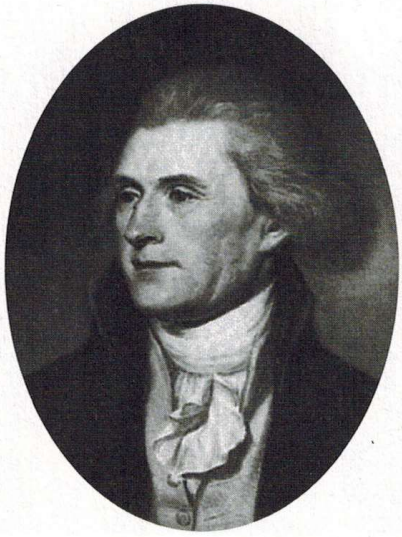
20 Declaring Independence



John Adams said that Jefferson should write the Declaration. "Well," said Jefferson, "if you are decided, I will do as well as I can."

Unless you like to memorize dates, there aren't many that you need to remember. But here are a few that are important:

1215
1492
1607
1620

What happened in those years? You can't remember? Go ahead and try. You might be surprised and find there is more in your brain than you realize. (Then, if you need to check, look on page 100.)

Now I have another date for you to remember, and this one is the most important of all. Something happened on that day that changed America—it even changed the whole world. (It was a day that King George III didn't think important. He would find out how wrong he was.)

The date is July 4, 1776. That was the day the members of the Second Continental Congress approved a Declaration of Independence. It was a year after the Battle of Bunker Hill, and, finally, the Americans had made up their minds to be free of Great Britain.

But that wasn't why the world was changed. It was the words they used in that declaration that made all the difference.

The delegates believed that if they were going to vote for independence, they should have a good reason. They knew that when they signed the declaration they became traitors to England. They would each be hanged if England captured them.

Thomas Jefferson thought John Adams should write the document about independence. This is how Adams remembered their conversation:

"Why will you not?" Jefferson asked. "You ought to do it."

"Reasons enough."

"What can be 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."

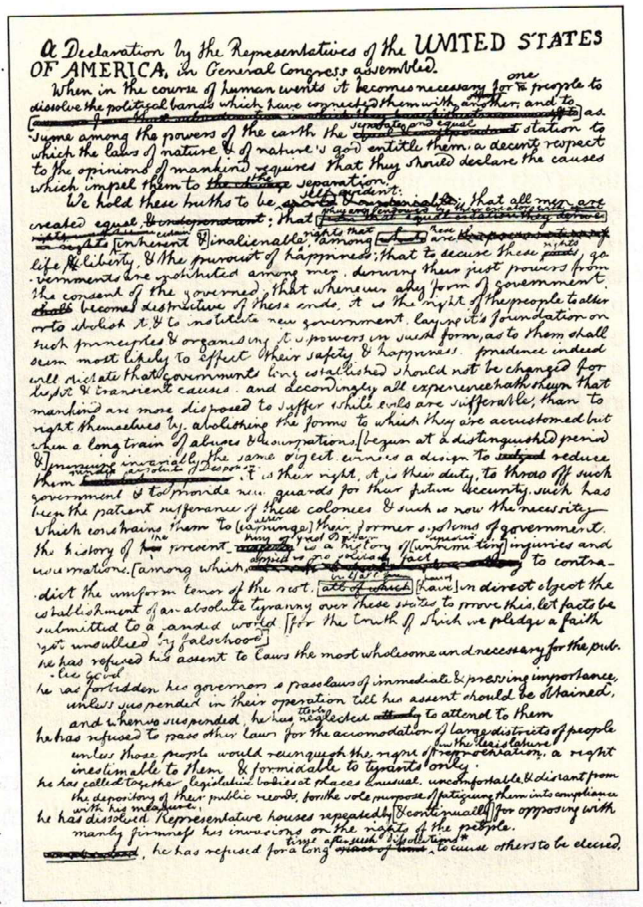
If they were going to take that big risk, they wanted to make it worthwhile. And it would be worthwhile if they could help create a free nation, a great nation, a nation run by its citizens—something that had never before been done.

So they thought it important to explain exactly what they were doing and why it was necessary to be free of English rule.

That's why they asked Thomas Jefferson, one of the members of the Congress, to write a paper—called a "declaration"—that would:

- *tell their beliefs about good government;*
- *tell what King George had done wrong; and*
- *announce that the colonies were now free and independent states.*

Some people thought it surprising that Thomas Jefferson was asked to write the declaration. Jefferson was one of the youngest members of the Continental Congress. He was a tall, shy redhead who loved to read, run, ride horseback, and play the violin. He had a reputation for writing well. John Adams said of him, "Though a silent member in Congress, he was so prompt, frank...and decisive upon committees and in conversation—not even Samuel Adams was more so—that he soon seized upon my heart."



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

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

We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal & independent; that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, & liberty, & the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these ends, 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 to abolish it, & to institute new government, laying it's foundation on such principles & organising it's 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, begun 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 unremitting injuries and usurpations, among which, no one fact stands alone for the truth of which we pledge a faith yet unsullied by falsehood, 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.

he has refused his assent to laws the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

he has forbidden his governors to pass laws of immediate & pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his assent should be obtained, and when so suspended, he has neglected to attend to them.

he has refused to pass other laws for the accomodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of representation in the legislature, a right inestimable to them & formidable to tyrants only.

he has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, & distant from the depository of their public records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

he has dissolved representative houses repeatedly & continually for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

he has refused for a long time after such dissolutions to cause others to be elected,

The first draft of the Declaration of Independence, in Jefferson's handwriting.

Jefferson had left his wife behind on his Virginia farm, and he missed her. He wasn't sure he could write a good declaration. But John Adams and Benjamin Franklin had faith in him. They talked Thomas Jefferson into trying. Adams told him, "You can write ten times better than I can."

Adams and Franklin were right. Thomas Jefferson knew just what to say, and he said it in a way that inspired people all over the world.

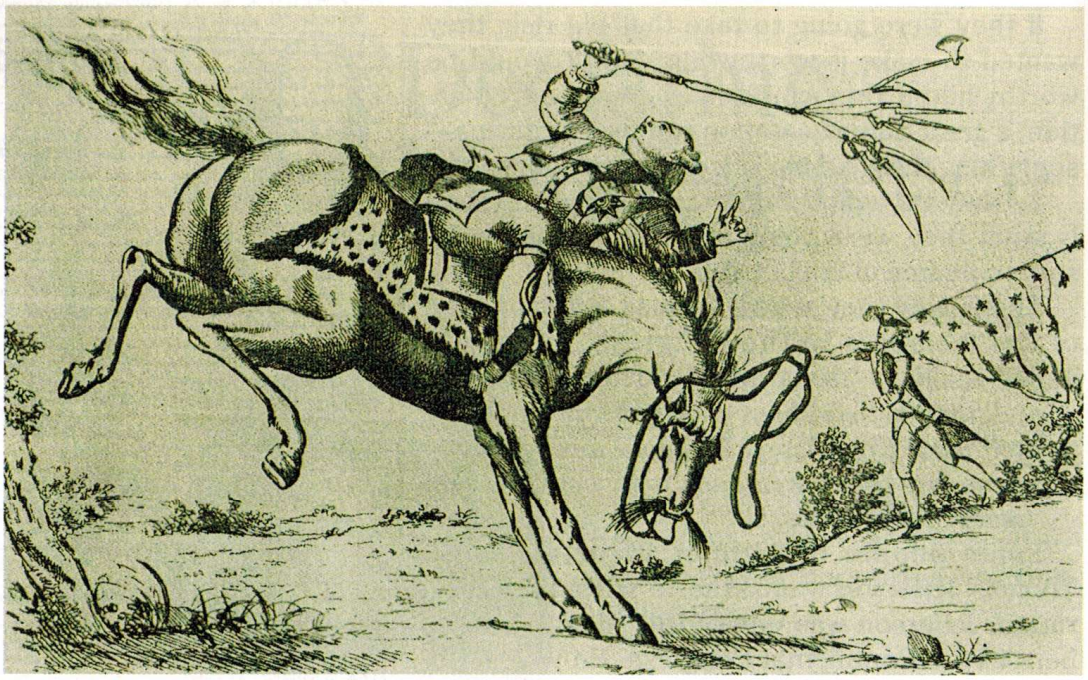
The whole Declaration is something to read and think about, but one part will ring in your ears with its greatness. Jefferson wrote:

> *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. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.*

That was plain language in the 18th century, but you might have

You can find the complete text of the Declaration of Independence on page 190.

Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God.
—MOTTO ON THOMAS JEFFERSON'S SEAL, CIRCA 1776



King George, in an English cartoon, as the helpless rider of "The horse America, throwing his Master."

to read it a few times to understand it. It is worth doing. Those words are worth memorizing.

All men are created equal.

Just what does "equal" mean?

Are we all the same? Look around you. Of course we aren't. Some of us are smarter than others, and some of us are better athletes, and some of us are better looking, and some are nicer. But none of that matters, said Jefferson. We are all equal in the eyes of God, and we are all entitled to equal rights: the right to live, the right to be free, the right to be able to try to find the kind of life that will make us happy.

And that is the whole reason for having governments, he said. Governments are not made to make kings happy. They are for the benefit of the people who are being governed. Governments should have "the consent of the governed."

Sometimes, when ideas are written down, they take on meanings that go beyond what the writers intended. Jefferson's Declaration of Independence was great from the moment he wrote it, but it has grown even greater with the passing of time. He said "all men are created equal." He didn't mention women. Did he mean to include women? No one knows. Perhaps not. We do know that in the 18th century the words "men" and "mankind" included men and women. But very few people, except for Tom Paine, thought much about

Dates to Remember—or Else!

1215: Magna Carta
1492: Columbus sails to America
1607: Jamestown settled
1620: the Pilgrims land at Plymouth
1776: the Declaration of Independence!

Here's another date for your memory bank: **1610:** when Spanish speakers founded Santa Fe, New Mexico.

women's rights. It was the 20th century before women in America had the right to vote.

Did Thomas Jefferson mean to include black men when he said "all men"? Historians sometimes argue about that. You'll have to decide for yourself.

In 1776, when Jefferson wrote the Declaration, he included a long section in which he described slavery as a "cruel war against human nature." Yet Jefferson lived in a slave society and owned slaves himself.

He thought slavery was wrong, and he said so. "Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free," wrote Jefferson. Many congressmen agreed. John Adams spoke out strongly against slavery. Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush founded the first antislavery society in the New World. But South Carolina and Georgia would not sign the Declaration if it contained the antislavery section. So Jefferson's antislavery words were taken out. The delegates compromised.

Should they have gone ahead without those southern colonies? That would have meant that the Deep South would not have joined in the fight against England. It might have meant defeat for the proposed union of states.

Jefferson and Adams and Franklin and others thought the Union was more important than the issue of slavery. They knew that staying with England would not bring freedom to the slaves. They thought slavery could be dealt with later. Do you agree with them?

Those were tough decisions the delegates were making.

It took a civil war to end slavery. Do you think that war could have been avoided? Do you think the delegates should have acted differently in 1776?

Of one thing you can be sure. Today, when people all over the world read Jefferson's words, they understand them to mean all people—men, women, and children—of all colors and beliefs.

The appointment of a woman to office is an innovation for which the public is not prepared, nor am I.
—THOMAS JEFFERSON TO ALBERT GALLATIN, 1807



In 1776 Arthur Middleton *(left)*, of South Carolina, owned more than 50,000 acres and 800 slaves. He also signed the Declaration of Independence.