

Founders, Framers, and Freedom: Fourth of July 2010: Intro; Signers of the Declaration of Independence: Matthew Thornton, NH; John Adams, MA; Stephen Hopkins, RI; Roger Sherman, CT; Francis Lewis, NY

Founders, Framers, and Freedom

The Fourth of July 2010

Introduction:

Two-hundred and thirty-five years ago today, the thirteen colonies of Great Britain declared themselves “free and independent states” with the approval of the representatives of the Second Continental Congress which met in the Pennsylvania Statehouse in Philadelphia and chaired by John Hancock.¹

The Declaration, drafted primarily by Thomas Jefferson with a few alterations by Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, was submitted to Congress on the twenty-eighth of June 1776. On the fourth of July, votes from all the colonies were obtained in its favor, and the thirteen united Colonies were declared free and independent States.

The Declaration was signed on that day, only by John Hancock and with his name alone it was sent forth to the world. It was ordered to be engrossed upon the Journals of Congress, and on the second day of August following, it was signed by all but one of the fifty-six signers whose names are appended to it. That one was Matthew Thornton, who on taking his seat in November, asked and obtained the privilege of signing it. Several who signed it on the second of August, were absent when it was adopted on the fourth of July, but approving of it, they thus signified their approbation.

The signing of that instrument was a solemn act, and required great firmness and patriotism in those who committed it. It was treason against the home government, yet perfect allegiance to the law of right. It subjected those who signed it to the danger of an ignominious death, yet it entitled them to the profound reverence of a disenthralled people. But neither firmness nor patriotism was wanting in that august assembly. And their own sound judgment and discretion, their own purity of purpose and integrity of conduct, were fortified and strengthened by the voice of the people in popular assemblies, embodied in written instructions for the guidance of their representatives.

Such were the men unto whose keeping, as instruments of Providence, the destinies of America were for the time intrusted; and it has been well remarked, that men, other than such as these could not have conceived, planned, and carried into execution, such a mighty movement, one so fraught with tangible marks of political wisdom, as the American Revolution.²

¹ *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, 15th ed. (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1979), 3:112.

² B. J. Lossing, “Introduction,” in *Biographical Sketches of the Signers of the Declaration of American Independence* (New York: George F. Coole and Brother, 1848; repr.: Aledo, TX: WallBuilder Press, 2007), 10–11.

As the Congress assembled debated the passage of the Declaration, a bellman ascended the steeple of the Statehouse, later known as Independence Hall. Below at the main entrance was stationed a young boy whose duty it was to signal the bellman if the vote favored independence. The bellman expressed doubt that the gentlemen of the Congress would make the treacherous decision to “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.”³

All his doubt was removed when the young lad below began clapping his hands yelling “Ring! Ring!” When the bell tolled the deed was done and those whose vote proclaimed liberty had now confirmed the veracity of their cause with the mutual pledge to each other of “our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”

Fifty-six men put their signature below the text of the Declaration, each of the thirteen colonies being represented as declaring themselves free and independent States. Today we will salute these brave and honorable men who put their very lives, fortunes, and sacred honor on the line and in doing so purchased our freedom which has been sustained now for two-hundred and thirty-four years. I have selected eight delegates to serve as examples of the kind of men who founded our heaven-rescued land.

The excerpts we will note are taken from the 1848 edition of B. J. Lossing’s *Biographical Sketches of the Signers of the Declaration of American Independence*.

New Hampshire: Matthew Thornton

Matthew Thornton was born in Ireland, in 1714, and was brought to this country by his father when he was between two and three years of age. Matthew chose the medical profession, and at the close of his preparatory studies, he commenced his business in Londonderry, New Hampshire.

When the provincial government of New Hampshire was organized, on the abdication of Governor John Wentworth, Dr. Thornton was elected president. When the provincial Congress was organized he was chosen Speaker of the House (January 1776). In September of the same year, he was appointed a delegate to the Continental Congress for one year, and was permitted to sign his name to the Declaration of Independence, when he took his seat in November.

In 1789, Dr. Thornton purchased a farm in Exeter, where he resided until the time of his death, which took place while on a visit to his daughters in Newburyport, Massachusetts, on the twenty-fourth of June, 1803. He was then in the eighty-ninth year of his age.

Dr. Thornton was greatly beloved by all who knew him, and to the close of his long life he was a consistent and zealous Christian. He always enjoyed remarkably good health, and by the practice of those hygienic virtues, *temperance* and *cheerfulness*, he attained a patriarchal age.

Massachusetts: John Adams:

³ This quote from Leviticus 25:10a is engraved on the Liberty Bell which is presently on display in a pavilion about 100 yards from Independence Hall.

Born at Braintree (now Quincy), in Massachusetts, on the thirtieth of October, 1735, and was a direct lineal descendant, in the fourth generation, from Henry Adams, who fled from the persecutions in England during the reign of the first Charles. His maternal ancestor was John Alden, a passenger on the May-Flower.

His primary education was derived in a school at Braintree, and there he passed through a preparatory course of instruction for Harvard University, whence he graduated at the age of twenty years (1755).

He was admitted as a barrister in 1761, and as his professional business increased, and his acquaintance among distinguished politicians extended, he became more publically active, until in 1765, when the Stamp Act had raised a perfect hurricane in America, he wrote and published his "Essay on the Canon on Federal Law." This production at once placed him high in the popular esteem; and the same year he was associated with James Otis and others, to demand, in the presence of the royal governor, that the courts should dispense with the use of *stamped paper* in the administration of justice.

In 1766 Mr. Adams married Abigail Smith, the amiable daughter of a pious clergyman of Braintree, and soon afterwards he removed to Boston. There he was actively associated with Hancock, Otis, and others, in the various measures in favor of the liberties of the people, and was very energetic in endeavors to have the military removed from the town. Governor Francis Bernard endeavored to bribe him to silence, at least, by offers of lucrative offices, but they were all rejected with disdain.

Mr. Adams became very obnoxious to both Governors Bernard and (his successor, Thomas) Hutchinson. He was elected to a seat in the Executive council, but the latter (Hutchinson) erased his name. He was again elected when Governor (Thomas) Gage⁴ assumed authority, and he too erased his name. These things increased his popularity.

Soon after the ascension of Gage, the Assembly of Salem adopted a proposition for a general Congress, and elected five delegates thereto in spite of the efforts of the governor to prevent it. John Adams was one of those delegates, and took his seat in the first Continental Congress, convened in Philadelphia on the fifth of September 1774. He was again elected a delegate in 1775.

On the sixth of May, 1776, Mr. Adams introduced a motion in Congress "that the colonies should form governments *independent of the Crown*." This motion was equivalent to a declaration of independence, and when, a month afterward, Richard Henry Lee introduced a motion more explicitly to declare the colonies free and independent, Mr. Adams was one of its warmest advocates. He was appointed one of the committee to draft the Declaration of Independence,⁵ and he placed his signature to that document on the second of August, 1776.

⁴ Bernard, Hutchinson, and Gage were royal governors. "In those colonies with royal governors—the number of those colonies grew from one in 1650 to eight in 1760—the crown possessed a mechanism by which to ensure that royal policy was enforced. The Privy Council issued each royal governor in America a set of instructions carefully defining the limits of provincial authority. The royal governors were to have the power to decide when to call the provincial assemblies together, to prorogue [postpone], or dissolve, the assemblies, and to veto any legislation passed by those assemblies. The governor's power over other aspects of the political structure of the colony was just as great" (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/616563/United-States/77690/Imperial-organization?anchor=ref612360>).

⁵ The committee consisted of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston.

Jefferson was to draft the declaration. But how this was agreed to was never made altogether clear. He and Adams would have differing explanations, each writing long after the fact.

According to Adams, Jefferson proposed that he, Adams, do the writing, but that he declined, telling Jefferson he must do it.

“Why?” Jefferson asked, as Adams would recount.

“Reasons enough,” Adams said.

“What can be your reasons?”

“Reason first: you are a Virginian and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason second: I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular. You are very much otherwise. Reason third: You can write ten times better than I can.”

Jefferson would recall no such exchange. As Jefferson remembered, the committee simply met and unanimously chose him to undertake the draft. “I consented: I drew it [up].”

Possibly neither of their memories served, and possibly both were correct. Jefferson may well have been the choice of the committee and out of deference or natural courtesy, he may have offered Adams the honor.⁶

In 1825 (Adams) had the felicity of seeing his son elevated to the presidency of the United States. In the spring of 1826 his physical powers rapidly declined, and on the fourth of July of that year, he expired, in the ninety-second year of his age. On the morning of the fourth it was evident he could not last many hours. On being asked for a toast for the day, the last words he ever uttered – words of glorious import – fell from his lips: “Independence for ever!” On the very same day, and at nearly the same hour, his fellow-committeeman in drawing up the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, also died. It was the fiftieth anniversary of that glorious act, and the coincidence made a deep impression upon the public mind.

Rhode Island: Stephen Hopkins:

Stephen Hopkins was born in the town of Providence, Rhode Island, on the seventh of March 1707. His mother was the daughter of one of the first Baptist ministers of Providence.

He early opposed the oppressive acts of Great Britain, and in 1774, he held three offices of great responsibility, which were conferred upon him by the patriots – namely: Chief Justice of Rhode Island, representative of the Provincial Assembly, and delegate to the Continental Congress.

In 1775, he was a member of the Committee of Public Safety, of Rhode Island, and was again elected a delegate to the General Congress. He was reelected in 1776, and had the privilege of signing the glorious Declaration of Independence.

The signature of Mr. Hopkins is remarkable, and appears as if written by one greatly agitated by fear. But fear was no part of Mr. Hopkins’ character. The cause of the tremulous appearance of his signature, was a bodily infirmity, called “shaking palsy,” with which he had been afflicted many years, and which obliged him to employ an amanuensis to do his writing. He died on the nineteenth of July, 1785, in the seventy-eighth year of his age.

⁶ David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 119.

The life of Mr. Hopkins exhibits a fine example of the rewards of honest, persevering industry. Although his early education was limited, yet he became a distinguished mathematician, and filled almost every public station in the gift of the people, with singular ability. He was a sincere and consistent Christian, and the impress of his profession was upon all his deeds.

Connecticut: Roger Sherman:

One of the most remarkable men of the Revolution, was Roger Sherman. He was born in Newton, Massachusetts, on the nineteenth of April, 1721. In 1723, the family moved to Stonington, in that State, where they lived until the death of Roger's father, in 1741. Roger was then only nineteen years of age, and the whole care and support of a large family devolved on him. He had been apprenticed to a shoemaker, but he now took charge of the small farm his father left. In 1744, they sold the farm, and moved to New Milford, in Connecticut, where an elder brother, who was married, resided. Roger performed the journey on foot, carrying his shoemaker's tools with him, and for some time he worked industriously at his trade there.

Mr. Sherman's early education was exceedingly limited, but with a naturally strong and active mind, he acquired a large stock of knowledge from books, during his apprenticeship. It is said that while at work on his bench, he had a book so placed that he could read when it was not necessary for his eyes to be upon his work. He thus acquired a good knowledge of mathematics, and he made astronomical calculations for an almanac that was published in New York, when he was only twenty-seven years old. Not long after he settled in New Milford, he formed a partnership with his brother in a mercantile business, but all the while was very studious. He turned his attention to the study of law, during his leisure hours; and so proficient did he become in legal knowledge, that he was admitted to the bar, in December, 1754.

In 1766, he was elected to the senate, or upper house of the legislature of Connecticut; and it was at this time that the passage of the Stamp Act was bringing the politicians of America to a decided stand in relation to the repeated aggressions of Great Britain. Roger Sherman fearlessly took part with the patriots, and was a leader among them in Connecticut, until war broke out. He was elected a delegate from Connecticut to the Continental Congress, in 1774. He was one of the most active members of that body, and was appointed one of the Committee to prepare a draft of a Declaration of Independence; a document to which he affixed his signature with hearty good will, after it was adopted by Congress.

He was a delegate from Connecticut in the Convention in 1787 that framed the present Constitution of the United States; and he was a member of the State Convention of Connecticut which assembled to act upon the ratification of that instrument. For two years after the organization of the government under the Constitution, he was a member of the United States House of Representatives. He was then promoted to the Senate, which office he filled at the time of his death, which took place on the twenty-third of July, 1793, in the seventy-third year of his age.

New York: Francis Lewis:

Francis Lewis was born in Wales, in the town of Landaff, in the year 1713. His father was an Episcopal clergyman, his mother was a clergyman's daughter, and Francis was their only child. He was left an orphan when only about five years old, and was taken under the care and protection of a maiden aunt, who watched over him with the apparent solicitude of a mother. He received a portion of his education in Scotland with another relative, and became proficient not only in his native tongue (the ancient Briton) but in the Gaelic language, then mostly used in Scotland. His uncle, Dean of St. Paul's, in London, afterward sent him to Westminster, where he obtained a good education.

At the age of twenty-one he became the possessor of some money, which he invested in merchandise and sailed for New York, in which city he formed a business partnership.

Mr. Lewis' business increased, and his commercial pursuits kept him much of his time in Europe until the opening of the "French and Indian War," in which he was an active partisan. He was the aid of Colonel [James] Mercer at Oswego, when the fort was captured by Montcalm⁷ in August, 1757. Mercer was slain, and Lewis was carried with other prisoners, to Canada. (Lewis) was sent to France, and was finally exchanged. At the close of the war, five thousand acres of land were given him by the British government as a compensation for his services.

Mr. Lewis was distinguished ... for his republican views, and he was elected one of the delegates for New York in the Continental Congress of 1765. When the Stamp Act became a law, and non-importation agreements nearly ruined commerce, he retired from business to his country residence on Long Island.

In 1775 he was elected a delegate to the General Congress, by the convention of deputies from several counties in New York. He was also elected a delegate for 1776, by the Provincial Assembly, and he became one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, in August of that year.

Mr. Lewis was a shining mark for the resentment of the British and Tories,⁸ and while the former possessed Long Island, they not only destroyed his property, but had the brutality to confine his wife in a close prison for several months, without a bed or a change of raiment, whereby her constitution was ruined, and she died two years afterward.

Having attained to the ripe age of nearly ninety years, and honored by the universal reverence and esteem of his countrymen, Mr. Lewis departed this life on the thirtieth of December, 1803.

⁷ Louis-Joseph de Montcalm-Gazon \ mōⁿ-kalm-gaw-zōⁿ\ was a French soldier who commanded the French army during the French and Indian War (1754–63) between France and Great Britain.

⁸ "Those are *Whigs* who would curb the power of the Crown; those are Tories who would curb the power of the people." —Sir Richard Phillips.