

THEME: The Declaration of Independence

TOPIC: The Background, Writing and Signing of the Declaration of Independence

PREPARATION / PROPS: Liberty Tree sign on a tree or wall, papers on the "Liberty Tree", poster of Declaration of Independence, tricorn hat with wig, a picture of a young Thomas Jefferson

LESSON: Long ago the United States was not a country – just 13 colonies that belonged to a country called Great Britain, ruled by King George III. King George III started requiring the colonists to pay certain taxes. The colonists didn't think it was fair because they had no say in it. They wanted the same rights as English citizens.

Olive Branch Petition. While some people wanted independence from Great Britain, especially after what happened at Lexington and Concord, when the British came looking for Samuel Adams and John Hancock and tried to find and destroy the Americans supplies, some people still wanted to work it out with the King. Men from the colonies got together again to talk about what to do. They called that meeting the 2nd Continental Congress.

They decided to give it one last chance and wrote something they called the Olive Branch Petition. The olive branch is a symbol of peace. They wrote a letter to King George to try to make things right and work out their problems.

John Adams didn't think the colonies would be able to work it out with the King. In fact, he wrote a letter to a friend where he said that war was inevitable. He also said that he thought the colonies should have already had a navy put together. Someone got hold of that letter and sent it to the King. King George got the letter that John Adams wrote about the same time he got the Olive Branch Petition. So, the King didn't think the colonists were serious about working it out and he wouldn't even read the Olive Branch Petition. He was not interested in working things out. In fact, he hired German soldiers to fight against the Americans.

Finally a man named Richard Henry Lee stood up and said that he thought America should be free and independent from Great Britain. They chose 5 men to draft a letter to the King to tell him so. The committee chose Thomas Jefferson to draft the letter. Thomas Jefferson was 33 years old when he wrote the Declaration of Independence. It took him just 17 days to write it.

Voting. On July 1 they voted on whether to send the letter or not. Two states actually voted against sending the Declaration of Independence at that time - Pennsylvania and South Carolina. They didn't think the country was quite ready for war with Great Britain. The representative from South Carolina thought it was important that the colonies all vote the same way – that they were together on this very serious undertaking. So the next day they voted again. South Carolina had changed their mind. Two men from Pennsylvania abstained from voting so that the other delegates could vote for the Declaration of Independence. The men from New York were not given the authority to vote and the men from Delaware were split in their vote – half were for it and half were against it.

The Content of the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration of Independence was a letter to King George III and it wrote out everything that the King was doing that the colonists thought was wrong. It told the King that the colonies were united – that they were working together – and that they should be free and independent from Great Britain. They said the government's job was to protect the rights of the people – the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – and that King George was not doing that. So the Americans had the right to break away from Great Britain.

The Declaration of Independence was written on parchment, which is made from animal skin.

A man named John Hancock was the first one to sign the Declaration of Independence. He signed his name large, saying he did it so that King George would be able to read it without his spectacles. When people say, “put your John Hancock here”, that means your signature.

The Declaration of Independence was very serious. Ben Franklin said “We must all hang together or most assuredly we shall all hang separately.” They knew that if they were caught, the men who signed the Declaration of Independence would all be executed by hanging. They all knew how serious this was. The Declaration of Independence ends with this line “And for the support of this document, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.” They were relying on God's protection, and they made a promise to support each other with their lives, their money, and their honor.

Celebration. The men who signed the Declaration wanted the colonists to know about it. Couriers on horseback rode to towns across the country, posted the Declaration on trees, and read it out loud in the streets. George Washington read it to his soldiers. They celebrated with bonfires and bells. John Adams predicted that future generations would celebrate this day with fireworks! That is why we have fireworks on the 4th of July. Remember this Fourth of July, when you see fireworks, that they are a celebration of America's Declaration of Independence.

DISCUSSION POINTS:

- Why do you think the colonists wanted to make one more attempt to work things out with the King with the Olive Branch Petition before going to war? King George didn't believe they were sincere and wouldn't read the petition. Have you ever tried to make things right with someone, but they wouldn't work it out with you? How did you feel? What did you do or what could you have done?
- Not everyone agreed to sign the Declaration of Independence at first. South Carolina thought all the colonies should agree one way or the other. Why was it important for all the colonies to agree? What might have happened if one or more of the colonies did not agree?
- Ben Franklin said that they should all hang together or they would surely hang separately? What did that mean? Is it harder or easier to stand up for what you believe if you have support from friends or other people?

- What did the founders mean when they spoke of pledging their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor? Is there anything that you believe in so strongly that you would give all of your money toward or be willing to fight and die for? What is honor and why is it important? Who do you know who is honorable and why?
- What are some ways that you, your family, and your community celebrate Independence Day? Do those activities honor our founding fathers and the men and women who fought for our country's freedom? What are some other activities that you could do to give more meaning to your celebration? (ideas – read the DOI, the Olive Branch Petition, read about our founders, etc.)

ACTIVITY: Powdering Their Wigs

Materials: Baby powder

Method: Tell the kids about how the signers wore white wigs. Explain that they used powder to keep them white and smelling fresh. Go around to each camper as they are signing their Declaration of Independence or waiting for their turn and sprinkle powder in their hair. Make sure to let one of the kids powder YOUR wig!



ACTIVITY: Signing the Declaration of Independence



Materials: Copies of the Declaration of Independence for each kid, pens with feathers taped to them, clipboards

Method: Ahead of time, print the Declaration of Independence on parchment paper (available at any office supply store).

Tape a feather to each of several pens. (You can use an actual quill pen and ink; however, they are difficult to use. Ballpoint pens with taped on feathers are much easier and less messy.). Put several copies on each clipboard and pass the clipboards and the feather pens around.

Each of the kids should sign their own name at the bottom of their copy of the Declaration of Independence. Reiterate the seriousness of this document and what it meant for the signers.

ACTIVITY: Celebration! (Outdoor Activity)

Materials: Sparklers, candle, lighter, bells, bucket with some water

Method: Have the kids line up. Go over safety rules for sparklers. Light a sparkler, hand it to one of the kids, and have them move away into some open space. Let the kids ring the bells if they want. Tell them how people celebrated when they heard the news.

REFERENCES: The Declaration of Independence by Sam Fink, A Guide for Learning and Teaching the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution by Joseph Andrews, A Picture Book of Thomas Jefferson by David A. Adler, Wikipedia, Liberty's Kids Episode 13 – The First Fourth of July.

