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# Writing the Declaration of Independence, 1776

The summer of 1776 was a harrowing time for the British colonies in America. Open warfare with the mother country had erupted a year earlier and the future was filled with political and military uncertainties.

In this tense climate, the Continental Congress met in Philadelphia with the intention of voting for independence from England. In anticipation of this vote, the Congress selected a committee to draft a declaration of independence. The committee, composed of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Robert R. Livingston, and Roger Sherman, in turn instructed Thomas Jefferson to write the declaration.

Jefferson began his work on June 11 and toiled in seclusion writing a number of drafts. After presenting his final draft, the committee further revised the document and submitted it to the Continental Congress on June 28. On July 2, the Continental Congress voted for independence and refined its Declaration of Independence before releasing it to the public on July 4th.

## History in the Making

*The Declaration of Independence stands with Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address as one of the noblest of America's official documents. In 1822, John Adams wrote a letter to Timothy Pickering responding to Pickering's questions about the writing of the Declaration of Independence. Adams' letters were published in 1850:*

"You inquire why so young a man as Mr. Jefferson was placed at the head of the committee for preparing a Declaration of Independence? I answer: It was the Frankfort advice, to place Virginia at the head of everything. Mr. Richard Henry Lee might be gone to Virginia, to his sick family, for aught I know, but that was not the reason of Mr. Jefferson's appointment. There were three committees appointed at the same time, one for the Declaration of Independence, another for preparing articles of confederation, and another for preparing a treaty to be proposed to France. Mr. Lee was chosen for the Committee of Confederation, and it was not thought convenient that the same person should be upon both. Mr. Jefferson came into Congress in June, 1775, and brought with him a reputation for literature, science, and a happy talent of composition.

Thomas Jefferson was 33 years old when he wrote the Declaration of Independence

John Adams  
(2nd President)

Writings of his were handed about, remarkable for the peculiar felicity of expression. Though a silent member in Congress, he was so prompt, frank, explicit, and decisive upon committees and in conversation - not even Samuel Adams was more so - that he soon seized upon my heart; and upon this occasion I gave him my vote, and did all in my power to procure the votes of others. I think he had one more vote than any other, and that placed him at the head of the committee. I had the next highest number, and that placed me the second. The committee met, discussed the subject, and then appointed Mr. Jefferson and me to make the draft, I suppose because we were the two first on the list.

of the U.S.) and Thomas Jefferson (3rd President) both died on the same day - July 4, 1826

The subcommittee met. Jefferson proposed to me to make the draft. I said, 'I will not,' 'You should do it.' 'Oh! no.' 'Why will you not? You ought to do it.' 'I will not.' 'Why?' 'Reasons enough.' 'What can be your reasons?' 'Reason first, you are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason second, I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular. You are very much otherwise. Reason third, you can write ten times better than I can.' 'Well,' said Jefferson, 'if you are decided, I will do as well as I can.' 'Very well. When you have drawn it up, we will have a meeting.'

A meeting we accordingly had, and conned the paper over. I was delighted with its high tone and the flights of oratory with which it abounded, especially that concerning Negro slavery, which, though I knew his Southern brethren would never suffer to pass in Congress, I certainly never would oppose. There were other expressions which I would not have inserted if I had drawn it up, particularly that which called the King tyrant. I thought this too personal, for I never believed George to be a tyrant in disposition and in nature; I always believed him to be deceived by his courtiers on both sides of the Atlantic, and in his official capacity, only, cruel. I thought the expression too passionate, and too much like scolding, for so grave and solemn a document; but as Franklin and Sherman were to inspect it afterwards, I thought it would not become me to strike it out. I consented to report it, and do not now remember that I made or suggested a single alteration.

We reported it to the committee of five. It was read, and I do not remember that Franklin or Sherman criticized anything. We were all in haste. Congress was impatient, and the instrument was reported, as I believe, in Jefferson's handwriting, as he first drew it. Congress cut off about a quarter of it, as I expected they would; but they obliterated some of the best of it, and left all that was exceptionable, if anything in it was. I have long wondered that the original draft had not been published. I suppose the reason is the vehement philippic against Negro slavery.

As you justly observe, there is not an idea in it but what had been hackneyed in Congress for two years before. The substance of it is contained in the declaration of rights and the violation of those rights in the Journals of Congress in 1774. Indeed, the essence of it is contained in a pamphlet, voted and printed by the town of Boston, before the first Congress met, composed by James Otis, as I suppose, in one of his lucid intervals, and pruned and polished by Samuel Adams."

**References:**

Adams, John (Charles Francis Adams ed.), *The Works of John Adams*, vol II, *The Diary* (1850) reprinted in Commager, H.S. and Nevins, A., *The Heritage of America* (1939); Maier Pauline, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (1997).

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