From Colonies to Independence

Betsy Ross

Writing the Declaration of Independence

The Minutemen

Rosie McCormick
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The Thirteen Colonies

Long ago, America was called the *colonies*. Colonies are lands controlled by other countries that are far away. There were thirteen colonies in America. Many of the people in the thirteen colonies came from England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland—though some came from France, Germany, and other European countries too.
Generally, people living in the thirteen colonies had traveled to America for a better life. Many thought of themselves as British, not as American. They liked to buy clothes and books from Great Britain. They liked to drink tea. They obeyed King George III, who ruled over England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and the colonies in America.
The colonists were proud of their king. Great Britain had just won a war against France. But to pay for that war, King George had borrowed a lot of money. Where could he find money to pay back what was borrowed? The answer was from the colonists in America.
The king and his parliament decided that when the colonists bought such things as sugar, paint, newspapers, writing paper, glass, or tea, they would be charged a payment, or sales tax, making the cost of these items more expensive.

The colonists showed their anger by protesting and not buying any of these things. In the end, the tax on everything except tea was dropped.
There is another story of life in the thirteen colonies, though. Not everyone had gone there for a better life. Not everyone was free. Many Africans were enslaved and forced to travel to the colonies. Enslaved Africans worked on large plantations, or farms, growing crops. Their hard work helped to make the British colonies rich and strong.
The Boston Tea Party

Many people in the thirteen colonies in America drank tea. Though tea was not cheap, people liked it so much they saved up to buy it. That was until the British Parliament and King George placed a tax on it. Then the colonists said they would stop drinking British tea.
British ships bringing tea to the colonies were turned away. Then, on a cold winter day, the governor in Boston allowed three British ships carrying tea to sail into Boston Harbor. That night a group of men who were dressed like Native Americans climbed onto the ships. They threw the tea into the water. This became known as the Boston Tea Party.
News of what had happened in Boston spread. Soon, many people in the colonies were celebrating the Boston Tea Party. However, when the news reached King George and Parliament, they became very angry. They sent British warships to close Boston Harbor. With the harbor closed, no food or supplies could get in.
To show their support for the people of Boston, colonists from across the thirteen colonies sent food and clothes. The British sent more British soldiers to keep order.

The colonists called the British soldiers redcoats because of their bright, red uniforms.
The Colonies Unite

It was September, and the leaves were beginning to change color in Philadelphia. Samuel Adams put on a new, red suit. He didn’t normally wear such fancy clothes, but he was going to meet with other leaders of the thirteen colonies. These leaders were meeting in Philadelphia to write a letter to King George III explaining why they were so unhappy.
When all the leaders were gathered together, they began to write the letter. In it, they asked King George to take away all unfair laws and taxes. They said that if he did not, the colonies would no longer buy anything from Britain. Each leader signed his name on the letter. One of the men who signed the letter was George Washington.
After signing the letter, the colonial leaders left the meeting and went home. They planned to meet again when they received news from the king and his parliament. Most importantly, the leaders from all the colonies had decided to work together. Being a proud American was becoming more important than being loyal to the king. These proud Americans were known as Patriots.
Paul Revere

Like most colonists, Paul Revere hoped that the letter the colonial leaders had sent to the king would bring peace. Few people wanted to fight the British. And most Americans were not trained for war. But to be safe, many Patriots got ready to fight—just in case.

In the town of Concord, near Boston, people hid cannonballs, gunpowder, weapons, and other things they might need.
The British soldiers, or redcoats, found out about the hidden weapons and planned to go to Concord to take them away. Paul Revere decided to ride to Concord to warn the Patriots. Before he left Boston, he needed to know whether the redcoats were coming by land or across the Charles River.

That night, he sent a Patriot up to the tower of Old North Church in Boston to give a signal. If the British were coming by land, the Patriot was to light one lantern. If they were coming across the river, he was to light two lanterns.
Paul Revere got into a small boat in the dark waters around Boston. He kept a close eye on the church tower as he was rowed across the Charles River. Suddenly, a light appeared in the church tower. Just one light. But then he saw a second light. The redcoats were coming across the water! Quietly, Paul Revere was rowed to the shore. As soon as he got there, he jumped onto a waiting horse.
Paul Revere raced through the countryside. “The regulars—the redcoats—are coming out!” he called. And as he passed each house, he saw windows and doors being thrown open, and candles being lit. The Patriots were getting ready for what was to come.
The American Revolution Begins

Paul Revere was arrested before he got to Concord. However, he had warned some people that the redcoats were coming. In the town of Lexington, near Concord, people woke to the sound of marching men. An army of redcoats had appeared! But the redcoats were not alone. A number of Patriots were there too. The Patriots in Concord and Lexington were called Minutemen because they could be ready to fight in a minute.
The Minutemen and the British soldiers faced one another. A voice from the British side called out, “Throw down your guns.” But the Minutemen refused. The leader of the Minutemen told his men to stand their ground. Suddenly, a shot was fired, and then another. Soon the air was filled with smoke. When the smoke cleared, people could see that some of the Minutemen had been shot!
The British soldiers still wanted the weapons that had been stored in Concord, so they set off to get them. But when they got to Concord, the weapons were gone. There was nothing they could do. But the Minutemen weren’t going to let the redcoats get away so easily. The Minutemen were good shots, and they forced the redcoats to retreat. The Americans had won the Battle of Concord.
Colonial Leaders Meet Again

After the fighting at Lexington and Concord, there were more battles between the British and the Americans. While these battles were happening, the leaders of the colonies met again to decide what to do. They agreed they needed an American army. They also agreed to give Britain one last chance. The colonial leaders wrote another letter to King George III, asking him to be fair.
The king and Parliament saw things differently. The colonists had fired shots, and so the king sent even more soldiers to America. Now the colonial leaders had to make a decision. Should they be ruled by Britain, or should they start a new nation that was completely free? They argued for a long time. They finally agreed to declare independence from Britain. Now they needed to put their decision in writing for the king—and the whole world—to read.
Thomas Jefferson, a Virginian, was one of the youngest leaders. Yet, he was known as a wise person and an excellent writer. He was chosen to write what became known as the Declaration of Independence.

But the Declaration of Independence was hard to write. Thomas Jefferson had the help of Benjamin Franklin and John Adams. It took them two weeks to get it just right.
Thomas Jefferson wrote that if a government hurts people, then people have the right to start a new government. That was a shocking idea at the time. Today, most people accept this idea. He also wrote that people have the right to live, the right to be free, and the right to be happy.

Thomas Jefferson wrote that “all men are created equal.” That means that everyone is born with equal rights. This is perhaps one of the most important ideas of all.
The reason that the Fourth of July is our country’s birthday is because on that day, the Declaration of Independence was signed. The first person to sign the Declaration was John Hancock. His name was the largest of all because he wanted the king to notice it.

For Americans, signing the Declaration of Independence was a brave thing to do, but to King George III, it was a crime called treason. Each of the other fifty-five men signed the paper. From that moment on, there were no longer thirteen colonies: there was a new nation instead—the United States of America.
For most Americans, news of the Declaration of Independence was reason to celebrate. The American Revolution lasted for seven years, until finally the British were defeated. Not every American fought for independence. Some were Loyalists who fought on the side of the British. Today, we light fireworks on the Fourth of July to celebrate the day that Americans decided to be independent. We celebrate just as people did long ago!
Benjamin Franklin

At the time the American Revolution began, Benjamin Franklin was seventy years old. Benjamin Franklin had worked hard to become a successful printer. Besides printing books and newspapers, Franklin did many other important things.

He set up Philadelphia’s first fire department. He even ran America’s first post office. And of course he helped Thomas Jefferson write the Declaration of Independence.
Benjamin Franklin also invented things—such as a stove that keeps houses warm. We call it a Franklin stove. He invented a chair with an arm that is also a desk, as well as eyeglasses that let you see both near and far. And he invented something called a lightning rod that stops lightning from setting fire to houses.
Benjamin Franklin also wrote a book that gave information about the seasons, and included wise sayings, such as, “Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.” How did he do so much? He followed his own advice. He went to bed early and got up early. He did not believe in wasting time. One of his sayings was, “Lost time is never found again.”
George Washington and the Fight for America

When war broke out, George Washington was put in charge of the American army. The soldiers were brave but untrained. The army needed more weapons and won few battles. The British took the city of New York and chased the Americans south through New Jersey and across the Delaware River to Pennsylvania.
Winter arrived, and George Washington’s men began to lose hope. They were cold and hungry, and some soldiers didn’t even have coats or shoes. George Washington needed a plan. It was Christmastime, and George knew that the redcoats in New Jersey would be celebrating on Christmas Day. If George made a surprise attack, he might win an important battle.
On Christmas night, George Washington decided to take his army across the Delaware River to attack the British in New Jersey. Just as his soldiers were about to get into their boats to cross the river, a snowstorm began. Soon, it became difficult to see clearly. George Washington decided to cross the icy Delaware River first, to give his men courage.
The storm gave George Washington the chance he needed to surprise the British. By the time the American soldiers got to the British camp in Trenton, New Jersey, it was morning. But they still took the redcoats by surprise. The British soldiers were not ready to fight the Americans. This was the victory George Washington and his men had hoped for.
The war did not end with the victory at Trenton. Many more years of fighting followed. In the end, America defeated the British, and George Washington became the first president of the United States; and Martha Washington, his wife, became the First Lady.
Washington, D.C., and American Symbols

Every country needs a capital city. It was decided that the capital of the United States would be the District of Columbia. Plans were made to build a beautiful city with wide avenues and parks. There would also be a Capitol building—the place where the Congress of the United States would meet to make laws for the country.
Plans were also made to build a house for the president and his family. The house would be called President’s Mansion. President’s Mansion eventually became known as the White House. George and Martha never got to live in the White House. The first president to do so was John Adams, along with his wife, Abigail.
There is a story that George Washington asked Betsy Ross to make the first American flag, but no one knows for sure if this is true. What is true, though, is that Betsy Ross was a Patriot who lived in Philadelphia at the time.

The first flag of the United States was a lot like the Stars and Stripes we use today, except that it had thirteen stars—one for each of the first states. Today, the American flag has fifty stars, one for each state, and thirteen stripes for the thirteen colonies.
Another important American symbol is the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. This great bell rang in Philadelphia to tell people that the Declaration of Independence had been sent to the king. People gathered to hear the declaration read out loud. From that moment on, the great bell has had a special meaning to all Americans. It became the Liberty Bell, the bell that told of America’s freedom.
Have you ever seen this fancy eagle before? It is the American eagle, and it is on the Seal of the President of the United States. Around the eagle today there are fifty stars, one for each state.

Do you see the branch in one of the eagle’s claws? It is an olive branch, a symbol of peace. The arrows in the other claw show strength. The American flag, the Liberty Bell, and the American eagle are three important symbols of the United States of America.
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