Q78 – Who wrote the Declaration of Independence?

DOUGLAS GINSBURG, Federal Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit:
The Second Continental Congress chose Thomas Jefferson to write the Declaration of Independence. And they couldn't have picked a better man for the job. Two years earlier, Jefferson had written a kind of prequel to the Declaration called "A Summary View of the Rights of British America." Among those rights: to become independent from the British Empire.

Jefferson's views were published throughout the colonies – but the First Continental Congress wasn't ready to declare independence. When Congress was at last ready, Jefferson was tapped to put their views on paper. But not until after the Revolutionary War did Jefferson become known as the author of the Declaration of Independence. Congress gave him seventeen days to submit a draft. He reportedly wrote it in a day or two, aided by a handful of books and pamphlets.
Most of the Declaration is a list of grievances. What we remember today – and what generations of students have memorized – is the preamble: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."
The universal ideas of liberty and equality are captured by those few words. And no one ever said it better. The ideas themselves were at least a century old. What was new was hurling them against an empire. Men volunteered to fight for those ideas. Some died for them. And achieving independence made Jefferson's words truly immortal.