



Declaration Conversations
Humanities Kansas
Facilitator Script

PART I: Overview (10-15 minutes)

In this overview, the facilitator will give a brief overview of the history behind the Declaration of Independence. PowerPoint slides contain points from this presentation script and images to help connect the audience with the history.

Slide 1: Title Slide

Slide 2: Introduction to Overview

Slide 3: The British Colonies in North America

In the 1600s and 1700s, the British developed a large colonial empire in North America. These colonies were primarily for economic benefit. Raw materials from the colonies, such as cotton, tobacco, rum, and other crops fueled industry in the mother country. Jamestown is an example.

Some people, like the Puritans on the Mayflower, founded colonies for religious freedom. Massachusetts is an example.

On the eve of the Revolution, 2.5 million people lived in the 13 colonies.

Slide 4: Life in the Colonies

Life in the colonies was incredibly diverse. Colonies like New York were merchant colonies that dealt in trade.

The Virginia colony focused on plantation agriculture and came to depend on the labor of enslaved people from Africa who were forcibly taken to North America. Tobacco became the chief cash crop. Colonies in the Carolinas and later Georgia also developed cash crop agriculture based on enslaved labor. Staple crops included rice, indigo (a plant that produced a blue dye), and cotton.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony combined both trade and small-scale agriculture. Some people, like the Puritans on the Mayflower, founded colonies for religious freedom. Massachusetts is an example. Over time, the New England colonies became focused on trade, shipping, boat construction, and more.

Life was also hard. The death rate was appallingly high initially and many colonists returned to Europe.

Slide 5: Map of the Thirteen Colonies

New England Colonies (MA, NH, RI, CT)

Settlers: Religious dissidents

Economy: lumber, ship building, trade

Culture: small farms and towns

Middle Colonies (NY, PA, NJ, DE)

Settlers: Farming and business. Some merchant trade, especially NY and PA.

Economy: grain agriculture, trade

Culture: small farms and cities

Southern Colonies (VA, MD, NC, SC, GA)

Settlers: People looking for land and larger scale farming opportunities.

Economy: plantation agriculture, tobacco, cotton, rice, indigo

Culture: small towns that served the large plantation economy and cities

Slide 6: The Legacy of Imperial British Warfare

Great Britain won the battle for colonial empire in North America against France in the French and Indian War (1754-1763), but the war forever changed the relationship between Britain and its colonies.

- It exposed the weak authority of British colonial governors and officials.
- The soaring debt from war forced the British government to raise revenue at home and in the colonies. Citizens in the mother country resented that colonists weren't paying their fair share. Colonists paid some taxes, but often evaded payment. They resented being forced to pay taxes without representation in Parliament.
- The British deployed a peacetime army to maintain order and authority in the colonies, which heightened tensions.

Slide 7: No Taxation Without Representation!

In order to raise revenue, the British government began strictly enforcing existing tax laws and creating new ones. Smuggling and tax evasion had been ignored for years, but by the 1760s the government increased in size and power to collect taxes. Smugglers were arrested and cargo was seized.

Parliament passed a series of tax acts between 1765 and 1770 designed to raise revenue and assert control over the colonies. For example:

- The Stamp Act of 1765 required small, printed markings on all court documents, land titles, and various other documents and served as revenue to keep British troops in America. It also taxed household goods like dice, playing cards, calendars, etc. This was a first; colonists had never paid such taxes previously.
- The Townshend Act of 1767 imposed duties on paper, paint, glass, and tea imported to America to pay for imperial officials in the colonies.

- The Revenue Act of 1767 allowed the government to enforce violations in military courts.

Colonists particularly resented these taxes because they marked the first direct taxes on colonies. Previously, colonists had only paid taxes through customs duties on products bought and sold in international trade.

Slide 8: Colonial Resistance and the British Response

The Stamp Act was quickly repealed due to massive colonial resistance, but resistance to the Townshend Act led to the deployment of 4,000 British troops in Boston, Massachusetts.

Colonists blamed Parliament for the turmoil. Some demanded colonial representation, which the Crown and Parliament rejected. The most vocal opponents of British authority came to be called Patriots, as opposed to the Tories, or Loyalists, who remained loyal to King and Parliament.

Loyalists tended to have a reason to support the empire. They were often tax collectors, officials, or businessmen who depended on the empire. Patriots also benefited from the empire but tended not to have as close connection with the mother country economically or culturally.

By 1770, the most outspoken Patriots rejected Parliamentary supremacy, claiming power for the colonial representative assemblies. Some American colonists were prepared to resist by force if Parliament or the king insisted on exercising Britain's claim to sovereign power.

Slide 9: Building the Colonial Resistance

Samuel Adams established the Committees of Correspondence and formed a communication network between Massachusetts' towns that stressed colonial rights. These committees soon spread to other colonies.

The committees sprang into action after the passage of the Tea Act of 1773, designed to break a colonial boycott of British tea, which had become a symbolic movement against Parliamentary authority.

- The Tea Act made the East India Company's tea less expensive than Dutch tea, which encouraged Americans to pay the Townshend duty.
- A scheme to land a shipment of tea and collect the tax led to a group of Patriots throwing the tea into Boston Harbor.

In response to the Boston Tea Party, Parliament in 1774 rejected a proposal to repeal the Tea Act and instead enacted four Coercive Acts to force Massachusetts into submission. Patriots called them the Intolerable Acts.

Delegates of a Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in September 1774. The Continental Congress was composed of influential people across the colonies who tended to oppose the

way in which the mother country was imposing its authority. How to achieve greater autonomy was less clear though.

They met to discuss colonial unity against British authority but came short of creating a united American government. Instead, it continued economic retaliation. The British government declared the Continental Congress an illegal assembly, declared that Americans had to pay for their own defense and acknowledge Parliament's authority, and imposed a blockade on American trade with foreign nations.

Slide 10: Shots Heard Round the World

In September 1774, General Thomas Gage ordered British troops to seize Patriot armories and storehouses at Charleston and Cambridge, Massachusetts, where colonists were openly defying British authority. In response, 20,000 colonial militiamen, including the "Minutemen" of Concord, mobilized to protect colonial supplies.

A little perspective: the 13 colonies had a total population of 2.5 million. This was a large mobilization!

Slides 11 and 12: General Thomas Gage and Paul Revere

On April 18, 1775, Gage dispatched soldiers to capture colonial leaders and supplies at Concord. Forewarned by Paul Revere and others, the local militiamen met the British first at Lexington and then at Concord. The Americans harassed the British regulars from behind trees, rocks, and fences with continual gunfire. As the British retreated, militiamen ambushed them from neighboring towns with the British suffering three times the American losses.

Shots had been fired, but were Lexington and Concord the first battles of a war or just civil unrest?

Slide 13: Conciliation vs. Independence

In the Second Continental Congress, moderates secured passage of an "Olive Branch Petition" to try and prevent war. More zealous Patriots won passage of a "Declaration of the Causes and Necessities of Taking Up Arms."

The king refused the moderates' petition and issued a Proclamation for Suppressing Rebellion and Sedition in August 1775. At this point, conflict seemed inevitable unless either the King or the colonies backed down—and that was unlikely.

Slide 14: *Common Sense* and the Decision for Independence

The Americans had initially believed that they were fighting for a redress of grievances, not for independence, but by 1776 the sentiment started to change as more colonists realized that compromise with the King and Parliament was unlikely.

In January 1776, Thomas Paine published *Common Sense*—a call to action that united the colonists and led more colonists to embrace the idea of independence. It sold over 100,000 copies in its first few months.

Paine's message was not only popular but also clear—reject the arbitrary powers of king and Parliament and create independent republican states. According to Paine, England was no more fit to rule America than a satellite was fit to rule the sun.

Slide 12: The Declaration of Independence

Support for independence grew rapidly in the first months of 1776. On July 4, 1776, the Congress approved a Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson, the main author of the Declaration, justified the revolt by blaming the rupture on George III rather than on Parliament.

Jefferson was known as a gifted thinker and writer who had read widely in the protest literature of the time. He knew the language of resistance, which made him an ideal author for the document.

Jefferson proclaimed that “all men are created equal”; they possess the rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”; and that government derives its power from the “consent of the governed.”

PART II: Reading the Declaration (Remainder of Session)

Using the slides provided, the event facilitator can lead the audience in reading aloud the Declaration of Independence. Key passages are highlighted in this guide and in the PowerPoint slides for the facilitator to pause for questions and discussion.

As the group reads, consider asking the questions provided below. (These are also contained in the PowerPoint slide notes.)

Slide: “When in the Course of human events...”

1. What do the Laws of Nature have to do with political independence? And what are the Laws of Nature? Where does natural law—the idea that there is a higher law than that enacted by people—come from?
2. How does this passage justify independence from Great Britain?

Slide: “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness”

1. Note that the famous life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is a modification of English political philosopher John Locke’s concept of life, liberty, and property. Pursuit of happiness sounds better! In basic terms, the phrase means that people have a fundamental right to live, to live as free people, and to live a fulfilling life.
2. Unpack this passage: What is this saying? How does it structure the origins of political power? What is the new political hierarchy it proposes?
(Creator>Governed>Government)

Slide: “To Begin the World Anew”

1. Are Jefferson and the signers creating perpetual revolution in this statement?
2. What are the limits of political revolution? What justifies it?

Slide: “Facts submitted to a candid world...”

1. Why is Jefferson blaming the King, as opposed to Parliament?

Slide: “Free and Independent States”

1. Who is declaring independence on behalf of whom?

Slide: “Our Lives, Our Fortunes, Our Sacred Honor...”

1. Does this document create one nation, or thirteen?

More general questions to start conversations include:

1. Why was this section included in the Declaration?
2. What are they trying to say (in a certain passage)?
3. What does the passage mean to you?
4. What is a founding document supposed to do?
5. Who is left out of the document, and why? Who have we added over the history of our nation?

6. How does reading this document change the way you view our nation today?