

Jefferson's Framing of the Declaration of Independence

Nathaniel Costello

Shenendehowa High School
11th Grade

When Thomas Jefferson ultimately expired on July 4, 1826 (eight-three years after being born on April 13, 1743, in Albemarle County, Virginia) he wished for his epitaph to display that he was the author: “of the Declaration of American Independence, the statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and father of the University of Virginia” so as to be remembered posthumously as an American hero (in regards to the Declaration of Independence). The day of his death ironically occurred exactly fifty years after the Declaration of Independence was adopted by Congress (soon to be known as the “shout heard round the world” in that the impact of this document could be felt worldwide with other national revolutions occurring in Europe and Latin America). This then would provide inspiration for similar further movements in other countries. Yet young Jefferson was merely the author of this illustrious document, while the original idea expressed can be traced back to Richard Henry Lee of Virginia on June 7, 1776. It was after this that the Continental Congress decided upon a committee containing men such as: Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, John Adams of Massachusetts, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, and Robert R. Livingston of New York (Jefferson worked well in committees of approximately three to four people where he could discuss problems).

While Jefferson was unanimously elected to head the committee to write the document, John Adams believed that despite his colorful accomplishments his efforts had not been fully recognized. Adams believed that he had been involved with the independence movement (and in the Continental Congress) as long as Jefferson had been, and he (Adams) should write it. In addition, some believed that Benjamin Franklin should write the document, however Adams expressed that Franklin was too unfamiliar with domestic politics to be involved with such an influential document (Franklin had more experience in dealing with diplomatic relationships

with other countries). Nevertheless, in retrospect Adams never imagined that this document would long be remembered and he did not want the assignment forsaken to his name.

However, Jefferson was, in turn selected by this committee (determined June 11, 1776) to be the author of the Declaration and he worked arduously on this work throughout the summer of 1776 (drafted from June 11 till June 28, 1776). Yet, Jefferson's qualifications should not be overlooked. The most obvious instance of Jefferson's capability to craft the Declaration can be seen in his involvement in the Virginia constitution, writing three drafts for this document (this was after the Virginia Convention had called for independence on May 15, 1776, so the Virginia constitution can be seen as a predecessor to the Declaration of Independence). For example, he had previous experience with other political works, such as his 1774 pamphlet *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* (Jefferson was at the time a delegate to the Virginia Convention from Albemarle County). In addition, he was an able legislator having been a member of Virginia's House of Burgesses. He also employed his legal training to draft a revision of Virginia's legal code in 1776. This was one of many instances where Jefferson's mighty pen was shown (additionally he often drafted important statements for his fellow colleagues). He was also privately viewed as an extremely scholarly individual, in that he was one of the only early people to understand the calculus associated with Newtonian mechanics.

Jefferson's original work would eventually be edited numerous times (eighty-six changes in total, a majority of which were suggested by John Adams and Benjamin Franklin) but often under the close watch of Jefferson (many of the revisions while done in Jefferson's handwriting were not always agreed upon by Jefferson, and Jefferson often noted in the margins were Adams and Franklin had commented). While Jefferson's "original Rough draught" contained an extensive list of grievances against King George III (After hearing the Declaration of

Independence read on July 9, the American army smashed the figure of King George III at the foot of Broadway on the Bowling Green in New York City) they would be altered for the final draft. In addition, Jefferson used ideals set forth by John Locke such as life and liberty, but threw out the notion of property and in its place declared that the populace had in addition the right to pursue happiness. Copies of this document were then handed out to both Loyalists and Rebels alike. On June 28, Jefferson's "Rough draught" was read in the Continental Congress and was consequently revised as previously described. Congress would, in due course, declare informal independence on July 2, 1776 (in the midst of the Revolutionary War nonetheless) and finally adopt the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. Afterwards the Declaration was officially issued to the states on January 10, 1777. Shortly thereafter, the Declaration was signed by fifty-six Congress members (with people beginning to sign on August 2, 1776).

The legacy of the Declaration lived on, in that besides just the states receiving copies of the document declaring American independence, copies were passed around between important political and military figures. George Washington got his copy of the Declaration (also now known as the "Dunlap Broadside") on July 9th. Washington had his personal copy read to the Continental Army in New York as motivation for the war. After the war, Washington hung his copy of the document which remains one of the only twenty-four to survive. The Declaration of Independence also had an impact on countries other than America. For instance, Lafayette hung a copy of it at his home in France, soon to be accompanied by the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which was to be written thirteen years later after the French Revolution was fought from 1789 till 1799.

Biography

I believe that I deserve this scholarship due to the level of writing that I have achieved in this essay, along with the fact that I not only excel in history (being currently involved with AP U.S. History as well as National History Day), but also in other specialties. I have earned various school achievements for the highest average in my class in both science and mathematics respectively. One might ponder as to why I have not achieved success on a broader level, and this can be attributed to the fact that I am profoundly involved with soccer and FIRST Robotics outside of school. With these aforementioned activities it is difficult to frequently participate in academic activities outside of school. However, when given the seldom chance to do a state or regional competition for soccer or robotics I habitually attain results, having won a statewide soccer shootout in ninth grade and my school robotics team being an award-winning year after year.

As well as the previous activities mentioned I am also involved with volunteer work in the community through my church. Through my volunteer efforts, it has dawned on me how beneficial it is to help those around you. For instance, last year when I composed a story of a woman's life and read it to her, it really touched my heart. She was a stroke patient that lived in an assisted living community, and needed her daughter to convey her information to me (at times). This resonated with me even more so, because I had known the woman's great-grandson as a child.

Bibliography

"Declaration of Independence." *National Archives and Records Administration*. Web. 10 Dec. 2009.

<<http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration.html>>.

"Declaring Independence: Drafting the Documents." *Library of Congress Home*. Web. 10 Dec.

2009. <<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/declara/declara2.html>>.

Ferling, John. *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800 (Pivotal Moments in American History)*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2004. Print.

Kennedy, David M., Elizabeth Cohen, and Thomas Bailey. *The American Pageant (13th Edition)*. 13 ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005. Print.

Kennedy, Roger G. *Burr, Hamilton, and Jefferson: A Study in Character*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1999. Print.

Staloff, Darren. *Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson: The Politics of Enlightenment and the American Founding*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2005. Print.

Vidal, Gore. *Inventing a Nation: Washington, Adams, Jefferson*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. Print.