

Delegates to the Second Continental Congress on the DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

July 1776 _ LETTERS (EXCERPTS)

On July 2, 1776, after months of deliberation and while directing battle in the colonies and Canada, the Second Continental Congress voted to declare the “thirteen united States of America” finally and irreversibly independent from Britain. On July 4, the Congress approved the final wording of the Declaration of Independence, written primarily by Thomas Jefferson. Delegates’ letters in the fateful month reveal their sense of accomplishment, trepidation, and readiness to face the consequences of their decision.

■ John Adams, delegate from Massachusetts, letters, 1/3 July 1776.

___ *To Archibald Bulloch, military commander in Georgia and former delegate, 1 July 1776* ___

There seems to have been a great Change in the sentiments of the Colonies since you left us, and I hope that a few Months will bring us all to the same Way of thinking.

This morning is assigned for the greatest Debate of all. A Declaration that these Colonies are free and independent states has been reported by a Committee appointed some weeks ago for that Purpose,¹ and this day or Tomorrow is to determine its Fate. May Heaven prosper the new born Republic and make it more glorious than any former Republics have been.

The Small Pox has ruined the American Army in Canada, and of Consequence the American Cause. A series of Disasters has happened there, partly owing I fear to the Indecision at Philadelphia, and partly to the Mistakes or Misconduct of our officers in that Department. But the Small Pox, which infected every Man we Sent there completed our Ruin and have compelled us to evacuate that important Province. We must however regain it, sometime or other.²

My Countrymen have been more successful at sea, in driving all the Men of War [British warships] completely out of Boston Harbor, and in making Prizes of a great Number of Transports and other Vessels.

We are in daily Expectation of an Armament before New York where, if it comes, the Conflict must be bloody. The object is great which We have in View, and We must expect a great Expense of Blood to obtain it. But We should always remember that a free Constitution of civil Government cannot be purchased at too dear a Rate; as there is nothing on this Side of the new Jerusalem³ of equal Importance to Mankind.

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¹ The “Committee of Five”: Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston.

² The Continental Army did not make another attempt to conquer the British province of Quebec in Canada.

³ In Christianity, representing the final reunion of God and man on earth in the second coming of Christ.

___To Abigail Adams, his wife, 3 July 1776 (letter #1)___

Yesterday the greatest Question was decided which ever was debated in America, and a greater, perhaps, never was or will be decided among Men. A Resolution was passed without one dissenting Colony “that these united Colonies, are, and of right ought to be free and independent States, and as such, they have, and of Right ought to have full Power to make War, conclude Peace, establish Commerce, and to do all the other Acts and Things, which other States may rightfully do.” You will see in a few days a Declaration setting forth the Causes which have impell’d Us to this mighty Revolution, and the Reasons which will justify it in the Sight of God and Man. A Plan of Confederation will be taken up in a few days.

When I look back to the Year 1761 and recollect the Argument concerning Writs of Assistance in the Superior Court,⁴ which I have hitherto considered as the Commencement of the Controversy between Great Britain and

Britain has been fill’d with Folly, and America with Wisdom; at least this is my judgment. Time must determine.

America, and run through the whole Period from that Time to this, and recollect the series of political Events, the Chain of Causes and Effects, I am surprised at the Suddenness as well as Greatness of this Revolution. Britain has been fill’d with Folly, and America with Wisdom; at least this is my judgment. Time must determine. It is the Will of Heaven that the two Countries should be sundered forever. It may be the Will of Heaven that America shall suffer Calamities still more wasting and Distresses yet more dreadful. If this is to be the Case, it will have this good Effect, at least: it will inspire Us with many Virtues which We have not, and correct many Errors, Follies, and Vices which threaten to disturb, dishonor, and destroy Us. The Furnace of Affliction produces Refinement in States as well as Individuals. And the new Governments we are assuming, in every Part, will require a Purification from our Vices and an Augmentation of our Virtues, or they will be no Blessings. The People will have unbounded Power. And the People are extremely addicted to Corruption and Venality, as well as the Great. [The letterbook copy of this letter includes the following sentence: “I am not without Apprehensions from this Quarter.”]

But I must submit all my Hopes and Fears to an overruling Providence in which, unfashionable [as] the Faith may be, I firmly believe.

___To Abigail Adams, 3 July 1776 (letter #2)___

Had a Declaration of Independency been made seven Months ago, it would have been attended with many great and glorious Effects. We might before this Hour have formed Alliances with foreign States. We should have mastered Quebec and been in Possession of Canada. You will perhaps wonder how such a Declaration would have influenced our Affairs in Canada, but if I could write with Freedom I could easily convince you that it would, and explain to you the manner how. Many Gentlemen in high Stations and of great Influence have been duped by the ministerial Bubble of Commissioners to treat . . .⁵ and in real, sincere Expectation of this Event,⁶ which they so fondly wished, they have been slow and languid in promoting Measures for the Reduction [defeat] of that Province. Others there are in the Colonies who really wished that our Enterprise in Canada would be defeated, that the Colonies might be brought into Danger and Distress between two Fires, and be thus induced to submit. Others really wished to defeat the Expedition to Canada, lest the Conquest of it should elevate the Minds of the People too much to hearken to those Terms of Reconciliation which they believed would be offered Us. These jarring Views, Wishes and Designs, occasioned an opposition to many salutary Measures which were proposed for the Support of that Expedition, and caused Obstructions, Embarrassments and studied Delays, which have finally, lost Us the Province. . . .

⁴ In 1761 Boston merchants challenged the use of “writs of assistance,” in this case open-ended search warrants issued to British customs officials who searched ships and warehouses for goods smuggled in to avoid British import duties. The merchants, led by attorney James Otis, Jr., lost the case, but the controversy marked an initial chapter in the revolutionary period.

⁵ Transitional marks in Adams (not ellipses). Also in this line, Adams wrote *effort*, crossed it out, then wrote *Event*.

⁶ I.e., the conquest of the British province of Quebec, Canada, which the Continental Army was unable to achieve.

But the Day is past— The Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America. —

John Adams, letter to Abigail Adams, 3 July 1776, one day after the adoption of the Declaration of Independence

But on the other Hand, the Delay of this Declaration to this Time has many great Advantages attending it. The Hopes of Reconciliation, which were fondly entertained by Multitudes of honest and well meaning though weak and mistaken People, have been gradually and at last totally extinguished. Time has been given for the whole People maturely to consider the great Question of Independence and to ripen their judgments, dissipate their Fears, and allure their Hopes, by discussing it in News Papers and Pamphlets, by debating it in Assemblies, Conventions, Committees of Safety and Inspection, in Town and County Meetings, as well as in private Conversations, so that the whole People in every Colony of the 13 have now adopted it as their own Act. This will cement the Union and avoid those Heats and perhaps Convulsions which might have been occasioned by such a Declaration Six Months ago.

But the Day is past. The Second Day of July 1776 will be the most memorable Epocha 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 commemorated as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty. 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 forever more.

You will think me transported with Enthusiasm but I am not. I am well aware of the Toil and Blood and Treasure that it will cost Us to maintain this Declaration, and support and defend these States. Yet through all the Gloom I can see the Rays of ravishing Light and Glory. I can see that the End is more than worth all the Means. And that Posterity will triumph in that Day's Transaction, even although We should rue it, which I trust in God We shall not.

- Robert Treat Paine, delegate from Massachusetts, letter to Joseph Palmer, Massachusetts militia commander, 6 July 1776.

The day before yesterday, the declaration of American independency was voted by twelve colonies, agreeable to the sense of the constituents, and New York was silent till their new convention (which sits next week) express their assent, of which we have some doubt. Thus the issue is joined; and it is our comfortable reflection that if by struggling we can avoid that servile subjection which Britain demanded, we remain a free and happy people; but if, through the frowns of Providence, we sink in the struggle, we do but remain the wretched people we should have been without this declaration. Our hearts are full, our hands are full; may God, in whom we trust, support us.

- William Ellery, delegate from Rhode Island, letter to his brother, Benjamin Ellery, 10 July 1776.

We have lived to see a Period which a few years ago no human forecast could have imagined. We have lived to see these Colonies shake off, or rather, declare themselves independent of a State which they once gloried to call their Parent — I said declare themselves independent, for it is One Thing for Colonies to declare themselves independent and another to establish themselves in Independency. For this Establishment, the Congress are exerting every Nerve, and I rejoice to see this as well as the other American States ready to execute their Measures.

Six hundred of the Associators of this State [continental troops] have already marched and Thousands are preparing to march to the Jersey. The Lower Counties are ready to send forth the Troops they can spare to oppose the Army under Genl. Howe, and Maryland will soon furnish its Quota of the Flying Camp. I wish it may be feasible to attack the British Forces before the Reinforcement or rather the Army shall arrive — By the best Accounts We can get, 20,000 Troops may be daily expected. A great Stroke will be struck in a short Time. The Events of War are uncertain. God send the Victory. We have nothing New.

I send you enclosed the News-Paper of this Day, in which you will take Notice that the Declaration of Independency was proclaimed at the State-House; but it is not published that the late King's Arms⁷ were taken from thence and the Court House that Morning and were burned that evening near the Coffee House. What a surprising Alteration hath taken Place here in the Course of a few Months! However there are still in this State, as well as in Jersey, the Lower Counties [Delaware], Maryland and New York, a Number of Tories [Loyalists] who will show themselves should Howe's Army be successful.

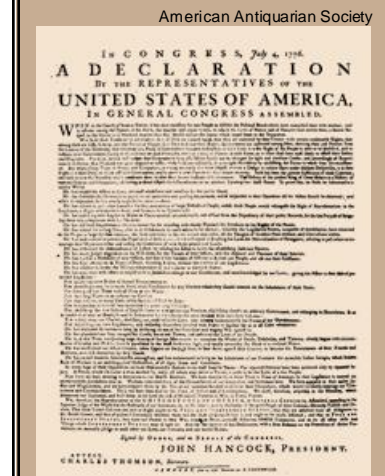
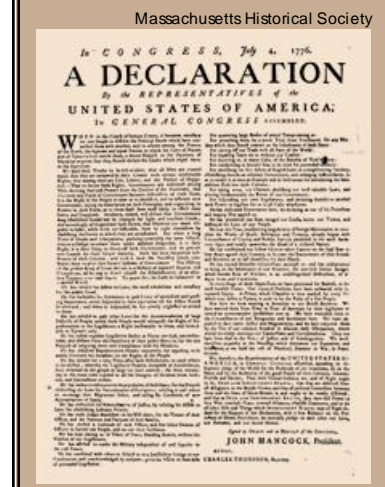
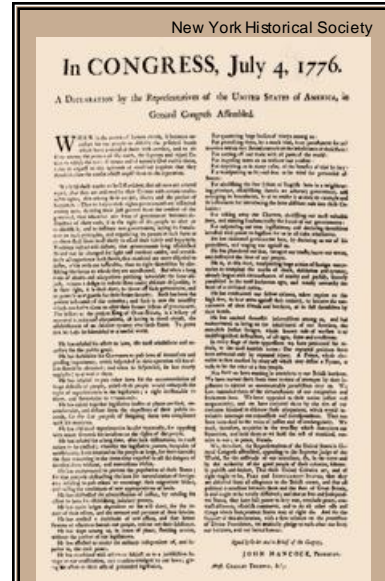
- Samuel Adams, delegate from Massachusetts, letters, 15/17 July 1776.

___To Richard Henry Lee, delegate from Virginia (then in Virginia), 15 July 1776___⁸

Our Declaration of Independency has given Vigor to the Spirits of the People. Had this decisive Measure been taken Nine Months ago, it is my opinion that Canada would at this time have been in our hands. But what does it avail to find fault with what is past. Let us do better for the future. We were more fortunate than we expected in having 12 of the 13 Colonies in favor of the all-important Question. The Delegates of N York were not empowered to give their Voice on either side. Their Convention has since acceded to the Declaration & publish'd it even before they receiv'd it from Congress. So mighty a Change in so short a Time!

___To John Pitts, member of Massachusetts provincial congress, 17 July 1776 [full text of letter]___

You were inform'd by the last Post that Congress declared the thirteen united Colonies free & independent States. It must be allow'd by the impartial World that this Declaration has not been made rashly. The enclosed Catalogue of Crimes of the deepest Dye, which have been repeatedly perpetrated by the King, will justify us in the Eyes of honest & good Men. By multiplied Acts of Oppression & Tyranny he has long since forfeited his Right to govern. The Patience of the Colonies in enduring the most provoking Injuries so often repeated will be the Matter of



Broadside editions of the Declaration printed in July 1776

⁷ The sign for the King's Arms tavern in Boston that contained the British royal coat of arms.
⁸ *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, ed. Harry Alonzo Cushing, Vol. III: 1773-1777 (New York/London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1907), pp. 296-299.

Astonishment. Too Much I fear has been lost by Delay, but an accession of several Colonies has been gain'd by it.⁹ The Delegates of every Colony were present & concurr'd in this important Act, except those of N. Y. who were not authoriz'd to give their Voice on the Question, but they have since publicly said that a new Convention was soon to meet in that Colony & they had not the least Doubt of their acceding to it. Our Path is now open to form a plan of Confederation & propose Alliances with foreign States. I hope our Affairs will now wear a more agreeable Aspect than they have of late.

- Robert Morris, delegate from Pennsylvania, letter to Joseph Reed, adjutant general of the American army, 21 July 1776.

I have uniformly Voted against & opposed the declaration of Independence because in my poor opinion it was an improper time and will neither promote the interest or redound to the honor of America, for it has caused division when we wanted Union, and will be ascribed to very different principles than those which ought to give rise to such an Important measure. I did expect my Conduct in this great Question would have procured my dismissal from the great Council, but find myself disappointed for the Convention have thought proper to return me in the New Delegation, and although my interest & inclination prompt me to decline the Service yet I cannot depart from one point that first induced me to enter in the Public Line. I mean an opinion that it is the duty of every Individual to Act his part in whatever Station his Country may Call him to in times of difficulty, danger & distress. Whilst I think this a duty I must submit, although the Councils of America have taken a different course from my Judgments and wishes. I think an individual that declines the Service of his Country because its Councils are not conformable to his Ideas makes but a bad Subject; a good one will follow if he cannot lead.

- William Whipple, delegate from New Hampshire, letter to his brother, Joseph Whipple, 29 July 1776.

The People in this Country are in high Spirits. Gentlemen of the first Fortunes take up their Muskets and March. No late accounts from abroad;¹⁰ it's probable our Letters have fallen into the hands of the Enemy. I agree with you that we are too late in all our movements. [How]ever, these delays answer one good purpose, they certainly tend to produce unanimity, which is a desirable object in perfecting the Revolution. Congress were unanimous in the Declaration of independency which would not have been three weeks sooner. Things go on much smoother now, then before that important Question was determin'd . . .

- Benjamin Rush, delegate from Pennsylvania, letter to Walter Jones, military physician, 30 July 1776.

What shall I say of the august assembly of our States? It is a wide field for speculation. Here we behold the strengths and weakness of the human Understanding and the extent of human virtue & folly. Time will meliorate us. A few more misfortunes will teach us wisdom & humility, and inspire us with true benevolence. The republican soil is broke up, but we have still many monarchical & aristocratical weeds to pluck up from it. The history of the Congress that will sit in the year 1780 will be the history of the Dignity of human nature. . . O' liberty — liberty — I have worshipped thee as a substance, and have found thee so. The influence of the declaration of independence upon the senate & the field is inconceivable. The militia of our state pant for nothing more than to avenge the blood of our brave countrymen upon our enemies on Staten Island.

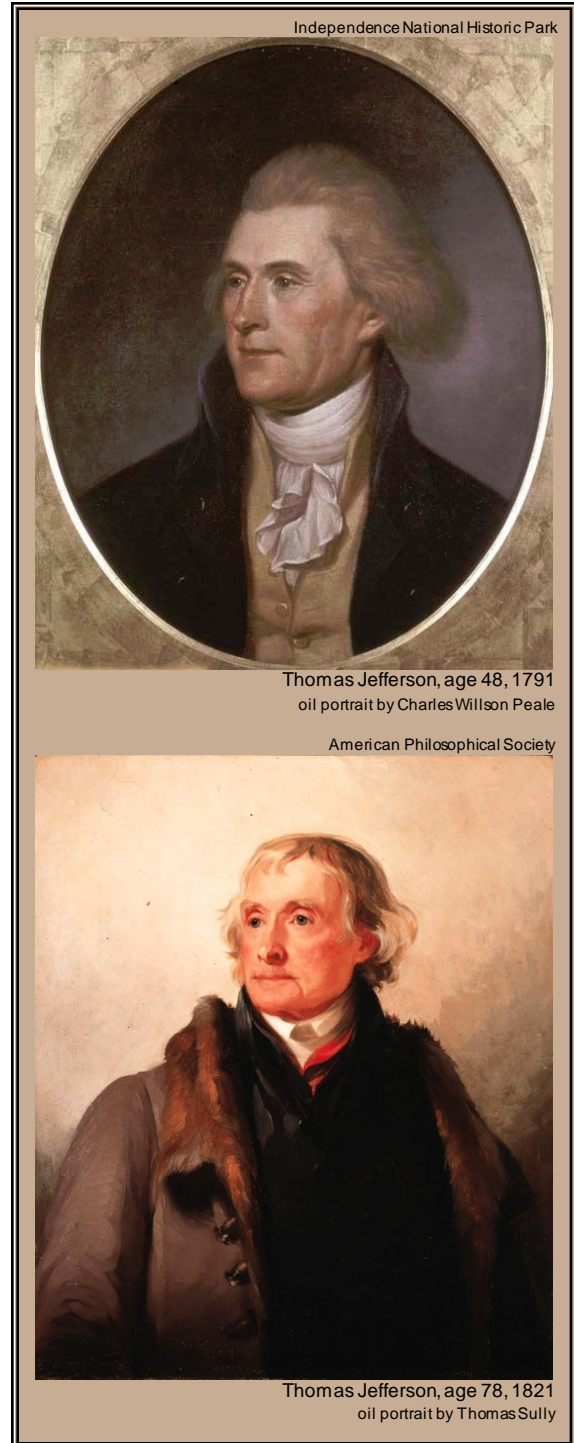
Adieu, my dear sir. Continue to enlighten your fellow citizens in the doctrine of a free government. Make them wise & virtuous, and they will be happy.

⁹ I.e., support for independence by several colonies that had initially withheld support.

¹⁰ I.e., no recent news of military actions in Canada, New York, and elsewhere.

- Thomas Jefferson (delegate from Virginia, primary author of the Declaration), letter to Roger Weightman, 24 June 1826, declining the invitation to attend the celebration in the nation's capital of the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, EXCERPT.¹¹

The kind invitation I receive from you on the part of the citizens of the city of Washington to be present with them at their celebration of the 50th anniversary of American independence, as one of the surviving signers of an instrument pregnant with our own and the fate of the world, is most flattering to myself, and heightened by the honorable accompaniment proposed for the comfort of such a journey. It adds sensibly to the sufferings of sickness to be deprived by it of a personal participation in the rejoicings of that day.¹² But acquiescence is a duty under circumstances not placed among those we are permitted to control. I should, indeed, with peculiar delight, have met and exchanged there congratulations personally with the small band, the remnant of that host of worthies, who joined with us on that day in the bold and doubtful election we were to make for our country between submission or the sword; and to have enjoyed with them the consolatory fact that our fellow citizens, after half a century of experience and prosperity, continue to approve the choice we made. May it be to the world, what I believe it will be (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all), the Signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings & security of self-government. That form which we have substituted restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view. The palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God. These are grounds of hope for others. For ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights and an undiminished devotion to them.



¹¹ Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, at www.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/jeffleg.html#214.

¹² Thomas Jefferson (age 83) and John Adams (age 90) died on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence.