AWESOME stories

WRITING the DECLARATION

0. WRITING the DECLARATION - Story Preface

1. A BOY'S LIFE

2. TREASURES ... LOST and FOUND

3. EARLY INFLUENCES

4. TOM'S MOUNTAIN

5. A WRITER not a SPEAKER

6. WE ARE ALL BORN FREE

7. THE DECLARATION HOUSE

8. SLAVERY and the DECLARATION

9. WRITING the DECLARATION

10. DECLARATION of INDEPENDENCE

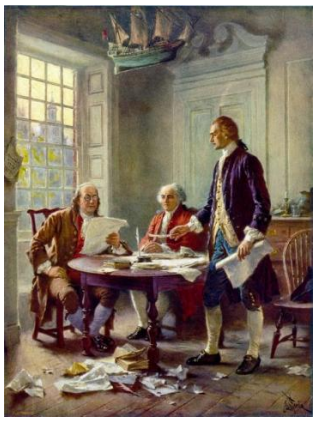
11. IMMEDIATE IMPACT

12. TIME WASTES TOO FAST

13. A MAN of CONTRADICTIONS

14. JEFFERSONIAN QUOTES

15. A SPECIAL 4TH OF JULY



This image - from a postcard based on the oil-on-canvas painting by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris (1863-1930) - depicts what it may have been like to watch Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson assessing, and editing, Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence. Online, courtesy Library of Congress.

As Jefferson created the document which became America's creed, how much time did he spend on his project? Where did he find words like "the pursuit of happiness?"

- He greatly respected John Locke, whose *Second Treatise of Civil Government* (see, for example, chapter 2, section 5) addresses mankind's natural rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of property.

- He thought Discourses Concerning Government (by Algernon Sidney) - which disputes the "natural power" of kings - "is probably the best elementary book of the principles of government." (See Jefferson's December 13, 1804 letter to Mason Weems.)

- And ... he admired the philosophy of Scotsman Henry Home (Lord Kames) whose book of essays on morality is one of the few which Jefferson personally annotated.

Widely read, Jefferson absorbed the concepts of such writers and merged what he found useful with his own thinking. All of his preliminary declaration drafts are lost to time except for one surviving fragment.

But ... why did Jefferson mix and match various phrases from various thinkers, utilizing some words and eliminating others? Fourteen months before he died, Jefferson explains what he was trying to accomplish in his May 8, 1825 letter to Henry Lee:

This was the object of the Declaration of Independence.

Not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take.

Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.

All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, &c.

Yet ... there was something new in Jefferson's Declaration:

- In a culture of slavery, he declared that all men are created equal.

- In a country ruled by a King, he declared that government is legitimate only if the governed consent.

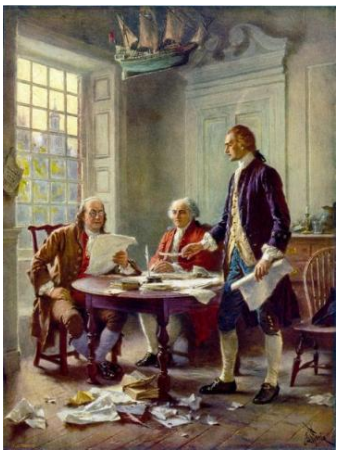
- In colonies which were not yet states, he declared the purpose of government is to protect the natural rights of its people.

These were heady thoughts, and it is now time for us to more closely examine the actual words.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/WRITING-the-DECLARATION-Thomas-Jefferson

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/WRITING-the-DECLARATION-Thomas-Jefferson

Media Stream



Jefferson, Franklin and Adams - Drafting the Declaration

As he wrote the Declaration of Independence—while working alone—Thomas Jefferson considered the words and ideas of others who had gone before him. To these he added his own ideas. When he finished his draft, he discussed it with Benjamin Franklin and John Adams. The original document reflects handwritten changes made by those two members of the drafting committee. This image—from a postcard based on the oil-on-canvas painting by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris (1863-1930)—depicts what it may have been like to watch the three men assessing, and editing, Jefferson's draft. The original painting is currently maintained by the Virginia Historical Society. The Library of Congress—where the postcard is maintained—provides this description:
Thomas Jefferson (right), Benjamin Franklin (left), and John Adams (center) meet at Jefferson's lodgings, on the corner of Seventh and High (Market) streets in Philadelphia, to review a draft of the Declaration of Independence.
Image online, courtesy Library of Congress. Further details of the postcard:
1 photomechanical print: halftone, color (postcard made from painting). Postcard published by The Foundation Press, Inc., 1932. Reproduction of oil painting from series: The Pageant of a Nation. Reproduction Number: LC-USZC4-9904 (color film copy transparency).
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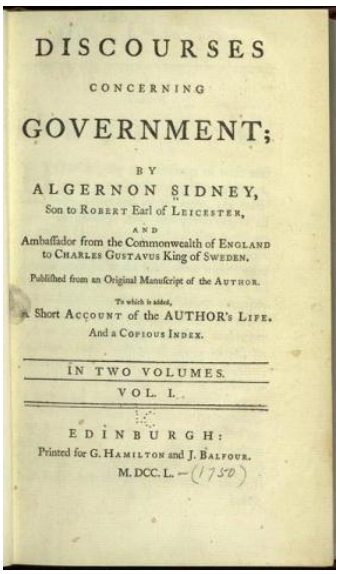
DISCOURSES
CONCERNING
GOVERNMENT;
BY
ALGERNON SIDNEY,
Son to ROBERT Earl of LEICESTER,
AND
Ambaſſador from the Commonwealth of ENGLAND
to CHARLES GUSTAVUS King of SWEDEN.
Publiſhed from an Original Manuſcript of the AUTHOR.
To which is added,
A Short ACCOUNT of the AUTHOR's LIFE.
And a COPIOUS INDEX.
IN TWO VOLUMES.
VOL. I.
EDINBURGH:
Printed for G. HAMILTON and J. BALFOUR.
M. DCC. L. -(1750)

[Discourses Concerning Government - by Algernon Sidney]
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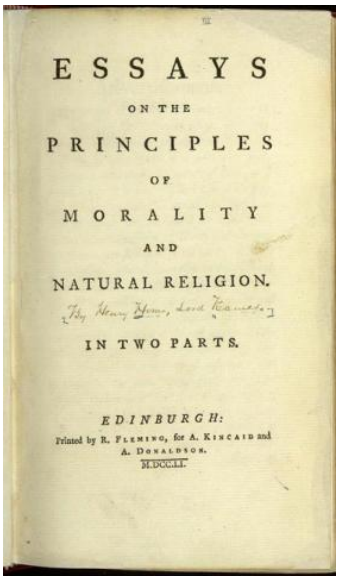
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ON THE
PRINCIPLES
OF
MORALITY
AND
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IN TWO PARTS.
EDINBURGH:
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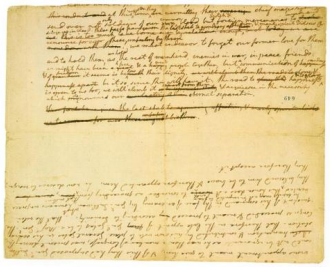

Jefferson's Declaration Drafts - Surviving Fragment

Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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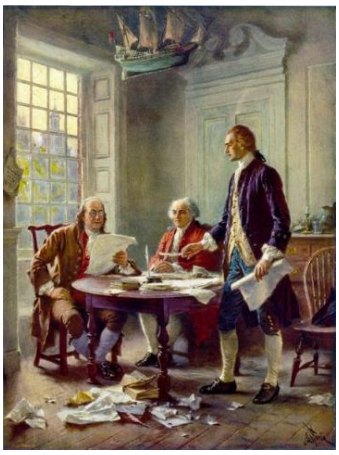

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