

Select Town Declarations in Massachusetts, May—July 1776

Historical Background

The Continental Congress voted to separate from Great Britain on July 2, 1776. Two days later, on July 4, it adopted the Declaration of Independence. But even prior these two important dates, many ordinary people in the American colonies had already publicly expressed their support for breaking away from Great Britain.

In May 1775, the Second Continental Congress met to respond to the battles with the British in Lexington and Concord. However, ideas about self-rule meant that many congressional delegates would not declare independence until they received permission from their colonies to take such a step. Over time, many local and state governments began to act, determining to vote on whether they supported independence.

For example, in May 1776, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress—a rebel government—asked each town in Massachusetts to vote on whether they supported independence. Many towns responded with written statements (see below) saying they would back their representatives if they voted to separate from Britain. This shows that ordinary people were involved in making important decisions about their future. This process was influenced by the political philosophy of John Locke who argued that governments should only exist with the consent of the people they govern.

This movement towards independence was not just happening in Massachusetts. Before July 1776, before the Continental Congress officially voted to separate, colonies like Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, and Rhode Island also took steps toward independence. In some places, like Annapolis, Maryland, people still hoped to make peace with Britain. Yet by the summer of 1776, support for independence had spread throughout the colonies. Influential writings like *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine, along with the presence of British troops, convinced many colonists that freedom and self-government were the right path. When towns and states sent instructions to their representatives in Congress, they weren't just offering opinions—they were giving their approval to create a new government that would protect their rights and represent their voices.

These local actions show that the Declaration of Independence was not just the work of Thomas Jefferson and other leaders in the Continental Congress. It was the result of a larger, grassroots movement in which ordinary Americans played a key role in shaping the country's future.

Consider these questions as you read the examples of local declarations of independence:

1. Why do you think towns held meetings to talk and vote about independence? What does this tell us about how people worked together?

2. In these votes, people promised to “support the measure with their lives and fortunes.” What does that reveal about the risks and commitments of independence?
3. How did these town votes prepare the way for the Declaration of Independence on July 4? What words or ideas sound the same?
4. Some towns, like Barnstable, voted “no.” Why do you think people in some places were not ready for independence yet? What might this teach us about the variety of opinion and the challenges of reaching agreement in a democracy?
5. In 1776, local town meetings gave citizens a voice in history. How do Americans today make their voices heard when big national decisions are being made? Can freedom and self-government grow from local participation rather than only from national leaders?

Murrayfield, Hampshire County, Massachusetts, June 17, 1776

Voted, (in a nearly full meeting.) That, under the present circumstances of the Thirteen United Colonies, and the treatment of *Great Britain* towards America, we view it necessary, and are willing, to a man, to be declared an independent State, whenever the honourable Continental Congress shall judge best.

Natick, Massachusetts, June 20, 1776

...we, the inhabitants of *Natick*, in town-meeting assembled, do hereby declare, agreeable to the tenor of the aforementioned resolve, that, should the honourable Continental Congress declare these *American* Colonies independent of the Kingdom of Great Britain, we will, with our lives and fortunes, join with the other inhabitants of this Colony, and with those of the other Colonies, in supporting them in such measure, which we look upon to be both important and necessary, and which if we may be permitted to suggest our opinion, the sooner it is come into the fewer difficulties we shall have to contend with, and the grand object of peace, liberty, and safety, will be more likely speedily to be restored and established in our once happy land.

Topsfield, Essex County, Massachusetts, June 21, 1776

Having thus freely spoken our sentiments in respect to independence, &c., we now instruct you, sir, to give the honourable Continental Congress the Strongest assurance that if, for the safety of the United Colonies, they shall declare *America* to be independent of the Kingdom of *Great Britain*, your constituents will support and defend the measure with their lives and fortunes, to the utmost of their power.”

Barnstable, Massachusetts, June 25, 1776

At a Town-meeting held at Barnstable, June 25, 1776: The question being put, agreeable to the Resolve of the General Court, Whether, if the Continental Congress should judge expedient to declare the United Colonies independent, they, the inhabitants of the Town of Barnstable would support the measure at the hazard of life and estate? It passed in the negative.

Ashby, Massachusetts, July 1, 1776

Agreeable to a Resolve of the late honourable House of Representatives, passed on the 10th of *May* last, the inhabitant of this town being assembled for that purpose, on the 1st day of *July* instant, and unanimously voted as follows, viz: That should the honourable Congress, for the safety of the Colonies, declare them independent of *Great Britain*, the inhabitants of *Ashby* will solemnly engage with their lives and fortunes to support them in the measure.