

*When in the Course of human events,*  
The Founders and the “Event” of Independence

When Thomas Jefferson died on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the nation’s independence, he was already widely recognized as one of the most important figures of America’s revolution, largely due to his authorship of the Declaration of Independence. By 1826, July fourth celebrations had assumed a sacred, ritual place in the hearts of Americans, as had the ideals of freedom and liberty professed in the Declaration. Through the years since 1776, Jefferson kept the red mahogany desk on which he penned the Declaration tucked away at his home, Monticello, in Virginia. Old and feeble in 1825, the aging revolutionary decided to give away his writing table, as a memento of America’s revolution, to James Coolidge, the husband of Jefferson’s granddaughter. “If things acquire a superstitious value because of their connection with particular persons,” he wrote his granddaughter, informing her of the gift, “surely a connection with the great Charter of our Independence may give a value to what has been associated with that; and such was the idea of the enquirers after the room in which it was written.” In describing his “writing box,” Jefferson believed that it claimed “no merit of particular beauty. It is plain, net, convenient, and taking no more room on the writing table than a moderate quarto volume, it yet displays itself sufficiently for any writing.” It was Jefferson’s hope that Mr. Coolidge would accept the gift, especially since its “imaginary value will increase with years.” Jefferson predicted that in the future, his wooden box would be “carried in the procession of our nation’s birthday, as the relics of the saints are in those of the Church. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

If Jefferson's "box" was a relic, the document that came from it -- the Declaration -- was a sacred text preaching the sanctified doctrine of independence and liberty. Both Jefferson's table and the Declaration of Independence were hallowed artifacts from a period in American history described by those who participated in it as an "event." In fact, the whole period of tumultuous debates about independence during the spring and summer of 1776 was one grand, ongoing event. The event's focus was the maturing of the idea of independence. Its climaxing moment came on July 4, when the Second Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia, formally adopted the Declaration. On that day, the United States bequeathed to the world one of the most profound statements of human rights and political liberty in history.

The event began early in 1776, when the question of independence was seriously considered by several prominent citizens and leaders in the thirteen colonies. Later that spring, the Second Continental Congress took up the debate, which became an agitation for independence in May and June. By June, independence fever was at a crescendo. Indeed, 1776 was already a year of independence before Congress finally proclaimed itself liberated from British rule. By the time of the Declaration, several colonies, including Virginia, New Jersey, and Massachusetts, among others, had already expressed their own freedom through petitions, declarations, political discourses, and even newly crafted state constitutions. Historian Pauline Maier, in her excellent study on the Declaration of Independence, identified at least ninety earlier declarations, forged together by state and local governments, mechanic workers, jurymen, militia units, and other groups in the spring of 1776.<sup>2</sup>

Independence, according to Massachusetts representative John Adams in a letter to his wife, Abigail, on July 3, was the "great question." The fateful step toward independence was finally taken on July 2, when Congress approved the Resolution put forth by Richard Henry Lee,

a Virginia delegate. When Congress accepted Lee's Resolutions, the Declaration of Independence was still tabled, awaiting a vote. Lee's Resolution, first introduced to the body of delegates on June 7, declared in three short sentences that the colonies were "free and independent states" and that their political relationship with Great Britain was "totally dissolved." It also called upon the colonies to immediately seek foreign alliances and to form a confederation as the basis of a new government. Adams believed the Resolutions embraced the most important debate that had ever been held in America. Indeed, a "greater [question], perhaps, never was nor will be decided among men," he reminded Abigail in his letter. Furthermore, the "resolution was passed without one dissenting Colony."<sup>3</sup> Thus, Congress decided on independence as its course of action two days before the Declaration of Independence came up for a vote. Independence, at least in writing and thought, became a reality for Americans on July 2. Congress' endorsement of Lee's Resolution on July 2, followed by its approval of the Declaration two days later (New York's delegation temporarily abstained until it could get approval from the colony's leaders), were the cumulative effects of mounting agitation for independence during the previous months.

In a letter to Archibald Bulloch, a Georgia delegate to Congress who opted to remain in his state and lead the revolution there, Adams pronounced the discussions about independence being held in Philadelphia as the "the greatest debate of all" which "marked the beginning of a "new-born republic." He hoped that "Heaven will prosper [it] and make it more glorious than any former republics have been!"<sup>4</sup> Not one to miss the symbolic meanings of great moments, Adams had a keen eye for pinpointing historical episodes that would later be passed down to posterity. Three years earlier, in 1773, the Boston resident and lawyer excitedly admitted in his diary that the "Tea Party" in his city was the "the most Magnificent movement of all. . . . I can't

but consider it as an Epoque in History.”<sup>5</sup> In similar language, he described to Abigail his predictions about Congress’ adoption of Lee’s Resolutions. “The second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorial Epoque, in the History of America,” he prophesized. “I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding generations, as the great anniversary festival.” The event ought to be remembered, he confided to his wife, as the “Day of Deliverance by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty.” Generations would celebrate independence, he believed, “with pomp and parade, with shews, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations from one end of this Continent to the other from this time forward forever more.”<sup>6</sup> The day Adams had in mind for the annual celebration of American independence -- July 2 -- was forgotten by later generations. When Congress officially adopted the Declaration of Independence on July 4, Lee’s Resolutions quickly faded into the background.

On July 6, two days after the Declaration of Independence was adopted and sent to the printer, John Hancock, a Massachusetts delegate and president of the Congress, wrote a cover letter to accompany the document when it was sent to the various colonies. One of the copies was sent General George Washington, Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army stationed with the Continental Army in New York City. The Congress, read the cover letter, had been debating on the greatest question that could ever “come before them, or any other assembly of men.” That body had acted upon “a duty we owe ourselves and posterity,” trusting “the *event* [italics mine] to that Being who controls both causes and events, to bring about his own determination.” Hancock informed his recipients that “the Congress have judged it necessary to dissolve all connections between Great Britain and the American colonies, and to declare them free and independent States.” At the end of Hancock’s cover letter to Washington, he relayed Congress’ desire that the General “will have it proclaimed at the head of the army, in the way

you shall think most proper.”<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, Washington, on July 9, addressed his troops, even as the first waves of an invasion fleet under the command of General Sir William Howe passed Sandy Hook, entered New York Bay, and unloaded thousands of British and Hessian soldiers unopposed on Staten Island, across the Hudson River from the city. “The several brigades are to be drawn up this evening on their respective parades at six o’clock,” he ordered his officers, “when the declaration of Congress, showing the grounds and reasons of this measure, is to be read with an audible voice.” The Declaration, Washington hoped, would encourage his fatigued and outnumbered army, since “this important *event* [italics mine] will serve as a fresh incentive to every officer and soldier to act with fidelity and courage, as knowing that now the peace and safety of his country depends (under God) solely on the success of our arms; and that he is now in the service of a state, possessed of sufficient power to reward his merit, and advance him to the highest honors of a free country.”<sup>8</sup> Washington’s men were surely energized by the proclamation. When the reading was finished, the soldiers broke out in “three huzzas,” remembered one eyewitness. “Everyone,” he recalled, “seemed highly pleased that we were separated from a king who has endeavor[ed] to enslave his once loyal subjects. God grant us success in this our new character.”<sup>9</sup>

The signers were keenly aware that their actions would profoundly impact the future, not only in the colonies, but also throughout Europe and the rest of the world. The “event’s” Magna Charta, the Declaration, ushered humanity into a new era of rights, liberties, and freedom. Richard Henry Lee believed that the friends of liberty around the world were joining America in the celebration of its newfound independence. “The union that has accompanied the declaration will gladden the heart of every true friend to human liberty,” he wrote in a letter to Samuel Adams, a Massachusetts delegate and cousin to John, in late July. Looking to the future, after a

victorious war, he saw a joyful America, where the blessings of liberty were secure. He cautioned, however, that the country's happiness would continue only as long as America was virtuous. "When we cease to be virtuous," he noted, then "we shall not deserve to be happy."<sup>10</sup>

Abraham Clark, a delegate from New Jersey, believed that Congress, in supporting the Declaration of Independence, was "the greatest Assembly on earth." The anvil was struck by the Declaration, he believed, and America was now a "Free State, or a Conquered Country."<sup>11</sup> In late 1776, Congress sent seventy-year-old Pennsylvania delegate, Benjamin Franklin, the oldest delegate to sign the Declaration, to France in order to seek a military alliance. Shortly after he arrived, the elder statesman discovered that there was overwhelming support for the American cause, not only in France, but in other European countries as well. "All Europe is on our side of the question, as far as applause and good wishes can carry them," he observed. "Those who live under arbitrary power do nevertheless approve of liberty, and wish for it; they almost despair of recovering it in Europe." Europeans were fascinated with America's actions and they read "the translations of our separate colony constitutions with rapture." Many told the Pennsylvanian that they would move to America when the war was over to escape monarchical tyranny in their own country. Franklin knew, as did many in Europe, that the impact of American independence went far beyond the United States and that the shockwaves of liberty would reverberate through the ages and across the world. "Our cause is the cause of mankind," he boasted, and Europeans recognized that "we are fighting for their liberty in fighting for our own." The event set America upon a "glorious task assigned us by Providence" and he hoped that his countrymen would have the "spirit and virtue" to crown their efforts with success.<sup>12</sup> Silas Deane, a member of the Continental Congress from Connecticut and a fellow diplomat with Franklin in Paris, also sensed European excitement over American independence. In an early December communication to

Congress' Committee of Secret Correspondence, Deane observed that the "good and wise part, the lovers of human liberty and happiness, look forward to the establishment of human freedom and independence as an *event* [italics mine] that will secure to them and their descendants an asylum from the effects and violence of despotic power, daily gaining ground in every part of Europe. . . ." <sup>13</sup> To Deane, Franklin, and other American diplomats in Europe, American proclamations of liberty and freedom seemed to be making inroads everywhere in the old world, except in England.

News of the Declaration was greeted by most citizens in the thirteen colonies with applause and celebrations. Silas Deane observed, before he embarked on his mission to France, that the Declaration was met "with universal approbation, and the people everywhere seem more animated by it in defense of their country." Throughout the colonies, celebrations, displays, toasts, and ceremonial volleys fired by militia followed the announcement of independence. The event prompted the Kentish guards in East Greenwich, Rhode Island, to give thirteen toasts in honor of independence. The far-reaching impact of American independence was recognized in the last toast, when the soldiers drank to the hope that liberty would "expand her sacred wings, and in glorious effort, diffuse her influence o'er and o'er the globe." In Richmond, Virginia, after the Declaration was publically proclaimed in front of a throng of freeholders, the militia formed and fired three volleys in honor of independence. Afterwards, the city was illuminated and toasts were given honoring liberty and freedom in the clubs and pubs. <sup>14</sup>

In many places, the affirmation of independence prompted the masses to carry out acts of violence against the images and statues representing King George III and the British monarchy. In Williamsburg, Virginia, after the reading of the Declaration, an angry crowd tore down George III's coat of arms at the courthouse and burnt it before a throng of spectators. In New

York City, some soldiers in Washington's army participated in the mob action that destroyed the statue of the king on Bowling Green. The statue, according to one eyewitness, was "tumbled down and beheaded." The action was premeditated, since the soldiers were plotting to tear down the statue when the opportunity arose. The publication of the Declaration gave them the only incentive they needed to express their built-up resentment toward the British monarch.

Washington, aghast at the thought that his soldiers had taken part in occasion, rebuked the unknown perpetrators the following day. Recognizing that the men who pulled down and mutilated the statue were "actuated by zeal in the public cause," their actions nonetheless still had "so much the appearance of riot and want of order in the army." The General disapproved "the manner, and directs, that in the future, these things shall be avoided by the soldiery and left to be executed by proper authority."<sup>15</sup>

Most Americans, by supporting independence, knew that they were stepping into an uncertain future. In their war against the British who controlled the world's greatest army and navy, the colonists were outmatched in almost every military category. Their only advantage, in 1776, was that they were fighting a defensive war on their home turf. With no major military victories to date, an army of citizen-soldiers with limited terms of enlistment in the Continental Army, no allies, a dearth of supplies and ammunition, a host of financial problems, and a large portion of the population still devoted to the crown, the colonists seemed doomed to failure. On the day that independence was approved in Congress, Abraham Clark informed Elias Dayton, the commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> New Jersey Regiment, that the United States was embarking on a "Tempestuous Sea, [where] Life [is] very uncertain" and the "dangers [are] Scattered thick Around us." He advised Dayton to "prepare for the Worst."<sup>16</sup> One month later, Clark was having second thoughts about his decision to support independence, as he confided to Dayton in



a subsequent letter. “If we continued in the State we were in,” he explained, “it was evident we must Perish. If we declared Independence, we might be saved, [but] we could [still] perish.” Instead of celebrating the event, Clark was experiencing great trepidation. “I assure you Sir I see, I feel the danger we are in, [and] I am far from exulting in our imaginary happiness.” There was not much hope for the colonists and “Nothing short of the Almighty Power of God can save us. . . . whether to make us a Great empire, or to make our Ruin more compleat [sic], the issue can only determine.”<sup>17</sup>

The bleak military situation even dampened the enthusiasm of John Adams, one of the strongest advocates for independence in Congress. “If you imagine that I expect this declaration will ward off calamities from this country, you are much mistaken,” he told Samuel Chase, a fellow delegate from Maryland. “A bloody conflict we are destined to endure. This has been my opinion from the beginning.” Adams knew that the British would not let America secede from the Empire without a fight. “You will remember my declared opinion was,” he told Chase, “at the first Congress, when we found that we could not agree upon an immediate non-exportation, that the contest would not be settled without bloodshed.” However, the decision for independence had been made. The die was cast and there was no turning back. “The river is passed,” he informed the Maryland delegate, “and the bridge is cut away.”<sup>18</sup>

Adams never let the euphoria associated with the event cloud the reality of tough days ahead. On July 3, the day after Congress adopted Lee’s Resolution and the day before the Declaration was approved, he managed to find time for a letter to Abigail. “You will think me transported with enthusiasm, but I am not,” he admitted. “I am well aware of the blood, and toil, and treasure, that it will cost us to maintain this declaration, and support and defend these states.” Despite the gloomy prospects, Adams still managed to find something positive to embrace. “I

can see the rays of ravishing light and glory,” he hopefully wrote. “I can see that the end is more than worth all the means, and that posterity will triumph in that day’s transaction, even though we should rue it, which I trust in God we shall not.”<sup>19</sup>

Congress’ issuance of the Declaration of Independence was a brave and bold act, but in England, it was perceived by an enraged King, his ministers, the vast majority of Parliament, and most of the citizenry, as nothing less than treason. The event, therefore, carried along with it the possibility of a death sentence. In short, the fifty-six delegates in Philadelphia who affixed their name to the Declaration were condemning themselves to the gallows should their revolution fail. An oft-told story relating a conversation between Hancock and Franklin during the signing of the Declaration highlighted the perils of treason. As they were about to put their name to the document, Hancock said, “We must be unanimous. There must not be any pulling different ways. We must all hang together.” Hearing the comment, the ever witty Franklin quickly shot back, “Yes, we must indeed hang together, or most assuredly we will all hang separately.”<sup>20</sup> A less-known exchange took place between delegates Benjamin Harrison from Virginia and Elbridge Gerry from Massachusetts. Harrison was a stocky, heavy-set man, while Gerry was thin and narrow-framed. Shortly after the signing, Harrison told Gerry, “When the hanging scene comes, I will have the advantage over you on account of my size. All will be over for me in a moment but you,” he warned the skinny Massachusetts delegate, “will be kicking in the air for half an hour after I am gone.”<sup>21</sup>

Flushed with emotions ranging from excitement and jubilation to fear and trepidation, those who signed the Declaration knew that they were leading their newborn nation into troubled and uncharted waters. They risked their lives and fortunes on the idea of independence, which they hoped would usher their own nation, and also the world, into a new age of liberty and

freedom. The Declaration of Independence represented the christening of an idea called independence. For that reason, it was the epic moment in an event that stretched back into the spring of 1776.

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Ellen W. Coolidge, November 14, 1825, in Andrew A Lipscomb and Albert E. Bergh, eds., The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, Vol. XVIII, (Washington, D. C.: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904), 349-350. John Adams also died on July 4 1776. The writing box was designed by Jefferson and built by Benjamin Randolph, a Philadelphia woodworker.

<sup>2</sup> Pauline Maier, American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 48-49.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Henry Lee's Resolution, June 7, 1776. See also, Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776 in Edmund C. Burnett, Letters of Members of the Continental Congress, Vol. I, August 29, 1774, to July 4, 1776, (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1921), 526. Lee's Resolution is currently housed in the American Archives, Washington, D. C. The Resolutions stated: "Resolved, That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved. That it is expedient forthwith to take the most effectual measures for forming foreign Alliances. That a plan of confederation be prepared and transmitted to the respective Colonies for their consideration and approbation."

<sup>4</sup> Letter from John Adams to Archibald Bulloch, July 1, 1776, in Burnett, Letters, 520.

<sup>5</sup> L. H. Butterfield, Marc Friedlaender, and Mary-Jo Kline, eds., The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784, With a new Forward by David McCullough, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 53.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>7</sup> Abram English Brown, John Hancock: His Book, (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1898), 211.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Donovan, ed., The George Washington Papers, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1964), 119-120.

<sup>9</sup> J. Watson Webb, Reminiscences of General Samuel B. Webb of the Revolutionary Army, (New York: Globe Stationary and Printing Co., 1880), 38.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Richard Henry Lee to Samuel Adams, July 29, 1776 in James Curtis Ballagh, ed., The Letters of Richard Henry Lee, Vol. 1, 1762-1798, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911), 211.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Abraham Clark to Elias Dayton, Colonel of the Third Battalion, New Jersey troops, July 4, 1776, in Burnett, Edmund C. Letters of Members of the Continental Congress. Vol. 1, August 29, 1774, to July 4 1776. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1921, 528.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Donovan, ed., The Benjamin Franklin Papers, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1962), 184.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Silas Deane to the Committee of Secret Correspondence, December 1, 1776,

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In Jared Sparks, ed., The Diplomatic Correspondence of the American Revolution, Six Volumes, Vol. 1, (United States Department of State, 1818), 59.

<sup>14</sup>For the Kentish Guards, see John Hampden Hazelton, The Declaration of Independence: Its History, (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1906), 260. The Richmond celebrations can be found in Carol Sue Humphrey, The Revolutionary Era: Primary Documents on Events from 1776-1800, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2003), 22.

<sup>15</sup>Washington address to the army, Headquarters, July 10, 1776 in J. Watson Webb, Reminiscences of General Samuel B. Webb of the Revolutionary Army, (New York: Globe Stationary and Printing Co., 1880), 38, 42. For Williamsburg, see, Humphrey, The Revolutionary Era, 22.

<sup>16</sup>Letter from Abraham Clark to Elias Dayton, commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> New Jersey Regiment, July 4, 1776, New Jersey Digital Library, [http://slic.njstatelib.org/slic\\_files/imported/NJ\\_Information/Digital\\_Collections/NJInTheAmericanRevolution1763-1783/7.7.pdf](http://slic.njstatelib.org/slic_files/imported/NJ_Information/Digital_Collections/NJInTheAmericanRevolution1763-1783/7.7.pdf) (accessed December 21, 2011).

<sup>17</sup>Letter from Abraham Clark to Elias Dayton, August 6, 1776, *Ibid.*, [http://slic.njstatelib.org/slic\\_files/imported/NJ\\_Information/Digital\\_Collections/NJInTheAmericanRevolution1763-1783/7.11.pdf](http://slic.njstatelib.org/slic_files/imported/NJ_Information/Digital_Collections/NJInTheAmericanRevolution1763-1783/7.11.pdf) (accessed December 22, 2011).

<sup>18</sup>Letter from John Adams to Samuel Chase, July 1, 1776, in Charles Francis Adams, The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: with a Life of the Author, Ten Volumes, Vol. IX, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1854), 415. For the river quote, see 420.

<sup>19</sup>Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776, *Ibid.*, 420.

<sup>20</sup>Jared Sparks, The Works of Benjamin Franklin, Ten Volumes, Vol. 1, (Boston: Hilliard Gray, and Company, 1840), 408.

<sup>21</sup>Merritt Ierley, The Year that Tried Men's Souls: A Journalistic Reconstruction of the World of 1776, (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1976), 196.