

Anatomy of a Declaration

The Declaration of Independence is made up of five parts: the introduction; the preamble; the body, which can be divided into two sections; and a conclusion. The introduction states that this document will "declare" the "causes" that have made it necessary for the American Colonies to leave the British Empire.

Having stated in the introduction that independence is unavoidable, even necessary, the preamble sets out principles that were already recognized to be "self-evident" by most 18th-century Englishmen, closing with the statement that "a long train of abuses and usurpations . . . evinces a design to reduce [a people] 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."

The first section of the body of the Declaration gives evidence of the "long train of abuses and usurpations" heaped upon the colonists by King George III. The second section of the body states that the colonists had appealed in vain to their "British brethren" for a redress of their grievances. Having stated the conditions that made independence necessary and having shown that those conditions existed in British North America, the Declaration concludes 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."

— Charlene LaVoie

THE WINSTED JOURNAL, Friday, July 3, 2009

a political pamphlet entitled "A Summary View of the Rights of British America." In the spring of 1776, Jefferson composed a draft of a proposed constitution for Virginia. On June 27, while Jefferson was in Philadelphia, a portion of his draft constitution was adopted as the preamble to the Virginia Constitution. In preparation for his draft of the Declaration of Independence Jefferson relied heavily on his draft of the proposed constitution for Virginia, as well as George Mason's Declaration of Rights, adopted by Virginia on June 12, 1776, and Richard Henry Lee's resolution.

Changes were proposed by Adams and Franklin, and after Jefferson completed his work, it is believed that he prepared a "fair copy" or revised document to be presented to Congress. The rough draft contains corrections, additions and deletions, primarily in Jefferson's hand, made by Adams and Franklin, the Committee of Five, and later by Congress.

On June 28, the Committee of Five presented to Congress the document entitled "A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America in General Congress assembled." Jefferson's text was presented to the Committee of the Whole for discussion after Lee's resolution was approved by Congress on Monday, July 2. For three days, Jefferson sat and listened while members of the Continental Congress altered his work. The most significant change was the elimination of a paragraph that restricted the slave trade and statements denouncing the people of England for their participation in a war against the colonies. The process of revision continued into the late morning of July 4. Then the church bells rang out over Philadelphia: The Declaration was officially adopted.

Charlene LaVoie is the community lawyer in Winsted. Her office is funded by the Shafeek Nader Trust for the Community Interest.