



Written by on July 7, 2008

That Significant, Sensational Signing

An anonymous author eventually summed up how the British government dealt with the signers in a short essay that permeates what we “know” about the Fourth, entitled “The Price They Paid.” It reads like good fiction because it is. The abuse his heroes supposedly suffered so transported the writer that he spurned mere fact, including the signers’ correct names (Lewis Morris of New York becomes “Lewis Norris,” South Carolina’s Edward Rutledge gets an extra “T,” William Ellery from Rhode Island goes incognito as William Dillery) and the reasons for events: the British Army did capture a few of the signers, but it took them in battle, as prisoners of war, not because they autographed the Declaration. Nor did any of the signers die of wounds inflicted by the British — though Button Gwinnett of Georgia did succumb to one sustained in a duel. Most of the others not only survived the signing, they flourished as judges, congressmen, and senators in the new country.



Debunking the legends, sifting reality from hyperbole and distortion, doesn’t diminish the signers’ heroism. But it does rescue patriots who honor them from charges of foolishness and historical illiteracy. Those who believe that the British Army punished New Jersey’s signers when it invaded the state in the fall of 1776, for example, look silly: Congress didn’t release the signed copy of the Declaration until the following January.

Common Misconception

Perhaps it is no surprise that “The Price They Paid” couldn’t get it right: neither did John Adams, and he was there. “The Second Day of July 1776,” he mistakenly but famously forecast, “will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty.”

The “Second Day of July 1776” began like many others in the Continental Congress, with correspondence received and answered, committees endlessly debating, and decisions major and minor rendered. The congressional minutes tell us, “Sundry letters were laid before Congress, and read” that Tuesday morning, including “One from General Washington.” Eventually, “the Congress resumed the consideration of the resolution agreed to by and reported from the committee of the whole; and the same being read, was agreed to as follows: 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



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crown, and that all political connexion between them, and the state of Great Britain, is, and ought to be, totally dissolved." No wonder John Adams enthused that the Second "ought to be solemnized 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."

But the delegates discussed, debated, and disputed instead of deciding. "After some time" Benjamin Harrison "desired leave to sit again" because the hours hadn't been long enough "to go through the same." And so the members "Resolved, That this Congress will, to morrow, again ... take into their farther consideration the declaration on independence."

"To morrow" turned out to be a rerun of Tuesday. Congress read and responded to more letters: it referred "an account of their expences" from "the commissioners of Indian affairs in the southern department" to the "Board of treasury" and authorized the Marine Committee to hire shipwrights "at the rate of 34 dollars and two-thirds per month; ... Each man to be allowed ... one half pint of rum, a day." Then, "Agreeable to the order of the day, the Congress resolved itself into a committee of the whole, to take into their farther consideration, the Declaration." Once more, "after some time, ... Mr. Harrison reported, that the committee, not having finished, desired leave to sit again."

When they resumed debate on a pleasantly mild Thursday with a high of only 76 degrees, "Mr. Harrison reported, that the committee of the whole Congress have agreed to a Declaration." The delegates read the immortal prose one last time; all "agreed to" it except John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, who was still hoping for reconciliation with Britain, and New York's representatives, who abstained pending instructions from their legislature. Congress then "Ordered, That the declaration be authenticated and printed."

Those typeset copies were the 18th-century's version of an e-mail, meant to alert "the several assemblies, conventions and committees, or councils of safety" and the Continental Army of the vote for independence; explaining to the world in general "the causes which impel them to the separation" would come later via an official copy. Having disposed of this earth-shaking event, the delegates returned to their mail — "A Letter from General Washington, dated New York, July 3d, was laid before Congress, and read" — rather than lining up to autograph their handiwork.

That evening, Congress sent the text to John Dunlap, the printer with whom it had a contract. Only a couple of names grace these "Dunlap broadsides," and they were set in type: those of Congress' president, John Hancock, and its secretary, Charles Thomson. Congress dispatched two copies of this early version to the king that it so thoroughly scolded. That turns to fairy tale the story of Hancock's adding his oversized signature to the document so that George III could read it without his spectacles: it's unlikely the monarch ever saw an autographed copy. And on July 15, New York's delegation finally received permission to vote "yea," so a "Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress Assembled" became the "unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America."

The Signing

Signing the masterpiece had to wait another fortnight, until a Quaker named Timothy Matlack copied it in his elegant hand. Eighteenth-century calligraphers "engrossed" even mundane legal papers, much less a document of the Declaration's magnitude. Matlack, known alike for his copperplate and the sword he wore "to defend my property and my liberty" despite his friends' disapproval, probably also engrossed General Washington's commission as commander-in-chief.



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Friday, August 2, seemed to be business as usual. First, the “declaration of independence being engrossed and compared at the table was signed.” But the members must have scribbled their names without much ceremony: soon they were “resolv[ing]” “That two hundred thousand dollars be sent to Mr. Jonathan Trumbull, pay master of the northern army,” and replacing Button Gwinnett on the Marine Committee with George Walton. (Were the shipwrights getting too drunk on Button’s watch?)

The weeks between “agreeing to” the Declaration and signing it meant that not everyone who voted for independence autographed the proclamation of it, and vice versa. Nor were the endorsements finished on August 2. Delegates trickled in to add their names over the next months. Thomas McKean of Delaware was commanding troops that summer and probably signed early the following year. Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts, Lewis Morris from New York, and Connecticut’s Oliver Wolcott were also latecomers. But at least they found room: when Matthew Thornton added his name, there was no more space near New Hampshire’s other representatives, Josiah Bartlett and William Whipple, so he wriggled in beside Connecticut’s instead. On January 18, 1777, Congress ordered “official,” i.e., engrossed and signed, copies sent to each of the states.

Nineteenth-century historian Jared Sparks tells a story, one that he qualifies as an “anecdote,” about the signing. While giving his John Hancock, John Hancock supposedly remarked that the Congress, which had argued so long and bitterly over independence, must now hang together. To which Benjamin Franklin allegedly quipped, “Yes, we must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately.” Perhaps this witticism sparked the myth that the British Army hunted down the signers, butchering those it caught or, when the signer himself proved too fleet, slaughtering his wife and children instead. The truth is less melodramatic but more inspiring.

Without a doubt, men brave enough to publish, let alone sign, a document as radical as the Declaration were risking everything — futures, families, friends, farms. Governments never appreciate challengers, and they almost always try to maim, kill, or at least impoverish anyone who resists them. But the British government, even during the American Revolution, was one of the least tyrannical mankind has endured. That shopkeepers and farmers were willing to confront the world’s most professional army confirms their fervor for freedom and principle, not George III’s dictatorship. Besides, the war against their American cousins was almost as unpopular among Britons as the Iraq War is with their descendants. Many Englishmen cheered the Declaration as wildly as did Americans — and they might have protested to the point of open rebellion had the administration ordered bloodthirsty retribution against the signers.

Price of Patriotism

In fact, the Redcoats persecuted only one signer — if any at all — and it took 19th-century sources, not Revolutionary ones, to blame his abuse on his autograph. That’s because his contemporaries knew better: the British imprisoned Richard Stockton of New Jersey when publication of the signed Declaration was still a month or so in the future. It’s possible that rumors of Stockton’s reputation as a signer preceded him, but there’s little proof that the British Army knew or cared about his identity. With a few exceptions, one rebel was pretty much like another to them.

Stockton was a successful judge in his mid-40s with one of the largest legal practices in America when he represented New Jersey in the Continental Congress. The proud father of six children, he must have been equally proud of his accomplished wife: Annis Boudinot wrote poetry about the Patriots’ cause and eventually published 21 of her verses in newspapers or magazines. The Stocktons might have lived happily ever after at Morven, their estate near Princeton with its magnificent library and gardens — but



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for their patriotism. War invaded New Jersey in November 1776 when the Redcoats chased the retreating, ragtag Continental Army across the new state. Annis buried the family's silver and some incriminating papers before the Stocktons fled to Monmouth County. They didn't escape for long: not only did the Redcoats burn their library and plunder Morven after using it as their headquarters, but Loyalists captured Judge Stockton, "dragg[ing] him from his bed, and treating him with every indignity that malice could invent," as historian Benson Lossing put it in the mid-1800s.

The judge starved and froze for the next few months in New York City's notorious Provost Jail. Starving and freezing were the usual fate for prisoners who fell into British hands, but at least Stockton languished ashore. So many Patriots were fighting to live free that the Redcoats captured more men than their prisons could hold. They resolved this problem by anchoring ships in New York's harbor and confining victims there.

Brutal as imprisonment on land was, the boats were worse. Quarters ashore or afloat were dangerously crowded and filthy; rations on both land and sea were sparse, spoiled, and sickening (bread infested with maggots and worms; a tiny portion of salted but nevertheless rotten meat; dirty, brackish water); smallpox and other diseases turned the vessels into killing fields as lethal as the jails; the guards stalking hallways or decks were cruel, corrupt, and bullying. But unlike the drafty prisons, the ships admitted almost no air: the British nailed their portholes shut to prevent escape, cutting small holes in the sides instead.

This turned the area below decks into an oven during warm weather — an oven whose stench we modern, antiseptic Americans cannot comprehend. To the odors of unwashed bodies and clothes, add those of vomit, blood, and suppurating sores, diarrhea, urine, and decaying flesh. Thanks to the darkness below decks, whatever died, whether mice, rats, or men, might lie for days before discovery and removal. Not only did this physically nauseate inmates, it psychologically tortured them, too. The germ theory of disease was still a century away, but the 18th century knew that air can carry illness. Its denizens lived in fear of "miasmas," as convinced that noxious smells kill as we are that second-hand smoke does.

The mortality rate aboard these naval prisons may have reached 75 percent. Some historians say that only the Nazis' death camps surpassed them for inhumanity. It is estimated that about 11,500 men died in New York's harbor, versus roughly 4,500 in the Revolution's battles. And release was only an enlistment away: if a prisoner agreed to join the British Army, recruiters rescued him from his floating hell.

So though Judge Stockton suffered agonizingly, all imprisoned rebels did. Mercifully, Stockton's captivity ended seven or eight weeks after it began. The British released him early in 1777, thanks in part to pressure from Congress. The fact that the beleaguered, broken judge swore an oath of allegiance to George III didn't hurt either. One of his fellow signers, John Witherspoon, saw him a few months later and reported, "Judge Stockton is not very well in health & much spoken against for his Conduct. He Signed Howes declaration & also gave his Word of honour that he would not meddle in the least in American affairs during the War." His poor health gave out in 1781, when Richard died penniless with Annis at his bedside. She salvaged what she could of their life at Morven, trying to rebuild the estate and living there until six years before her death in 1801.

Other signers also writhed in prison — not because of the Declaration but because the Redcoats captured them in battle. In December of 1778, the British Army took both the city of Savannah and one of its defenders, George Walton, a signer from Georgia. Fortunately for Walton, if not Savannah, the



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British held onto the city longer than they did him. They exchanged Walton in September 1779 but didn't leave town until June 1782.

Three of South Carolina's four signers — Edward Rutledge, Thomas Heyward, and Arthur Middleton — were among the roughly 5,000 Americans defending Charleston during its six-week siege in the spring of 1780. (The fourth, Thomas Lynch, Jr., might have fought beside them, but the ship on which he and his wife sailed for the West Indies in 1776 disappeared.) When the city fell on May 12, the British imprisoned all its defenders, not just those who had signed the Declaration.

Abraham Clark of New Jersey was 50 years old when war began in 1775, so his battles took place in the halls of Congress. Yet, like thousands of other American parents, he must have anguished when the British captured two of his three sons. Both boys were officers with the Continental Army, and both wound up on HMS *Jersey*, one of the prison ships in New York's harbor.

Thanks to a war waged in their backyards, other signers — and masses of Americans whose names are now forgotten — paid a steep and literal price for freedom. Lewis Morris belonged to a family so wealthy and with such extensive lands that a neighborhood in the Bronx carries the name "Morrissania" to this day. But in mid-September 1776, about six weeks after he signed the Declaration, his worried son worked feverishly to pack Mrs. Morris and the household's furniture off to safety. He wrote his absent father, "The Enemy has possession of Montroseur's Island [in the East River off Manhattan; now known as Randall's Island] for these three or four days and yesterday they brought several Field Pieces upon the North West Point and fired several times at your house. I suppose they will shoot it like a sieve and destroy what little I left on the place." Lewis Morris and his family would spend years rebuilding what the war took from them. So would other Patriots whose homes were plundered or burned, whose fields, gardens, and orchards the Redcoats stripped, whose barns and fences warmed the enemy while cooking his supper.

Some signers and other Americans lent the Patriots money or materiel. The country occasionally repaid the debt; often it did not. Robert Morris of Pennsylvania frequently bailed out the bankrupt Continental Army, and Carter Braxton of Virginia gave the Revolutionary cause £10,000 sterling. Each man died in poverty. Another of Virginia's signers, Thomas Nelson, underwrote a cavalry unit and personally guaranteed some of his state's wartime loans. Legend says he ordered his mansion near Yorktown shelled when he learned that it had become British headquarters; if so, the bombing was ineffective because the house stands to this day.

The men who signed a psalm to liberty one bright August morning knew it could mean their death. Yet they signed anyway. That devotion to freedom, to its morality and mercy and the hope it gives the downtrodden while stripping officials of their spurs, makes each signer a hero. But every farmer who marched with the militia for Boston or Brandywine, Concord or Camden knew it could be his death, too. And went anyway. Ditto the millers and merchants, sailors and shopkeepers who enlisted with the Continental Army. To Patrick Henry's question — "Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?" — they resoundingly answered "No!"

Revolutionary America's population probably numbered about three million. John Adams supposedly figured that a third favored the Patriots, a third remained loyal to the king, and the rest didn't care. Yet of those million rebels, only 56 had the honor of signing the Declaration. The chance to strike so dramatic a blow on behalf of liberty comes rarely. But that blow would have boomeranged on the signers had a throng of other Americans not stood firm against abusive government. For a magical moment, Americans not only understood government's evils, they repudiated them. That gives us not



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just 56 heroes but multitudes, not just several dozen men who signed the Declaration but hundreds of thousands who signed Liberty itself with their principles, privations, prayers, and lives.

Can we do less?

Becky Akers is an expert on the American Revolution.



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