

Five Things You Should Know about the Declarations of the Rights of Man and Woman

- 1. TENNIS, ANYONE?** The National Assembly of France, governing after the outbreak of the French Revolution, approved the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. The National Assembly, the vestiges of the delegation of the Third Estate (everyone in France except the nobility and the clergy) delegation to the Estates-General, tried to create a new governing body and was locked out of its meeting room. In 1789, its members met at a nearby tennis court to swear an oath (known as the Tennis Court Oath) not to disband until they gave France a constitution. They began by proposing the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen.
- 2. AN AMERICAN HERO:** Much of the declaration was taken from a draft done by General Marquis de Lafayette, a liberal and a heroic participant in the American Revolution as well as a hero at home in France, at the request of the National Assembly during the summer of 1789. He was ultimately disappointed in the more radical course of the revolution.
- 3. AN ENLIGHTENED PROPOSAL:** The declaration reads as a tribute to the ideas of the Enlightenment. It embodies the ideas of John Locke's theories of natural rights and social contract, Montesquieu's separation of powers, Rousseau's idea of general will, and Voltaire's thoughts on equality and free speech. Another major influence was the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States. In all, seventeen articles were published, creating a document based on universal principles that encouraged further discussion of human rights and demanded clarification of the definition of "man and citizen." The ideas of the Declaration of the Rights of Man were upheld in the 1791 constitution.
- 4. INTEGRATION OF CHURCH AND STATE:** The declaration struck at the Roman Catholic Church in France by ending tithes, taking church lands, and resulting in the passage of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1790, which made the clergy into civil servants elected by the people and paid by the state. This issue divided the French people.
- 5. NO EQUALITY FOR WOMEN:** In 1791, a companion document, the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen, was written by Marie Gouze—a self-educated daughter of a butcher—writing under the name Olympe de Gouges. The declaration was never accepted or enforced. The language of her feminist writings was so strong that she was executed for crimes against the government in 1793.

