



INDEPENDENCE

by Jerry Miller

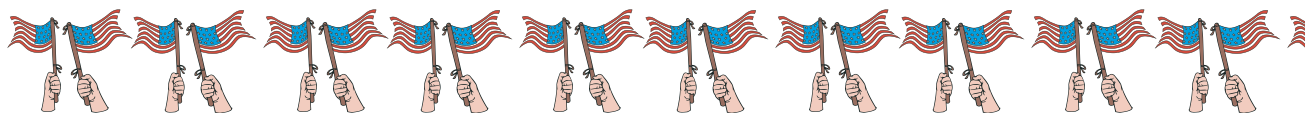
This French view of how the Americans responded to the reading of the Declaration in New York City shows colonists destroying a statue of King George III.

The morning after Richard Henry Lee's motion that the Colonies should become "free States" was made to the Second Continental Congress, the debate on independence began. It lasted for two days and was so bitter at times that several delegates threatened to leave.

On June 9, 1776, it became clear that an immediate vote would favor independence, but by the narrowest of margins. Seven colonies would vote for freedom from Britain; six

would vote against it. The majority of the individual delegates from those six colonies either opposed independence or believed it should be declared later, rather than sooner.

Even the strongest supporters of independence realized that the Congress needed to be more solidly united before taking such a big — and dangerous — step. So, the weary delegates postponed voting until July 1 in the hope that by then they might all agree.





Independence did take one step forward that day in June, though. By a one-vote majority, the Congress agreed to choose a committee to write a declaration of independence. The document could then be ready for immediate publication and shipment throughout the Colonies if Lee's resolution passed in July. The committee's members were Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Robert R. Livingston of New York, Roger Sherman of Connec-

ticut, John Adams of Massachusetts, and Thomas Jefferson of Virginia.

This Committee of Five began by deciding what points their document needed to include. But who should write it? It would not be Livingston, as he was so opposed to independence that he returned home to New York. Sherman was not a skilled writer, and Franklin, America's greatest writer and most experienced diplomat, was so ill he spent most of June in bed.

Fortunately, the committee included two other outstanding writers — Adams and Jefferson. It was determined that the fiery Adams would continue to lead the fight for independence on the congressional floor, while the quiet and shy Jefferson would pen the work.

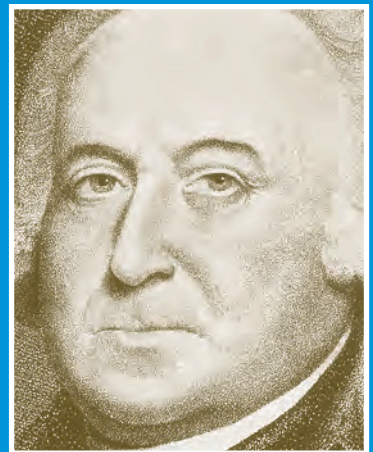
Jefferson spent two days writing and rewriting the declaration before showing it to the committee. Sherman liked the draft and apparently made no suggestions. Adams admired it, but made a few changes. Franklin praised it and made more changes. Finally, the declaration was ready to be presented to the Congress on June 28.

On the morning of July 1, a thunderstorm was brewing as the delegates prepared to vote on Lee's Resolution. Since early June, American opinion had shifted rapidly toward independence. Even so, the debate promised to be bitter, with the outcome still not assured.

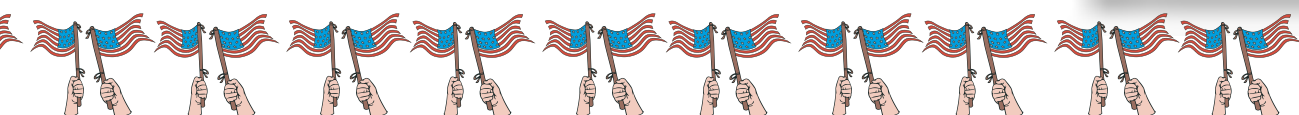
John Dickinson of Pennsylvania spoke first. He presented reason after reason why declaring independence at that time would bring disaster. To do so, Dickinson said, would be to "brave the storm in a skiff made of paper."

"The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival.... It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forevermore."

— John Adams in a letter to his wife, Abigail, dated July 3, 1776



John Adams was a highly respected lawyer from Massachusetts. His pro-independence leadership in the Second Continental Congress led Thomas Jefferson to call him "the colossus of independence." Adams served as a diplomat, as well as America's first vice president and its second president.





Roger Sherman of Connecticut began life as a poor shoemaker. He taught himself mathematics and law and became a wealthy merchant and politician. He later helped write the U.S. Constitution.

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Robert R. Livingston, a wealthy New York landowner, opposed independence but remained a patriot. He later was a strong supporter of the Constitution. In 1801–1803, as minister to France, Livingston negotiated the Louisiana Purchase on behalf of President Thomas Jefferson.

Dickinson spoke so impressively that when he finished, the room fell silent. The only sound was that of the raging storm outside. Then, John Adams rose to speak. For two hours, while thunder roared and lightning flashed, Adams argued for independence. He spoke, said Jefferson, “with a power...that moved us from our seats.”

The debate continued long into the evening. At last, a preliminary vote was taken. Nine colonies favored independence. Pennsylvania and South Carolina voted against it; New York **abstained**. Delaware had only two delegates present, and they could not agree.

Those who supported independence had a definite majority,

but they had hoped to prove their resolve to Great Britain and the world with a unanimous vote. Edward Rutledge of South Carolina made a motion that the voting wait until the next day. Perhaps, he said, his colony would change its vote.

By the morning of July 2, South Carolina’s delegates had agreed to vote with the majority. Dickinson and Robert Morris, also of Pennsylvania, stayed home. Their absence allowed Pennsylvania’s vote to become in favor of independence. Delaware’s third delegate, Caesar Rodney, arrived at the last moment soaked in mud — he had ridden all night through the storm to cast his vote for independence. New York still abstained, but that made the vote 12 in favor, none opposed.



There was still work to be done, however. The next day, more than 50 delegates took up the task of considering the actual wording of the Declaration of Independence. They eventually deleted one-fourth of Jefferson's original and changed or added many words and phrases. It was not until July 4 that Congress adopted the final version.

The completed document was rushed to John Dunlap's print shop,

and by the next morning, **broadside** copies of the official Declaration were on their way to each colony and to General George Washington with his army in New York. As the news spread, public readings of the Declaration of Independence took place in military camps, on town squares, and all over the Colonies. There were great celebrations everywhere.

Declaration by the Representatives of the UNITED STATES
AMERICA, in General Congress assembled.

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to
the political bands which have connected them with another, and to
among the powers of the earth the ^{separate and equal} station to
the laws of nature & of nature's god entitle them, a decent respect
opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes
impel them to ^{self-evident} separation.

We hold these truths to be ^{self-evident} that all men are
equal & independent that they are endowed by their Creator with
unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty & 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 abolish it, & to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles & organising its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety & happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light & transient causes: and accordingly all experience hath shewn 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 & usurpations [began at a distinguished period, & 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, & to provide new guards for their future security. such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies; & 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 unremitted injuries and usurpations, [among which, ^{appears no solitary fact}], to contradict the uniform tenor of the rest, [all of which] have in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. to prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world, for the truth of which we pledge a faith

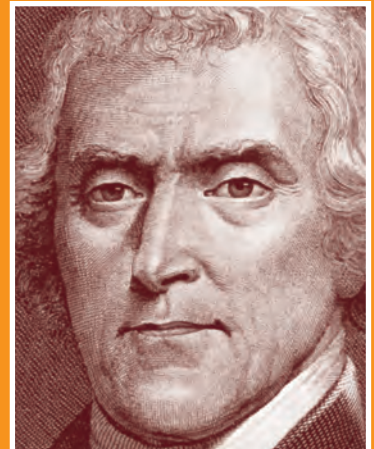
OPPOSITE: The Congress appointed a Committee of Five to put their reasons for independence in writing, but most of the work was done by Thomas Jefferson, with some input from Benjamin Franklin and John Adams.

LEFT: Jefferson's edits during the course of debate are clearly marked on his "fair copy" of the Declaration of Independence. From this edited version, the final text was printed by John Dunlap. The Dunlap broadsides were the first printed versions of the Declaration of Independence.



Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania was the oldest member of the Congress at age 70 in 1776. Because of his scientific discoveries, inventions, and writings, he was already world famous. Eleven years later, he became the oldest delegate to the Constitutional Convention.

A **broadside** is a large sheet of paper with print on one side.



Thomas Jefferson was the second youngest member of the Continental Congress at 33. He spent most of the Revolutionary War years as governor of Virginia and served as America's first secretary of state and its third president.



NUMB. 248f.

Jerry Miller is a former teacher. He writes about history for *COBBLESTONE*, *APPLESEEDS*, and other magazines.

An illustration of two hands, one from the left and one from the right, each holding a small American flag. The flags are waving. The background is white, with a blue and white patterned area on the left and a yellow area on the right.

An illustration of two hands holding a flagpole. The flagpole is brown and has a small black flag at the top. The hands are light-skinned and are holding the pole from the bottom. The background is white.

