

## THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE AND THE TWO-DOLLAR BILL

Senior Counsel Section

Chairs: Tom Hyde – Attorney at Law & Don Smith – Smith, Tozian, Daniel & Davis, PA



**The two-dollar bill commemorates the role of Thomas Jefferson in the drafting and the presentation of the Declaration of Independence.**

In May of 1776, the Second Continental Congress convened in the Pennsylvania State House, now Independence Hall, in Philadelphia. Tensions were already high. British troops had clashed with minutemen in Lexington and Concord. Blood had been spilled. King George III was sending 12,000 German mercenaries to put down the rebellion.<sup>1</sup> The Congress chose a Committee of Five: Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Robert Livingston, Roger Sherman, and Thomas Jefferson to oversee the writing of a resolution calling for independence.<sup>2</sup> When the Committee first met, they discussed who would write the first draft. Years later (1822), Adams recalled the moment it was decided that Jefferson should write it. Jefferson first proposed that Adams write the resolution. Adams refused and gave three reasons why Jefferson should write it. “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.”<sup>3</sup>

The two-dollar bill commemorates the role of Thomas Jefferson in the drafting and the presentation of the Declaration of Independence. The front of the bill features the image of Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration. On the reverse of the bill is an engraving of a painting by John Trumbull (circa 1818) entitled *Declaration of Independence*. It depicts the Committee of Five standing before John Hancock, the president of the Congress, on June 28, 1776, when the first draft of the Declaration was presented to the Second Continental Congress. Jefferson is handing the document to John Hancock. This painting by Trumbull is one of four revolutionary period scenes commissioned by the United States Congress in 1817 and is now located in the United States Capitol Rotunda.<sup>4</sup>

After the Declaration was presented, the delegates to the Congress began revising and editing the document. After eighty-six edits, they reached a final agreement. One of the most

famous edits came from Benjamin Franklin. Jefferson had written, “We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable.” Franklin suggested changing it to “We hold these truths to be self-evident.”<sup>5</sup>

As Jefferson began writing the Declaration of independence, he took inspiration from the English philosopher John Locke and from the discussions that he witnessed in the Second Continental Congress. Jefferson’s language was also influenced by George Mason, who had written the Virginia Declaration of Rights wherein he wrote, “all men are born equally free and independent.”<sup>6</sup> In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson acknowledges that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>7</sup> Jefferson, ever the lawyer, then lays out the facts of the case against the British Crown, showing that Great Britain has established an absolute tyranny over the colonies.<sup>8</sup>

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Finally, Jefferson makes this declaration of independence from Great Britain clear. He concludes, “We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America solemnly publish and declare . . . that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.”<sup>9</sup>

The two-dollar bill, nicknamed “The Tom,” depicts the presentation

of the Declaration of Independence to the Second Continental Congress, but today, almost 250 years later you can go to your bank teller, ask for a “Tom,” and put a little history in your wallet. ■

<sup>1</sup> *The Oxford History of the American People*, Samuel Elliot Morison, p. 221, Oxford University Press (1965).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 222.

<sup>3</sup> *Signing Their Lives Away*, Denise Kiernan and Joseph D’Agnese, p. 28, Quirk Books (2009).

<sup>4</sup> “The Mystery of \$2 Bills” *Pacific Standard Archived*, Rick Paulus, [psmag.com/economics/money](http://psmag.com/economics/money) (2019).

<sup>5</sup> *Signing Their Lives Away*, Denise Kiernan and Joseph D’Agnese, p. 176, Quirk Books (2009)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 177.

<sup>7</sup> *The Constitution of the United States*, National Center for Constitutional Studies p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 37-39.

<sup>9</sup> *The Oxford History of the American People*, Samuel Elliot Morison, p.221, Oxford University Press (1965).

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## Senior Counsel Section Luncheon

On September 18, the Senior Counsel Section hosted a special guest speaker for their luncheon, former City of Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn. Mayor Buckhorn discussed the topic “The Tampa Transformation and Where We Go from Here.”

Thank you to Mayor Buckhorn for taking the time to meet with our members!

