

Independence Day

IN THIS ERA OF “ALTERNATE FACTS,” HISTORY GIVES US SOMETHING REAL AND SUBSTANTIAL WE CAN ALL DEPEND ON—JULY FOURTH, THE DAY WE CELEBRATE THE CREATION OF OUR NATION. OR SHOULD IT BE JULY SECOND?

IF YOU HAD CELEBRATED America’s independence in 1789, the year our country adopted its constitution and George Washington took office as the first President, you likely would have celebrated not on July 4 but July 2. On that day, the Second Continental Congress officially voted for independence.

Shortly thereafter, still on July 2, the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* announced the vote and American freedom with the headline, “This day the CONTINENTAL CONGRESS declared the UNITED COLONIES FREE and INDEPENDENT STATES.” The act was done—and it had nothing to do with the Declaration of Independence we all know, the one penned (mostly) by Thomas Jefferson, on July 4.

“The Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America,” wrote John Adams to his wife, Abigail, on July 3, 1776. “I am apt to believe that it 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. It 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.”

Our July Fourth celebration of Independence Day did not coalesce until the early years of the 19th Century. Surprisingly, politics, not history, determined the date.

INDEPENDENCE

Independence didn’t switch on like a light on a single day. Certainly there were skirmishes between British troops and American patriots in Massachusetts before the fateful Declaration on July 2, but in early 1776 many if not most Americans believed some form of conciliation was possible. By June, however, determined patriots—led by Samuel Adams and his cousin John from Massachusetts and Richard Henry Lee of Virginia—had crafted a resolution for Congress to consider.

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On June 7, Lee presented his proposal, now called the “Lee Resolution.” It read, “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.”

Congressmen did what they were best at—they put it off. Not all of the representatives were in agreement on independence. But, just in case, they set five esteemed members—John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Robert R. Livingston, and Roger Sherman—to craft a document explaining the reason for independence (as well as committees for a model treaty and constitution).

After three weeks of political horse-trading, Congress was ready to

vote. On July 2, Lee brought his resolution to the floor. Adams seconded the motion, and it carried unanimously—sort of. The vote was 12-0 with New York abstaining.

Only *after voting* for independence did Congress begin to consider the document prepared by the Committee of Five, even though Jefferson had delivered what he called his “original rough draft” on June 28, when it was immediately tabled.

When the whole Congress finally got around to reading it, they were surprised. Expectations were for a simple legal document, probably on par with the preamble John Adams wrote for the Lee Resolution a fortnight earlier, which began, “Whereas his

Britannic Majesty, in conjunction with the lords and commons of Great Britain, has, by a late act of Parliament, excluded the inhabitants of these United Colonies from the protection of his crown ...”

Instead they got a work of literature—probably Jefferson’s greatest masterpiece—that evoked the perfect tone of majesty, invoking higher powers and principles, reverence, and legal argument, one that both served its purposes and inspired generations of Americans.

PRESS RELEASE

Of course, given such a masterpiece, the first action of Congress was to tear it apart, cutting nearly a quarter (including a condemnation of the slave trade), tinkering with the wording, and sliding in the exact text of the Lee Resolution. (You’ll find it hiding in

the second-to-last paragraph.)

Jefferson was not happy with the criticism, a bitterness that evidently endured for the rest of his life. On August 30, 1823, he wrote to his friend James Madison about an oration made by Colonel Timothy Pickering before Pickering publicly read (and commented on) the Declaration on July 4, 1823.

“Timothy thinks the instrument the better for having a fourth of it expunged. He would have thought it still better had the other three fourths gone out,” Jefferson wrote.

In two days of sometimes fiery debate and blue-pencil scribbling, Congress produced the Declaration of Independence we know today, which they sent to John Dunlap to print. He made about 200 copies. In that only 26 are known to survive, it appears it was seen not as cherished but merely functional. It was not the actual document passed by Congress but more of an elaboration of the July 2 announcement. Jefferson celebrated this first Fourth of July by going out and buying a thermometer.

Later Adams, Franklin, and Jefferson all would assert that the Declaration was signed by *all* the Congressional delegates on July 4, although the Dunlap copies bear only the notation “Signed by Order and in Behalf of the Congress” and the printed names of John Hancock (as President of Congress) and Charles Thomson (secretary and witness).

Many historians believe such a complete signing never happened, that it wasn’t even possible—several signatories were absent from Congress on that date. Some had yet to be elected. Perhaps the Founding Fathers meant, in modern terms, everyone “signed off on” the Declaration that day.

Even considering that, because the delegates from New York were not authorized to vote for independence, they abstained and would not have signed the document on July 4. The New York Provincial Congress would approve independence only on July 9, so the first printed Declaration did not include the word

“unanimous” in its introduction.

When the Dunlap printing was first read to the public in Philadelphia on July 8, listeners cheered, and Congress finally began to realize the document’s power. On July 19, Congress ordered a formal parchment to be prepared and signed by all. Only then did they order the word “unanimous” added.

For the record, Timothy Matlack, clerk of Congress, likely wrote the parchment, and John Hancock and fifty-five other representatives signed it on August 2, 1776. Matthew Thornton, representative from New Hampshire, added his signature last, on November 4, 1776, when he was first seated. The document we know, with all the members signing, wasn’t complete until November 4.

This signed or “engrossed” copy is now preserved in the United States Archives, faded from an early attempt to make copies by squeezing the ink onto other papers.

Any of these dates might be considered for the title Independence Day. The one we celebrate, July 4, is the one on Jefferson’s document—which means that with today’s parades, speeches, and skyrockets, we’re celebrating the printing of a press release.

FORGOTTEN DOCUMENT

After the Declaration had been read to the public and distributed abroad, it was nearly forgotten until it re-emerged in the 1796 and 1800 Presidential elections pitting Adams against Jefferson.

Adams advocates noted it was he who crafted the Lee Resolution and spearheaded the movement for independence through Congress. For them, Independence Day was July 2.

Those favoring Jefferson rolled out the aging Declaration to show his patriotism—after all, *he* wrote the document that made America a nation. And the Declaration said on its face and in ink, July 4, 1776.

Adams won the election in 1796, and if he had had his way, we might have celebrated July 2 as he recommended to Abigail. After Jefferson took office in 1800, he had eight years to advocate for the July 4 date as Independence Day.

The Declaration proved to be everything Jefferson wanted it to be. As he noted, “It was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.” *

You can see the original declaration passed by Congress on our website, www.EarlyAmericanLife.com

Over a decade, artist John Lewis Krimmel painted several scenes depicting the changing composition of Philadelphia’s Independence Day celebrants. By 1819, the year in which Krimmel exhibited *Fourth of July Celebration in Centre Square*, the event had become a largely white working-class celebration, in contrast to earlier years when blacks and whites from all social classes gathered in the square facing Independence Hall.

