

The Revolutionary Era and the Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence has shaped thinking about freedom, liberty, justice, and human rights since the American Revolution. Activities explore the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention and the Declaration of Sentiments; Eleanor Roosevelt and the writing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and what students think a 21st century Declaration should declare. A Media Literacy Connection examines Declarations of Independence on social media.

Standard 2.1: The Revolutionary Era and the Declaration of Independence

Apply knowledge of the American Revolutionary period to determine the experiences and events that led the colonists to declare independence; explain key ideas about equality, representative government, limited government, rule of law, natural rights, common good, and the purpose of government in the Declaration of Independence. (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Science) [8.T2.1]

British attempts to assert tighter control over its North American colonies and the colonial resolve to pursue self-government led to a colonial independence movement and the Revolutionary War. (AP U.S. History Key Concept) [3.1]

FOCUS QUESTION: What Key Ideas are the Foundations of United States Government?



["Declaration of Independence"](#) by John Trumbull | Public Domain

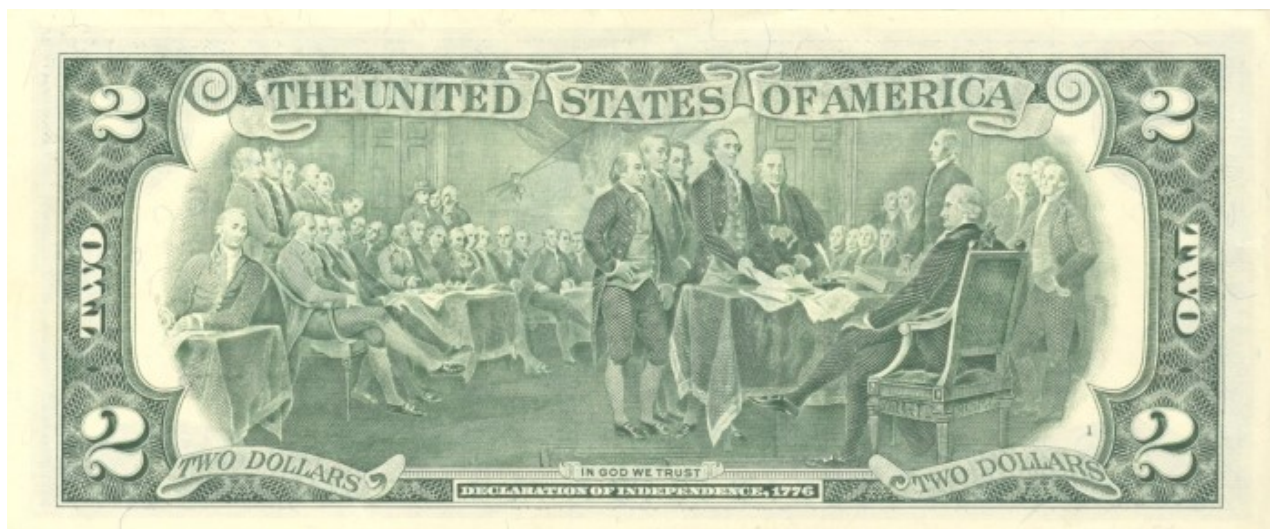
Drafted by Thomas Jefferson, edited by Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, and adopted by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, the [Declaration of Independence](#) consists of 1,320 of the most famous words and phrases in history:

- "When in the course of human events"
- "We hold these truths to be self-evident"
- "All men are created equal"
- "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"
- "The consent of the governed"

The Declaration asserted that all men have "inalienable rights" that had been violated by a "long train of abuses and usurpations" committed by the king and government of England. Listing the laws and acts that the colonists felt were intolerable, the Declaration stated in no uncertain terms that **people had a right to cut ties with a government that they believe is unjust.**

A statement of principles and protests, the Declaration did not have the force of law. It is the United States Constitution that "establishes the shape of government, and the limits and boundaries of the freedom it protects. Still the Declaration of Independence remains the outstanding example of the spirit, as opposed to the letter, of U.S. law" (Teaching American History Professional Development Project, nd., p. 1).

The signing of the Declaration has been immortalized by [John Trumbull's](#) famous painting (shown below). But as journalist Olivia B. Waxman has noted in *Time* magazine, "[This Painting is Probably How You Imagine the Original Fourth of July. Here's What Wrong with It.](#)"



John Trumbull's Painting is found on the back of the two dollar bill

["USTwoDollarBillBack"](#) | Public Domain

The Declaration of Independence is a key document of the American Revolution, but by the time it was signed the Revolutionary War was well underway, having begun with the Battles of Lexington and Concord (April 19, 1775) and the Battle of Bunker Hill (June 17, 1775).

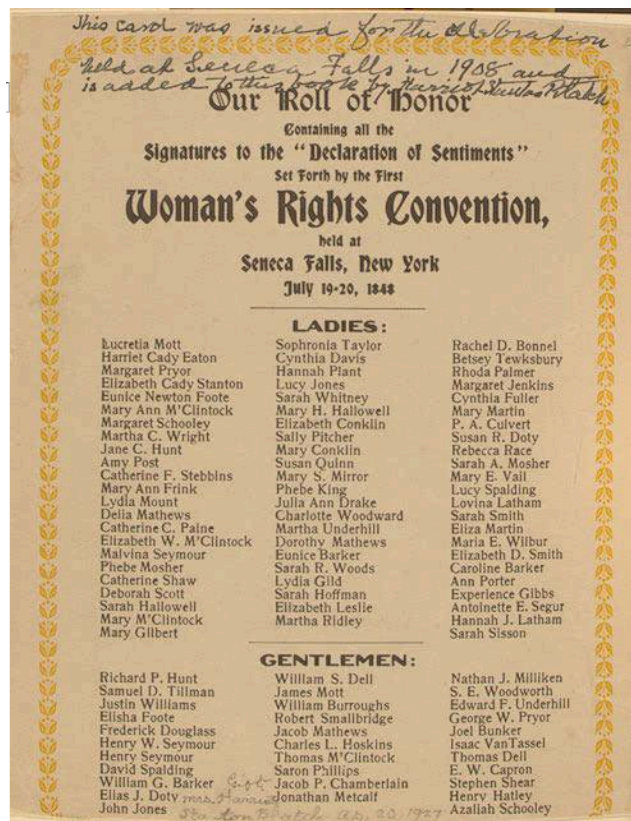
The Declaration was also not the only one as states, towns, counties, and assorted other bodies had issued nearly 100 declarations leading up to July 4, 1776 ([America's 100 Other Declarations of Independence](#)).

Modules for this Standard Include:

1. [INVESTIGATE: The Seneca Falls Convention and the Declaration of Sentiments \(1848\)](#)
2. [UNCOVER: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)
3. [ENGAGE: What Would a 21st Century Declaration of Independence Declare?](#)
 - MEDIA LITERACY CONNECTIONS: Declarations of Independence on Social Media

1. INVESTIGATE: The Seneca Falls Convention and the Declaration of Sentiments (1848)

The [Seneca Falls Convention](#) was organized in western New York in 1848 by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and a collection of Mott's fellow Quakers.



"List of Signatures of the Declaration of Sentiments" by Mcv is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

The Convention lasted six days and was attended by 300 people. On the morning of July 19, 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton read aloud what would become one of the most important documents in United States history, the [Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions](#).



["Engraving of Elizabeth Cady Stanton"](#) (created before 1869) by Henry Bryan Hall, Jr. | Public Domain

Modeled after the Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of Sentiments contained a **list of the grievances and inequalities caused by men**, which paralleled those caused by the King of England. It included a list of demands for equality for women in the home, at work, and in education, as well as a call for women's suffrage (the right to vote in political elections). Frederick Douglass attended and spoke at the convention, supporting suffrage. The resulting Declaration of Sentiments was signed by 100 people.

The Declaration of Sentiments provides teachers and students with opportunities to compare and contrast the issues that led the colonists to declare independence from England with the events and issues that led women to declare their rights as equal members of society. The [Timeline of Women's Rights in Early America](#) (National Women's History Museum) offers an overview of the status of women in early America.

Teachers from different subject fields can integrate the Declaration of Sentiments in curriculum and instruction (submitted by [Sharon Edwards](#)):

- **History teachers** — This is as important a document as the one it was modeled on and ought to be taught in the time frame of the teaching the Declaration of Independence, for it is a Declaration of Independence— a voice of resistance to what is wrong and a demand for equality. Also, consider exploring the role of Frederick Douglass and other male advocates for change who took the women seriously and supported their goals and desires.
- **English teachers** — Read and record the Declaration of Sentiments in kid-friendly vocabulary so the language is accessible to students whose level and knowledge of English need this material translated into more understandable terms. Women as voters, is a compelling story. In the lives of students there will be issues parallel to women's rights that occasion disagreement and may in 100 years be seen the same way as wrongheaded thinking. Maybe that issue is students having no voice in school policies, schedules, instructional tracks kids are assigned to, disciplinary procedures, or length of the school day and school year. At some future point these exclusions will seem unwarranted and as ridiculous as the view of women was in the mid 1800s.

- **Math teachers** - The long history of change of heart and mind and thinking about the changes to society that might have come about with much sooner adoptions of what we consider to be unquestionable rights— the opposite of what women had then. Time, resistance, inertia, propulsion, energy transfer (yes, I recognize that these are now describing physics are quantifiable and the same forces are affecting students' lives now as they wish they had voices in making changes to schools and the way learning happens, and are told always, no, you are not capable of doing the things you want to do because you are too young). Math words are everywhere: change— implying more than of some things and less than of others— not capable, too young, not reliable or trustworthy.
- **All teachers** - Consider who you are and why. Those historical doers set the path. Now, we could be history setting doers by rethinking the ways learning happens, the big ideas we feature in the content and how much we teach about equity and students' rights. In math and science, are you featuring the contributions of women and immigrants with the curriculum and concepts? In English and history are you connecting these histories to students' lives and asking for their writing of their ideas, positions, and platforms for change?

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Compare and Contrast the Declarations**
 - Read the Declaration of Independence and Declaration of Sentiments side-by-side.
 - What similarities do you find?
 - What differences do you find?
 - What has been the lasting impact of each Declaration?
 - What events and issues influenced the writing of each Declaration?
- **Create a Poster**
 - Use the following resources to define what rights did women had and not have in early America:
 - [Women's Rights in the Early Republic](#)
 - [Women and the Law](#)
 - "Coverture stipulated that a married woman did not have a separate legal existence from her husband.
 - **Right of dower** meant women had a right to property they brought into the marriage as well as to life usage of one-third of their husbands' estate" ([President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2010, para. 1](#)).
 - [The Legal Status of Women, 1776-1830](#), Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History
- **Analyze Primary Sources**
 - [Women's Rights: Primary Sources and Teaching Activities](#), National Archives DocsTeach

Online Resources for the Declaration of Sentiments and Women's Rights in Early America

- [Seneca Falls Convention](#), Learning Plan, National Women's History Museum
- [Seneca Falls Declaration](#), Learning Plan, Teaching American History Project, Windham (Connecticut) Public Schools
- [From the Declaration of Independence to the Declaration of Sentiments](#), National Women's History Museum
- [Suffering for Suffrage](#), Learning Plan
- [She Votes!](#) Podcast series hosted by journalists Ellen Goodman & Lynn Sherr released in 2020 for the 100 anniversary of the 19th Amendment
- PICTURE BOOK: [Her Name is Mary Katharine: The Only Woman Whose Name Is on the Declaration of Independence](#). Ella Schwartz (Christy Ottaviano Books, 2022).

2.UNCOVER: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

[Eleanor Roosevelt](#) was the wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and one of the most influential first ladies and women leaders in United States history.

A political activist throughout her life, Eleanor Roosevelt worked for women's rights and the end of discrimination and poverty in the nation and the world. She was a diplomat, active internationally after World War II in promoting peace and freedom for all people. She was a prolific writer, authoring a six-days-a-week newspaper column titled [My Day](#) that ran from December 30, 1935 to September 26, 1962. At its height, the *My Day* column appeared in 90 newspapers nationwide with a readership of over four million people. Learn more about her expansive political career: [Eleanor Roosevelt, First Lady and Citizen Activist](#).

Eleanor Roosevelt has been called the "First Lady of the World." One of her most important achievements was inspiring the writing of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).



Eleanor Roosevelt holding poster of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (in English), Lake Success, New York. November 1949. FDR Presidential Library & Museum 64-165. [CC BY 2.0](#)

Adopted by the United Nations in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights consists of **30 articles listing the basic rights that every person anywhere on Earth should have**. The Universal Declaration was a direct response to the horrors of atrocities of World War II. The opening to its Preamble reads: "Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world" ([United Nations](#)).

As summarized in *National Geographic Magazine* (2008), the Declaration stated:

- All human beings are born free (Article 1).
- No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment (Article 5).
- No one shall be held in slavery or servitude (Article 4).
- Everyone has the right to rest and leisure (Article 24).
- Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 18).
- Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance (Article 25.2).
- Everyone has the right to education (Article 26.1).
- Everyone has the right to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits (Article 27.1).



[Watch on YouTube](#)

The following wiki page offers more background on [The Creation of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Create a Human Rights Mosaic**
 - Design a mosaic image for one or more of the rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

*Amherst Middle School teachers Kat Sherrick and Irene LaRoche created this lesson for students. For examples of student work, visit [Year 4 2017-2018 Human Rights Art Project Presentation for Methods](#).

Online Resources for Eleanor Roosevelt and the Declaration of Human Rights

- [Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: A Lesson Plan for Middle and Upper Grades](#)
- [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) from Ken Burns in the Classroom, PBS LearningMedia
- [Do You Know Your Rights?](#) Learning Interactive from Amnesty International

3.ENGAGE: What Would a 21st Century Declaration of Independence Declare?

The Declaration that was adopted on July 4, 1776 was not the first declaration of independence in the colonies (Worcester, Massachusetts adopted [America's First Declaration of Independence](#) on October 4, 1774) nor was it the only declaration of rights and independence in United States and world history.

Today, more than half of the countries represented at the United Nations (193) have a signed declaration of independence document. Here is the [list of Declarations of Independence from Wikipedia](#).

Other notable declarations in United States and world history include:

- [Virginia Declaration of Rights](#) (1776)
- [Mashpee Wampanoag Declaration of Independence](#) (1833). Select *Petition, 1833* to view the document.
- [Texas Declaration of Independence](#) (1836)
- [Declaration of Sentiments](#) (1848)
- [A Declaration of Liberty by the Representatives of the Slave Population of the United States of America](#) (1858)
- [Farmers Declaration of Independence](#) (1873)
- [United Steelworkers Declaration of Independence](#) (1936)
- [Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam](#) (1945)
- [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (1948)
- [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (1959)
- [A Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace](#) (1996)
- [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (2007)

There are famous statements of independence by individual writers and activists, including:

- [Dorothea Dix Memorial to the Massachusetts Legislature, 1843](#)
- [Frederick Douglass "The Meaning of July 4th for the Negro" speech, 1852](#)
- ["I Have a Dream Speech in Its Entirety](#), Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., August 28, 1962 (Audio and Text from NPR)
- [Fourth of July Address at Independence Hall](#), John F. Kennedy, 1962

All of these declarations were written before the 21st century's technology, climate, and politically-interconnected global world. Many think an updated Declaration is needed; for example, one commentator proposed that instead of text that says "all men are created equal," revised language might say "all humankind is entitled to fully enjoy unalienable rights" ([A 21st Century Declaration of Independence](#), *KQED*, July 2, 2021).

What should a 21st century Declaration of Independence declare? What language from the original Declaration would you change? What language would you keep? What statements about human rights, economic opportunities, rules of law, climate justice, technology, or other issues would you add?

Media Literacy Connections: Declarations of Independence on Social Media

Throughout U.S. history, oppressed and disenfranchised groups (women, African Americans, farmers, workers, indigenous peoples, and more) have set forth their declarations of independence. Modeled after the original Declaration of Independence written by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, these documents set forth their visions for achieving full rights, freedoms, and liberties as members of American democracy.

Imagine these groups had access to modern social media platforms. How would they have utilized social media to express their ideas and gain support for their goals?

- [Activity 1: Design a Social Media Campaign for a Declaration of Independence](#)
- [Activity 2: Design a Modern-Day Declaration of Independence](#)



Suggested Learning Activities

- **Make a Declaration or Statement of Independence Jamboard**
 - Choose one of the Declarations of Independence listed about and display in a jamboard?
 - What is the document about in kid-friendly language?
 - Who wrote the document?
 - Why was it written?
 - Why is it important?
 - What image or images convey the meaning of the document?
- **Compare and Contrast Declarations of Independence**
 - Using the resources listed above, what are individuals and groups declaring about independence and freedom in their documents and speeches?
 - How are they alike? How do they differ?
 - Is a Declaration an effective way to persuade people to support a cause or a movement?
- **Analyze a Work of Art**
 - **Learning Plan:** [Memorializing Independence: John Trumbull's *The Declaration of Independence*](#), Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art
 - How does the artist use setting, image and detail to communicate meaning to viewers?

Online Resources for other Colonial Era Declarations of Independence

- [Text of the Declaration of Independence](#) (1776)
- [Text of the British Reply to the Declaration of Independence](#) (1776)
- [Malden, Massachusetts Declaration of Independence](#) (May 27, 1776)
- [Vermont Declaration of Independence](#) (1777)
- [The Declaration of Independence in Global Perspective](#), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, 2019

Standard 2.1 Conclusion

The principles of the Declaration of Independence, declared Frederick Douglass in his 1852 Fourth of July address, are "saving principles" and people must be "true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost." **INVESTIGATE** discussed efforts by women to assert their rights and freedoms through the Seneca Falls Convention's Declaration of Sentiments. **UNCOVER** explored Eleanor Roosevelt and the writing of Universal Declaration of Human Rights. **ENGAGE** asked who wrote other declarations of independence in U.S. and world history and what might a 21st century declaration declare.



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