

# 1776

## Viewing Guide

### Introduction

The purpose of a curriculum guide is to provide you, as an audience member, a resource to utilize before and after attending the performance.. The guide contains background information on the author and the history of the play as well as suggestions for viewing and reflective questions. Please let us know how we can improve future viewing guides and your thoughts on this one. You may email us at [amandarudolph73@gmail.com](mailto:amandarudolph73@gmail.com). Your thoughts and ideas would be greatly appreciated.

### Importance of 1776 in 2026

America was born 250 years ago in 1776. This year it is important to remember how the American experiment in democracy was born. The characters depicted in the play were actual men wrestling with questions of freedom, independence, and democracy. Some felt the need to stay loyal to the crown while others envisioned a new future of freedom in a new country. The Declaration of Independence is a living document created by visionaries that America still relies on to continue this democracy and our independence. The Declaration of Independence is still important as it is the philosophical foundation of human rights by stating “all men are created equal.” Additionally, the document sets out the powers of government stating the government has "just powers from the consent of the governed." In other words, America is a country governed by the people. Finally, the Declaration of Independence is still a beacon of hope and aspiration. America is only 250 years old and a young country still; however, Americans still strive to achieve the ideal democracy laid out by our founders.

### Sherman Edwards (music and lyrics)

Sherman Edwards earned a history degree from New York University and began his career as a high school history teacher. He also studied history at Cornell University in the graduate program. He then worked as a pianist and wrote popular music in the 1950s. *1776* was his only Broadway score and earned him the 1969 Tony Award. (MTI Study Guide for 1776)

### Peter Stone (book)

Peter Stone graduated from Bard College and the Yale School of Drama. He began writing for radio and television winning an Emmy Award. He wrote two plays and multiple books for musicals including *Woman of the Year* for which he won the 1981 Tony Award. He also wrote for motion pictures including *Father Goose* for which he won the 1964 Academy Award.

### Summary of 1776

*1776* is set in the final weeks of the Continental Congress leading up to July 4, 1776 and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Characters include representatives from the 13 colonies as they wrestle with the issue of independence from England. As the play begins, John Adams is frustrated with the lack of progress being made on his proposal of independence. As the heat and humidity plague the gentlemen, nerves are frayed and many are beyond irritated. Adams seeks his wife’s input through letters and eventually finds Benjamin Franklin. Franklin and Adams speak with Richard Henry Lee and suggest that someone other than Franklin propose independence. Lee offers to get a proposal from the Virginia legislature.

On June 7, the group meets again with Dr. Lyman Hall arriving from Georgia. All delegates are there

except New Jersey. A message from General Washington is read that relates dire circumstances for the army holding off the British. Hancock opens the meeting to new resolutions and Lee returns to propose a resolution on independence. Dickinson makes a motion to indefinitely postpone the question of independence and it is seconded by Read. As the voting is coming to a close, Hopkins comes in to vote for debating the proposal of independence and breaks the tie. Arguments for and against ensue. As the vote is about to be called, New Jersey arrives and states they are for independence essentially tying the vote which would be broken by Hancock. Worried that the resolution may pass, Dickinson makes another motion that the vote needs to be unanimous. It is a tie vote with Hancock breaking it in favor of a unanimous vote. The vote for independence is called again. Adams calls for a postponement in order to have a declaration of independence written. A committee is appointed and Jefferson will take lead on writing the document.

A week later, Jefferson is blocked on writing the declaration. Franklin and Adams call for Martha, Jefferson's wife to join him for inspiration. On June 22, the congress convenes again. Washington sends a report that things are even worse and the British have taken control of New York. Franklin, Adams, and Jefferson discuss a symbol for America and settle on the eagle.

On June 28th, Thomson completes the reading of the Declaration of Independence. Hancock asks for any amendments to the document. Many small changes are made with Jefferson's approval. Eventually, Rutledge objects to the inclusion of a denunciation of slavery. The exchange becomes heated with Rutledge and Hall leaving the chamber. Without the south, the proposal cannot be ratified. Soon, Adams is working to rally votes for independence among all delegates. The vote is called. All are voting "Yea" until it gets to Rutledge and he demands again that the slavery clause be deleted. Jefferson agrees. When the vote comes to Pennsylvania, the three delegates are polled since they cannot agree. Franklin votes yea; Dickinson votes nay; Wilson eventually votes yea, afraid he would go down in history as the man who denied independence. Dickinson leaves to join the army to protect the country without signing the document. Hancock then leads the others in signing the Declaration of Independence. It is the evening of July 4th and the Liberty Bell begins to toll

### **Essential Questions Related to *Emma***

- How do the mundane and the extraordinary work together?
- How do we know the will of the people?
- What is independence?
- How does today's America reflect the America envisioned in the Continental Congress?
- What is compromise?
- Were the founders courageous?
- What are inalienable rights?
- Is it harder to work together today than in 1776?

These questions may be used to guide the investigation of the play. As an audience member, you can use these questions to prime your thinking prior to the performance..

### **Pre-Viewing Activities**

1. Put yourself in the shoes of a member of the Continental Congress. What would you have done? The following website allows one to sign the Declaration of Independence: <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/join-the-signers> Would you sign it?
2. Consider: How does today's America reflect the America envisioned in the Continental Congress? Think of how much has changed in 250 years. If a founder from 1776 visited America today, what would they think?

### **Post-Viewing Activities**

1. Consider: Is it harder to work together today than in 1776? Would it be harder today with technology, social media, and innovations of the last 250 years?
2. Write reviews of the play through short form videos. Post your review video on social media using #tsf2026 or @texasshakes.

### **Useful Websites**

<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration/how-did-it-happen>

<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/join-the-signers>