

## Reflect Upon Your Country: A New Republic

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This is reprinted from a series of articles I used to write for the 741<sup>st</sup> MI BN newsletter. This was the first article of that series, which started on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, somewhere around 1994. - Cutter

The shot that was heard around the world. That was what they called the beginning of the resistance to the opposing invasion. A corrupt and cruel government had been imposing crippling taxes and stiling the trade of its colonies, all without the consent of their legislatures. Many in the colonies had decided that they weren't going to take it anymore. But some were still undecided about independence.

Such was the scene in the Second Continental Congress, the political stage unto which Jefferson stepped in 1776. The thirty-two year old lawyer, writer, and statesman had been chosen to take the place of his elder cousin, Peyton Randolph. Young Jefferson was to sit in council with the top political thinkers of his time (Ben Franklin, John Hancock, and John Adams to name a few) to bring the colonies into a new direction, freedom and independence of Britain's rule. The revolution had begun in earnest with with Lexington and Concord. Now there was a Continental Army, commanded by General George Washington.

Thomas Jefferson was the most complex of simple men. Born into a wealthy family he was still raised with deep seated morals taught to him at the school of the Reverend Matthew Maury (who educated three of our nations presidents, Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe). After his initial education Thomas Jefferson attended the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. After two years there he went to work in the law office of George Wythe, one of the most distinguished lawyers of the day and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Even at this age Jefferson was recognized for his brilliance, by both his peers and his mentors.

In 1770 Jefferson began public service as county lieutenant of Albemarle County. In 1773 he became county surveyor, and a year later he was chosen for the Virginia Convention which would become the state legislature. Unable to attend due to illness, he nevertheless sent his position on to the other members of the convention. This position was anonymously published by some of his friends as a **Summary View of the Rights of British Americans**.

"Kings, he informed George III (in an age when kings were approached with reverence), are the servants, not the proprietors of the people. 'Open your breast, Sire, to liberal and expanded thought. Let not the name of

George the third be a blot on the page of history,' he lectured him." (**Great Achievers: Thomas Jefferson - Man on a Mountain**, Natalie S. Bober, Collier Books, 1993)

When Lord North read these words before the British Parliament, and it was determined who had written them, Jefferson's name was put on a list of "outlaws" to be brought to England for trial.

When Thomas Jefferson spoke, people listened. He was a very shy, soft-spoken man, and when he spoke publicly (a truly rare occasion) it was always very clear, thought out, and to the point. He said more of meaning in a few sentences than many of today's congressmen speak in their entire term of office. When it was clear that the colonies were in revolution, it was Jefferson who was asked to round out the committee to write the Declaration for the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms to be read by General Washington to his troops, to justify the actions which were being taken towards war.

To explain all of the events which led up to the signing of the Declaration of Independence would take up chapters. A committee of five (Ben Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert R. Livingston, and Thomas Jefferson) was appointed by the Continental Congress to draft the formal Declaration of Independence. All of these men were distinguished, but it was young Jefferson who received the highest vote, of any of the five, to not only be on but head the committee.

"He had already won for himself a reputation for his 'masterly pen' and for his 'peculiar felicity of expression.'" (**Great Achievers: Thomas Jefferson-Man on a Mountain**, Natalie S. Bober, Collier Books, 1993, quotes by John Adams)

It was unanimously decided by the other members of the committee that Thomas Jefferson should actually write the document. He was known throughout the colonies as one of the most elegant and prolific writers of that time. For seventeen days Jefferson secluded himself in the home of a brickmason on the outskirts of Philadelphia and, without books or notes but only his encyclopedic memory, wrote his initial draft of the Declaration of Independence. After he had finished, he sent the draft to John Adams, and in turn Ben Franklin to find their reaction. After a few minor changes, the document was sent on to the other members of the committee for their input and received unqualified approval (It is interesting to note that Robert Livingston, a conservative who was against breaking off from Britain, had been asked to join this committee and had left Philadelphia in order to not have to give his opinion of the declaration [**Signers of the Declaration**, Katherine and John Bakeless, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969]). The time had come to bring the document before congress.

On Friday, June 28, the document was brought before congress and tabled until the following Monday. That Monday as the session began, the argument was finally begun as to whether to actually declare independence. On Tuesday, July 2, congress made the most momentous decision of American history, A decision that, should it fail, would mean trial and death for treason for every member of congress. Independence from British rule.

John Adams, writing to his wife the next day, said:

"Yesterday, the greatest question was decided, which ever was debated in America, and a greater, perhaps, never was nor will be decided among men....The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It out to be commemorated, as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade....."(Works, John Adams)

But the 4th of July became a much more momentous occasion. After much heated debate over wording, and even the removal of several key points (such as Jefferson's paragraph condemning slavery), the Declaration of Independence was accepted by congress and signed by John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress. The Congressional Secretary, Charles Thomson witnessed it. The deed was done, and the most influential document ever written in American history was accepted. The document declared the United Colonies to be Free and Independent States.

There are volumes of information on the life and history of Thomas Jefferson. They will tell you of the hardships he had dealt with during these trying times. Mr. Jefferson had six children, only two of whom lived. His mother died in 1776, and in 1782 his beloved wife, Martha, also died. Although he was essentially a very wealthy man, public service did not pay as much as it cost, and the crops grown at his estate, Monticello, suffered more and more during his absences. And his public service extended to terms as first War Governor of Virginia, America's first Secretary of State (as a side note it was Jefferson's proposal to accept the dollar, based upon the decimal system, as our currency, instead of the pound or the franc), Ambassador to France, and vice-president and President of the United States. He also designed and had built the University of Virginia, and assembled what would eventually evolve into the Library of Congress.

The information given here is only a portion of the events revolving around the Declaration of Independence and the life of Thomas Jefferson. I would suggest to everyone to seek out more information. Some good sources are: **Signers of the**

**Declaration**, Katherine and John Bakeless, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969; **Great Achievers: Thomas Jefferson - Man on a Mountain**, Natalie S. Bober, Collier Books, 1993; and **Jefferson Himself: The Personal Narrative of a Many-Sided American**, Edited by Bernard Mayo, The University Press of Virginia, 1992.