

The Charters of Freedom: The Declaration of Independence, The Constitution of the United States, and the Bill of Rights

The simple truth at the heart of the American Revolution is that people are born with certain natural rights, including “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” These and other rights of the American people are secured by this nation’s founding documents, known collectively as *the Charters of Freedom: the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and the Bill of Rights*.

The documents reproduced in this exhibition chronicle the creation of the Charters and their impact on events in this country and around the world. They reveal the story of earlier generations of Americans who had both the vision to see a better world and the audacity to build it.

“Chartering Freedom” is an exhibition featuring reproductions of the Charters of Freedom and other milestone documents that chronicle the conception, creation, and implementation of the Founding Fathers’ vision.

The challenge facing Americans was to translate the guiding spirit of the Revolution—beliefs in political self-determination and personal liberty—into a viable, durable scheme of government.

- **The Declaration** announced to the world in 1776, that 13 British colonies in North America were leaving Great Britain. In justifying revolution, it gave voice to the ancient longing of the human soul—for freedom.
- **The Constitution**, drafted in 1787 after a hard-won victory in the War for Independence, codified the spirit of the Revolution into an ingenious practical scheme of government to promote the welfare of its citizens.
- **The Bill of Rights**, added to the Constitution in 1791 as the first 10 amendments, explicitly protected freedom of speech, of the press, of religion, and of assembly, among many other freedoms.

These documents represent a monumental achievement of the nation’s Founders, who believed their cause held the promise of liberty for all mankind. The principles established in the Charters have bound the nation together through more than two centuries of growth and turmoil.

Teacher resources for this exhibit include lesson plans, glossary, and the texts of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, and the Bill of Rights. Educational material reproduced here with the permission of the National Archives Traveling Exhibits Service.

Lesson Plan 1 – Declaration of Independence
Grade Level: Middle School

To Sign or Not to Sign

Focusing on Details: Discussion Topic

Students will consider the arguments made by members of the Continental Congress regarding whether or not to sign the Declaration of Independence. They will also have the opportunity to analyze each section of the Declaration to understand its meaning and consider the consequences of signing the document.

- Thinking Skill: Historical Issues—***Analysis & Decision-Making***
- Bloom’s Taxonomy: ***Evaluating***

Suggested Teaching Instructions

Grades 6-8

Use this activity in the middle of a unit on the American Revolution when introducing the reasons for and against signing the Declaration of Independence and the immediate and long-term consequences of the members of the Second Continental Congress’ decision to sign the Declaration of Independence.

Analyze the document and ask students to respond to the questions (in the Activity Section). Provide them with an opportunity to share their answers, listing reasons for their decisions. A few delegates who voted for adoption of the Declaration on July 4th never signed it. Non-signers included John Dickinson (Pennsylvania), who clung to the idea of reconciliation with Britain, and Robert R. Livingston (New York), who thought the Declaration, was premature.

ACTIVITY

In this activity you will consider the arguments made by members of the Second Continental Congress regarding whether or not to sign the Declaration of Independence.

1. Imagine that you are a member of the “Committee of Five”* tasked with writing the Declaration of Independence. What is going through your mind as you draft this document?
2. Eventually 56 delegates from 13 states signed the Declaration, but a few of the delegates who had voted for independence decided not to sign it. What objections do you think they might have had?
3. If you were a member of the Second Continental Congress, would you have signed? Why or why not? Remember the risks and the benefits!

** John Adams, Massachusetts; Thomas Jefferson, Virginia; Benjamin Franklin, Pennsylvania; Roger Sherman, Connecticut; Robert R. Livingston, New York*

Note: The following text is a transcription of the Stone Engraving of the parchment Declaration of Independence (the document on display in the Rotunda at the National Archives Museum.) The spelling and punctuation reflects the original.

Text of the Declaration of Independence

In Congress: July 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America, 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 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. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.--Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harrass our people, and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:

For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

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. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our Brittish brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies 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; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

Signers of the Declaration of Independence

GEORGIA

*Button Gwinnet
Lyman Hall
George Walton*

MARYLAND

*Samuel Chase
William Paca
Thomas Stone
Charles Carroll of
Carrollton*

DELAWARE

*Caesar Rodney
George Read
Thomas McKean*

MASSACHUSETTS

*Samuel Adams
John Adams
Robert Treat Paine
Elbridge Gerry*

NORTH CAROLINA

*William Hooper
Joseph Hewes
John Penn*

VIRGINIA

*George Wythe
Richard Henry Lee
Thomas Jefferson
Benjamin Harrison
Thomas Nelson, Jr.
Francis Lightfoot Lee
Carter Braxton*

NEW YORK

*William Floyd
Philip Livingston
Francis Lewis
Lewis Morris*

RHODE ISLAND

*Stephen Hopkins
William Ellery*

SOUTH CAROLINA

*Edward Rutledge
Thomas Heyward, Jr.
Thomas Lynch, Jr.
Arthur Middleton*

NEW JERSEY

*Richard Stockton
John Witherspoon
Francis Hopkinson
John Hart
Abraham Clark*

CONNECTICUT

*Roger Sherman
Samuel Huntington
William Williams
Oliver Wolcott*

PENNSYLVANIA

*Robert Morris
Benjamin Rush
Benjamin Franklin
John Morton
George Clymer
James Smith
George Taylor
James Wilson
George Ross*

NEW HAMPSHIRE

*Josiah Bartlett
William Whipple
Matthew Thornton*

MASSACHUSETTS

John Hancock

Join the Signers!

You can join the ranks of those willing to stand for freedom using the link below from the National Archives. Follow the instructions and print a facsimile of the Declaration of Independence with your signature added.

https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_sign.html