



The Paper That Said We Are Free

WisdomForge Booklet — Ages 5–10

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About This Book

This is a story about a paper written in a hot city in the summer of 1776. The city was Philadelphia. The paper was not a map. It was not a recipe. It was not a set of school rules. It was a letter to the world that said: we will not be a colony of a king anymore.

The paper is called the Declaration of Independence. It does not build a government. The Constitution does that later. This paper explains a break. It says why some people thought they had a right to leave.

WisdomForge already has sittings for this story. The six chapters in this book match those sittings: the room in 1776, the word “self-evident,” the sentence about being equal, the three rights, the right to change a government, and the long second life of the words.

You will hear real words from the Declaration and from people who used it later. The words are old. They are still real. This book will not pretend everyone in the country was free. They were not. It will not pretend everyone signed on the same day. They did not.

Magna Carta was pulled from a king in a field. The Constitution was designed in a locked room. The Declaration is the loud paper in between: a break, then a promise. The middle booklet has tables. The high booklet has debates. Stay here if you want the story first.

Each chapter has a story, words to remember, a big idea, something to try, and a question to ask a grown-up. The questions are not tests. They are doors to walk through together. A grown-up who wants Locke, Jefferson’s cut paragraph, or Douglass’s Fourth of July speech should use the middle or high booklet.

Chapter 1: The Hot Room and the Wrong Date

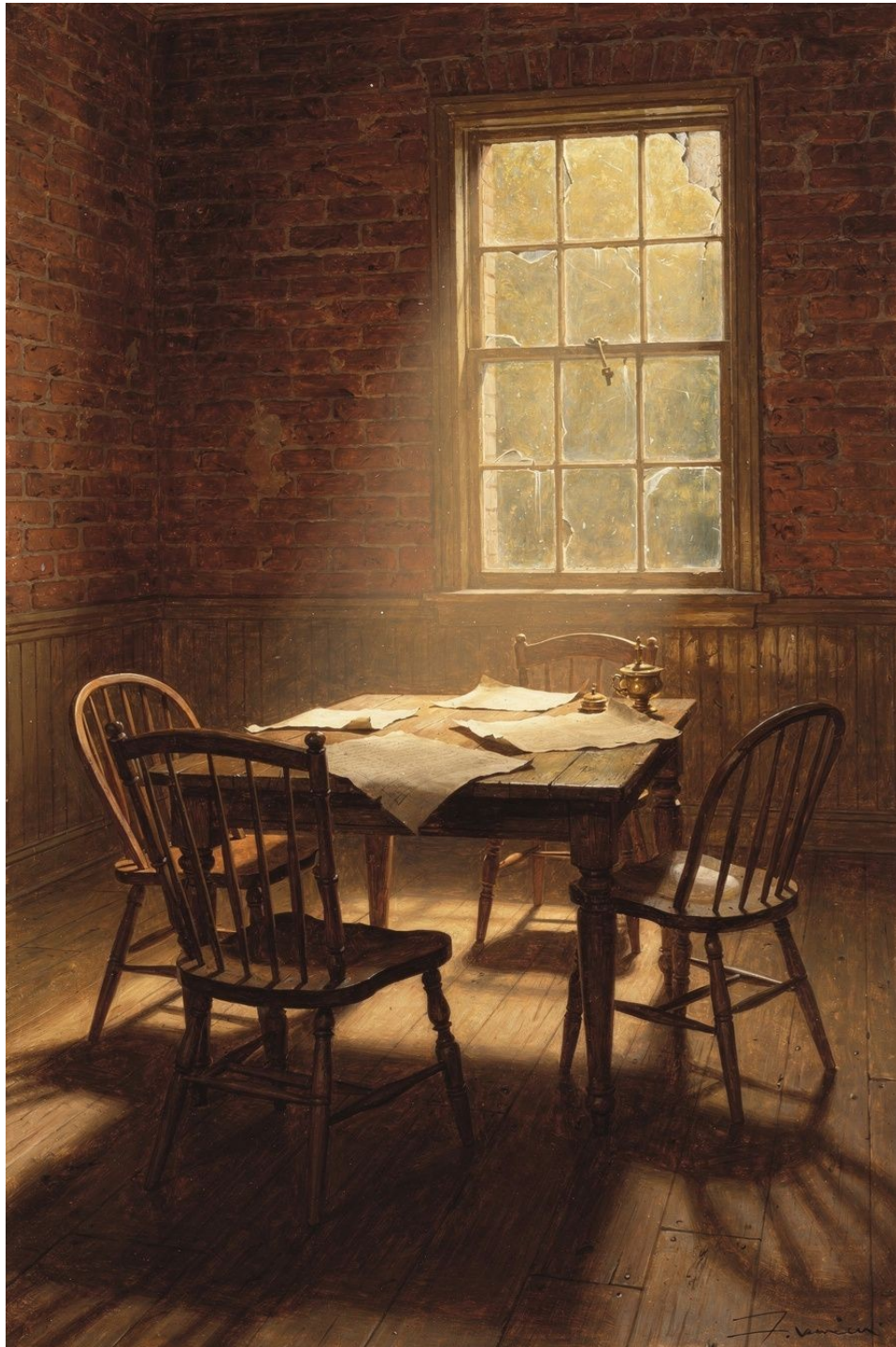


Illustration for Chapter 1

Imagine a group of grown-ups in a brick building. It is July. It is sticky. They have already been fighting a war for more than a year. Soldiers have already died at Lexington and Concord. The king's soldiers are still coming. The grown-ups are not writing a game. They are writing a reason.

On June 11 they picked five men to draft a paper: Thomas Jefferson from Virginia, John Adams from Massachusetts, Benjamin Franklin from Pennsylvania, Roger Sherman from Connecticut, and Robert Livingston from New York. The five asked Jefferson to write the first draft. He wrote for about two weeks.

Richard Henry Lee of Virginia had already asked Congress to say the colonies were free. That vote did not happen on the Fourth. It happened on July 2. Twelve colonies said yes. New York waited. John Adams wrote to Abigail that July 2 would be the great day. He was right about a festival. He was wrong about the date people would remember.

On July 4 they finished the words. A printer named John Dunlap made copies that night. Those first printed sheets are called Dunlap broadsides. The paper was read out loud in a yard on July 8. Bells rang then, not because a movie said so. People heard the words. Some pulled down the king's picture.

Most men did not sign on July 4. John Hancock signed the journal that day because he was president of Congress. Most signatures went on parchment later, on August 2. Some men signed even later. The last may have been Thomas McKean. Stories about everyone dipping a quill together on the Fourth are pictures, not clocks.

Fifty-six men signed. They were not a picture of the whole country. They were wealthy, educated, white men. Many were lawyers. Some held people in slavery. None were women. None were poor in the way most people were poor. None were Indigenous. Signing was still dangerous. The paper was treason against the British crown. Franklin is said to have joked that they must hang together or they would hang separately.

Caesar Rodney of Delaware rode through a storm so his colony's vote would not stay split. That ride is a real story. It is also easy to turn into a cartoon. The vote still needed South Carolina to switch and Pennsylvania to reshuffle. Independence was a count, not a magic ride.

The war did not stop because of the paper. New York fell. Philadelphia fell. Washington's army almost melted. France later helped. The Treaty of Paris in 1783 said Britain recognized the new country. The Declaration was the promise. The war was the cost. People who signed still lost houses, money, and sometimes their freedom as prisoners. Courage and politics sat in the same chairs.

Thomas Paine wrote, in *Common Sense*:

*"The sun never shone on a cause of greater worth." — Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, January 1776*

He also wrote that the blood of the slain cried it was time to part. That is tavern language. The Declaration is Congress language. Both belong in the summer of 1776. Do not mix them into one author.

Common Sense sold in huge numbers for a small country. Grown-ups still argue about the exact count. The point is not a trophy number. The point is that independence became something you could say in a tavern without whispering. Congress still had to vote. Pamphlets do not vote. People do.

John Adams wrote Abigail on July 3 that the second of July would be the great anniversary. Keep that letter next to the picnic. Letters remember votes. Picnics remember papers.

A child might ask: if July 2 was the vote, why do we picnic on July 4? Because people remember the paper's date, not the roll call. Dates stick when fireworks stick. The honest clock still matters.

Go back to the hot room. One pile of paper is a draft. One pile is a printed sheet. One pile is a later parchment with names. All three are the Declaration. The Fourth is one of the days, not the only day.

Words to Remember

"We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America... solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States..." — Declaration of Independence, 1776

That means: the paper is not only ideas. It is an act. It says we are a country now.

Big Idea

Independence was voted on July 2. The famous words were adopted on July 4. Most names were written later. A holiday can remember a paper and still mix up the clock.

Try This

1. Draw three boxes. Label them July 2 (vote), July 4 (words), August 2 (many signatures). Put a star in the box your town celebrates. 2. Fold a paper "broadside." Write one sentence: We are free. Read it out loud in a yard or a kitchen. 3. With a grown-up, look at a picture of Hancock's large name. Talk about why a large name is not the same as everyone agreeing.

Ask a Grown-Up

If a family remembers a birthday on the wrong day, is the party still real? What should we keep honest about July 2 and July 4?

Chapter 2: The Word That Changed the Sentence



Illustration for Chapter 2

Jefferson first wrote that some truths were “sacred and undeniable.” Franklin changed those words to “self-evident.” That sounds small. It is not small.

Sacred is a church word. It means holy, set apart, not for arguing. Self-evident is a school word. It means you can see it if you think. Like a geometry fact: the whole is bigger than a part. You do not need a king to tell you.

The Declaration still talks about a Creator. It talks about Nature’s God, a Supreme Judge, and Divine Providence. It never names Christ. It never quotes a Bible verse. It is a theistic paper: it talks about God in wide words so many kinds of believers, and some doubters, can hear it.

Jefferson liked reason. Franklin liked reason. Adams was a Unitarian. Washington spoke of Providence more than of church tests. Other signers were serious Christians. The paper had to hold them together. “Self-evident” helped. It did not kick God out. It moved the proof from a pulpit to a mind.

Think of a classroom rule. If the rule is “because I said so,” the rule lives in the teacher’s voice. If the rule is “because anyone can see it is fair,” the rule lives in the room. The Declaration wanted the second kind of rule for rights.

This is why later people far from Philadelphia could use the paper. If the truths were only American church truths, they would stay in one pew. If they are self-evident, a reader in another country can test them. That is Danielle Allen’s close-reading point: the sentences are built to be public.

Paine’s pamphlet *Common Sense* had already used plain words in January. He said it was time to part. Jefferson’s paper used slower, more formal words in July. The country needed both: a shout in taverns and a letter to the world. Self-evident is the letter’s voice.

A child might ask: if a truth is self-evident, why did anyone fight about it? Because people can refuse what they see. Seeing is not the same as sharing. The paper claims the truths are obvious. History shows the sharing was slow.

Go back to the two words. Sacred. Self-evident. One points up. One points around the table. The Declaration uses both kinds of language, but the famous hold is self-evident.

Words to Remember

“We hold these truths to be self-evident...” — *Declaration of Independence, 1776*

That means: we are not asking a king to bless these ideas. We say any thinking person can see them.

Big Idea

Franklin's change moved the paper from a holy claim toward a reason claim. The Creator is still in the next line. The proof is in the open.

Try This

1. Write "sacred" on one card and "self-evident" on another. Act out a judge using each card. 2. Name one playground rule that is self-evident (don't hit) and one that is only a local rule (blue team lines up first). 3. Ask a grown-up to read the first two sentences of the Declaration slowly. Circle every God-word. Count them. There are four in the whole paper.

Ask a Grown-Up

Can something be both from God and obvious to reason? When do grown-ups use church words, and when do they use school words?

Chapter 3: The Sentence That Would Not Stay Small



Illustration for Chapter 3

“All men are created equal.” Five words. They did not mean, in 1776, that every person could vote. They meant no one is born with a crown in the blood. A king is not a different

kind of human. That was already a huge idea. Most of the world had kings, lords, and empires.

The sentence still left people out. Women could not vote. Abigail Adams told John to “remember the ladies.” He did not, not as law. Enslaved people were not treated as equals. Jefferson wrote the sentence and held hundreds of people in slavery in his life. Indigenous nations were insulted in the grievances as “merciless Indian Savages.” Many poor men without land could not vote.

This book will not hide that. Equality in the sentence was wider than equality in the room. That gap is not a tiny stain. It is the long story of the country.

Later people picked up the sentence like a tool. Frederick Douglass, who had been enslaved, asked what the Fourth of July was to a slave, and still called the principles saving principles. Lincoln called the sentence a standard a free society should keep walking toward, even if it never fully arrives. Women at Seneca Falls in 1848 wrote “all men and women are created equal.” Martin Luther King Jr. called the founding words a promissory note that had come back marked insufficient funds.

A promise you write down can outrun the person who wrote it. That is the strange hope of this chapter. The men in the room did not give everyone a seat. They wrote a sentence that later seats could point to.

At least forty-one of the fifty-six signers held people in slavery. That number is not a rumor. It is why this chapter cannot be only fireworks. The honest reading holds two facts in one hand: the sentence is the most productive in American politics, and the authors did not live it.

A child might ask: if they did not mean everyone, why praise the sentence? Because words can be better than the speakers. Praise the tool. Tell the truth about the hands.

Go back to a small table with a big paper. Only some people sit. The paper says all are equal. The sitting and the saying do not match. American history is the argument about that mismatch.

Words to Remember

*“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...” —
Declaration of Independence, 1776*

That means: no one is born owning other people as a king. It did not yet mean every person in the country was treated that way.

Big Idea

The equality sentence was radical against kings and still too small for the country. Later movements used the small sentence to make it larger.

Try This

1. Draw a table with 56 chairs for signers. Draw a second circle of empty chairs labeled women, enslaved people, Indigenous nations, people without land. Do not erase either picture. 2. Copy Lincoln's idea in kid words: a star you walk toward, even if you never touch it. 3. With a grown-up, read one line from Douglass or King (grown-up picks a short, true line). Talk about a promise that is not finished.

Ask a Grown-Up

If someone writes a fair rule and then breaks it at home, do we throw away the rule or ask them to keep it? Why?

Chapter 4: Three Rights You Cannot Sell



Illustration for Chapter 4

The paper says people are endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights. Among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Unalienable means you cannot sell them the way you sell a wagon. You can sell a wagon. You cannot rightly sell yourself into being owned. Even if someone says yes under fear, the right is still there. That is a hard grown-up idea. The short kid version is: some things are not for sale because they are about being a person.

John Locke, an English writer, had said life, liberty, and property. Jefferson wrote pursuit of happiness instead of property. George Mason in Virginia had already written about pursuing happiness and safety. Jefferson's line is shorter and wider. Happiness here is not ice cream. It is the chance to seek a good life, not a government that tells you exactly what joy is.

Life means you should not be killed without justice. Liberty means you should not be locked, moved, or bossed without a fair reason. Pursuit of happiness means you get to try your path. It does not mean the government owes you a smile.

The list says "among these." That means the list is not finished. Other rights can exist. The Ninth Amendment later says the Constitution's list does not erase other rights the people keep. The Declaration planted that "among."

Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights, written days earlier, listed "the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety." Jefferson shortened the pile. Short is not theft if the source is a public paper. It is craft.

A child might ask: if rights cannot be taken, why did so many people have none? Because a paper can name a right while a country refuses it. Naming is not the same as keeping. Chapter 3 already told that story. Chapter 4 names the three words people kept arguing about.

Go back to three stones in a pocket: life, liberty, happiness. You can lose a stone if someone is stronger. The paper says the stones were yours before the stronger person came. That claim is why later courts and marches kept using the pocket.

Words to Remember

"...they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." — Declaration of Independence, 1776

That means: these rights are not gifts from a king. They belong to persons. The list is not the whole box.

Big Idea

The Declaration turns Locke's property line into a wider hope: not just owning things, but seeking a life. Unalienable means not for sale.

Try This

1. Make three paper stones. Label them Life, Liberty, Happiness. Put them in a pocket. You may not sell them in the game. 2. Draw Locke's three words and Jefferson's three words. Circle the one that changed. 3. List three ways a person can pursue happiness that do not hurt someone else. Keep the list short.

Ask a Grown-Up

What is the difference between being happy and being free to try? When should a grown-up stop a child's "happiness"?

Chapter 5: When a People May Leave



Illustration for Chapter 5

The paper says governments are instituted to secure rights, and they get just powers from the consent of the governed. If a government becomes destructive of those ends, the people may alter or abolish it and make a new one.

That is the most dangerous sentence in the book. It is also the sentence that explains the break with the king. It is not a permission slip for a bad mood. The Declaration hedges. Prudence says do not change governments for light and transient causes. There must be a long train of abuses, showing a design of despotism.

Then comes the long middle of the paper: twenty-seven grievances, almost all starting “He has...” The “He” is King George III. Taxes without consent. Armies in peacetime. Cutting off trade. Dissolving legislatures. Taking away charters. The grievances are the evidence. The principles are the law. The last part is the act.

Consent in 1776 meant mostly property-owning white men. The idea was bigger than the voters. Later amendments widened who counts as “the people.” That is another second life.

Not every angry group gets the right. Shays’s Rebellion after the war was crushed. The Whiskey Rebellion was crushed. The Confederacy claimed revolution to keep slavery. Lincoln said that was not the Declaration’s right. It was a rejection of the Declaration. A child version: you may not use a fairness paper to keep owning people.

This band does not teach anyone to smash a capitol. It teaches the paper’s own brakes: long abuse, the people not a faction, and a plan to build a new government, not only to break.

The last grievance speaks of “domestic insurrections” and uses a cruel name for Native nations. Even a children’s booklet must say: the equality sentence and that grievance do not fit. We do not repeat the slur as a game word. We notice it so we do not pretend the paper was kind to everyone.

A child might ask: if we vote now, why keep a revolution sentence? Because voting is how consent usually works. Revolution is the last door when voting is destroyed. Doors should stay last.

Go back to a broken fence. You do not tear down every fence that has a loose board. You tear it down when it has become a trap. The Declaration claims Britain’s fence had become a trap. Whether that was fair is a grown-up fight. The structure of the argument is still the structure.

Words to Remember

“That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...” — Declaration of Independence, 1776

That means: a government is a tool to protect rights. Its power is supposed to come from the people’s yes.

Big Idea

The right to alter or abolish is real in the paper and tightly fenced. Evidence comes after principle. A tantrum is not a long train of abuses.

Try This

1. Make a two-column paper: “Light cause” and “Long train.” Put “lost a game” in the first. Put “no voice, forever” in the second. 2. Count “He has” if a grown-up reads three grievances. Stop at three. Talk about what “He” means. 3. Draw a door labeled LAST. Write elections, courts, and talking in front of the door.

Ask a Grown-Up

When is leaving a club fair, and when is it just quitting because you lost a vote? How can you tell?

Chapter 6: The Paper's Second Life



Illustration for Chapter 6

The Declaration had two lives. First it was a wartime act. Britain recognized independence in 1783. That job ended. Second it became a measuring stick. People who had been left out used the words against the exclusions.

Jefferson's draft attacked the king for the slave trade. Congress cut the paragraph. South Carolina and Georgia would not take it. Jefferson himself still held people in slavery. The cut did not make slavery honest. It made the paper silent. Silence postponed a fight that later became a war.

Douglass in 1852 would not let the holiday be easy. King in 1963 stood at the Lincoln Memorial and said the founders had signed a promissory note. The Seneca Falls women copied the form. The Gettysburg Address spoke of a new birth of freedom. None of those later words are inside the 1776 paper. They are the paper being used.

The Declaration is not the Constitution. One states why. One builds how. Eleven years and a failed first government sit between them. Adults argue whether courts should read 1776 into 1787. Children only need this: a promise and a machine are not the same object.

Around the world, other declarations copied the habit of explaining a break. Armitage wrote a global history of that habit. The UN's later human rights paper is a cousin, not a twin. Cousins can look alike and still be different families.

Read this slowly with a grown-up, from Lincoln at Gettysburg:

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." — Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, 1863

Four score and seven is eighty-seven. 1863 minus 87 is 1776. Lincoln was pointing at the Declaration, not at the Constitution's compromises. That pointing is the second life in one math problem.

A child might ask: is the story over? No. The sentence is not fully true yet. Lincoln said a standard can be walked toward. Walking is the work. This booklet does not tell you the country is finished. It tells you the paper is still in the room.

Go back to a folded broadside in a pocket. The war is over. The pocket is not empty. That is the second life.

Words to Remember

"Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes..." — Declaration of Independence, 1776

That means: even the revolution paper tells you not to smash things for a small reason. The second life is mostly arguing, voting, amending — not a new war every year.

Big Idea

The Declaration's first job was independence. Its longer job is a standard. Silence about slavery was a cost. Later voices cashed the words.

Try This

1. Fold a paper into two lives: Act (1776–1783) and Standard (still). Write one name on the second half: Douglass, Lincoln, or King. 2. With a grown-up, find the National Archives text of the Declaration. Do not use a summary first. 3. Draw a promissory note. Write “equality” on the amount line. Talk about what insufficient funds means without pretending money solves it.

Ask a Grown-Up

Which is harder: winning a war, or keeping a promise after the war? Why do holidays make the hard part easy to forget?

For the Grown-Up Reader

This band follows six sittings: Philadelphia 1776, self-evident truths, created equal, unalienable rights, consent and revolution, second-life chain.

Quotes are Declaration text. No invented sayings. No family names. No medical, legal, or pastoral advice. Elementary omits the Locke-plagiarism debate, originalism, and modern insurrection case studies. Slavery, Indigenous exclusion, and the July 2 / July 4 clock stay on the page.

Harry's research files under ``content/declaration-independence/`` are the source spine. There is no ``INVENTORY.md``; README lists 37 content files complete. This booklet is typeset prose, not gold. If a video says everyone signed on July 4, close it and come back to Chapter 1.

About WisdomForge

WisdomForge turns founding documents and great thinkers into booklets for every age. Each figure or document gets four booklets: ages 5–10, 11–14, 15–18, and adults. The same text, told at the right depth. Because the Declaration is not a costume of liberty. It is a hot room, a printed sheet, and a long afterlife, and every generation has to read it again. Read the 1,337 words before you read a summary of the 1,337 words. The National Archives keeps a public text. Use it. Keep the paper nearby. Keep the picnic honest. Keep the empty

chairs in the picture even when the cake is good. That is enough for tonight. Read it now. Then ask a grown-up one question from the book. Walk through the door together.