



The American Revolution

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Sons of the American Revolution

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Article 7

United States Declaration of Independence:

While General Washington was moving his army from Boston down to New York in anticipation of a British military strike at that location and while Charleston, South Carolina was preparing Fort Moultrie for action against a similar British threat, delegates to the Second Continental Congress were pondering a united call for independence. In January, 1776, it had become clear in the colonies that King George III of Great Britain was not to be a great conciliator, and coincidentally, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* had exploded on the scene. Colonial sentiment was leaning heavily on the side of independence.

In February, 1776, Britain's Parliament passed the *Prohibitory Act*, which established a blockade of all American colonial ports. John Adams believed this act of Parliament effectively declared American independence before Congress had been able to do so. Adams labeled this act as the "Act of Independency." It was soon discovered

that King George had hired German mercenaries to be used against American subjects. Despite the growing interest in independence, delegates to Congress represented thirteen different independent governments, and lacked specific instructions which would allow them to vote for independence.

From April to July, 1776, the revision of Congressional instructions took place.

Historians have identified and recorded more than ninety different declarations issued at different governmental levels throughout thirteen colonies. These declarations took a wild variety of forms. One of the first written instructions for Congressional delegations came from the colony of North Carolina in the form of “The Halifax Resolves of April 12,” making that colony the first colony to explicitly authorizing its delegates to vote for independence. Other more simple forms were like the April 23, 1776, jury instructions issued by Chief Justice William Henry Drayton of South Carolina, when he said, “the law of the land authorizes me to declare... King George III, King of Great Britain...has no authority over us, and we owe no obedience to him.” Some colonies held back on endorsing independence, so we find this resistance among the middle colonies of New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. Some of this resistance was due to loyalist influences within these middle colonies.

May 15, 1776, Congress appointed a committee to draft a preamble to explain the purpose of a resolution outlining the exercising of colonial independence, and rejecting King George III’s failure at reconciliation and the hiring of foreign mercenaries against the colonies. John Adams authored the preamble to be designed to encourage the overthrow of the governments of Pennsylvania and Maryland, which were still under proprietary governance. Congress passed the preamble on May 15. On that same day, the Virginia Convention instructed Virginia’s congressional delegation “to propose to

that respectable body, to declare the United Colonies free and independent States, and absolved from all allegiance to the Crown or Parliament. In accordance with these instructions, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia offered a three-part resolution to Congress on June 7. This motion, which was seconded by John Adams, called on Congress to declare Independence. The resulting congressional debate was considerable, and on June 10 the motion was tabled and discussion postponed. In our next article, we will explore what happened, when Congress reconvened and the motion was reconsidered. On June 11, 1776, Congress appointed a “Committee of Five.” It consisted of John Adams of Massachusetts, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, Robert R. Livingston of New York, and Roger Sherman of Connecticut; their purpose was to draft a declaration. It was agreed that Thomas Jefferson of Virginia would write the first draft. The draft was produced, comments were made, corrections applied, deletions performed and changes completed. The committee presented its copy to the Congress on June 28, 1776, bearing the title “A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress assembled.”

The declaration was tabled for two days while Congress further edited the document. On Monday 1 July 1776, Congress acting as “A Committee of the Whole,” debated the declaration. After a whole day of debate, the “Committee of the Whole” voted to present the declaration to the Congress for a vote. On 2 July 1776 Congress passed the Declaration of Independence, however, it wasn’t until 4 July 1776, that the wording of the Declaration of Independence was approved and sent to the printer for publication and distribution to the public.

The Declaration became official when Congress voted for it. The signatures of the

delegates were not needed to make it official. However, the handwritten copy was signed by Congress on 4 July 1776 and contained signatures of fifty-six delegates. On 2 August 1776, a parchment paper copy of the Declaration was signed by fifty-six persons, some of which were not present at the original signing. Two future U. S. presidents, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were among the signatories. The most famous signature on the engrossed copy is that of John Hancock. This world famous document is divided into three basic parts: an introduction, followed by the most popular and remembered part [*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*], the preamble. The final portion directs its attention to the indictment of the king of England.