

The Declaration of Independence

Our wonderful country was born in 1776. On July 4th, to be exact. So what exactly happened on that historic day? Well, that's when **delegates** of the thirteen original colonies approved the Declaration of Independence, which is, along with the United States Constitution, one of the two **founding documents** of our nation.

The Three Parts of the Declaration

The Declaration of Independence can be divided into three main parts.

The first part is a statement of individual rights. This part is very famous. You may have heard or seen this before:

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.

The second part is a list of grievances against the King of England, George III. This is basically a list of all the reasons the American colonists were angry at the British government and King. They didn't like certain laws that were passed, such as the Stamp Act and the Tea Act; they didn't like that they had to pay taxes without sending representatives to the British government; they didn't like that the King felt that he could ignore or **alter** the **colonial** governments; and they were really upset that the King was trying to force them, with the help of hired armies, to obey him.

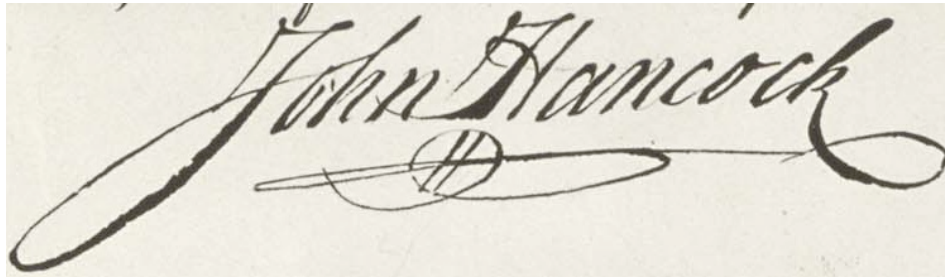
During colonial times, the United States was under the rule of Great Britain. The British government made the people living there pay many taxes that they didn't agree with. The Stamp Act was a tax on paper goods while the Tea Act was a tax on tea.

The final part of the Declaration comes **logically** from the first two. It is a formal **declaration** of Independence. It separates the colonial governments from the British government and the colonial people from the British people. It basically says "we are now our own country and our own people."

How the Declaration Came to Be

All of this happened in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where the Continental Congresses met. A "Committee of Five" was assigned to write the Declaration. These men were John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston and Roger Sherman. Jefferson actually wrote most of it and the others helped him revise it.

July 4th is special because that's when Congress approved the declaration, which means the United States of America was born. July 4th was not really the day that everyone – 56 delegates from the 13 colonies - signed it. We're actually not sure exactly when everyone signed it, but most probably did so in August. And do you know why we use the expression "John Hancock" as another word for "signature?" Well, John Hancock was the President of the Second Continental Congress, and his large and fancy signature appears on the Declaration.



John Hancock's famous signature.