



America declares its Independence 1776

"Tis time to part" wrote Thomas Paine, describing relations between the American colonies and Great Britain in his pamphlet "Common Sense" published in January 1776. This was also the feeling of many American colonists. For several years they had received unreasonable treatment from the British government. For example, the British imposed high taxes, gave the colonists no control over how they were governed and even forced many to let British soldiers live in their homes.

Harsh measures often require harsh countermeasures, and in growing numbers, the Americans began standing up for their rights. In March 1770 protests in Boston resulted in the killing of five Americans by British soldiers. Three years later, the Sons of Liberty boarded a ship in Boston Harbor and destroyed 342 chests of English tea to protest an unjust tea tax. Then in April 1775 at Lexington and Concord, Massachu-

setts the "shot heard round the world" was fired as American militiamen and British regulars engaged in the first battles of the Revolution. In June the Battle of Bunker Hill was fought just outside of Boston.

Two weeks later General George Washington took command of the Continental Army. In October the Continental Navy was organized, and a month later the Continental Marines began recruiting. So for all practical purposes, the War for American Independence had begun. Tom Paine's pamphlet simply spelled out and reinforced what most Americans already knew.

Therefore when the Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in July 1776 to vote on a formal resolution to declare the 13 American colonies independent of England, there was little controversy. On July 2 Congress resolved that the colonies "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 absolved." John Adams was so elated by this decision that he wrote to his wife, "The Second Day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America . . . it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great Anniversary Festival." Adams may have mentioned the wrong date, but he certainly realized the importance of the occasion.

Thomas Jefferson prepared the formal Declaration of Independence which would be signed by the Congressional delegates and sent to King George III. A rough draft was read to Congress on July 3. Some slight changes were made, and on July 4 Congress approved the amended Declaration of Independence. The declaration was then rushed to a printer so that copies could be publicly read to the people of the new nation — the United States of America.

About 11:00 a.m. on July 8 the large bell in the Pennsylvania State House, which later became known as Independence Hall, began to ring, as did bells throughout the city. However, no bell was more appropriate for this historic occasion than the State House Bell. It hung above the building in which the Founding Fathers guided the course of American independence, and it was inscribed with the Biblical verse "Pro-

claim Liberty throughout all the land and to all the inhabitants thereof." Many years later this huge bell became known as the Liberty Bell and today it is a symbol of democracy for the entire world.

At noon the city's bells were silenced, as Colonel John Nixon publicly read the Declaration of Independence for the first time. "When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people . . ." His voice carried to the silent thousands who had gathered to hear the document which explained why the colonies had declared themselves "free and independent states" and listed the charges against King George III which had led to the separation from England. "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." When this final inspiring sentence was read, the crowd broke into cheers, and the bells resumed their joyous ringing sounds.

Independence had been declared. The next step was to win that independence — a momentous task which would involve five years of bitter fighting.