

The Declaration of Independence

From VOA Learning English, this is The Making of a Nation – American history in Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

This week in our series, we continue the story of the American Revolution.

The year was seventeen seventy-five. Colonists in Massachusetts had fought battles with British troops in the towns of Lexington and Concord. War had not been declared. But citizen soldiers in each of the thirteen American colonies were ready to fight.

Who was going to organize the colonists into an army?

This was the first question that faced the Second Continental Congress when delegates met in May in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The delegates decided that the man for the job was George Washington. He had experience fighting in the French and Indian War. He seemed to know more than any other colonist about being a military commander.

The delegates elected him as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. He accepted the position, but he said he would not take any money for leading the new army.

George Washington left Philadelphia for Massachusetts, where he took command on July third, seventeen seventy-five. Jayne Gordon at the Massachusetts Historical Society says Washington looked very impressive.

“He was tall, he was very elegant, very well put together. It's very interesting because when he came to take command of the Continental Army, many of the New England soldiers were not quite sure what to make of this man who was, after all, from Virginia, not from New England. Washington won them over. His conduct, his grace, I think his discipline was extremely important.”

Back in Philadelphia, the delegates to the Second Continental Congress made one more attempt to prevent war with Great Britain. They sent another message to King George. They asked him to consider their problems and try to find a solution.

The king would not even read the message.

You might wonder: Why would the delegates try to prevent war if the people were ready to fight?

The answer is that most of the members of the Congress -- and most of the colonists -- were not yet ready to break away from England. They continued to believe they could have greater self-government and still be part of the British Empire.

Jayne Gordon at the Massachusetts Historical Society says many colonists felt conflicted and confused about their identity.

“They're Englishmen, they're still Englishmen, but they're not Englishmen. All along what they've wanted is just to have the rights of Englishmen. And it doesn't seem to be possible under an old system.”

A major battle took place in June of seventeen seventy-five, just two days after the delegates in Philadelphia chose George Washington as commander. It was the first major battle of the American Revolution. It was called the Battle of Bunker Hill, although it really involved two hills: Bunker and Breed's. Both are just across the Charles River from the city of Boston.

Massachusetts soldiers dug positions on Breed's Hill. The British started to attack from across the river. The Americans had very little gunpowder. They were forced to wait until the British had crossed the river and were almost on top of them before they fired their guns. Their commander reportedly told them not to fire on the British until they saw the whites of their eyes.

The British climbed the hill. The Americans fired. A second group of British soldiers climbed the hill. The Americans fired again. The third time, the British reached the top, but the Americans were gone. They had left because they had no more gunpowder.

Peter Drummey, a librarian at the Massachusetts Historical Society, reads part of a letter that a young soldier wrote to his mother.

“I was in the fort when the enemy came in, jumped over the wall, and ran half a mile, where balls’ — that is, musket balls — ‘flew like hail stones, and cannon roared like thunder.’”

The British captured Breed's Hill. But Peter Drummey says the Americans still considered the battle a kind of victory.

“The paradox is, even though the American forces are defeated and forced off the hill, nevertheless the British casualties are so high it is at least a moral victory.”

Even the young American soldier who fled the battle wrote to his mother that he would continue fighting for American independence.

“And in fact that's probably what the British learned from this battle. That they could capture this hill at great cost, but the New England countryside is full of hills and they couldn't capture them all back.”

That battle also reduced whatever hope was left for a negotiated settlement. King George declared the colonies to be in open rebellion.

The American colonists fought several battles against British troops in seventeen seventy-five. Yet the colonies were still not ready to declare war. Then, the following year, the British decided to use Hessian soldiers to fight against the colonists. Hessians were mostly German mercenaries who fought for anyone who paid them. The colonists feared these soldiers and hated the British for using them.

In January of seventeen seventy-six, Thomas Paine published a document that strongly influenced the colonists. He named the pamphlet “Common Sense.” It attacked King George, as well as the idea of a monarchy — a government led by a king or queen. The pamphlet called for independence.

About one hundred fifty thousand copies of "Common Sense" were sold in the colonies. Everyone talked about it. As a result, the Second Continental Congress began to act. It opened American ports to foreign shipping. It urged colonists to establish state governments and to write constitutions.

On June seventh, seventeen seventy-six, Virginia delegate Richard Henry Lee proposed a resolution for independence.

The resolution was not approved immediately. Declaring independence was an extremely serious step. Signing such a document would make the delegates traitors to Britain. They would be killed if captured by the British.

The delegates wanted the world to understand what they were doing, and why. So they appointed a committee to write a document giving the reasons for their actions.

One member of this committee was Thomas Jefferson of Virginia. He had already written a report criticizing the monarchy. So the other committee members asked him to write the new document. They said he was the best writer in the group.

They were right. Jefferson was thirty-three years old. It took him seventeen days to write the document. The Second Continental Congress approved it on July fourth, seventeen seventy-six.

It was America's Declaration of Independence.

Historian Gordon Wood at Brown University says the declaration sent a message to more than just the British.

“They're trying to, I think, to signal to the world, 'We are a new nation. We have broken away from this other nation. We're a separate nation and we want recognition of our independence.’”

The Declaration of Independence begins with these words:

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 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 declaration goes on to say:

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 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.

The British believed that the Americans were violating British law. Jefferson argued that the British treatment of the American colonies violated the natural laws of God.

This idea of natural law had been expressed by British and French philosophers more than one hundred years earlier. Jefferson had studied these philosophers in school. But in writing the Declaration of Independence, he said, the words came straight from his heart.

The declaration goes on to list twenty-seven complaints against the king. There are complaints against taxes without the consent of the colonists and against the presence of British troops in the colonies.

After the list, Jefferson went on to write this statement:

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 the full power to levy war, conduct peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do.

Jefferson concluded the declaration with a line that was meant to persuade the delegates to support the most serious step -- revolution.

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.

Delegates to Continental Congress approved and signed the Declaration of Independence on July fourth, seventeen seventy-six. The new country was called the United States of America, and it was at war with Britain. Yet, not everyone in the former colonies agreed with the decision. That will be our story next week.

You can find our series online with transcripts, MP3s, podcasts and pictures at voaspecialenglish.com. You can also follow us on Facebook and Twitter at VOA Learning English. Christopher Cruise read the words of Thomas Jefferson. I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us again next week for The Making of a Nation -- American history in VOA Special English.