



4 Declaring Independence

TERMS & NAMES

Ethan Allen
 artillery
 Second Continental Congress
 Continental Army
 Benedict Arnold
 Declaration of Independence
 Thomas Jefferson

MAIN IDEA

Fighting between American and British troops led the colonies to declare their independence.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The United States of America was founded at this time.

ONE AMERICAN'S STORY

In May 1775—one month after the battle at Lexington and Concord—Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, John Adams. “The house is a Scene of Confusion,” she said. Colonial militiamen were camped outside. Everyone was preparing for war. John Adams was away in Philadelphia at the time, meeting with other Patriot leaders at the Second Continental Congress.

Abigail and John Adams would spend most of the Revolutionary War apart. In his absence, she ran the household and farm in Braintree, Massachusetts, and raised their four children. During their separation, they exchanged many letters. Abigail was a very sharp observer of the political scene. In one letter, she shared her concerns about the future of the American government.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

If we separate from Britain, what Code of Laws will be established? How shall we be governed so as to retain our Liberties? Can any government be free which is not administered by general stated Laws? Who shall frame these Laws? Who will give them force and energy?

Abigail Adams, quoted in *Abigail Adams: Witness to a Revolution* by Natalie S. Bober



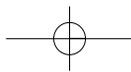
Abigail Adams was an early advocate of women's rights and one of the great letter writers in history.

These questions would be answered later. First, a war had to be fought and won.

The Continental Army Is Formed

After the fighting at Lexington and Concord, militiamen from Massachusetts and other colonies began gathering around Boston. Their numbers eventually reached some 20,000. General Gage decided to move his soldiers from the peninsula opposite Boston to the city itself. Boston was nearly surrounded by water. This fact, he thought, made a colonial attack by land almost impossible.

Not long after, on May 10, 1775, Americans attacked Britain's Fort Ticonderoga on the New York side of Lake Champlain. **Ethan Allen** led



this band of backwoodsmen known as the Green Mountain Boys. They captured the fort and its large supply of **artillery**—cannon and large guns. These guns would be used later to drive the British from Boston.

Also on May 10, the **Second Continental Congress** began meeting in Philadelphia. Delegates included John and Samuel Adams, John Hancock, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and Patrick Henry. They agreed to form the **Continental Army**. Washington, who was from Virginia, was chosen as its commanding general. He had served as a colonial officer with the British during the French and Indian War. Congress also authorized the printing of paper money to pay the troops. It was beginning to act as a government.

The Battle of Bunker Hill

Background

The battle was called Bunker Hill because the original plan was to fight the battle there.

Meanwhile, tensions were building in Boston in June 1775. Militiamen seized Bunker Hill and Breed's Hill behind Charlestown. They built fortifications on Breed's Hill. Alarmed, the British decided to attack.

General William Howe crossed the bay with 2,200 British soldiers. Forming in ranks, they marched up Breed's Hill. On the hilltop, the militia waited.

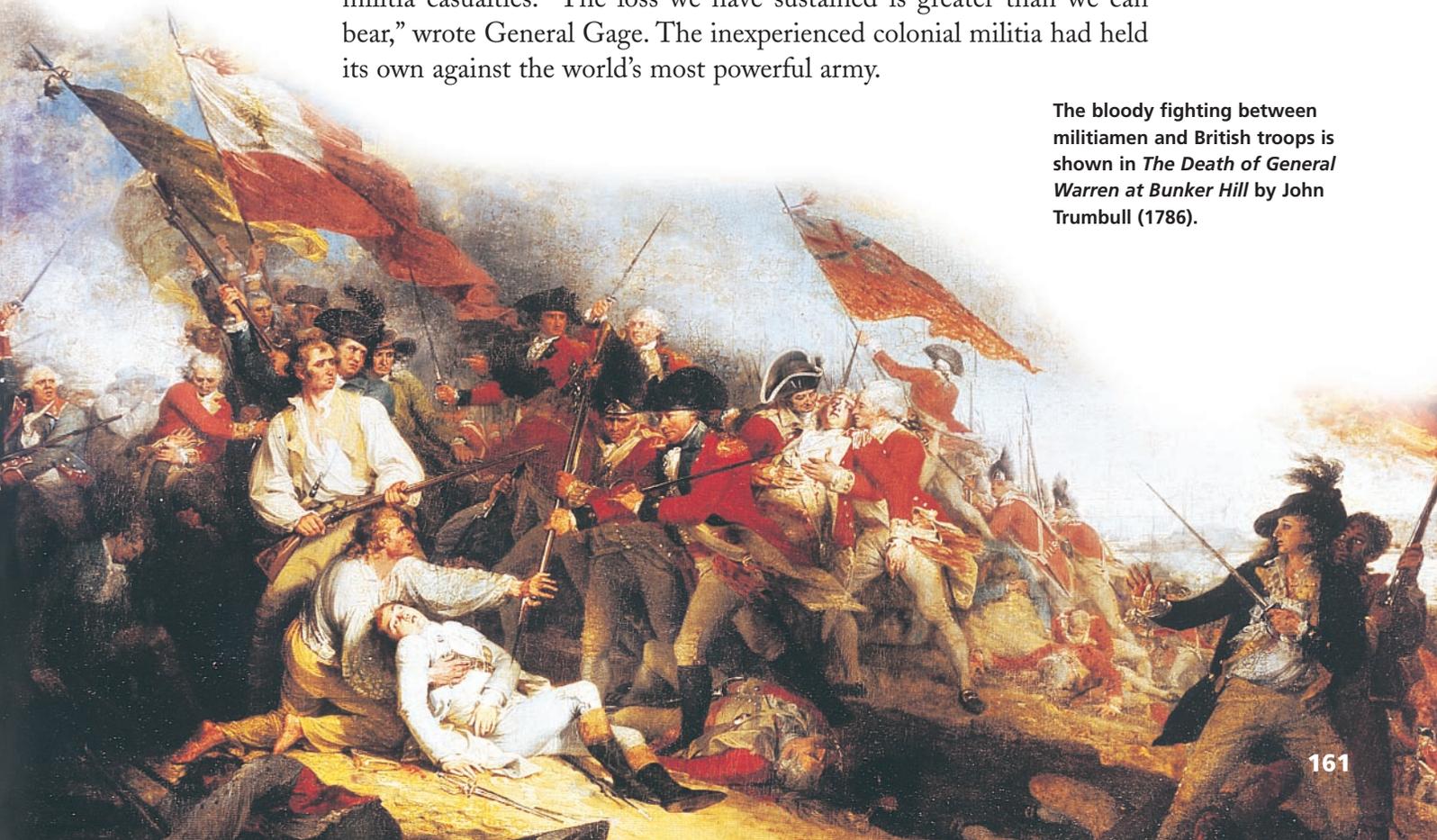
According to the legend, Colonel William Prescott ordered, "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes!" When the British got close, the militia unleashed murderous fire. The British fell back and then charged again. Finally, they forced the militia off the hill.

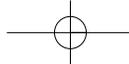
The redcoats had won the Battle of Bunker Hill, but at tremendous cost. More than 1,000 were killed or wounded, compared with some 400 militia casualties. "The loss we have sustained is greater than we can bear," wrote General Gage. The inexperienced colonial militia had held its own against the world's most powerful army.

*"Don't fire
until you see
the whites of
their eyes!"*

Colonel William Prescott

The bloody fighting between militiamen and British troops is shown in *The Death of General Warren at Bunker Hill* by John Trumbull (1786).





Connections TO LITERATURE

PHILLIS WHEATLEY

Phillis Wheatley was America's first important African-American poet. She was born in Africa about 1753 and sold into slavery as a child. She was a household servant for the Wheatley family of Boston but was raised and educated as a family member.

Some of Wheatley's poems were about the Patriot cause. Of George Washington, she wrote:

*Proceed, great chief, with
virtue on thy side,
Thy ev'ry action let the
goddess guide.
A crown, a mansion, and
a throne that shine,
With gold unfading,
Washington! be thine.*

In other poems, Wheatley connected America's fight against British oppression with the struggle for freedom for enslaved African Americans.



A Last Attempt at Peace

Despite this deepening conflict, most colonists still hoped for peace. Even some Patriot leaders considered themselves loyal subjects of the king. They blamed Parliament for the terrible events taking place.

In July 1775, moderates in Congress drafted the Olive Branch Petition and sent it to London. This document asked the king to restore harmony between Britain and the colonies. Some members opposed the petition but signed it anyway as a last hope.

The king rejected the petition, however, and announced new measures to punish the colonies. He would use the British navy to block American ships from leaving their ports. He also would send thousands of hired German soldiers, called Hessians, to fight in America. "When once these rebels have felt a smart blow, they will submit," he declared.

The colonial forces were not going to back down, though. They thought they were equal to the British troops. George Washington knew otherwise. The British soldiers were professionals, while the colonial troops had little training and were poorly equipped. The Massachusetts militia barely had enough gunpowder to fight one battle.

During the summer of 1775, Washington arrived at the militia camp near Boston. He immediately began to gather supplies and train the army. In the fall, Washington approved a bold plan. Continental Army troops would invade Quebec, in eastern Canada. They hoped to defeat British forces there and draw Canadians into the Patriot camp. One of the leaders of this expedition was **Benedict Arnold**. He was an officer who had played a role in the victory at Fort Ticonderoga.

After a grueling march across Maine, Arnold arrived at Quebec in November 1775. By that time, however, winter had set in. Under harsh conditions, the Americans launched their attack but failed. After several months, they limped home in defeat.

The British Retreat from Boston

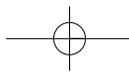
In Massachusetts, the Continental Army had surrounded British forces in Boston. Neither side was able or willing to break the standoff. However, help for Washington was on the way. Cannons were being hauled from Fort Ticonderoga. This was a rough job, since there were no roads across the snow-covered mountains. It took soldiers two months to drag the 59 heavy weapons to Boston, where they arrived in January 1776.

Background

The olive branch is considered a symbol of peace.

Reading History

A. Analyzing Points of View
Why did King George reject the petition?



Armed with these cannons, Washington moved his troops to Dorchester Heights, overlooking Boston. The Americans threatened to bombard the city. General Howe, who was now in charge of the British forces, decided to withdraw his troops. On March 17, about 9,000 British soldiers departed Boston in more than 100 ships. Boston Patriots joyfully reclaimed their city. Although the British had damaged homes and destroyed possessions, Boston was still standing.

ReadingHistory

B. Forming

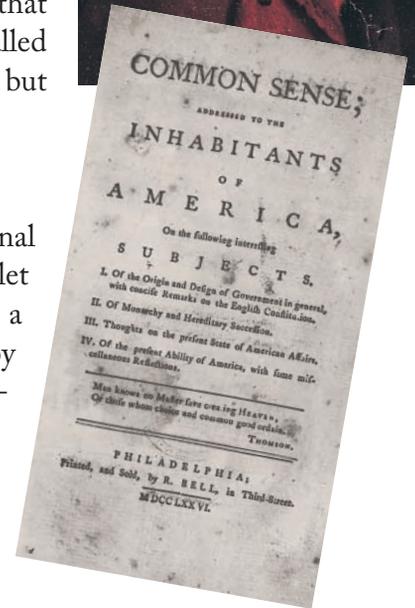
Opinions Did the Loyalists deserve punishment? Explain.

More than 1,000 Loyalist supporters left along with the British troops. Anti-British feeling in Boston was so strong that the Loyalists feared for their safety. Some Patriots even called for Loyalists to be hanged as traitors. This did not happen, but Loyalists' homes and property were seized.

Common Sense Is Published

In early 1776, most Americans still wanted to avoid a final break with Britain. However, the publication of a pamphlet titled *Common Sense* helped convince many Americans that a complete break with Britain was necessary. Written by Thomas Paine, a recent immigrant from England, this pamphlet made a strong case for American independence.

Paine ridiculed the idea that kings ruled by the will of God. Calling George III “the Royal Brute,” Paine argued that all monarchies were corrupt. He also disagreed with the economic arguments for remaining with Britain. “Our corn,” he said, “will fetch its price in any market in Europe.” He believed that America should follow its own destiny.



This is the front page of *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine (above). It was one of the most influential political documents in history.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

Everything that is right or natural pleads for separation. The blood of the slain, the weeping voice of nature cries, “’Tis time to part.” Even the distance at which the Almighty has placed England and America is a strong and natural proof that the authority of the one over the other was never the design of heaven.

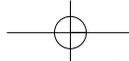
Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*

Common Sense was an instant success. Published in January, it sold more than 100,000 copies in three months. The call for independence had become a roar.

A Time of Decision

The Continental Congress remained undecided. A majority of the delegates still did not support independence. Even so, in May 1776, Congress adopted a resolution authorizing each of the 13 colonies to establish its own government.

On June 7, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia introduced a key resolution. It called the colonies “free and independent states” and declared



HISTORY through ART

The Declaration of Independence is presented for adoption to the Continental Congress by John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin (left to right). John Trumbull painted this work many years after the adoption of the Declaration on July 4, 1776.

What is the artist trying to show about the mood of the American leaders as they declare independence?

that “all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is . . . totally dissolved.”

Congress debated the resolution, but not all the delegates were ready to vote on it. They did, however, appoint a committee to draft a **Declaration of Independence**.

The committee included Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, and **Thomas Jefferson**.

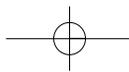
The group chose Jefferson to compose the Declaration. Two reasons for selecting Jefferson were that he was an excellent writer and that he came from Virginia. The members knew that no independence movement could succeed without Virginia’s support. Jefferson immediately went to work. In two weeks, he had prepared most of the Declaration. (See pages 166–169.) On July 2, 1776, Congress considered Lee’s resolution again. Despite some strong opposition, the measure passed. From this point forward, the colonies considered themselves independent.

The Declaration Is Adopted

Two days later, on July 4, 1776, Congress adopted the document that proclaimed independence—the Declaration of Independence. John Hancock, the president of the Congress, was the first to sign the Declaration. According to tradition, he wrote in large letters and commented, “There, I guess King George will be able to read that.” The core idea of the Declaration is based on the philosophy of John Locke. This idea is that people have unalienable rights, or rights that government



The Liberty Bell was rung to announce the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence, in Philadelphia on July 8, 1776.



cannot take away. Jefferson stated this belief in what was to become the Declaration's best-known passage.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

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.

Thomas Jefferson, The Declaration of Independence

ReadingHistory

C. Summarizing

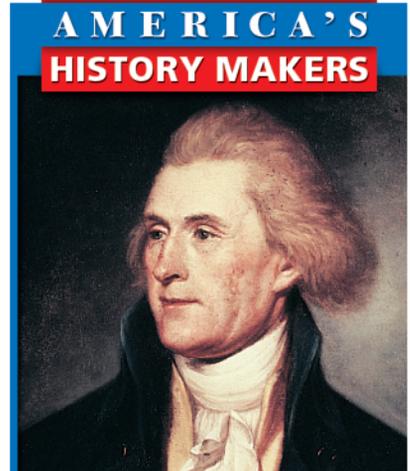
When does the Declaration say it is right to overthrow an established government?

If a government disregards these rights, Jefferson explained, it loses its right to govern. The people then have the right to abolish that government, by force if necessary. They can form a new government that will protect their rights. When Jefferson spoke of “the people,” however, he meant only free white men. Women and enslaved persons were left out of the Declaration.

The Declaration also explained the reasons for breaking with Britain. It then declared the colonies to be free and independent states. This was a very serious action—treason from the British point of view—and the delegates knew it. John Hancock urged the delegates to stand together in mutual defense. Each realized that if the war were to be lost, they would most likely be hanged.

The Declaration closed with this pledge: “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.”

Americans had declared independence. Now they had to win their freedom on the battlefield.



THOMAS JEFFERSON

1743–1826

Jefferson was just 33 when chosen to write the Declaration of Independence. He was already a brilliant thinker and writer and a highly respected political leader. Jefferson came from a wealthy Virginia family. As a child, he was interested in everything, and he became an inventor, scientist, and architect, among other things. In 1769, he began his political career in the House of Burgesses.

Jefferson felt that writing the Declaration was a major achievement of his life. He had that fact carved on his tombstone.

Why do you think Jefferson felt the Declaration was one of his greatest achievements?

Section 4 Assessment

1. Terms & Names

Explain the significance of:

- Ethan Allen
- artillery
- Second Continental Congress
- Continental Army
- Benedict Arnold
- Declaration of Independence
- Thomas Jefferson

2. Taking Notes

Use the chart below to explain colonial views for and against independence.

Views About Independence

For	
Against	

What is the strongest reason for independence? against independence?

3. Main Ideas

- a. What challenges did George Washington face in forming the army?
- b. What forced the British to leave Boston?
- c. What is *Common Sense*?

4. Critical Thinking

Drawing Conclusions

Why did it take colonists so long to declare independence?

THINK ABOUT

- the colonists' British traditions
- the risk of revolution

ACTIVITY OPTIONS

ART

LANGUAGE ARTS

Find out more about a person discussed in this section. Create a **trading card** or write a **biography** of that person.