





Thomas Jefferson and the

# Declaration of Independence

For Thomas Jefferson, the pen truly was mightier than the sword

by Kathy Wilmore

A Gifted Writer

As a boy, Thomas Jefferson was shy and often tongue-tied. He had a habit of always singing or humming to himself, and preferred the company of books to that of most people. Yet this quiet young man's passion for freedom carried him into a very public life.

For Thomas Jefferson, the pen truly was mightier than the sword. From his pen flowed some of the world's most famous and influential words: "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.*"

For more than two centuries, those simple words from the **preamble** (introduction) to the Declaration of Independence have inspired lovers of freedom everywhere.

Benjamin Franklin (left), John Adams (center), and Thomas Jefferson review a draft of the Declaration of Independence.

## Words to Know

- **self-evident**: obvious, unmistakable.
- **delegate**: representative.
- **unalienable**: cannot be taken away.

Thomas Jefferson was born on April 13, 1743, in Shadwell, Albemarle County, Virginia. A studious young man with freckles and thick red hair, he spent 15 hours a day reading and writing, and 3 hours practicing his violin.

He had a way with words—on paper, anyway. Young Tom once hoped to impress a girl he loved with his talk. As he wrote to a friend: "I had dressed up in my own mind such thoughts as occurred to me, in as moving language as I knew how, and expected to have performed in a tolerably creditable manner." Unfortunately, he failed miserably with the girl.

Jefferson soon found a way to use his "moving language" to greater effect. For some time, the American Colonies had been buzzing with rebellion against their ruler, King George III of Great Britain. On April 19, 1775, the buzzing turned into battles in Lexington and Concord, Massa-



“This was the object of the Declaration of Independence. Not to find out new principles, or new arguments . . . but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take.”

—Thomas Jefferson

chusetts. The nation was at war. A few weeks later, the Colony of Virginia sent Jefferson to Philadelphia, as a **delegate** to the Second Continental Congress.

Jefferson was one of the youngest delegates—and probably the quietest. “During the whole time I sat with him in the Congress,” wrote Massachusetts delegate John Adams, “I never heard him utter three sentences together.”

Not everyone in Congress wanted independence from Britain. As the war dragged on, though, more colonists and Congress members talked of making a clean and total break. On April 12, 1776, North Carolina gave its delegates the go-ahead to vote for independence. Virginia soon did the same.

On June 7, Richard Henry Lee, a Virginia delegate, proposed: “That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states . . . and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and

Jefferson’s rough draft of the Declaration shows his neat handwriting—and his struggle to find exactly the right words to convey his thoughts.

ought to be, totally dissolved.” Congress appointed a committee to write up that proposal for further debate: John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, Robert R. Livingston, and Thomas Jefferson.

For several days, the men hashed out ideas. (Only four took part; Franklin was sick at the time.) Once they decided on a framework, someone had to fill in the gaps and write the proposal. The group chose Jefferson, who was known as a fine writer.

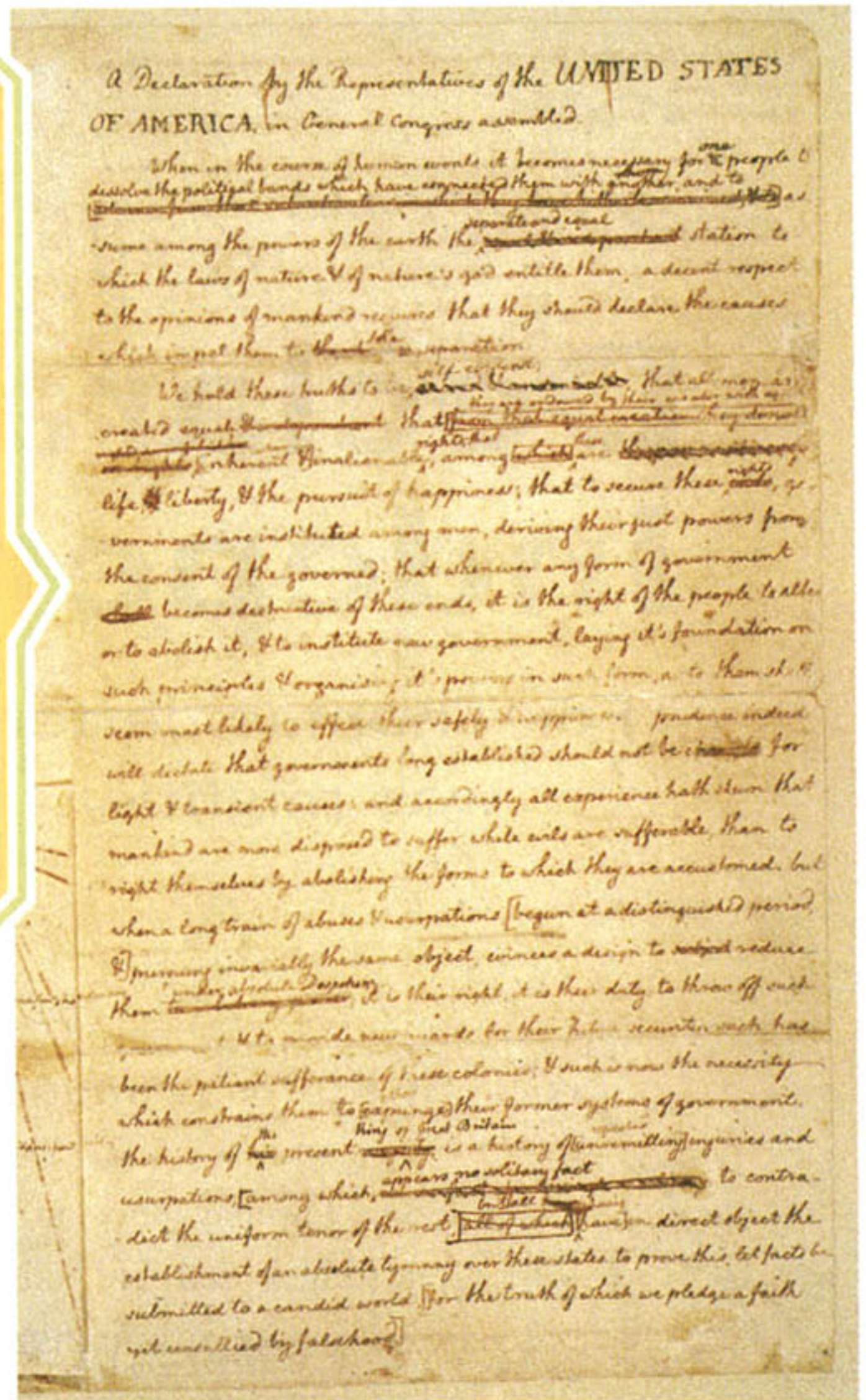
Being chosen was no special honor. Writing congressional proposals was a common task. At the time,

no one had any idea how important *this* one would turn out to be.

Expressing  
the American Mind

The Declaration of Independence did not spring from Jefferson’s mind alone. Jefferson drew on the writings and ideas of others, including English philosopher John Locke, political writer Thomas Paine—whose popular pamphlet, “Common Sense,” argued for independence—and fellow Congress members.

Jefferson also reworked some of his own writings, such as *A Sum-*





mary View of the Rights of British America, which had been published two years earlier. As he wrote to a friend: "This was the object of the Declaration. Not to find out new principles, or new arguments . . . but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent [agreement], and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take. . . . [It] was intended to be an expression of the American mind."

Even so, it was Jefferson's brilliant, fact-crammed mind and flair for drama that gave the Declaration its poetic punch. He expressed the ideals in a way that people could take to heart—even be willing to die for.

Within a matter of days, Jefferson had a draft for the committee. Adams and Franklin made some changes. Then it went to the full Congress, where members made more changes.

After the Declaration's stirring opening, Jefferson listed King George's offenses against the American people. Some points sparked debates in Congress. One of the

hottest issues was slavery. Should the Declaration call to end it? Adams, Franklin, and Jefferson argued yes. Other delegates argued no, refusing to accept the proposal unless mention of slavery was cut. In the end, it was.

### Hang Together— or Separately

The delegates wanted approval of the Declaration to be **unanimous** (all in agreement). They realized that the Declaration would have an enormous impact on the future. They were waging rebellion against their King, and admitting it in writing. If they won the revolution, all well and good. However, if Britain won, anyone who had signed his name to the document would be branded a traitor to the Crown, and hanged for that crime. As Benjamin Franklin joked, "We must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately."

By July 2, the delegates had reached a draft acceptable to all. On July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress officially adopted "The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America." Eventually, all 56 delegates signed the document, which ends with the words, "We mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

### The Test of Time

The Declaration of Independence gave a renewed sense of purpose to the war that Americans had been fighting for 16 months, and would wage for 7 more years. From the time it appeared, the people of the United States were able to see in writing the ideals they were defending.

The Declaration of Indepen-

dence's influence far outlasted that war. It gave heart to Abraham Lincoln as he strove to preserve the Union during the Civil War. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other suffragists adapted it in demanding the right of women to vote. Martin Luther King Jr. used it to inspire African-Americans during their struggle for civil rights. Indeed, the Declaration's call for "**unalienable** rights," including "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," has been admired and adopted worldwide.

Thomas Jefferson went on to achieve many other triumphs. Besides serving as the third U.S. President, he was a brilliant inventor, scientist, and architect. Yet he is most remembered for one thing: putting the ideals of freedom into words that have withstood the test of time. **JS**

*write it!* 

Write an essay describing what the words "all men are created equal" means to you. Tell how the Declaration of Independence may not have completely lived up to those words.

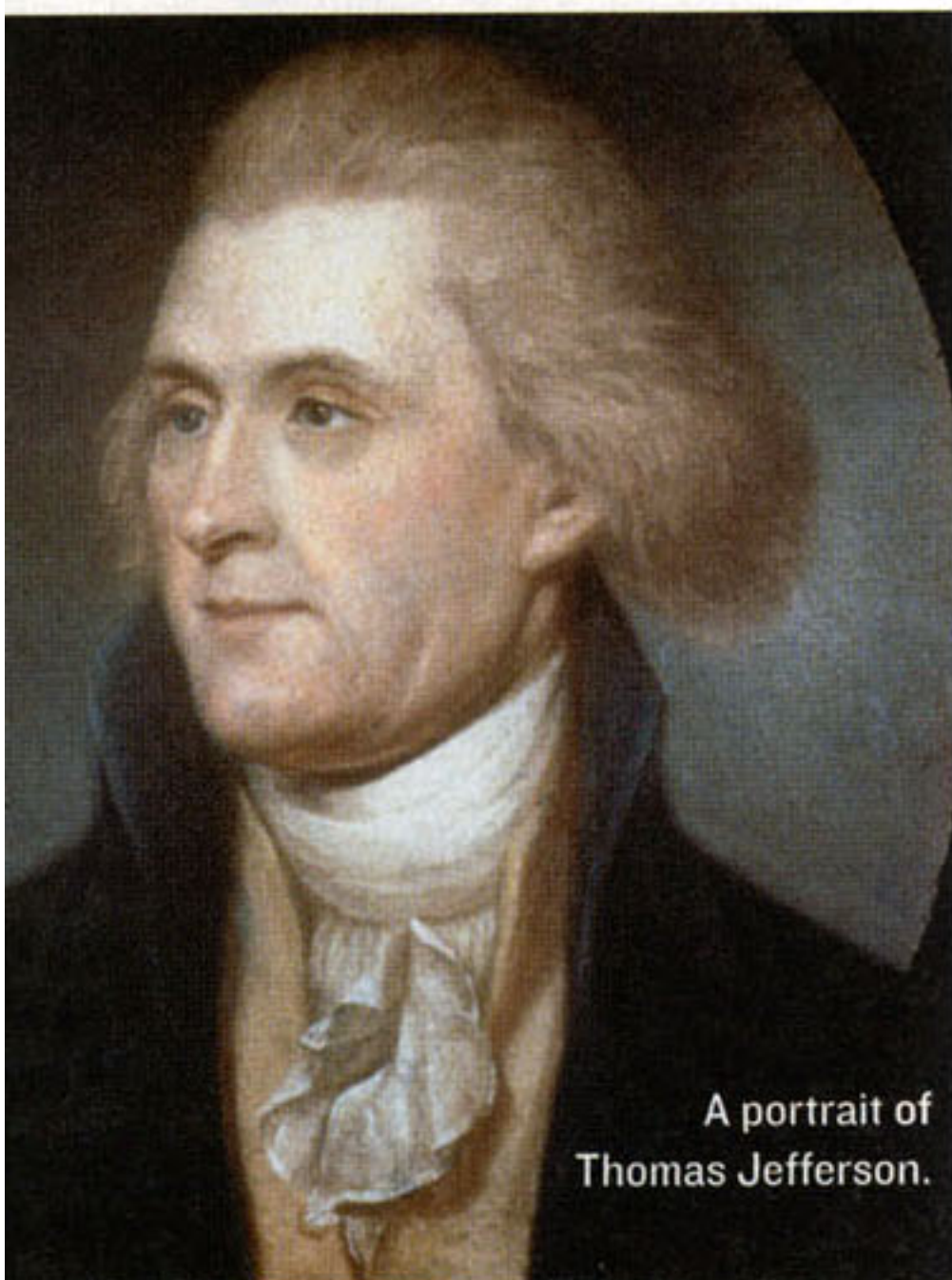
### Your Turn

#### WORD MATCH

- |                 |                          |
|-----------------|--------------------------|
| 1. assent       | A. representative        |
| 2. delegate     | B. cannot be taken away  |
| 3. self-evident | C. all in agreement      |
| 4. unalienable  | D. acceptance            |
| 5. unanimous    | E. obvious; unmistakable |

#### THINK ABOUT IT

1. What was the purpose of the Declaration of Independence?
2. Could America have split from England without it? Explain.



A portrait of  
Thomas Jefferson.



## AMERICAN HISTORY

Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence, pp. 8-11

### OBJECTIVES

Students should understand

- what the Declaration of Independence is, why it was created, and its effect on the American Revolution;
- how Thomas Jefferson came to write the Declaration of Independence.

### TEACHING STRATEGY

Ask students: "What is the Declaration of Independence? What role did it play in America's transition from British Colonies to 'free and independent states'?"

### BACKGROUND

By the time Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence in July 1776, America and Great Britain had been at war for 15 months. Although the Declaration did not set off the American Revolution, it was a major factor in shaping Americans' attitudes toward the war being fought.

### CRITICAL THINKING

**MAIN IDEA:** *What important role did Thomas Jefferson play in the creation of the Declaration of Independence?* (Jefferson's talent as a writer helped him define the justifications and goals of the American Revolution in eloquent and clear language.)

**MAKING INFERENCES:** *Why was it important to the delegates that they reach a unanimous agreement on the Declaration?* (The delegates were risking their lives by openly calling for a revolt against British rule. They needed to be sure that the justification for a revolution was worth the risk.)

### ACTIVITY

**ROLE-PLAYING:** Divide students into small groups. Have each group create three points for a Declaration of Independence, then present them to the class for debate—to be agreed upon unanimously. Which points remain at the end of the debate? What compromises must delegates make to reach agreement?

## STANDARDS

### SOCIAL STUDIES, GRADES 5-8

- Power, authority, and governance: How the Declaration of Independence was created in 1776 to protest the ways the British government had violated American rights.
- Individual identity and development: How Thomas Jefferson wrote one of the most important documents in American history.

## RESOURCES

### PRINT

- Freedman, Russell, *Give Me Liberty! The Story of the Declaration of Independence* (Holiday House, 2000). Grades 5-8.
- Marcovitz, Hal, *The Declaration of Independence* (Mason Crest Publishers, 2003). Grades 5-8.

### GROLIER WEB SITE KEY TERM

- Declaration of Independence

### WEB SITE

- Monticello, the Home of Thomas Jefferson  
[www.monticello.org/jefferson](http://www.monticello.org/jefferson)

## GEOSKILLS

Hot Spots, pp. 12-13

### OBJECTIVE

Students should understand

- a volcano is an opening in Earth's surface through which gases and melted rock spew into the air.

### WORDS TO KNOW

**lava:** molten rock that flows from a volcano

- **Ring of Fire:** a zone of frequent volcanic eruptions that nearly encircles the Pacific Ocean.

### TEACHING STRATEGY

Ask students: "What would you do if you lived near a volcano and it started to rumble?"

### BACKGROUND

One of the most destructive eruptions in modern history occurred at Krakatau, a volcano in Indonesia, on August 26, 1883. A series of eruptions—one of which could be heard in Australia—generated huge, destructive ocean waves known as tsunamis. The giant waves, fumes, and ash killed about 36,000 people on

nearby islands. Scientists believe the dust released by Krakatau might have been the cause for a worldwide drop in temperature that lasted for years.

### CRITICAL THINKING

**NOTING DETAILS:** *In which region of the continental United States are most volcanoes located?* (the Pacific Northwest)

**COMPREHENSION:** *Where are volcanoes located in general?* (Volcanoes can be found both on land and at the bottom of the sea. Most volcanoes are located in areas where the large plates that make up Earth's surface continually collide with each other or pull apart.)

### ACTIVITY

**VOLCANIC NEIGHBORS:** Instruct students to research the agricultural advantages of settling in an area of a volcano. Students can create a poster or present an oral report describing how eruptions have benefited the agricultural life of a region.

## STANDARDS

### SOCIAL STUDIES, GRADES 5-8

- People, places, and environment: How volcanoes form on Earth's surface and how volcanic eruptions affect the physical environment and the lives of the people nearby.

## RESOURCES

### PRINT

- Kunhardt, Edith, *Pompeii... Buried Alive!* (Random House, 2003). Grades 5-8.
- Van Rose, Susanna, *Volcano* (DK Publishing, 2004). Grades 5-8.

### GROLIER WEB SITE KEY TERM

- Volcano

### WEB SITES

- Weekly Volcanic Activity Report  
[www.volcano.si.edu/reports/usgs](http://www.volcano.si.edu/reports/usgs)
- Mount St. Helens Web Cam  
[www.fs.fed.us/gpnl/volcanocams/msh](http://www.fs.fed.us/gpnl/volcanocams/msh)







NAME \_\_\_\_\_

**NEWS: ELECTION 2004, PAGE 5**

■ Select the word, phrase, or number that best completes each sentence.

- \_\_\_ 1. Voter participation rates \_\_\_\_\_ since the 1996 presidential election.  
**A.** have decreased  
**B.** have stayed the same  
**C.** have increased
- \_\_\_ 2. The states with the highest voter turnout rates are Minnesota, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.  
**A.** Wisconsin, New Hampshire  
**B.** New Hampshire, Ohio  
**C.** Hawaii, Florida
- \_\_\_ 3. A greater percentage of voters cast ballots in the 2004 presidential election than in any other since \_\_\_\_\_.  
**A.** 2000  
**B.** 1976  
**C.** 1968
- \_\_\_ 4. Political analysts believe the \_\_\_\_\_ helped increase voter participation rates in this year's presidential election.  
**A.** intense voter-registration drives  
**B.** organized efforts of the Bush and Kerry campaigns  
**C.** Both A and B are correct.
- \_\_\_ 5. Most voters ages 18-29 chose to support \_\_\_\_\_ in this year's election.  
**A.** President Bush  
**B.** Senator Kerry  
**C.** Ralph Nader

**MEDIA: THE DIARY OF MA YAN, PAGES 6-7**

■ Decide whether each sentence is true, false, or an opinion.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. For Ma Yan, a pen symbolizes her struggle against poverty and hunger.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Poor farmers in rural China should migrate to urban areas to pursue better work opportunities.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Ma Yan dropped out of school after her brother was killed in the Korean War.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. After struggling to light the stove fire, Ma Yan came to admire her mother's dedication and work ethic.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Ma Yan's biggest goal in life is to become a nurse.

**AMERICAN HISTORY: THOMAS JEFFERSON AND THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, PAGES 8-11**

■ Match the clue in the left column with the answer in the right column.

- |                                     |   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| ___ 11. Benjamin Franklin           | <b>A.</b> list of King George III's offenses against the American Colonies              |
| ___ 12. self-evident                | <b>B.</b> English philosopher   |
| ___ 13. Massachusetts               | <b>C.</b> proposed that the American Colonies ought to be "free and independent states" |
| ___ 14. Philadelphia                | <b>D.</b> obvious   |
| ___ 15. Second Continental Congress | <b>E.</b> cannot be taken away  |
| ___ 16. John Locke                  | <b>F.</b> argued the Declaration of Independence should renounce slavery                |
| ___ 17. Declaration of Independence | <b>G.</b> where the Declaration of Independence was signed                              |
| ___ 18. "Common Sense"              | <b>H.</b> group that supported rebellion against Great Britain                          |
| ___ 19. unalienable                 | <b>I.</b> where the Revolutionary War's first battles took place                        |
| ___ 20. Richard Henry Lee           | <b>J.</b> pamphlet that criticized British rule of the American Colonies                |

**GEOSKILLS: HOT SPOTS, PAGES 12-13**

■ Use a word from the list to correctly complete each sentence.

- 79, 1,500, Andes Mountains, Arctic, Atlantic, Iceland, lava, magma, Pacific, Pompeii, three, Vulcan, Washington
21. Mount St. Helens is located in \_\_\_\_\_.
22. The melted rock that has erupted from a volcano is \_\_\_\_\_.
23. Earth's \_\_\_\_\_ volcanoes are located on land and under the sea.
24. The Ring of Fire is a belt of volcanoes that nearly circles the \_\_\_\_\_ Ocean.
25. \_\_\_\_\_ has more than 30 active volcanoes, one of which erupted on November 4, 2004.