

‘For Freedom Alone’

Dianne Bergstedt FSA Scot
Historian
St. Andrews Society of Maine

It has been said that the men who drafted the American Declaration of Independence were mostly Presbyterians of Scottish ancestry. Thomas Jefferson was a descendant of Thomas Randolph, a blood nephew of King Robert the Bruce. Randolph had signed the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320. Almost half the signatories of the Declaration of Independence were of Scottish descent, and as US President Woodrow Wilson said, “every line of strength in American history is a line colored with Scottish blood”.

The Declaration of Arbroath, also known as Scotland’s Declaration of Independence, was the first formal declaration of independence by any nation and asserted Scotland’s right to self-government and to be free of England’s dominion. The American Declaration of Independence was *our* formal declaration asserting our right to self-government and freedom from England’s dominion.

A comparison of the language of the two documents shows the influence of the Scottish Declaration upon the American Declaration:

Declaration of Independence

All men are created equal

Declaration of Arbroath

...nor distinction of Jew or Greek, Scots or English

Declaration of Independence

...certain unalienable rights, among these are life, liberty

Declaration of Arbroath

We fight for liberty alone which no good man loses but with his life

Declaration of Independence

We mutually pledge...our lives

Declaration of Arbroath

We will maintain even to the death

Declaration of Independence

The history of the present King of Great Britain in a history of repeated injuries

Death

Desolation

He has sent hither swarms of officers to harass our people

He has plundered our seas...burnt our towns

Declaration of Arbroath

The mighty King of the English ...perpetrated...injuries

Slaughters

Deeds of violence

In most unfriendly wise harassed our Kingdom

Plunderings, burnings

Declaration of Independence

That these United Colonies are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown

Declaration of Arbroath

For so long as a hundred remain alive, we never will in any degree be subject to the dominion of the English

Our Constitution shares language with another important Scottish document; the National Covenant, drawn up in Edinburgh in 1638:

US Constitution

We...Do...Solemnly...Declare

National Covenant

We...Do...Solemnly Declare

US Constitution

...usurpations, all having in direct Object the Establishment of an absolute tyranny

National Covenant

...usurped authority of...all his tyrannous laws

US Constitution

That these United Colonies are and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States

National Covenant

That the aforesaid Confessions are to be interpreted and ought to be understood

US Constitution

We mutually pledge to each other

National Covenant

To the mutual defence and assistance every one of us of another

US Constitution

Our live, our Fortunes

National Covenant

With our means and lives

Certain conclusions may be drawn:

Scotland was the first country to declare independence. This declaration stated clearly the principles of equality under the law, the obligation to defend liberty with life, and the right of the people to change an unjust government. All of this in a document written 456 years before 1776.

Our forefathers who drafted the American Declaration of Independence drew heavily upon the tenets of Scottish philosophy as it applied to the theory and practical application of government.

Recommended Reading:

The Scottish Invention of America, Democracy and Human Rights

Alexander Klieforth

Robert John Munro