

Looking back

There has been a lot of unfairness in history. Think of the peasants in the Middle Ages who had to serve their lord, had no right to leave the village or marry without his permission. Or remember the millions of Africans sold into slavery by traders and treated cruelly for the profit of others. Or the workers in Britain's cities – facing dangers at work and dreadful living conditions. In every country,

ordinary people felt powerless to change things. Their grievances were ignored. What could they do to improve their lives?

Looking forward

You are going to look at an extraordinary period of history when the idea emerged that ordinary people had rights. People demanded a say in how they were ruled – in other words, they wanted democracy. We're going to begin it with ...

A day that made history

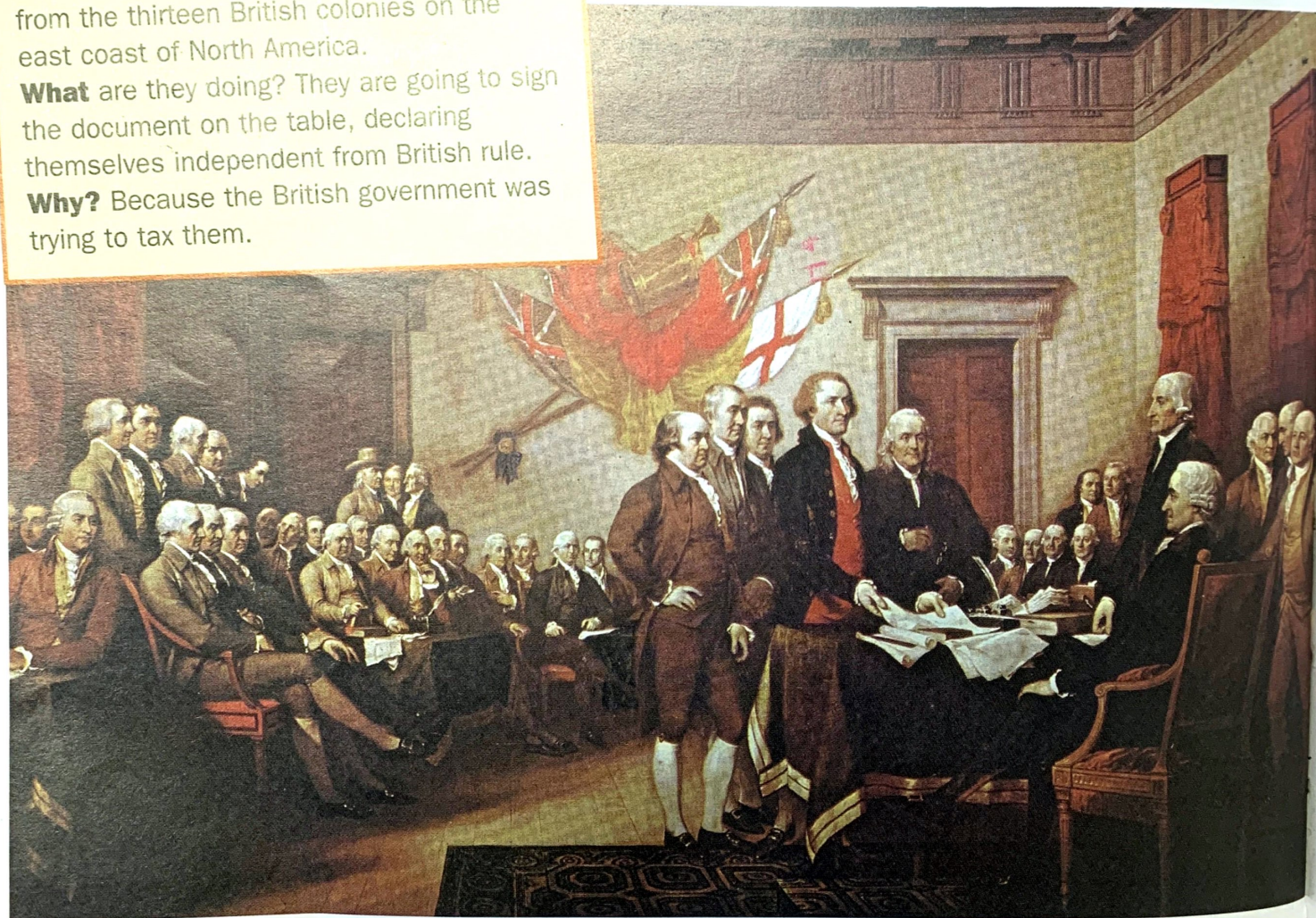
When? 4 July, 1776

Where? Philadelphia, USA

Who are these people? Representatives from the thirteen British colonies on the east coast of North America.

What are they doing? They are going to sign the document on the table, declaring themselves independent from British rule.

Why? Because the British government was trying to tax them.



How did this happen?

From 1607, when the first successful British colony was set up in Virginia, more and more people had emigrated from Britain to America. They made a living as farmers, fishermen, merchants. In the south some were owners of plantations worked by slaves brought over from Africa.

At first the thirteen colonies were left alone by their British rulers – they were 3000 miles away, six weeks' hard sailing across the Atlantic. But as the British Empire in North America grew wealthier the British government felt that the colonists should pay

more taxes. The colonists fiercely resisted these efforts because they had no say in the British Parliament about how much and how often they were to be taxed. Their slogan was 'No taxation without representation'. In 1776 they declared themselves independent from Britain and wrote the Declaration of Independence. War broke out between the colonists and Britain. With help from France, the colonists defeated British forces and in 1783 Britain admitted defeat. It had lost the most valuable part of its empire. The history of the USA had begun.

What did the Declaration say?

- *All men are created equal ...*
- *They are given certain Rights by their Creator ... Among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*
- *To secure these rights, Governments are set up ... gaining their power from the agreement of the governed.*
- *Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to set up a new Government.*

Therefore, the colonists said, they were no longer citizens of Great Britain, but of a new country, the United States of America.

Why was this a turning point?

- **Before** this day they were British colonists, ruled from London.
- **After** this day they lived in a new country, the United States of America. It was the first time a colony had broken free from its European masters.

But the fact that it was a new country was not the really powerful thing. It was the **ideas**:

Before 1776, governments had said:

- 1 people are not equal
- 2 ordinary people do not have any rights
- 3 kings get their power direct from God
- 4 the upper classes run the government because they own lots of land
- 5 rebellion is a sin and a 'treason', which is the worst form of crime.

DISCUSS

- 1 How did the Declaration of Independence challenge each of the points in the 'Before' list?
- 2 These ideas were dynamite at the time: why do you think they were so explosive?