

## Featured Artifact: Declaration of Independence Desk

Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s)

<http://historyexplorer.americanhistory.si.edu/resource/?key=3358>



Look at the artifact presented to you. In a few sentences, respond to the following questions:

**Describe:** Objectively describe the artifact. What do you think it is made of? What does it look like? Does it look old or new? Is it intact, or is it damaged in some way?

**Analyze:** When, where or how do you think this item was used? What kind of person may have created or used this item? What significance do you think the object held, either for the creator or the user? Do you see words or images on the artifact that connect it to others (besides the creator and user)?

Share your conclusions with a partner, then discuss the following:

**Evaluate :** Justify why you came to those conclusions about the artifact. What further questions do you have about the object? Of those questions, which could you solve by observing the object in person and which would you need to solve with research?

## Background Information

In 1776 Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence on this portable desk of his own design. It features a hinged writing board and a locking drawer for papers, pens, and inkwell.

By the summer of 1776 members of the Second Continental Congress prepared to declare their independence from Great Britain. They assigned the task of drafting the declaration to Thomas Jefferson, a delegate from Virginia. Jefferson would later write that rather than aiming for originality, "it was intended to be an expression of the American mind." On July 4, 1776 the Continental Congress amended and adopted the declaration. Its words not only established the guiding principles for the new nation, it has served to inspire future generations in America and around the world.

The desk continued to be Jefferson's companion throughout his life as a revolutionary patriot, American diplomat, and president of the United States. While the drafts of the Declaration of Independence were among the first documents Jefferson penned on this desk, the note he attached under the writing board in 1825 was among the last: "Politics as well as Religion has its superstitions. These, gaining strength with time, may, one day, give imaginary value to this relic, for its great association with the birth of the Great Charter of our Independence."

On November 14, 1825, Thomas Jefferson wrote to his granddaughter Eleanora Randolph Coolidge to inform her that he was sending his "writing box" as a wedding present. Jefferson's original gift of an inlaid desk had been lost at sea and his portable writing desk was intended as a replacement. The desk remained in the Coolidge family until April 1880, when the family donated it to the U.S. government.

In his letter, Jefferson wrote: "Mr. Coolidge must do me the favor of accepting this [gift]. Its imaginary value will increase with years, and if he lives to my age, or another half-century, he may see it carried in the procession of our nation's birthday, as the relics of the Saints are in those of the Church."

**After reading and considering the background information, compose a response to the following:**

**Analyze:** Address the following object-specific questions:

- What is “imaginary value”? Why did Jefferson use it to describe this desk?
- To many, this desk may seem astonishingly simple for how significant it is. Why is this so? Do you agree?

**Synthesize:** What does this object tell us about the era in which it was created, or the American experience as a whole? How would you describe the social, economic, or political climate of America during this time? What connections can you make between this object and other things that you have seen, read, or experienced?

**Analyze:** Address the following era-specific questions:

- What impact did the American Revolution have on politics, economy, and society?