



Research and Fireworks: Reading The 250th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence

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One of the problems with being a historian, besides the inability to watch a movie without noticing the anachronisms, is that you can't simply enjoy a historic anniversary without saying, "Yeah, but ..."

This Fourth of July, most of America celebrated the 250th birthday of the United States. Meanwhile, I celebrated the 250 years since the Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence. Similar, but not the same. The Declaration was a big deal, no question, but it took a war, a treaty and a constitutional convention in 1787 before you can fairly say that the republic we know as the United States was created.

What the events of July 4, 1776, kicked off was this continent's biggest "No Kings" rally. And it was a big one. When the text of the Declaration made it to New York City on July 9th and was read at the Bowling Green in Lower Manhattan, the crowd was so enthusiastic they tore down the statue of King George III and broke it into dozens of pieces. (The tail of the King's and other fragments can be found at the New York Historical Society Museum, <https://emuseum.nyhistory.org/>.)

That is perhaps more understandable when you read the entire document. We all know Thomas Jefferson's crisp and polished preface declaring the principles of the revolutionary movement that the document called into existence:

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 and 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 unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and 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, and to institute a 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.

We might have not read the 27 paragraphs below this high-minded section that together indict George III for a litany of crimes that accused him of being a "Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant" and one who is "unfit to be the ruler of a free people."

These passages not only condemned the king to his face, but they also marked the principles that would later animate the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. When the Declaration accuses George of making "Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices," it is declaring that judges should be independent. Moreover, the charges of violating the right of trial by jury, taxing without representation, quartering standing armies and suspending legislative powers would not be forgotten when the founders sat down later to draft the U.S. Constitution.

Nonetheless, Jefferson's Preface not only sparked our revolution, it has echoed through history, inspiring not only the French revolutionaries of 1789, but also anticolonial movements in South America, Africa and Southeast Asia. The whole document is worthy of careful study, and there are great tools and wonderful books to do so.

Resources

Tools and Primary Documents

The most useful tool is the National Constitution Center's Annotated Declaration of Independence (<https://constitutioncenter.org/declaration/annotated-declaration>), with notes drafted by Akhil Reed Amar, a leading scholar of the U.S. Constitution and the Sterling Professor of Law and Political Science at Yale University. Each key phrase or section is annotated with weblinks to relevant texts like John Locke's "Second Treatise on Government" (1690), Jefferson's "A Summary View of the Rights of British America" (1774) or Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" (1776), or references to a Constitutional provision it inspired.

Typically, the annotations draw on three key websites: the National Constitution Center's Constitution (<https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution>), the National Archive's Founders Online (<https://founders.archives.gov/>) and the Yale Law School Law Library's Avalon Project (<https://avalon.law.yale.edu/>).

For example, when the Preamble avers that "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed," the annotation quotes philosopher John Locke's statement that "by nature," men are "all free, equal, and independent, no one can be ... subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent," in his "Second Treatise on Government" (1690), and Algernon Sidney's "Discourses Concerning Government" (1698) positing that "general consent" is "the ground of all just government."

Also, the annotations explain language and allusions that may not be clear to the modern reader. When Jefferson writes that George "has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people, and eat out their substance," Amar's note ties this to the many customs officers created to prevent tax evasion and their use of "general warrants" to search and seize goods without probable or even reasonable cause. These "writs of assistance" were condemned by James Otis Jr. in a blistering best-selling 1761 pamphlet that is a direct source of the Fourth Amendment.

Books

Dozens of new books, good and bad, are heading into bookstores and Amazon queues for this year's celebration. I can't review them all but here are a few, old and new, worth consulting.

Pauline Maier's 1997 classic, "American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence" serves as a quasi "legislative history" of the passage of the Declaration, describing each step in the process as anti-monarchical sentiment in the Continental Congress grew from May through June to the pivotal declaration severing the ties that bound the 13 colonies to England and its king. It is also a great read.

Akhil Reed Amar's "The Words That Made Us: America's Constitutional Conversation, 1760-1840" (2021) and Joseph J. Ellis, "The Cause: The American Revolution and its Discontents, 1773-1783" (2022) provide a deeper background to the animating ideas of the Declaration.

Finally, Walter Isaacson's 67-page pamphlet, "The Greatest Sentence Ever Written" (2026), unpacks the meaning of the 35-word sentence from "We hold these truths" to the "the pursuit of happiness," at a microlevel.

All these books can be found at UofL and the Louisville Free Public Library (LFPL).

Cultural Resources

Who wants to turn from Enlightenment era natural law treatises and pamphlets to a musical? I see a hand in the back. Well for that, I would direct you to "1776" (1972) the movie adaptation of Sherman Edwards' Broadway production about the Continental Congress' progress toward a decision to declare independence. (Think of Pauline Maier's "American Scripture" with better songs.)

As the movie's Wikipedia page notes, "The Columbia Companion to American History on Film" found that while historical "inaccuracies pervade 1776," none were "troubling" enough to trigger historians. Since few detailed contemporaneous accounts of the session existed, the playwright had to use his imagination, but the film does capture the spirit and the humanity of the event. You can find "1776" on DVD at UofL and LFPL.

Speaking of humanity, what could capture that better than one of our era's greatest actors, Paul Giamatti? His portrayal of the title character in HBO miniseries "John Adams" (2008) brings the revolutionary era to life. Based on David McCullough's biography, the second episode is a good compliment to "1776." You can find it on HBO Max, and the DVD boxset at LFPL and UofL.

Stay Safe!

If you decide to continue celebrating the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence over the rest of 2026 by reading a book, watching a movie, setting off fireworks or toppling a statue of a king, stay safe! If you don't take care, those paper cuts can get infected.

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