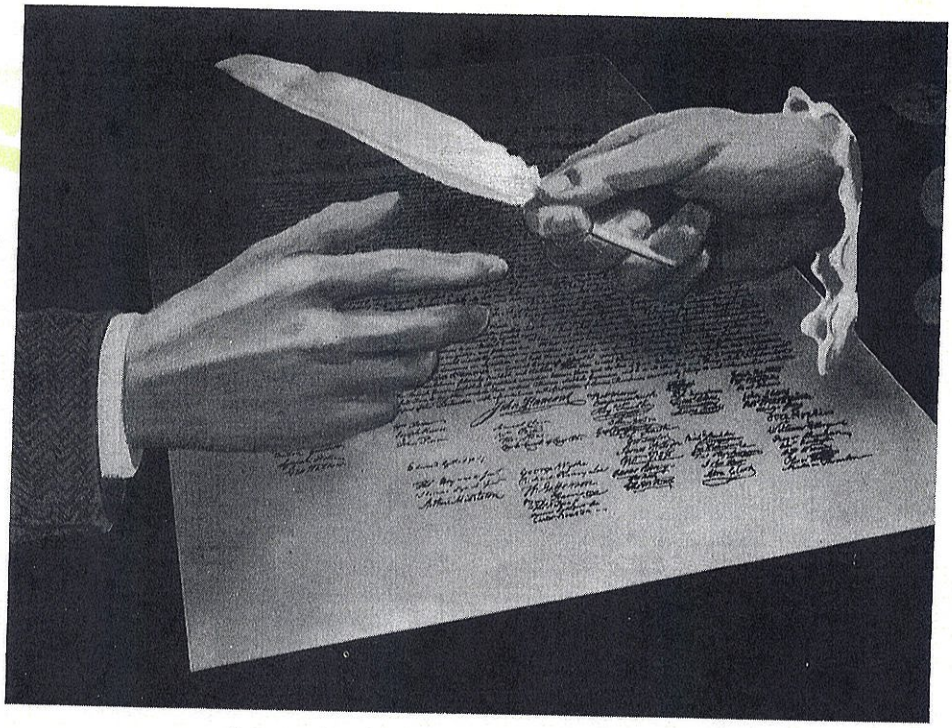
Their Lives, Their Fortunes, And Their Sacred Honor



How much will our generation risk for liberty?

Caesar Rodney was weary when he reached his plantation near Dover on the night of July 1, 1776. An outspoken advocate of American independence, Rodney was exhausted from many months of battling Delaware's Tories while building up and drilling the colony's militia. The 47-year-old son of a plantation owner, he was first elected to the colonial legislature in 1761, and sent to the First and Second Continental Congresses. Caesar Rodney was also afflicted with a painful and unsightly facial cancer. So terribly was he ravaged by the disease that he wore a green silk scarf over part of his face, and was described by one colleague as "an animated skeleton, with a bandaged head."

Tonight there was to be no rest for this weary patriot. An urgent message from his colleague, Thomas McKean, now demanded his presence in Philadelphia "at the earliest possible moment." McKean and George Read, the other two representatives from Delaware, were split on the issue of independence and Rodney's vote was needed if Delaware were to join the United States of America.

But Philadelphia was 80 miles away and a torrential rainstorm was swamping the region between the two cities. Exhausted and wracked by cancer, Rodney set out after dusk and rode all night through the pouring rain and the crashing thunder, stopping only long enough to change horses. As he raced through the stormy darkness, it must have occurred to Caesar Rodney that a political storm was rising out of Philadelphia that would change the course of history. It was a storm which had been building for more than a decade as the British Parliament and King George III imposed one oppressive measure after another on the Colonies, increasing their taxes and decreasing their freedoms.

The Grievances

The passage of the Stamp Act in 1765 had infuriated many wealthy and influential colonists, and was responsible for beginning the storm that settled over that historic assembly in Philadelphia in July of 1776. These Americans had become angry not so much at the amount of the taxes exacted as at the realization that this was only the opening move in a program of confiscatory taxation. If Parliament "may take from me one shilling in the pound," argued Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, "what security have I for the other nineteen?"

Although the Stamp Act was subsequently repealed, it had been followed by the Townshend Acts and the Writs of Assistance in 1767, the Boston Massacre in 1770, increasing interference in colonial governments, the Boston Port Bill in 1774, and other "injuries and usurpations, all having, in direct object, the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states."

The tyrannical actions of the Crown were quickly followed by measured and sometimes violent reactions from the colonists. They had held a Stamp Act Congress in New York during September of 1765, and that same year formed the Sons of Liberty, which one observer called "a mob of gentlemen." Committees of Correspondence were organized in 1772 to exchange information among the Colonies and mold public opinion in the

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developing struggle. And Continental Congresses were convened at Philadelphia in 1774 to deal with Britain's passage of the Intolerable Acts, and in 1775 shortly after the Battles of Lexington and Concord.

The Second Continental Congress had constituted itself a Provisional Government and had begun making preparations for war with Britain, including the creation of a Continental Army under the command of George Washington. But even as late as January 6, 1776, the Congress adopted a resolution stating that the Colonies "had no design to set up as an independent nation." Many men of influence were opposed to independence, preferring a return to the relationship of a dozen years earlier.

In January, however, a sensational pamphlet appeared in Philadelphia. It stirred more revolutionary fervor than anything that had been written to that time. Entitled *Common Sense*, the 25,000-word tract by Thomas Paine challenged British authority over the Colonies and bluntly stated that "the period of debate is closed. Arms, as a last resort, must decide the contest."

In the months that followed, impassioned speeches were delivered from New Hampshire to Georgia, and the tension became almost unbearable. Then, on June 7th, Richard Henry Lee put this resolution before the Congress:

> 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.

After several days of heated debate, final action on Lee's resolution was deferred until July 1st, and men on both sides of the issue used the intervening weeks to lobby for their own position. On July 1st, the Colonies, balloting according to a majority of each delegation, approved the Lee resolution by a vote of 9-2, with South Carolina and Pennsylvania opposed, Delaware deadlocked, and New York abstaining. Unanimity was essential, so Edward Rutledge of South Carolina moved that a final vote be postponed until the following day.

Thus had the stage been set as Caesar Rodney galloped up Chestnut Street to the State House in Philadelphia on the morning of July 2nd. He was enthusiastically greeted by Thomas McKean and escorted into the brick building where some 50 to 60 men were about to decide the fate of a continent.

There was no debate or discussion. The time had come to vote again on Richard Henry Lee's resolution. New England was unanimously for independence. New York still abstained, but New Jersey and Pennsylvania voted in the affirmative. The Pennsylvania delegation had been 4-3 against independence, but Robert Morris and John Dickinson deliberately stayed away from the State House during the balloting, allowing Pennsylvania, under the unit rule, to support independence despite instructions by which the two men felt themselves personally bound.

Delaware was called next by Charles Thomson, the Clerk of Congress, and Caesar Rodney, in a tired but clear voice, responded: "As I believe the voice of my constituents and of all sensible and honest men is in favor of independence, and my own judgment concurs with them, I vote for independence." Rodney knew very well that, now unable to go to England for treatment of his terrible cancer, he would die a horrible death.

There were no negative votes among the five southernmost Colonies — South Carolina went along for the sake of unity — and when the roll had been completed 12 Colonies had voted in favor of separation from Britain, and only New York had abstained. A monumental decision had been made, and now it would have to be implemented.

Declaring Themselves

The man chosen formally to declare the reasons for independence was Thomas Jefferson, a 33-year-old lawyer and plantation owner from Virginia. A member of the five-man drafting committee created immediately after the Lee resolution was introduced, Jefferson had proposed that John Adams of Massachusetts undertake the actual writing of the statement, but Adams declined. He said that the task should fall to his rival Jefferson on three counts: "Reason first, you are a Virginian, and Virginia 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."

"Well," said Jefferson, "if you are decided, I will do as well as I can."

That he did his job well is obvious to anyone who has read the Declaration of Independence, particularly his statement of the self-evident truths that "all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

On July 3rd, Jefferson's draft of the Declaration was submitted to the delegates from the 13 Colonies, and he suffered the pain of all authors at the hands of editors — in this case, half a hundred of them. The debate continued into the Fourth of July and, in Jefferson's own words, "seemed as though it would run on interminably. The weather was oppressively warm and the room occupied by the delegates was hard by a livery stable . . . . The horse-flies swarmed thick and fierce, alighting on the legs of the members and biting hard through their thin silk stockings. Handkerchief in hand they lashed at the hungry pests to no avail."

The revisions were completed on the evening of July 4th; the document was adopted without dissent; and the Declaration of Independence was ordered proclaimed throughout the United States. Only John Hancock signed the Declaration that day, and a formal signing by all the delegates was scheduled for August 2nd.

In the days that followed, copies of the Declaration of Independence were posted throughout the 13 states and read in public places. General Washington ordered that the document be read to each Army brigade on July 9th, and he reported afterwards to Congress on "the expressions and behavior of officers and men testifying their warmest approbation of it." Parades and demonstrations, patriotic observances and celebrations were held across the states. Exuberant citizens of Bowling Green, New York, hauled down a large equestrian statue of George III and carried it to the Connecticut home of General Oliver Wolcott, a

delegate to Congress. Wolcott's wife and children, and other ladies of the town, melted down the statue into 42,088 bullets for the American Army.

Meanwhile, the New York State Convention had finally voted to allow its delegates to approve the Declaration. On July 15th, New York became the 13th colony to affirm independence.

Two weeks later, August 2, 1776, the Congress met again at the State House in Philadelphia to formalize with their signatures what they had adopted a month before. Not all of those who had voted for independence on July 2nd were present in August. Some had left Congress; others were away and had to sign later; and several new delegates had since been elected.

Whatever their status that August, the 56 men who eventually signed the Declaration of Independence were under no illusions. They knew they were committing an act of high treason against the Crown and that the penalty for doing so was death by hanging. They understood quite clearly that they were indeed pledging "to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

William Ellery of Rhode Island deliberately moved close to the signing table "to see how they all looked as they signed what might be their death warrants." He said that "undaunted resolution was displayed on every countenance."

John Hancock of Massachusetts, the president of the Congress, had been the first to sign. "There!" he had said after writing his name in large, bold letters. "His Majesty can now read my name without spectacles, and can now double his reward of 500 pounds for my head. That is my defiance."

Hancock is also reported to have said that "we must be unanimous. There must be no pulling different ways; we must all hang together." To which the witty Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania reportedly replied: "Yes, we must all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately."

Stephen Hopkins of Rhode Island, the second-oldest signer, was afflicted with palsy. "My hand trembles," he said as he handed the quill to William Ellery, "but my heart does not." And Charles Carroll, a new delegate from Maryland and one of the wealthiest men in America, replied as he was asked by Hancock if he would sign: "Most willingly." When he had backed away from the table, one delegate whispered, "There go a few millions!"

Engraving of 49 of the 56 signers of the Declaration

And so it went through the rest of the states, with George Walton of Georgia the last to affix his name to the historic document that day. Even George Read of Delaware, who had voted against the Declaration on July 2nd, signed it; as did Robert Morris of Pennsylvania, who had stayed away from the session rather than vote no as he was formally instructed to do.

It took only a few minutes to complete the signing, and it was agreed not to make the signatures public for six months to give the signers and their families as much time as possible to secure themselves against certain reprisals. Despite this precaution, it is probable that the British Government and its Tory al-

The Declaration being read to Washington's army (Detail of Howard Pyle Illustration)

lies knew the names of every signer long before they were released to the public.

Men of Character

These 56 men who spoke for some two and a half million American freemen were a spectacular group of individuals. That such men were present at the moment of America's birth strongly suggests that the same Divine Providence they invoked in the Declaration of Independence had indeed planned it that way.

The signers were public-spirited and patriotic citizens who had for years been important participants in the affairs of their local communities and governments. Ranging in age from 26 (Edward Rutledge) to 70 (Benjamin Franklin), they were for the most part materially well-off in colonial society. Eleven delegates were prosperous merchants, nine were wealthy farmers or landowners, and 24 were lawyers or judges. The Colonies' most respected doctors, educators and clergymen were numbered among their ranks.

Here were the elite of eighteenth century America, but few were elitist. They were moral men, mostly religious, and all men of integrity who had been welded together in a common purpose. They had a great deal to lose — life, liberty and property — but they were convinced that the cause was worth the risk. That risk was not only substantial, it was imminent. On the day of the signing, the British fleet — an armada of dozens of ships with 42,000 sailors and soldiers — was waiting off the coast to crush these patriots and make an example of them. Behind that fleet was all the wealth and power of the British Empire.

Arrayed against such might was a Continental Army of 10,000 men, and a handful of poorly equipped and badly trained militia in the several states. Few with a knowledge of history would have predicted anything but disaster and ruin for those gathered in Philadelphia during the first week of August in 1776.

In point of fact, disaster and ruin was the lot of many of the signers. Nine died of wounds or hardships during the war. Five were jailed and brutally treated. One lost all 13 of his children. The wives, sons, and daughters of others were killed, imprisoned, harassed or deprived of all material possessions. Seventeen signers lost everything they owned, and all of them were hunted as traitors, with most separated from their homes and families.

But none of the signers ever betrayed his pledged word. There were no defectors. No one changed his mind. Lives and fortunes were lost, but their sacred honor was never sacrificed. Half continued to serve their country after the war — several as President, many as Members of Congress, governors, and state legislators — and a number of them later played a role in drawing up the Constitution of the United States.

Tragedy and Triumph

The first signer to die, in 1777, was John Morton of Pennsylvania, a former Crown officer who had been sent to Philadelphia to oppose independence. Once persuaded otherwise, however, Morton signed the Declaration and stood by his decision, though he was ostracized by his family and friends, many of whom were Tories. That reaction deeply hurt Morton, particularly when he was ignored even after he fell gravely ill early in 1777. On his deathbed, John Morton sent these final words to those who had rejected him: "Tell them that they will live to see the hour when they shall acknowledge it [the signing] to have been the most glorious service that I ever rendered to my country."

The New York signers — William Floyd, Philip Livingston, Francis Lewis, and Lewis Morris — were particularly vulnerable to British retaliation. The ink was hardly dry on the Declaration of Independence when General William Howe landed 25,000 British soldiers on New York's Long Island. They inflicted nearly 20 percent casualties on the Continental Army in a battle on August 27th. Washington ordered his forces to withdraw and the Redcoats laid waste to most of the countryside, destroying in the process the homes and lands of the four who had signed for New York.

The wife of William Floyd escaped with her children by boat across Long Island Sound into Connecticut. She died in 1781 without ever again seeing her home.

Philip Livingston lost two homes and much of his business property, but was able to sell some of his remaining holdings to help maintain the credit of the United States. He died in 1778 while separated from his family by the war.

Francis Lewis was away when the British ransacked his home, so they seized his wife, treated her brutally, and threw her into prison under foul conditions. Her health broke during captivity and Mrs. Lewis died shortly after being released in a 1778 prisoner exchange.

The other New York signer, Lewis Morris, lost his magnificent estate, "Morrisania," which was sacked and burned. He lived in poverty for years before he

was able to restore his property. Yet he so conducted himself that Benjamin Rush of Pennsylvania said of Morris that "every attachment of his heart yielded to his love of his country."

Great hardships and suffering were also inflicted upon three signers from neighboring New Jersey. John Hart, at the insistence of his dying wife, finally left her bedside to flee as a party of Hessians approached his farm. He was hunted by soldiers and dogs and was forced to hide in the woods and caves of the Sourland Mountains during icy December weather. When he was at last able to return to his home, John Hart found that his wife had died and his 13 children were scattered throughout the countryside or in captivity. His own health began to deteriorate and he was dead by the third anniversary of the signing of the Declaration.

Richard Stockton was betrayed by a loyalist and seized by the British, who subjected him to frequent beatings and starvation. When he was finally freed in a prisoner exchange, Stockton was an invalid who died a short time later at the age of 51.

Abraham Clark, the New Jersey signer who was known as the "Poor Man's Counsellor," had two sons — both Army officers — who were captured and accorded barbarous treatment on the hellship *Jersey*. The British offered freedom for his boys if he would abandon the American cause, but Abraham Clark refused. When other members of Congress heard of the plight of the Clark sons, they ordered George Washington to take a British prisoner, preferably an officer, and starve him to death in a dark hole. The mere communication of that congressional order to General Howe was enough to end the persecution of the Clark brothers and they survived their imprisonment.

During the siege of Yorktown in 1781, the British forces were under heavy attack from some 16,000 American troops, 3,000 Virginia militia, and the French fleet. The militia commander was signer Thomas Nelson Jr., who noticed that the artillery gunners were shelling everything in the vicinity except his own stately brick mansion, which was being used as British headquarters. "Why do you spare my house?" Nelson demanded of the gunners. "Sir, out of respect to you," an artilleryman replied. "Give me the cannon," Nelson shouted. The next round from the gun went through the mansion, killing the British officers inside and destroying the Nelson home.

Thomas Nelson Jr., who died in poverty after paying off his wartime debts "like an honest man," said he was only honoring a pledge he had made six years before. "I am a merchant of Yorktown, but I am a Virginian first," he declared in the House of Burgesses. "Let my trade perish. I call to God to witness that if any British troops are landed in the County of York, of which I am Lieutenant, I will wait no orders, but will summon the militia and drive the invaders into the sea!"

Joseph Hewes of North Carolina was a Quaker with a long pacifist heritage. For many months he sided with those in Congress who were opposed to independence. After much soul-searching, Hewes decided that his belief in liberty outweighed his pacifist convictions, and he joined those urging separation from England. During the war he devoted a superhuman effort to outfitting the Continental Navy, an activity which alienated him from his fellow Quakers. "My country is entitled to my services, and I shall not shrink from the cause, even though it should cost me my life," he declared. Joseph Hewes died in 1779, literally from overwork, a lonely man separated by principle from his Quaker friends and family.

During the British assault on South Carolina in 1780, three of that state's signers — Thomas Heyward Jr., Arthur Middleton, and Edward Rutledge — distinguished themselves in the defense of Charleston. All three were captured, refused a British offer of amnesty if they would repudiate the American cause, and were shipped to the Crown stockade at St. Augustine, Florida. Heyward defied the guards by writing new words to "God Save the King" and teaching the other prisoners to sing "God Save the States" to the old tune. The three South Carolinians were given their freedom in a prisoner exchange late in 1781. Thomas Heyward returned to find that his wife had died in hardship during his imprisonment.

Such was the caliber of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence, the men who risked their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to establish the American Republic and to guarantee our rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

"These are the times that try men's souls," Thomas Paine wrote in *Common Sense*. "The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it now deserves the thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like Hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph."

We, too, live in times that try men's souls. Like the Founding Fathers, we find the right to life and liberty threatened in our own country. We are burdened by an oppressive government that "has erected a multitude of new offices and sent hither swarms of officers to harass our people and eat out their substance," a government that has left us exposed and vulnerable to a foreign enemy bent upon our destruction.

And we have our own "summer soldiers and sunshine patriots" who shrink from the service of our country. But we also have many more courageous and dedicated men and women — some in the Congress, others in the state legislatures, still more in the cities and towns among people of all walks of life — who will not submit to tyranny, who are now vigorously defending our rights and fighting for less government, more responsibility, and, with God's help, a better world. This too is a time for patriots. And it is a time to remember that "the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph." ■

Looking Ahead

In the next issue of THE NEW AMERICAN:

- ★ James J. Drummey chronicles the reality of life under Communism;
- ★ Jane H. Ingraham reviews *Pinstripes and Reds* by David Funderburk, a former Reagan Administration ambassador to Communist Romania;
- ★ William F. Jasper interviews Russian defector and author Yuri Vetokhin;
- ★ Elizabeth Drummey profiles Armando Valladares, a prisoner of Castro for 22 years; and
- ★ Kirk Kidwell reports on the 4th International Conference on Aids.