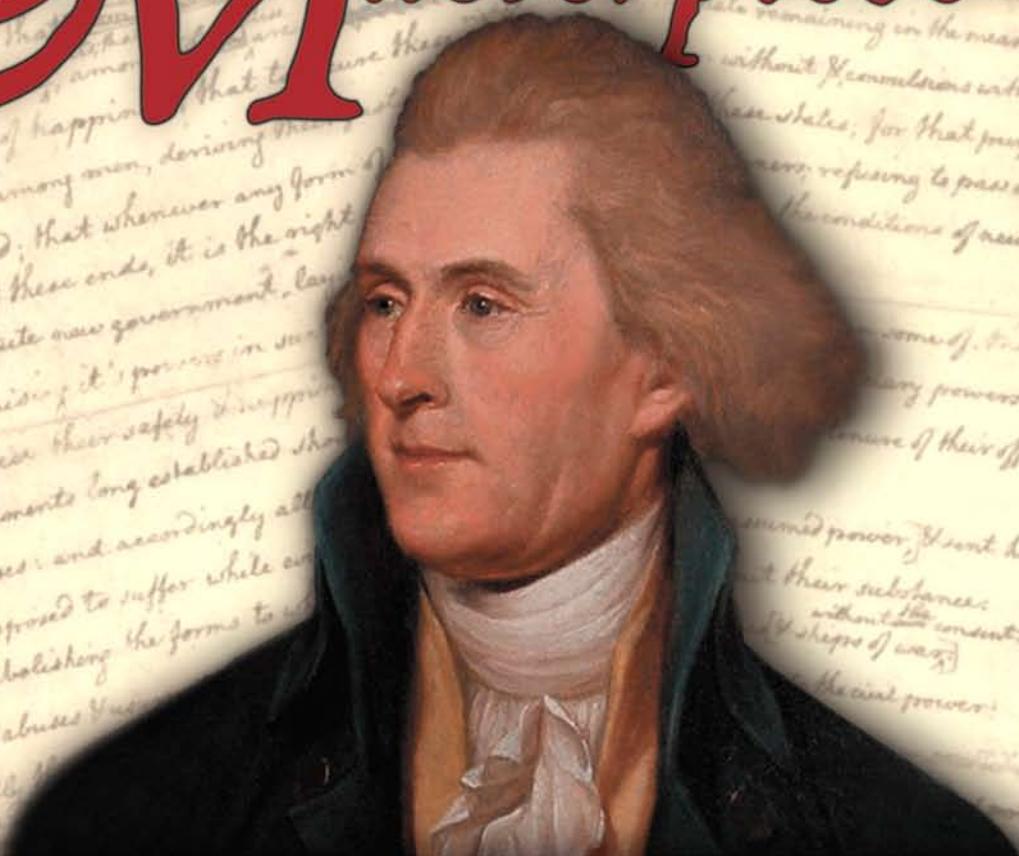


Jefferson's Masterpiece



The Story of the Declaration of Independence
for Young Readers

Dennis Parker

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*The Story of the Declaration of Independence
for Young Readers*

SECOND EDITION

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction based on historical facts. The main characters, events and places were real. Fictional characters have been added to enrich the story. Some of the dialogue is based on writings and speeches of the real people and some is the product of the author's imagination.

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I also want to acknowledge that *Jefferson's Masterpiece* could not have been written without the scholarly research and writing of so many dedicated people for more than two centuries.

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DEDICATION

To the memory of Thomas Jefferson and our forefathers and foremothers who, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, “brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

TO THE READER

I have made a special effort to accurately reproduce the excerpts from the Declaration of Independence, *Journal of the Continental Congress* and other eighteenth century letters and documents. You will notice that the original spelling, punctuation and capitalization have been retained. Dictionaries and punctuation rules were rare in the eighteenth century. People also used a liberal number of capitalized words in their writing. I hope this will enhance your understanding of the people and the times.

Dennis Parker

Tuesday, June 11, 1776

“T

he time has come for the American colonies to declare independence from the British monarchy!” exclaimed Benjamin Franklin in a louder voice than he normally spoke. “Congress has no other choice but to approve the Virginia Resolution proclaiming our freedom. When that is done, we can go on with the important business of winning this war and governing ourselves.” Franklin reclined in his favorite chair and rested his sore foot on a cushioned stool. Keeping his foot elevated helped relieve the pain from the gout he had suffered for many years. He invited the Committee of Five to hold its first meeting in his three-story brick Philadelphia home located only a few blocks from the Pennsylvania State House, where the Second Continental Congress met.

“You are absolutely right . . . we all agree with you,” John Adams said to Dr. Franklin and to the three other men sitting in Franklin’s parlor that warm June afternoon. “I hope we can convince the delegates who are reluctant to support independence to vote with us.”

“We were given an important job,” added Franklin. “Our assignment is to write a statement that clearly sets forth our reasons for breaking ties with the government of Great Britain. We must select the right man to write our declaration of independence.”

“There is only one man on this committee or in this Congress who can write the kind of statement we need,” answered Adams as his eyes settled on Thomas Jefferson. “That man is you, Thomas.” He turned in his chair so he directly faced Jefferson, who felt uncomfortable by his friend’s attention. “We all know you are an experienced and able writer.” Adams paused for a brief moment. “Gentlemen, I nominate Thomas for this important job.”

Franklin, Roger Sherman and Robert Livingston looked at each other and nodded their heads. “We all agree,” Franklin responded.

After a few moments of hesitation, Thomas Jefferson spoke. “I appreciate your confidence, John, but I think the committee should appoint you. Virginia, as you know, recently declared its independence from the British government. My countrymen are now working to establish a new government. I would like to take part by helping to write Virginia’s constitution. In fact, I have already made some notes that I plan to take when I go to Williamsburg. John, you should write the declaration. You led the fight to get us this far; you should be the one to write it.”

Adams was visibly agitated by what Jefferson said about going to Virginia. He tried to compose himself before speaking. “But . . . you know how important a written declaration of America’s independence would be for the colonies. This is a matter that concerns all the colonies – all the citizens. The new government for Virginia is important, of course, but freedom for all of our people is the most important business at hand.”

Adams was upset with himself that he had let his emotions get out of control. He paused and stood in front of Jefferson. “You are the best person . . . the only person . . . to write our declaration of independence. I urge you to accept.” He returned to his seat.

Jefferson felt compelled to return to Virginia. “What can be your reasons?” He asked as he looked directly into Adams’ eyes.

“Reasons enough,” Adams answered. “Reason first: You are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason second: I am obnoxious, suspected and unpopular. Reason third: You can write ten times better than I can.”

Adam’s enthusiasm and passion did not surprise anyone. He had been working for almost two years to convince the delegates to the Continental Congress that the colonies should break away from British domination.

All eyes were fixed on Jefferson, who sat with his head bowed. The only sound in the room was the ticking of the grandfather clock that stood beside the window. He raised his head and looked momentarily into the face of each man. They watched as he crossed his arms and cupped his chin with his

left hand. He stared at the floor in front of him. More time passed until he scanned the face of each man again. “If you are determined,” he finally said, “I will do as well as I can.”



The members of the Committee of Five were meeting to make plans to write a declaration of America’s independence. Earlier that day, John Hancock, President of the Second Continental Congress, had appointed John Adams of Massachusetts, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, Robert Livingston of New York and Roger Sherman of Connecticut to serve on the declaration committee. Their job was to write a statement that would explain why the thirteen American colonies were proclaiming independence from the British government.

Before the Second Continental Congress could formally proclaim America’s independence in a written declaration, the delegates from the thirteen colonies first had to approve a resolution that officially proclaimed the colonies to be free and independent states. That resolution was the Virginia Resolution, which Richard Henry Lee of Virginia had presented to Congress on June 7. The resolution plainly stated:

“Resolved, 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.”

Approval of the Virginia Resolution would grant the American colonies total independence from the government of England and give them the freedom to govern themselves.

The Virginia Resolution, also known as the Lee Resolution, was first approved by the Virginia Convention on the previous May 15. Since Richard Henry Lee was in Williamsburg, Virginia’s capital city, when the resolution passed, he was given the responsibility to take it to Philadelphia and present it to Congress.

The delegates from the colonies had debated the Virginia Resolution for three days after Lee introduced it. Then on June 11, they voted to postpone the final decision until July 1. They wanted to give the colonies that had not made a decision on the question of independence more time to decide.

In order to avoid any delays if Congress voted to approve the Virginia Resolution, President Hancock had appointed the Committee of Five to prepare a formal, written declaration of America's independence. Hancock also appointed two other committees: one to prepare a constitution that would unite the new independent American states with a central government of limited powers, and a second committee to draw up a plan to form alliances with foreign countries.



After the Committee of Five adjourned, Jefferson returned to his lodgings at the Graff House where he rented a furnished two-room corner suite on the second floor from Jacob Graff, a Philadelphia bricklayer. Jefferson's suite faced the corner of Seventh and Market Streets. He spent the rest of the night thinking about his new assignment and what lay ahead for the colonies.

Jefferson found the Graff House more comfortable than where he lived when he first arrived in Philadelphia a few weeks earlier on May 14. The



Jefferson's Sitting Room

new residence was located on the outskirts of town – it was peaceful and provided him more space. His suite consisted of a bedchamber and a sitting room. The only furniture that belonged to him was a Windsor chair he had bought. One of the few complaints he had about his new lodging was the horseflies that flew into his room from the stable across the street.

As he settled in his chair by the sitting room window, hoping to catch a cool breeze, he could see the lamplighter making his rounds through the city streets. He watched the tall, middle-aged man raise the long pole with the flaming wick on the end to light the oil street lamps – bringing a soft glow of light to the streets of the city known as the City of Brotherly Love.

At precisely eight o'clock, Jefferson heard the bell from the tower of the Pennsylvania State House toll eight times. The sound of the chiming bells echoed throughout Philadelphia. This bell would later be renamed the Liberty Bell.



*Massachusetts
militia defeats
three companies
of British troops
at the Concord
North Bridge on
April 19, 1775*

Jefferson's thoughts were on the reasons why the colonies were on the verge of taking action to declare independence from the British government.

Like most Americans, Jefferson could not forget what happened on April 19, 1775. That was the day the military conflict between the colonies and the English government began at Lexington and Concord. British troops had marched to Concord, Massachusetts, to capture the patriots' supply of arms and ammunition. When the patriots received an early warning that British troops were coming, they moved their supplies to a safer place. Before the day was over, the British killed forty-nine Massachusetts citizens and wounded dozens more.

Since the British marched on Lexington and Concord, Jefferson had supported the American colonies severing ties with Great Britain.

Jefferson also thought back to an earlier incident in 1770 when five Boston citizens had been killed by a small group of British soldiers in what had become known as the Boston Massacre. The unfair taxes that had been imposed on the colonists, and the stationing of British troops in their homes had served to ignite this controversial event and to unite the people in their opposition to English domination.

For more than ten years, the Americans had protested and resisted the violation of their rights and privileges as British subjects, but King George III and the British Parliament still continued to mistreat them.

In the early fall of 1775, Congress learned that King George had rejected the Olive Branch Petition, which had been approved on July 8. In this last attempt at reconciliation, Congress hoped the petition that affirmed America's loyalty to the king and to Great Britain and that had included an appeal for a better relationship with the British government would prevent armed conflict. However, instead of accepting the Olive Branch Petition, the king issued the Proclamation of Rebellion on August 23 that declared the colonies to be in a state of "open and avowed rebellion." He ordered British officials "to use their utmost endeavours to withstand and suppress such rebellion."

The severity of the American situation grew worse when it was learned that King George had hired German mercenaries to fight along side the British Army in America. From that moment, they knew the king planned to use whatever force was necessary to force the colonies to accept the new taxes and restrictions the British government imposed upon them.

These and other events had caused a growing number of Americans to realize that complete independence from Great Britain was their only option. Their rights had been violated long enough. They would continue to oppose those actions they believed to be unjust and to defend themselves against the British military for as long as necessary in order to become a free people.

Congress and some colonies had already taken the first steps toward independence.

- On April 12, the North Carolina Fourth Provincial Congress passed the Halifax Resolves, which were the first instructions by any colony to authorize its delegates to the Second Continental Congress to vote for independence from the British government.
- On May 4, Rhode Island became the first colony to declare its independence from Great Britain.
- On May 10, the Second Continental Congress passed a resolution that recommended that each colony write a constitution to establish a new government.
- Two colonies followed the congressional recommendation and adopted a constitution and an independent government – Virginia on June 20 and New Jersey on July 2.
- New Hampshire on January 5 and South Carolina on April 12 were the first colonies to both declare independence and adopt a constitution.
- By the end of 1776, five more colonies – Connecticut, Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania and North Carolina – would establish independent governments.

All of these actions were in addition to the Virginia Convention's adoption of the Virginia Resolution on May 15, that if approved by the Second Continental Congress, would declare independence for all thirteen American colonies.

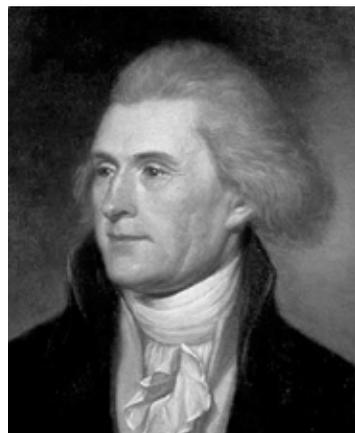
These thoughts went through Jefferson's mind and he began to realize the importance of the declaration he had been asked to write. He knew it would be a difficult task. He would have to use all the knowledge and skills he possessed to draft a statement that would explain the common sense reasons why the colonies had no other choice but to gain independence from Great Britain.

As he rose from his chair to prepare for bed, Jefferson dedicated himself to write a statement that would clearly express the American mind on the rightness of their actions.



Thomas Jefferson was thirty-three years old and stood six feet two-and-a-half inches tall. He was a lean and muscular man with long arms and legs, large hands and feet, a square jaw with prominent cheekbones, ruddy complexion, hazel eyes, and a full head of carrot-red hair that fell below his ears. He was an optimistic and easygoing person with graceful manners.

As a Virginia farmer, lawyer and legislator, he had never traveled farther than four hundred miles from his home at Monticello, which was located on a small mountain outside the small town of Charlottesville. Yet, he was one of the most educated and respected men in Virginia and Congress. He attended the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg and studied law under George Wythe. He began his law practice at the age of twenty-four. Two years later, he was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses as a representative of Albemarle County.



Thomas Jefferson

Jefferson's service in the Continental Congress began on June 11, 1775, when he replaced Peyton Randolph, who returned to Virginia to preside over the Virginia House of Burgesses. Jefferson was the youngest Virginia delegate.

His abilities as a writer and thinker were well known. In 1775, he had written a paper entitled, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*. He gained his reputation as a patriot writer with his arguments that the British Parliament did not have the right to legislate for the American colonies. The paper was published and widely read throughout the colonies.

Jefferson was the most silent member of Congress; he very seldom participated in debates. He was more comfortable writing than speaking. A member of numerous committees, he was the person most often asked to write reports and resolutions.

*Observations on the weather
Philadelphia 1776*

July	hour	Thermom.	day	A. m.	P. m.	°
1	9-0	84½	9	5-30	A. m.	75
				9		77½
	7-			6-30	P. m.	81½
2	6-	78		9-45		78
	9-40	A. m. 78		10-8	A. m.	75
				9-15		76½
	9-	P. m. 74		2-0	P. m.	80
3	5-30	A. m. 74½		4-45		81½
	1-30	P. m. 76		6-30		78
	8-10			9-30		78
4	6-	A. m. 68		5-30	A. m.	74
	9-			8-		76½
	9-	P. m. 76		9-40	P. m.	75
	1-			9-40	A. m.	72
	9-	A. m. 71½		9-		72
	9-			8-30	P. m.	72
	9-	P. m. 74		5-30	a. m.	71½
6	5-			11-		74
	9-	A. m. 74		2-	P. m.	76
	4-			6-45		76
	10-			7-25		75
	6-	A. m. 74		9-		75
	10-			rain		
	1-	P. m. 74		6-30	a. m.	73
	3-20			9-30		72
	9-30			rain		
8	5-35	A. m. 75		9-	P.	71½
	9-			rain		
	9-	P. m. 77½		1-35		70
	2-			2-45		70
	5-					
	8-15					
	9-30					

It was during this gathering of the Second Continental Congress that

Jefferson started to keep detailed weather observations.

His favorite spots were the window near the Virginia delegates' table and the corner window at the Graff House.

Thursday, June 13, 1776

Jefferson heard a commotion and immediately knew what it was. He turned to his left and saw Benjamin Franklin being carried into the congressional chamber in an enclosed sedan chair. Two prisoners from the local jail, one in front and one in back, carried him into the room. They held a wooden rail in each hand that was attached to the sides of the chair. Many mornings Franklin was carried from his home to the Pennsylvania State House. After he got out of the chair, Franklin thanked his porters and give each man a coin. They left the chair in the center hall before returning to the jail.

Franklin and Jefferson sat in the last row of chairs on the far right side of the room close to a window that looked out over the tree-shaded yard of the State House.

Jefferson was standing by the window when Franklin arrived. Franklin noticed that he was holding a thermometer.

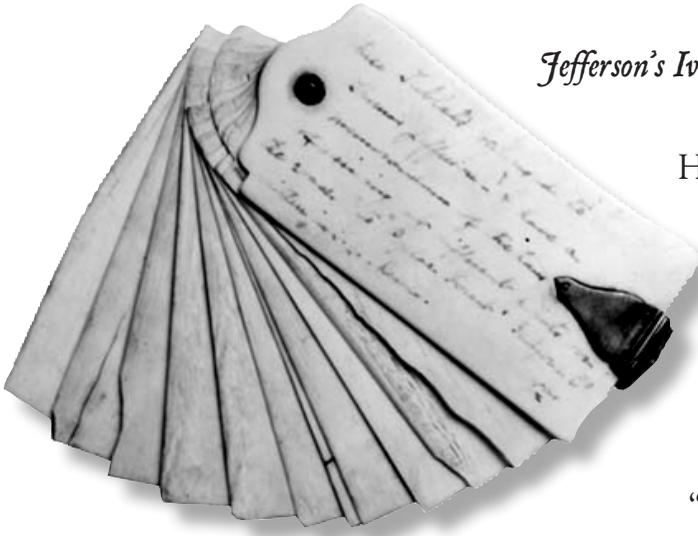
“Good morning, Thomas,” greeted Franklin, as he settled in his chair and put his foot on a small stool under the table. “I expect the heat will be above normal again. Another hot, humid Philadelphia summer is in the making.”

“Yes, it will be a hot day. The current temperature is already seventy-six degrees,” he said while looking at his thermometer.

“So that is why you have a thermometer in your hand,” remarked Franklin.

“I bought it this morning,” Jefferson said as he handed the thermometer to Franklin. “I plan to make two observations a day, one early in the morning, the other from three to four o’clock, which is usually the hottest part of the day. I will record the temperatures in this book I also purchased.”

Jefferson owned a small book made of ivory that he used to make notes.



Jefferson's Ivory Notebook

He would later transfer the notes into permanent record books or onto individual pages. The penciled notes would be erased and new notes added.

“Thomas, you are a man of many interests. I am content with my little writings and inventions.” He examined the thermometer and handed it back to Jefferson.

It was during this gathering of the Second Continental Congress that Jefferson started to keep detailed weather observations. His favorite spots were the window near the Virginia delegates' table and the corner window at the Graff House.

Franklin watched the delegates enter the room. After a few minutes he turned to Jefferson and asked, “Have you made any progress on the declaration?”

Jefferson took his time before answering. Franklin was about to restate the question when his friend began to speak. “Well, that depends. I have done a lot of thinking. I have made notes. I have been writing. But, mostly, I have been discarding what I have written and starting over again.” It was apparent to Franklin from the tone of Jefferson's voice and his facial expression that his young friend was frustrated.

“My paper supply is getting low, too,” he chuckled.

“Paper you will have,” Franklin reassured him. “I will get all the paper you need from one of my printer friends. I know all the printers in Philadelphia. And some of them owe me favors.”

“Is there anyone in Philadelphia you do not know?” Jefferson asked with a twinkle in his eyes. “People ask about you everywhere I go. Many of them

express their gratitude and respect for you. You are a highly respected man throughout the city.”

Franklin smiled. “I am grateful for my friends. I am especially thankful for the opportunities I have had since I moved to Philadelphia fifty-three years ago. I may have been born in Boston, but now I am a Philadelphian.”

He looked thoughtfully at Jefferson and said: “You have been given an important assignment. What you write is going to be very critical. Your words could unite the citizens to our cause. Your words, hopefully, will rally Washington’s army to victory. Your words could secure the help we need from foreign countries. And I believe your words will set us on the right course for the future.” He paused to reposition his leg on the stool and then looked at Jefferson. “Thomas, you should not get discouraged.

“You can write those words. I know you can. John Adams knows you can. As John said recently, you are ‘the best writer in Congress’.”

Jefferson was surprised by what Franklin said to him. He had heard of his generous nature, but had never experienced it himself. “I agree with you on one point,” he replied. “This will indeed be the most important paper I will ever write. Maybe, just maybe, that is the reason I am having so much trouble getting started.” He paused and thought a moment. “I appreciate your kind words of encouragement. Thank you, Benjamin.” He leaned over and offered his hand to Franklin, who vigorously shook it with a broad smile on his face.

At the appointed hour of nine o’clock, John Hancock banged his gavel on the desk to begin the daily congressional session.

END OF SAMPLE