

UNIT 2 UNITED STATES HISTORY LESSON 2

Summary

- In this lesson, students will read pages 34–39 of Chapter 2, "A Revolutionary Age: Birth of a Nation," in their Readers. They will learn about the creation of the Declaration of Independence and reflect upon its definition of freedom and equality.

Social Studies Background

The Declaration of Independence, approved by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, was a document announcing the separation of the 13 American Colonies from Great Britain.

The document, largely written by Thomas Jefferson, was mainly a list of complaints against the British king, George III. It is best remembered for the following statement: "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, and that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."

While these words have resonated throughout history, they did have their shortcomings. That is because the Founding Fathers did not apply their democratic ideals equally. Only wealthy, powerful men were included. Poor men, they thought, could not be trusted with political power. Women had no rights. Neither did Africans, who continued to be enslaved. In fact, many of the Founding Fathers owned slaves.

Despite this, the declaration planted the seeds of a new political system based on equality, democracy, and citizenship. It would take many more decades before those rights were extended to all citizens of the new country.

ENGAGE

Encourage students to flip through the assigned pages and turn and talk with a partner to discuss what they see. Invite students to ask questions or share what they already know about the Declaration of Independence.

EXPLORE

Instruct students to examine the image and read the caption on page 36 of their Readers. **Ask:** *What do you notice about the people in this painting?* (They're all white men.) Invite students to discuss what this reveals about the culture of colonial America and how that influenced the contents of the Declaration of Independence.

EXPLAIN

Point out to students that the Declaration of Independence, approved by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, was an announcement that the American Colonies were breaking away from Britain. **Ask:** *What drove the Founding Fathers to write the Declaration of Independence?* (It was a response to the "repeated injuries and usurpations" against American liberties by King George III.) Have students turn and talk as they discuss reasons why the declaration was seen as a document of hope. Then have them debate the document's most memorable words: "All men are created equal." Challenge students to explain how those words had a limited meaning and why, from the Founding Fathers' point of view, this was acceptable.

ELABORATE

Invite students to complete the National Geographic activity "Tracing Democratic Ideas" (www.nationalgeographic.org/activity/tracing-democratic-ideas/). Students will analyze excerpts from the Declaration of Independence and other historical documents to identify evidence of democratic ideas.

EVALUATE

Have students complete the **Content Assessment** for this lesson. Encourage them to share and compare their results in small groups.

CONTENT ASSESSMENT: The Declaration of Independence

Read these words from the Declaration of Independence. Then answer the questions.

"We should 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."

Why has this statement resonated throughout world history?

Did the statement, and the Declaration of Independence as a whole, bring about true equality in colonial America? Why or why not?
