

# **DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE LESSON**

## **\* GETTING TO KNOW THE SIGNERS THROUGH ROLE PLAY \***

- ❖ For 10 years prior to the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, American colonists and the British government argued over money and control. The colonists were unhappy with the taxes they were forced to pay and their lack of representation in the British government which controlled colonial life.
- ❖ After England closed Boston Harbor in response to the Boston Tea Party, Massachusetts secretly invited representatives from all of the other colonies to meet. On September 5, 1774, 55 delegates representing 12 colonies (all but Georgia) met in Philadelphia and organized the First Continental Congress.
- ❖ After weeks of debate and compromise, the group declared that American colonists were entitled to the same rights as Englishmen everywhere. The group also imposed a rule which prevented colonists from buying English products, with “committees of safety” in each colony to enforce the ban.
- ❖ The relationship between England and the colonies worsened. The first shots of the Revolutionary War were fired at Lexington and Concord in April 1775 after Paul Revere’s famous ride warning Patriots that the British troops were marching toward them – “The British are coming! The British are coming!”
- ❖ The Second Continental Congress, with delegates from all 13 colonies, met in Philadelphia beginning May 10, 1775. It prepared for war while making one last unsuccessful effort at peace.
- ❖ During a vote at the Second Continental Congress on July 1, 1776, only 9 of the colonies voted for independence. Another vote was taken on July 2, 1776, and resulted in 12 colonies voting for independence, with New York (which was mostly loyal to England) declining to vote.
- ❖ After two more days of debate over the content of the Declaration of Independence written by Thomas Jefferson, the Second Continental Congress approved it on July 4, 1776, with New York again declining to vote. The Declaration of Independence was signed by 50 men on August 2, 1776, and by six more men after that.
- ❖ That historic document declares that “all men are created equal” and they are entitled to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” It recognizes governments are created by the agreement of the people and the job of government is to protect people’s rights. The Declaration stated that when governments fail to do their job, the people have the right to change or end such governments when the circumstances become unbearable. In that document, the colonies announced their independence from England. That is how our country began.
- ❖ Most of the signers were well-educated, prosperous, and married with an average of 6 children each (although one signer had 18 children!). Some used their own money to pay for the Revolutionary War, and nearly all were poorer afterward. Some lost sons, wives, or their own lives in support of independence.

- ❖ The signers, ranging in age from 26 to 70, included 4 doctors and 8 people born outside the colonies. More than half were trained as lawyers, and four were trained as ministers. Most went on to serve the country as judges or politicians, including as President and Vice President. All risked their lives and their property to create our nation.

Who would like to discover more about the men who signed the Declaration of Independence?

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**SUGGESTIONS:**

Discuss the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the facts listed above. Then ask for volunteers to “become” the signers to the Declaration of Independence. Each volunteer comes forward and pulls a card or slip of paper from a bag, bowl, or box. He/she then reads the card or paper drawn, telling the group who he/she is and giving pertinent facts about that particular signer. (To make this work, you may have to pick volunteers—10 or 15 at a time—and have them line up. Otherwise, you will run out of time.)

Please note that six signers of the Declaration of Independence—George Clymer, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Morris, George Read, Roger Sherman, and James Wilson—also signed the Constitution. An asterisk appears next to the names of those signers on the cards.

Recommendation: Supply markers and a poster board for the students to sign the name of their Signer after they have read their cards.

Help the students understand the significance of the drafting and signing of the Declaration of Independence by asking them what surprised them most about the signers. Through this discussion, they hopefully will learn of the remarkable nature of the Declaration of Independence and its signers.

The information regarding the Declaration of Independence signers largely came from the National Park Service website ([nps.gov](http://nps.gov)). For more information about this game, please contact the chambers of the Hon. Leanna K. Weissmann, Indiana Court of Appeals, (317) 232-6895 or [kimberly.jackson@courts.in.gov](mailto:kimberly.jackson@courts.in.gov).

### **JOHN ADAMS**

**Massachusetts 1735-1826  
(died at age 90)**

- Few men did more than I did for U.S. independence.
- As a lawyer, I defended Patriot John Hancock as well as British soldiers charged in the Boston Massacre.
- I served as Vice President and President. My son, John Quincy Adams, also became President.
- I died at age 90 just a few hours after Thomas Jefferson's death and on the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence.

### **JOSIAH BARTLETT**

**New Hampshire 1729-1795  
(died at age 65)**

- I likely was the first to vote for independence and the second to sign the Declaration of Independence.
- My house was burned down, possibly by people who supported the British.
- I was a doctor in the War and a lawyer.
- I served as Governor of New Hampshire.

### **SAMUEL ADAMS**

**Massachusetts 1722-1803  
(died at age 81)**

- I was labeled "Firebrand of the Revolution."
- I failed in everything but politics and never really had a steady job.
- I helped start the Sons of Liberty and participated in the Boston Tea Party.
- The Continental Congress was my idea.

### **CARTER BRAXTON**

**Virginia 1736-1797  
(died at age 61)**

- I had 18 children, more than anyone else who signed the Declaration of Independence.
- I acted as spokesman for Patrick Henry, who is famous for saying, "Give me Liberty or give me death."
- I lost most of my money because the British took my ships and property.

**CHARLES CARROLL**  
**Maryland 1737-1832**  
**(died at age 95)**

- I lived longer than any other signer of the Declaration of Independence.
- I also was the last of the signers to die.
- I was one of the richest men in America but risked everything for the Patriots.
- I traveled to Canada with Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Chase to try to talk Canada into joining the colonies, but Canada said no.

**ABRAHAM CLARK**  
**New Jersey 1726-1794**  
**(died at age 68)**

- I taught myself law and was known as “the poor man’s counselor.”
- I thought farmers and mechanics were the most important people in our country.
- My sons were Patriot officers captured by the British Army.
- The British offered to give back my sons if I would remove my name from the Declaration of Independence. I said no.

**SAMUEL CHASE**  
**Maryland 1741-1811**  
**(died at age 70)**

- I was a lawyer who hated the British government.
- I voted for independence but objected to the Constitution.
- I served on the U.S. Supreme Court but was almost removed because I was too political.

**GEORGE CLYMER \***  
**Pennsylvania 1739-1813**  
**(died at age 73)**

- Along with five others, I signed both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.
- When the Continental Congress left Philadelphia because the British Army was coming, I bravely stayed there.
- British troops destroyed my house while my wife and children hid in the woods.
- A U.S. Navy ship was named after me.

**WILLIAM ELLERY**  
**Rhode Island 1727-1820**  
**(died at age 92)**

- I was a lawyer who lived in Newport, Rhode Island for 92 years.
- In 1778, the British destroyed my home and property because I was a Patriot.
- President George Washington gave me a job at which I worked for 30 years.

**BENJAMIN FRANKLIN \***  
**Massachusetts 1706-1790**  
**(died at age 84)**

- I am considered the father of electricity.
- When I was 16 years old, I pretended I was a widow named "Silence Dogood" and wrote a popular newspaper column.
- I created my own alphabet, which had six new letters and did not include C, J, Q, W, X, and Z.
- I never had to work after age 42 because I became very rich.
- I also invented bifocal glasses and a musical instrument used by Mozart and Beethoven.

**WILLIAM FLOYD**  
**New York 1734-1821**  
**(died at age 86)**

- My son-in-law was Col. Benjamin Tallmadge, who was General George Washington's most important spy during the Revolutionary War.
- British soldiers took over my mansion in Mastic Beach, N.Y., and stole my property.
- My family still owns that house, which is open to visitors.

**ELDRIDGE GERRY**  
**Massachusetts 1744-1814**  
**(died at age 70)**

- I signed the Declaration of Independence late, after 50 other men signed it.
- I was known for often changing my mind.
- The term gerrymandering is named after me because I signed a law in Boston allowing for a partisan district in the shape of a salamander.
- I lost the election for Massachusetts governor four times before I was elected to that office in 1810.
- I died in office as Vice President to President James Madison.

**BUTTON GWINNETT**

**Georgia 1735-1777  
(died at about age 42)**

- I was born in England and did not live in America until I was almost 30.
- I was shot in a duel in 1777 and died a few days later.
- I was the second signer of the Declaration of Independence to die.

**JOHN HANCOCK**

**Massachusetts 1737-1793  
(died at age 56)**

- I was the first signer of the Declaration of Independence, and I signed in large letters so the King would not need his glasses to see my name.
- I was the first Governor of Massachusetts.
- When someone says, "I want your John Hancock," it means your signature is required.
- I hoped Congress would pick me instead of George Washington to lead the army.

**LYMAN HALL**

**Georgia 1724-1790  
(died at age 66)**

- I was a minister in Connecticut, a doctor in Georgia, and later Governor of Georgia.
- My state of Georgia was poor, had the fewest people, and mostly supported England before the Declaration.
- My family had to move to the North when the British destroyed our home and took our property.

**BENJAMIN HARRISON**

**Virginia 1726-1791  
(died at age 65)**

- I thought we should fix our problems with England without violence, but I later changed my mind.
- I objected to the Constitution at first.
- My son, William Henry Harrison, and my great-grandson, Benjamin Harrison, both became President of the United States.

**JOHN HART**

**New Jersey**

**Born 1706-1713 and  
died 1779 in his 60s**

- I had 13 children and was known as “Honest John.”
- I had dinner with General George Washington when he and his 12,000 soldiers camped on my land for three days.
- I had to hide near some mountains when the British destroyed my home.
- I died after six months of painful kidney stones.

**THOMAS HEYWARD, JR.**

**South Carolina 1746-1809**

**(died at age 62)**

- I was born in America but studied law in England.
- I was wounded while fighting the British.
- I later was caught by the British and held as a prisoner in Florida for 11 months.
- After the war, I became a judge.

**JOSEPH HEWES**

**North Carolina 1730-1779**

**(died at age 49)**

- The woman I loved died a few days before our wedding. I never married.
- My mother was a Quaker minister.
- I helped create the American Navy and donated my own ships for its use.
- When I died in 1779, all members of the Continental Congress came to my funeral.

**WILLIAM HOOPER**

**North Carolina 1742-1790**

**(died at age 48)**

- I was a Loyalist for many years and helped the English stop the Patriots at first.
- After I became a Patriot, some people thought I was a spy and did not trust me.
- I missed the vote on the Declaration of Independence but still signed it.
- After the War, some people would not hire me as a lawyer because I said we should forgive the British.

**STEPHEN HOPKINS**  
**Rhode Island 1707-1785**  
**(died at age 78)**

- I was one of the first Patriots.
- I was 69 when I signed the Declaration of Independence, but Benjamin Franklin was even older than me.
- I hated slavery.
- I helped pass a law in Rhode Island that stopped people from bringing slaves there.

**SAMUEL HUNTINGTON**  
**Connecticut 1731-1796**  
**(died at age 65)**

- After teaching myself law, I was the King's Attorney in Connecticut.
- I quit that job to join the Patriots.
- I served as President of Congress for two years.
- I was Connecticut's Chief Justice, Lieutenant Governor, and Governor.

**FRANCIS HOPKINSON**  
**New Jersey 1737-1790**  
**(died at age 53)**

- I helped the Revolution by printing letters and other things which blasted the British and told the Patriot's side of the story.
- I was a lawyer and judge.
- I was famous for my art and music.
- I was a judge when I died.

**THOMAS JEFFERSON**  
**Virginia 1743-1826 (died at age 83)**

- I wrote the Declaration of Independence.
- I was one of the smartest men of my time and had many interests.
- I was Governor of Virginia, the first Secretary of State, the second Vice President, and the third President of the United States.
- I died a few hours before John Adams on the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.



## **FRANCIS LIGHTFOOT LEE**

**Virginia 1734-1797  
(died at age 62)**

- I was from a family of wealthy Patriots.
- I was not a fan of English rule for many years before the Revolutionary War began.
- My brother, Richard Henry Lee, also signed the Declaration.
- My brother and I often disagreed on politics.

## **FRANCIS LEWIS**

**New York 1713-1802 (died at age 89)**

- Born in Wales, I was one of the first to join the Sons of Liberty after moving to America.
- My son, Morgan, served in the Patriot army and later became Governor of New York.
- New York told me not to vote for the Declaration of Independence, but I still signed it.
- My wife was captured by the British and later died as a result.

## **RICHARD HENRY LEE**

**Virginia 1732-1794  
(died at age 62)**

- I was born in Virginia but went to school in England.
- I was a great speaker and introduced the proposal to break with England.
- I did not vote on my proposal because I had to leave, but I returned in time to sign the Declaration of Independence.
- I later served as a U.S. Senator.

## **PHILLIP LIVINGSTON**

**New York 1716-1778 (died at age 62)**

- Before the War, I was a rich merchant who believed all protests should be peaceful.
- General George Washington and his officers met at one of my homes during the War.
- The British also used my homes during the War—as a hospital and a home for soldiers.
- I gave the Patriots much of my money, and I died poor.

**THOMAS LYNCH, JR.**  
**South Carolina 1749-1779**  
**(died around age 30)**

- My father, Thomas Lynch Sr., and I were the only father and son who served at the same time in the Continental Congress.
- I was one of the youngest signers but also died at the youngest age.
- When I was 30, I died when my ship sank.
- I signed so few things that people pay lots of money for papers I signed.

**ARTHUR MIDDLETON**  
**South Carolina 1742-1787**  
**(died at age 44)**

- I thought Loyalists should be tarred and feathered.
- I was captured by the British and jailed in Florida with other signers.
- I lost most of my money during the Revolution.

**THOMAS McKEAN**  
**Delaware 1734-1817 (died at age 83)**

- I was the last to sign the Declaration of Independence, and my handwriting was very sloppy.
- My parents came from Ireland and ran a tavern in New London, Pennsylvania.
- Another Patriot challenged me to a duel and then did not show up.
- I lived in Philadelphia, but I was the top leader of independence in Delaware.

**LEWIS MORRIS**  
**New York 1726-1798 (died at age 71)**

- I came from a family of leaders and rebels, but I lived in a state which supported England.
- Even my brother was a general in the British Army.
- When that brother warned me not to sign the Declaration, I told him to “give me the pen.”
- My oldest three sons were good soldiers in the Continental Army.

**ROBERT MORRIS \***  
**Pennsylvania 1734-1806**  
**(died at age 72)**

- I was one of the wealthiest colonists and was called “the Financier of the Revolution.”
- My job during the War was to get supplies and money for General George Washington’s army.
- I was born in England.
- I died poor and nearly forgotten.

**THOMAS NELSON, JR.**  
**Virginia 1738-1789 (died at age 50)**

- I was a Virginia legislator who loudly called for breaking with England.
- I got money for Virginia’s troops by promising to pay it back myself if Virginia did not.
- Some people think I ordered Patriot troops to shoot cannons at my own home so that the British could not use it.
- I never had the money to fix that house.

**JOHN MORTON**  
**Pennsylvania 1725-1777**  
**(died at age 51)**

- I helped my state change its vote to independence right before the final vote on July 2, 1776.
- I said the best thing I ever did for my country was to sign the Declaration of Independence.
- I worked in politics most of my life.

**WILLIAM PACA**  
**Maryland 1740-1799**  
**(died at age 58)**

- I studied law in Annapolis and London.
- I was a senator and soldier before President George Washington made me a judge.
- Sadly, both of my wives died before me.

**ROBERT TREAT PAINE**

**Massachusetts 1731-1814  
(died at age 83)**

- I prosecuted British soldiers after the Boston Massacre.
- My nickname was “Objection Maker,” because I argued so much.
- I was born in Boston and became a minister and then lawyer.

**GEORGE READ \***

**Delaware 1733-1798 (died at age 65)**

- I was the only signer of the Declaration of Independence who voted against it on July 2, 1776.
- I was President of Delaware.
- I helped Delaware become the first state to approve the Constitution.
- I was Chief Justice of Delaware when I died.

**JOHN PENN**

**North Carolina 1741-1788  
(died at age 47)**

- I only went to school for two years because my father did not think education was important.
- I later became a country lawyer.
- I was found guilty of saying mean things about the Stamp Act, but the judge made me pay only one penny.
- A U.S. Navy ship is named after me.

**CAESAR RODNEY**

**Delaware 1728-1784  
(died at age 55)**

- I rode on a horse all night over 80 miles to make sure Delaware voted for independence on July 2, 1776.
- I was President of Delaware for three years.
- I was a general during the War.
- I had cancer on my face for 10 years, and I covered it with a green veil. The cancer later killed me.

**GEORGE ROSS**  
**Pennsylvania 1730-1779**  
**(died at age 49)**

- My nephew married Betsy Ross.
- My relative was a Scottish king long ago.
- I served as a lawyer for the English King for many years before becoming a Patriot.
- I later became a judge in Pennsylvania.

**EDWARD RUTLEDGE**  
**South Carolina 1749-1800**  
**(died at age 50)**

- I was the youngest signer at age 26.
- I first voted against independence on July 1, 1776, but then changed my vote the next day.
- I was among the Patriot leaders captured by the British and kept prisoner for more than a year in Florida.
- I died while serving as Governor of South Carolina.

**BENJAMIN RUSH**  
**Pennsylvania 1745-1813**  
**(died at age 67)**

- I was one of four doctors who signed the Declaration of Independence.
- I had 13 children.
- I did not like General George Washington and tried to get him fired.
- I was a famous doctor who believed draining people's blood, making them vomit, and giving them cold baths was the way to cure them.
- I died of typhus during an epidemic.

**ROGER SHERMAN \***  
**Connecticut 1721-1793**  
**(died at age 72)**

- Robert Morris and I were the only ones to sign the Declaration of Independence, Articles of Confederation, and Constitution.
- I never studied law, but I was a lawyer and judge.
- I also was a farmer, cobbler, shop owner and manager, U.S. Representative, and Senator.
- I had 15 children.

**JAMES SMITH**  
**Pennsylvania 1719-1806**  
**(died at age 87)**

- I was born in Ireland and came to America when I was about 10 years old.
- I did not support the War at first but became a general.
- I was known for being funny and strange.
- I may have been the oldest lawyer in Pennsylvania when I died at age 80.

**THOMAS STONE**  
**Maryland 1743-1787**  
**(died around age 44)**

- I ignored my state's rules and voted for independence.
- In 1776, my wife got a smallpox shot. She became sick and was ill for the rest of her life.
- I left Philadelphia to care for her and our children.
- Four months after my wife died in 1787, I died from a broken heart.

**RICHARD STOCKTON**  
**New Jersey 1730-1781**  
**(died at age 50)**

- I was one of the best lawyers in the colonies.
- I hid from the British, but Loyalists told them where I was hiding.
- The British caught me, placed me in jail, and starved me.
- I never recovered after the British let me go, and I died before the war was over.

**GEORGE TAYLOR**  
**Pennsylvania 1716-1781**  
**(died at age 65)**

- At age 20, I left Ireland to be an ironmaster's servant in Pennsylvania.
- After my master died, I married his widow and owned his businesses.
- I did not do much in the Continental Congress other than sign the Declaration of Independence.
- However, I helped the war effort by making bullets and cannons for the Patriots.

**MATTHEW THORNTON**  
**New Hampshire 1714-1803**  
**(died around age 89)**

- Although I had no training in law, I became a judge and was called “The Honest Man.”
- I was born in Ireland and came to America when I was 3 years old.
- I was a doctor and soldier during the War.
- I signed the Declaration of Independence late, after it was already signed by 50 other men.

**WILLIAM WHIPPLE**  
**New Hampshire 1730-1785**  
**(died at age 55)**

- I worked on ships as a boy.
- I thought Loyalists should be punished.
- I was a general in the War and helped beat the British in New York.

**GEORGE WALTON**  
**Georgia 1740s-1804**  
**(died around age 60)**

- I spoke loudly for independence in a state which was wishy-washy about it.
- I was a carpenter and then a lawyer.
- I was wounded and captured by the British for 9 months.
- I became a judge, Governor of Georgia, and a U.S. Senator.

**WILLIAM WILLIAMS**  
**Connecticut 1731-1811**  
**(died at age 80)**

- I was a member of the Sons of Liberty.
- I joined the Continental Congress after its vote on the Declaration of Independence, but I still signed the Declaration.
- I moved out of my home to let French officers stay there while they helped the Patriots.
- I died at age 80—exactly 35 years after I signed the Declaration of Independence.

**JAMES WILSON \***  
**Pennsylvania 1741 or 1742-1798**  
**(died at age 55)**

- I was born and went to school in Scotland before I came to America.
- In the fall of 1779, 35 other leaders and I had to stay in my home to protect ourselves against a mob unhappy with the lack of food and high prices.
- President George Washington appointed me to the U.S. Supreme Court.
- I died poor and mentally ill.

**OLIVER WOLCOTT**  
**Connecticut 1726-1797**  
**(died at age 71)**

- I was a general in the War.
- I signed the Declaration of Independence late because I was very ill.
- I was the top student in my college class.
- My father was Governor of Connecticut, and I later was Lieutenant Governor.

**JOHN WITHERSPOON**  
**New Jersey 1723-1794**  
**(died at age 71)**

- I fought the English beginning when I was a minister in Scotland.
- I came to the colonies to lead a college.
- My son was a Patriot soldier who died in the War.
- When I was 68, I married a woman 44 years younger and had two more children before dying.

**GEORGE WYTHE**  
**Virginia 1726-1806**  
**(died around age 80)**

- I taught Thomas Jefferson about law and was his friend always.
- I was the first law professor at an American college.
- I likely was poisoned to death by a relative who wanted my money.