Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*

In 1774, the Englishman Thomas Paine had arrived in Philadelphia with a letter of introduction from Benjamin Franklin, then in London. Paine had failed at a number of jobs, including being fired from one for publishing a political statement expressing his opinion about raising pay. When he met Franklin, Paine said he was interested in emigrating. With help from Franklin's friends and his son-in-law, Paine became acquainted with the editor and printer of a new journal, *Pennsylvania Magazine*, and he became a writer for the magazine.

Philadelphia was the site of the meetings of the Second Continental Congress, and Paine became swept up in the politics of the Congress. In January 1776, he published his pamphlet *Common Sense*. In it, Paine explained in "simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense" why the colonies should separate themselves from Great Britain. He likened colonial dependence to an endless childhood.

> . . . I have heard it asserted by some, that as America hath flourished under her former connection with Great Britain that the same connection is necessary towards her future happiness, and will always have the same effect. Nothing can be more fallacious [false] than this kind of argument. We may as well assert that because a child has thrived upon milk that it is never to have meat, or that the first twenty years of our lives is to become a precedent [pattern] for the next twenty.

Paine also argued that continued connection with Great Britain would mean continued involvement in European wars. Last, drawing on the thinking of the Enlightenment philosophers, Paine asserted that the colonies had a "natural right" to their own government. He also criticized the monarchy and said that the British system of government was based on tyranny.

Common Sense sold over 100,000 copies and greatly affected the thinking of the delegates to the Continental Congress. Slowly, more and more of them came to the realization that their differences with Great Britain could not be reconciled. The colonists must seek independence.

Declaration of Independence

On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia introduced in the Second Continental Congress a resolution calling for independence. On June 9, the Congress established a committee to write a declaration of independence. Thomas Jefferson was chair of the committee and because of his writing abilities, much of the actual work fell to him.

The committee presented its draft to the Congress on June 28. On July 2, the delegates passed Lee's resolution and on July 4, they approved the Declaration of Independence, declaring the 13 colonies a new nation, free and independent of the king and Parliament.

The Declaration has four parts. The Preamble explains why the colonies are declaring their independence from Great Britain. The next part explains the political ideas behind their action. The third, and longest part, lists all the charges against the king, and the fourth part lists all the rights that the new nation is claiming for itself as a nation. Students may be familiar with the beginning of the

second part:

"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."