



In March 1776 the British shipped out of Boston, taking about a thousand loyalists with them. By May the Continental Congress was using the term "states," not "colonies," and advising the states to establish governments independent of Britain. On June 7, a Virginia delegate introduced an independence resolution in Congress. The delegates debated it for several days, meanwhile appointing a committee to draft a declaration of independence, just in case. On July 2, the Congress resolved "that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be free and independent states."

It was Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, only thirty-three, who was asked to draft the Declaration of Independence with the helping hands of committee members Benjamin Franklin and John Adams. Jefferson was tall, slender, and red-haired. His shyness made him seem stiff to strangers. He was a brilliant student with an extraordinary range of interests and skills in the arts and sciences. A competent lawyer, he served in the Virginian legislature and the Continental Congress. At this time he was a rising star in Virginia's ruling class. Congress made some further changes in Jefferson's draft, taking out most importantly an attack upon the slave trade, for which the king had been blamed. This deletion was made, said Jefferson at the time, upon the request of South Carolina and Georgia, "who had never attempted to restrain the importation of slaves, and who on the contrary still wished to continue it. Our northern brethren also I believe felt a little tender under those censures, for though their people had very few slaves themselves yet they had been pretty considerable carriers of them to others."

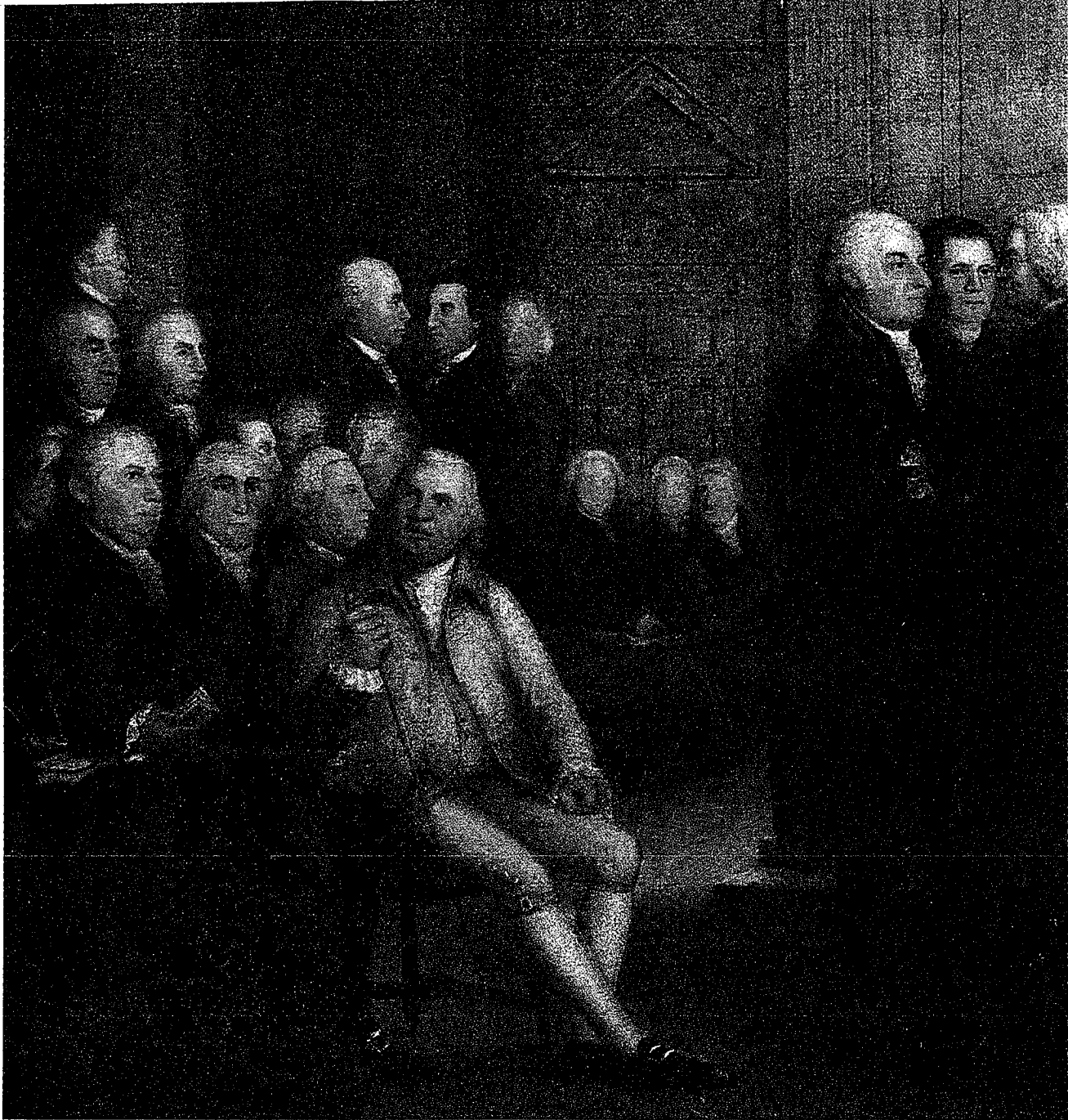


Th Jefferson

On July 4, the Declaration was adopted, and then printed. The text was read aloud to jubilant crowds throughout the states. A year later the country began the now hallowed tradition of celebrating the Fourth of July as Independence Day.

The aim of the Declaration, Jefferson wrote later, was not to say something new. Rather, it was "to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent. . . . Neither aiming at originality of principles nor sentiments, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind."

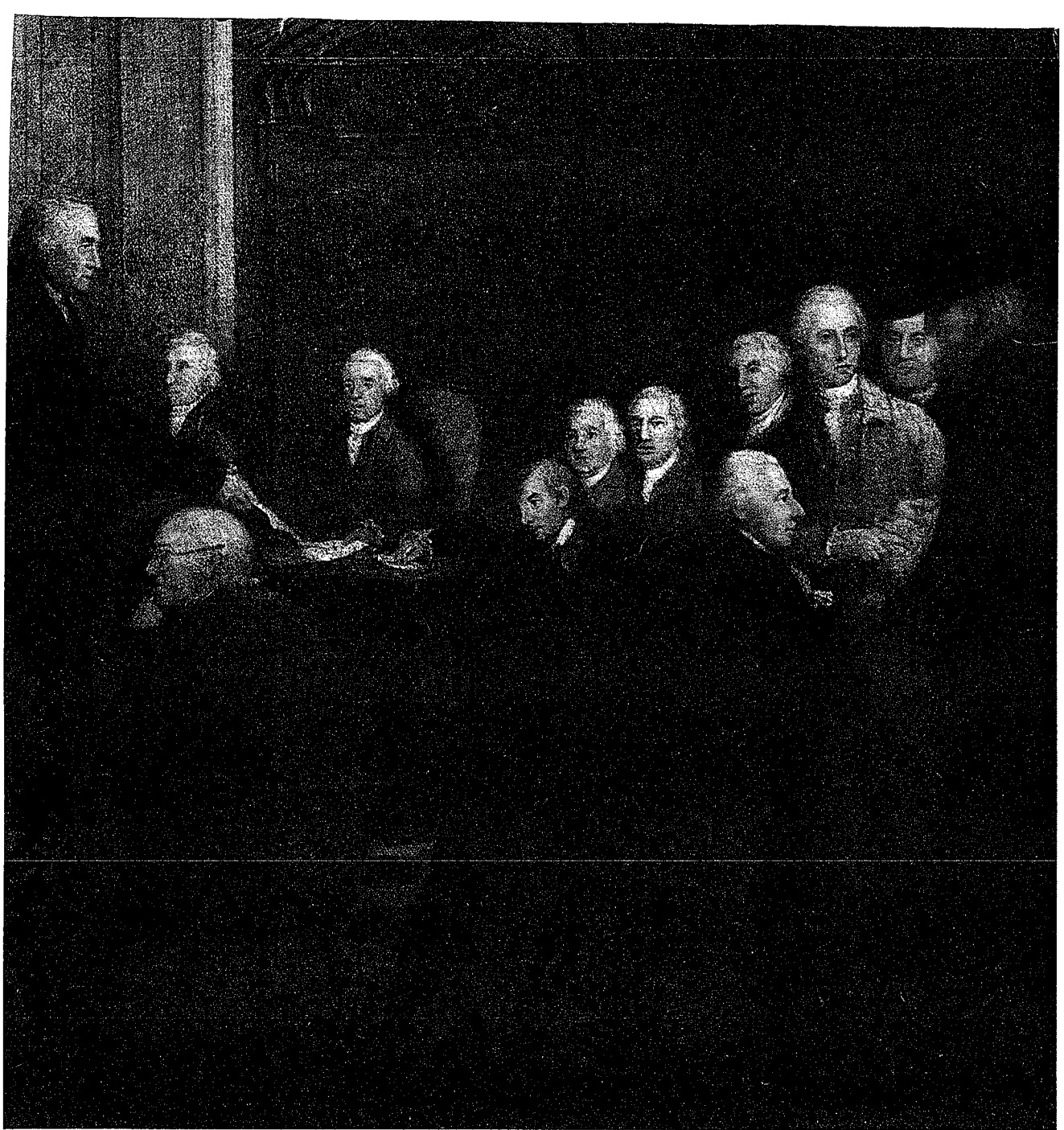




The Declaration has a preamble stating the rights at issue, followed by a list of grievances about the infringements upon those rights, and it closes with a mutual pledge to support the steps taken to independence. Here is the text, minus the specific charges against Britain and the king:

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

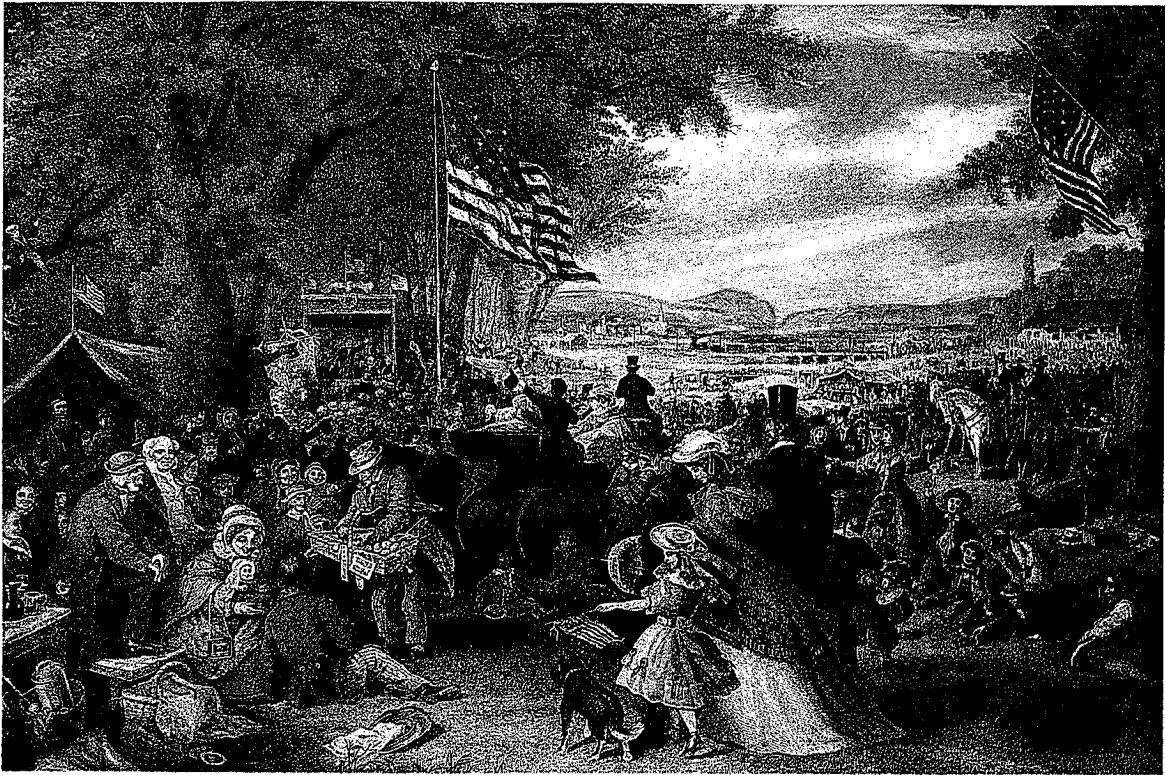




The committee to draw up a Declaration of Independence presents it to the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1776. In rear center is Thomas Jefferson, handing the draft to John Hancock, seated in the back. Seated in front center is Benjamin Franklin. Standing at left center of the group is John Adams.

and equal station to which the laws of nature and 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.





The Day We Celebrate (The Fourth of July): American Engraving, 1875

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. ^{stop}

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 to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly, all experience hath shown, 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 and usurpations, 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, and to provide new guards for their future security.



Such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies; and 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 repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world. . . .

We, therefore, the representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the name and by authority of the good people of these colonies, solemnly publish and declare, that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be free and independent states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as free and independent states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do. And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.



Through this selection, what did you learn about the Declaration of Independence that you did not know before?

Thomas Jefferson described the Declaration of Independence as “an expression of the American mind.” Do you think this description still applies today? Explain your response.

Summarize the main argument of the Declaration of Independence.

WRITE Write a letter to a real or imaginary friend in another country explaining why the Declaration of Independence is such an important document for Americans.