

The Committee of Five: Representing the Will of the People

“Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Those words, immortalized in the Declaration of Independence, were penned at the Graff House, a three and one-half story Georgian-styled brick house in the outskirts of Philadelphia.¹ This carefully, word-smithed document was written by the Committee of Five, a group of five accomplished delegates to the Second Continental Congress charged with drafting a document outlining why the thirteen colonies should sever their ties from Great Britain and declare themselves to be independent sovereign states. Little did anyone know that this house, owned and built a year earlier by local tradesman and bricklayer Jacob Graff, Jr. for his wife and young son, would become inextricably linked to the famous founding document symbolizing the will of our great nation.

The gentlemen comprising the Committee of Five included attorney and diplomat John Adams from Massachusetts, seasoned statesman Benjamin Franklin from Pennsylvania, respected delegates Roger Sherman from Connecticut and Robert Livingston from New York, and Thomas Jefferson, a well-spoken newly-elected young delegate from Virginia.² The Committee initially met on June 11, 1776 and jointly determined “the articles of which the declaration was to consist.”³ According to Adams, they then selected Adams and Jefferson to “draw them up in form.” Adams, the most senior of the five, determined Jefferson should pen the first draft:

Jefferson proposed to me to make the draught. 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

¹ Robert G. Ferris, *Signers of the Constitution: Historic Places Commemorating the Signing of the Constitution* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1976), 276-77.

² Danielle S. Allen, *Our Declaration: A Reading of The Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (New York: Liveright, 2015), 66-68.

³ “1776: Declaration of Independence (Various Drafts),” Online Library of Liberty, accessed December 14, 2023, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/page/1776-declaration-of-independence-various-drafts>.

your reasons?' Reason 1st. You are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason 2d. I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular; You are very much otherwise. Reason 3d: 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.⁴

While official records do not designate a specific meeting place for the Committee, Jefferson later acknowledged that he "wrote habitually" in two furnished second story rooms, a bedroom and parlor, of a house he rented from Mr. Graff in May 1776, "and in it wrote this paper 'Declaration of Independence' particularly."⁵ Jefferson used a quill pen and parchment to write the document on a portable wooden lap desk which he had designed.⁶ Given the treasonous nature of the subject matter (a formal testament of the principles supporting the revolutionary cause for freedom from Great Britain), it is likely that the Committee of Five met in a private location, most probably the Graff house, rather than the highly popular City Tavern where delegates routinely frequented or even the Pennsylvania State House.⁷ British spies were everywhere and the threat of being "hanged, drawn and quartered for Treason" was imprinted on every delegate's mind.⁸

When penning the initial declaration, Jefferson formulated his ideas based upon John Locke's philosophy of government and the natural rights of man and Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* pamphlet and newsletters, as well as his familiarity with two writings: the Virginia

⁴ "Founders Online: From John Adams to Timothy Pickering, 6 August 1822," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed December 14, 2023, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-7674>.

⁵ "Thomas Jefferson and Robert Hemings in Philadelphia," National Park Service, accessed December 14, 2023, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/independence-jeffersonphiladelphia.htm>.

⁶ Dumas Malone, *The Story of the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 70-71.

⁷ Robert G. Ferris, *Signers of the Constitution: Historic Places Commemorating the Signing of the Constitution* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1976), 277.

⁸ "Founders Online: From John Adams to Timothy Pickering, 6 August 1822," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed December 14, 2023, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-7674>.

Declaration of Rights and the Virginia Constitution.⁹ Only written weeks earlier by George Mason, the Virginia Declaration of Rights influenced Jefferson so heavily that, later in his life, Jefferson felt compelled to respond to the similarities between the two. To James Madison, Jefferson wrote, “I did not consider it as any part of my charge to invent new ideas altogether and to offer no sentiment which had ever been expressed before.”¹⁰

Jefferson wrote, and rewrote, for almost seventeen days in the Graff House; he discarded complex philosophical language in favor of other more plainspoken ones to better represent the views of the colonists.¹¹ To Jefferson, the document “was intended to be an expression of the American mind.”¹² He strived to espouse statements and principles which had been expressed by the Continental Congress, as well as local assemblies, colonies and patriots’ rallying cries, in the two years leading up to its creation.¹³

The other Committee members, particularly Franklin and Adams, collaborated on and edited Jefferson’s preliminary draft.¹⁴ The only surviving document memorializing the Committee’s work during this initial writing phase shows a premature draft of the declaration with some of Jefferson’s words edited, altered, or even deleted.¹⁵ Overall, however, Adams was

⁹ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Belknap Press, 2017).

¹⁰ Joseph Postell, “The Document That Inspired the Declaration of Independence,” The Heritage Foundation, July 10, 2023. Accessed December 3, 2023, <https://www.heritage.org/american-founders/commentary/the-document-inspired-the-declaration-independence>; *Founding Fathers: A Captivating Guide to Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, John Jay, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and James Monroe* (Coppell, TX: Captivating History, 2019), 312-313.

¹¹ Danielle S. Allen, *Our Declaration: A Reading of The Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (New York: Liveright, 2015), 68.

¹² Dumas Malone, *The Story of the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 71.

¹³ Robert Stephens, “7 Little-Known Facts about the Declaration of Independence,” University of Central Florida News | UCF Today, July 10, 2019, <https://www.ucf.edu/news/7-little-known-facts-declaration-independence/>.

¹⁴ Carl L. Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1922), 80-82.

¹⁵ “Founders Online: III. Jefferson’s “original Rough draught” of the Declaration of Independence, 11 June–4 July 1776,” National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed December 5, 2023. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-01-02-0176-0004I>; Dumas Malone, *The Story of the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 72.

especially pleased with the draft's spirit. He recalled, "I was delighted with its high tone, and the flights of Oratory with which it abounded" ¹⁶

The Committee of Five delivered a hand-written draft of the Declaration to Congress on June 28, 1776 "when it was read and ordered to lie on the table."¹⁷ On July 1, 1776, the Second Continental Congress began debating the Committee's draft declaration, with Adams persuasively arguing for the document's merit.¹⁸ Although Congress significantly altered and edited the declaration over the next several days, it remained largely consistent with the original version penned by Jefferson—with the exception of two sections which were wholly deleted (one critical of England and the other critical of the slave trade). Adams later recalled that "Congress cut off about a quarter part of it, as I expected they would, but they obliterated some of the best of it and left all that was exceptionable, if any thing in it was."¹⁹ On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress officially ratified the Declaration.

The Committee of Five was also charged with printing the Declaration. The Committee chose John Dunlap, the official printer of Congress, to print the first copies; they delivered Jefferson's revised handwritten copy with the Congressional edits to Mr. Dunlap and he feverishly worked through the night of July 4 to print approximately 200 copies, of which 26 are known to exist today.²⁰ On July 5, the Continental Congress delegates sent those initial copies, known now as "the Dunlap Broadside," throughout the colonies and Continental Army.²¹

¹⁶ "Founders Online: From John Adams to Timothy Pickering, 6 August 1822," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed December 14, 2023, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-7674>.

¹⁷ "Declaration of Independence: Thomas Jefferson's Account," *ushistory.org*, accessed December 14, 2023, <https://www.ushistory.org/declaration/account/index.html>.

¹⁸ Dumas Malone, *The Story of the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 72.

¹⁹ "Founders Online: From John Adams to Timothy Pickering, 6 August 1822," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed December 14, 2023, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-7674>.

²⁰ Frederick Richmond Goff, *The John Dunlap Broadside: The First Printing of the Declaration of Independence* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1976).

²¹ "The Declaration of Independence: A History," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed December 14, 2023, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-history>.

Three historic places across the United States honor the Committee of Five. In the United States Capitol Rotunda, John Trumbull's famous painting, *Declaration of Independence*, features the Committee of Five presenting their draft to the Second Continental Congress. And, the Committee of Five is artfully sculpted into the marble triangular pediment of the Jefferson Memorial. While Jefferson stands in the middle, the other four members are seated around a table; their jackets are off and they are leaning in, collaborating and working together on what historian Joseph Ellis has described as "the most potent and consequential words in American history."²² Finally, the Graff House in Philadelphia where the Committee met and drafted the Declaration memorializes the birthplace of this famous document. This home of a common man, a local tradesman, highlights the dedicated Committee members who worked together to devise an everlasting "statement of principles" that created the lens to interpret the Constitution.²³ It crystallizes the unalienable rights of man and symbolizes the right of all people to assemble and assert their freedom against an unjust government and tyranny.

Word Count: 1151 / 800-1200 Words

²² Joseph J. Ellis, *American Creation: Triumphs and Tragedies at the Founding of the Republic* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2007), 55-56.

²³ "The Declaration House (Graff House)." The Constitutional Walking Tour of Philadelphia, January 22, 2015. <https://www.theconstitutional.com/blog/2014/08/18/declaration-house-graff-house>.

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