Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia behind a veil of Congressionally imposed secrecy in June 1776 for a country wracked by military and political uncertainties. In anticipation of a vote for independence, the Continental Congress on June 11 appointed Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston as a committee to draft a declaration of independence. The committee then delegated Thomas Jefferson to undertake the task. Jefferson worked diligently in private for days to compose a document. Proof of the arduous nature of the work can be seen in the fragment of the first known composition draft of the declaration, which is on public display here for the first time.

Jefferson then made a clean or "fair" copy of the composition declaration, which became the foundation of the document, labeled by Jefferson as the "original Rough draught." Revised first by Adams, then by Franklin, and then by the full committee, a total of forty-seven alterations including the insertion of three complete paragraphs was made on the text before it was presented to Congress on June 28. After voting for independence on July 2, the Congress then continued to refine the document, making thirty-nine additional revisions to the committee draft before its final adoption on the morning of July 4. The "original Rough draught" embodies the multiplicity of corrections, additions and deletions that were made at each step. Although most of the alterations are in Jefferson's handwriting (Jefferson later indicated the changes he believed to have been made by Adams and Franklin), quite naturally he opposed many of the changes made to his document.

Congress then ordered the Declaration of Independence printed and late on July 4, John Dunlap, a Philadelphia printer, produced the first printed text of the Declaration of Independence, now known as the "Dunlap Broadside." The next day John Hancock, the president of the Continental Congress, began dispatching copies of the Declaration to America's political and military leaders. On July 9, George Washington ordered that his personal copy of the "Dunlap Broadside," sent to him by John Hancock on July 6, be read to the assembled American army at New York. In 1783 at the war's end, General Washington brought his copy of the broadside home to Mount Vernon. This remarkable document, which has come down to us only partially intact, is accompanied in this exhibit by a complete "Dunlap Broadside" -- one of only twenty-four known to exist.

On July 19, Congress ordered the production of an engrossed (officially inscribed) copy of the Declaration of Independence, which attending members of the Continental Congress, including some who had not voted for its adoption, began to sign on August 2, 1776. This document is on permanent display at the National Archives.