

The Declaration of Independence

Cast

Thomas Jefferson of Virginia

Ben Franklin of Pennsylvania

John Hancock of Massachusetts

Roger Sherman of Connecticut

John Adams of Massachusetts

Robert Livingston of New York

JOHN HANCOCK: The Second Continental Congress has selected you five men to draw up the Declaration of Independence.

JOHN ADAMS: Thomas Jefferson, you're the best writer. You write and we'll make suggestions.

THOMAS JEFFERSON: Okay. What's today's date?

JOHN HANCOCK: July 4, 1776.

BEN FRANKLIN: We should start our declaration of independence with a preamble.

JOHN HANCOCK: What's that?

ROBERT LIVINGSTON: Something to summarize the fundamental principles of American self-government.

ROGER SHERMAN: How about we start out with "the unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America".

BEN FRANKLIN: Then add "when in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political ties which have connected them to one country"

THOMAS JEFFERSON: Slow down. But I like the visual imagery of the connections between us and England dissolving like sugar in tea.

JOHN ADAMS: Both of which stupid King George taxed without us having any say about it.

THOMAS JEFFERSON: What next?

BEN FRANKLIN: Explain why the 13 colonies are separating.

THOMAS JEFFERSON: Okay. I'll finish this sentence with "and become a separate and equal country, they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation."

ROGER SHERMAN: Kind of like we're getting a divorce.

BEN FRANKLIN: Put in some of that stuff my friend Thomas Paine wrote in *Common Sense*.

ROBERT LIVINGSTON: I read Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* and liked the part that said "a government of our own is a natural right."

ROGER SHERMAN: And stuff from John Locke and how every man has the right to life, liberty and to own property

JOHN ADAMS: Maybe stuff from your fellow Virginian, George Mason, who wrote the Virginia's Declaration of Rights.

BEN FRANKLIN: Yes, that stuff about the pursuit of happiness being every man's right.

THOMAS JEFFERSON: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,

JOHN ADAMS: My wife Abigail Adams wants us to say men and women.

THOMAS JEFFERSON: No way. And I'm not writing anything about slaves having rights either.

ROBERT LIVINGSTON: (*aside to audience*) There will be trouble later on because of this.

THOMAS JEFFERSON: that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights like life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

ROGER SHERMAN: Way to combine Locke and Mason on one sentence.

ROBERT LIVINGSTON: That to secure these rights, people set up governments.

BEN FRANKLIN: Like Thomas Paine wrote.

JOHN ADAMS: Put in there that people have to give the government permission to govern them.

THOMAS JEFFERSON: These governments get powers from the consent of the governed.

ROBERT LIVINGSTON: And put in that whenever any government destroys life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the people should get rid of it.

JOHN ADAMS: Use abolish instead of "get rid of it". Sounds fancier.

BEN FRANKLIN: It's good to end the preamble with something fancy.

THOMAS JEFFERSON: Now I'll enumerate all the abuses, injuries and usurpations of King George and Parliament.

JOHN HANCOCK: Plain English, please.

ROGER SHERMAN: Explain what the king did to tick us off.

ROBERT LIVINGSTON: One, he forbade his governors from passing laws we needed without his permission.

BEN FRANKLIN: Two, he shut down our colonial houses of legislature.

JOHN ADAMS: Write that the King took away our charters, like the Mayflower Compact. We've had that in Massachusetts since 1620.

ROBERT LIVINGSTON: Three, he's kept us from having our own courts. Prisoners have to go to 3,500 miles across the Atlantic Ocean to Britain for court.

BEN FRANKLIN: And we don't have the right to a trial by jury, even though that is in the Magna Carta.

THOMAS JEFFERSON: Four, he makes us keep soldiers in our house.

JOHN ADAMS: They are eating my family out of house and home.

ROBERT LIVINGSTON: Yes. His armies are here without our consent in times of peace.

ROGER SHERMAN: And his soldiers don't have to obey our laws.

ROBERT LIVINGSTON: Some even commit murder and walk away free. How whack is that!

JOHN ADAMS: Who can forget the Boston Massacre where British soldiers shot at an angry mob and killed five colonists?

ROGER SHERMAN: Some soldiers aren't even British. He sends Germans who don't speak English and don't obey our laws.

THOMAS JEFFERSON: I'll write "the king is transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation, tyranny, and cruelty scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages.

BEN FRANKLIN: And put that it is totally unworthy the head of a civilized nation

JOHN ADAMS: Five, he won't let us trade with other countries.

ROBERT LIVINGSTON: Yeah, we have to buy from Britain after they mark up the prices.

ROGER SHERMAN: We are taxed without representation in Parliament.

JOHN ADAMS: Put down he has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

BEN FRANKLIN: Remind him we have asked him to fix these things and all he does it make thing worse.

THOMAS JEFFERSON: How does this sound: in every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress in the most humble terms: our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injury?

ROGER SHERMAN: Sounds fine. Then write any prince who acts like this defines the word "tyrant" and is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

THOMAS JEFFERSON: I'll write he's been deaf to the voice of justice.

BEN FRANKLIN: Finish off by saying we declare to be Free and Independent States; no longer owing allegiance to the British Crown.

JOHN ADAMS: And that we, the United States, have the right to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce,

BEN FRANKLIN: and do all other things that independent states may do.

JOHN HANCOCK: As President of the Second Continental Congress, I'll sign it with such big letters King George will be able to read it a mile away.

JOHN ADAMS: You're exaggerating.

JOHN HANCOCK: I prefer the literary term hyperbole.

ROBERT LIVINGSTON: Let's have a public reading of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia on July 8th.

ROGER SHERMAN: The crowd will cheer; church bells will ring.

ROBERT LIVINGSTON: I predict that by July 15th, all thirteen states will agree to the resolutions in this Declaration of Independence.

JOHN ADAMS: I predict that the ideals behind "all men are created equal" will be used by Northern states to abolish slavery.

JOHN HANCOCK: I predict a guy named Abraham Lincoln will use equal rights to justify a war against slavery.

THOMAS JEFFERSON: I bet it will cause a Civil War.

JOHN ADAMS: I bet women will fight for the vote and wish we had written that "all men and women are created equal."

BEN FRANKLIN: I imagine by 1963, Martin Luther King will repeat "that all men are created equal" in a speech.