As the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence approaches, Monticello remains dedicated to understanding, teaching and preserving the legacy of America’s founding document. Education is a core element of Monticello’s mission. Our guides, activities and historic objects spark curiosity and facilitate conversations about Jefferson’s most important achievement. Monticello teaches the Declaration through a modern lens, exploring its two main ideas of freedom and equality.

From activities for children at the Mountaintop Activity Center to resources and workshops for teachers to the inspiring naturalization ceremony on July 4th, the founding ideals of Jefferson’s Declaration are woven throughout much of what happens at Monticello.

The Thrill of the Quill

Open seasonally in the spring and summer, the Mountaintop Activity Center is a bustling outdoor learning environment where children and families can engage with the past, including the foundational ideas of the Declaration of Independence. Among the most popular activities, quill pen writing holds a magnetic attraction for children and adults alike. Guests often excitedly exclaim, “I’ve always wanted to try this!” as they grasp a feather pen and dip it in the ink pot.

Prompted to copy famous lines from the Declaration of Independence, many guests proudly scratch out the words “All men are created equal” or “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Others choose their own words to lay down on paper. As children reflect on the Declaration’s ideas of liberty and equality, they make connections and find personal relevance. One young hand writes, “End slavery forever.” Another proclaims, “All Women are created equal. By offended Sonia.” A third pronounces, “Today I write that children have all rights to be presidents of all households. Children can write their own declarations.”

Nearby, a Declaration of Independence timeline demonstrates some of the ways that the ideas of the Declaration have resonated over the past 250 years — and how they have been claimed by groups of people who were not included in Jefferson’s original vision. Starting with the well-known words of the 1776 document, and moving through the centuries, the timeline highlights famous historical figures who have quoted the Declaration in struggles to expand the borders of freedom and equality.

“...We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”


This and the entries on the following pages are part of a larger timeline created by Monticello staff member Jacqueline Langholtz. The timeline illustrates the lasting and far-reaching legacy of the Declaration of Independence.
Hanging above the fireplace in the Hall of Monticello is an engraving by Asher B. Durand of John Trumbull’s famous painting from 1823, titled “Declaration of Independence.” This is a dramatic scene that never actually happened as the artist imagined it — not all at once, not all at the same time.

How did those 56 men feel as they signed their names to a document that was effectively evidence that they were committing treason? When asked by a visitor how he felt in this moment, Jefferson replied he felt as though there were “a halter around [my] neck.” The outcome of this “business,” as John Adams described it, was uncertain at the time, but these men believed in this visionary idea of independence and individual rights.

As visitors explore the main floor of Monticello, they will see two copies of the Declaration of Independence: an 1818 engraving by Benjamin Owen Tyler and an 1819 engraving by John Binns. Thomas Jefferson displayed engravings of his Declaration of Independence in his home, undoubtedly sharing stories with his visitors about that hot, tumultuous summer in Philadelphia in 1776. Tall and quiet, the 33-year-old Virginian was not known for his public speaking, but he was known for his skill with a quill.

Visitors often ask, “What did Jefferson mean?” Did he and the other Founders recognize the future impact of those words or the blatant contradictions of the times in which they lived, an era of great inequality for people of different genders or with different skin colors? The answers are unclear. But the Revolution that began on July 4th, 1776, never ended, inspiring future generations of people around the world to pursue those promises of freedom and equality.

Whether adult, student or young learner, all visitors at Monticello engage with the Declaration on their tours, challenging them to consider: What do those words, and Monticello, mean to you?

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, The Declaration of Rights and Sentiments, Women’s Rights Convention, Seneca Falls, New York

“...We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal.”

1848

By Ashley Hollinshead, historic interpreter and tour supervisor
Character Study

Bill Barker is renowned as the foremost historical interpreter of Thomas Jefferson. Throughout a career spanning more than 40 years, Barker has taught people of all ages, and from all around the world, about Jefferson and his greatest achievement, the Declaration of Independence. For Barker, it’s a topic that never grows old.

“My understanding of the Declaration of Independence continues to grow,” says Barker. “I continue to discover new things within one of our most essential founding documents. And that’s the beauty of it.”

Barker meets with guests at Monticello Tuesday through Saturday, answering questions in character as Jefferson. He says the best questions are most often asked by children, and he revels in bringing the ideals and legacy of the Declaration to life for his audiences.

“We are all teachers — Jefferson believed that knowledge should be shared openly, not locked up as something sacred unto any one individual,” Barker says. “The Declaration lives and breathes. I think its most important legacy is its vision for the future of generations yet unborn. Its founding principles continue to influence who we are — and who we are continuing to become — as Americans.”

Ways to Connect with the Declaration

Listen to the words
To celebrate July 4th, NPR broadcasts a reading of the Declaration of Independence by staff members as part of a long-standing tradition on Morning Edition. Go deeper with a recording of Bill Barker’s reading of Jefferson’s original draft of the Declaration, which includes a different “We hold these truths...” statement and a condemnation of the slave trade. Listen at monticello.org/barkerdeclaration.

Visit on Independence Day
This July 4th marks the 60th anniversary of the first naturalization ceremony held at Monticello. During this powerful event, men and women from around the globe become American citizens, taking the Oath of Allegiance on the West Lawn. The day holds such meaning that many return to witness others become American citizens.

“It just really gets you. I’m always in tears and get goosebumps when people give their oath,” one returning prior participant said. “It just reminds me so much of when I became a citizen.”

Find inspiration online
Monticello’s website contains a wealth of information about the legacy of the Declaration and what it means in today’s world. The latest addition to the site is “The Art of Citizenship,” a new digital resource that explores the modern-day relevance of Thomas Jefferson’s ideas about the American experiment in self-government. The result is a hub of civics content examining debates over education, religion, equality, immigration, voting, partisanship, the press, wealth, debt and more. Visit monticello.org/citizenship.
Every summer, the Monticello Teacher Institute (MTI) welcomes teachers from different states and nations to spend a week in a collaborative environment with peers and scholars from Monticello. The teachers engage in research to expand their historical understanding while also building resources for the classroom. During their discussions, they tackle the complex history surrounding Monticello and Jefferson, including race, slavery, freedom, and the ideas and realities of the Declaration of Independence.

MTI allows teachers to gather and experience the power of place at Monticello while discussing the ideas presented in the Declaration through a critical and historical lens. Through their research and conversations, teachers become better equipped to engage with students on how the Declaration of Independence presents a specific set of arguments directly related to the political climate of 1776 and how it created an idea upon which our national identity is founded.

During MTI, educators access resources that help them understand the impact of the man who authored the Declaration but also owned people and held them as property. The Monticello Teacher Institute takes educators on a journey to think deeply about the relevance of the Declaration throughout history and in the tomorrow their students will build.

The Monticello Teacher Institute is made possible through the support of Mr. and Mrs. Paul B. Barringer II and The Charles Fund, Inc.

The  Digital Classroom

By Melanie Boywer, manager of digital media and strategy

At classroom.monticello.org, educators and students can find virtual resources — including a downloadable version of the Declaration of Independence timeline activity featured at the Mountaintop Activity Center. From images and articles to teacher-created lesson plans, the Monticello Digital Classroom was particularly valuable during the pandemic with the increase in online learning. But teachers have been using the Monticello Digital Classroom long before the pandemic, even as a complement to on-site visits. Today, as we welcome more students to Monticello in person, teachers can use the resources online to give context to their field trips or encourage learning that was jump-started here.

“"All men are created equal. No matter how hard they try, they can never erase those words. That is what America is about.”

Harvey Milk, California Board of Supervisors, Gay Freedom Day Parade, San Francisco, California