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THE SIGNERS

"We mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our Sacred Honor." With these words ends the Declaration of Independence and immediately following them came the signatures of the fifty-six men who by virtue of their act gained immortality.

Not all of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence were famous or geniuses, brilliant writers or orators, outstanding soldiers or statesmen. Among the fifty-six were quite ordinary men of no great distinction, ambition, or achievement, who simply did what the times required of men of honor and love of liberty.

On July 2, 1776, the Second Continental Congress passed a resolution affirming that the states were independent of the British Crown. Subsequently, on July 4, 1776, the same Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence. On that day it was signed only by John Hancock as President of the Congress. On August 2, 1776, the actual signing of an engrossed copy of the document took place with John Hancock signing first. Fifty more of the fifty-six delegates to the Congress signed on August 2. The other five signed later in the fall

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of 1776, except for Thomas McKeon of Delaware, who signed it sometime after January, 1777, and according to some evidence as late as 1781.

The signators represented no single stratum of Colonial life. They were of varied backgrounds, ages, education, property, and experience. There were two Lees, brothers; two Adamses, remote cousins; two Morrisises, no kin.

Some of the signers, like the Adamses of Massachusetts and the Lees of Virginia, already had broad political experience and had earned a considerable degree of fame. Some, like Benjamin Franklin and George Wythe, were known and highly respected throughout the colonies. Others were unheard of, chosen as delegates because they were willing to serve--several as last minute replacements for men who had refused to vote for independence or to support it. Some signed reluctantly, but none signed casually. They were clearly aware, as Abraham Clark of New Jersey put it, that they would have "freedom or a halter."

Sixteen of the signers had not voted for independence on July 2. The four-member New York delegation abstained because they had no directive to do so. Robert Morris, who opposed the revolution was absent on July 2 and five other Pennsylvania signers were elected late in July to bolster the Pennsylvania

delegation. Oliver Wolcott was home in Connecticut ill and William Williams

had not arrived in Philadelphia as his replacement. Matthew Thornton, who

signed the Declaration in November, was not elected to the Congress until

September and Charles Carroll of Maryland was not elected until July 4.

William Hooper of North Carolina was absent when the vote for independence was

taken. All of these fifteen signers signed without having actually voted for

it. The sixteenth, George Beard of Delaware was the only signer to actually

vote against independence. Later, he became an ardent supporter of The

Declaration.

Eight of the signers were not ^{NATIVE} ~~nation~~ born--all eight being natives of the British Isles. The last signer to arrive in the colonies was Dr. John Witherspoon, president of Princeton, who came from Scotland only eight years before. The rest or 48 signers were born in America.

Age wise, the average age of the signers was 45. Edward Rutledge of South Carolina was the youngest at 26. Only one other was in his twenties, 16 were in their thirties, twenty in their forties, eleven in their fifties, six in their sixties, and only one Benjamin Franklin was in his seventies--he being just seventy.

Nine of the signers, all of whom had pledged their lives in the support of the Declaration died during the Revolution. The first to die was John Morton, a Pennsylvania farmer.

Forty-seven signers survived the war and their average age at death was sixty-nine--strikingly high for the times. Four lived until their nineties, ten into their eighties and nine into their seventies. Thomas Lynch, the second youngest to sign, was the youngest at his death, at age thirty. Charles Carroll, who was thirty-nine when he signed, was the oldest at his death at ninety-five in 1832 and the last surviving signer. The last widow of a signer to die was the wife of Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts who died in 1849 and strangely enough the last child of a signer to die was his daughter, Emily, who died in 1894.

Of the fifty-six signers, all but two were married, and fourteen were married twice. Caesar Rodney of Delaware was the only doctrinal bachelor. The other unmarried signer was Joseph Hewes of North Carolina, who was engaged to be married but whose fiancée died a few days before the marriage. Benjamin Franklin, who had only functional views of marriage, had a common-law wife but the other fifty-three had formally acquired their spouses.

Altogether, history records that the signers had 305 children (figures are not available for two). Seven of the children were illegitimate. Two, including the Loyalist governor of New Jersey, William Franklin, were Benjamin Franklin's by unknown predecessors to his wife Deborah, and two were those of another Pennsylvanian, George Taylor, who had two children by his wife and five by his housekeeper.

The predominant occupations of the signers were broken down into 25 lawyers, 12 merchants, 9 landowners, 4 physicians, 2 farmers, 2 full time politicians (with no other occupation), one printer (Franklin) and one Clergyman.

The eighteenth century was an age of admirable generalists--men like Franklin and Jefferson who could turn with equal skill to many fields. However, by far the most versatile ^{of} ~~to~~ this group was Francis Hopkinson of New Jersey. Hopkinson wrote verse and essays, practiced law, was regarded by many as the first native American composer, wrote social and political satires, was a professional artist, an inventor, served as a judge of admiralty designed the American flag, the seals of the state of New Jersey, the University of Pennsylvania, and the American Philosophical Society--

oldest of American learned societies. He excelled at the harpsichord, was a leader in establishing the Protestant Episcopal Church after its separation from the Church of England. He was also a merchant and a collector of customs.

The group as a whole had better than average educations. Twenty-eight, exactly half of them, were college graduates. Eight of these went to Harvard, five to William and Mary, four to Yale, two to Princeton, then the College of New Jersey, and one to the University of Pennsylvania then known as the College of Philadelphia. Eight went abroad to college. Only three were limited to a common school education, and eleven were largely self educated. Fourteen had a good private education by tutors and in academies below the collegiate level.

Eighteen, a little less than a third of the signers were considered to be rich men. Some were to lose all of their fortunes in their support of the movement for independence. The richest of all was Charles Carroll who styled himself "of Carrollton" and of whom as he signed The Declaration another delegate observed ominously, "There go a few millions."

When they affixed their signatures to The Declaration, the signers could have not helped but realize that they were up to something far more serious than making a brave gesture. For reasons of security, The Declaration with the signatures was not published until January, 1777. It was fully understood

by the signers that if the Revolution failed, they would be rounded up, their property confiscated, and their lives forfeited. However, Washington's victory at Trenton the day after Christmas in 1776, and his defeat of Cornwallis ^{at} ~~at~~ Princeton the next week, turned the tide, and The Declaration complete with the fifty-six signatures (or 55, depending on exactly when Thomas McKean actually signed the document) was published.

Practically all of the signers became involved in the prosecution of the war in either a civil or military role. Seventeen saw military service and twelve of these were active in the field. Four were taken prisoner.

The first to be captured was a civilian signer, Richard Stockton of New Jersey. Stockton personified the ideal of sacrifice in defense of his beliefs perhaps as well as any American who ever lived. Late in September 1776 he was appointed by Congress to visit the northern army at Saratoga. Here he found the Colonials marching with neither shoes nor leggings. Before he got home to New Jersey the British had invaded the colony and sacked his estate, Moroen. In December, he succeeded in relocating his family in the house of friends in Monmouth County, but he was apprehended by the British and taken to prison. Cold, poorly fed, and badly treated, he was kept jailed until Congress

eventually effected his release. However, his health was permanently broken. His prized library and personal papers were destrpyed, great destruction was wrought to his property, and his large fortune was greatly diminished. He died of cancer in 1781, not surviving to see the victory for which he had made such a tremendous personal sacrifice. Richard Stockton had all his life taken quite literally the injunction that "unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required."

The four militarily engaged signers who were taken prisoner were George Walton, a Georgia lawyer, who was commanding the First Georgia Regiment at the seige of Savannah in 1778. He was shot from his horse, his leg shattered, and captured. He remained a prisoner for ten months until exchanged by the British for a captain of the Royal Navy. Walton lived to serve an active political life as Governor of Georgia, Chief Justice of Georgia, a Superior Court Judge, United States Senator, before he died in 1804.

Three of the four South Carolinian signers, Thomas Heyward, Jr., Arthur Middleton, and Edward Rutledge, were captured by the British at the seige of Charleston. They were imprisoned in the British garrison at Saint Augustine, and after a year's imprisonment were exchanged and survived the war.

Just as some signers lost their lives in the pursuit of independence, seventeen of the signers suffered extreme and in some cases total property losses. William Poca, long an articulate leader of Maryland politics used his own money to outfit troops for the Continental Army. Thomas Nelson, Jr., of Virginia had started the independence ball rolling in May, 1776, when he introduced the resolution calling for independence at the Virginia Convention in Williamsburg and then carried it to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. He succeeded Jefferson as governor of Virginia and mustered a force of 3,000 men to aid Washington in his seige of Cornwallis at Yorktown. His home was in Yorktown and his house was occupied by British officers. He ordered the artillery to fire on his own house. The house was riddled and the British were driven from it. Others also lost their homes. The houses of William Ellerg, Lewis Morris, and Josiah Bartlett were burned. Those of George Clymer, Lyson Hall, John Hart, William Floyd, William Hooper, Francis Hopkinson, and Arthur Middleton were destroyed or ransacked.

Nine of the signers died during the Revolution (Six as a direct or indirect result of it). Seventeen suffered severe property loss. However, not one of the fifty-six lost his "sacred honor." In a cause that sometimes seemed

hopelessly lost there was not a single defection among the fifty-six—although some had had reservations about independence in the beginning and despite the repeated sagging of popular support for the war.

Forty-seven signers survived the war and for the most part they continued their active political careers. Many of them served in positions of responsibility in the first days of the republic, after the failure of the experiment of the Confederation. Two, Adams and Jefferson, became the second and third presidents of the United States. Samuel Huntington was the only man other than Washington and Adams to receive any votes in the presidential election in January, 1789. Three signers became vice presidents: Adams, Jefferson, and Elbridge Gerry. Samuel Chase of Maryland and James Wilson of Pennsylvania became Justices of the United States Supreme Court. Four became United States Senators; four, ambassadors; seventeen, governors of their states; fifteen, state judges, including nine Chief justices; five, speakers of their state legislatures.

One signer, Thomas McKean, who signed The Declaration as a delegate from Delaware, held political office in Delaware and Pennsylvania concurrently. In 1777, he was made Chief Justice of Pennsylvania while still a member of Congress from Delaware. In 1781, he was both Chief Justice of Pennsylvania and

President of the Congress. Also, while Chief Justice of Pennsylvania he was Governor of Delaware and in 1799 he became Governor of Pennsylvania--the only signer to have been governor of two states.

Samuel Chase of Maryland engaged in a career sometimes more inflammatory than the Revolution itself. He served on twenty-one committees in 1777 and thirty in 1778. He was removed from Congress for his effort to corner the flour market based on knowledge he had gained as a member of Congress. He came back to the Congress later but was too busy to attend to his Congressional duties since he was selling munitions to the Maryland militia. He held two Maryland judgeships simultaneously and was almost removed from both offices by the assembly--a majority but not the required two-thirds of the members condemning him. Washington appointed him an associate justice of the Supreme Court. President Jefferson suggested that he be impeached for his hostility toward him and some unjudicial behavior in court. He was impeached in 1804 by the House but was acquitted on all eight charges.

James Wilson of Pennsylvania, one of the architects of the Constitution was appointed to the Supreme Court by Washington--he like Robert Morris speculated heavily in lands--attempted to influence legislation and had to move from state to state to avoid arrest for debt.

The only other signer to incur censure was George Walton, governor of Georgia, who sent a forged letter to Congress in 1779 in connection with the military service of General Lacklan McIntosh, the man who mortally wounded signer Button Gwinett in a duel. Four years later he was censured by the state legislature for this action, but he was not greatly embarrassed by this action since this same body had chosen him as Chief Justice of Georgia the day before.

Thomas Jefferson is purported to have been the signer chiefly responsible for the drafting of the Declaration of Independence and outside of the sacred religious writing of man, this document more than any other has inspired American citizens and statesmen to their noblest actions.

It has never received more eloquent testimony than that of Abraham Lincoln who on Washington's Birthday in 1861, speaking in Independence Hall, said "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiment embodied in The Declaration of Independence. I have often pondered over the dangers which were incurred by the ^{men} man who assembled here, and framed and adopted The Declaration of Independence. I have pondered over the toils that were endured by the officers and soldiers of the army who achieved that Independence.

"I have often inquired of myself what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the Colonies from the motherland; but that sentiment in The Declaration of Independence which gave liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but, I hope, to the world, for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weight would be lifted from the shoulders of all men."

These were certainly uncommon men in uncommon times—these fifty-six who almost two hundred years ago pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor in the cause of liberty for themselves and all future generations of Americans.

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