.

Review Questions

1. How many men signed the Declaration?
2. Why is John Hancock's signature in the center and so large?
3. What was the most common occupation among the signers?
4. Which two signers later became President, and what was unusual about their deaths?
5. Name one member of Congress who did not sign, and why.

Chapter 10: What the Declaration Means Today

You've now read the whole Declaration. Before we finish, let's step back and ask a practical question: what does a 250-year-old letter to King George III have to do with us?

It Isn't the Law of the Land, But It Shaped It

The Declaration is not the Constitution. It doesn't create Congress, the presidency or the courts, and it doesn't list rights the way the Bill of Rights does. The Constitution calls itself "the supreme Law of the Land." The Declaration makes no such claim.

But the Declaration set out the ideas the Constitution was built to carry out. Look at them side by side:

The Declaration (1776)	Where the idea shows up later
Governments get their just powers from the consent of the governed.	The Constitution begins "We the People," and its officers are chosen by election, directly or indirectly.
Complaint against judges who depend on the king for their jobs and pay.	Article III: federal judges serve "during good Behaviour," and their pay can't be cut while in office.
Complaint against soldiers quartered among the people.	The Third Amendment bars quartering soldiers in homes in peacetime without the owner's consent.
Complaint against losing trial by jury.	Article III and the Sixth and Seventh Amendments protect jury trials.
Complaint against the military placed above civil power.	Article II makes the elected President Commander in Chief, and Article I gives Congress the power to fund the army.
Complaint against taxes without consent.	Article I says all bills for raising revenue start in the House of Representatives, the part of Congress elected directly by the people.

A Promise Bigger Than 1776

The most lasting part of the Declaration is its second paragraph. As Chapter 3 showed, the men who wrote "all men are created equal" lived in a country that kept hundreds of thousands of people in slavery and gave women almost no political rights. Over the next two centuries, Americans who were left out kept pointing back to those words. The women at Seneca Falls in 1848 rewrote them to include women. Frederick Douglass held the nation to them in 1852. Abraham Lincoln built the Gettysburg Address around them in 1863.

The Library of Congress describes how Americans have used the Declaration's words as a call to "right longstanding injustices." That's the Declaration's strange power. The country fell short of it, and the document itself became the measuring stick for how far short.

Reading It for Yourself

If you take one thing from this book, I hope it's this: read the Declaration yourself. It's about 1,340 words, and you can read the whole thing in ten minutes. The full original text is printed at the back of this book with no interruptions, the way its first readers heard it in 1776.

When you read it, notice three things. First, how carefully it argues. It doesn't just say "we're angry." It states a principle, lays out evidence and reaches a verdict. Second, how much of it is about the right to govern yourselves: to elect lawmakers, to have fair judges, to be tried by your neighbors. Third, how bold it was. Fifty-six men put their names on a document that the most powerful empire on earth considered treason.

In a Nutshell

- The Declaration is not the law courts apply. The Constitution is. But the Declaration set out the principles the Constitution was built to protect.
- Several grievances show up later as protections in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.
- Its promise that "all men are created equal" became a standard later Americans used to demand rights for everyone.
- It's short enough to read in one sitting, and worth reading in full.

Review Questions

1. Does the Declaration of Independence set up the government of the United States? Explain.
2. Pick one grievance and name the part of the Constitution or Bill of Rights that answers it.
3. How did later Americans use the words "all men are created equal"?
4. In your own words, what is the main idea of the Declaration's second paragraph?

Timeline

This timeline covers the main events in this book. Each date comes from the sources listed at the back.

Date	Event
1763	The war with France ends with the Treaty of Paris. A royal proclamation bars colonial settlement on lands set aside for Native peoples west of the mountains.
1765	Parliament passes the Stamp Act. Delegates from nine colonies meet in October to protest it. Parliament also passes a Quartering Act.
1766	Parliament repeals the Stamp Act.
1767	Parliament passes the Townshend Acts and suspends New York's assembly.
1770	The Boston Massacre and the trials of the soldiers, defended by John Adams.
1772	Colonists burn the British customs ship Gaspee off Rhode Island.
December 16, 1773	The Boston Tea Party.
1774	Parliament passes the Coercive Acts (the Intolerable Acts) and the Quebec Act. General Thomas Gage becomes military governor of Massachusetts.
September-October 1774	The First Continental Congress meets in Philadelphia and agrees to boycott British goods.
April 19, 1775	Fighting at Lexington and Concord begins the Revolutionary War.
July 8, 1775	Members of Congress sign the Olive Branch Petition to King George III.
August 23, 1775	The king proclaims the colonies in "open and avowed Rebellion."
October 1775	A British naval force burns Falmouth (now Portland, Maine).
November 7, 1775	Lord Dunmore, royal governor of Virginia, offers freedom to enslaved people and indentured servants of rebels who fight for Britain.
December 22, 1775	Parliament bans all trade with the colonies.
January 1776	Thomas Paine publishes Common Sense.
June 7, 1776	Richard Henry Lee proposes independence in Congress.
June 11, 1776	Congress postpones the vote and names the Committee of Five to draft a declaration.
June 12, 1776	Virginia adopts George Mason's Declaration of Rights.
June 28, 1776	The Committee of Five presents its draft to Congress.
July 2, 1776	Congress votes for independence. Twelve colonies vote yes; New York does not vote.
July 4, 1776	Congress approves the final wording. John Dunlap prints the first copies that night.
July 9, 1776	New York approves independence.
July 19, 1776	Congress orders the Declaration engrossed on parchment as "The unanimous Declaration."
August 1776	Nearly 8,000 Hessian soldiers arrive in New York.

Date	Event
August 2, 1776	Most of the signers sign the parchment copy.
1778	The United States and France sign a Treaty of Alliance.
1783	In the Treaty of Paris, Britain recognizes American independence.
August 1814	The Declaration is carried out of Washington, D.C., ahead of the British attack.
July 4, 1826	John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both die, fifty years after the Declaration.
1832	Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the last surviving signer, dies.
1848	The Seneca Falls convention adopts the Declaration of Sentiments.
July 5, 1852	Frederick Douglass gives his Fourth of July speech in Rochester, New York.
November 19, 1863	Abraham Lincoln gives the Gettysburg Address.
1952	The Declaration moves to the National Archives.

The Declaration of Independence: The Full Text

Here is the whole Declaration straight through, with no interruptions, as transcribed by the National Archives. The spelling, capitals and punctuation are the originals.

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 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.

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 Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; 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 harrass 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 compleat 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 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. 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.

Signers

Georgia: Button Gwinnett, Lyman Hall, George Walton

North Carolina: William Hooper, Joseph Hewes, John Penn

South Carolina: Edward Rutledge, Thomas Heyward, Jr., Thomas Lynch, Jr., Arthur Middleton

Massachusetts: John Hancock

Maryland: Samuel Chase, William Paca, Thomas Stone, Charles Carroll of Carrollton

Virginia: George Wythe, Richard Henry Lee, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Harrison, Thomas Nelson, Jr., Francis Lightfoot Lee, Carter Braxton

Pennsylvania: Robert Morris, Benjamin Rush, Benjamin Franklin, John Morton, George Clymer, James Smith, George Taylor, James Wilson, George Ross

Delaware: Caesar Rodney, George Read, Thomas McKean

New York: William Floyd, Philip Livingston, Francis Lewis, Lewis Morris

New Jersey: Richard Stockton, John Witherspoon, Francis Hopkinson, John Hart, Abraham Clark

New Hampshire: Josiah Bartlett, William Whipple

Massachusetts: Samuel Adams, John Adams, Robert Treat Paine, Elbridge Gerry

Rhode Island: Stephen Hopkins, William Ellery

Connecticut: Roger Sherman, Samuel Huntington, William Williams, Oliver Wolcott

New Hampshire: Matthew Thornton

Answer Key

Chapter 1: The Story Behind the Declaration

1. They had no elected members in Parliament, and they believed only their own elected assemblies had the right to tax them.

2. That the colonies are, and ought to be, free and independent states.

3. John Adams, Roger Sherman, Benjamin Franklin, Robert R. Livingston and Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson wrote the draft.

4. It voted for independence on July 2, 1776, and approved the wording on July 4, 1776.

5. On August 2, 1776.

6. Being independent made it possible to form a formal alliance with France and get French help in the war.

Chapter 2: Why Explain Yourself?

1. New York's convention approved independence on July 9, so by the time the official copy was ordered on July 19 all thirteen had agreed.

2. To end the ties of government that connected the colonies to Great Britain.

3. An independent place among the nations of the world, equal in standing to other countries.

4. Out of decent respect for the opinions of the rest of mankind.

5. Any two of: Americans in the colonies, governments and people in Europe (especially France), and the British people.

Chapter 3: The Truths They Held

1. So plain that it needs no proof.

2. Rights that can't be taken away or given up. The Declaration says they come from people's Creator, not from government.

3. To secure, or protect, the people's rights.

4. From the consent of the governed, meaning the agreement of the people.

5. No. It says long-established governments should not be changed for light and passing reasons, only after a long train of abuses that shows a plan for total, unchecked rule.

6. The 1848 women's rights convention at Seneca Falls (Declaration of Sentiments), or Frederick Douglass and the movement to end slavery.

Chapter 4: The Case Against the King, Part 1: Lawmaking and the Courts

1. A complaint about something believed to be wrong or unfair.

2. King George III.

3. They were put on hold until the king approved them, and then the king ignored them.

4. Back to the people at large.

5. The legal process that makes someone born in another country a citizen or subject. Colonists wanted more settlers to come and become members of the community.

6. They feared those judges would rule the way the king wanted instead of ruling fairly.

Chapter 5: The Case Against the King, Part 2: Soldiers, Officials and Outside Rule

1. A permanent army kept in peacetime. They feared a ruler could use it to control his own people.

2. Parliament.

3. Housing soldiers in civilians' buildings. The Third Amendment.

4. They had no juries. A judge decided the case alone.

5. A 1774 law for Quebec that kept French civil law, set up no elected assembly, and stretched Quebec's borders into the Ohio Valley. Colonists feared the same kind of rule could be imposed on them.

6. It was the original complaint that started the conflict, and by 1776 it was one of many.

Chapter 6: The Case Against the King, Part 3: War on the Colonies

1. To give up an office or responsibility. Congress said the king gave up his role by declaring the colonists out of his protection and waging war on them.

2. German soldiers hired by Britain, named for the German states of Hesse where most of them came from.

3. Forcing men to serve in a navy against their will.

4. Freedom to enslaved people and indentured servants of rebels who were able and willing to fight for the British.

5. It blamed the king for the slave trade. Jefferson said it was removed to please South Carolina and Georgia, and that some northern delegates were uncomfortable with it too.

6. No. The Oneida, Catawba and Stockbridge-Mohican, among others, supported the revolutionaries.

Chapter 7: We Asked, and We Warned

1. A petition is a formal written request to someone in authority. Redress means setting a wrong right.

2. Congress's July 1775 request for peace and reconciliation. The king refused to receive it and in August 1775 declared the colonies to be in open rebellion.

3. A ruler whose actions mark him as a tyrant.

4. The people of Great Britain.

5. Britain will be treated like any other nation: as an enemy while the war lasts and as a friend once there is peace.

Chapter 8: Free and Independent States

1. The good people of the colonies.

2. The states are free from any loyalty they used to owe the British king.

3. Any three of: make war, make peace, form alliances, set up trade, and do everything else independent states may rightfully do.

4. The United States needed allies, especially France, and could not sign a treaty of alliance as colonies of Britain.

5. Their lives, fortunes and sacred honor, to each other.

Chapter 9: The Signers

1. Fifty-six.

2. He was the president of Congress and signed first.

3. Lawyer.

4. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Both died on July 4, 1826, fifty years to the day after the Declaration was approved.

5. John Dickinson, who did not support declaring independence that summer, or Robert R. Livingston, who helped draft it but never signed.

Chapter 10: What the Declaration Means Today

1. No. It explains and announces independence. The Constitution sets up the government.

2. Examples: judges dependent on the king and Article III's "good Behaviour" and pay protections; quartering troops and the Third Amendment; loss of jury trials and the Sixth and Seventh Amendments.

3. To argue for rights for people who had been left out, such as women at Seneca Falls and enslaved people in the movement to end slavery.

4. People have rights that come before government; government exists to protect them and gets its power from the people; and when a government destroys those rights, the people may change or replace it.

Glossary

Abdicate. To give up a throne, office or responsibility.

Abolish. To end something completely, such as a law or a government.

Absolved. Set free from a duty, obligation or blame.

Acquiesce. To accept something without protest, even reluctantly.

Allegiance. Loyalty owed to a ruler, government or country.

Annihilation. Complete destruction.

Arbitrary. Based on someone's personal choice or power rather than on fair rules or law.

Assembly. An elected group of lawmakers. Each colony had one, often called the House of Burgesses or House of Representatives.

Assent. Approval. A law needed the king's or governor's assent to take effect.

Broadside. A large sheet of paper printed on one side, used for public notices in the 1700s.

Candid. Fair, honest and open-minded.

Charter. A written grant from a ruler that creates a colony or organization and sets out its rights and form of government.

Civil power. The civilian government, as opposed to the military.

Colony. A settlement or territory ruled by a faraway country. The thirteen American colonies were ruled by Great Britain.

Consanguinity. Being related by blood; family ties.

Consent of the governed. The idea that a government's rightful power comes from the agreement of the people it governs.

Continental Congress. The meeting of delegates from the colonies that acted as the first national government during the Revolution.

Convulsions. Violent disturbances or uprisings.

Customs. Taxes on goods brought into or sent out of a country, and the officials who collect them.

Despotism. Rule by one person who has total power and answers to no one.

Dissolve. To end or undo something, such as a government or a political tie.

Endowed. Given or provided with something.

Engrossed copy. The official copy of a document written out neatly by hand, usually on parchment, for signing.

Grievance. A complaint about something you believe is wrong or unfair.

Hessians. German soldiers hired by Britain during the Revolution, named for the German states of Hesse where most came from.

Impressment. Forcing men to serve in a navy against their will.

Indentured servant. A person who agreed to work for someone for a set number of years, often in exchange for passage to America.

Inestimable. Too valuable to be measured.

Instituted. Set up or established.

Insurrection. A violent uprising against authority.

Intolerable Acts. Laws Parliament passed in 1774 to punish Massachusetts after the Boston Tea Party. The British called them the Coercive Acts.

Judiciary. The court system; the judges and courts.

Jurisdiction. The right and power to make laws or judge cases over a place or people.

Jury. A group of ordinary citizens who listen to a trial and decide the facts.

Levy. To raise or impose, such as raising an army or collecting a tax.

Magnanimity. Generosity of spirit; being big-hearted toward others.

Mercenary. A soldier hired to fight for a country that is not his own.

Mutually. Shared by each person toward the others.

Natural law. The idea that some rules of right and wrong are built into the world and can be known by reason, and that these rules stand above any government's laws.

Naturalization. The legal process by which someone born in another country becomes a citizen.

Olive Branch Petition. Congress's July 1775 request to King George III for peace and reconciliation, which the king refused to receive.

Parliament. Great Britain's national lawmaking body in London. The colonists elected no members to it.

Petition. A formal written request to someone in authority.

Pretended. Claimed, but not real or rightful.

Proclamation of 1763. A British order that barred colonists from settling west of the Appalachian Mountains.

Proposition. An idea put forward to be accepted or proved.

Providence. God's care and guidance over the world.

Prudence. Good judgment and caution.

Quartering. Housing soldiers, especially in buildings owned by civilians.

Rectitude. Rightness; honest and correct behavior.

Redress. Setting right a wrong; a remedy.

Representation. Having someone you helped elect speak and vote for you in a lawmaking body.

Right of revolution. The idea that people may change or replace a government that destroys the rights it was set up to protect.

Self-evident. So plain that it needs no proof.

Standing army. A permanent army kept in peacetime as well as in war.

Sufferance. Patient endurance; putting up with something hard.

Tenure. How long a person may keep a job or office.

Transient. Lasting only a short time.

Treason. The crime of betraying your own country, for example by making war against it. In 1776 the British government considered the signers traitors.

Tyranny. Cruel and unfair rule by someone with too much power.

Unalienable. Cannot be taken away, sold or given up. Also spelled "inalienable."

Usurpation. Taking power or a right that doesn't belong to you.

Veto. The power to reject a law so it doesn't take effect.

Vice-admiralty court. A British court that handled cases about ships, trade and customs, with a judge and no jury.

Sources and Further Reading

These are the pages I checked while writing this book, in October 2026. Web addresses change, so if one stops working, search the site for the page title. They are listed by chapter.

Chapter 1: The Story Behind the Declaration

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Office of the Historian: Declaration of Independence, 1776 (reluctance in Congress, December 22, 1775 trade ban, Common Sense, French alliance, recognition by other nations). https://history.state.gov/milestones/1776-1783/declaration

National Archives: The Declaration of Independence: A History (Lee Resolution, Committee of Five, drafting, July 2 vote, July 4 adoption, Dunlap broadside, engrossing, August 2 signing, 56 signers, later history). https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-history

National Archives, NHPRC blog "Declaring Our Independence" (John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776). https://annotation.blogs.archives.gov/2014/07/02/declaring-our-independence-3

Thomas Jefferson Foundation (Monticello): quotes Jefferson's 1821 Autobiography on the deleted clause and South Carolina and Georgia. https://www.monticello.org/the-art-of-citizenship/the-art-and-science-of-compromise/making-the-idea-a-reality

Chapter 2: Why Explain Yourself?

National Archives: Declaration of Independence: A Transcription (source of all original text in this book). https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript

National Archives: New York's approval on July 9 and the July 19 order to engross with the "unanimous" title. https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-history

Office of the Historian: independence as a step toward French aid and recognition by foreign governments. https://history.state.gov/milestones/1776-1783/declaration

Chapter 3: The Truths They Held

National Park Service, Independence National Historical Park: Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, "an expression of the American mind". https://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/historyculture/resources-declaration-quotes.htm

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Teaching American History: Number of Slaves in the Territory Enumerated, 1790 to 1850 (from the U.S. Census Bureau, A Century of Population Growth, 1909; the 1790 figures for Virginia alone exceed 287,000). https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/number-of-slaves-in-the-territory-enumerated-1790-to-1850/

National Park Service: Seneca Falls convention, July 19-20, 1848; "all men and women are created equal"; 100 signers. https://www.nps.gov/articles/declaration-of-sentiments-the-first-women-s-rights-convention.htm

National Park Service, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site: speech of July 5, 1852, Corinthian Hall, Rochester. https://www.nps.gov/frdo/what-to-the-slave-is-the-4th-of-july.htm

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library: Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863, opening sentence. https://presidentlincoln.illinois.gov/GettysburgAddress

Office of the Historian: Parliamentary Taxation of Colonies (1765 petitions and Virginia resolutions "denying Parliament's authority to tax the colonies"). https://history.state.gov/milestones/1750-1775/parliamentary-taxation

Chapter 4: The Case Against the King, Part 1: Lawmaking and the Courts

National Park Service, Fort Stanwix National Monument: "The Declaration of Independence: What Were They Thinking?" (June 30, 2021), background for each grievance. https://www.nps.gov/fost/blogs/the-declaration-of-independence-what-were-they-thinking.htm

Journal of the American Revolution: "The Declaration of Independence: The Twenty-Seven Grievances" (July 4, 2019), historians' commentary on each grievance. https://allthingsliberty.com/2019/07/the-declaration-of-independence-the-twenty-seven-grievances/

Avalon Project: The Royal Proclamation, October 7, 1763. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/proc1763.asp

Chapter 5: The Case Against the King, Part 2: Soldiers, Officials and Outside Rule

Journal of the American Revolution: Will Monk's comment on grievance 11 (the king's duty to defend the empire; frontier conflicts). https://allthingsliberty.com/2019/07/the-declaration-of-independence-the-twenty-seven-grievances/

Office of the Historian: General Thomas Gage appointed military governor of Massachusetts in 1774. https://history.state.gov/milestones/1750-1775/parliamentary-taxation

NPS: 1765 Quartering Act required colonies to house and supply troops; 1767 New York Restraining Act enforced it. https://www.nps.gov/fost/blogs/the-declaration-of-independence-what-were-they-thinking.htm

Avalon Project: The Quartering Act, June 2, 1774. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/quartering_act_1774.asp

Avalon Project: The Administration of Justice Act, May 20, 1774. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/admin_of_justice_act.asp

Office of the Historian: Parliament prohibited trade with the colonies on December 22, 1775. https://history.state.gov/milestones/1776-1783/declaration

Avalon Project: The Boston Port Act, March 31, 1774. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/boston_port_act.asp

Avalon Project: The Quebec Act, October 7, 1774 (appointed Legislative Council; boundary to the Ohio and Mississippi). https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/quebec_act_1774.asp

Avalon Project: The Massachusetts Government Act, May 20, 1774 (town meetings). https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/mass_gov_act.asp

Avalon Project: The Declaratory Act, March 18, 1766 ("in all cases whatsoever"). https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/declaratory_act_1766.asp

Avalon Project: Repeal of the Stamp Act, March 18, 1766. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/repeal_stamp_act_1766.asp

Chapter 6: The Case Against the King, Part 3: War on the Colonies

NPS: the King's October 1775 address declared the colonies in rebellion. https://www.nps.gov/fost/blogs/the-declaration-of-independence-what-were-they-thinking.htm

Journal of the American Revolution: Gary Shattuck on grievance 23 and the bargain of protection and allegiance. https://allthingsliberty.com/2019/07/the-declaration-of-independence-the-twenty-seven-grievances/

American Battlefield Trust: "more than 30,000 German troops," most from Hesse-Cassel and Hesse-Hanau; nearly 8,000 in the first expedition, August 1776. https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/hessians-auxiliaries

George Washington's Mount Vernon: Dunmore's Proclamation (November 7, 1775), nearly 800 in the Ethiopian Regiment, at least 20,000 Black loyalists over the war. https://edit.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/dunmores-proclamation-and-black-loyalists

American Battlefield Trust: Jefferson's draft on the slave trade, "execrable commerce," "MEN should be bought & sold," cut by Congress. https://www.battlefields.org/learn/primary-sources/jefferson-condemns-slave-trade-declaration-independence

Thomas Jefferson Foundation (Monticello): Jefferson's 1821 Autobiography on South Carolina and Georgia and "our northern brethren". https://www.monticello.org/the-art-of-citizenship/the-art-and-science-of-compromise/making-the-idea-a-reality

National Archives: Jefferson's rough draft, with changes by Franklin and Adams and Jefferson's notes of changes by Congress, is at the Library of Congress. https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-history

Chapter 7: We Asked, and We Warned

National Archives Museum: Olive Branch Petition (dated July 8, 1775; John Dickinson primary author; "happy and permanent reconciliation"; the king refused it; August 23, 1775 proclamation of "open and avowed Rebellion"). https://visit.archives.gov/whats-on/explore-exhibits/olive-branch-petition

Founders Online: "Address to the People of Great Britain," approved by Congress October 21, 1774 (drafted by John Jay). https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jay/01-01-02-0070

Chapter 8: Free and Independent States

National Archives: the Lee Resolution of June 7, 1776, and the July 2 vote. https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-history

Office of the Historian: the 1778 Treaty of Alliance with France. https://history.state.gov/milestones/1776-1783/declaration

American Battlefield Trust: Stockton captured in late 1776; Heyward and Rutledge taken prisoner after the 1780 Siege of Charleston; homes burned; at least 14 served in militias or the Continental Army. https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/who-were-signers-declaration-independence

Chapter 9: The Signers

National Archives: Hancock signed first; signatures arranged by the geographic location of the states, New Hampshire first and Georgia last. https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-history

National Archives: Signers gallery (24 lawyers, 4 physicians, 1 printer; mostly merchants or plantation owners; Witherspoon and Hall as clergymen; Franklin oldest at 70; Rutledge youngest at 26; Carroll last survivor, died 1832 at 95; Adams and Jefferson both died July 4, 1826). https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/signers-gallery

American Battlefield Trust: average age about 44.5; last delegate signed November 4; Button Gwinnett died in a duel; John Morton first signer to die, April 1777. https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/who-were-signers-declaration-independence

Chapter 10: What the Declaration Means Today

National Archives: Constitution transcription (Article VI, "the supreme Law of the Land"). https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript

National Archives: Bill of Rights transcript (Third, Sixth and Seventh Amendments). https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript

Library of Congress exhibition "The Declaration's Promise": Americans have read its language as a call to "right longstanding injustices". https://www.loc.gov/exhibitions/declarations-promise/

Timeline

Avalon Project: The Royal Proclamation, October 7, 1763 (refers to the Definitive Treaty of Peace concluded at Paris, February 10, 1763). https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/proc1763.asp

Avalon Project: The Quartering Act, May 15, 1765. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/quartering_act_165.asp

Avalon Project: Repeal of the Stamp Act, March 18, 1766. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/repeal_stamp_act_1766.asp

NPS, Fort Stanwix: New York Restraining Act, 1767. https://www.nps.gov/fost/blogs/the-declaration-of-independence-what-were-they-thinking.htm

Journal of the American Revolution: 1770 Boston Massacre trials, John Adams for the defense. https://allthingsliberty.com/2019/07/the-declaration-of-independence-the-twenty-seven-grievances/

About This Book

This book explains the Declaration of Independence part by part: the story behind it, the truths the signers held, every charge they made against the king, and the warning and the break that followed. You will meet the men who signed it and see what they risked by putting their names on it. The last chapter looks at what the Declaration still means today.

At the back you will find the full text, a timeline, an answer key, a glossary, and a list of sources.