

CHAPTER 3

Declaring Independence

Good historians share with magicians a talent for elegant sleight of hand. In both professions, the manner of execution conceals much of the work that makes the performance possible. Like the magician's trapdoors, mirrors, and other hidden props, historians' primary sources are essential to their task. But the better that historians are at their craft, the more likely they will focus their readers' attention on the historical scene itself and not on the supporting documents.

Contrary to prevailing etiquette, we have gone out of our way to call attention to the problems of evidence to be solved before a historical narrative is presented in its polished form. As yet, however, we have not examined in detail the many operations to be performed on a single document. What at first seems a relatively simple job of collecting, examining, and cataloging may become remarkably complex, especially when the document in question is of major importance.

So let us narrow our focus even more than in the previous two chapters by concentrating not on a region (Virginia) or a village (Salem), but on one document. The document in question admittedly carries more import than most, yet it remains brief enough to be read in several minutes. It also has the merit of being one of the few primary sources that virtually every reader of this book already will have encountered: the Declaration of Independence.

The Declaration, of course, is one of the most celebrated documents in the nation's history. Drafted by Thomas Jefferson, adopted by the Second Continental Congress, published for the benefit of the world, memorialized in countless patriotic speeches, it is today displayed within the rotunda of the National Archives, carefully encased in a glass container filled with helium to prevent any long-term deterioration from oxygen. Every schoolchild knows that Congress declared the colonies' independence by issuing the document on July 4, 1776. Nearly everyone has seen the painting by John Trumbull that depicts members of Congress receiving the parchment for signing on that day.



Along with the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence (*center*) is displayed within the rotunda of the National Archives. Since 1952, when the nuclear arms race was in full swing, these documents have been lowered every night into a 55-ton vault of reinforced concrete and steel, whose massive doors swing shut to protect them from the threat of atomic attack.

So the starting place is familiar enough. Yet there is a good deal to establish when unpacking the facts about such a seminal document. Under what circumstances did Jefferson write the Declaration? What people, events, or other documents influenced him? Only when such questions are answered in more detail does it become clear that quite a few of the “facts” enumerated in the previous paragraph are either misleading or incorrect. And the confusion begins in trying to answer the most elementary questions about the Declaration.

THE CREATION OF A TEXT

In May 1776 Thomas Jefferson traveled to Philadelphia, as befit a proper gentleman, in a coach-and-four with two attending slaves. He promptly took his place on the Virginia delegation to the Second Continental Congress.

Even a year after fighting had broken out at Lexington and Concord, Congress was still debating whether the quarrel with England could be patched up. Sentiment for independence ran high in many areas but by no means everywhere. The greatest reluctance lay in the middle colonies, particularly in Pennsylvania, where moderates such as John Dickinson still hoped for reconciliation.

Such cautious sentiments infuriated the more radical delegates, especially John and Samuel Adams of Massachusetts. The two Adamses had worked for independence from the opening days of Congress but found the going slow. America, complained John, was “a great, unwieldy body. It is like a large fleet sailing under convoy. The fleetest sailers must wait for the dullest and the slowest.” Jefferson also favored independence, but he lacked the Adamses’ taste for political infighting. While the men from Massachusetts pulled their strings in Congress, Jefferson only listened attentively and took notes. Thirty-three years old, he was the youngest delegate, and no doubt his age contributed to his diffidence. Privately, he conversed more easily with friends, sprawling casually in a chair with one shoulder cocked high, the other low, and his long legs extended. He got along well with the other delegates and performed his committee assignments dutifully.

The debate over independence seemed to sputter on fitfully until late May, when Jefferson’s colleague Richard Henry Lee arrived from Williamsburg. Lee was under instructions from the Virginia convention to force Congress to act. On Friday, June 7, he rose in Congress and offered the following resolutions:

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.

That it is expedient forthwith to take the most effectual measures for forming foreign alliances.

That a plan of confederation be prepared and transmitted to the respective colonies for their consideration and approbation.

On Saturday and again on Monday, moderates and radicals earnestly debated the propositions. They knew that a declaration of independence would make the breach with England final. The secretary of the Congress, Charles Thomson, cautiously recorded in his minutes only that “certain resolutions” were “moved and discussed”—the certain resolutions, of course, being treasonous in the extreme.

Still, sentiment was running with the radicals. When delegate James Wilson of Pennsylvania announced that he felt ready to vote for independence, Congress set the wheels in motion by appointing a five-member committee “to prepare a Declaration to the effect of the said first resolution.” The events that followed can be traced, in bare outline at least, in a modern edition of Secretary Thomson’s minutes (*Journals of the Continental Congress: 1774–1789*). From it we learn that on June 11, 1776, Congress constituted

Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston as a “Committee of Five” responsible for drafting the declaration. Then for more than two weeks, Thomson’s journal remains silent on the subject. Only on Friday, June 28, does it note that the committee “brought in a draught” of an independence declaration.

On Monday, July 1, Congress resolved itself into a “Committee of the Whole,” in which it could freely debate the sensitive question without leaving any official record of debate or disagreement. (Thomson’s minutes did not record the activities of committees.) On July 2 the Committee of the Whole went through the motions of “reporting back” to Congress (that is, to itself). The minutes note only that Richard Lee’s resolution, then “being read” in formal session, “was agreed to.”

Thus the official journal makes it clear that Congress voted for independence on July 2, not July 4, adopting Richard Henry Lee’s original proposal of June 7. When John Adams wrote home on July 3 to his wife, Abigail, he enthusiastically predicted that July 2 would be remembered as “the most memorable Epoca in the History of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival. . . . It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more.”

As it turned out, Adams picked the wrong date for the fireworks. Although Congress had officially broken the tie with England, the declaration *explaining* the action had not yet been approved. On July 3 and 4 Congress again met as a Committee of the Whole. Only then was the formal declaration reported back, accepted, and sent to the printer. Thomson’s journal notes, “The foregoing declaration was, by order of Congress, engrossed, and signed by the following members. . . .” Here is the enactment familiar to everyone: the “engrossed” parchment (one written in large, neat letters) beginning with its bold “IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776,” and concluding with the president of the Continental Congress’s signature, so flourishing that we still speak of putting our John Hancock to paper. Below that, the signatures of fifty-five other delegates appear more modestly inscribed.

If mention of the Declaration in Thomson’s minutes concluded with the entry on July 4, schoolchildren might emerge with their memories reasonably intact. But later entries of the journal suggest that in all likelihood, the Declaration was not signed on July 4 after all, but on August 2. To muddy the waters further, not all the signers were in Philadelphia even on August 2. Some could not have signed the document until October or November.

So the upshot of the historian’s preliminary investigation is that (1) Congress declared independence on the second of July, not the fourth; (2) most members officially signed the engrossed parchment only on the second of August; and (3) all the signers of the Declaration never met together in the same room at once, despite the appearances in John Trumbull’s painting. In the matter of establishing the basic facts surrounding a document, historians are all too ready to agree with John Adams’s bewildered search of his recol-



The Committee of Five—Adams, Sherman, Livingston, Jefferson, and Franklin—present their work to John Hancock, president of the Continental Congress, in a detail from *The Declaration of Independence* by John Trumbull. When Hancock finally put his elaborate signature to the engrossed copy, he is reported to have said, “There! John Bull can read my name without spectacles, and may now double his reward of £500 for my head.”

lections: “What are we to think of history? When in less than 40 years, such diversities appear in the memories of living men who were witnesses.”

Yet even with the basic facts in place, many important points remain to be answered about the Declaration’s creation. Although Jefferson drafted it, what did the Committee of Five contribute? If the delegates made changes during the congressional debate on July 3 and 4, for what purpose? A historian will want to know which parts of the completed document were most controversial; surviving copies of earlier drafts could shed valuable light on these questions.

The search for accurate information about the Declaration’s drafting began even while the protagonists were still living. Some forty years after the signing, both Jefferson and John Adams tried to set down the sequence of events. Adams recalled the affable and diplomatic Jefferson suggesting that Adams write the first draft. “I will not,” replied Adams.

“You shall do it,” persisted Jefferson.

“Oh no!”

“Why will you not do it? You ought to do it.”

“I will not.”

“Reasons enough.” And Adams ticked them off. “Reason 1st. You are a Virginian and a Virginian ought to be at the head of this business. Reason 2nd. I am obnoxious, suspected and unpopular; you are very much otherwise. Reason 3rd. You can write ten times better than I can.”

“Well,” said Jefferson, “if you are decided, I will do as well as I can.”

Jefferson, for his part, did not remember this bit of diplomatic shuttlecock. In a letter to James Madison in 1823 he asserted that

the Committee of 5 met . . . [and] they unanimously pressed on myself alone to undertake the draught. I consented; I drew it; but before I reported it to the committee I communicated it separately to Dr. Franklin and Mr. Adams requesting their corrections; . . . and you have seen the original paper now in my hands, with the corrections of Dr. Franklin and Mr. Adams interlined in their own handwriting. Their alterations were two or three only, and merely verbal [that is, changes of phrasing, not substance].

So far, so good. Jefferson’s “original paper”—which he endorsed on the document itself as the “original Rough draught”—is preserved in the Library of Congress. Indeed, the draft is even rougher than Jefferson suggested. As historian Carl Becker pointed out,

the inquiring student, coming to it for the first time, would be astonished, perhaps disappointed, if he expected to find in it nothing more than the “original paper . . . with the corrections of Dr. Franklin and Mr. Adams interlined in their own handwriting.” He would find, for example, on the first page alone nineteen corrections, additions or erasures besides those in the handwriting of Adams and Franklin. It would probably seem to him at first sight a bewildering document, with many phrases crossed out, numerous interlineations, and whole paragraphs enclosed in brackets.

These corrections make the rough draft more difficult to read, but in the end also more rewarding. For the fact is, Jefferson continued to record on this copy successive alterations of the Declaration, not only by Adams and Franklin, but by Congress in its debates of July 3 and 4.

Thus by careful comparison and reconstruction, we can accurately establish the sequence of changes made in one crucial document, from the time it was first drafted, through corrections in committee, to debate and further amendment in Congress, and finally on to the engrossed parchment familiar to history. The changes were not slight. In the end, Congress removed about a quarter of Jefferson’s original language. Eighty-six alterations were made by one person or another, including Jefferson, over those fateful three weeks of 1776.

THE TACTICS OF INTERPRETATION

Having sketched the circumstances of the Declaration’s composition, the historian must attempt the more complicated task of interpretation. And here, historians’ paths are most likely to diverge—understandably so. To de-

termine a document's historical significance requires placing it within the larger, more complex context of events. There is no single method for doing this, of course. If there were, historians would all agree on their reconstructions of the past, and history would be a good deal duller. On the other hand, historians do at least share certain analytical tactics that have consistently yielded profitable results.

What follows, then, is one set of tactical approaches to the Declaration. These approaches are by no means the only ways of making sense of the document. But they do suggest some range of the options historians normally call upon.

The document is read, first, to understand its surface content. This step may appear too obvious to bear mentioning, but not so. The fact is, most historians examine a document from a particular and potentially limiting viewpoint. A diplomatic historian, for instance, may approach the Declaration with an eye to the role it played in cementing a formal alliance with France. A historian of political theory might prefer to focus on the theoretical justifications of independence. Both perspectives are legitimate, but by beginning with such specific interests, historians risk prejudging the document. They are likely to notice only the kinds of evidence they are seeking.

So it makes sense to begin by temporarily putting aside any specific questions and approaching the Declaration as a willing, even uncritical reader. Ask only the most basic questions. How is the document organized? What are its major points, briefly summarized?

The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America.

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands, which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.—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,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them 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. Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.—He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.—He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.—He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.—He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.—He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.—He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the meantime exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.—He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.—He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing judiciary powers.—He has made judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.—He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people, and eat out their substance.—He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.—He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.—He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation.—For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:—For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the inhabitants of these States:—For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:—For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:—For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:—For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offenses:—For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighboring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:—For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:—For suspending

our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.—He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.—He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.—He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.—He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.—He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions. In every state of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people. Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, 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: and that as Free and independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which independent States may of right do.—And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

As befits a reasoned public document, the Declaration can be separated fairly easily into its component parts. The first sentence begins by informing the reader of the document's purpose. The colonies, having declared

their independence from England, intend to announce “the causes which impel them to the separation.”

The causes that follow, however, are not all of a piece. They break naturally into two sections: the first, a theoretical justification of revolution, and the second, a list of the specific grievances that justify this revolution. Because the first section deals in general, “self-evident” truths, it is the one most often remembered and quoted. “All men are created equal,” “unalienable Rights,” “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” “consent of the governed”—these principles have relevance far beyond the circumstances of the colonies in the summer of 1776.

But the Declaration devotes far greater space to a list of British actions that Congress labeled “a long train of abuses and usurpations” designed to “reduce [Americans] under absolute Despotism.” Because the Declaration concedes that revolution should never be undertaken lightly, the document proceeds to demonstrate that English rule has been not merely unwieldy and inconvenient, but so full of “repeated injuries” that “absolute Tyranny” is the result. What threatens Americans most, the Declaration proclaims, is not the individual measures, but the existence of a deliberate plot by the king to deprive a “free people” of their liberties.

The final section of the Declaration turns to the colonial response. Here the Declaration incorporates Richard Lee’s resolution passed on July 2 and ends with the signers solemnly pledging their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to support the new government.

Having begun with this straightforward reading, the historian is less likely to wrench out of context a particular passage, magnifying it at the expense of the rest of the document. Yet taken by itself, the reading of “surface content” may distort a document’s import. Significance, after all, depends on the circumstances under which a document was created. Thus historians must always seek to place their evidence in context.

The context of a document may be established, in part, by asking what the document might have said but did not. When Jefferson retired to his second-floor lodgings on the outskirts of Philadelphia, placed a portable writing desk on his lap, and put pen to paper, he had many options open to him. Yet the modern reader, seeing only the final product, is tempted to view the document as the logical, even inevitable result of Jefferson’s deliberations. Perhaps it was, but the historian needs to ask how it might have been otherwise. What might Jefferson and the Congress have declared but did not?

We can get a better sense of what Congress and Jefferson rejected by looking at a declaration made some ten years earlier by another intercolonial gathering, the Stamp Act Congress. Like Jefferson’s, this declaration, protesting the Stamp Act as unjust, began by outlining general principles. In reading the first three resolves, note the difference between their premises and those of the Declaration.

I. That his Majesty’s Subjects in these Colonies, owe the same Allegiance to the Crown of *Great-Britain*, that is owing from his Subjects

born within the Realm, and all due Subordination to that August Body the Parliament of *Great-Britain*.

II. That his Majesty's Liege Subjects in these Colonies, are entitled to all the inherent Rights and Liberties of his Natural born Subjects, within the Kingdom of *Great-Britain*.

III. That it is inseparably essential to the Freedom of a People, and the undoubted Right of *Englishmen*, that no Taxes be imposed on them, but with their own Consent, given personally, or by their Representatives.

The rights emphasized by the Stamp Act Congress in 1765 differ significantly from those emphasized in 1776. The Stamp Act resolutions claim that colonials are entitled to "all the inherent Rights and Liberties" of "Subjects, within the Kingdom of *Great-Britain*." They possess "the undoubted Right of *Englishmen*." Nowhere in Jefferson's Declaration are the rights of Englishmen mentioned as justification for protesting the king's conduct. Instead, the Declaration magnifies what the Stamp Act only mentions in passing—natural rights inherent in the "Freedom of a People," whether they be English subjects or not.

The shift from English rights to natural rights resulted from the changed political situation. In 1765 Americans were seeking relief within the British imperial system. Logically, they cited rights they felt due them as British subjects. But in 1776 the Declaration was renouncing all ties with its parent nation. If the colonies were no longer a part of Great Britain, what good would it do to cite the rights of Englishmen? Thus the natural rights "endowed" all persons "by their Creator" took on paramount importance.

The Declaration makes another striking omission. Nowhere in the long list of grievances does it use another word that appears in the first resolve of the Stamp Act Congress—"Parliament." The omission is all the more surprising because the Revolutionary quarrel had its roots in the dispute over Parliament's right to tax and regulate the colonies. The Sugar Act, the Stamp Act, the Townshend duties, the Tea Act, the Coercive Acts, the Quebec Act—all place Parliament at the center of the dispute. The Declaration alludes to those legislative measures but always in the context of the king's actions, not Parliament's. Doing so admittedly required a bit of evasion: in laying out parliamentary abuses, Jefferson complained, rather indirectly, that the king had combined with "others"—namely Parliament—"to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation."

Obviously, the omission came about for much the same reason that Jefferson excluded all mention of the "rights of Englishmen." At the Stamp Act Congress of 1765, virtually all Americans were willing to grant Parliament some jurisdiction over the colonies—not the right to lay taxes without American representation, certainly, but at least the right to regulate colonial trade. Thus Congress noted (in Resolve I) that Parliament deserved "all due Subordination."

By 1775 more radical colonials would not grant Parliament any authority over the colonies. They had come to recognize what an early pamphleteer had noted, that Americans could be “as effectually ruined by the powers of legislation as by those of taxation.” The Boston Port Bill, which closed Boston harbor, was not a tax. Nor did it violate any traditional right. Yet the radicals argued, quite correctly, that Parliament could take away Americans’ freedoms by such legislation.

Although many colonials had totally rejected all parliamentary authority in 1775, most had not yet advocated independence. How, then, were the colonies related to England if not through Parliament? The only link, radicals argued, was through the king. The colonies possessed their own sovereign legislatures, but they shared with all British subjects one monarch. Thus when the final break with England came, the Declaration carefully laid all blame at the king’s feet. Even to recognize Parliament would be to tacitly admit that it had some legitimate connection with the colonies.

What the Declaration does *not* say, then, proves to be as important as what it did say. Historians can recognize the importance of such unstated premises by remembering that the actors in any drama possess more alternatives than the ones they finally choose.

A document may be understood by seeking to reconstruct the intellectual worlds behind its words. We have already seen, in the cases of Virginia and Salem, the extent to which history involves the task of reconstructing whole societies from fragmentary records. The same process applies to the intellectual worlds that lie behind a document.

The need to perform this reconstruction is often hidden, however, because the context of the English language has changed over the past two hundred years—and not simply in obvious ways. For example, what would Jefferson have made of the following excerpt out of a computer magazine?

Macworld’s Holiday Gift Guide. It’s holiday shopping season again. *Macworld* advises you on the best ways to part with your paycheck. . . . It could be an audio CD, but it could also be a CD-ROM containing anything from an encyclopedia to a virtual planetarium to an art studio for the kids.

To begin with, terms like “audio CD” and “CD-ROM” would mystify Jefferson simply because they come from a totally unfamiliar world. Beyond the obvious, however, the excerpt contains words that might seem familiar but would be deceptively so, because their meaning has changed over time. Jefferson probably would have recognized “planetarium,” though he might have preferred the more common eighteenth-century term *orrery*. He would recognize “virtual” as well. But a “virtual planetarium”? Today’s notion of virtual reality would be lost to him unless he read a good deal more about the computer revolution.

Even more to the point, look at the innocuous phrase, “It’s holiday shopping season again.” The words would be completely familiar to Jefferson, but the world that surrounds them certainly would not. To understand the phrase, he would have to appreciate how much the Christmas holiday has

evolved into a major commercial event, bearing scant resemblance to any eighteenth-century observance. (In John Adams's puritan New England, of course, even to celebrate Christmas would have been frowned upon as a popish superstition.) Or to make an even subtler linguistic point: unlike a magazine article from the 1950s, this one from the 1990s never uses the word *Christmas*. The social reasons for this deliberate omission would undoubtedly have interested Jefferson, for it reflects a multicultural nation sensitive to the questions of equality and the separation of church and state. But unless he were aware of the ways in which American society had evolved, Jefferson would miss the implications hidden within language that to us seems reasonably straightforward.

By the same token, eighteenth-century documents may appear deceptively lucid to twentieth-century readers. When Jefferson wrote that all men were "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights," including "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," the meaning seems clear. But as essayist and historian Garry Wills has insisted, "To understand any text remote from us in time, we must reassemble a world around that text. The preconceptions of the original audience, its tastes, its range of reference, must be recovered, so far as that is possible."

In terms of reassembling Jefferson's world, historians have most often followed Carl Becker in arguing that its center lay in the political philosophy of John Locke. Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* (1690) asserted that all governments were essentially a compact between individuals based on the principles of human nature. Locke speculated that if all the laws and customs that had grown up in human society over the years were stripped away, human beings would find themselves in "a state of perfect freedom to order their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature." But because some individuals inevitably violate the laws of nature—robbing or murdering or committing other crimes—people have always banded together to make a compact, agreeing to create governments that will order human society. And just as people come together to allow themselves to be governed, likewise they can overturn those governments wherein the ruler has become a tyrant who "may do to all his subjects whatever he pleases."

Jefferson's colleague Richard Henry Lee in later years commented that Jefferson, in writing the Declaration, had merely "copied from Locke's treatise on government." Yet as important as Locke was, his writings were only one facet of the Enlightenment tradition flourishing in the eighteenth century. Jefferson shared with many European philosophes the belief that the study of human affairs should be conducted as precisely as the study of the natural world had come to be. Just as Sir Isaac Newton in the 1680s had used mathematical equations to derive the laws of gravity, optics, and planetary motion, so the philosophes of Jefferson's day looked to quantify the study of the human psyche.

The results of such endeavors seem quaint today, but the philosophes took their work seriously. Garry Wills has argued that even more important to

Jefferson than Locke were the writings of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, chief among them Francis Hutcheson. In 1725 Hutcheson attempted to quantify such elusive concepts as morality. The result was a string of equations in which qualities were abbreviated by letters (B = benevolence, A = ability, S = self-love, I = interest) and placed in their proper relations:

$$M = (B + S) \times A = BA + SA; \text{ and therefore } BA = M - SA = M - I, \text{ and } B = \frac{M-I}{A}$$

Jefferson possessed a similar passion for quantification. He repeatedly praised the American astronomer David Rittenhouse and his orrery, a mechanical model of the solar system whose gears replicated the relative motions of the earth, moon, and planets. Jefferson also applied classification and observation as a gentleman planter. If it were possible to discover the many relationships within the natural order, he reasoned, farmers might better plant and harvest to those rhythms. Even in the White House, Jefferson kept his eye on the Washington markets and recorded the seasons' first arrivals of thirty-seven different vegetables.

Wills argues that Jefferson conceived the "pursuit of Happiness" in equally precise terms. Francis Hutcheson had suggested that a person's actions be judged by how much happiness that person brought to other people. "That action is best," he argued, "which accomplishes the greatest happiness for the greatest number." According to Enlightenment science, because happiness could be quantified, a government's actions could be weighed in the balance scales to discover whether they hindered a citizen's right to pursue happiness as he or she saw fit. Thus for Jefferson the pursuit of happiness was not a phrase expressing the vague hope that all Americans should have the chance to live happily ever after. His language reflected the conviction that the science of government, like the science of agriculture or celestial mechanics, would gradually take its place in the advancing progress of humankind.

Historians' reconstructions of Jefferson's intellectual world, imaginative as they are, must remain speculative. We do not have Jefferson's direct testimony of what he was thinking, aside from a few recollections made decades after the event. When Garry Wills made his case for the importance of Scottish moral philosophy, he was forced to rely on circumstantial evidence, such as the presence of Francis Hutcheson's works in Jefferson's library or the topics Jefferson's professors lectured on during his college years—or even, more generally, what ideas and opinions were "in the air." Whether or not Wills's specific case stands up to examination, his method of research is one that historians commonly employ. By understanding the intellectual world from which a document arose, we come to understand the document itself.

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER?

More than a few historians, however, become uneasy about depending too heavily on a genealogy of ideas. To be sure, a historian can speak of theories as being "in the air" and of Jefferson, as it were, inhaling. But that approach

may neglect the noisy and insistent world outside his Philadelphia lodgings. By June 1776 Congress was in the midst of waging a war as well as a revolution, and a hundred and one events demanded its daily attention. The morning that Richard Henry Lee submitted his motion for independence, delegates had to deal with troops being raised in South Carolina and complaints about the gunpowder manufactured by a certain Mr. Oswald of Eve's Mill. Over the following days they learned that the British fleet had sailed from Halifax, on its way to attack New York City. Events both large and small kept Jefferson and the other members of Congress from sitting down quietly for long to ponder over the creation of a single document.

Thus to understand the Declaration we must not only set it in the context of previous ideas, but also of contemporary events. "What was Jefferson thinking about on the eve of his authorship of the Declaration of Independence?" asked a recent biographer, Joseph Ellis. "The answer is indisputable. He was not thinking . . . about John Locke's theory of natural rights or Scottish commonsense philosophy. He was thinking about Virginia's new constitution." Throughout May and June, couriers brought news to Jefferson of doings in Williamsburg, the capital of his own "country," as he called it. There, on June 12, the Virginia convention adopted a preamble to its state constitution, written by George Mason. "All men are created equally free and independent and have certain inherent and natural rights," wrote Mason, ". . . among which are the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety."

These words reached Philadelphia little more than a week before Jefferson penned his immortal credo "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." The point is not to expose Jefferson as a plagiarist, for he substantially improved Mason's version. Nor is it to deny that John Locke or Francis Hutcheson may have played a role in shaping Jefferson's (and Mason's) thinking. But seeing how closely Jefferson's language resembles George Mason's makes it clear how much Jefferson was affected by events around him.

Often enough, actions do speak louder than words. One way to put the Declaration in context is to compare it with the actions taken by other Americans during these same months. As historian Pauline Maier has noted, the Continental Congress was not the only body to issue a declaration of independence. She discovered at least ninety other resolutions to similar effect made between April and July of 1776. Some were issued by town meetings; others, by gatherings of militia or workers; still others, by grand juries or county conventions. These state and local declarations, argued Maier, "offer the best opportunity to hear the voice of the people . . . that we are likely to get."

Like Congress's Declaration, the local resolutions listed grievances that caused them to take up arms. Worrying less about theoretical consistency, these local declarations did not hesitate either to mention Parliament or to emphatically condemn it. Many pointed in particular to the Declaratory Act

of 1766, in which Parliament asserted the right to make laws binding the colonies “IN ALL CASES WHATSOEVER,” as one declaration stated in uppercase letters. It was Parliament that had no right to legislate whatsoever, colonials now countered.

Once this flat assertion was made, most local declarations did not bother to list a “long train of abuses.” Instead, they focused on the outrages of the preceding year. New York’s mechanics complained that the king “is deaf to our petitions,” including Congress’s Olive Branch Petition of July 1775. The war itself supplied many more grievances, beginning with the casualties at Lexington and Concord: “We hear their blood crying to us from the ground for vengeance,” noted one Massachusetts town. Many resolutions condemned the “barbarous” act of hiring “foreign mercenaries” such as the German Hessians to prosecute the war for the king’s “inhuman purposes.”

In short, the local resolutions reflected the events around them even more strongly than the Declaration did. They underline the likelihood that sentiment for independence among most colonials did not really blossom until well after the fighting began. In that sense, the resolutions help us link the official Declaration more closely with the feelings of ordinary Americans.

Yet a problem remains. The proverb proclaims that actions speak louder than words, but all these declarations are still just words. The point of the aphorism is that we cannot always take words at face value—that often, actions are what reveal true feelings. We need not reject the Declaration’s heartfelt sentiments in order to recognize that the Congress (or, for that matter, colonials themselves) may have had reasons for declaring independence that they did not enunciate fully, either in the Declaration or in local resolutions.

For example, consider the vexed topic of slavery, especially interesting in a document proclaiming that “all men are created equal.” It has become commonplace to point out the contradiction between the Declaration’s noble embrace of human liberties and the reality that many delegates to Congress, including Jefferson, were slave owners; or similarly, the inconsistency between a declaration of equality and the refusal to let women participate in the equal rights of citizenship.

Although such contradictions have attained the status of truisms, they deserve to be pointed out again and again. Indeed, much of American history can be seen as an effort to work out the full implications of the phrase “all men are created equal”—whether that history be the Civil War, wherein a vast and bloody carnage was required to bring an end to slavery, or the more peaceful Seneca Falls Convention, mounted in 1848 by women to proclaim their own Declaration of Sentiments supporting an equality of the sexes. The theme could be applied to the populist and progressive reform movements of the late nineteenth century, grappling as they did with the effect on equality of the monopoly powers of big business; or to the debates of the late twentieth century over civil rights and affirmative action. The implications of the Declaration have engaged the republic for more than two centuries and no doubt will continue to do so.

Granting the ironies of these unstated contradictions, it may still be worthwhile to return to the notion of actions and to examine the intriguing way in which slavery *does* appear in the Declaration. At first glance, the Declaration seems to say very little about slavery. In its long list of grievances, Congress merely notes that the king has “excited domestic insurrections amongst us”—in other words, encouraged slaves to revolt. The five words slip by so quickly we hardly notice them.

Slavery did not slip by so quickly in Jefferson’s rough draft. His discussion of the institution appeared not as a grace note, but as the climax of his long list of grievances against the king:

He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of *infidel* powers, is the warfare of the *Christian* king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where *Men* should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative [used his veto power] for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce. And that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguishing die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people on whom he also obtruded them: thus paying off former crimes committed against the *Liberties* of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the *lives* of another.

The passage is in many ways both revealing and astonishing. It reveals, first, that Jefferson was very much aware of the contradiction between slavery and the Declaration’s high sentiments. Not once but twice he speaks out. The enslavement of black Africans violates the “most sacred rights of life and liberty,” he admits; and again, enslavement amounts to “crimes committed against the *Liberties* of one people.” Yet in admitting the wrong, he blames the king for it! Jefferson based his charge on the fact that several times during the eighteenth century, Virginia’s legislature passed a tariff designed to restrict the importation of slaves. It did so not so much from humanitarian motives (although these were occasionally mentioned) but because the colony’s slave population was expanding rapidly. Importing too many Africans would lower the price of domestic slaves whom Virginia planters wanted to sell. The British administration, however, consistently disallowed such laws—and thus the king had “prostituted his negative” to prevent the slave trade from being restrained. For their part, white Georgians and South Carolinians were generally happy to see the trade continue, as were many New England merchants who made a profitable livelihood from it.

To accuse the king of enslaving black colonials was far-fetched enough, but Jefferson then turned around and hotly accused the king of *freeing* black colonials. In November 1775, the loyal Governor Dunmore of Virginia

proclaimed that any slave who deserted his master to fight for the king would be freed. Dunmore's Proclamation, as it was called, outraged many white patriots. Hence Jefferson called King George to account for the vile "crime" of freeing slaves who remained loyal.

What the delegates in Congress thought of the passage does not survive. But their actions speak loudly. In the final draft, Jefferson's long passage has vanished. All that remains is the general accusation that the king has "excited domestic insurrections." It seems likely Congress simply rejected Jefferson's logic as being so tortuous that it could hardly withstand public scrutiny. The less said, the better.

DECLARING FOR FREEDOM

Saying less, however, is not the same as saying nothing. By not deleting the accusation regarding "domestic insurrections," Congress revealed that this particular issue remained a sensitive one. Indeed, other local declarations featured it prominently. Marylanders complained that slaves "were proclaimed free, enticed away, trained and armed against their lawful masters." Pennsylvanians objected that the British had incited "the negroes to imbrue their hands in the blood of their masters." North Carolina echoed the sentiment nearly word for word. The frequency of this complaint raises a question. Leave aside for a moment the issue of white attitudes toward slavery and liberty. How did the actions of *African Americans* affect the drafters of the Declaration?

On the face of it, the chance of answering that question seems far-fetched. The approximately 400,000 black slaves living in the colonies in 1776 could not leave a trail of resolutions or declarations behind them, for most were not allowed to. Yet the Declaration's complaint that Britain was stirring up American slaves brings to mind the similar laments of proslavery advocates in the 1850s and of segregationists during the 1950s and 1960s. Both repeatedly blamed "outside agitators" for encouraging southern blacks to assert their civil rights. In the eighteenth century, the phrase most commonly used was "instigated insurrection." "The newspapers were full of Publications calculated to excite the fears of the People—" wrote one indignant South Carolinian in 1775, "Massacres and Instigated Insurrections, were words in the mouth of every Child." And hardly children alone: South Carolina's First Provincial Congress voiced their own "dread of instigated insurrections." North Carolinians echoed the sentiment, warning that "there is much reason to fear, in these Times of general Tumult and Confusion, that the Slaves may be instigated, encouraged by our inveterate Enemies to an Insurrection."

But were the British "instigating" rebellion? Or were they taking advantage of African Americans' own determination to strike for freedom? As historian Sylvia Frey has pointed out, the incidence of flight, rebellion, or protest among enslaved African Americans increased significantly in the decade following the Stamp Act, despite the long odds that weighed against success. In 1765 the Sons of Liberty paraded around Charleston harbor

shouting “Liberty! Liberty and stamp’d paper!” Soon after, black slaves organized a demonstration of their own, chanting “Liberty!” Planter Henry Laurens believed this action to be merely a “thoughtless imitation” of white colonials, but it frightened many South Carolinians.

With good reason. Look more closely at events in Virginia preceding Dunmore’s Proclamation. Governor Dunmore in November 1775 offered freedom to able-bodied slaves who would serve the king. Six months earlier, anticipating the outbreak of hostilities, the governor had confiscated some of the colony’s gunpowder to prevent it from falling into rebel hands. At that point, “some Negroes . . . had offered to join him and take up arms.” What was Dunmore’s reaction? He ordered the slaves “to go about their business” and “threatened them with his severest resentment, should they presume to renew their application.” Patriot forces, on the other hand, demanded the return of the gunpowder and accused Dunmore of seizing it with the intention of “disarming the people, to weaken the means of opposing an insurrection of the slaves.” At this charge Dunmore became “exceedingly exasperated” and threatened to “declare freedom to the slaves and reduce the City of Williamsburg to ashes.”

In other words, the slaves, not Dunmore, made the first move in this particular game of chess! And far from greeting the slaves’ offer with delight, Dunmore shunned it—until patriot fears about black insurrections made him consider the advantages that black military support might provide. Similarly, in 1773 and again in 1774 the loyal governor of Massachusetts, General Thomas Gage, was approached with five separate petitions from “a grate Number of [enslaved] Blacks” offering to fight for him if he would provide arms and set them free. “At present it is kept pretty quiet,” Abigail Adams reassured her husband, John, who was off at the First Continental Congress.

By 1775 unrest among black slaves was common in many areas of the Carolinas and Georgia. South Carolina had taken on “rather the appearance of a garrison town,” reported one observer, because the militia were patrolling the streets at night as well as during the day, “to guard against any hostile attempts that may be made by our domesticks.” White fears were confirmed when a black harbor pilot, Thomas Jeremiah, was arrested, tried, hanged, and burned to death for plotting an insurrection that would enlist the help of the British navy. Jeremiah had told other blacks that “there was a great War coming soon” that “was come to help the poor Negroes.” According to James Madison, a group of Virginia slaves “met together and chose a leader who was to conduct them when the English troops should arrive.” The conspiracy was discovered and suppressed. Islands along the coast—Tybee Island and Sullivan’s Island off South Carolina and Cockspur Island off Georgia—as well as English cruisers, attracted slaves striking for freedom. The slaves were not “inticed,” reported one captain; they “came as freemen, and demanding protection.” He could “have had near 500 who had offered.”

The actions of these and other enslaved African Americans clearly affected the conduct of both British officials and colonial rebels. The British, who

RUN away from *Hampton*, on *Sunday*
 last, a lusty Mulatto Fellow named ARGYLE, well known about the Country, has a Scar on one of his Wrists, and has lost one or more of his fore Teeth; he is a very handy Fellow by Water, or about the House, &c. loves Drink, and is very bold in his Cups, but dastardly when sober. Whether he will go for a Man of War's Man, or not, I cannot say; but I will give 40s. to have him brought to me. He can read and write.
 NOVEMBER 2, 1775. JACOB WRAY.

RUN away from the Subscriber, in *New Kent*, in the Year 1772, a small new New Negro Man named GEORGE, about 40 Years of Age, with a Nick in one Ear, and some Marks with the Whip. He was about *Williamsburg* till last Winter, but either went or was sent to Lord *Dunmore's* Quarter in *Frederick County*, and there passes for his Property. Whoever conveys him to me shall have 5l. Reward.
 I|| JAMES MOSS.

Masters whose slaves ran away commonly posted notices in newspapers offering rewards for their return. The advertisements often assumed that slaves had gone to join kin. But these advertisements from an issue of the *Virginia Gazette* in November 1775 indicate that slaveowners were frequently convinced that their male slaves might have gone to offer service to Lord Dunmore or to the British navy ("a Man of War's Man").

(like Dunmore) remained reluctant to encourage a full-scale rebellion, nevertheless saw that the mere possibility of insurrection might be used as an effective psychological threat. If South Carolinians did not stop opposing British policy, warned General Gage ominously, "it may happen that your Rice and Indigo will be brought to market by negroes instead of white People." For their part, southern white colonials worked energetically to suppress both the rebellions and all news of them. As two Georgia delegates to the Continental Congress informed John Adams, slave networks could carry news "several hundreds of miles in a week or fortnight." When Madison heard about the slave conspiracy in Virginia, he saw clearly the dangers of talking about the incident: "It is prudent such things should be concealed as well as suppressed," he warned a friend. Maryland's provisional government felt similarly about Governor Dunmore's proclamation in neighboring Virginia. It immediately outlawed all correspondence with Virginia, either by land or water. But word spread anyway. "The insolence of the Negroes in this county is come to such a height," reported one Eastern Shore Marylander, "that we are under a necessity of disarming them which we affected [sic] on Saturday last. We took about eighty guns, some bayonets, swords, etc."

Thus the actions of African Americans helped push the delegates in Congress toward their final decision for independence, even though the Declaration remained largely silent on the subject. By striking for liberty, slaves encouraged the British to use them as an element in their war against the Americans. As Lord North told the king in October 1775, British troops sent to Georgia and the Carolinas should expect to meet with success, especially because “we all know the perilous situation . . . [arising] from the great number of their negro slaves, and the small proportion of white inhabitants.”

The Americans were pushed toward independence by this knowledge. Georgia delegates told John Adams that slaves in their region were simply waiting a chance to arise, and if “one thousand regular [British] troops should land in Georgia, and their commander be provided with arms and clothes enough, and proclaim freedom to all the negroes who would join his campaign, twenty thousand would join it from [Georgia and South Carolina] in a fortnight.” James Madison, worrying about Lord Dunmore, confided that the possibility of a slave insurrection “is the only part in which this Colony is vulnerable; & if we should be subdued, we shall fall like Achilles by the hand of one that knows the secret.” George Washington too perceived the threat. Dunmore must be crushed instantly, he warned in December 1775, “otherwise, like a snowball, in rolling, his army will get size.” Although southern delegates at first attempted to pass legislation forbidding black Americans from serving in the Continental Army, Washington changed his mind and supported the idea, having come to believe that the outcome of the war might depend on “which side can arm the Negroes the faster.” Until recently, few historians have appreciated the role African Americans played in shaping the context of independence.

Actions do speak louder than words—often enough. Still, the echoes of the Declaration’s words and the persistent hold of its ideals have outlasted the often contradictory actions of its creators. Jefferson’s entire life embodied those contradictions. More than any American president, save Lincoln, Jefferson contributed to the downfall of slavery. In addition to penning the Declaration’s bold rhetoric, he pushed for the antislavery provision in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which served as a model for later efforts to stop slavery’s expansion. Yet despite Jefferson’s private criticisms of slavery, he continued to depend on the labor of enslaved African Americans throughout his life. Although he apparently maintained a sexual relationship with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings, upon his death he freed none, except five members of the Hemings family. Sally was not among them.

It lay with Abraham Lincoln to express most eloquently the notion that a document might transcend the contradictions of its creation. In 1857 Lincoln insisted that in proclaiming “all men are created equal,” the founders of the nation

did not mean to assert the obvious untruth that all were then actually enjoying that equality. They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which

should be familiar to all, and revered by all, constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.

“For the support of this Declaration,” Jefferson concluded, “we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.” This sentiment was no idle rhetoric. Many delegates took the final step toward independence only with great reluctance. If the war was lost, they faced a hangman’s noose. Even in victory, more than a few signers discovered that their fortunes had been devastated by the war. Yet it does no dishonor to the principles of the Revolution to recognize the flawed nature of Jefferson’s attempt to reconcile slavery with liberty. Even less does it dishonor the Revolution to appreciate the role enslaved African Americans played in forcing the debates about independence. They too risked all in the actions—the unspoken declarations—that so many of them took to avail themselves of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Additional Reading

The Declaration of Independence, surely one of the most scrutinized documents in American history, stands at the center of the American Revolution, surely one of the most scrutinized events in that history. Consequently, the interested reader has plenty of material upon which to draw.

For background on the Revolution, Edmund S. Morgan's *Birth of the Republic*, rev. ed. (Chicago, 1977) remains brief and lucid. More recent studies include Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution* (London, 1985), good on the social and economic background; and Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause* (New York, 1982), which treats military aspects more fully. For the Declaration itself, see Carl Becker's venerable yet still engaging *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York, 1942). Garry Wills's wide-ranging contextual analysis of the Declaration can be found in *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1978). Wills has been called to task for overstating his case by Ronald Hamowy in a classic cut-and-thrust maneuver entitled "Jefferson and the Scottish Enlightenment: A Critique of Garry Wills's *Inventing America*," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 36 (1979): 503–523. For a discussion of the local declarations of independence, see Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1997). Maier also examines how the Declaration outgrew its position of relative obscurity during the half century following the Revolution to become one of the "scriptural" texts of American history. In this light, Garry Wills's brilliant explication of another seminal document in American history is worth consulting: *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York, 1992).

Readers wishing to do their own textual analysis will find Julian P. Boyd's *The Declaration of Independence: The Evolution of the Text* (Princeton, NJ, 1945) a good starting place. Worthington C. Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress: 1774–1789* (Washington, DC, 1904–1937) provides Charles Thomson's tantalizingly brief minutes. For a better sense of the delegates' concerns, see Edmund C. Burnett, ed., *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress* (Washington, DC, 1921–1936), and the much more inclusive edition of letters, Paul H. Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774–1789* (Washington, DC, 1976–). A brilliant though somewhat eccentric analysis of the Declaration's text can be found in Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, CA, 1993). Fliegelman even finds meaning in the pauses and punctuation of the document.

As for Jefferson himself, the best brief starting place is Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1996). Ellis is perceptive about Jefferson's conflicting, often self-deceptive attitudes toward slavery and race. Although Ellis argued against the likelihood of Jefferson's having had an intimate and ongoing relationship with his slave Sally Hemings, he more recently reversed himself in light of evidence, based on a DNA analysis of Jefferson's descendants, that Jefferson fathered at least one child

by Hemings; Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville, VA, 1997) lays out the debate. For the DNA findings, see the articles in *Nature* 396 (5 November 1998): 13–14, and in the *New York Times*, 1 November 1998, A1.

Sylvia Frey's fine study, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, 1991), outlines the actions taken by African Americans during the Revolutionary years. See also Woody Holton, "Rebel against Rebel: Enslaved Virginians and the Coming of the American Revolution," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 105 (1997): 157–192, and Peter H. Wood, "'Taking Care of Business' in South Carolina: Republicanism and the Slave Society," in Jeffrey J. Crow and Larry E. Tise, eds., *The Southern Experience in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1978). For the relation of African American rebellion and the Declaration itself, see Sidney Kaplan, "The Domestic Insurrections of the Declaration of Independence," *Journal of Negro History* 61 (1976): 243–255.

Interactive Learning

The *Primary Source Investigator* sources explore the process of declaring independence from Great Britain. Included are the Olive Branch Petition, the Declaration of Sentiments, the first drafts of the Declaration of Independence, and the Articles of Confederation. In addition, there are ordinances concerning the Northwest Territory, early constitutions upon which the founders modeled the federal constitution, and correspondence between key members of the fledgling government. It is useful to examine the multiple drafts of the Declaration and the changes made in each version.