

# Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence

Edward Sanders

—from *America, a History in Verse*,  
*Volume 7, the 18th Century*

January 10, 1776

Tom Paine's *Common Sense*

came off the press

& into the Revolutionary Mind

Tom Jefferson read it in February

Jefferson had been elected

to the Continental Congress in '75

From late March/early April

for six weeks

Jefferson suffered from crippling headaches

so that he could not leave Monticello for Philadelphia

till May 14

These headaches he said began “every day at sunrise,

and never left me till sunset”

On June 11 Congress appointed a committee of five

to create a “Declaration of Independence”

(The five: Jefferson, John Adams, Ben Franklin,

Robert Livingston, Robert Sherman)

The committee of 5 chose chose Thomas Jefferson to write it

He was 33 at the time

When Jefferson asked Adams why

Adams would not write it

Adams, in part, recalled replying

“You can write ten times better than I can.”

The writing took two weeks, or two and a few

He wrote much of it standing

up against his portable mahogany writing desk



which he designed and had built

He was living in a rented set of rooms  
in a new house in Philadelphia

Scholars of the Time-Track  
have suggested he mooched ideas scanning the texts  
of John Locke, say, during the days standing up against the desk

“I turned to neither book or pamphlet  
while writing it”  
Jefferson later noted to James Madison

The original *Declaration* takes up about 6 pages of  
Jefferson’s autobiography

Other Committee members such as Ben Franklin,  
and John Adams, and then the Congress itself  
added and subtracted words and phrases

but the overall text remains part of  
the prize of America

Among the sections axed by Congress was  
text that beat the drum ’gainst human slavery  
(the “he” is the English king, George III):

“He has waged cruel war against human nature itself,  
violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty  
in the persons of a distant people who never offended him,  
captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere,  
or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither.  
This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidels powers,  
is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain.

He has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce determining to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold: and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them: thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.”

Jefferson wasn't so clear-conscienced  
writing and thinking about the Native Americans

when, among the king's crimes, he listed:

“He has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.”

The historian Richard Drinnon for instance  
has pointed out that Jefferson's text served as  
a “rationale for extermination” and “was embedded  
in the great charter of white American liberties”

(see p. 98 of Drinnon's *Facing West: The Metaphysics  
of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building*)

Southerners axed the anti-slavery text in Jefferson's first draft  
but kept in the text about Native Americans  
pretty much as he had written it

He was miffed at what he called the “mutilations”  
& sent copies of the original to his friends

He was very worried about his pregnant wife Martha  
staying with his brother in law Francis Eppes  
during the writing of the Dec'

So, in early September of '76  
Jefferson split back to Virginia.

Those who had signed the Declaration of Independence

kept their names hidden  
for fear it might backfire  
and they'd face a firing squad or the gallows

so that the press and thus the people  
did not know that Jefferson had written the Dec'  
for a number of months.

But the glory was set  
at the shiny mahogany  
It gave him a luster  
no pry-bars could tarnish

Shine, Tom Jefferson, shine

Scholars when faced with the genius prosody  
of the tubercular young Keats  
or the *Hamlet* and *Sonnets* of the overworked Shakespeare

ponder "how" could they have done it?

Same way with Jefferson. They poke, they pry, they analyze,  
they wonder

how how how how?

Shine, Tom Jefferson, shine.