

Lesson Two

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson work for a formal declaration of independence.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- 1) Explain that John Adams and Thomas Jefferson served together in the Continental Congress during the early stages of the Revolutionary War.
- 2) Describe the ways in which both men worked together to convince the 13 colonies to officially separate from Britain.

Materials

- 1) **2.1**: Biographical sketch of John Adams.
- 2) **2.2**: Biographical sketch of Thomas Jefferson.
- 3) **2.3**: Excerpts from “John Adams autobiography, part 1, ‘John Adams,’ through 1776 sheet 22 of 53, August 1775–April 1776.”
Excerpt from “John Adams autobiography, part 1, ‘John Adams,’ through 1776 sheet 24 of 53, April 1775–August 1776.”
- 4) *The Declaration of Independence*.

Lesson Outline

- Cover events leading up to the beginning of the American Revolution.
- Introduce John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.
- Hand out **2.1** and **2.2**. Have the students work in pairs. They will read **2.1** and **2.2** and make a list of things that John Adams and Thomas Jefferson did to secure a *Declaration of Independence* from Great Britain.
- Call on student pairs and ask them to go over their lists. Write on the board the ways in which Thomas Jefferson and John Adams worked towards the goal of officially declaring independence from the mother country.
- Read the *Declaration of Independence* with the class.

2.1

John Adams

John Adams was born in 1735 in Braintree, Massachusetts. Today, this part of Braintree is called Quincy. He graduated from Harvard in 1755 and began practicing law. Adams married Abigail Smith in 1764.

Adams involved himself in the struggle against Britain early, serving in the Continental Congress from 1774–1777. In 1776 he served with Thomas Jefferson on the committee to draft a declaration of independence from Great Britain.

In 1778 Adams was sent by the Continental Congress as minister to France, where he served with Benjamin Franklin and Arthur Lee. He sailed back to Massachusetts briefly in 1779 to draft the state constitution, and was sent back to France that same year.

Adams helped negotiate the peace with Britain in 1783 and served as America's first minister to Britain.

Adams returned home to serve as George Washington's Vice President and defeated Thomas Jefferson in the presidential election of 1796. He served one term and lost a reelection bid to Thomas Jefferson in 1800.

John Adams died on his farm in Quincy, Massachusetts, on July 4, 1826.

2.2

Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson was born in Shadwell, Virginia, in 1743. He was educated at William and Mary College graduating in 1762. Jefferson studied law and was admitted to the Virginia Bar in 1767. He was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1769. In 1772 he married Martha Wayles Skelton.

Jefferson served in the Continental Congress from 1775–1776. He served with John Adams on the committee to write a declaration of independence from Great Britain and wrote the first draft.

Jefferson was Governor of Virginia from 1779–1781. His wife Martha died in 1782 and he became minister to France in 1784, a post he held until 1789.

George Washington picked Jefferson to be his Secretary of State in 1790. Jefferson gave up the job in 1793 and ran for president in 1796 losing to John Adams. Jefferson served as Adams's vice president and defeated him in the election of 1800.

Thomas Jefferson was president of the United States from 1801–1809, after which he spent a long retirement at his home Monticello where he died on July 4, 1826.

2.3

Excerpts from the Diary and Autobiography of John Adams

Excerpted from “John Adams autobiography, part 1, ‘John Adams,’ through 1776 Sheet 22 of 53, August 1775 - April 1776.” [electronic edition] *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

At the appointed time, We returned to Philadelphia and Congress were reassembled. Mr. Richard Penn had sailed for England, and carried the Petition, from which Mr. Dickenson and his party expected Relief. I expected none, and was wholly occupied in measures to support the Army and the Expedition into Canada. Every important Step was opposed, and carried by bare Majorities, which obliged me to be almost constantly engaged in debate: but I was not content with all that was done, and almost every day, I had something to say about Advizing the States to institute Governments, to express my total despair of any good from the Petition or any of those ~~measures~~ Things which were called conciliatory measures. I constantly insisted that all such measures, instead of having any tendency to produce a Reconciliation, would only be considered as proofs of our Timidity and want of Confidence in the Ground We stood on, and would only encourage our Ennemies to greater Exertions against Us. That We should be driven to the Necessity of Declaring ourselves independent States, and that We ought now to be employed in preparing a Plan of Conferation for the Colonies, and Treaties to be proposed to foreign Powers particularly to France and Spain, that all these Measures ought to be maturely considered, and carefully prepared, together with a declaration of Independence. That these three Measures, Independence, Confederation and Negotiations with foreign Powers, particularly France, ought to go hand in hand, and be adopted all together. That foreign Powers ~~illegible would~~ could not be expected to acknowledge Us, till We had acknowledged ourselves and taken our Station, among them as a sovereign Power, and Independent Nation. [...]

Excerpted from “John Adams autobiography, part 1, ‘John Adams,’ through 1776 Sheet 24 of 53, April – August 1776.” [electronic edition] *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

Not long after this the three greatest Measures of all, were carried. Three Committees were appointed, One for preparing a Declaration of Independence, another for reporting a Plan of a Treaty to be proposed to France, and a third to digest a System of Articles of Confederation to be proposed to the States.—I was appointed on the Committee of Independence, and on that for preparing the form of a Treaty with France [...]. The Committee of Independence, were Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman and Robert R. Livingston. Mr. Jefferson had been now about a Year a Member of Congress, but had attended his Duty in the House but a very small part of the time and when there had never spoken in public: and during the whole Time I satt with him in Congress, I never heard him utter three Sentences together. The most of a

speech he ever made in my hearing was a gross insult on Religion, in one or two Sentences, for which I gave him immediately the Reprehension, which he richly merited. It will naturally be enquired, how it happened that he was appointed on a Committee of such importance. There were more reasons than one. Mr. Jefferson had the Reputation of a masterly Pen. He had been chosen a Delegate in Virginia, in consequence of a very handsome public Paper which he had written for the House of Burgesses, which had given him the Character of a fine Writer. Another reason was that Mr. Richard Henry Lee was not beloved by the most of his Colleagues from Virginia and Mr. Jefferson was sett up to rival and supplant him. This could be done only by the Pen, for Mr. Jefferson could stand no competition with him or any one else in Elocution and public debate. [...] The Committee had several meetings, in which were proposed the Articles of which the Declaration was to consist, and minutes made of them. The Committee then appointed Mr. Jefferson and me, to draw them up in form, and cloath them in a proper Dress. The Sub Committee met, and considered the Minutes, making such Observations on them as then occurred: when Mr. Jefferson desired me to take them to my Lodgings and make the Draught. This I declined and gave several reasons for declining. 1. That he was a Virginian and I a Massachusettensian. 2. that he was a southern Man and I a northern one. 3. That I had been so obnoxious for my early and constant Zeal in promoting the Measure, that any draught of mine, would undergo a more severe Scrutiny and Criticism in Congress, than one of his composition. 4thly and lastly and that would be reason enough if there were no other, I had a great Opinion of the Elegance of his pen and none at all of my own. I therefore insisted that no hesitation should be made on his part. He accordingly took the Minutes and in a day or two produced to me his Draught. Whether I made or suggested any corrections I remember not. The Report was made to the Committee of five, by them examined, but whether altered or corrected in any thing I cannot recollect. But in substance at least it was reported to Congress where, after a severe Criticism, and striking out several of the most oratorical Paragraphs it was adopted on the fourth of July 1776, and published to the World.