



The Declaration of Independence

For Grades 3-5

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ARTICLE

Continental Congress

The Continental Congress was the first government of the United States. When the congress adopted the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, it brought the United States into existence. It then served as the country's government until the U.S. Constitution went into effect in 1789.



Delegates leave the First Continental Congress in September 1774.

Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (reproduction no. LC-USZ62-049980)



George Washington stands at a session of the Continental Congress, in an illustration from about...

Currier & Ives Collection, Library of Congress, Neg. No. LC-USZC2-3154

First Continental Congress

In the early 1770s citizens of the 13 British colonies in North America were starting to rebel against Great Britain. A network of patriots, known as the Committees of Correspondence, called together the First Continental Congress to plan future action.



The First Continental Congress met in Carpenters' Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on September...

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The First Continental Congress met in secret in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on September 5, 1774. All colonies except Georgia sent delegates, or representatives. George Washington, Patrick Henry, John Adams, and Samuel Adams were among them. Each colony had one vote.

The delegates decided not to call for independence from Britain. Instead they demanded such rights as life, liberty, property, public assembly, and trial by jury. They protested having to pay British taxes without being represented in Parliament (the part of the British government that made laws). The congress also called for the colonies to boycott, or refuse to buy, British goods.

Second Continental Congress

The American Revolution had already begun when the Second Continental Congress opened in Philadelphia on May 10, 1775. Delegates from all 13 colonies attended the congress. New delegates included Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

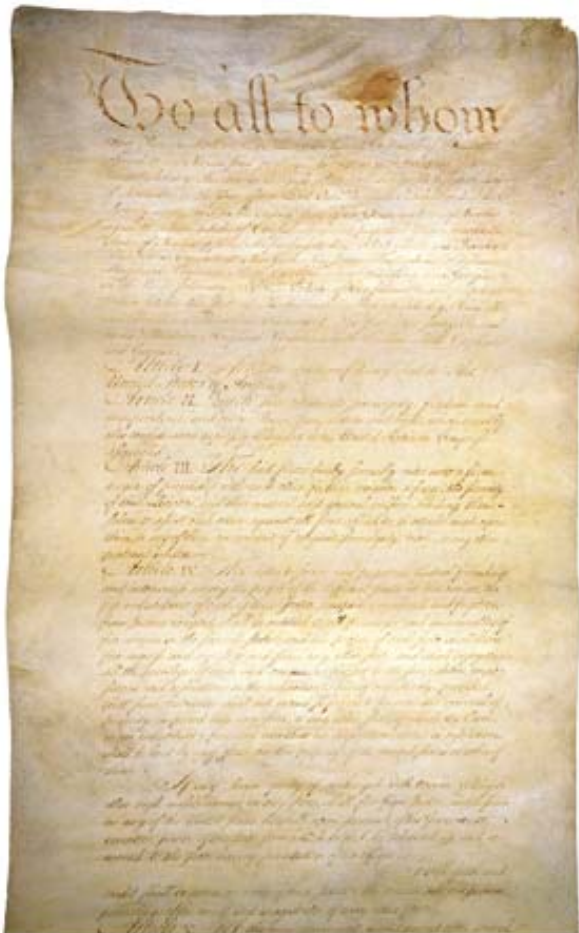
The congress took control of the colonies' new Continental Army. It put Washington in command of the army. The congress also issued and borrowed money and set up a postal service and a navy.



The painting Declaration of Independence by John Trumbull shows members of the Second Continental...

Architect of the Capitol

At first the congress still said that the colonists were fighting for their rights as British citizens. On July 2, 1776, however, the congress stated that the colonies should be independent states. The congress declared independence from Britain two days later.



The Articles of Confederation served as the first constitution of the United States.

National Archives, Washington, D.C.

The congress prepared the Articles of Confederation, which served as the first constitution of the new United States. The articles went into effect in 1781. After that, the Continental Congress became known as the Confederation Congress.

The Confederation Congress had little real control over the states. In 1789 the new U.S. Constitution set up the U.S. Congress. The U.S. Congress replaced the Confederation Congress.

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"Continental Congress." *Britannica LaunchPacks: The Declaration of Independence*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 8 Aug. 2020. packs.eb.com. Accessed 14 Oct. 2020.

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ARTICLE

Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence is the founding document of the United States. On July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress of the British colonies in North America adopted the declaration at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. The document proclaimed that the 13 original colonies of America were "free and independent states." It was the last of a series of steps that led the colonies to final separation from Great Britain.



Many important people in the early history of the United States signed the Declaration of...

National Archives, Washington, D.C.



The painting Declaration of Independence by John Trumbull shows members of the Second Continental...

Architect of the Capitol

At the time the American Revolution began with Great Britain in April 1775 most colonists were not seeking independence. They simply wanted the British government to listen to their complaints. But as the war continued, many colonists began to favor freedom from British rule.

New reasons for independence from Great Britain appeared regularly. In August 1775 King George III declared that the colonists were rebels and hired foreign troops to fight them. The British attacked the coast of Maine and did great damage in Virginia. In January 1776 Thomas Paine published the pamphlet *Common Sense*. It pointed out how the colonists were being mistreated by the king. Many copies of the pamphlet were sold, and support for independence grew.

On June 7 Richard Henry Lee, a Virginian, asked the Continental Congress to consider declaring independence from Great Britain. The Congress appointed a committee of five to write the formal declaration. Thomas Jefferson wrote the first draft. A few changes were suggested by other members of the committee: John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston.

On July 2, 1776, Congress accepted the idea of independence. Congress then debated the content of the declaration over the next two days. On July 4 the Declaration of Independence was accepted by the representatives of 12 states. The New York delegation accepted it 11 days later. It was first published in newspapers and read aloud to crowds in towns throughout the colonies. Members of Congress signed the official parchment document on August 2. The document first lists the complaints against the English king and then makes the actual declaration.

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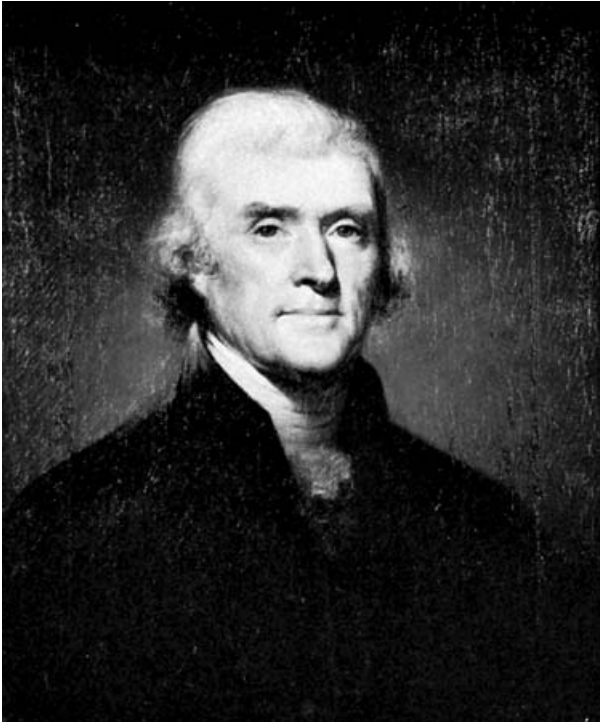
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ARTICLE

Thomas Jefferson

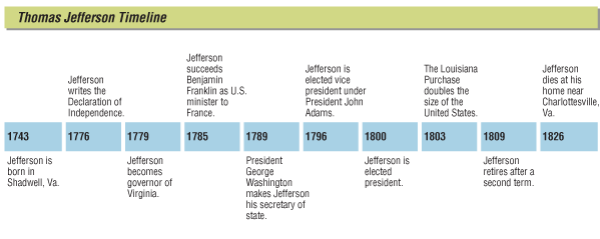
Thomas Jefferson was the third president of the United States and the chief author of the Declaration of Independence. Many people praise Jefferson as someone who believed strongly in the ideas of democracy, equality, and freedom. At the same time, however, he owned enslaved people, and that has caused some people to question his beliefs.

Early Life



Thomas Jefferson

Courtesy of the White House Collection, Washington, D.C.



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Some major events in the life of Thomas Jefferson

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Thomas Jefferson was born on April 13, 1743, in Shadwell, Virginia. His parents were Peter Jefferson, a land surveyor, and Jane Randolph, a member of a rich family. The Jeffersons lived on a plantation with enslaved people. Jefferson studied at a boarding school and at William and Mary College in Williamsburg, Virginia. In 1767 he became a lawyer. The next year he designed his own home, named Monticello, on a mountain near Shadwell.

Jefferson married Martha Wayles Skelton on New Year's Day in 1772. They had six children. Skelton died after 10 years of marriage, and Jefferson never remarried. (See a letter that Jefferson wrote to his daughter Martha [called Patsy] in 1783.) However, Jefferson maintained a long-term relationship with Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman owned by Jefferson.

Political Career



Learn about Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Jefferson was elected to the Virginia legislature in 1769. He became a strong supporter of American independence from Great Britain. He served as Virginia's delegate to the Continental Congress in 1775 and 1776. In 1776 he was the main author of the Declaration of Independence. He wrote the famous lines that said "all men are created equal" and have the rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Jefferson then returned to the Virginia legislature. There he proposed several important reforms to Virginia law. The changes were aimed at ending the privileges of the wealthy and promoting individual freedoms. One important bill required the separation of church and state. It was called the Statute for Religious Freedom. After many years of debate the legislature passed the law in 1786. Jefferson also worked to make education available to all citizens.

In 1779 Jefferson was elected governor of Virginia. Many criticized him for not defending the state from a British attack in 1780. In 1782 Jefferson reentered the Continental Congress. After the American Revolution ended, he replaced Benjamin Franklin as U.S. minister to France.

During 1790–93 Jefferson was the first U.S. secretary of state, under President George Washington. Jefferson clashed with Alexander Hamilton, the secretary of the treasury. Jefferson and his supporters, called Republicans (or Democratic-Republicans), believed that the states should have the power to make their own decisions in most matters. Hamilton led the Federalists, who believed in a powerful central government. In 1796 Jefferson was elected vice president under President John Adams.

Presidency

In 1800 Jefferson and Aaron Burr ran for president against President Adams. Jefferson and Burr received the same number of electoral votes. The House of Representatives eventually chose Jefferson as the winner.



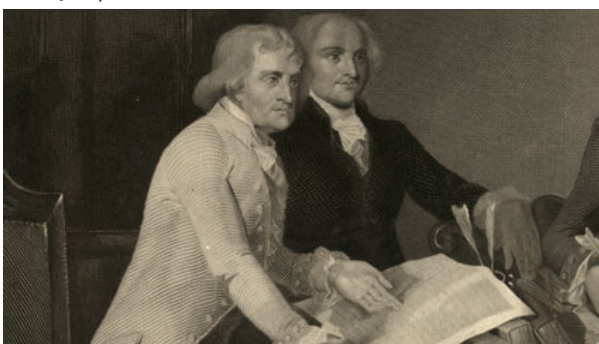
The Louisiana Purchase greatly increased the territory of the United States.
Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

The most important event of Jefferson's first term was the purchase of a large area of land known as the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803. The territory doubled the size of the United States. The president launched the Lewis and Clark Expedition to explore the new territory. Jefferson easily won reelection in 1804, but his second term was less successful than the first. A war between Britain and France hurt U.S. trade with Europe.

Retirement



Thomas Jefferson designed the Rotunda at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.
Aaron Josephson



Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died on the same day—July 4, 1826.
Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

In 1809 Jefferson retired to Monticello, where he wrote, looked after his estate, and entertained friends. His last great project was founding the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. Jefferson died on July 4, 1826.

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PRIMARY SOURCE

Declaration of Independence

Britannica Note:

The Declaration of Independence is the founding document of the United States. The document proclaimed that the 13 original colonies of America were "free and independent states."



[Image of the Declaration of Independence \(1776\)](#)

taken from an engraving made by printer William J....

Image of the Declaration of Independence (1776) taken from an engraving made by printer William J....

National Archives, Washington, D.C.

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 shown, 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 migration 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.

John Hancock

New Hampshire

Josiah Bartlett

Wm. Whipple

Matthew Thornton

Massachusetts Bay

Saml. Adams

John Adams

Robt. Treat Paine

Elbridge Gerry

Rhode Island

Step. Hopkins

William Ellery

Connecticut

Roger Sherman

Samuel Huntington

Wm. Williams

Oliver Wolcott

New York

Wm. Floyd

Phil. Livingston

Frans. Lewis

Lewis Morris

New Jersey

Richd. Stockton

Jno. Witherspoon

Fras. Hopkinson

John Hart

Abra. Clark

Pennsylvania

Robt. Morris

Benjamin Rush

Benja. Franklin

John Morton

Geo. Clymer

Jas. Smith

Geo. Taylor

James Wilson

Geo. Ross

Delaware

Caesar Rodney

Geo. Read

Tho. M^rKean

Maryland

Samuel Chase

Wm. Paca

Thos. Stone

Charles Carroll of Carrollton

Virginia

George Wythe

Richard Henry Lee

Th. Jefferson

Benja. Harrison

Ths. Nelson, Jr.

Francis Lightfoot Lee

Carter Braxton

North Carolina

Wm. Hooper

Joseph Hewes

John Penn

South Carolina

Edward Rutledge

Thos. Heyward, Junr.

Thomas Lynch, Junr.

Arthur Middleton

Georgia

Button Gwinnett

Lyman Hall

Geo. Walton

Note.--Mr. Ferdinand Jefferson, Keeper of the Rolls in the Department of State, at Washington, says: "The names of the signers are spelt above as in the facsimile of the original, but the punctuation of them is not always the same; neither do

the names of the States appear in the facsimile of the original. The names of the signers of each State are grouped together in the facsimile of the original, except the name of Matthew Thornton, which follows that of Oliver Wolcott."--
Revised Statutes of the United States, 2nd edition, 1878, p. 6.

Citation: No citation is available for this resource

IMAGE

Second Continental Congress



The painting *Declaration of Independence* by John Trumbull shows members of the Second Continental Congress presenting the Declaration of Independence.

Architect of the Capitol

Citation (MLA style):

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