

PAPER MILL PLAYHOUSE



1776

STUDY GUIDE

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Time Period & Location: May 8–July 4, 1776

Major Historical Events: The Revolutionary War (1775–1783), the creation and signing of the Declaration of Independence

Key events leading up to 1776:

The French and Indian War (1754–1763):

A conflict fought between Great Britain and France, along with their Indigenous allies, for further control of North America. While Great Britain gained more territory and control over the continent, subsequent challenges would eventually lead to colonial discontent.

To pay off the enormous debt from the French and Indian War, the British imposed a series of taxes and regulations on the American colonists. In addition, to fund the defense of their newly acquired territories, King George III installed permanent British Army bases across the colonies. After over a century of hands-off governance that granted the colonies relative self-rule, this sudden tightening of control was met with resistance.

The Stamp Act of 1765:

The first direct British tax on the American colonies, requiring colonists to purchase official stamps for all paper goods. This would lead to a series of unpopular British laws and tax acts across the colonies in the coming years.



The Boston Massacre of 1770:

British soldiers fired into a mob outside of the Customs House, killing five colonists.

The Tea Act of 1773:

Parliament granted the British East India Company, which played an integral role in Britain's economy, a monopoly on tea sales in the American colonies. This would cut off any colonial merchants from selling their own tea, and further resistance and boycotts soon followed.



The Boston Tea Party (1773):

An act of protest where a group of American colonists dumped over 300 chests of tea overboard in the Boston Harbor, protesting both the Tea Act and taxation without representation.

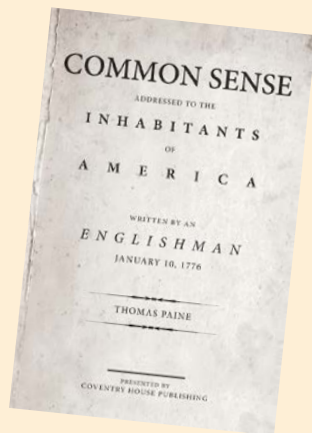
The Coercive Acts:

After the Boston Tea Party, British Parliament implemented a series of oppressive acts to punish Massachusetts and shut down Boston Harbor.



The Battle of Lexington & Concord:

On April 17, 1775, the first shots were fired between colonial militia and the British army, which marked the beginning of the Revolutionary War.



Thomas Paine's pamphlet, "**Common Sense**," was published in January 1776. It quickly became a bestseller, influencing public opinion in favor of full independence from Great Britain.



Formation of the **First Continental Congress**, which took place in Philadelphia (1774), denounced "taxation without representation" but not total independence from Britain.



The Continental Congress **held onto the belief that reconciliation with Great Britain was the ultimate goal**. However, this notion would soon change due to the actions of King George III. In October 1775, King George III publicly denounced the colonies in front of Parliament and began assembling his army and navy to stop their rebellion.



On June 7, 1776, **Richard Henry Lee of Virginia introduced a motion to declare independence from Great Britain**. In response, Congress formed a committee to draft a document that would justify this motion.



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Slavery in the 18th century

The most significant change to the original draft of the Declaration of Independence, as well as one of the major disputes in 1776, was the removal of a 168-word anti-slavery clause. Written by Thomas Jefferson, the clause blamed King George III for perpetuating the slave trade and criticized Britain for offering freedom to enslaved people in exchange for serving in the British Army. An excerpt from the passage reads:

“He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither.”

However, this clause proved to be a paradox within the document and amongst the Founding Fathers. By the time the Founding Fathers were all born, the institution of slavery in America was already deeply rooted and a major pillar in the economies of both Great Britain and the colonies. And while the Founding Fathers and their respective colonies were divided on the issue to various degrees, 41 of the 56 signers of the Declaration were slaveholders, with both the North and Southern colonies having financial stakes in its existence.

Women and the Declaration of Independence

Abigail Adams frequently corresponded with her husband John about politics, life back home, and about the happenings of the Revolutionary War. This letter contains one of her most well-known phrases, “remember the ladies”, as she writes about liberty and hopes for women to be recognized by law in the new nation:

Suggested Reading: Abigail Adams - [“Remember the ladies” letter](#) (1776)

“...I desire you would remember the ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.”

THE SHOW

Composer and lyricist Sherman Edwards conceived the musical *1776* in 1959 while residing in Parsippany, New Jersey. A former schoolteacher, his passion for history, inspired him to write a musical about the signing of the Declaration of Independence. At first struggling to find collaborators on the project, Edwards dedicated several years to researching the American Revolution and writing both the music and original libretto of *1776*. His research began at the Morristown Public Library, the Pennsylvania Historical Societies' libraries, and the Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Book Division of the New York Public Library.

Continuing to pitch the idea to other writers, Edwards soon gained the interest of producer Stuart Ostrow and writer Peter Stone, who became his collaborators on *1776*. Between Edwards and Stone's research and Stone's rewriting of the script, the two created a concise narrative that delved into the personal characteristics and idiosyncrasies of the men engaged in a heated debate about independence during the sweltering June and July of 1776.

1776 premiered on Broadway on March 16, 1969, at the 46th Street Theatre (now the Richard Rodgers Theatre). An unexpected success, the musical earned critical acclaim and was nominated for six Tony Awards, winning three, including Best Musical. In 1971, the Broadway production was invited by President Richard Nixon to give a special performance at the White House. It would be the first Broadway musical to be performed in its entirety at the White House. The original production closed on February 19, 1972, after 1,217 performances. That same year, *1776* was adapted for the screen, with most of the original Broadway cast featured in their respective roles.



The Original Broadway Cast of *1776*



Ken Howard, Howard Da Silva & William Daniels in *1776*



William Daniels and the cast of *1776*



William Daniels, Howard Da Silva, Betty Buckley & Ken Howard

SHERMAN EDWARDS

Born in New York, Sherman Edwards pursued a career in American history education after studying at New York University and Cornell University. His diverse interests led him to also work as a jazz pianist, performing with legendary musicians like Louis Armstrong, as well as a songwriter in New York City's legendary Brill Building in the 1950s. *1776* would be his only musical produced on Broadway.

MUSICAL THEATER HISTORY

In the history of Broadway musical theater, there have only been five Broadway musicals that take place during the American Revolution (three of which opened at the Richard Rodgers Theatre): *Dearest Enemy* (1925), *Arms and the Girl* (1950), *Ben Franklin in Paris* (1964), *1776* (1969), and *Hamilton* (2015).

Questions to think about...

- *How do each of these musicals depict the time period and its events differently?*
- *How did the eras in which these musicals premiered influence how the subject matter was handled/how the characters are depicted?*

SUGGESTED READING (external resources to learn more)

- [*Signing Their Lives Away: The Fame and Misfortune of the Men Who Signed*](#) by Denise Kiernan and Joseph D'Agnese
- [*Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*](#) by Joseph J. Ellis
- [*Washington's Crossing*](#) by David Hackett Fischer
- [*American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*](#) by Pauline Maier
- [*The 1619 Project*](#) by Nikole Hannah-Jones
- [*Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*](#) by [Phillis Wheatley](#)
- [*Common Sense*](#) by Thomas Paine
- [*Afraid of Revolution?*](#) - New York Times Article by Peter Stone, book writer of *1776*

ACTIVITIES

At Paper Mill Playhouse, our mission is to **entertain, inspire, and enrich** audiences of all ages through the power of live theater and storytelling. The following activities are designed to extend the themes of the show beyond the stage and into the classroom, encouraging students to explore history, creativity, and personal expression in meaningful ways.

Each section reflects one of our core pillars. **Creative Activities** invite students to entertain their peers by bringing ideas to life through performance, art, and collaborative storytelling. **Independent Activities** encourage students to inspire deeper thinking as they reflect on themes, ideas, and connections between the story and their own experiences. **Community Engagement Activities** help students enrich their understanding of and connection to the world around them by exploring how the themes of the show resonate beyond the stage.

Together, these activities provide opportunities for students of different ages to think critically, express themselves creatively, and discover how the arts can connect history, imagination, and everyday life.

EARLY ELEMENTARY (GRADES K–2)

CREATIVE ACTIVITY - Group

“Sign the Big Declaration!” Classroom Mural

Begin by reading a simplified explanation of independence and discussing what “freedom” means in students’ everyday lives. As a class, create a large classroom “Declaration.” Each student contributes a drawing of a freedom they value—such as playing, speaking, learning, or spending time with family. Students “sign” the declaration using decorated name cards inspired by the Founding Fathers.

INDEPENDENT ACTIVITY – Solo

“If I Lived in 1776...” Drawing & Sentence

Students draw themselves living in 1776 and complete the sentence:

“I would want freedom to _____.”

This activity encourages imagination, empathy, and perspective-taking.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT – Group

Thank-You Cards for Community Helpers

Discuss how freedom comes with responsibility and respect for those who serve the community. Students create thank-you cards for community helpers such as firefighters, librarians, veterans, or school staff.

Standards Alignment:

Aligned with New Jersey Student Learning Standards for Social Studies (6.1.2.CivicsPR.1–2: community roles and responsibilities) and New Jersey Student Learning Standards for Visual and Performing Arts (VA.Cr1–Cr2: creating visual artwork; TH.Pr4: expressing ideas through performance and storytelling).

UPPER ELEMENTARY (GRADES 3–5)

CREATIVE ACTIVITY – Group

Mini Congressional Debate Reenactment

Divide students into small groups and assign roles representing historical delegates. Provide a short summary of the debates surrounding independence. Students discuss and perform a short reenactment debating whether the colonies should declare independence. Groups may present their debate to the class and optionally add a short chant inspired by the political energy of the time.

INDEPENDENT ACTIVITY – Solo

Write Your Own Grievance List

Students read a simplified version of grievances from the Declaration of Independence. They then write three to five grievances about something in their own lives (school rules, chores, etc.). Students revise one grievance into a respectful and constructive solution.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT – Group or Solo

Classroom Bill of Rights & Responsibilities

Students collaboratively draft a “Class Bill of Rights and Responsibilities.” The class discusses and votes on the final version, then shares or presents it to another class.

Standards Alignment:

Aligned with New Jersey Student Learning Standards for Social Studies (6.1.5.CivicsPI.3: democratic principles; 6.1.5.HistoryCC.1: analyzing historical perspectives) and New Jersey Student Learning Standards for Visual and Performing Arts (TH.Pr4–Pr6: performing and presenting dramatic work).

MIDDLE SCHOOL (GRADES 6–8)

CREATIVE ACTIVITY – Group

Rewrite a Scene for Today

In small groups, students select a moment from 1776—such as the debate over independence or the signing of the Declaration—and reimagine it in a modern setting (student council meeting, social media debate, or community forum). Students perform a short 3–5 minute adaptation focusing on persuasion, compromise, and rhetoric.

INDEPENDENT ACTIVITY – Solo

Personal Declaration Essay

Students respond to the prompt:

“When is it justified to challenge authority?”

Students reference ideas from the Declaration of Independence and compare them to a modern issue before explaining their own viewpoint.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT – Group or Solo

Civic Action Project

Students choose one activity that connects historical ideas to real civic participation:

- Attend or research a local town council meeting
- Write a letter to a representative
- Create a voter education poster
- Organize a small school awareness campaign

Standards Alignment:

Aligned with New Jersey Student Learning Standards for Social Studies (6.1.8.CivicsPR.3: analysis of government principles; 6.3.8.CivicsPD: civic participation and public discourse) and New Jersey Student Learning Standards for Visual and Performing Arts (TH.Cr1–Cr3: developing theatrical work; TH.Pr6: presenting performance).

HIGH SCHOOL & OLDER (GRADES 9–12+)

CREATIVE ACTIVITY – Group

Founders’ Roundtable Reenactment

Students research historical figures involved in the independence debate and participate in a staged roundtable discussion debating whether independence should be declared. Students use primary source ideas, persuasive rhetoric, and performance choices to represent differing viewpoints.

INDEPENDENT ACTIVITY – Solo

Modern Declaration Essay or Multimedia Project

Students respond to the prompt:

“What ideals from the Declaration of Independence remain unresolved today?”

Students may present their ideas through an essay, spoken-word performance, or short video that connects founding principles to contemporary issues.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT – Group or Solo

Civic Dialogue or Action Project

Students engage in civic participation by choosing one activity:

- Facilitate a classroom discussion on a current civic issue
- Write a policy letter to a local official
- Develop a public-awareness campaign about civic participation
- Organize a student forum on rights and responsibilities

Standards Alignment:

Aligned with New Jersey Student Learning Standards for Social Studies (6.1.12.CivicsPR.1–2: evaluating founding documents; 6.3.12.CivicsPD: informed civic action) and New Jersey Student Learning Standards for Visual and Performing Arts (TH.Cr2–Cr3: developing performance work; TH.Pr4–Pr6: interpreting and presenting theatrical works).