

MEN OF THE DECLARATION

INDEPENDENCE DAY SPECIAL – 2016

This Fourth of July is the 240th birthday of when our Founders' issued a declaration of independence to King George III and Parliament of Great Britain. Fifty-six men from the thirteen colonies signed the document and its distribution signaled the beginning of the War for Independence.

There are but a few men who are presently well-known among the signers such as John Hancock, John Adams, Samuel Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Richard Henry Lee, Francis Lightfoot Lee, and Thomas Jefferson. The names of the remaining forty-nine are relatively unknown, yet to a man, these individuals brought sterling credentials to the debate in Philadelphia. Aristocrats, doctors, lawyers, educators, pastors, planters, businessmen, and military officers made up this distinguished gathering of highly educated and accomplished leaders of the fledgling commonwealth.

I have selected one man from each of the thirteen colonies for our study. Two of them are well-known: John Hancock and Richard Henry Lee. The rest, most likely not. Each was chosen to demonstrate the high degree of honor, integrity, patriotism, courage, intelligence, ingenuity, and accomplishments these men possessed. They exemplify the types of men who gathered as one to participate in the founding of our Republic

It is my intent that the synopses of these individuals' biographies will adequately illustrate and amplify the magnanimity of the men who stepped forward, debated, concluded, and went public by signing their names to a document that fomented revolution against the Mother Country. And they did so with clear vision of the magnitude of their decision as they mutually pledged to each other "our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."

The text quoted was written in 1848 by Benson J. Lossing and is typical of the writing style of the nineteenth century.

1. From the Colony of New Hampshire:



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. His father, when he emigrated to America, first settled at Wiscasset, in Maine, and in the course of a few years moved to Worchester, in Massachusetts, where he gave his son an academical education, with a view to fit him for one of the learned professions. Matthew chose the medical profession, and at the close of his preparatory studies, he commenced his business career in Londonderry, New Hampshire.

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.

Dr. Thornton was not the only one to whom this indulgence was granted. There were several members absent when the vote was taken on the adoption of that instrument on the fourth of July, but who, approving of the measure, subsequently signed his name thereto.

In 1789, Dr. Thornton purchased a farm in Exeter, where he resided until the time of his death 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 Hygeian virtues, *temperance* and *cheerfulness*, he attained a patriarchal age.

2. From the Colony of Massachusetts:



John Hancock. One of the most distinguished personages of the War for Independence was John Hancock, who was born near the village of Quincy, in Massachusetts, in the year 1737. His father and grandfather were both ministers of the gospel. His father is represented as a pious, industrious, and faithful pastor; a friend of the poor, and a patron of learning. He died while John was quite an infant, and left him to the care of a paternal uncle, who cherished him with great affection. This relative was a merchant in Boston, who had amassed a large fortune, and after having given John a collegiate education at Harvard College (where at the age of seventeen years he graduated in 1754) he took him into his counting-room as clerk. His abilities proved such, that, in 1760, he sent him on a business mission to England, where he was present at the funeral rites of George II, and the coronation ceremonies of George III. Soon after his return to America, his uncle died, and left him, at the age of twenty-six, in possession of a princely fortune – one of the largest in the Province of Massachusetts.

In 1776, he was chosen a representative for Boston in the General Provincial Assembly, where he had for his colleagues some of the most active patriots of the day, such as Samuel Adams, James Otis, and Thomas Cushing.

Years before Mr. Hancock entered upon public life, the tyrannous measures of the British cabinet had excited the fears of the American colonies, and aroused a sentiment of resistance that long burned in the people's hearts before it burst forth into a flame of rebellion.

These feelings were familiar to the bosom of young Hancock, for he imbibed the principles of liberty with the breath of his infancy, and when circumstances called for a manifestation thereof, they exhibited the sturdy vigor of maturity.

When Parliament adopted those obnoxious measures toward America, which immediately succeeded the odious Stamp Act, Mr. Hancock was a member of the Provincial Assembly, and, in union with those patriots before named, and others, he determined not to submit to them. He was one of the first who proposed and adopted nonimportation measures, a system which gradually spread to the other colonies, and produced a powerful effect upon the home government. He became a popular leader and drew upon himself the direst wrath of offended royalty.

In 1774, the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts unanimously elected Hancock their president. The same year he was chosen a delegate to the Continental Congress; and was re-elected to the same station in 1775. When, during the summer of that year, Payton Randolph left the presidential chair of that body, John Hancock was elected to the station, — a gift the most exalted possessed by the American people. In that office he labored arduously, and filled that chair on the ever-memorable Fourth of July 1776. As President, he first signed the Declaration of Independence, and with his name alone, it first went forth to the world.

Mr. Hancock continued a popular leader until the time of his death, and no one could successfully contend with him for office. He was not a man of extraordinary talent, but was possessed of that tact and peculiar genius fitted for the era in which he lived. He died on the eighth of October 1793, in the fifty-fifth year of his age.

3. From the Colony of Rhode Island:



Elbridge Gerry was born in Marblehead, Massachusetts, on the seventeenth of July 1744. His father was a merchant in extensive business, and he resolved to give his son an excellent education. When his preparatory studies were concluded, he entered Harvard College, and graduated with the title of A.B.,¹ in 1762.

He soon after entered into commercial pursuits, amassed a handsome fortune, and by his intelligence and good character, won for himself the esteem of his fellow-citizens. He watched with much solicitude the rapid strides which the oppressions of Great Britain were making in this country, and having expressed his sentiments fearlessly, his townsmen elected him a member of the General Court of the province in 1773.

Mr. Gerry was active in all the leading political movements in Massachusetts until the War broke out. He was a member of the first Provincial Congress of that province, and was one of the most efficient opposers of Governor Gage.

He was a member of the provincial Congress at the time of the battle of Bunker Hill. The night preceding that event, he and General Warren slept together in the same bed. They bade each other an affectionate farewell in the morning, and separated, Mr. Gerry to go to the Congress, sitting at Watertown, and Dr. Warren to be slain upon the battlefield.

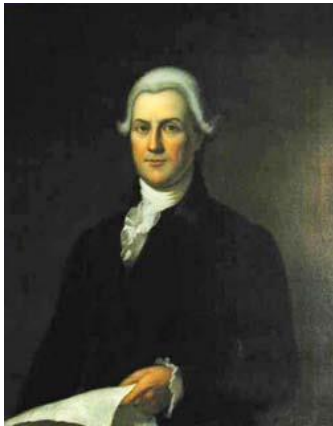
¹ *Artium Baccalaureus* (Bachelor of Arts).

In January 1776, Mr. Gerry was elected a delegate to the Continental Congress. There his commercial knowledge proved very useful, and he was put upon many committees where such knowledge was needed. He was a warm supporter of the resolution of Mr. (Richard Henry) Lee, declaring the United States free and independent, and he signed his name to the Declaration on the second of August, following its adoption.

In 1811, he was nominated for, and elected, Vice President of the United States.

While in the performance of his duties at the seat of government, he was suddenly seized with illness, and died on the twenty-third of November 1814 at the age of seventy years.

4. From the Colony of Connecticut:



Samuel Huntington. The family of Samuel Huntington was among the earlier settlers of Connecticut, who located at Saybrook. He was born at Windham, Connecticut, on the second of July 1732. Samuel was very studious, and the active energies of his mind surmounted many obstacles that stood in the way of intellectual advancement.

He acquired a tolerable knowledge of the Latin language, and at the age of twenty-two years he commenced the study of law. Like Roger Sherman he was obligated to pursue it with borrowed books and without an instructor. He succeeded, however, in mastering its difficulties, and in obtaining a good practice in his native town, before he was thirty years of age.

Mr. Huntington was elected to the General Assembly of Connecticut in 1764, and the next year he was chosen a member of the Council.

He was appointed Associate Judge of the Superior Court in 1774; and in 1775 he was appointed one of the delegates from Connecticut, in the General Congress. The following year he had the glorious privilege of voting for, and signing, the Declaration of Independence. He was a member of the Congress nearly five consecutive years, and was esteemed as one of the most active men there.

His integrity and patriotism were stern and unbending; and so conspicuous became his sound judgment and untiring industry, that in 1779 he was appointed President of [the Continental] Congress, then the highest office in the nation.

He was appointed Chief Justice of the Superior Court of his State in 1784. In 1785 he was elected Lieutenant Governor, and was promoted to the Chief Magistracy [Governor} in 1786, which office he held until his death, which occurred at Norwich, on the fifth day of January 1796, in the sixty-fourth year of his age.

Governor Huntington lived a life of the irreproachable and sincere Christian, and those who knew him most intimately, loved him the most affectionately. He was a thoughtful man, and talked but little – the expression of his mind and heart was put forth in his actions. He seemed to have a natural timidity, or modesty, which some mistook for the reserve of haughtiness, yet with those with whom he was familiar, he was free and winning in his manners.

Investigation was a prominent characteristic of his mind, and when his faculty led him to a conclusion, it was difficult to turn him from the path of his determination. Hence as a devoted Christian and a true patriot, he never swerved from duty, or looked back after he had placed his hand to the work. The cultivation of this faculty of *decision* we would earnestly recommend to youth, for it is the strong arm that will lead them safely through many difficulties, and win for them that sentiment of *reliance* in the minds of others, which is so essential in securing their esteem and confidence. It was this most important faculty which constituted the chief aid to Samuel Huntington in his progress from the humble calling of a ploughboy, to the acme of official station, where true greatness was essential, and to which none but the truly good could aspire.

5. From the Colony of New York:



Lewis Morris was born at Morrisania, Westchester county, New York, in the year 1726. Being the eldest son, he inherited his father's manorial estate, which placed him in affluent circumstances. At the age of sixteen years he entered Yale College, and under the presidency of the excellent Reverend Mr. Clapp, he received his education.

Mr. Morris was a handsome man; and his personal appearance, connected with a strong intellect and great wealth, made him popular throughout the Colony.

When Great Britain oppressed her children here, he hardly felt the unkind hand, yet his sympathy for others was aroused, and he was among the first to risk ease, reputation and fortune, by coalescing with the patriots of Massachusetts and Virginia. His clear perception saw the end from the beginning, and those delusive hopes which the repeal of obnoxious acts held forth, had no power over Lewis Morris. Neither could they influence his patriotism, for he was a stranger to a vacillating, temporizing spirit. Hence, when he forsook his quiet hearth, and engaged in the party strife of the Revolution, hazarding fortune and friends, no sinister motive could be alleged for his actions, and all regarded him as a patriot without selfish alloy.

He was elected to Congress in 1776 and when the question of independence came up, he boldly advocated the measure, although it seemed in opposition to all his worldly interests.

He plainly foresaw what actually happened – his house ruined, his farm wasted, his forest of a thousand acres despoiled, his cattle carried off, and his family driven into exile by the invading foe.

He voted for and signed the Declaration of Independence, and his State afterward thanked him for his patriotic firmness. His family seemed to be imbued with his own sentiments, for three of his sons entered the army, served with distinction, and received the approbation of Congress.

Mr. Morris relinquished his seat in the National Council in 1777, but he was constantly employed in public service in his native State, either in its legislature, or as a military commander, until the adoption of the Constitution. He died in January 1778 in the seventy-second year of his age. His funeral presented a large concourse of citizens, who truly mourned his loss; and the military honors due to his rank of Major General, were rendered, when his body was committed to the family vault.

6. From the Colony of New Jersey:



John Witherspoon was born in the parish of Yester, near Edinburgh, Scotland, on the fifth of February 1722. He was a lineal descendant of the great reformer, John Knox. His father was a minister in the Scottish church, at Yester, and was greatly beloved. He took great pains to have the early education of his son based upon sound moral and religious principles, and early determined to fit him for the gospel ministry. His primary education was received in a school at Haddington, and at the age of fourteen years he was placed in the University of Edinburgh. He was a very diligent student, and, to the delight of his father, his mind was specially directed toward sacred literature. He went through a regular theological course of study, and at the age of twenty-two years he graduated, a licensed preacher.

He was severally invited to take charge of a parish and flock, at Dublin, in Ireland; Dundee, in Scotland; and Rotterdam, in Holland; but he declined them all. In 1766 he was invited, by a unanimous vote of the trustees of New Jersey College [later Princeton], to become its president, but this, too, he declined, partly on account of the unwillingness of his wife to leave the land of her nativity. Being strongly urged by Richard Stockton (afterward his colleague in Congress, and fellow signer of the Declaration of Independence), then on a visit to that country, he accepted the appointment, and sailed to America. He arrived at Princeton with his family, in August 1768, and on the seventeenth of that month he was inaugurated president of the College.

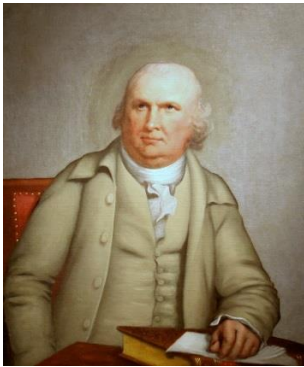
When the British army invaded New Jersey, the College at Princeton was broken up, and the extensive knowledge of Dr. Witherspoon was called into play in a vastly different arena. He was called upon early in 1776, to assist in the formation of a new Constitution for New Jersey, and his patriotic sentiments and sound judgment were there so conspicuous that in June of that year, he was elected a delegate to the General Congress. He had already formed a decided opinion in favor of Independence, and he gave his support to the resolution declaring the States free forever. On the second of August 1776, he affixed his signature to the Declaration.

Dr. Witherspoon was a member of Congress from the period of his first election until 1782, and so strict was he in his attendance, that it was a very rare thing to find him absent. He was placed upon the most important committees, and intrusted (*sic*) with delicate commissions. He took conspicuous part in both military and financial matters, and his colleagues were astonished at the versatility of his knowledge.

After the restoration of peace in 1783, Doctor Witherspoon withdrew from public life, except so far as his duties as a minister of the gospel brought him before his flock.

As a theological writer, Doctor Witherspoon had few superiors, and as a statesman he held the first rank. In him were centered the social elements of an upright citizen, a fond parent, a just juror, and humble Christian; and, on the tenth of November 1794, at the age of nearly seventy-three years, his useful life closed.

7. From the Colony of Pennsylvania:



Robert Morris, the distinguished patriot and financier of the Revolution, was born in Lancashire, England, in January 1733. His father was a Liverpool merchant, extensively engaged in the American trade, and when Robert was a small child, he left him in the care of his grandmother, came to this country, and settled at Oxford on the eastern shore of Chesapeake Bay. He finally sent for his family, and Robert was thirteen years old when he arrived.

Young Morris was placed in the counting room of Mr. Charles Willing, one of the leading merchants of Philadelphia, when he was fifteen years old, and about the same time he became an orphan by the sudden death of his father. Robert was greatly esteemed by Mr. Willing who gave him every advantage his business afforded; and at the death of his master and friend, he was a finished merchant.

In 1754, Mr. Morris formed a mercantile business partnership with Mr. Thomas Willing. The firm soon became the most extensive importing-house in Philadelphia, and rapidly increased in wealth and standing. But it was not until the tragedy at Lexington aroused the fiercest indignation of the colonists and extinguished all hope of reconciliation, that Mr. Morris took an active part in public affairs.

It is said that Mr. Morris and a number of others, members of the Sr. George's Society, were at dinner, celebrating the anniversary of St. George's Day, when the news of the battle of Lexington reached them. Astonishment and indignation filled the company, and they soon dispersed.

A few remained and discussed the great question of American freedom: and there, within that festive hall, did Robert Morris and a few others, by a solemn vow, dedicate their lives, their fortunes, and their honor, to the sacred cause of the Revolution.

Mr. Morris was elected to Congress on the eighteenth of July 1776, fourteen days after the Declaration of Independence was adopted; and being in favor of the measure, he affixed his signature thereto on the second of August following.

When Congress fled to Baltimore, on the approach of the British across New Jersey, Mr. Morris, after removing his family into the country, returned to, and remained in Philadelphia. Almost in despair, Washington wrote to him, and informed him that to make any successful movement whatever, a considerable sum of money must be had. It was a requirement that seemed almost impossible to meet. Mr. Morris left his counting-room for his lodgings in utter despondency. On his way he met a wealthy Quaker, and made known his wants. "What security can'st thou give?" he asked. "My note and my honor," promptly replied Mr. Morris. The Quaker replied: "Robert, thou shalt have it." It was sent to Washington, the Delaware was crossed, and victory won.

Many instances of a similar nature are related, where the high character of Mr. Morris enabled him to procure money when the government could not, and his patriotism never faltered in inducing him to apply it to the public benefit.

In 1781, upon the urgent solicitation of Congress, Mr. Morris accepted the appointment of general financial agent of the United States, in other words, Secretary of the Treasury. His business talent, and his extensive credit at home and abroad, were brought to bear in this vocation, and upon him alone, for a long time, rested the labor of supplying a famished and naked army and furnishing other necessary supplies for the public service.

Congress, at that time, could not have obtained a loan of one thousand dollars, yet Robert Morris effected loans upon his own credit, of tens of thousands.

It has been justly remarked, that: "If it were not demonstrable by official records, posterity would hardly be made to believe that the campaign of 1781, which resulted in the capture of Cornwallis, and virtually closed the Revolutionary War, was sustained wholly on the credit of an individual merchant."

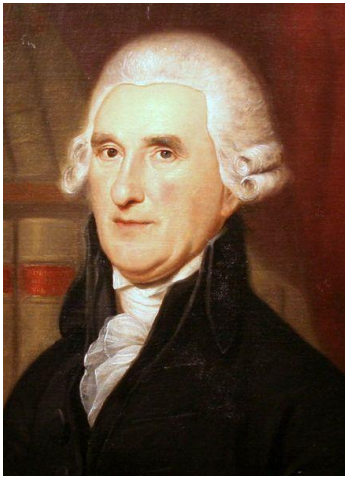
At the time, Washington was preparing in his camp upon the Hudson in Westchester county, to attack Sir Henry Clinton in New York, Mr. Morris and Judge Peters of Pennsylvania were then at headquarters. Washington received a letter from Count de Grasse \gräs², announcing his determination not to sail for New York. He was bitterly disappointed, but almost before the cloud had passed from his brow, he conceived the expedition against Cornwallis, at Yorktown. "What can you do for me?" said Washington to Mr. Peters. "With money, everything, without it, nothing," he replied, at the same time turning with anxious look toward Mr. Morris. "Let me know the sum you desire," said Mr. Morris; and before noon Washington's plan and estimates were complete. Mr. Morris promised him the amount, and he raised it upon his own responsibility.

² Francois Comte de Grasse commanded French fleet in Chesapeake Bay which prevented English fleet from giving aid to Cornwallis at Yorktown.

Mr. Morris served a regular term in the United States Senate, and then retired forever from public life. By his liberal expenditures and free proffers of his private obligations for the public benefit, he found his ample fortune very much diminished at the close of hostilities.

He sunk to rest in the grave, on the eighth day of May 1806, in the seventy-third year of his age, leaving a widow with whom he had lived in uninterrupted domestic happiness for thirty-seven years.

8. From the Colony of Delaware:



Thomas McKean was born in New London, Chester County, Pennsylvania, in the year 1734. His father was a native of Ireland. After receiving the usual elementary instruction, he was placed under the care of Reverend Doctor Allison, and was a pupil under him. At the conclusion of his studies, he entered the office of David Finney, of New Castle, as a law student; and so soon did his talents become manifest, that in the course of a few months after entering upon the study of the law, he was employed as an assistant clerk of the Court of Common Pleas. In fact, he performed all the duties of the principal. He was admitted to the bar before he was twenty-one years of age.

Mr. McKean was a delegate to the “Stamp Act Congress” in 1765, and was the associate upon a committee with James Otis and Thomas Lynch, in preparing an address to the British House of Commons. He, with his colleagues, defied the Stamp Act, by using unstamped paper in their legal proceedings.³

³ “Stamp Act in U.S. colonial history, first British parliamentary attempt to raise revenue through direct taxation of all commercial and legal papers, newspapers, pamphlets, cards, almanacs, and dice. Completely unexpected was the avalanche of protest from the colonists, who effectively nullified the Stamp Act by outright refusal to use the stamps as well as by riots, stamp burning, and intimidation of colonial stamp distributors. Colonists passionately upheld their rights as Englishmen to be taxed only by their own consent through their own representative assemblies, as had been the practice for a century and a half” (*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, 15th ed. [Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2010], 11:206–207).

Mr. McKean zealously opposed the encroachments of British power upon American rights, and he heartily concurred in the sentiments of the Massachusetts Circular, recommending a General Congress. He was elected a delegate thereto, was present at the opening on the fifth of September 1774, and soon became distinguished as one of the most active men in that august body. He continued a member of the Continental Congress from that time, until ratification of the treaty of peace in 1783. Impressed with the conviction that reconciliation with Great Britain was out of the question, he zealously supported the measure which led to a final Declaration of Independence; and when that Declaration was submitted to Congress for action, he voted for and signed it.

Mr. McKean was claimed as a citizen by both Pennsylvania and Delaware, and he faithfully served them both, for in 1777 he was Chief Justice of the former and President of the latter. In addition to these offices he was Speaker of the Delaware Assembly, and delegate to the Continental Congress.

He continued in the chair of Chief Justice of Pennsylvania until 1799 (a period of twenty years) when he was elected Governor of the State. To this office he was elected three successive terms, and held it nine years.

He then withdrew into private life, where he remained until his death, which occurred on the twenty-fourth day of June 1817 in the eighty-fourth year of his age.