

The
DECLARATION
of
INDEPENDENCE



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INDEPENDENCE
— US

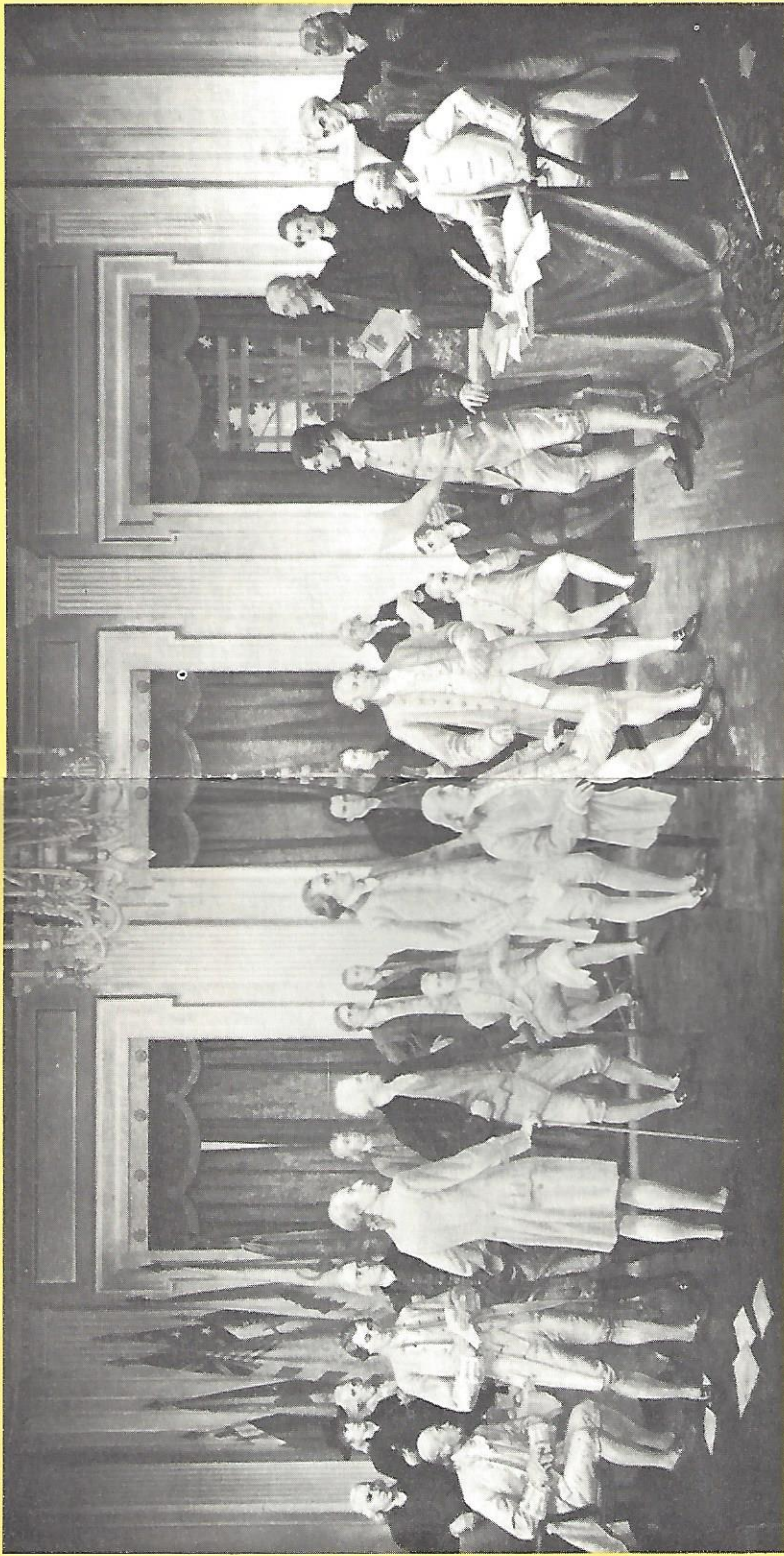
DEPARTMENT MA

John Hancock
MUTUAL LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

*“Dedicated
to the security and independence
of the American family...”*

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"The Day of Decision" — July 2, 1776 — A mural painted by Barry Faulkner for the home office of the John Hancock.

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FRAMING THE DECLARATION

OF the many great days in the history of our country, none is more universally celebrated, none is more filled with meaning to true patriots, than July fourth, 1776, the birthday of the United States of America.

The events which led up to the adoption of the Declaration of Independence tell the story of the birth of a new nation which was "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

FOUNDATION OF INDEPENDENCE

The story of the Declaration of Independence begins far back in our colonial history — long before there was any trouble between the mother country and the colonies, long before the British Parliament began its attempts to tax the colonies. The true seeds of American independence were planted on American soil by the first permanent English settlers, especially the Pilgrims, who came to the New World in search of religious liberty. The search for liberty — religious, civil, or personal — brought thousands of our early settlers to these shores, and peopled the young America with a race of men to whom liberty was more precious than life. From that day to this, our country has clung to the ideal of liberty planted by her founders. It was because this liberty was threatened, and attempts at conciliation with the mother country had failed, that the colonial leaders finally declared on July 4, 1776, that "these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States."

The Declaration of Independence was inevitable. The very nature of the new country destined it to be a land free from external rule. It was a country far from the old European governments, separated by three thousand miles from England. There were no telegraphs, and no cables by which the mother country could keep in touch with her growing young colonies. The slow sailing ships took weeks and often months to carry news from one to the other across the ocean. It was therefore natural that the colonies should develop the widest possible powers of self-government. Their forms of government were modelled on those of England, with local variations, but the conditions of the New World made the spirit different, and the people to a great extent ruled themselves. There were few nobles in the country, and the power and importance of the common man became, as a result, greater than in the countries of the old world.

The people themselves were not, in the true sense, Englishmen. The majority of them were descended from Englishmen, of course, but they were three, four, and sometimes five generations removed from their English forebears. They were Americans. There were many who were not even of English descent, such as the Dutch of New York and New Jersey, the Germans of Pennsylvania, the French Huguenots scattered through all the colonies, and the numerous Scotch-Irish along the whole frontier. These people felt little loyalty to the rule of England.

All these conditions promoted the growth of independence. But although these conditions existed, it was not until the Customs Officers used Writs of Assistance, and Parliament passed the Stamp Act, the Tea Tax, and the Boston Port Bill, that the need for independence began to build up a sentiment in America which grew, slowly at first, until it culminated in the Declaration of Independence.

But independence without first a strong colonial union was impossible. We must remember that the thirteen colonies were not in any sense a unified nation such as our United States

today. The colonies were almost completely separate from one another. They had no common governor, no common legislative body, no congress. It was therefore necessary to bring about some kind of union, before the growing desire for independence could take form.

COLONIAL UNION BEGINS

Such a union finally began in 1774, as a result of events growing out of the Boston Tea Party. Parliament passed the Coercive or Intolerable Acts, including the Boston Port Bill, by which the port of Boston was to be closed on and after June 1, 1774, until such time as the citizens of Boston should see fit to pay for the tea which had been thrown overboard in Boston Harbor on December 16, 1773.

This action on the part of Parliament aroused the whole country. In Virginia, the House of Burgesses passed resolutions of sympathy declaring that Boston was suffering in a common cause. The Royal Governor of Virginia at once dissolved the House of Burgesses as a rebuke for passing such resolutions. The members of the House, now thoroughly aroused over the situation, and wishing to help Boston, met informally at the Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg, Virginia, on May 27, 1774, and recommended an annual Congress of delegates from all thirteen colonies.

The time was ripe for such a step; every colony but Georgia responded by sending delegates to the First Continental Congress, which met in Philadelphia on the fifth day of September, 1774. This Congress, which adjourned October 26, brought the colonies together into the beginning of a union, started an effective American boycott of British goods, and eloquently stated the colonial case against Parliament. Although independence was still a long way off, a second Congress was called for May 10, 1775.

THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

Before the Second Continental Congress met, war had actually begun. At Lexington and Concord, on April 19, 1775, the Minutemen had fought the first battle of the War of the Revolution. Independence now seemed inevitable; but although Congress met in May and appointed Washington Commander-in-Chief of the American Army, thereby declaring war against Great Britain, the colonies were not ready for independence.

The war continued. The siege of Boston, which had begun as the Regulars straggled back into the city the evening of April 19, and the battle of Bunker Hill on June 17, showed both the British and Americans that peace was a long way off.

It seems strange to us, looking back over the events of the year 1775, that the colonies did not at once see the necessity and desirability of declaring their independence from Great Britain. Many of the leaders knew that it had to come. Samuel Adams, John Adams, Richard Henry Lee, Patrick Henry, George Washington, and others favored such a move.

On the other hand, a great many colonists believed that independence was neither necessary nor desirable. *Common Sense*, a remarkable pamphlet by Thomas Paine published in January, 1776, was such an effective argument for independence that it won thousands to the cause. Public opinion is a slow but a surely moving force, and public opinion was not yet ready for extreme measures. But after a year of war, the people were ready. Congress heard the voice of public opinion, and knew the time had come to act.

THE LEE RESOLUTION

On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, a man who for some time had been an advocate of colonial independence, arose in Congress and offered three resolutions, of which the

first declared: "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 connections between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved."

In order that the members might have time to think over this very important resolution, it was laid on the table until the following day, when Congress began discussion in committee of the whole.

We know only in general what was said, as no complete report was made of the speeches in the Continental Congress. But after two days of discussion, the committee of the whole, of which Benjamin Harrison was chairman, voted as follows: "Resolved that the consideration of the first resolution be postponed to this day three weeks, and in the meanwhile, that no time be lost in case the Congress agree thereto, that a committee be appointed to prepare a declaration to the effect of the said first resolution."

The reason for delaying the final vote on the resolution until after the first of July was that it appeared in the discussion that not all the colonies were ready to vote for independence. The representatives of seven or eight of the colonies would have voted in favor of the Lee resolution on June 10, if it had been allowed to come to a vote. But at least three of the colonies would have voted against it, and one or two others were doubtful. By delaying the vote the members who favored immediate independence hoped to bring the doubtful members into line, and thus secure unanimous action in favor of American independence. It was a wise move, and the final result justified the delay.

As Jefferson wrote, "It appearing in the course of these debates that the colonies of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland and South Carolina were not yet matured for falling from the parent stem, but they were fast advancing to that state, it was thought most prudent to wait a while for them."

WRITING THE DECLARATION

The committee to draw up the Declaration of Independence was chosen on June 11. It consisted of the chairman, Thomas Jefferson, and four other members — John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston.

As chairman, Thomas Jefferson was entrusted with the important work of writing what was to become the birth certificate of a new nation. No happier choice could have been made for the authorship of this immortal document. Jefferson, though only thirty-three years of age, had been for some years a leader of the colonial cause in Virginia. He was an excellent lawyer and a thorough student of government. He had already written a document, two years earlier, in which he had set forth the rights of the colonies in a series of instructions to the Virginia delegates to the First Continental Congress.

Jefferson began work at once on the Declaration. The location of the house in which he wrote it has been definitely established. It was on the southwest corner of Market and Seventh Streets in Philadelphia. The house unfortunately is no longer standing, but the desk upon which he wrote has been preserved, and is today among the treasured possessions of the Department of State in Washington. It is a portable desk, beautifully made of mahogany according to Jefferson's own design in 1775, and presented by him in 1825 to his favorite grandson-in-law, Joseph Coolidge, Jr., of Boston with an identifying letter that includes the words, "Politics, as well as Religion, has its superstitions." In 1880, the family presented it to Congress.

Never in the whole range of political writing has the fundamental basis of government been so clearly and so powerfully stated as in Jefferson's Declaration. The ideas were not new — they could not have been new because Jefferson attempted to state what the colonists all believed and were fighting for —

but Jefferson possessed the ability of combining words and phrases that cling to the memory, and that do not grow stale by continuous repetition. To this day such phrases as "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," are as true and as fresh as the day Jefferson penned them.

THE MEANING OF THE DECLARATION

The argument of the Declaration is likewise clear and convincing. Jefferson first outlined the basis of true popular government: "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the consent of the governed." From this statement he continued by declaring "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."

After a word of caution against haste in destroying established governments for small or transient causes, he went on to enumerate the long list of grievances which the colonists had suffered at the hands of the present government, and finally declared that because the present government had broken all the laws of justice and consideration, "these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be *Free and Independent States*."

Having finished the document, Jefferson sent it to the other members of the committee. Franklin and John Adams made a few minor changes, but on the whole the document was sent to the Congress almost exactly as it came from Jefferson's desk.

On June 28, 1776, Jefferson delivered the Declaration to the Congress, where it was read and laid on the table to await the vote on Lee's resolution before coming up for consideration.

INDEPENDENCE DECIDED

Unanimous consent on the Lee resolution was still very doubtful when July first came and the resolution was brought up for final action. Each colony had one vote, the majority of the delegates casting it, while the minority counted for nothing. The delegates from New York still had no instructions from their colony as to what action they should take. The majority of the Pennsylvania delegates opposed independence; while the delegation from Delaware was equally divided, one for, and one against. The other delegate from Delaware, Caesar Rodney, was at home, eighty miles from Philadelphia. He was known to favor independence, so an express rider was sent posthaste to bring him to the Congress in time to cast the deciding vote for his colony. The members from South Carolina had no instructions as to how they should vote on the measure, but they had been instructed to vote with the other colonies for such measures as would promote the best interests of their colony and of the continent.

The proponents of independence secured another day's delay so that they might bring the doubtful members to the point of an affirmative vote. The night of July first must have been a busy one. Caesar Rodney, having received the express rider's message, mounted his horse and rode all night. The South Carolina delegation was at last persuaded that their instructions were broad enough to permit them to vote for independence. Two of the Pennsylvania delegates, who opposed independence, were persuaded to stay away from the session of July 2, while the third was convinced that he should change his vote.

The morning of July second dawned with the independence party in complete control. The Lee resolution was passed without a dissenting vote, for although New York did not vote for it, neither did she vote against it. Independence of the American colonies was definitely decided.

On the next day, July 3, John Adams wrote to his wife: "Yesterday the greatest Question was decided, which ever was debated in America, and a greater perhaps, never was or will be decided among Men. A Resolution was passed without one dissenting Colony, that these united Colonies 'are, and of right ought to be free and independent States.' You will see in a few days a Declaration setting forth the Causes, which have impell'd Us to this mighty Revolution, and the Reasons which will justify it, in the Sight of God and Men."

And in another letter, on the evening of the same day, he said: "The second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epoca, in the History of America. . . . It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other, from this Time forward forever more."

THE ADOPTION

Posterity has seen fit to celebrate not July second, the day on which the question of independence was decided, but July fourth, the day on which the Declaration of Independence was adopted. For the Declaration was the full and complete statement of the action of the colonies which was published to the world, while the Lee resolution lay in the Journal of the Congress, which was not published until years later.

July third and fourth of the year 1776 were spent by the Congress in discussing the Declaration, and several small changes were made before it was finally adopted by unanimous vote late in the afternoon of July fourth. The members did not sign the Declaration at once—in fact, the actual signing was not to take place until August 2.

PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT

Several copies of the Declaration of Independence were printed and sent out July 5 to the governors of the several colonies and to the generals of the army; but it was not until July 8 that the first public reading of the Declaration took place, in the old State House yard (Independence Square) in Philadelphia.

By order of Congress, the bell in the old State House, where Congress was in session, was rung to call together the citizens of Philadelphia. Now known as the "Liberty Bell," it had been cast originally in London in 1752, and was twice recast by Pass and Stow in Philadelphia. In 1753 it again hung in the old State House (Independence Hall). The inscription on the bell was indeed prophetic: "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." This bell is to be seen today in Independence Hall, though it was silenced in 1835 when it cracked while tolling for the funeral of John Marshall. But on July 8, 1776, it announced in loud tones to the people of Philadelphia that a new nation had been born.

An eyewitness of that occasion described it as follows: "There was a large assembly of people in the yard who had been summoned by the tolling of the Liberty Bell, as there had been many times before on the occasion of some public event. Passing through the assembled crowd, the procession of officials, who had charge of proclaiming this State paper to the people, reached the platform, at which time the Liberty Bell ceased ringing. Colonel John Nixon, to whom the high sheriff of Philadelphia had delegated the reading, stood up in the silence. He was a strong-voiced and open-featured man. He began reading with the words 'In Congress, July 4, 1776, a Declaration of the Representatives of the United States of America,' and read through the important document. And it was accepted with general applause and heartfelt satisfaction."

Everywhere, the public reading of the Declaration of Independence was received with the same burst of enthusiasm. "It was read in courts and council halls, on public squares and village greens, from pulpits and platforms. It was received with processions, banquets, and salvos of cannon. In Philadelphia the people tore down the late king's arms from the State House and burned them in a bonfire in Independence Square. In New York the troops and citizens together, after hearing the Declaration read, proceeded to Bowling Green and dragged down the leaden equestrian statue of George III, which was melted up into bullets for the patriots' rifles. The citizens of Savannah, Georgia, after a day of feasting, burned George III in effigy and read a mock funeral service over his grave."

THE SIGNING

Congress, on July 19, ordered the Declaration to "be fairly engrossed on parchment." And this copy is the one which was finally signed by the members on August 2, 1776.

When John Hancock, as President of the Congress, affixed his bold signature to the immortal document, "where all nations should behold it and all time should not efface it," he is reported to have said, upon laying down his pen, "There! John Bull can read my name without spectacles, and may now double his reward of £500 for my head. *That* is my defiance." The other members then signed the Declaration. In all there were fifty-six signers; but it is very likely that fewer than fifty signed it on August 2. The others signed at various times, even as late as 1781, when Thomas McKean, who had voted for the Declaration on July 4 and left Philadelphia almost at once to join the army, was allowed to sign. In fact, seven of the signers were newly elected members of Congress who had not been present to vote for it, and seven others who had voted for it on

July 4 were no longer members and therefore did not sign.

The original of this great state paper is carefully preserved to this day in Washington. After one hundred and eighty years, it exists not only in body but also in spirit, for our country, whose birth it announced, still stands secure upon the foundation of liberty, equality, and justice. These are the great cornerstones of American independence — firmly set in place on July fourth, 1776, when the Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence.



Declaration of Independence

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,

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.

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, 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.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their Public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative Powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise;

the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary Powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people, and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil Power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their acts of pretended Legislation:

For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from Punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

For imposing taxes on us without our Consent:

For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offenses:

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with Power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

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.

JOHN HANCOCK

Button Gwinnett
Lyman Hall
George Walton
William Hooper
Joseph Hewes
John Penn
Edward Rutledge
Thomas Heyward, Jr.
Thomas Lynch, Jr.
Arthur Middleton
Samuel Chase
William Pava
Thomas Stone
Charles Carroll of
Carrollton
George Wythe
Richard Henry Lee
Thomas Jefferson
Benjamin Harrison

Thomas Nelson, Jr.
Francis Lightfoot Lee
Carter Braxton
Robert Morris
Benjamin Rush
Benjamin Franklin
John Morton
George Clymer
James Smith
George Taylor
James Wilson
George Ross
Caesar Rodney
George Read
Thomas McKean
William Floyd
Philip Livingston
Francis Lewis
Lewis Morris
Richard Stockton
John Witherspoon
Francis Hopkinson
John Hart
Abraham Clark
Josiah Bartlett
William Whipple
Samuel Adams
John Adams
Robert Treat Paine
Elbridge Gerry
Stephen Hopkins
William Ellery
Roger Sherman
Samuel Huntington
William Williams
Oliver Wolcott
Mathew Thornton