

Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence

Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence stands as one of the most influential political documents in human history. Adopted on July 4, 1776, it announced the American colonies' decision to sever their ties with Great Britain and articulated the timeless principles of liberty, equality, and self-government. Its assertion that all people are endowed with unalienable rights reshaped political thought and inspired movements for freedom around the world that continue to this day.

Jefferson drafted the text while serving as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress, drawing on the ideals of the European Enlightenment. Jefferson's original draft went even further than the final version we see today because it included a powerful passage condemning the transatlantic slave trade and blaming the British crown for perpetuating human bondage. Although this language was ultimately removed in order to preserve unity among the colonies, its presence reveals Jefferson's awareness of the moral contradiction between slavery and the ideals of the Revolution.

This rare broadside displayed before you was published by Benjamin Owen Tyler in 1818. It was dedicated to Jefferson and holds great historical importance. Tyler's edition marked the first time that ordinary Americans could see the actual signatures of the men who pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to the revolutionary cause. By making the signatures visible to the public, the document transformed abstract ideals into personal acts of courage and responsibility. Very few Tyler copies survive today. Jefferson personally owned two copies of this broadside, the whereabouts of which remain unknown.

Nearly two and a half centuries later, the Declaration continues to resonate far beyond the United States. Its principles have influenced constitutions, human-rights movements, and struggles for self-determination across the globe. As displayed here at Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, the Declaration reminds us that the pursuit of liberty is ongoing—and that its promises demand continual reflection, vigilance, and action.