

Understanding the Declaration of Independence at 250

with Philip Mead, Chief Historian and Curator of The Museum of the American Revolution

A short document with a long national and global reach, the Declaration of Independence of the United States is approaching its 250th anniversary. This course engages students in their own close readings of the text of the Declaration of Independence, alongside major interpretations of the Declaration, both by famous and little-recognized figures, over the course of its 250-year history. By closely examining the document's original language and exploring interpretations over time of four key themes in the Declaration - equality, rights, revolution, and sovereignty - this four-part discussion-rich course asks, what is the significance of Declaration of Independence on the cusp of the coming anniversary? The course discussion and outcomes will help shape the narratives of an upcoming exhibition at Philadelphia's Museum of the American Revolution, currently being developed by the course instructor.

Texts for the course

Participants are responsible for acquiring these books:

Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (2015)

Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (2007)

Rob Parkinson, *Thirteen Clocks: How Race United the Colonies and Made the Declaration of Independence* (2021)

David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (2007)

The remainder of the material will be provided via online links or PDFs.

May 17 at The Rosenbach: Equality

Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (2015), full text.

The Declaration of Independence (1776)

Lemuel Haynes, "Liberty Further Extended" (1776)

Martin Luther King, "I have a Dream" Speech (1963)

May 31 at The Rosenbach: Rights

Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (2007), Introduction, chapters 3-5, and appendix.

Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (1998), Chapter 4.

John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government* (1689) (Selection)

Prince Hall et al, "To the Honorable Council and House of Representatives..." (1777)

"Declaration of the Secession of South Carolina" (1860)

"Declaration of the People of the Cherokee Nation of the Causes Which Have Impelled Them to Unite Their Fortunes with...the Confederate States of America" (1861)

June 14 at The Museum of the American Revolution: Revolution

Rob Parkinson, *Thirteen Clocks: How Race United the Colonies and Made the Declaration of Independence* (2021), full text.

John Adams and Abigail Adams, March 31 and April 5, 1776.

Frederick Douglass, "What to a Slave is the Fourth of July" (1852)

Footage of 1.6.2021

June 28 at The Museum of the American Revolution: Sovereignty

David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (2007), full text, including Declarations in the appendix.

Thomas Jefferson to Roger C. Weightman, 24 June 1826.

William Apess, *Indian Nullification of the Unconstitutional Laws of Massachusetts* (1835) pp. 1, 20-24, 54 -55.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

About the Instructor

Philip Mead is the Chief Historian and Curator of the Museum of the American Revolution (MoAR), located nearby on Third and Chestnut Streets in Philadelphia. He received his Ph.D. in history from Harvard University in 2012, where he focused on Revolutionary America. He began working for MoAR in 2011 where he co-curated MoAR's critically acclaimed core exhibition that opened in 2017. He has published on various aspects of early American constitutional, military, material culture, and political history. His current book project, which is based on his dissertation, is titled *Melancholy Landscapes: Soldier Diaries and the Making of a Revolutionary War*. It explores the way manuscript writing and circulation of wartime journals shaped a revolutionary nation. The 2020 exhibition that he directed, *When Women Lost the Vote: A Revolutionary Story, 1776 - 1807*, used newly-found manuscript poll lists to study voting practices in Revolutionary New Jersey. The lists, which are now available as [an online interactive on MoAR's website](#), identified names of African American voters and prove that large numbers of women voted under the New Jersey Constitution of 1776, until 1807 when their legal right to vote was stripped from both women and people of color. He is currently leading the museum's content development for the 250th anniversary of the United States, which include an exhibition provisionally titled *The Declaration's Journey: 250 Years of a Founding Document*.