

Eyewitnesses to the American Revolution

The Writing of the Declaration of Independence

A classroom play by Team HOPE

Cast List

John Adams..... member of the Continental Congress
Chief Student Correspondent in charge of facilitating the discussion
Student Correspondent 2 co-host and moderator
Student Correspondent 3 co-host and moderator
Student Correspondent 4 co-host and moderator

NOTE: All responses by historical figures are based on actual eyewitness sources and reflect actual events as closely as possible.

TEACHER NOTES

SETTING: A contemporary classroom. It is advised to set up the anchor in the front of the room facing the class, in front of some sort of background with “The History New Report.” Other correspondents and the historical figure can be placed in a semi-circle to the left or right of the anchor facing the rest of the class. A name plate in front of each cast member is highly recommended. A 5x8 index card folded in half works great for this purpose.

COSTUMES: Although not necessary, any period costumes for the historical figures are a great addition. Even a simple hat or wig is excellent.

MASKS: Masks are an easy addition that will add to the drama and make the entire event more fun for the students. First, go to www.google.com and click on “image search.” Type in the historical figure’s name and find an image of the person. Copy and paste the picture in a Word document. You may need to crop and then enlarge the photo so you get a picture large enough to be used as a mask. Portraits obviously work best for this use. Print out the picture and paste it onto a cardboard backing. You can tape a plastic spoon or popsicle stick to be used as a handle. You may decide to make masks for the student correspondents as well, using pictures of television news personalities for the masks.

Note: If there is a historical person you cannot find a picture for, don’t despair! Almost any random “period” person’s picture (as long as it not someone easily recognizable) would work as a mask.

ROLES: Encourage students to act out the roles with as much energy as possible. Do not be too terribly concerned that the sex of the historical figure matching with the sex of the student.

The teacher may decide to take a part in the play, role-modeling one of the historical figures. It is recommended that five copies of the scripts are specifically set aside for each character in the play. For each character, *highlight all their lines* in order to facilitate a faster pace of dialogue. All other students should receive an unmarked copy of the play to read as the play is performed.

DISCUSSION: Use the accompanying worksheet to facilitate discussion before and after the play. Students who are not directly involved in the play can attempt to write preliminary answers as the play is performed. The audience should be told that they will be the primarily responsible for the discussion questions at the end of the lesson.

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CAST ABBREVIATIONS

John Adams.....**ADAMS**
Chief Student Correspondent **CHIEF**
Student Correspondent 2**ST1**
Student Correspondent 3**ST2**
Student Correspondent 4**ST3**

CHIEF Now we welcome to our classroom a famous hero from the American Revolution (*gesture toward him*) who also became the second President of the United States, John Adams. Thanks for coming today Mr. Adams.

ADAMS My pleasure.

CHIEF Let us begin.

ST1 Mr. Adams, tell us a little bit of your history before you served in the Continental Congress.

ADAMS Well, I was born just outside of Boston in 1735. As a young man I attended Harvard and then became a lawyer. Of course, my most famous case was defending the British soldiers who killed five Americans during the “Boston Massacre.”

ST1 (*surprised*) Why would you agree to defend those soldiers?

ADAMS Simple. I wanted to prove that the British soldiers could be given a fair trial in an American courtroom. I also felt that the soldiers acted in self-defense. The Boston mob was throwing snowballs and ice chunks at them and had obviously provoked them. In America, everyone deserves a fair trial, even those that we hate the most.

ST3 How did it turn out?

ADAMS Splendidly! I argued that hanging the redcoats would be a worse disgrace on Massachusetts’ name than the Salem witch trials. In the end, all but two were found not guilty and the other two were convicted of lesser charges.

ST2 Very impressive. Tell us about your work in 1776 in the Continental Congress.

ADAMS Oh, by that time we were at full war with the British and it seemed obvious it was

time for total separation. King George III had just ordered 12,000 Hessian troops to America, so we knew there was no turning back. It was time for a formal declaration of independence.

ST3 Was this purely symbolic, or was there another purpose behind it?

ADAMS It was very strategic. No European state would support us if we were still a formal member of the British Empire. By declaring independence, we felt it was possible to get France to join in an alliance. If we could get European countries to recognize the United States, we might get practical help, which we did.

ST1 So how the Declaration of Independence come about?

ADAMS On June 7, 1776, Virginia's Richard Henry Lee introduced a motion that "these United Colonies are, and ought to be, free and independent states." Congress then named a committee to draft a declaration of the causes for independence. Myself, Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Robert Livingston of New York, and Roger Sherman of Connecticut were all named to the committee.

CHIEF By my count, that means there were four northerners and one southerner, Jefferson, on the committee?

ADAMS Correct and I knew it was important to make sure the south remained loyal to the cause of independence. We feared they would leave and form a confederation of their own, especially since up to this point, almost all the action and fighting had been around Boston.

ST2 So what did you do?

ADAMS (*emphatic*) I knew I *had* to have Virginia's support. Virginia led the south and the other southern states would follow her lead. If we got Virginia's help, Massachusetts was guaranteed to never have to stand alone. (*pause*) So, I nominated Thomas Jefferson to draft the Declaration of Independence.

ST3 What did he think about this?

ADAMS (*smiling, almost chuckling*) Oh I remember the conversation well! At first, Jefferson said "John, you should write the draft."
I said, "I will not! You should do it!"
"Oh no!" He responded. "Why will you not do it? You ought to do it!"
"I will not!" I said again.
"What can possibly be your reasons?" Jefferson demanded.
"Reason one, you are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason two, I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular! You are very much otherwise." Jefferson looked shocked when I said this. "And reason three, you can write ten times better than I can."

ST2 Was he convinced?

ADAMS At first, he paused, taking in what I said, then responded slowly with “Well, if you are convinced, I will do as well as I can.” And that was it. I told him we would meet as soon as he got the draft written. Soon we did.

ST3 What went on in that meeting?

ADAMS Well, we went over the draft carefully. I loved the language and high tone. It was beautiful writing. I was especially thrilled with a line about how the King forced African slavery on us and that this was one of the reasons for independence. Many people have forgotten about that anti-slavery part of the original draft. However, I knew this wasn’t going to be accepted by the other southern states and Congress cut it out of the final draft.

ST2 Shouldn’t you northerners have fought harder for that clause? It was wrong to just accept slavery in the south wasn’t it? You could have gotten rid of slavery right then!

ADAMS Well, it might seem that way now, but you have to understand the time. If the north had forced our point on slavery, the south would have left the union immediately and would have formed their own country. What affect could we have had on slavery then? None. By staying unified, we actually had the ability to have some affect on slavery in the future. Besides, divided, we surely would have been defeated.

ST1 How did Congress accept what Jefferson had written?

ADAMS Oh, they loved it, except with the southern states, who despised the African slavery clause. However there was no debate. Jefferson wrote exactly what we believed.

CHIEF Describe the signing of the Declaration.

ADAMS Everyone knew this was a serious moment. President of Congress John Hancock called us forward. We pledged “our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor” to support independence. The men present knew that signing this document could be a death sentence. John Hancock signed first and wrote his signature in large, bold strokes. Someone asked him why such a large signature? He said, “So that King George could read my name without his glasses!” There was laughter.

ST2 Did everyone then sign?

ADAMS Well, after Hancock signed, he challenged us: “We must make this unanimous! There must be no pulling different ways,” he said. “We must all hang together!” There was a silent pause and then Ben Franklin spoke with his characteristic wit:

“Yes, we must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly, we shall all hang separately!” Fifty-six men signed that document.

ST3 So, after that, it was printed and distributed around the country?

ADAMS Exactly. George Washington was in New York with the Continental Army and had the Declaration read out loud to all the soldiers. In the excitement, the soldiers ripped down a statue of George III and melted its lead down into bullets. What a great moment!

CHIEF I think that does it. Thank you Mr. President for joining us today!

"Writing the Declaration of Independence, 1776," EyeWitness to History, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (1999).
