

THE HISTORY QUARTERLY

Vol. 1

October, 1926

No. 1

THE SIGNING OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

During this sesquicentennial year our thoughts naturally revert to that theatre where the stage was the thirteen American colonies, the scenes real and true, not merely depicted for the pleasure of an audience, and the applause not given for the gratification of some playwright. Those characters were real men and women, living real parts; their tragedies, melodramas, and love affairs were no playthings carefully thought out and studied that their shadows might be thrown upon a screen for the temporary amusement of audiences and then forgotten, but their acts were destined to influence generations to come and, indeed, future civilization. All our colonies bordered on the Atlantic, and, on land, our Revolutionary stage reached from northern New Hampshire and Vermont to southern Georgia and, indeed, beyond, for we fought at Quebec and some of our "Signers" were imprisoned at St. Augustine. It did not go far into the interior, however, before encountering the hostile Indians.

Climatic conditions and character of soil prevented those living at the extremes from having much in common, and yet Christopher Gadsden of South Carolina was one of the first to advocate separation from the mother country, a move that was early and ardently advocated by the Lees of Virginia and Adams and Hancock of Massachusetts, for, even before the battles of Lexington and Concord, the British endeavored to capture Adams and Hancock to try them for treason. In New England the sentiment for separation was so strong that it was difficult for their delegates to the Continental Congress to see and appreciate the other side. Whereas in the middle states, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland, and

also in South Carolina, the prevailing sentiment was in favor of preserving our union with Great Britain. When the Massachusetts delegates were approaching Philadelphia in 1775, they were met by some of our Pennsylvania patriots and particularly cautioned not even to "lisp the word Independence."

The place selected for the Congress to meet was at Philadelphia near the center of this hotbed of Toryism, and the middle states had specifically instructed their delegates to oppose any move looking towards independence. Those delegates favoring the American cause soon gravitated together, kept in close touch with each other, watched those who entertained Tory sentiments, and through correspondence with kindred spirits helped to develop and strengthen the idea of separation. Much, if not most, of their serious work was done in small groups and committees of whose transactions no official records were kept, and, but for their correspondence, we would, indeed, be in the dark as to how they did it. Most of that correspondence now in existence has probably come to light, and much of it has been and is being published. Thus it was that they determined what resolutions should be introduced and by whom, and it was in this way that Washington was nominated by Thomas Johnson of Maryland as General and Commander in Chief of the Army.

As the spirit of independence developed, people began boldly to express their sentiments in its favor, first as localities, then as counties, and later as colonies. On the fifteenth of May, 1776, Virginia instructed her delegates to introduce a resolution looking toward independence. Accordingly on June 7, Richard Henry Lee introduced the following resolution:

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.

That it is expedient forthwith to take the most effectual measures for forming foreign alliances.

That a plan of confederation be prepared and transmitted to the respective Colonies for their consideration and approbation.

With the delegates from the five middle states under specific instructions to oppose such action and with the Congress as then constituted, the resolution could not be carried; however, sentiment in these states was changing rapidly, and those delegates who were for independence felt the time was ripe for forcing the issue. New Jersey on June 21 changed her instructions and elected an entirely new delegation; Maryland changed her instructions on June 28. The resolutions of the Pennsylvania and Delaware conventions were not clear and decisive, and the delegates from those states felt free to follow their individual judgments. The New York delegates felt that the sentiment in their state was tending towards independence, but, until their instructions were changed, did not feel they would be justified in casting their vote that way. The South Carolina delegates were opposed to it. Congress postponed action on Lee's resolution for a day, then for two days, and following that for three weeks more, and, on June 10, "that no time be lost, in case the Congress agree thereto," a committee was "appointed to prepare a declaration to the effect of the said first resolution." Richard Henry Lee was the logical chairman of that committee, but he was suddenly called home by the illness of his wife, and Jefferson was substituted in his stead, the other members being John Adams of Massachusetts, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, Robert R. Livingston of New York, and Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania. Livingston was opposed to the action, returned to New York, and, so far as I know and believe, took no active part in the work of the committee. Jefferson actually made the draft of the Declaration, on which Adams and Franklin wrote modifications, each in his own handwriting, emphasizing certain points even stronger than Jefferson had done. The copy that Jefferson laid before Congress as the report of his committee was a clean one as altered. Consideration of it was begun on July first, the date agreed upon. Between then and the fourth of July, it ran the gauntlet, and came out materially modified by many amendments.

The real work of considering it was done in the committee of the whole, where the feeling was most tense, and whose proceedings were not recorded. On July 1, Pennsylvania and South Carolina were opposed, the Delaware vote divided, and New York not voting. Rutledge of South Carolina asked for

postponement of a day because the South Carolina delegation thought the time was not yet ripe for independence, but they felt that unanimity of action was most important and he believed on the morrow they would vote for it. On July 2, the independence resolution of Lee was passed without a dissenting vote, owing to the absence of Dickinson and Morris of Pennsylvania; Delaware being still divided and New York not voting. The Declaration of Independence was passed on July 4, the Pennsylvania delegation being the same as on the second; Caesar Rodney having arrived casting the deciding vote for Delaware in favor of independence; New York still not voting. On July 9, New York instructed her delegation to vote for independence, and the action was reported to Congress on the fifteenth, thus making it unanimous.

Outdone by the action of those who had opposed independence, the Pennsylvania Conference had a meeting on July 20 and elected a full delegation of nine, four of whom were re-elected, those nine being the signers for Pennsylvania.

On July 19, now that New York had acted, Congress passed the following:

Resolved, That the Declaration passed on the 4th, be fairly engrossed on parchment, with the title and stile of 'The unanimous declaration of the thirteen United States of America', and that the same, when engrossed, be signed by every member of Congress.

On July 4 Congress had provided for publishing and distributing copies of the Declaration. On July 5 the printed document was completed by the signatures of John Hancock as president, and Charles Thomson, as secretary, and it was sent to the governors of the several states and to the generals to be read to the army.

The act of July 19, however, was for another purpose. Those who were taking part in the passage of this measure were committing treason in the eyes of the British, even though absolute proof of their complicity might be difficult. There had been in Congress some who remained true to the British cause, and our patriots determined to eliminate them definitely and permanently; hence, they decided to require each member of Congress

to sign the Declaration, thus undeniably linking him up with the American cause and approval of that document. The fact that they recognized the seriousness of their act is well attested by the following: Hancock remarked, "We must be unanimous, there must be no pulling different ways; we must all hang together," to which Franklin replied, "Yes, we must, indeed, all hang together or most assuredly we shall hang separately."

The actual signing of the engrossed copy did not begin until August 2, when those then present signed. By the middle of January following all but one member had signed, and on January 17, 1777, Congress ordered the Declaration reprinted with the signatures attached thereto; hence, this publication contained the names of only fifty-five signers. McKean was in the field commanding his regiment and did not have an opportunity to sign until after the document was published.

Singular as it may seem, when the Acts of Congress were first published, under date of July 4, the Declaration of Independence was printed with the names of the fifty-six signers as though they had signed on that date, an error which caused much confusion as to when that document was actually signed by those eminent men, because several of those who were members on July 4 never signed the document, their terms of office having expired before August 2, and others who did sign it were not elected until after July 4.

The British were resentful to all those who sided with the American colonies and made especial efforts to capture and persecute those who had signed the Declaration of Independence, and members of their families. In New York, the wife of Francis Lewis was captured, thrown in prison, and kept there for several weeks, it is said, without even a change of clothing; then she was released. In New Jersey, Richard Stockton was taken prisoner at Monmouth on November 30, 1776, and was cruelly treated for about three weeks, until he was released. Whilst in prison he was re-elected to Congress, but never took his seat, nor did he ever again take any active part in the American cause, though he did nothing that was disloyal. His colleagues censured him for his inaction and it is thought that, in order to obtain his release, he was compelled to take the oath of abnegation. In 1781, the British invaded Virginia, and the legislature adjourned from Williamsburg to Richmond and

later to Charlottesville. Jefferson was then governor, and three of the signers, Richard Henry Lee, Thomas Nelson, Jr., and Benjamin Harrison, were members of the legislature. Cornwallis ordered Tarleton to make a raid on Charlottesville, break up the legislature, and capture Jefferson with the view of sending him to England in irons to be tried for treason. Some thirty-five miles from Charlottesville, young Captain Jack Jouett learned what the raid was intended to accomplish, and, making a very remarkable ride through short cuts and byways, he reached Monticello in time to enable Jefferson and his family to escape just a few minutes before Tarleton arrived. He rode on into Charlottesville, where he warned the legislators, and most of them, including the signers, escaped, though some of the others were taken prisoners. At the surrender of Charleston, in 1780, the three South Carolina signers who were then living, Heyward, Middleton, and Rutledge, were all taken prisoners and sent to St. Augustine, where they were confined in Fort Marion for nearly a year, and, whilst there, one of the prisoners wrote the following stanzas, which are generally attributed to Heyward, though there is no positive proof of that fact,—

“When first Sir Henry came to town,
To finish all vexation,
He, in obedience to the crown,
Did make a proclamation,

“Desiring all, both great and small,
To come and swear allegiance;
At which some looked very glad,
And some declared obedience.

“Among the rest was Williams Bob,*
Who was so very funny,
Sir Henry’s troops might steal and rob,
So he could keep his money.

*Robert Williams.

“Sir Henry’s right he will maintain,
And swears by all it is so,
The righteous cause he will sustain,
Like honest Tommy Phippoe.

“Sweet George,* indeed, is little known,
But you shall hear the story:
His limbs he swore he would have none,
E’er he would turn a Tory.

“First, then, said he, cut off my thighs,
And this you may believe, sir,
Cut off my arms, my head, likewise,
You’ll leave an honest trunk, sir.

“But honest George soon changed his mind,
Petitioned for protection,
Would rather keep his limbs, we find,
Than undergo dissection.”

R. C. BALLARD THRUSTON

*Dr. G. Carter.