

THE JEFFERSON IMAGE

JEFFERSON and THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

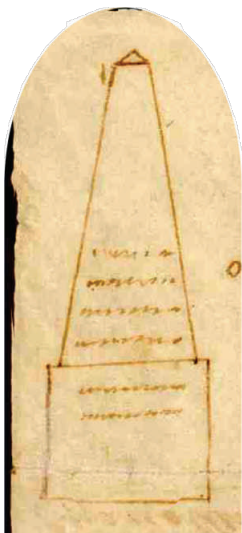
Prelude to War

After the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, Great Britain controlled the eastern seaboard from Georgia to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, with the Appalachian Range as the western boundary. A large area between the Appalachians and the Mississippi River remained in dispute. France retained the province of Quebec. It also kept Louisiane, a large slice of territory in the middle of America which became known as the Louisiana Territory.

War flared again in 1739, and although an uneasy peace was reached, both England and France continued to covet the disputed area to the Mississippi River. France edged down from Quebec and England stretched its colonies westward to the Ohio Valley and they collided in 1754. Over the next two years, England and France collected allies on the European continent and in 1756, the Seven Years War began, called in America the French and Indian War.

Great Britain looked to the colonies to pay its share for the French and Indian War, but the Americans felt no such obligation. They believed that the actions of Parliament were antagonistic to their rights as British citizens and to their tradition of independence. Parliament did not back down. It rejected the argument that it had no authority to levy against the colonies directly, and continued to impose various duties and taxes.

With England's constitutional history as the foundation of his paper, a young Virginian, Thomas Jefferson, penned *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*. Jefferson went beyond the common argument that the colonists were entitled as Englishmen to be ruled only by their elected representatives. He berated the king for permitting Parliament to tax and regulate within the colonies and asserted that the rights of the colonists were "derived from the laws of nature, and not as the gift" of the king.



Jefferson left a sketch for his tombstone on which he wanted these words.

HERE WAS BURIED
THOMAS JEFFERSON
AUTHOR OF THE
DECLARATION
OF
AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE
OF THE
STATUTE OF VIRGINIA
FOR
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
AND FATHER OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA.

Its tone was a little too strong for the delegates assembled in Philadelphia in September 1774, as the First Continental Congress.

There were many loyalists to the crown not swept up by the fervor of the revolutionists. The Second Continental Congress offered in July 1775 the Olive Branch Petition. Again, it promised the continued loyalty of the people if the king would stop hostilities. Reconciliation did not happen. George III answered the Olive Branch Petition by declaring the colonies in "open and avowed rebellion."

Drafting the Declaration

Richard Henry Lee, of Virginia, rose on June 7, 1776, to offer a resolution that these "colonies are, and of a 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."

Before voting on the resolution, the Congress appointed a committee to draft a declaration of independence. The "draft committee" was composed of Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, John Adams of Massachusetts, Robert Livingston of New York, Roger Sherman of Connecticut and Thomas Jefferson of Virginia. Adams proposed Jefferson as the draftsman because a Virginian was needed to show support from the southern colonies. Adams credited Jefferson with a "masterly pen" and the natural draftsman of the committee.

Jefferson recalled that the committee "passed on myself alone to undertake the draught," to justify throwing off any allegiance to the British Crown. He was to draw from the history of English liberty, from the Magna Carta, through the long struggle between the people and the Crown, to the Petition of Rights of 1629 and the Bill of Rights of 1689, to the statements of freedom in the charters of the colonies.

By the time Jefferson sat down to synthesize the mind of this new American citizen, the colonists had for a dozen years pondered their relationship with Great Britain in an increasing output of handbills, pamphlets and newspaper articles. In the past year, the delegates were often reminded of the emerging American attitude from the statements of protest issued by states, counties and towns.

After the committee decided on the general points to be

Cont'd on page 4

made, Jefferson prepared his draft which he showed to Adams and Franklin. After slight changes, he prepared a "fair draft" which was approved by the full committee. It was reported to Congress on June 28. On July 2 Lee's resolution was adopted. The declaration was then debated and approved by nine of the thirteen colonies. It was put to a vote on July 4 and approved by all except New York, which later consented on July 19. The Declaration was signed by all members of Congress on August 2, 1776.

Jefferson was not happy with the editing of his work. He sent a copy of his draft along with the final version as changed by Congress to Richard Henry Lee. Lee agreed the declaration had been "mangled." He also sent a copy to Edmund Pendleton who agreed that it was "offered for the worse." Again, in 1783, Jefferson wrote to James Madison about the "alterations." He never accepted them. In his Autobiography in 1821, he included a copy of his draft with the "parts struck out" and "inserted" by Congress.

The role of Congress in the final version of the Declaration has been examined in detail by a number of historians. There were word changes and additions. In some cases, large portions, on the slave trade, and the relationship of the colonies to the king, were deleted. But the preamble, Jefferson's statement of how government relates to its people, remained virtually as Jefferson had conceived it. What Jefferson wrote cannot be disputed. He had also furnished a copy of his draft to George Wythe, who was the head of Virginia's delegation to the Continental Congress. When Wythe died in 1806, a copy of Jefferson's final draft was found among his papers.

Sources of the Declaration

Jefferson is acknowledged as the author of the preamble to the Virginia Constitution in which he listed the grievances suffered by Virginia at the hands of Parliament. These are similar to the grievances Jefferson listed in the Declaration of Independence, but in the Declaration, Jefferson created a different preamble. He opened with the arresting: "When in the course of human events..." and from there to the promise that "all men are created equal." It is this preamble which makes the Declaration unique, but Congress seems to have given it the least attention. Perhaps they were not so captivated by the majesty of this language, as were generations of Americans to come.

There are strong similarities in the Declaration to the Virginia Bill of Rights authored by George Mason. The Bill of Rights was adopted by the Virginia Convention on June 12, 1776, and was available to the delegates at the Second Continental Congress prior to Jefferson's writing of the Declara-

tion. Earlier, in July 1774, the Fairfax County Resolves asserted that the laws and taxes by Parliament were "totally incompatible with the Privileges of a free People, and the natural Rights of Mankind." More so than in England, the colonists were influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment. John Locke's theory of the "social compact," was well known. When Parliament moved to impose the Stamp Act, and other levies, resistance to Parliament grew.

The spirit of independence was felt in the American mind, but the spirit needed expression. Jefferson defined it for us, in a timeless way, so that each July 4th these words can ring again, as though new.

Jefferson's Emergence as the Author

It does not appear that Jefferson's unique role in drafting the Declaration was generally known by the public. Jefferson did not advance himself, an attitude in keeping with the times. It was not until the early 1780s that Jefferson's role began to emerge. A sermon published in 1783 cited Jefferson's contribution. In the 1790s, while Secretary of State, as factions of political differences intensified between Federalists and Republicans, the Declaration became a weapon or shield, and Jefferson was increasingly identified as its author.

The originality of Jefferson's preamble was directly attacked in 1819 when the *Raleigh Register* published the Mecklenburg Resolves, which were supposedly adopted in 1775. These Resolves, by a number of Mecklenburg county residents, claimed independence for this North Carolina county. Such an action predates the Declaration of Independence by more than a year and contains phrases identical to the Declaration. No basis has ever been produced to support this claim, but it caused a brief flare-up over Jefferson's authorship.

John Adams seemed perturbed by the increasing fame accorded Jefferson and he asserted in 1822 that "there is not an idea in it but has been hackneyed in Congress for two years before." In response to this, Jefferson acknowledges in a letter to James Madison in 1823 that this may be true. "Whether I gathered my ideas from reading or reflection, I do not know. I know only that I turned to neither book or pamphlet while writing it. I did not consider it as any part of my charge to invent new ideas altogether and to offer no sentiment which had ever been expressed before." In a letter to Henry Lee in 1825, Jefferson conceived his task was to give "expression to the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion." Jefferson reflected that the colonies were forced to resort to arms for redress and must then appeal to the tribunal of the world for justification. "This was the object of the Declaration of Independence."

By Richard E. Dixon