

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Ask those same people you questioned about Paul Revere's ride what happened on July 4, 1776, that caused this nation to celebrate that date as Independence Day ever since, and you will get mostly wrong answers again. They will probably say, "The Declaration of Independence was signed," but that is incorrect.

There are three important dates concerning American independence and the document that proclaimed it:

July 2—The Second Continental Congress *voted for independence.*

July 4—Congress *voted on and approved the Declaration of Independence.*

August 2—Most members of Congress *signed the Declaration.* ①

The entire independence business began on June 7 when Richard Henry Lee, delegate from Virginia, offered Congress a resolution 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.

Debate raged for several days until all the colonies were lined up in favor of the resolution except New York, whose delegates awaited instructions from home. Meanwhile, a committee headed by Thomas Jefferson went ahead with drafting a declaration of independence. On July 2 the resolution passed. ②

WHEN IS INDEPENDENCE DAY?

Was this day, July 2, really Independence Day? The delegates thought it would be. John Adams wrote his wife: "The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable . . . in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival."

But it was not to be: Americans would celebrate not the act of independence, but the day that act was proclaimed to the world. On the famous Fourth, the Congress approved—but *did not sign*—a final version of Jefferson's masterpiece and ordered it printed. Only John Hancock, as president of the Congress, put his John Hancock on it that day except for Charles Thomson (sic), the secretary, who signed merely to attest Hancock's signature. On July 19, after hearing the New York legislature had approved their action, the Congress ordered the Declaration embossed on parchment. Now it could be entitled *The Unanimous Declaration of Independence of the United States of America*—and now it could be signed. ③

The formal signing ceremony was held on August 2, but some members who were not there that day signed it later. (It is believed about fifty of the fifty-five signers were present.) Some who signed were not members on July 2 and had not voted for it, while some who had voted on that date were no longer members and did not sign it.

WHY THE FOURTH?

The question still remains: Why do we celebrate July 4 instead of July 2? All that happened on the Fourth was official sanction of a document explaining why thirteen

American colonies had declared their independence from Great Britain. One reason is that the people didn't know yet what had happened on July 2; meetings of the Congress were secret—after all, what they were doing was treason. Hancock stepped down from the chair and the voting was done informally so that no records needed to be kept. Because of this, Richard Henry Lee's resolution went unnoticed for years. ④

The Declaration, on the other hand, was a full and ringing statement for all the world to hear. For most citizens of the new republic, it was, indeed, the first knowledge they had of what had gone on in Philadelphia's old State House. As far as the general body politic was concerned, July 4 *was* Independence Day.

In later years, after the July 4 tradition was firmly established, the Congress even doctored its own records to indicate the signing took place that day. Not until the secret *Journals* of the Congress were ordered printed by the United States Congress in 1821 did the facts become known.

The first known reading of the Declaration of Independence was on July 8 in Philadelphia—from a scaffold. The Liberty Bell did not ring out the news, as legend insists; nor did it crack at that time. It cracked while tolling for the death of John Marshall, the long-time Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, on July 6, 1835. ⑤

The Liberty Bell legend began in 1847 with the publication of the book *Washington and His Generals or Legends of the Revolution* by George Lippard, said to be the most popular writer of his day. Lippard, like Weems before him, made up the story out of whole cloth. The anti-slavery movement, trying to marshal all its forces at the time, adopted the bell as a symbol and distributed the first pictures of it. They first called it the "Liberty Bell," using its inscription, "Proclaim Liberty to all the Land and all the Inhabitants thereof," as a reference to slavery rather than to American independence.² ⑥