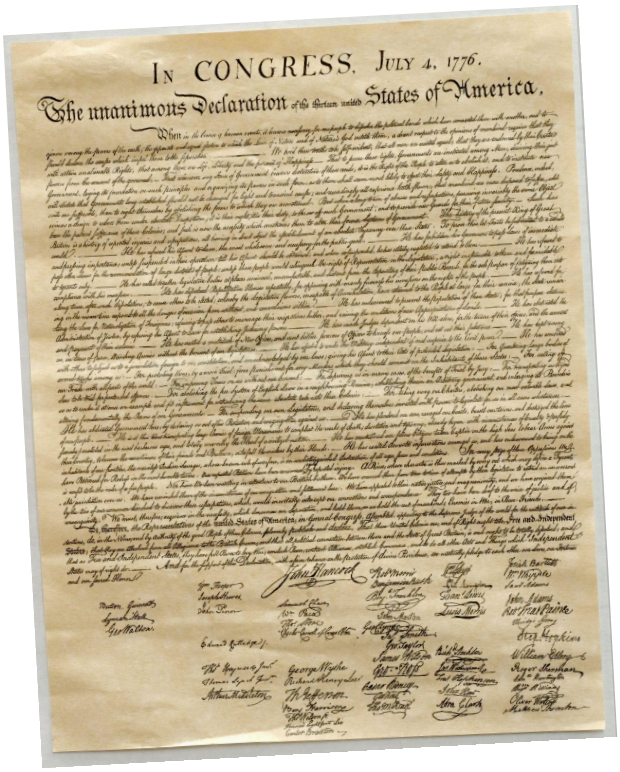
UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE
BIDEN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY & ADMINISTRATION

Delaware Center for Civics Education
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Teaching and Commemorating the United States Declaration of Independence

1776-2026

To Whom Does the Honor Go? Drafting the Declaration

About these Lessons Plans

Lessons developed for our Teaching and Commemorating the U.S. Declaration of Independence project are sponsored in part by the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources Mid-Atlantic and US Territories Region Program, located at the American Historical Association. Content created and featured in partnership with the TPS Mid-Atlantic and US Territories Region does not indicate an endorsement by the Library of Congress.

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To Whom Does the Honor of Being Asked Go? [Drafting the Declaration of Independence]

Estimated Time: *75-90 minutes*

> *"...memory has other masters than the past. It belongs equally to the present."*
>
> *Robert E. McGlone*
> *Journal of American HIstory,*
> *Sept. 1998 Vol 85, No. 2, p. 438*
> *Accessed here.*

Lesson Introduction: There are conflicting accounts about who was asked to draft the Declaration of Independence. One account suggests that Thomas Jefferson alone was asked. A second account suggests that both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were asked. In this lesson, students will analyze primary source documents to discover that there are competing accounts, and use historical thinking skills to form a credible, evidence and reason-based conclusion about who was asked.

Suggested responses to questions posed in the lesson appear in blue font below.

Delaware Social Studies Standard(s): This lesson offers opportunities to address elements of the following Delaware civics and history standards.

- **History Standard 2a, Grades 4-5 [Analysis]:** Students will draw historical conclusions and construct historical accounts from primary and secondary source materials
- **History Standard 3, Grades 4-5 [Interpretation]:** Students will explain why historical accounts of the same event sometimes differ and relate this explanation to the evidence presented or the point-of-view of the author.

- **History Standard 2b, Grades 6-8 [Analysis]**: Students will examine historical documents, artifacts, and other materials, and analyze them in terms of credibility, as well as the purpose, perspective, or point of view for which they were constructed.

Essential Question: Who was Asked [to draft the Declaration of Independence]?

Enduring Understanding: Students will understand that there are primary source documents that support competing claims made by Thomas Jefferson and John Adams regarding who was asked to draft the Declaration, and that such claims are to be judged on the bases of reason and the weight of available evidence. As is the case with many questions about the past, we may never know an irrefutable answer unless new evidence is found.

Warm-up:

1. Present the following scenario to students: Imagine that there was an agreement reached by influential people in our country to write a one page document that would likely change the course of history and be remembered for centuries. Then suppose that only one person will be chosen to write the document but two different adults are being considered for the assignment. Candidate A is 70 years old and is an excellent writer. Candidate B is 77 years old and has more knowledge about the topic that will be discussed in the one page document.
    a. Why might both people be eager to be the one chosen to write that document? [they will be remembered in history, national honor, personal pride, books and movies might be made about them, they might be honored with parades and statues etc.]
    b. Who do you think should be selected to write it and why? [opinion question]

Activity 1: Understanding Context

Depending on grade level and prior instruction, Activity 1 may or may not be needed.

1. **Vocabulary Development/Concept Formation:** Write the word "context" on the board. Explain that context refers to the situation or circumstances that surround an event and that help us understand why the event occured.
2. **Provide Examples**
    a. **Example 1**
        i. The Event: Students are seen walking into school wearing costumes.
        ii. The Context: It's Halloween.
    b. **Example 2**
        i. The Event: A student who wears sneakers, jeans, and a t-shirt to school every day comes in wearing a suit and tie.
        ii. The Context: The student has a job interview.
    c. **Example 3**
        i. The Event: Librarians have noticed that a lot of people are checking out books about the Declaration of Independence.
        ii. The Context: The 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence will be celebrated on July 4, 2026.
3. **Scaffolded Support**
    a. Give students a scenario and ask them to engage in a think-pair-share in which they speculate on possible contexts.
        i. Scenario 1: An unusual high number of students are absent from school. What might be the context?
        ii. Scenario 2: All of the leaves are falling off of trees. What might be the context? [it's the Fall season]
        iii. Scenario 3: Students across the hall are having a pizza party. What might be the context? [students have achieved a goal set by the teacher e.g., test scores, behavior etc.]
        iv. Scenario 4: The President of the United States decides to give a special speech and all shows on TV will be interrupted. What might be the context? [the country has landed a man on the moon or Mars; a war has erupted; there is a serious downturn in the economy; the President is running for re-election or resigning etc.]

4. **Check for Understanding: Fade the Scaffolds** - Invite students to work with a partner or in small groups to generate similar examples of context by providing an event and the context that helps explain why it occurred (examples can be hypothetical or real). Ask volunteers to share their examples and check for understanding.

5. **Reading: Contextualizing the 1820s**
    a. Tell students that they are now going to read about the context that will help them better understand why two letters written by famous Americans were written in the 1820s.
    b. See **Resource 1**. Set a purpose for the reading - ask students to read Resource 1 and be prepared to…
        i. Describe the context in which Timothy Pickering wrote a letter to John Adams. [the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence was approaching, the key figures in the American Revolution were dying out].
        ii. Explain why Timothy Pickering wrote his letter to John Adams. [he wanted to learn about the history of declaring independence from someone who was there at the time]

Activity 2: Thinking Chronologically

1. See **Resource 2**. Distribute copies. Ask students to read the events on the timeline as described in the dated boxes.
2. Think Pair Share: Ask students to think about answers to the two questions at the bottom of Resource 1, pair off with a partner and discuss their ideas, then have volunteers share out responses with the whole class.
    a. How old were John Adams and Thomas Jefferson when they wrote their letters about the history of the Declaration of Independence in the 1820s? Why might this matter? Jefferson was 80; Adams was 87. Mental functioning and memory might have been diminishing. Or, Adams had more experience than Jefferson but Jefferson's mind and memory might be sharper.

b. How many years elapsed between the year when the Declaration of Independence was being written and approved and when Adams and Jefferson wrote their letters about the history of the Declaration of Independence? Why might this matter? [approximately 47 years during which the abilities of both men to recall details would likely have faded in varying degrees]

Activity 3: Document analysis - Excerpt of a Letter from John Adams to Thomas Pickering (August 6, 1822)

1. Access Resource 3: Letter from Adams to Pickering. Explain that students are now invited to read the letter from John Adams to Thomas Pickering. They should have the following questions in mind as they read the letter:
    a. According to the letter, who was asked to draft the Declaration of Independence? [Jefferson's letter claims he was asked; Adams letter suggests that both Jefferson and he were asked]
    b. Is there anything about the letter that might make a reader somewhat suspicious about its credibility or accuracy? Explain. [they were both in their 80s, the event they were writing about took place nearly 50 years earlier; and both men may have been very eager to go down in history as the one on whom the honor was bestowed etc.]
    c. Why should a reader consider the information in the letter to be accurate or suspect? [see suggested responses to question b above]
2. Think-Pair-Share: have the students think about answers independently, pair off with a partner to discuss their responses, then share out with the whole class.

Activity 4: Document analysis - Excerpt of a Letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Madison (April 30, 1823)

1) Access Resource 4 - letter from Jefferson to Madison. Explain that students are now invited to read a second letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Madison. As they read the letter they should have the following questions in mind:

a) According to the letter, who was asked to draft the Declaration of Independence? [Jefferson]
b) Is there anything about the letter that might make a reader somewhat suspicious about its credibility or accuracy? Explain. [Jefferson was 80 years old, the event he was recalling took place nearly 50 years earlier; and he may have been very eager to go down in history as the one on whom the honor was bestowed etc.]
c) Why should a reader consider the information in the letter to be accurate or suspect? [see suggested responses to question b above]
d) In what way is Jefferson's recollection of events similar or different from Adams' recollection of events? How might you explain any similarities or differences? [Jefferson's letter claims he was asked; Adams letter suggests that both Jefferson and he were asked. The difference may be due to the age and failing memories of the two men; both men were eager to go down in history as the chief author of our country's most famous document etc.]
e) Based on the information contained in the two letters, who was invited to write the draft of the Declaration of Independence? What led you to this conclusion and why might the answer matter? [students may have different responses but press them for evidence and sound reasoning. A legitimate answer might be - it may have been Adam, Jefferson, or both but we really don't have enough evidence at this time to prove that either Adams' or Jefferson's memories were credible]

2) Think-Pair-Share: Have the students think about answers independently, pair off with a partner to discuss their responses, then share out with the whole class.

Check for Understanding

See **Resource 5** below.

A Sample of Model Responses appears below in blue font.

1. Historians may have used difference sources - one of the other available in this lesson; the smight have different points of view about Jefferson or Adams.
2. At this point in time and with the limited resources the students have available to them in this lesson, a sophisticated answer might suggest that the evidence suggests that Jefferson was asked to draft the Declaration and that John Adams may have been asked but we cannot be sure if Adams was asked

Extension

Extension 1: Think-Square-Share: See **Resource 6.** Project a copy of Resource 6 for all to see. Invite students to engage the document by adapting the Library of Congress Guide to Analyzing Primary Sources framework of Observe, Reflect, Question (see here). Have them think silently about the following questions, square off with three peers, and be prepared to share responses that they concluded are best:

Observe: Does this document appear to be a primary or secondary source? What leads you to this conclusion?

Reflect: What does this document appear to be?

Question: What important question(s) does this document appear to answer?

Extension 2: Tell students that this is the original draft of the Declaration of Independence. The document contains Thomas Jefferson's draft wording of the Declaration with edits made by John Adams and Thomas Jefferson (see here).

Ask students…

1. Does this help us answer this lesson's Essential Question, "Who was asked to draft the Declaration of Independence"? Not really but it may suggest to some that Jefferson was asked since this document provides the evidence showing that he did write the first draft.
2. If not, what important question does it help answer? Who wrote the original, first draft of the Declaration?

Resource Packet

To Whom Does the Honor Go?

Resource 1: Contextualizing the 1820s

The 1820s were important for various reasons. Among them the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence was approaching (in 1826) and many Americans were growing excited. Additionally, many of the people who lived at the time that the Declaration was written, who participated in the decision to declare independence from England in 1776, and who played roles in writing the Declaration were dying off. For example, of the five people who served on the committee to draft the Declaration of Independence, only two were still alive - John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

At such times, a few thoughtful people realize that opportunities to capture the stories of great moments in history are slipping away. So, they begin reaching out to those who participated in the historic events to interview them and better understand what happened before they die.

The Declaration of Independence is a very historic document. It gave birth to our country. Its wording includes incredibly influential statements like “all men are created equal” and all men are born with “certain unalienable rights.” These statements continue to inspire millions of people to demand equality and their rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The Declaration has also led people all over the world to rise up against tyranny (the abuse of power) despite the risk of being killed. It is a document that continues to be recognized and admired around the world.

And so, you can imagine most people would have been eager to have been THE person who was asked to write the Declaration of Independence.

It is in this context that a man named Timothy Pickering - our country’s third Secretary of State - wrote to John Adams in 1822 to learn more about the history of the Declaration - how it was written and by whom. Pickering wanted to make sure that the history of our country did not die out along with the people who made it. He wanted to know who the heroes of 1776 were, and what they might be able to share about that momentous year with those who were not around to witness it?

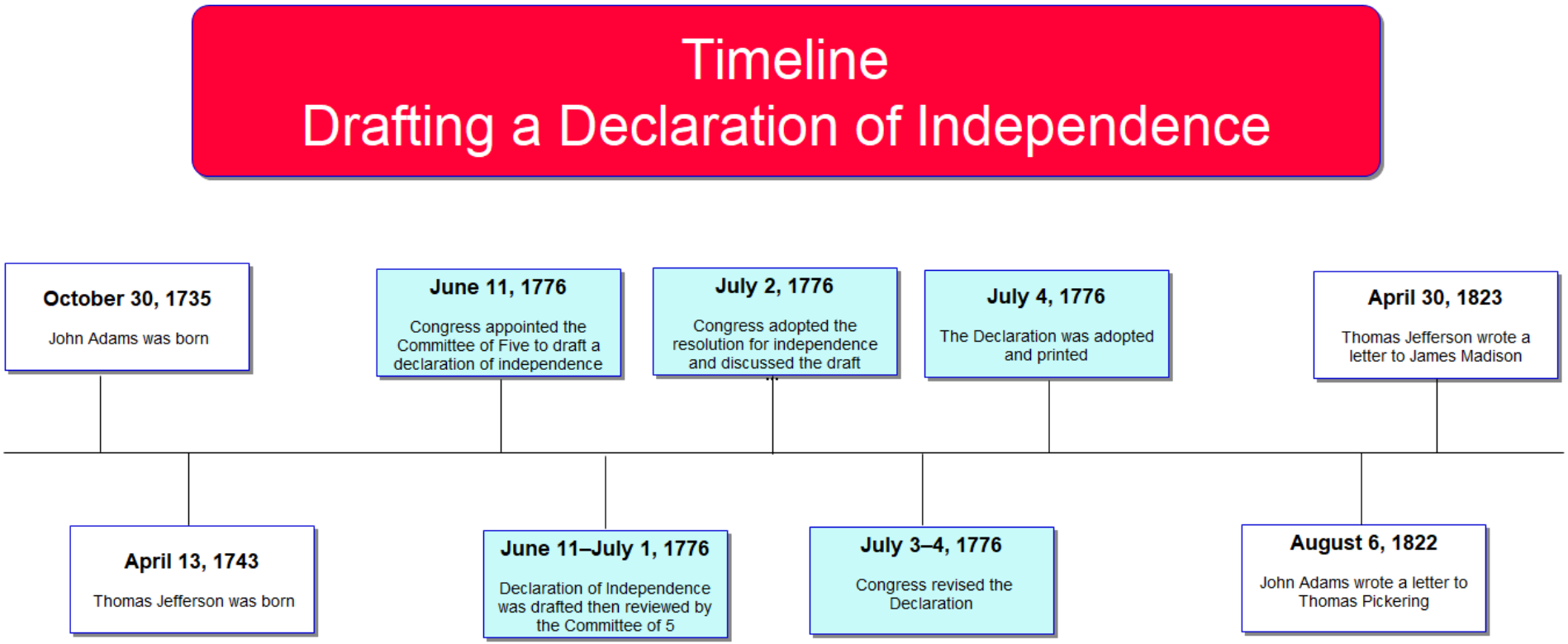
In his letter to John Adams, Pickering wrote…

> *“As no act of the Congress of the Thirteen United American Colonies was so distinguished as that by which their Independence of Great Britain was declared, the most particular history of that transaction will probably be sought for; not merely as an interesting curiosity, but to do substantial justice to the abilities and energy of the leaders in that great measure…*
>
> *—I have thought it desirable that the real facts in this case should be ascertained. You alone can give a full statement of them—to be communicated to whom you think proper. To arrive at Truth, and to assure to every one his just portion of applause.”*

In this lesson, you will have the great privilege of reading what John Adams and Thomas Jefferson revealed about the drafting of the Declaration and how they came to be chosen for this historic assignment.

Pay attention to how their accounts are similar and/or different, and why they might be similar or different.

Resource 2: Timeline - Drafting a Declaration of Independence



For Discussion

1. How old were John Adams and Thomas Jefferson when they wrote their letters about the history of the Declaration of Independence in the 1820s? Why might this matter?

2. How many years elapsed between the year when the Declaration of Independence was being written and approved and when Adams and Jefferson wrote their letters about the history of the Declaration of Independence? Why might this matter?

Resource 3 MODIFIED: Excerpt of Letter from John Adams to Timothy Pickering

A committee in Congress met, discussed the proposal for independence, then appointed Mr. Jefferson and me to write the first draft of the Declaration. Jefferson turned to me and proposed that I write the first draft

I said, "I will not. You shall do it."

[Jefferson replied] "I will not! You shall do it."

"Oh no! sighed Mr. Adams.

[Jefferson replied] "Why will you not? You ought to do it. What are your reasons for saying no?"

"Reason 1: You are from Virginia and a Virginian ought to be viewed as a person who is pushing for independence.

Reason 2: I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular."

Reason 3: you can write ten times better than I can."

"Well," said Jefferson, "if you have decided, I will write the draft and do the best I can."

"Vey well," [Adams replied] let's meet after you have created the draft and go over it."

John Adams to Thomas Pickering
August 6, 1822
Accessed here

For Discussion

1. According to the letter, who was asked to draft the Declaration of Independence?

2. Is there anything about the letter that might make a reader somewhat suspicious about its credibility or accuracy? Explain.

3. Why should a reader consider the information in the letter to be accurate or suspect?

Resource 4 MODIFIED: Excerpts of Letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Madison (April 30, 1823)

Mr. Madison

You have no doubt heard Timothy Pickering's 4th of July speech in which he talked about the history of the Declaration of Independence. If he actually based his information on a letter that he received from John Adams, I must tell you that at age 88 and 47 years after the Declaration was written, Mr. Adams' memory is incorrect about a few facts. I take no joy in hearing about the quality of Mr. Adams' memory. I also realize that some might find it difficult to believe that my memory is much better given that I am 80 years old. But *my* memory is based on notes that I have and wrote down back in 1776 when the Declaration was drafted and in the very same place where our committee did the work of drafting the Declaration.

In his speech, Mr. Pickering suggested that Mr. Adams said that the committee responsible for drafting the Declaration (Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, Livingston, John Adams and me - Thomas Jefferson) met, discussed a plan, then decided that John Adams and I write the draft. He also states that John Adams and I tried to convince each other to take the lead on writing the draft.

These details are not correct. The committee did not ask John Adams and I to work on a draft. Rather, the committee unanimously asked only me to write the draft. I was the one who drafted the Declaration but before I submitted it to the committee I gave it to Benjamin Franklin and John Adams and asked them to review my draft and make any necessary corrections.

Thomas Jefferson to James Madison [modified]
April 30, 1823
Accessed here

For Discussion

1. According to the letter, who was asked to draft the Declaration of Independence?
2. Is there anything about the letter that might make a reader somewhat suspicious about its credibility or accuracy? Explain.
3. Why should a reader consider the information in the letter to be accurate or suspect?
4. In what way is Jefferson's recollection of events similar or different from Adams' recollection of events? How might you explain any similarities or differences?
5. Based on the information contained in the two letters, who was invited to write the Declaration of Independence? Why might this matter?

Resource 5: Check for Understanding Name: _____

Directions: Read the information in the text box below then answer the question that follows.

Account 1
Thomas Jefferson was asked by delegates to the Second Continental Congress to draft the Declaration of Independence.

Account 2
Leaders in Congress approached John Adams and Thomas Jefferson and asked them both to draft the Declaration of Independence.

1. **Why might two historians arrive at different accounts of the past?**

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. **Based on what you learned in this lesson, what should our history books be communicating to students about who was asked to draft the Declaration of Independence? Explain why.**

_____

_____

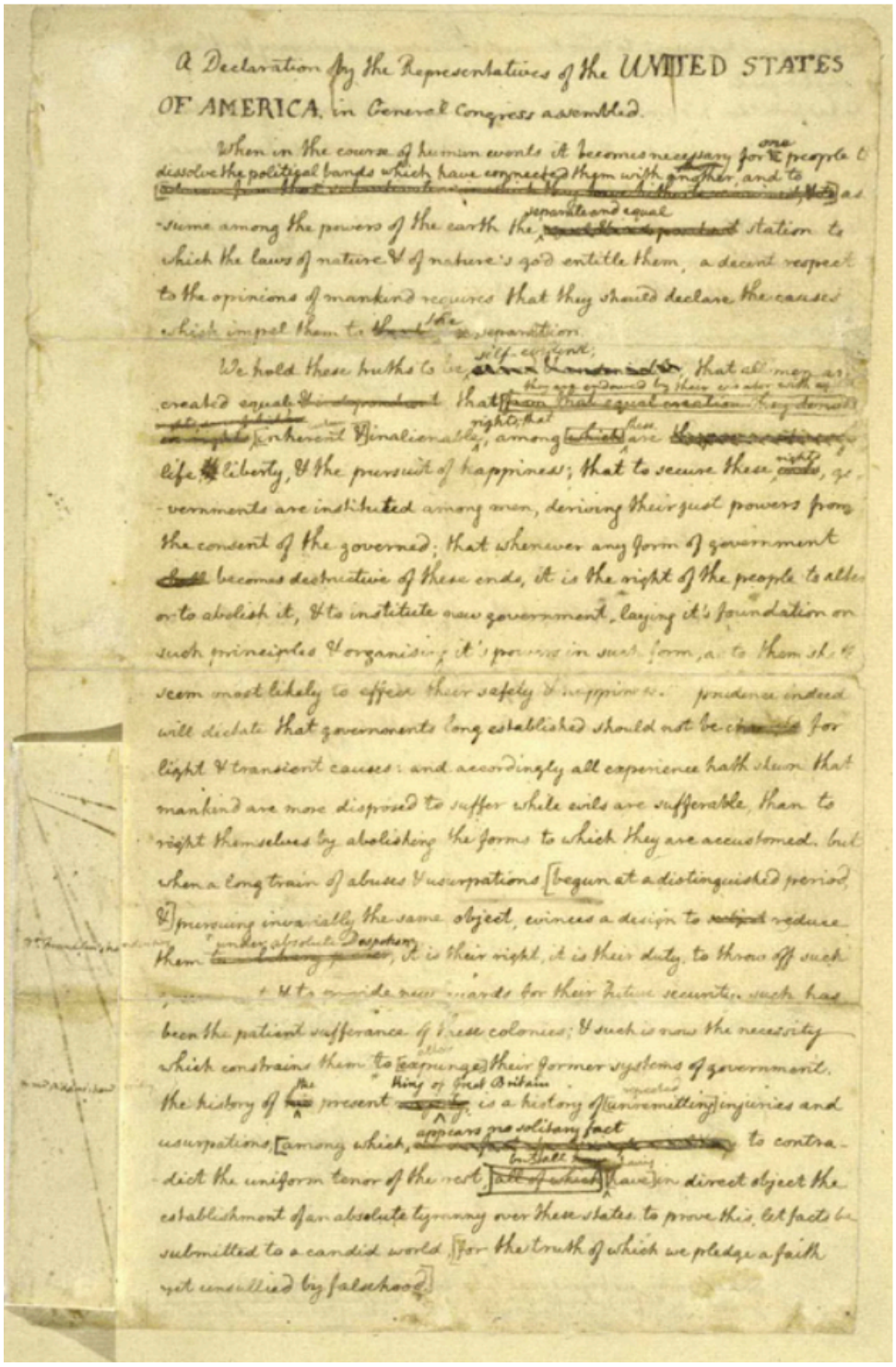
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Resource 6: An "original Rough draught"



A Declaration by the Representatives of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in General Congress assembled.

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 & 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 inherent & inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, & 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, & to institute new government, laying it's foundation on such principles & organising it's powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety & happiness. prudence indeed will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light & transient causes: and accordingly all experience hath shewn 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 & usurpations [begun at a distinguished period & 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 & to provide new guards for their future security. such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies; & such is now the necessity which constrains them to expunge their former systems of government. the history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of unremitting injuries and usurpations, [among which, appears no solitary fact to contradict the uniform tenor of the rest, but all have] in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. to prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world. [for the truth of which we pledge a faith yet unsullied by falsehood.]

Source: /www.loc.gov/exhibits/declara/declara4.html#ob

About the Delaware Center for Civics Education

Since 1999, the Delaware Center for Civics Education (DCCE) has provided resources and support for teaching and learning aligned to Delaware's civics standards so that preservice and professional educators are well-equipped to prepare their students for college, career, and civic life. DCCE is an initiative of the Institute for Public Administration, a research and public service center at the University of Delaware's Joseph R. Biden, Jr. School of Public Policy and Administration. For more information about DCCE visit: https://www.ipa.udel.edu/civics