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Grade 2: Lesson 16 *The Declaration of Independence*

The Declaration of Independence and the First Fourth of July

By Michael A. Signal

Three men worked late into the night. They read and reread, making final changes to the document. It had to be perfect before all thirteen colonies would approve it. Thomas Jefferson had written most of the text, but John Adams and Benjamin Franklin reviewed the declaration to help make changes. They had been working for days. The candles lighting the room flickered and grew short. The summer air was hot and uncomfortable, but still the men continued.

Finally, the document was ready for the colonies' representatives to read and approve. By the afternoon of July 4th, 1776, they had done just that. The thirteen British colonies had decided not to be British anymore. They had declared their independence. America was born.

The British had been at war with the thirteen American colonies for over a year before the colonies declared their independence, or freedom. The Battle of Lexington marked the start of the American Revolution on April 19, 1775. The colonies had fought many battles against the British army since then, and the colonists knew that they didn't want to be ruled by the king of Britain anymore. But it still took fifteen months for the colonies to declare their independence.

The Continental Congress

Not long before, the colonies had established a Continental Congress. The Continental Congress was made up of delegates from each of the thirteen colonies and served as the government. For years, the colonies had been displeased with the way the British had forced them to follow laws they didn't approve. One of the most important issues to the colonies was something called "taxation without representation." The British government taxed many goods, such as tea, without asking the colonists for permission. The British government made lots of other rules that the colonies had to follow, and the colonies couldn't do anything about it.

In 1775, the Continental Congress sent a petition to the British King. It listed the ways that the colonies thought Britain had treated them unfairly. The Continental Congress hoped that the King and the colonies could reach an agreement and that would make both sides happy. But the king ignored the petition.

Writing the Declaration

After this, the colonies were sure that the only way forward was to gain their independence from Britain. The Continental Congress selected five men to draft a document declaring America's freedom. The men all agreed that Thomas Jefferson, who had been a lawyer in Virginia, should be the main writer of the Declaration of Independence.

Jefferson worked on the Declaration of Independence for weeks. The Continental Congress wanted the declaration to state exactly why America should break its ties with Britain. They wanted a document they could show to the American people and even to people in other countries. The Congress wanted the declaration to help Americans join together against Britain. They also wanted other countries to recognize the colonies' freedom and treat America like its own country, not like part of Britain.

Parts of the Declaration of Independence

Thomas Jefferson felt just as strongly about independence as the rest of The Continental Congress. He toiled day and night to get every word just right. He ended up writing the Declaration of Independence in four parts. The first part is called the Preamble. He wrote it as an introduction to explain the purpose of the declaration. Jefferson used the next part to list the rights that all people should have. In this part, Jefferson explained that if the government tried to take these rights away from the people, the people should change the government. Jefferson wrote the third part of the declaration to show exactly why the colonies were upset with Britain. He listed many of the ways that Britain had treated the colonies unfairly. He also described how the colonies tried to work with the King of Britain to settle the problems. Lastly, in the final section, Jefferson wrote that that the colonies should now be treated just like any other independent country.

Signing the Declaration

On July 4, 1776, the final version of the Declaration of Independence was complete. Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Ben Franklin, and the other delegates had created a new nation.

As soon as the Continental Congress agreed to the Declaration of Independence, the president of the Continental Congress, John Hancock, signed his name to it. Eventually, Adams, Jefferson, Franklin, and fifty-two other patriots also signed the Declaration of Independence. It was rushed off to a printer so copies could be spread across the new country. However, the fighting with England continued for seven more years. Finally, Britain would lose the war and accept America as a free country. Even though the war didn't end until September 3, 1783, July 4th, 1776 will always be America's Independence Day.

Student notes for: The Declaration of Independence and the First Fourth of July

1. According to the article, what is the meaning of the word "declaration"?
2. In paragraph 3, what is the meaning of the word "independence"?
3. According to the text, why are the colonies fighting the American Revolution?

Independent Practice

Now it's your turn to demonstrate your understanding of *The Declaration of Independence*. You will respond to a question by writing the answer on a piece of paper. You need to write your answer in complete sentences. Remember, a complete sentence has a subject and a verb. It is a complete thought.

Focus question: According to the article, what is the Declaration of Independence?

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