

The Declaration of Independence

Professor Eric Slauter

Summer 2025 | Term I

Course Description

This course investigates the origins, meanings, and contested legacies of one of the most consequential political documents in world history. What does the Declaration of Independence declare? What did the Declaration's language of equality, liberty, and rights mean to its authors and earliest readers? How and why have understandings of the document changed over time? And what place do the words and ideals of the Declaration hold now, nearly 250 years later? Lectures and primary and secondary readings provide a series of philosophical, political, economic, social, cultural, religious, and legal perspectives on the document's sources, meanings, and legacies. Early sessions focus on the origin and dissemination of key ideas about equality and rights across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the imperial debates of the 1760s and 1770s; the drafting and editing of the text in Congress; the circulation, reception, and re-deployment of the Declaration among domestic and international audiences in the age of the American Revolution; and the relation of the Declaration to the Constitution. The final sessions explore key turning points in the life of the document, including the place of the Declaration in arguments about the rights of enslaved peoples and women in antebellum America and changing meanings of the Declaration in the era of Southern secession and the Civil War.

Course Primary Source Readings

- "The Declaration of Independence: Primary Source Documents, 1689–1865" (PDF). Documents listed by number below; documents marked GLC are from the Gilder Lehrman Collection.

Course Secondary Source Readings (Suggested)

- Allen, Danielle. *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality*. New York: Liveright, 2014.
- Armitage, David. *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Maier, Pauline. *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*. New York: Vintage, 1997.
- Pincus, Steve. *The Heart of the Declaration: The Founders' Case for an Activist Government*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Course Requirements

- Watch all course lectures
- Complete all course readings
- Submit five short papers (500 words each)
- Contribute to five discussion boards
- Participate in at least three Q&As
- Complete a 15-page (~3,750 words) research paper or project of appropriate rigor
- Complete a course evaluation (A survey link will be sent to your Gettysburg email during Week Four of the semester.)

Learning Objectives

1. To understand the origins, meanings, and contested legacies of the Declaration of Independence, drawing on sources from the seventeenth century to the present.
2. To use our exploration of the Declaration to develop core historical skills, including: the ability to read a document closely and in different contexts; the study of sources and influences; the genesis and textual evolution of a document through multiple drafts; the material production and circulation of a document; the different receptions of a document in its own time; and the changing understanding of a document over time.

Class Schedule

Week One: May 29

Introduction

Readings

- [39] "Resolutions of Richard Henry Lee," June 7, 1776.
- [43] "First Newspaper Report of Independence," *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, July 2, 1776.
- [44] Declaration of Independence: Dunlap Broadside, July 4–5, 1776.
- [48] Declaration of Independence: Engrossed and Signed Copy, 1776 [1823 Stone facsimile].
- [49] Declaration of Independence: Transcript of engrossed copy, 1776.
- [50] Lemuel Haynes, manuscript title page for "Liberty Further Extended: Or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave-Keeping," 1776.

Declaring Rights

Readings

- [1] English Declaration of Rights, 1689.
- [2] Locke, John. *Second Treatise of Government*. London: Awnsham Churchill, 1690.
- [3] James Otis, *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved*, Pamphlet,

July 30, 1764.

- [4] Virginia House of Burgesses, "Stamp Act Resolutions," 1765.
- [5] George Grenville, letter to George III, July 4, 1765.
- [6] Stamp Act Congress, "Declaration of Rights and Grievances," 1765.
- [8] "Toasts on the Second Anniversary of the Stamp Act Riots," 1767.
- [10] Letters between "Sophronia" (Sarah Prince Gill) and Catharine Macaulay, 1769–1770.
- [13] John Adams, letter to Catharine Macaulay, July 9, 1770.

Assignments

- Discussion Board One: Introduce yourself to your group and list three potential topics for your final paper/project. Comment on one potential topic for each member of your group.
 - First post due: Friday, May 30
 - Second post due: Sunday, June 1
 - Final paper/project research question due: Wednesday, June 4
 - In roughly 1–2 pages, outline the question your final paper or project will attempt to answer. This should include a description of the paper or project you are proposing, some background information and historical context on your topic, a brief description of your research plan, and a justification for why your particular paper or project is worth pursuing.
 - Short Paper One due: Wednesday, June 4
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
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Week Two: June 5

Self-Evidence: Benjamin Franklin

Readings

- [7] Examination of Doctor Benjamin Franklin, Pamphlet, 1766.
- [14] Benjamin Franklin, letter to Jane Mecom, December 30, 1770.
- [15] Benjamin Franklin. Autobiography, London, 1793, Parts 1 (1771) and 2 (1784).
- [17] Boston Town Meeting, "Votes and Proceedings," 1772.
- [21] Continental Congress, "The Association," 1774.
- [22] Continental Congress, "Petition to the King," 1774.
- [23] Continental Congress, "Bill of Rights and List of Grievances," 1774.
- [24] Edmund Burke, "Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies," March 22, 1775.

Pamphlets, Parchments, Petitions, Propaganda, and Thomas Paine

Readings

- [9] John Dickinson, "Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania," 1767–1768.
- [11] Paul Revere, "Bloody Massacre," Engraving, 1770.

- [12] [Alexander McDougal], "Defense of Non-Importation Agreements," May 16, 1770.
- [18] Phillis Wheatley, "Poems to the King and the Earl of Dartmouth," 1773.
- [19] Phillis Wheatley, letter to Samson Occom, 1774.
- [27] Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, Pamphlet, January 10, 1776.
- [28] Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, London, 1776.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Two: Post three potential sources (a mixture of primary and secondary) for your final paper or project. Suggest an additional primary or secondary source for each of the members in your group and explain why you chose that source.
 - First post due: Friday, June 6
 - Second post due: Sunday, June 8
 - Revised question and annotated bibliography due: Wednesday, June 11
 - Revise your initial proposal to incorporate your section professor's feedback, AND
 - Create an annotated bibliography containing at least five sources. Each of these sources should be followed by a short paragraph describing the source and what it will contribute to your final paper/project.
 - Short Paper Two due: Wednesday, June 11
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
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Week Three: June 12

Debating the Declaration: Abigail Adams and John Adams

Readings

- [26] John Adams, letter to Richard Henry Lee, November 15, 1775.
- [29] Abigail Adams, letter to John Adams, March 31, 1776.
- [30] John Adams, letter to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776.
- [31] John Adams, "Thoughts on Government," 1776.
- [32] John Adams, letter to James Sullivan, May 26, 1776.
- [33] Continental Congress, "Resolution of May 15," 1776.
- [34] Virginia Convention, "Resolutions of May 15," 1776.
- [35] Presentments by the Grand Jury, Cheraws District, SC, 1776.
- [38] Richard Henry Lee, letter to Landon Carter, June 2, 1776.
- [39] "Resolution of Richard Henry Lee," June 7, 1776.

Drafting the Declaration: Thomas Jefferson

Readings

- [16] Thomas Jefferson, letter to Robert Skipwith with Book List, August 3, 1771.
- [20] Thomas Jefferson, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, Pamphlet, 1774.
- [25] Continental Congress, "Declaration of the Causes for Taking Up Arms," July 6, 1775.
- [36–37] Virginia Convention, "Declaration of Rights," 1776, Committee Draft and Final.
- [40] Thomas Jefferson, "Preamble to the Virginia Constitution," 1776.
- [41] Thomas Jefferson, "Original rough draft," 1776.
- [42] Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on Proceedings in Congress," 1776.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Three: Post an outline of your final paper/project.
 - Due Sunday, June 15
 - Paper/project preview due: Wednesday, June 18
 - Paper: Turn in a rough draft of the first five pages of your final paper.
 - Project: Submissions of the project preview will differ from project to project according to type. Determine with your section professor an appropriate portion of your final project to turn in.
 - Discussion Board Four: Post a 200-word abstract for your final paper/project. Submit the first five pages of your paper (or the portion of your final project submitted to your section professor) to your group members for peer review.
 - Due Wednesday, June 18
 - Short Paper Three due Wednesday, June 18
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
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Week Four: June 19

Printing and Proclaiming the Declaration

Readings

- [44] John Dunlap Broadside, 1776.
- [45] Steiner and Cist Broadside, 1776.
- [47] Peter Timothy Broadside, 1776.
- [48] Engrossed and Signed Copy, 1776 [1823 Stone facsimile].
- [51] Constitution of Pennsylvania (Sec. 13–15), 1776.
- [55] Mary Katherine Goddard Broadside, 1777.

Signing and Answering the Declaration

Readings

- [50] Lemuel Haynes, "Liberty Further Extended," 1776.

- [52] [Jeremy Bentham], "Short Review of the Declaration," 1776.
- [53] Thomas Hutchinson, "Strictures upon the Declaration," October 15, 1776.
- [54] Petition of Lancaster Hill et al. to the Massachusetts Assembly, 1777.
- [56] Articles of Confederation, 1777/1781.
- [57] "Treaty of Alliance with France," February 6, 1778.
- [58] "Virginia Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom," 1777/1785.
- [59] Judith Sargent Murray, "On the Equality of the Sexes," 1779/1790.
- [60] Massachusetts Constitution, "Declaration of Rights," 1780.
- [61] "Treaty of Paris," September 3, 1783.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Five: Return peer reviews to group members as attachments on the discussion board.
 - Due Wednesday, June 25
 - Short Paper Four due: Wednesday, June 25
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
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Week Five: June 26

The Declaration and the Constitution

Readings

- [62] James Madison, "Vices of the Political System," April 1787.
- [63] "Records of the Federal Convention," June 6, 1787.
- [64] Benjamin Franklin, "Speech at the Federal Convention," September 17, 1787.
- [65] Constitution of the United States (1787) and "Bill of Rights" (1789).
- [66] Richard Henry Lee, "Amendments Proposed," September 27, 1787.
- [67] James Madison, letter to Thomas Jefferson, October 24, 1787.
- [68] "Brutus No. 2," *New York Journal*, November 1, 1787.
- [69] James Madison, "Federalist No. 10," November 22, 1787.
- [70] Thomas Jefferson, letter to James Madison, December 20, 1787.
- [71] James Madison, "Federalist No. 40," January 18, 1788.
- [72] [Melancton Smith], "The Federal Farmer No. 16," 1788.
- [73] Amos Singletary, "Speech at the Massachusetts Convention," 1788.
- [74] Patrick Henry, "Speeches at the Virginia Ratifying Convention," 1788.
- [75] Alexander Hamilton, "Federalist No. 84," May 28, 1788.
- [76] James Madison, letter to Thomas Jefferson, October 17, 1788.
- [77] Thomas Jefferson, letter to James Madison, March 15, 1789.
- [78] James Madison, "Amendments Proposed," June 8, 1789.
- [79] National Constituent Assembly, "French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen," August 26, 1789.

The Anti-Slavery Declaration

Readings

- [80] Benjamin Banneker, letter to Thomas Jefferson, August 19, 1791.
- [81] Haitian Declaration of Independence, 1804.
- [82] David Walker, *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, 1830.
- [86] John Quincy Adams, "Argument in the Amistad Case," 1841.
- [87] Liberian Declaration of Independence, 1847.
- [88] John C. Calhoun, "Speech on the Oregon Bill," June 27, 1848.
- [90] Charles Sumner, "Argument in *Roberts v. Boston*," 1849.
- [92] Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" Oration, July 5, 1852.

Assignments

- Short Paper Five due: Wednesday, July 2
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
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Week Six: July 3

Women's Rights and the Inclusive Declaration

Readings

- [83] George Henry Evans, "Workingman's Declaration of Independence," December 1829.
- [84] William Lloyd Garrison, "Declaration of Sentiments," December 6, 1833.
- [85] Sarah Grimké, "Letters on the Equality of the Sexes," 1838, Letter 8.
- [89] Seneca Falls, "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions," 1848.
- [91] Selections from Women's Rights Conventions, 1850–1854.
- [94] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Address to the Legislature of New York," February 1854.

The Declaration Divided: The Civil War

Readings

- [93] George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South: Or, The Failure of Free Society*, 1854.
- [95] *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 1857, selections.
- [97] South Carolina, "Secession Ordinance and Declaration," Pamphlet, 1860.
- [98] Abraham Lincoln, "Emancipation Proclamation," printed by Rufus Blanchard (c. 1863–1864).
- [99] Abraham Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address," November 19, 1863.
- [100] "Thirteenth Amendment," December 6, 1865.
- [101] South Carolina Secession Ordinance captured by the 102nd US Colored Troops, 1865.

Assignments

- Final Draft due: Wednesday, July 9
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Course and Program Policies

It is the responsibility of students to know, understand, and abide by course and program policies.

For a full overview of program policies, review the Gettysburg College–Gilder Lehrman Institute Student Handbook.

Course correspondence

Correspondence with faculty and administrators should be formal. Include a subject line, addressee, and closing. Put the name and number of your course in the subject line.

Plagiarism and AI

This program uses Turnitin to check for instances of plagiarism and AI. Plagiarism and papers composed fully or in part by AI will not be tolerated. This includes self-plagiarism. A student caught plagiarizing or composing papers with AI for the first time may receive a zero on the assignment. A student caught plagiarizing or composing with AI for a second time may be permanently removed from the program.

Your section professor will set the policies for use of AI for research or purposes other than composing your papers.

Late work

Assignments should be submitted no later than 11:59 p.m. Pacific Time on the due date unless otherwise specified by your section professor. If you think you will be unable to submit an assignment on time, it is your responsibility to contact your section professor to ask for an extension before the assignment's due date. Late assignments will be docked 5% if less than a week late, 10% if one week late, and an additional 10% for each subsequent week.

Grading scale

Letter Grade	Number Grade	Grade Points
A	95%–100%	4
A-	90%–94%	3.67
B+	87%–89%	3.33
B	84%–86%	3

B-	80%–83%	2.67
C+	77%–79%	2.33
C	74%–76%	2
C-	70%–73%	1.67
D+	67%–69%	1.33
D	64%–66%	1
D-	60%–63%	.67
F	0%–59%	0

Group Work

This course requires students to work in groups assigned at the beginning of the semester. Groups will interact on discussion boards focused on final papers/projects.

Peer Review (discussion boards four and five)

This two-part assignment requires that you a) post an abstract and the first five pages of your final paper/project to your group discussion board and b) review and add track changes to the first five pages of the other members' final papers/projects.

Assignment Descriptions

Short Papers (25% of grade – 5% per short paper)

Students will complete five short papers. Each should be approximately 500 words long. The purpose of these papers is not to merely summarize weekly readings but to demonstrate that you have read them analytically and contextually. Students have the option of responding to a prompt created by their section professor or to one of their own design. Prompts should reflect the themes discussed in course readings. If you need help getting started, you can complete one of the options listed below.

Complete a thesis identification - Select one of your assigned readings and focus on identifying the thesis as well as the evidence the authors use to support that thesis.

Complete a primary source evaluation - Evaluate a primary source from the Gilder Lehrman Collection or elsewhere. Primary sources must be relevant to that week's readings. Keep the following questions in mind:

- Who is the author of this document?
- Who was their intended audience?
- How might both author and audience impact the content of the document?
- For what reason was this document created?

Complete a book review - Focus on one of the secondary sources assigned in this course and critique it. Keep the following questions in mind:

- What is the author's argument?
- Does the author adequately support their argument?
- Are you convinced of their argument? If not, why not?
- How does this source fit into the larger discussion of its topic?

Discussion Board Posts (20% of grade – 4% per discussion board)

Students will interact in five discussion boards in this course. Discussion boards are led by section professors, who will provide specific instructions for participation in their section. You are required to make at least one post to each discussion board and respond to **at least two other students**.

Question-and-Answer Sessions (15% of grade – 5% per reaction)

Throughout the semester the lead professor of each course will conduct four Q&As. Students **MUST** attend at least three of these sessions for each course they are taking. **In order to receive credit for attending each Q&A, you must complete a 1–2-paragraph Q&A Reaction within 24 hours of participation.** Note: If you cannot attend three of the five Q&As, you may receive credit by viewing archived Q&As and completing a 500-word review of topics covered for each missed Q&A. **Makeup assignments must be completed within two weeks of the missed Q&A.**

Final Project/Paper (40% of grade)

For the final assignment of each course, you will choose to complete either a research project or 15-page research paper. Research projects are a public-education tool designed for the general population, teachers, and/or students of varying ages. Sample projects include (but are not limited to) vodcasts and podcasts, documentary editing and transcription, websites, annotated readers, walking tours, or museum exhibits. Lesson plans *will not* be accepted. A 5-page paper narrative must accompany the project. Your section professor must approve research projects.

The research paper can be a traditional position paper that uses original research to prove a thesis statement or a historiography paper that critically examines how American historians have interpreted the same event differently and why shifts in historical debates may have occurred.

Both final assignment options require you to ask an open-ended historical question (something that does not have an easy yes or no answer) that you do not yet know the answer to. You will then use the research process (pulling from a variety of resources, mostly primary source documents) to explore that question and create a thesis-driven answer. Regardless of whether you choose to pursue a project or paper, finals are scaffolded throughout the semester. This method breaks up a large grade into smaller constituent grades and allows time to incorporate instructor feedback into assignments.

Scaffolded Assignments

- Final Project/Paper Proposal (2%)

In roughly 1–2 pages, you should outline the main question, topic, or purpose of your final project or paper. This should include a description of the project or paper you are proposing, some background information and historical context on your topic (answer the questions who, what, where, and when), a brief description of your research plan (this does not need to be super specific, but should outline how many weeks you plan to research, if you need to schedule research trips or if your sources are published or available digitally, and when you plan to begin writing) and a justification for why your particular project or paper is worth pursuing (what is the significance of this topic? What does it add to our historical knowledge? Are you filling a gap that other historians have overlooked such as considering race, ethnicity, or gender?)

- Revised Proposal and Annotated Bibliography (4%)

This assignment will give you the opportunity to incorporate the feedback you received on the first draft of your proposal. In addition to incorporating your section professor's comments, you will also submit a proposed bibliography listing five sources you plan on utilizing in your research for your final product. Each of these sources should be followed by a brief summary (3–5 sentences) of the source and what it will contribute to your research process.

- Project or Paper Preview (10%)

This will give you the opportunity to show the progress you have made on your final project or paper and get some early-stage feedback from your section professor. For a final project, determine with your section professor an appropriate portion of your final submission to turn in. For a final paper, this should be roughly the first five pages of what will ultimately be your final submission.

- Final Product (24%):

Final Project: Much like the final paper option, a final project is meant to prove that you have mastered the content covered by this course. We encourage you to be creative in your approach to this project, though it should be equivalent in rigor and workload to a final paper.

Final Paper: Final papers should be at least fifteen pages in length. These can take the form of research papers or historiography papers.