

We Hold These Truths: Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration of Independence, and Identity

- **Compelling Question**
 - How can your knowledge and experiences affect your identity?
- **Virtue:** Identity
- **Definition** – Identity answers the question, “Who am I?”
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will read a narrative about Thomas Jefferson and the writing of the Declaration of Independence in order to understand their identity.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will understand how knowledge and experience affects one’s identity.
 - Students will analyze Thomas Jefferson’s identity related to writing the Declaration of Independence.
 - Students will apply their knowledge of their own identity in actions in their own lives.
- **Background**
 - During the 1760s and 1770s, the American colonists asserted that they had certain rights as Englishmen and as free human beings. In 1775, they went to war to defend those rights and liberties against what they considered to be British tyranny. In 1776, more and more important American statesmen, ordinary citizens, and soldiers argued for independence from Great Britain. When the Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence drafted by Thomas Jefferson on July 4, 1776, it did more than talk about separation. Americans claimed the universal principles of liberty, equality, and self-government in creating a natural rights republic. Thus, they founded the American identity around certain principles, which have been repeated by groups of Americans arguing for equal rights and by peoples yearning for liberty around the world.

Several factors impelled the Americans toward independence. First, the Americans and British had already fought the Battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill, and a massive British fleet was preparing to invade New York. Second, in January 1776, Thomas Paine electrified the colonists with arguments for independence with his pamphlet, *Common Sense*. Third, on May 15, expressing the idea of popular sovereignty—that authority resides in the people—Congress had called on the individual colonies to “adopt such government as shall, in the opinion of the representatives of the people, best conduce to the happiness and safety of their constituents.” This call to the colonies had a preamble written by John Adams, which declared, “It is necessary that the exercise of every kind of authority under the said Crown should be totally suppressed, and all the powers of government exerted under the authority of the people.” Virginia immediately adopted a constitution and declaration of rights—mostly written by George Mason—that laid down the principle (from John Locke and other philosophers) that the people formed a social compact with each other in order to protect their natural rights. “That all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.”

On June 7, 1776, Virginian Richard Henry Lee rose in Congress and offered a resolution which read, “That these United States 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.” The resolution sparked a vigorous debate, and Congress appointed a committee that included John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson to draft a declaration of independence. Jefferson was chosen to write the document because he was so closely identified with being an excellent writer and firmly committed to the cause of liberty and self-government.

- **Vocabulary**

- Tyranny
- Statesmen
- Natural rights
- Republic
- Fleet
- Popular sovereignty
- Constituents
- Social compact
- Inherent
- Posterity
- Resolution
- Absolved
- Allegiance
- Dissolved
- Vigorous
- Momentous
- Renowned
- Devotion
- Tutelage
- Incisive
- Logical
- Oratory
- Persuasive
- Grievances
- Sentiment
- Eloquently
- Felicity
- Unabating
- Enlightenment
- Chagrin
- Sullenly
- Assuage
- Whittling
- Endowed
- Deriving
- Mutually

- **Introduce Text**

- Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**

- As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**

- What was Jefferson’s identity as he penned the Declaration? How did that role continue to remain a part of his identity until his death and in his legacy since then?
- Why was Jefferson called to write the document above other great leaders on the committee such as John Adams or Benjamin Franklin?
- What experiences and knowledge did Jefferson have that helped him write a persuasive Declaration?

- **Discussion Questions**
 - Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
 - Allen, Danielle. *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality*. New York: Liveright, 2014.
 - Arnn, Larry P. *The Founders' Key: The Divine and Natural Connection Between the Declaration and the Constitution and What We Risk by Losing It*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012.
 - Maier, Pauline. *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*. New York: Vintage, 1997.
 - Spalding, Matthew. *We Still Hold These Truths: Rediscovering Our Principles, Reclaiming Our Future*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2009.

Handout A: We Hold These Truths: Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration of Independence, and Identity

Background

During the 1760s and 1770s, the American colonists asserted that they had certain rights as Englishmen and as free human beings. In 1775, they went to war to defend those rights and liberties against what they considered to be British tyranny. In 1776, more and more important American statesmen, ordinary citizens, and soldiers argued for independence from Great Britain. When the Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence drafted by Thomas Jefferson on July 4, 1776, it did more than talk about separation. Americans claimed the universal principles of liberty, equality, and self-government in creating a natural rights republic. Thus, they founded the American identity around certain principles, which have been repeated by groups of Americans arguing for equal rights and by peoples yearning for liberty around the world.

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Narrative

In mid-June of 1776, thirty-three-year-old Virginian Thomas Jefferson was given a momentous task to complete. The leading American statesmen gathered in Congress in Philadelphia had created a committee of five individuals, including Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, Roger Sherman, and John Adams to draft a Declaration of Independence. Adams insisted that Jefferson write the document because he was renowned for his writing skill and his strong devotion to the cause of universal principles of liberty and self-government. “I had a great opinion of the elegance of his pen,” Adams said.

Jefferson was known for the beauty and precision of his writing. He studied at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia under the tutelage of law professor, George Wythe. Wythe assigned his student a rich knowledge of the law and the greatest classics in the history of liberty and self-government. Jefferson developed a rigorous routine of reading in science, ethics, and religion from dawn until 8:00 a.m., reading law for the rest of the mornings until noon, reading about politics and history for the rest of the afternoon, and then literature in the evenings until bedtime. His program of reading the best authors in a variety of classics gave him a wonderful imagination and love of beauty, an appreciation for the principles of liberty, and an incisive mind that searched for first principles and ordered, logical arguments.

In 1769, Jefferson entered the Virginia House of Burgesses as a representative. He spoke little because oratory was not his strongest ability. However, he listened carefully to the arguments for liberty and self-government against British tyranny and taxes that influenced his thinking. In 1774, he published a beautifully written, persuasive pamphlet, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, which established his fame as a writer. “That these are our grievances which we have thus laid before his majesty, with that freedom of language and sentiment which becomes a free people claiming their rights, as derived from the laws of nature, and not as the gift of their chief magistrate.” Jefferson concluded the pamphlet by writing eloquently about liberty and self-government: “Our properties within our own territories shall [not] be taxed or regulated by any power on earth but our own. The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time; the hand of force may destroy, but cannot disjoin them.”

Jefferson’s reputation as a writer was firmly established when he traveled to Philadelphia to serve in the Continental Congress in late June, 1775. John Adams was just one of many Founders who praised Jefferson’s writing ability. He said that Jefferson was known for the “peculiar felicity of expression.” Not surprisingly, he was chosen to pen the Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms,” which would be sent to the king. He wrote, “The arms we have been compelled by our enemies to assume, we will, in defiance of every hazard, with unabating firmness and perseverance, employ for the preservation of our liberties; being with one mind resolved to die freemen rather than to live as slaves.” Almost a year later, when the Congress considered a resolution for independence and assigned a five-man committee to draft a Declaration of Independence, Jefferson was naturally selected to the committee.

In mid-June, 1776, Jefferson was selected to draft the Declaration of Independence. He attended the Continental Congress during the day and had time to write during the early mornings and in the evenings after dinner. He was lodged on the second floor of a brick house at Seventh and Market Streets. He was confident that his skills as a writer equipped him for the task of writing the important document. When Jefferson sat down with his quill, his ink bottle, and his writing box in his warm room during the early days of summer, he probably longed to complete the assigned task at his home, Monticello. There, he could take advantage of its library filled with great books on liberty and self-government such as John Locke’s *Second Treatise on Government*. However, he did have a copy of fellow Virginian George Mason’s recently-adopted Virginia Declaration of Rights, which was published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on June 12. In addition, he remembered the arguments he had made when writing two of the key documents in the cause of American liberty and rights: his 1774 *Summary View* and his 1775 “Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms.” Moreover, he was well-acquainted with the works of classical republican thinkers such as Aristotle and Cicero as well as modern Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke. Jefferson was an excellent choice to draft the Declaration of Independence because of his elegant writing and familiarity and commitment to liberty and self-government.

When Jefferson was satisfied that his handiwork was complete, he showed the parchment to Adams and Franklin who made some minor edits. On July 1, as the temperatures in Philadelphia began to rise, the Declaration of Independence was presented to Congress and fiercely debated, particularly between oratorical giants John Dickinson and John Adams. Jefferson did not say much because his skill was mostly in his pen and not his oratory. As a storm passed over Philadelphia and rain pelted the windows, Adams thundered in favor of the Declaration of Independence. On July 2, 1776, the Congress voted for independence and adopted Richard Henry Lee’s resolution for independence. The members of Congress revised the document—to Jefferson’s chagrin at having his work edited—and adopted the Declaration of Independence on July 4.

Because his identity was so closely tied to his expression of words and the principles of liberty, Jefferson was deeply wounded by the editing of the Declaration and sat there sullenly, barely listening as his fellow delegates cut about a quarter of his text. The witty Benjamin Franklin leaned over to assuage the young man’s hurt feelings with a story. A hatter asked his friends for their opinion on a sign he created for his shop that read, “John Thompson, Hatter, Makes and Sells Hats for Ready Money.” The friends kept whittling down unnecessary words until the sign contained only his name and the drawing of a hat. Jefferson might have managed a forced smile, but he still did not have to like the changes the Congress made. But, out of that fine-tuning, a masterpiece of eloquence and liberty emerged for their posterity.

Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence created a natural rights republic in which rights came from “nature and nature’s God,” not government. With stirring words, it proclaimed universal principles of liberty and equality: “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.”

The document was based upon a compact theory of government in which the sovereign people voluntarily agreed to form a republic rooted upon their consent and protecting their natural rights. The people had the right to overthrow a government that failed in its essential duty to protect natural rights.

“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.”

The representatives of the people then declared American independence and mutually pledged to each other “our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.” Jefferson would of course serve in many important offices—Governor of Virginia, Minister to France, Secretary of State, Vice-President, and President—and achieve significant accomplishments throughout his life. But no achievement could rival the importance of the fruit of his achievement as a writer and political philosopher about liberty and self-government. As a result, when he composed his epitaph, he selected writing the Declaration as one of his three greatest accomplishments.