

PROJECT TITLE: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness

AUTHOR: Nancy McCullen

SUBJECT & GRADE LEVEL: 3rd Grade,
History and Civics

SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. Primary Investigative Question –

How did Enlightenment thought influence the American colonies' call for independence?

2. Contextual Essay –

What were the political antecedents to the Declaration of Independence? How did the Enlightenment movement provide the rationale that Thomas Jefferson penned in the Preamble? How were these same sentiments used to justify the long list of grievances against the King? Enlightenment thoughts about human rights, the role of government, and natural law fueled the colonists' rebellion against a tyrannical King eventually leading them to declare independence from the crown.

Defining the Enlightenment is difficult. The term references an intellectual movement occurring simultaneously throughout Europe and spreading to America. Spanning an era from the late seventeenth century through the eighteenth century, the movement is broadly characterized by a shift from acting out of deference to a higher authority, faith, and mystery to interacting with the environment with autonomy and reason. The critical questioning of traditions, morals, and institutions that was central to the Enlightenment generated divergent thinking and contradictory ideas in Europe and America. In America, the Enlightenment values of natural rights, natural liberty and the limits of government were common among colonists, Whigs and Tories, and found in written sources both formal and informal, public and private. These values can be traced back to the European Enlightenment and played a pivotal role in America's fight for independence as well as the defining of the American republic.

Largely ignored from 1620 until 1763 by the British monarchy, the American colonists enjoyed a great measure of autonomy and self-government while benefitting from the protection of the most powerful nation in the Atlantic community. Beginning with the Proclamation of 1763 and followed by a series of acts, many colonists were enraged by King George III's intrusion into their lives. When the Revolutionary War first began, the colonies were not seeking independence. However after the King ignored a petition for redress and after he enlisted German mercenaries to fight the Americans, it became clear to colonial leaders that they were being treated like a foreign enemy to which the inevitable response was separation and independence.

In July of 1776, the thirteen colonies passed a resolution, known as the Lee Resolution, declaring their independence from the British Empire. Along with the Lee Resolution, both the colonies and the Continental Congress, the American governmental body, passed resolutions that one by one severed their ties with mother England. To add emphasis and legitimacy to the Lee Resolution, the Declaration of Independence announced to the world that the war between England and its colonies was not simply a civil dispute: it was a war between two equal nations.

While the King's actions may have provided the sparks, Enlightenment thought supplied the fuel. As the author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson himself explains in a letter to Henry Lee

that the ideas presented in the document were neither new nor original. Rather, ...it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion. All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, &c. (as cited in Howell, 1961)

Of the sources Jefferson references, the writings of John Locke are closely linked to the premises and principles of the American Enlightenment and put forth in the Declaration. In Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* published in 1690, he argues that human beings are not born with ideas or understandings, but learn from experience and interaction with the environment. In this way, humans control their own destiny as they seek to understand their environment. The theory of *tabula rasa*, which can be traced back to Aristotle, assumes the autonomy that is central to democratic ideals. In the Declaration much of the preamble's emphasis on human rights is based on these premises of natural law.

In subsequent political essays, Locke expands on the theme of using the premises of self-possession and natural rights of individuals as arguments against the divine rights of kings and the inherited rule of monarchs. This Lockean philosophy is based on social contract theory. Enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about social contract theory as it applied to his religious beliefs in his book *Du Contrat Social, Principes du droit politique* published in 1762. Locke used social contract theory and the *tabula rasa* concept to define the role of government. He posited that, as an extension of the human ability to learn from his experience and to shape his future, humans have the right to enjoy and defend the fruits, in particular property, born through the labor of his efforts. The role of government is therefore to protect the individual's rights. However, in exchange for that protection, individuals must surrender some of their rights to support this common goal. And finally, if the government usurps the rights of individuals and abuses its power, the people may abolish the government. The grievances against the king and the conclusion that the colonies must divorce a government that does not defend their rights are inextricably linked to the Enlightenment thinking of Locke, Rousseau, their contemporaries, and their predecessors.

The confluence of the Enlightenment thinking and antipathy towards the king for his actions became the thesis of the Declaration of Independence. Pitting the social contract and natural law against the divine right of kings was common dialogue not only in America but also in England and France. Jefferson and the other members of the Continental Congress knew these sentiments would capture the sympathy and hopefully the alliance of other nations, particularly France. And most importantly Jefferson knew that Enlightenment logic would justify America's call for revolution.

3. **Annotated Bibliography** –

References

Allemand, L. E. (1975). Two European Influences on the American Revolution. *Depaul Law Review*, 25, 805-824.

Summary: In this essay Allemand describes the influence of Puritanism and the Enlightenment on the American Revolution. The essay is divided into two distinct sections. The section titled "The Enlightenment of John Locke (1632-1704)" is useful as it relates the natural law and social contract concepts articulated by Locke to the American Revolutionary period.

Bailyn, B. (1992). *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Enl Sub ed.). Cambridge: Belknap Press.

Summary: This Pulitzer Prize winning book delves into the political ideas behind the American Revolution. Chapter II was particularly useful. In it, Bailyn describes and analyzes the content of print sources (especially pamphlets) of the colonist's thought. His generalizations about their commonalities support the influence of European Enlightenment as a primary theme of the Revolution.

Carey, G. W. (2005). Natural Rights, Equality, and the Declaration of Independence. *Ave Maria Law Review*, 3, 45-67. Retrieved April 7, 2010, from the HeinOnline database.

Summary: In this article, Carey defines the theoretical underpinnings of the Declaration of Independence. He describes interpretations of the document that were based on consensus and discusses problems of interpretation. This article was useful as a source for interpreting Jefferson's remarks about the content of the Declaration, being "an expression of the American mind." In addition it provided detailed information about Colonial sentiment regarding natural rights, liberty, and the limits of government.

Declaration of Independence. (n.d.). *National Archives and Records Administration*. Retrieved March 23, 2010, from http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_history.html

Summary: This website includes high-resolution images of the original and replica version of the Declaration of Independence. In addition there is historical information about the document and its author. The value of the site is the historical information that it provides about not only the Declaration of Independence, but also the major events surrounding its penning. Pages within this site describe the "artistry" of the Declaration. This outlines that five main parts of the document and describes the style, format and purpose of each part. This is valuable background information for the teacher as discussion and questions arise during an analysis of the Declaration.

Howe, D. W. (1982). European Sources of Political Ideas in Jeffersonian America. *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (The Promise of American History: Progress and Prospects), 28-44.

Retrieved January 3, 2010, from the JSTOR database.

Summary: This article compares and contrasts the scholarship of many authors who have written about international influences and sources of political ideology in Jeffersonian America. This essay reveals many potential influences on American republicanism, including but not limited to the Scottish Enlightenment and John Locke. Howe makes the case, through a review of historical literature, that Jefferson and his contemporaries did not have an isolated perspective.

Kindig, T. (n.d.). Revolutionary War Timeline. *ushistory.org*. Retrieved March 6, 2010, from <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/revwartimeline.htm>

Summary: This site provides a wealth of information about the Declaration and the history of the Declaration. The value of this site is the timeline that chronicles the history of events leading up to the American Revolution. Here teachers can find a description of the actions that became the grievances listed in the indictment of King George III in the Declaration of Independence.