THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Rare Copies of America’s Founding Document

Contrary to popular belief, it is easy to build a complete collection of July 4, 1776 signers of the Declaration of Independence. You don’t need Button Gwinnett or Thomas Lynch, Jr., the legendary rarities of Independence. Only two men actually signed on July 4th: John Hancock, President of Continental Congress, and Charles Thomson as Secretary of Congress.

A brief background. The colonists knew that Britain had expended a fortune defending them against the French and their Indian allies, but nobody likes to pay taxes, and Britain didn’t say please. So protests broke out when the Stamp Act was imposed in 1765. Britain’s heavy-handed response led to more protests, the most famous of which was the Boston Tea Party in 1773.

Then came war. After the Battle of Lexington and Concord on April 14-15, 1775, Congress began to function as a national government, establishing an army and navy, opening American ports to foreign commerce, printing currency and organizing a post office. By mid-1776 the Revolutionary War had been waged for over a year. John Adams’ incessant prodding in Congress, and Thomas Paine’s arguments in Common Sense, persuaded many that the time had come for America to govern itself.

On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee, a Virginia delegate to the Second Continental Congress, proposed a resolution “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.” Congress voted to recess for three weeks, appointing a committee of five—John Adams, Roger Sherman, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston and Thomas Jefferson—to draft an appropriate message. Written by Jefferson, with minor edits by Franklin and Adams, the draft was submitted to Congress on June 28.

Not all in Congress favored independence. George Read of Delaware voted against Lee’s Resolution. Thomas McKean, another delegate, sent a message to Caesar Rodney, the third Delaware member, to come quickly to Philadelphia to break the tie in favor of independence. The 47 year old Rodney received the dispatch on July 1. He rode 80 miles nonstop from his home near Dover to Philadelphia, arriving just in time to vote yes.

Make sure to start celebrating on our real independence day, the second of July, when Lee’s resolution declaring independence was adopted.

Immediately afterward Congress turned to debating the formal Declaration text. Though some revisions were made, in particular, striking the provision calling for abolition of the slave trade, it remained essentially Jefferson’s prose.

Rest assured, the Declaration of Independence was passed on July 4. It wasn’t unanimous, though, thanks to New York. Even so, Congress ordered official printings of the Declaration to be distributed to the state legislatures, committees of safety and commanders of Continental troops. John Dunlap printed the broadsides on July 4-5. States and cities, and even individual printers followed up with their own broadside and newspaper printings to continue to spread the news of independence.

On July 19, 1776, soon after word reached Philadelphia that New York had finally voted to adopt the Declaration, Congress ordered an engrossed copy (prepared in a large clear hand) on parchment. The engrossed manuscript, which could now be headed “the Unanimous Declaration,” was finished on August 2, when the famous signing ceremony took place.

Broadsides & Newspapers

When we get calls from people who have copies of the Declaration, the first question we ask is, “does it look like it has signatures?” The most valuable copies, those from July, 1776, are not signed. The last copy on the market of the Philadelphia July 4th John Dunlap broadside sold in 2000 for $8,140,000 to TV producer Norman Lear, who has been exhibiting it around the country. Values are based on rarity, timing and format of subsequent editions, with earlier and scarcer 1776 broadsides approaching $1,000,000, but going down to a couple of thousand dollars for some original August 1776 printings. A July, 1776 broadside is shown on the facing page, and a July 1776 newspaper printing on page 59.

By Seth Kaller

“This day the Hon. Continental Congress declared the united colonies free and independent states.”

July 2, 1776
DECEMPTION
By the REPRESENTATIVES of the
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,
IN GENERAL CONGRESS ASSEMBLED.

WHEN in the Course of Human Events, it becomes necessary
for one People to dissolve the Political Bands which have con-
trasted them with another, and to affright among the Powers
of the Earth, the separate and equal Station to which the Laws of Nature
and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent Respect to the Opinions of
Mankind requires that they should declare the Causes which impel
them to the Separation.

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created
equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable
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
Authority from the Consent of the Governed, that 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 institute new
Governments, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its
Powers in such Forms, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their
Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments
long established should not be changed for light and transient Causes;
and accordingly it has been said, that the Mankind are more dif-
cult to please, when their Eloquency is at an end, than at any time before
by abolishing the Forms to which they are accustomed, but when a long
Train of Abuses and Usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object,
have in fact put it beyond the Power of Congress to effect those ends, by
abolishing it, and by establishing a new Government, upon
this Principles:

In the Congress, July 4, 1776.

For quartering large Bodies of armed Troops among us:
For transporting us across the borders by a Mock Trial, from Punishment for any Misdemeanors which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:
For depriving us in many Cases, of the Benefit of Trial by Jury:
For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended Offences:
For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighboring Province, establishing therein an arbitrary Government, and enlarging its Boundaries, so
as to render it at once an Example and disappear for introducing the same
abrupt System into these Colonies:
For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Form of our Governments:
For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested
with Power to legislate for us in all Cases whatsoever:
In every Stage of these Oppressions we have petitioned for Redress. In the still boundless Tenet. Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated Fruitz. A Pardon, which was promised was delived by every Act
which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the Ruler of a free People:
We have petitioned for Redress in the most humble Terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated Fruitz. A Pardon, which was promised was delived by every Act
which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the Ruler of a free People:
By the Voice of Justice and of Civilization. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the Necessity which devolves our Separation, and establish the Independence of
the States which have thus far stood as a single People.

To this end a Convention of the United States of America is assembled, to
establish the Independence of these States, to unite them into one and
common Federation, for their mutual Defense, and for theלהיות
Adek to the Voice of Justice and of Civilization. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the Necessity which devolves our Separation, and establish the Independence of
the States which have thus far stood as a single People.

Signed by Order and in Behalf of the Congress,
JOHN HANGOCK, President.

ATTEST:
CHARLES THOMPSON, Secretary.
Benjamin Tyler and John Binns produced notable early facsimiles. But the best copies are by William Stone, who was the first to accurately reproduce the original manuscript. His result was so remarkable that he is often accused of using a chemical process to lift ink from the original to make a mirror image, which he then supposedly used to engrave his copper plate. That would go far in explaining why so much of the original manuscript is illegible today, but documentary evidence suggests that the original had already begun to deteriorate after rough handling and much exposure to light.

Careful comparison of Stone’s prints against the original manuscript shows differences that argue against the “wet” or chemical process idea. In any case, when you see a reproduction of the Declaration that looks like the original looked in August of 1776, you can thank William J. Stone.

William J. Stone. Washington, 1823. 30¼ x 24¾ inches. The engraved facsimile of the entire document was produced in actual size. The printer’s imprint is at the top of the document to the left and right of In CONGRESS, July 4, 1776. On the top left is Engraved by W. I. Stone, for the Dept. of State, by order, and on the right is of J. Q. Adams, Sect. of State, July 4th 1823.

201 copies were printed on vellum, of which approximately 45-50 are currently known, mostly in museums. Several copies printed on paper, but with the first edition imprint, have surfaced in recent years. Some may be proofs of the first edition, while others appear to be early reprints.

The Stone Declaration shown on the facing page was hanging in a garage for many years, when a pre-marriage ultimatum caused it and many other things to be donated to a Tennessee thrift shop. A lucky buyer paid $2.48—and then did his research and had it authenticated. It sold at auction for $477,650 in 2007, quite high a price for this particular copy. It came back on the market in March 2009, and I acquired it at Raynor’s Historical Collectible Auction, for $246,750. In the meantime, a very fine condition copy of Stone’s 1823 first edition sold at Christie’s on February 12, 2009, for a record $693,500.

William J. Stone for Peter Force. These were printed by Stone in 1833, on thin wove paper for insertion into Peter Force’s American Archives, 5th series, Volume I, which was finally published in 1848. 30 x 26 inches. The imprint was moved to bottom left and changed to W. J. Stone SC WASH.
Stone printing of the Declaration of Independence. This one was purchased in a thrift shop a few years ago for $2.48 and subsequently sold for over $475,000. Next time you’re at Goodwill looking for knickknacks, don’t forget to go through the dusty boxes in the back. The enlargements are the legend, from the top left and right of the document. But beware, some reproductions also show the Stone legend.

Stone Sc Washn. These are known both folded for book, as shown in the example at left, and unfolded.

I often see descriptions talking about the rarity of Force printings, with estimates that as few as 500 were produced. But Stone billed Force for printing 4,000 copies, and judging by the number I have handled, and others I have seen, I have no reason to doubt that quantity. The Stone and Force printings are the best representations of the Declaration as it looked when members of the Continental Congress put their lives on the line to sign it in 1776.

The particular Force printing shown at left is a fine condition copy, valued at $38,000.

Facsimiles that look like the Stone printing, but are substantially smaller in size, are later generation copies. Unfortunately, they have little monetary or historic value.

Benjamin Owen Tyler. Washington, 1818. Engraved by Peter Maverick. 31 x 27 inches. The title and text are in various ornamental scripts; the signatures are in facsimile. They were produced on paper and in lesser quantities on vellum, with only four originally ordered on linen or silk (as shown on the following page).

Tyler printings range from about $25,000 for paper copies in nice condition, to a multiple of that for vellum and silk printings.

John Binns. Philadelphia, October or November 1819. 36 x 26¼ inches. The text was engraved by C. H. Parker, the signatures by Tanner, Vallance, Kearny & Co. The title and text are in ornamental script with the signatures in facsimile, within an ornamental border bearing state seals in medallions and portraits of Washington, Jefferson, and Hancock. There is an engraved attestation to its accuracy by John Quincy Adams, Sec. of State. Binns intended to have the first facsimile of the Declaration, but his great attention to quality, and the time he needed to refine his superb medallion illustrations, slowed him down. Thus, Tyler beat him to it.

We sold a Binns for $9,500 only a few years ago, but prices for all the important Declaration prints have escalated significantly. I bid too timidly when the copy illustrated here came up at auction at Freeman's in 2007, selling for $14,340. This and another copy have since sold privately in the $30,000 range.

Eleazer Huntington. Believed to have been printed in Hartford, Conn., circa 1820-1824. 25 x 21½ inches. This imitates but reduces in size Tyler's design, and it skims on some of Tyler's details, but is still an excellent early engraving of the Declaration.

The Huntington example illustrated here is a fine copy I sold in 2007 for $22,000. Others have sold for more, but copies with flaws can go for much less. I have one such example now at $6,000. These were originally hung on wooden rollers, often in schoolhouses, so significant condition flaws are common.

William Woodruff. Philadelphia, 2-1819. It was pirated from Binns, but was on the market first. Printed by C. P. Harrison. 26¼ x 18¼ inches. By giving less attention to engraving quality, Woodruff was able to sell his knock-off first, offering it with a separately published facsimile of just the signatures, again copying Binns' design.

There are excellent reproductions of several of the facsimile printings. In person, they are readily identifiable, but be careful if you are considering an acquisition based on photographs alone.
New Hampshire broadside. No printer’s legend, but likely printed circa July 12-16, 1776, in Exeter, N.H., by Robert Luist Fowle. This copy came from the descendants of Charles Toppan, a noted antiquarian and the first to produce a facsimile of Jefferson’s manuscript of the Declaration. The author acquired the broadside privately in May, 2009. As of July 2, it will be on loan for exhibit at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia.

A Few Fun Declaration Facts

How fast did word spread? Forget e-mail. It took more than a month for the Declaration to get around to all of the Colonies. In Philadelphia, where it was written, it was publicly read on July 8. It took until July 26 for the complete text to be published in Virginia, and even later in Charleston, S.C.

Of the 56 signers, how many voted for independence? 39. Eight of the 56 signers were newly elected members who joined Congress after July 4. And some who voted for it never had an opportunity to sign it. Henry Wiener, for one, returned instead to New York congress, and Robert R. Livingston, a member of the committee appointed to draft the document. Who voted against independence, but signed the Declaration anyway? George Read of Delaware. Why didn’t our most famous founding father sign the Declaration? George Washington resigned from Congress in June, 1775 when he was appointed to lead the army. In July, 1776, the war moved from Boston to New York.

Who is the most valuable signer? Button Gwinnett of Georgia, who was killed in a duel by General Lachlan McIntosh in May 1777.

Whose vote and signature replaced that of his ailing father? Thomas Lynch, Jr. His full signature may be even scarcer than Gwinnett’s.

Where were the signers’ names first published? Not until 1777, when Congress ordered an official broadside published, including their names. Mary Katherine Goddard of Maryland was the printer.

Where is the original manuscript? The July 4th manuscript, signed by Hancock and Thomson and then rushed to the printer, has not been seen since. But the engrossed signed manuscript is on view for all to see, at the National Archives in Washington, DC.