

The Declaration of Independence

6.1 Introduction

As you read in Chapter 5, the bloodshed at Lexington and Concord marked a turning point for the colonies. The day after the clashes, horseback riders galloped through the colonies with news of Britain's "barbarous murders" of innocent militiamen. Most Americans were deeply shocked by the news. More urgently than ever before, they debated what the colonies should do about the trouble with Great Britain.

The choices were clear enough. The colonies could declare their **independence**—a course that would surely lead to war. Or they could continue with protests and **petitions**. This choice would keep the colonies at peace, but at what cost to the colonists' freedom?

No one was more outspoken in his support for independence than Patrick Henry of Virginia. After the passage of the Intolerable Acts, Henry delivered to the Virginia House of Burgesses one of the most famous speeches in American history.

"There is no room for hope," Henry began. "If we wish to be free...we must fight! Our chains are forged. Their clanking can be heard on the plains of Boston. The war is inevitable—and let it come!"

Then Henry spoke to those who treasured peace above freedom:

Gentlemen may cry, peace, peace—but there is no peace. The war is actually begun. The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms!... What is it that gentlemen wish?... Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death!

Despite the passionate words of Patriots like Patrick Henry, most colonists remained reluctant (hesitant) rebels. As you will read in this chapter, only after war had already started did the colonies decide to declare their independence.

6.2 The War Begins

On May 10, 1775, the Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia. By then, New England militia had massed around Boston. The first question facing Congress was who should command this "New England Army." The obvious answer was a New Englander.

George Washington and the Continental Army John Adams of Massachusetts had another idea. He proposed that Congress create a "continental army" made up of troops from all the colonies. To lead this army, Adams nominated "a gentleman whose skill as an officer, whose...great talents and universal character would...unite...the colonies better than any other person alive." That man was George Washington of Virginia.

The delegates agreed. They unanimously elected Washington to be commander-in-chief of the new Continental Army.

The Battle of Bunker Hill Meanwhile, militiamen near Boston made plans to fortify two hills that overlooked the city—Bunker Hill and Breed's Hill. On the night of June 16, Israel Putnam led a few hundred men up Breed's Hill. In four hours of furious digging, they erected a crude fort on the top of the hill.

The fort worried British general William Howe, who had just arrived from England with fresh troops. Howe ordered an immediate attack. Under a hot June sun, some 2,000 red coated troops formed two long lines at the base of Breed's Hill. At Howe's order, they marched up the slope.

As the lines moved ever closer, Putnam ordered his men, "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes." Only when the British were almost on top of them did the militiamen pull their triggers. The red lines broke and fell back in confusion.

The British regrouped and attacked again. Once more the Americans stopped their advance. On their third attack, the redcoats finally took the hill—but only because the Americans had used up all their gunpowder and pulled back.

This clash, which was misnamed the Battle of Bunker Hill, was short but very bloody. More than 1,000 British troops were killed or wounded, and nearly half that many Americans. British and Americans alike knew that this was no small skirmish on a village green. A war had begun.

6.3 The Siege of Boston

A week later, George Washington took command of his new army. He found "a mixed multitude of people...under very little discipline, order, or government." Washington worked hard to impose order. One man wrote, "Everyone is made to know his place and keep in it.... It is surprising how much work has been done."

Ticonderoga A month later, a dismayed Washington learned that the army had only 36 barrels of gunpowder—enough for each soldier to fire just nine shots. To deceive the British, Washington started a rumor in Boston that he had 1,800 barrels of gunpowder—more than he knew what to do with! Luckily, the British swallowed this tall tale. Meanwhile, Washington sent desperate letters to the colonies begging for gunpowder.

Washington got his powder. But he still did not dare attack the British forces in Boston. To do that he needed artillery— heavy guns, such as cannons—to bombard their defenses. In desperation, Washington sent a Boston bookseller named Henry Knox to Fort Ticonderoga to round up some big guns.

Ticonderoga was an old British fort located at the southern end of Lake Champlain in New York. A few months earlier, militiamen led by Ethan Allen and Benjamin Arnold had seized the fort. The Americans had little use for the run-down fort, but its guns would prove priceless.

As winter set in, Knox loaded 59 cannons onto huge sleds and dragged them 300 miles to Boston. Knox's 42 sleds also carried 2,300 pounds of lead for future bullets. Boston was about to be put under siege.

The British Abandon Boston On March 4, 1776, the British soldiers in Boston awoke to a frightening sight. The night before, the ridges of nearby Dorchester Heights had been bare. Now they bristled with cannons, all aimed on the city.

Rather than risk another bloodbath, General Howe abandoned the city. Within days, more than a hundred ships left Boston Harbor for Canada. The ships carried 9,000 British troops as well as 1,100 Loyalists who preferred to leave their homes behind rather than live with rebels.

Some Americans hoped the war was over. Washington, however, knew that it was only beginning.

6.4 Toward Independence

Nearly a year passed between the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord and the British retreat from Boston. During that time, there was little talk of independence. Most colonists still considered themselves loyal British subjects. Their quarrel was not with Great Britain itself, but with its policies toward the colonies.

The Olive Branch Petition Many Americans pinned their hopes for peace on King George. In July 1775, Congress sent a petition to George III asking him to end the quarrel. John Adams called the petition an “olive branch,” because olive tree branches are an ancient symbol of peace.

By the time the petition reached London, however, the king had declared the colonies to be in “open and avowed rebellion.” He ordered his ministers “to bring the **traitors** to justice.”

Being called a traitor was enough to change the mind of one of Washington's generals. The general confessed that he had long “looked with some degree of horror on the scheme of separation.” Now he agreed with Patrick Henry that “we must be independent or slaves.”

Common Sense Many colonists, however, still looked with “horror” at the idea of independence. Then, early in 1776, a Patriot named Thomas Paine published a fiery pamphlet entitled *Common Sense*. Paine scoffed at the idea that Americans owed any loyalty to King George. “Of more worth is one honest man to society,” he wrote, “than all the crowned ruffians who ever lived.”

Paine also attacked the argument that the colonies' ties to Britain had benefited Americans. Just the opposite was true, he said. American trade had suffered under British control. Americans had also been hurt by being dragged into Britain's European wars.

Paine ended with a vision of an independent America as a homeland of liberty. “Ye that love mankind!” he urged. “Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny, but the tyrant, stand forth!... The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth.”

Within a few months, more than 120,000 copies of *Common Sense* were printed. Paine's arguments helped persuade thousands of colonists that independence was not only sensible, but the key to a brighter future.

6.5 Thomas Jefferson Drafts a Declaration

A few weeks after the British left Boston, the Continental Congress appointed a committee to write a declaration, or formal statement, of independence. The task of drafting the declaration went to the committee's youngest member, 33-year-old Thomas Jefferson of Virginia. A shy man, Jefferson said little in Congress. But he spoke brilliantly with his pen.

Jefferson's job was to explain to the world why the colonies were choosing to separate from Britain. “When in the course of human events,” he began, if one people finds it necessary to break its ties with another, “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind” requires that they explain their actions.

Natural Rights Jefferson's explanation was simple, but revolutionary. Loyalists had argued that colonists had a duty to obey the king, whose authority came from God. Jefferson reasoned quite differently. All people are born equal in God's sight, he began, and all are entitled to the same basic rights. In Jefferson's eloquent words:

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.

Governments are formed, Jefferson said, "to secure these rights." Their power to rule comes from "the consent of the governed." If a government fails to protect people's rights, "it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it." The people can then create a new government that will protect "their safety and happiness."

The King's Crimes King George, Jefferson continued, had shown no concern for the rights of colonists. Instead, the king's policies had been aimed at establishing "an absolute tyranny over these states [the colonies]."

As proof, Jefferson included a long list of the king's abuses. In all these actions, Jefferson claimed, George III had shown that he was "unfit to be the ruler of a free people."

The time had come, Jefferson concluded, for the colonies' ties to Britain to be broken. "These United Colonies are," he declared, "and of right ought to be, free and independent states."

6.6 The Final Break

On July 1, 1776, the Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia's State House to debate independence. By noon, the temperature outside had soared into the nineties, and a thunderstorm was gathering. Inside the State House, emotions were equally hot and stormy. By the end of the day, the issue was still undecided.

The next day was cooler and calmer. On July 2, all but one of the 13 colonies voted for independence. New York cast no vote.

No delegate was more excited about the colonies' decision than John Adams. He wrote to his wife Abigail, "The second of July...will be celebrated by succeeding generations...with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations, from one end of the continent to the other, from this time forward forevermore."

Debate over Slavery Adams was wrong about the date that would be celebrated as America's birthday, but only because Congress decided to revise Jefferson's declaration. Most of the delegates liked what they read, except for a passage on slavery. Jefferson had charged King George with violating the "sacred rights of life and liberty...of a distant people [by] carrying them into slavery."

Almost no one liked this passage. Southerners feared that it might lead to demands to free the slaves. Northerners worried that New England merchants, who profited from the slave trade, might be offended. Even delegates who opposed slavery felt that it was unfair to blame the king for enslaving Africans. The passage was struck out.

Independence Day On July 4, the delegates approved a final version of the Declaration of Independence. One by one, they stepped forward to sign it. In doing so, they pledged to support independence with "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

This was a serious pledge. Every signer knew that he was committing an act of treason against Great Britain. If the new "United States of America" failed to win its freedom, each of them could end up swinging from a hangman's rope. Knowing this, Benjamin Franklin told the delegates, "We must all hang together. Or most assuredly we shall all hang separately."

6.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you read how the American colonies took the dramatic step of declaring their independence. You used a visual metaphor to describe the key historic events that led up to the Declaration of Independence. Soon after the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord, the struggle with Great Britain turned into all-out war. The Second Continental Congress elected George Washington as the head of the Continental Army. After the bloody Battle of Bunker Hill, American troops threatened the city of Boston with heavy guns. The British decided to abandon the city.

The failure of the Olive Branch Petition, and Thomas Paine's eloquent pamphlet, *Common Sense*, moved the colonies closer to a declaration of independence. Thomas Jefferson, a delegate to the Second Continental Congress, was selected to write a draft of the declaration.

On July 4, 1776, the delegates took their lives in their hands by signing the Declaration of Independence. For the first time in history, a government was being established on the basis of the natural rights of people and the duty of government to honor those rights.

But independence could not be won with words alone. As you will read in the next chapter, the colonies now faced the challenge of winning a war against the most powerful nation in the world.