

Independence Day

July 4, 2007

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Castillo de San Marcos National
Monument, St. Augustine, Florida



A Growing America

Independence Day celebrates the birth of a unique nation, the United States of America, and a unique and special document that created that nation, the Declaration of Independence. Growing discontent over economic, political and military issues compelled 13 of the 17 British North American colonies to separate themselves and contend by armed rebellion the right to form their own government and country. Their success however was not assured when they publicly declared and celebrated the first "4th of July."

"When in the Course of Human Events..."

On June 11, 1776, the colonies' Second Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia formed a committee with the express purpose of drafting a document that would formally sever their ties with Great Britain. The committee included Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman and Robert R. Livingston. The document was crafted by Jefferson, who was considered the strongest and most eloquent writer. Nevertheless, a total of 86 changes were made to his draft. The final version was officially adopted by the Continental Congress on July 4.

The following day, copies of the Declaration of Independence were distributed and, on July 6, *The Pennsylvania Evening Post* became the first newspaper to print the extraordinary document. The Declaration of Independence has since become our nation's most cherished symbol of liberty.

Bonfires and Illuminations

On July 8, 1776, the first public readings of the Declaration were held in Philadelphia's Independence Square to the ringing of bells and band music. One year later, on July 4, 1777, Philadelphia marked Independence Day by adjourning Congress and celebrating with bonfires, bells and fireworks.

The custom eventually spread to other towns, both large and small, where the day was marked with processions, oratory, picnics, contests, games, military displays and fireworks. Observations throughout the nation became even more common at the end of the War of 1812 with Great Britain.

On June 24, 1826, Thomas Jefferson sent a letter to Roger C. Weightman, declining an invitation to come to Washington, D.C., to help celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. It was the last letter that Jefferson, who was gravely ill, ever wrote. In it, Jefferson says of the document:

"May it be to the world, what I believe it will be ... the signal of arousing men to burst the chains ... and to assume the blessings and security of self-government. That form, which we have substituted, restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. ... For ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them."