

## 1776 ♦ Founding Fathers—East

Once the minutemen's bullets began to fly in Massachusetts, there really was no turning back. The family tie between Britain and the thirteen colonies was stretched so thin that it was nothing more than a spider's thread. It needed only the slightest tug to snap it forever. There were some loyalists who hoped that all would be forgiven and that King George would overlook the trouble that had been brewing up and down the Atlantic coast. But those voices were hard to hear above the roars and shouts for independence.

In June, Richard Henry Lee of the colony of Virginia stood before the members of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia and made a bold statement: "Resolved, That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and Independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved!"

A wild tumult greeted Lee's resolution, with banging on tables and stamping of feet. "Hear! Hear!" came the cries from delegates of seven colonies

willing to vote immediately to break away from the king. But there were other delegates who urged caution, who insisted they had to discover the will of their people back home, who feared the crown would crush the upstarts with mighty force. Bickering, argument, dispute, and hot temper filled the chamber of the Pennsylvania State House and sent the pigeons fluttering from the windowsills. The only things that could be agreed on were to put off the vote by three weeks and to draw up a document that clearly stated their goals.

Five members of the congress were chosen to write the document: Philadelphia's own Benjamin Franklin, known throughout the colonies and in Britain; John Adams, the hotheaded rebel from Massachusetts and cousin to Sam Adams; Roger Sherman of Connecticut; Robert Livingston of New York; and young Thomas Jefferson of Virginia.

Jefferson suggested that Adams write the first draft.

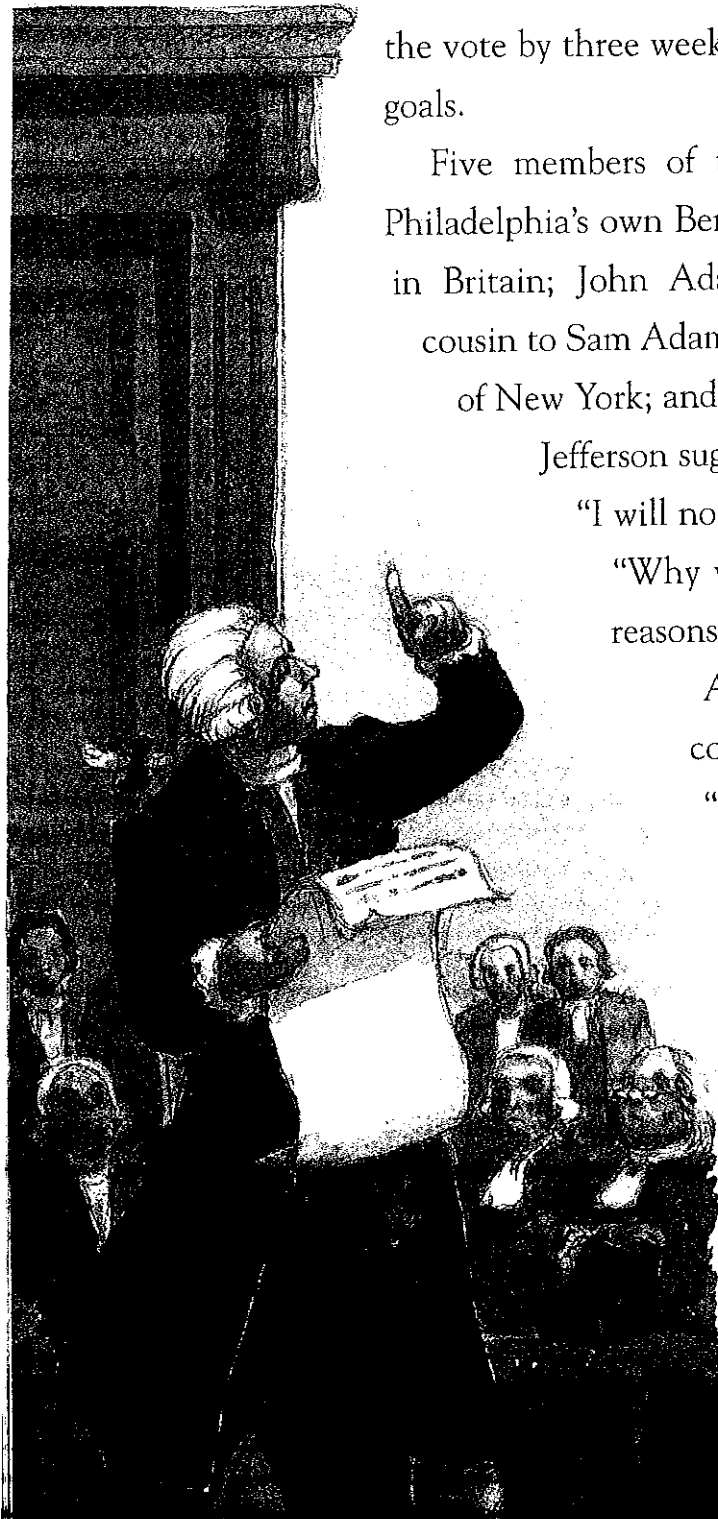
"I will not!" retorted Adams.

"Why will you not? You ought to do it. What can be your reasons?"

Adams glared at the young, red-haired farmer and counted off on his fingers while the others looked on. "Reason first, you are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason second, I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular. You are very much otherwise. Reason third, you can write ten times better than I can."

"Well," Jefferson replied, "if you are decided, I will do as well as I can."

It was settled. None of the others objected. "Very well," Adams said. "When you have



...own it up, we will have a meeting.”

For the next two weeks, Jefferson stood at a tall desk, waving away flies while he wrote. The silence of the hot room was broken by the scratching of his quill pen, by the distant cries from street vendors, and by the clip-clop of carriage horses hurrying past.

“When in the course of human events . . .”

*(scratch-scratch-scratch.)*

“We hold these truths to be self-evident . . .”

*(Knives to grind!)*

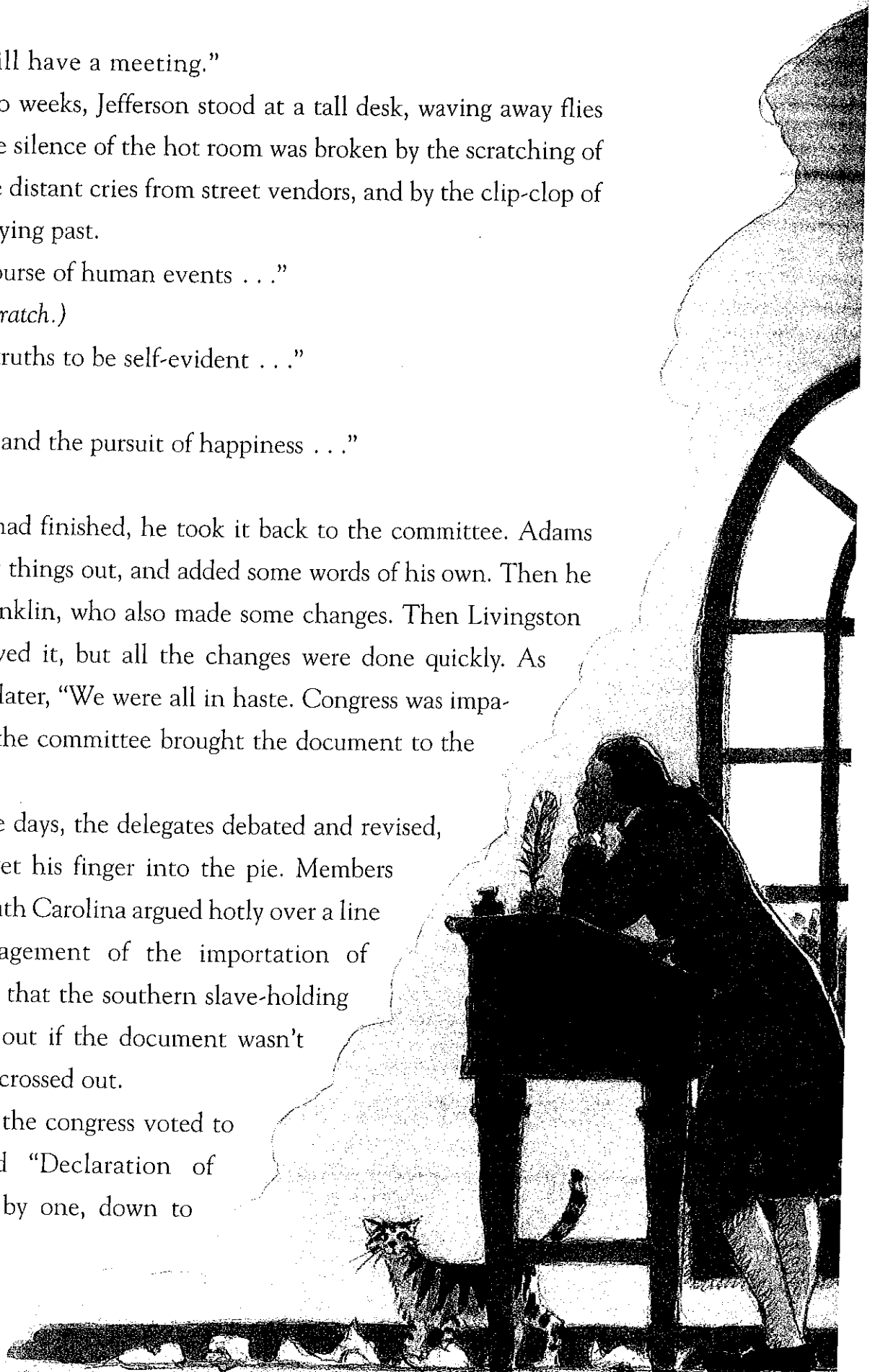
“ . . . life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness . . .”

*(clop-clop-clop.)*

When Jefferson had finished, he took it back to the committee. Adams read it, crossed a few things out, and added some words of his own. Then he passed it over to Franklin, who also made some changes. Then Livingston and Sherman reviewed it, but all the changes were done quickly. As Adams remembered later, “We were all in haste. Congress was impatient.” On June 28, the committee brought the document to the meeting hall.

For the next three days, the delegates debated and revised, each man eager to get his finger into the pie. Members from Georgia and South Carolina argued hotly over a line urging “the discouragement of the importation of slaves.” Worries grew that the southern slave-holding colonies would back out if the document wasn’t altered. The line was crossed out.

At last, on July 4, the congress voted to adopt this so-called “Declaration of Independence.” One by one, down to



the last, the newly independent states voted in favor. John Hancock, the president of the Continental Congress, signed his name with a flourish at the bottom of the page.

It was official. The colonies were now the United States of America.

*Note: Exactly fifty years later to the day, both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson died, both having served as president in their newly independent country.*

