Chapter 5 Lesson 4: Declaring Independence

The Second Continental Congress:

The Second Continental Congress met on May 10, 1775, some of the delegates included: John and Samuel Adams, Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee, and George Washington – all delegates to the First Continental Congress. Several new delegates came as well –

Benjamin Franklin – a former leader in the Pennsylvania legislature, he also had represented the colonies in London and helped repeal the Stamp Act.

John Hancock – A wealthy merchant from Massachusetts, he funded many patriot groups including the Sons of Liberty. Hancock was chosen to be president of the Second Continental Congress.

Thomas Jefferson – only 32, served in the Virginia legislature, known as a brilliant thinker and writer.

Though blood had been spilled, they were not yet ready to vote for a break from England.

Key Actions:

Steps the Continental Congress took to begin governing:

1. Authorized the printing of money
2. Setup a post office, with Franklin in charge
3. Committees to handle relationships with Native Americans and foreign countries
4. Created the Continental Army, this force could carry out an overall strategy for fighting the British. George Washington unanimously chosen to lead it.
5. Sent a petition to King George III, called the Olive Branch Petition, assuring the King that the colonists wanted peace. It asked for protection of their rights, the King rejected the petition and prepared for war hiring more than 30,000 Hessian (German) troops to fight alongside his British forces.

The War Heats Up:

Congress learned that the British troops in Canada were planning to invade New York. The Americans tried to attack first, striking out from Ft. Ticonderoga, they were able to capture Montreal. A later attack on Quebec, led by Benedict Arnold, failed.

Washington reached Boston in July of 1775, a few weeks after the Battle of Bunker Hill. Washington, realizing that his troops were disorganized and lacking discipline, began the task of turning civilians into soldiers. He also needed weapons and arranged for cannons to be brought from Ft. Ticonderoga. Finally in March of 1776, Washington believed his men were ready to fight. Under the cover of darkness he moved his troops and cannons into positions overlooking Boston. This move surprised the British. British General William Howe commanded his troops to board ships and withdraw from Boston. On March 17th, Washington led his troops into the city and they watched the British depart for Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Moving Toward Independence:

Many colonists still wanted to remain part of Great Britain, however support for independence was growing. Thomas Paine arrived in the colonies in 1774, he soon caught the revolutionary spirit and in January 1776 published a pamphlet called Common Sense. In bold language Paine called for a complete break with England. Common Sense listed powerful reasons why Americans would be better off free from Great Britain, this pamphlet greatly influenced opinions throughout the colonies.

Declaring Independence:

The Second Continental Congress was filled with spirited debate:

Should the colonies declare themselves independent or should they stay under British rule?

“That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States…and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.”

-Richard Henry Lee, resolution for independence, 1776

Congress debated Lee’s resolution, still the Congress was split.

Writing the Declaration:

While delegates debated Congress chose a committee to write a declaration of independence. John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman formed the committee. Adams asked Jefferson to write the first draft stating:

“Reason first-You are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason second-I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular. You are very much otherwise. Reason third-you can write ten times better than I can”

-from the writings of Thomas Jefferson, 1822

Jefferson agreed drawing ideas from John Locke to explain why the 13 colonies were proclaiming their freedom. In the 1690’s Locke expressed the idea that people are born with certain natural rights to life, liberty, and property. Locke wrote that people form governments to protect those rights and that a government interfering with those rights could rightfully be overthrown. On July 2nd, 1776, the Second Continental Congress voted on Lee’s resolution for independence. Twelve colonies voted for independence, NY did not but later announced support for it.

Next the delegates discussed Jefferson’s draft of the Declaration of Independence, after making some changes the document was approved on July 4th, 1776. John Hancock signed it first noting that he wrote his name large enough for King George to read without his glasses. 56 delegates signed the document.

Copies were made and sent out to people in the newly declared states. George Washington had the Declaration read to his troops in New York City on July 9th. In Worcester, Massachusetts, a public reading of the Declaration of Independence led to “repeated [cheers], firing of musketry and cannon, bonfires, and other demonstrations of joy.”

The Declaration of Independence

There are 4 major sections:

Preamble (introduction) states that people who wish to form a new country should explain the reason for doing so. Next two sections list the rights that the colonists believed they should have and their complaints against Great Britain. The final section proclaims the existence of the new nation.

John Adams expected July 2nd to be celebrated as a national holiday, he wrote, “The Second Day of July 1776…ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade…and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other.” Instead we celebrate it on July 4th.

The Declaration contains what many Americans see as universal principles.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable [not to be denied] Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

-Declaration of Independence, 1776

If government fails “it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it and to institute new Government.” Document lists grievances against the king and Parliament. These include “cutting off our trade with all parts of the world” and “imposing taxes on us without our consent.” Americans had “Petitioned for Redress” of these grievances and the British had ignored or rejected these petitions.

The Declaration announces America’s new status, pledging “to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor,” the Americans declared themselves a new nation.