

**Whatever Happened to the *Real* Declaration of Independence?**

You've probably seen copies of the original Declaration of Independence, signed by 56 men who pledged their "Lives," their "Fortunes," and their "sacred Honor" to one another. The list of signers includes such famous Patriots as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Hancock. Every person who put his name on the Declaration took an enormous risk by doing so. Declaring independence from Great Britain was an act of treason, and treason was punishable by death.

The Declaration of Independence is one of the most important documents in our nation's history. If that is true, then whatever happened to the original paper—the actual one signed by those 56 brave men?

The real Declaration of Independence is housed in the National Archives and Records Administration exhibit hall in Washington, D.C. It is on display where anyone can see it, along with the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Perhaps you've been lucky enough to be one of the lucky few to see it in person!

But the Declaration has only been in the Washington exhibit hall since 1952.

What happened to it between its signing in 1776 and 1952? That's almost 200 years! You may be surprised to learn that one piece of paper could have traveled so extensively or \Uj Ybeen so carefully guarded. You may also be

surprised to learn that the Declaration is not written on a piece of paper at all. It is written on parchment, which is animal skin that has been specially treated and stretched.

**Printing a National Treasure**

On July 4, 1776, bells rang out in Philadelphia. They were ringing because Congress had formally adopted the Declaration of Independence. John Dunlap, the official printer of the Continental Congress, quickly printed copies of the document. Today these copies are called "Dunlap Broadside," and Uh Yuh24 of them still exist. The next several days were spent getting the word out to the people of the former English colonies that independence had been declared. On



Author Thomas Jefferson later called the Declaration of Independence "an expression of the American mind" and a "signal . . . to burst the chains."

the Declaration was printed in the *Pennsylvania Evening Post*. Two days later, it was read in Philadelphia in public for the first time. On July 9, George Washington ordered that his personal Dunlap Broadside be read to the troops in New York. Now the men had more reason to fight than ever!

On July 19, 1776, the Continental Congress ordered that the Declaration of Independence be engrossed. To *engross* is to write, or inscribe, an official document. This beautiful work was likely done by a Philadelphia man named Timothy Matlack. The parchment on which the Declaration was written was big—two feet wide and two-and-a-half feet long. The delegates met to sign this official copy on August 2, but the last signature was not added until 1777.

In January 1777, a Baltimore printer named Mary Katharine Goddard created copies of the Declaration. Congress ordered these copies to be sent to all the states. When they arrived, people gathered in town squares everywhere to hear the Declaration read aloud. The news that the colonies were now free of British rule was met with joyous cries of “Huzzah!,” the old-fashioned way of saying “Hooray!”

From that point on, more and more copies were made of the Declaration of Independence. But the *official* Declaration with its *original* signatures was kept by the Continental Congress. It traveled with them throughout the war. No one wanted to take the chance that the Declaration would be lost or, worse, captured by the British. The Declaration was already more than a piece of animal skin: it was a national treasure. Unfortunately, the Declaration was rolled for storage and then unrolled whenever someone needed to see it. Rolling was much better than folding the parchment, but it was still very hard on the document. During the Revolutionary War and the years immediately following, the Declaration is known to have been in Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, and New York at one point or another.

After the war ended and the Constitution was written, the Declaration was kept in the nation’s capital. The capital moved a lot in those early days—from New York to Philadelphia and finally, in 1800, to Washington, D.C. As of 1789, the Department of State was given the responsibility of keeping the Declaration safe.

All was quiet in the life of the Declaration for more than a decade. But then the War of 1812 broke out with the British. During this war, the British attacked Washington. The Declaration was in danger! Quick-thinking men threw the Declaration into a linen sack, loaded it on a cart, and hid it in Virginia. Thank

goodness they did, because the British set fire to many government buildings, including the White House.

### **At Home in Washington—Mostly**

Since its return to Washington, D.C., in 1814, the Declaration has remained in that city for the most part. It was kept for many years in the Patent Office and then in the Library of Congress. People worried, however, that it was not well protected from fire and other hazards. By 1869, the parchment was showing its age, especially the signatures. One author of the time described it by saying, “it is old and yellow, and the ink is fading from the paper.”

Just a few years after this comment was made, the Declaration was again roused from its home. It was taken briefly to Philadelphia in 1876 as part of the nation’s centennial celebrations. Not until 1922 did government officials begin discussing a “permanent” home for the Declaration. The Librarian of Congress proposed that a place be built in the Great Hall of the Library of Congress for the safekeeping of the Declaration and other key documents in the nation’s history, “where they need not be touched by anybody but where a mere passer-by could see them.” Congress approved the funds, and planning got underway immediately. This newly created display was completed in 1924.



The original Declaration of Independence, on display in the exhibition hall at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C.

The Declaration hung in the Great Hall until World War II broke out. Concerns arose about the safety of the Declaration, the Constitution, and other documents should the United States come under attack. It was decided to move them to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for safekeeping. The documents were packed under armed guard and then were taken by armed Secret Service agents by train to Kentucky. The final leg of the journey to Fort Knox was guarded by the Secret Service agents and a cavalry troop. The Declaration remained at the fort for three years before being taken back to Washington, D.C.

Soon after, the National Archives and Records building was completed. An exhibit hall built specially for the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights was part of the new facility. In 1952, the

Declaration was moved to its new, and so far, permanent home. The documents are sealed behind helium-filled, bulletproof glass panels, framed with titanium and aluminum. They are guarded while the building is open to the public during the day. At night, the documents are lowered 22 feet into the ground into a bombproof vault. This security is a far cry from Revolutionary days, when the nation's most precious pronouncement of liberty and freedom was kept in a wooden trunk!

### **An Inspiration to the World**

From the moment the Declaration was printed in newspapers and copies were made of the original, news of the ideals it proclaimed made their way to countries around the world. People who read it believed that the statements it made were simple but true. Its words have been echoed throughout the centuries by those who have fought for freedom and justice.

When the French rose up against the monarchy in the late 1700s, some of the ideas they expressed in their Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) came from the American Declaration of Independence. Soon afterward, the French found themselves on the other side of the argument, when Toussaint L'Ouverture led the people of Haiti in an uprising against French rule. The Haitians won their independence in 1804, inspired partly by the United States and its Declaration of Independence. Soon after, Simon Bolívar led the country of Venezuela in an effort to end Spanish rule in their country. He, too, was inspired by the principles of the Declaration.

In 1848, women's rights advocates at the Seneca Fall convention modeled their Declaration of Sentiments on the Declaration of Independence. Abraham Lincoln quoted the Declaration during his campaign to restrict slavery in the years before the Civil War. In 1945, the country of Vietnam announced its independence from France with its own declaration, based on the one written by Thomas Jefferson in 1776. In 1948, the United Nations adopted a Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The preamble of this document is based on the Declaration of Independence. Some 20 years later, Rhodesia also based its declaration of independence on the United States document. In more recent times, Martin Luther King often referred to the ideals stated in the Declaration during the fight for civil rights.

Throughout the ages, men and women have been inspired by the words conceived by Thomas Jefferson so long ago. This is one reason that the original Declaration of Independence is not only a national treasure but also a global treasure, worthy of our best efforts to safeguard it for the future.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** George Washington had the Declaration of Independence read to the troops in order to
  - A.** update the troops on the government's activities
  - B.** fool the British into thinking they had given up
  - C.** convince the troops that the war had been won
  - D.** inspire the troops to continue fighting
  
- 2.** After the Declaration of Independence was engrossed,
  - A.** Dunlap Broad­sides were printed
  - B.** members of the Continental Congress met to sign it
  - C.** Congress ordered copies sent to all the states
  - D.** it was read in public for the first time
  
- 3.** Through the years, the Declaration of Independence has often served as inspiration for
  - A.** monarchs wishing to better rule their people
  - B.** politicians running for public office
  - C.** colonies seeking to end colonial rule
  - D.** state governments rebelling against the federal government
  
- 4.** You have learned that the Declaration of Independence survived wars and the decay of age. How did the actions taken by the federal government during times of war illustrate the value of the Declaration of Independence? Use evidence from the reading passage to support your answer.