

The early colonists came to America to find freedom, but had to face many dangers. They became very independent and self-sufficient. At first, England paid little attention to the colonists in America, and the colonists were not strictly controlled by English law and government.

However, after the colonies grew and became important centers of trade, the British imposed restrictions and trade regulations on them. Some of these restrictions put England in a favorable position concerning trade with the colonies. The colonies objected vigorously.

The colonists also objected to the quartering of soldiers, taxation without representation in Parliament and lack of true self-government, among other issues.

People soon banded together and, at the urging of patriotic groups like the *Sons of Liberty*, refused to buy English goods.

Incidents like the *Boston Tea Party* in 1773 added fuel to the revolution. The Boston Tea Party occurred when patriots, disguised as Indians, threw tons of tea into Boston Harbor, because the colonists did not like tax policies of the British. When the British punished the Bostonians, all the colonists were inflamed. Conditions grew worse and, a year after the Boston Tea Party, Patrick Henry shouted:



Patrick Henry

"The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death!"

Henry's speech became one of the best-known pre-revolutionary speeches.

First Continental Congress

Colonial leaders decided to call a meeting to discuss how to win their rights. They were more interested in fair treatment than in independence. The *First Continental Congress* met at Carpenters' Hall in Philadelphia,

Pennsylvania, in 1774, with delegates from 12 of the 13 colonies. Georgia did not send representatives but agreed to support any plans made at the meeting. The delegates sent their complaints to the king, but British colonial policy did not change. Although they wanted their rights,



Carpenters' Hall

delegates did not dream they would soon have the responsibility of conducting a war. The colonial leaders also imposed an *embargo* (agreement prohibiting trade) on British trade and goods.

Second Continental Congress

The First Continental Congress adjourned in late October 1774, but agreed to convene the following May. By then the *American Revolution* had begun. In the spring of 1775, British soldiers were sent to Lexington, Massachusetts, to seize the guns and ammunition of the colonists and arrest colonial leaders Samuel Adams and John Hancock. It was Paul Revere who warned the Minutemen to meet British soldiers at Lexington, where, an unidentified shot started the war.

The *Second Continental Congress* met a few weeks later in May 1775, again in Philadelphia. Many of the same 56 delegates who attended the first meeting were in attendance, including one from each of the 13 colonies. These delegates had first come hoping for peace, but soon, more and more leaders called for complete separation from Great Britain.

Many critical actions were discussed and decided. The Second Continental Congress assumed the powers of a central government. An army and a navy were organized, and money was issued. General George Washington was chosen to lead the army. The Second Continental Congress became the nation's first government and continued to meet until the Articles of Confederation took effect in 1781.

Six years after the fighting began in Lexington, the British surrendered to General Washington at Yorktown, Virginia. The Americans had won their fight for independence.

From Revolution to Independence

On June 7, 1776, more than a year after the Revolution began, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia introduced this resolution to the Second Continental Congress:

“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.”

The resolution proposed independence for the American colonies. Following a spirited debate, the delegates agreed to the *Lee Resolution* on July 2. A couple of days later on July 4, 1776, the *Declaration of Independence* was signed. It gave various reasons why the colonists wanted to separate from England and announced the existence of a new nation.

The Declaration was written by Thomas Jefferson and a committee from the Second Continental Congress. While the words were mostly Thomas Jefferson’s, the ideas were centuries old. The Declaration can be divided into three parts: a statement of principle concerning the rights of a man and why a revolution was necessary, a list of specific grievances against England’s King George III, and a formal claim of independence. The most important part of the Declaration comes in its second paragraph:

“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.”

The Declaration is Read

On July 8, 1776, the *Liberty Bell* was rung in Philadelphia to call the people to the first public reading of the Declaration. For the safety of the signers, their names were not made public for six months. When they were revealed, many were seized by the British and thrown into prison, and their homes were burned. This small group had risked their lives for liberty.

Today, in Philadelphia, there stands a tablet that marks the place where Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration. After Congress had adopted the Declaration, John Dunlap printed copies of it. These prints are now called *Dunlap Broad-sides*. Twenty-four copies are known to exist, two of which are in the Library of Congress. The original copy was exhibited for many years until light and air threatened its existence. In 1921, it was transferred to the care of the Library of Congress, and in 1952, it was placed in the National Archives building in Washington, D.C. You may see it there, and you also may visit the meeting place of the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia.

The important fact is not that the Americans had declared themselves independent, but that they had set down certain principles and beliefs that were new to governments: all men are created equal; all men have rights; and governments are subject to the will of the people.

The Declaration of independence is not a constitution or form of government. It served to set up principles for a new government. Such principles were used in writing the United States Constitution.

Historical Note: When the Declaration of Independence was written, Jefferson wrote of “unalienable rights.” Today, it is more common to use the word “inalienable” to mean the same thing. This important word is defined as rights that are unable to be taken away from you.

On June 14, 1777, less than a year after the Declaration of Independence was signed, the Continental Congress adopted the *Stars and Stripes* as the flag of the United States. Original plans



to provide a new star and a new stripe for each new state proved impractical, and it was decided that only a new star would be added with each new state. So our flag today retains 13 stripes in honor of the 13 original colonies and 50 stars, one for each of the 50 states.

We look upon our flag as a symbol of union, freedom, and justice. Historically, the red of the flag stands for courage, the white for liberty, the blue for loyalty. Since the number of stars show the growth of our nation, the flag is not only an emblem but a history of our nation, as well.

It should be important to all Americans to fly the flag from their homes on national holidays and other patriotic occasions. When we pledge allegiance to our flag, it is not a pledge to any person or political party, but to the United States Constitution and its ideals.

When the flag passes in a parade or during the ceremony of raising or lowering the flag, all persons present should face the flag, stand at attention and salute, and men should remove their hats.

The Pledge of Allegiance

Thirty-one words that affirm the values and freedom the American flag represents are recited while facing the flag as a pledge of Americans' loyalty to their country.

"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

Flag Code Rules

All Americans should treat the country's flag with respect and follow established conduct in the use and display of the flag. Some of the main points of the flag code are shown here. Consult a copy of the complete code, found in your library or on the internet, when you have other questions about the flag.

- The flag should be flown only from sunrise to sunset.
- The flag should be hoisted briskly and lowered ceremoniously.
- When displayed against the wall, the union should be on top and to the flag's own right, your left.
- The flag may be used to cover a casket, but should not be lowered into the ground.
- In a procession, the flag should always be in the front.
- When shown with flags of states or other groups, the flag should be in the center and highest.

- When shown with flags of other nations, the American flag should not be flown higher than others.
- The flag should never be used as a cover.
- The flag should be displayed daily and especially on national holidays.
- The exact likeness of the flag should never be used for advertising.
- Nothing should be attached to the flag.
- The flag should never be allowed to touch the ground or floor, not be used as a carrying device, nor brush against any objects, nor be used as a drapery of any sort.
- Worn flags should be burned and not thrown in the trash.
- On a speaker's platform, the flag should be displayed at the right if it is on a staff or on the wall behind the speaker if is flat.
- Flags flown from fixed staffs are placed at half staff to indicate mourning. The flag so used should be first raised to the peak and then lowered to half-staff; it is again raised to the peak before lowering.

Contrary to popular belief, the flag code is not a law with penalties. It is a guide for American citizens on what is the best etiquette for displaying and honoring the American flag. The Supreme Court has ruled that even those who desecrate the flag by burning or mutilating the flag are simply exercising their rights of free speech and cannot be prosecuted. However, most Americans heed the flag code and treat it very seriously.

From our independence in 1776 until today, many Americans have fought for and died to preserve the ideals of democracy represented by the flag.

Who Designed the Flag?

Did Betsy Ross design the flag? Probably not. Historians have been unable to find solid evidence that Betsy was involved in either making or designing the flag. Best guess as who did? Probably Francis Hopkinson, a naval flag designer, who billed Congress for that service in 1781.