

“The Men Whose Words Forged a Nation”

Millions of books, essays, and documents have been written since the beginning of time. Epics such as *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid* recount myths of daring and courageous warriors, while works such as John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* delve into the purpose of mankind and its nature. Such books and historical documents outline the rise of human civilizations and the fall of empires. Similar documents detail human exploration, freedoms granted to citizens, and even the downfall of kingdoms. One of these documents, *The Declaration of Independence*, stands out among all others. Masterfully composed and edited by five men, *The Declaration* was, and continues to be, one of the greatest documents ever written. The document achieved its ultimate purpose, dissolving all political connections between Great Britain and the American colonies and ignited the most important war in American history. With everlasting impact, the Committee of Five brought forth one of the greatest documents ever written.

When the Continental Congress convened on June 7, 1776, the need for political separation from British rule was at a critical point. After Lexington and Concord and repeated battles and skirmishes, including Ticonderoga, the British occupation of Boston, and Bunker Hill, tensions continued to rise between the colonies and the British Crown. Richard Henry Lee, a delegate from Virginia, proposed that members of Congress create a document to “absolve from all allegiance to the British Crown” (Rose, *Constituting America*). The proposal sparked a spirited debate among the delegates, but eventually the motion carried, setting in motion the effort to draft a *Declaration of Independence*.

While the delegates debated whether or not to even issue such a declaration, John Hancock, who presided over the Continental Congress, appointed a committee of five men to

draft the proposed document. Thomas Jefferson, a Virginian and the only Southerner on the committee, was charged with writing the initial draft. Quiet and tall, Jefferson was the youngest member of Congress and one of the most educated. Jefferson was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses and was heavily involved in revolutionary politics through his writing.

Massachusetts delegate John Adams, a close friend of Jefferson, was assigned to the committee and was the chief editor of *The Declaration*. The antithesis of Jefferson, Adams, was short and talkative. He was known for his work as an attorney in Boston, his passionate orations, and his opinionated views, which he was not afraid to share. Benjamin Franklin, of Pennsylvania, assisted with editing. At age seventy, Franklin was by far the oldest delegate, and his opinions were highly sought after by every political faction. A lesser-known delegate, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, was placed on the committee because of previous petitions he sent to King George. As a lawyer and judge, Sherman's main contribution was to help organize governmental portions of *The Declaration*. The final member was New York delegate Robert Livingston. Livingston served on the committee despite opposing the document and believing "the Declaration was premature" (U.S. National Archives).

The Committee of Five first met on June 11, 1776 (Ellis, 57) to organize their thoughts and opinions for the first draft. Franklin was often ill throughout the summer of 1776, so he only edited the document. Adams, however, known for his oration skills, would often discuss what he wanted in the document with Jefferson, as he told him, "You can write ten time[s] better than I can" (Monticello.org). As Jefferson penned the first draft of *The Declaration*, he often referenced John Locke's *Two Treatises on Civil Government* and emphasized Locke's philosophy of Natural Law (Munves, 13). Locke's work had such an influence on Jefferson that the wording of *The Declaration's* preamble mirrors much of the wording from Locke's essay on civil government.

Throughout the entire month, Jefferson woke up early and retired to bed late. He drafted, revised, rewrote, and repeated the process for many days. He pored over his words and selected each one meticulously. In his document, he described the long list of grievances committed by the King against the colonies (Bole, 64), the colonies' rights upon which the monarch had infringed, and how the colonies held an inherent right to revolution and separation from Great Britain (Bole, 66). Finally, he was satisfied with his work and sent his first draft to Adams and Franklin.

Both Adams and Franklin edited and made improvements to the first draft of *The Declaration*. Adams' changes included substituting "his present Majesty" for "the King of Great Britain" and adding phrases such as "after such dissolutions" in the eighth paragraph (Munve, 53-55). Franklin's edits tended to choose different words rather than add or take away phrases. Some of Franklin's edits that appear in the final draft include changing "a people" to "one people" in the preamble, "the change" to "separation" again in the preamble, and adding "abolishing our most valuable Laws," which appears in the twenty-third paragraph (Munve, 70-74). Finally, the draft was completed and presented to Congress on June 28, 1776.

The draft of *The Declaration* was presented to Congress by the Committee of Five, and for four days, the content and wording of the document were debated and discussed. Jefferson's draft was four pages long and underwent major revisions until the final document was a single page. Both the third and fourth pages were practically omitted, and the passages removed included topics including acknowledging Parliament's power, the issue of slavery in the colonies, and a lengthy personal attack against King George (Munve, 114-119). *The Declaration of Independence* was finally agreed upon and adopted on July 4, 1776.

On August 2, 1776, fifty-six delegates signed *The Declaration of Independence*, and of the Committee of Five, only four members signed. Robert Livingston still believed *The Declaration* was premature and severed the colonies' ties to England too abruptly. The document was rushed to the presses of John Dunlap, an Irish printer. Dunlap made many spelling corrections and then printed 200 copies to be dispersed, proclaimed, and displayed throughout the colonies (Library of Congress).

Few works tend to stand the test of time. Books are burned and essays are lost, but still, some prevail. *The Declaration of Independence* survives today the same way Locke survived in Jefferson's time— a constant reminder of what has been won and at what cost. *The Declaration* is a document of unity, justice, rebellion, and passion. It survives and prevails over time like the nation whose founding it inspired. *The Declaration*, written by men determined to design a nation that would always stand the test of time, ultimately brought forth a new nation founded upon the principles of freedom and liberty. Two hundred fifty years after it was drafted, the work of Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, Sherman, and Livingston stands as a lasting reminder and continues to inspire men, women, and children all across the world to learn *The Declaration's* history. Thanks to the tireless work of these five men, a new nation was conceived that placed citizens above kings and produced a government previously unknown to mankind. From June 1776 onward, the work of The Committee of Five would serve as a model upon which future republics would break political bonds and establish new nations.

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