GROTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Newsletter

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Washington, D.C. was full of visitors this summer, and many made their way to the National Archives, where they could see the original, signed Declaration of Independence.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: I'm not a historian, so please email me if I've made errors or I'm missing something essential. I'll correct and clarify online and also in the next issue of the newsletter.

Louise Reynolds

The Declaration of Independence:
How a new nation announced itself

LOUISE REYNOLDS

This year marks the 250th anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence by the Second Continental Congress. It's the year we commemorate the formal founding of the United States of America, and certainly, there is much to celebrate and contemplate at this juncture in our relatively short history.

Charged with honoring the event throughout the year—a task made more challenging by the fact that Vermont did not become part of the Union until 1791—the Directors of the Groton Historical Society began by reading the Declaration of Independence, in somewhat abbreviated form, at the start of Town Meeting in March. Today, it impresses us as a powerful document: eloquent, passionate, bold, brave and aspirational. I've tried to give the Declaration some context in case your U.S. History years are as far behind you as mine are. Several of my sources appear at the end of this article.

Early in 1775, Britain began to prepare for direct war with its American colonies. Many colonists were fearful the oppression they faced under colonial rule was increasing and would only get worse.

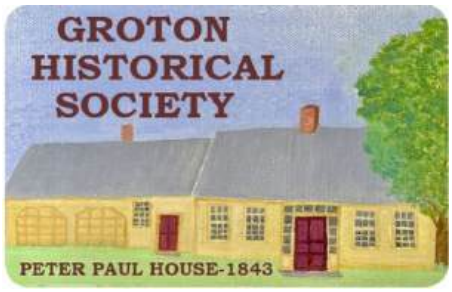
Not all colonists favored severing their ties with Britain. Economic opportunity played a role, with wealthy merchants in port cities especially reluctant to harm their businesses that relied on trade with England. Historians now estimate that about 15 to 20% of white, male colonists felt themselves to be both British and American, owing allegiance to King George. This group was known as Loyalists.

Another group—larger—identified themselves as Patriots. Independence and self-rule was their strong desire. Those who had political views rejected the ideas of a monarchy and aristocracy, or any form of inherited power. Instead, they embraced the idea of a re-



John Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence*, completed in 1818, depicts the Committee of Five presenting Jefferson's draft to Congress. The 12 x 18' painting, one of four by Trumbull that hang in the Capitol Rotunda, isn't historically exact. Urged by John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, Trumbull portrayed 47 of the 56 delegates, including those who weren't present or wouldn't sign. Each portrait is a likeness of the delegate, most painted from life.

Continued on p.3



President's Report

Summer 2026

A Day in Our Village was a thrilling success for the GHS. People who toured the Peter Paul House were treated to the art installations we had been working on all spring. They also got to see the new Sleeping Sentinel Display, huge progress on the Civil War display case and all the blackout shades we fundraised for in 2025, mounted throughout the house. A special thanks goes out to Director Patrick Ayer, who managed to devise a method for making the shades fit our uneven windows.

The Annual Meeting will be on August 29th at 10 a.m, followed by a talk, "Caring for Family Treasures," by Jane Cadwalader from the Vermont Dept. of Historical Records. We will elect Officers and Directors.

We do have an "ask" of our members. We need more volunteers to help staff the PPH on the approximately four Open House Saturdays we host. A tour of the museum is almost self-guided. The valuable items on display are behind locked doors, and the signage throughout the house tells stories visitors find engaging. If you are interested in getting a chance to really delve into the collection yourself and meet folks who want to know more about our town…. this is an opportunity.

As another summer draws to a close, I can hear the call of the little house wren, making her presence known. Where does the summer go?

Warmly,
Deborah Jurist
President



"Single Heifer," donated by Groton artist Altoon Sultan, hangs in the meeting room. "Portrait of William Scott," on loan from Barnet artist Edward Kadunc, brings to life the story of the "Sleeping Sentinel." Both artists were present at the Peter Paul House for A Day in Our Village.

Also that day, the GHS hosted Vermont State Roving Archivist Jane Cadwalader and Rachel Onuf, of the Vermont State Records and Archives Administration. Jane will return later this month for "Caring for Family Treasures"–see below.







Lieutenant William Peck's Parade Dress Militia uniform and other Civil War era artifacts will be on display in this beautiful new case by Groton woodworker Emily Pratt.



PLEASE JOIN US *for our* ANNUAL MEETING *Saturday August 29th 10 a.m.*

"Declaration," *cont.*

public, with liberty and unalienable individual rights for all men. Most colonists, however, saw reason in both arguments and hoped for a peaceful reconciliation; many were busy enough trying to feed their families and get ahead. With so many Americans uncommitted to the cause, the fight for hearts and minds was crucial.

In April of 1775, the Battle of Lexington and Concord, the first military engagement of the Revolutionary War, gave momentum to the Patriots.

Fighting broke out in Lexington, Massachusetts. There, 700 British regulars, on their way to seize the military guns and ammunition supposedly hidden in the town of Concord, confronted 70 Lexington militiamen. Massachusetts militias along the route, having been warned by a group of riders, including Paul Revere, were prepared. The shot that was fired on the Lexington Green may have come from either side, but by the end of the day, it was the British who had retreated to Cambridge. Within the week, 20,000 militiamen from throughout New England arrived in the Boston area and surrounded the city on three sides, beginning the Siege of Boston. Two months later, Congress appointed George Washington to command the Continental Army. These men, from New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Connecticut and Massachusetts, would form the foundation of that army.

British troops in Boston remained under siege for 11 months. With public sentiment (which must have been hard to gauge in that period) on their side, the Patriot cause was ascendant. Throughout 1775, the Second Continental Congress was working to reconcile with the Crown at the same time they were organizing an army to defend themselves. But King George and the British Parliament were in no mood for olive branches from the colonists, and in August, the King declared the colonists "in a state of open and avowed rebellion."

In January of 1776, Philadelphian Thomas Paine published—anonymously—*Common Sense*, advocating for independence and egalitarian government. The 47-page "pamphlet" sold 120,000 copies in its first three months. Its clarity and plainspoken style, as well as Paine's direct attacks on King George, made the pamphlet widely popular. It was read aloud on street corners and in taverns, gaining the Patriots more followers and the Continental Congress greater legitimacy to act on the people's will.

(For an engaging discussion of "The General Populace's Thoughts on Cries for Independence," read or listen to Professor Joanne Freeman's lecture, part of her *American Revolution* syllabus in the Yale Open Courses series.)



"State Portrait of George III in Coronation Robes," by Allan Ramsay (1760).

Delegates to the Second Continental Congress sent King George III a petition in 1775, now known as the "Olive Branch Petition." The document emphasized the colonists' loyalty to the Crown and their rights as British citizens.

It was a final effort to avoid war, but the King did not respond to the petition. Instead, he declared parts of the colonies to be in "open and avowed rebellion."

Later that year, on June 7, 1776, Delegate Richard Henry Lee of Virginia introduced a resolution in the Second Continental Congress, proposing independence for the American colonies: "These united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states," Lee began. Congress didn't vote on Lee's resolution, but they did appoint a "Committee of Five" to draft a statement of intention, that the thirteen colonies in the Americas at that time wished to declare, forcefully, their independence from the rule of England—and more specifically, from the tyranny of its monarch, King George.

The Declaration of Independence had multiple audiences: King George III, the American colonists, and the nations of the world. Its authors undertook to announce the birth of a new nation, inspire colonists to support a cause that would demand great sacrifice, and persuade foreign governments to become allies in the fight for independence.

In her comprehensive volume of American History, *These Truths*, Historian Jill Lepore describes the Declaration of Independence as an "act of state," not a declaration of war. The war, in one form or another, had been underway for more than a year. She writes, "The Declaration explained what the colonists were fighting for; it was an attempt to establish the cause of the revolution…" (98).

Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert R. Livingston and Roger Sherman formed the committee; Jefferson wrote the first draft of the document. He incorporated Enlightenment ideals that others had expressed and borrowed (with more eloquence) from the Virginia Declaration of Rights, written just weeks before. It took him 17 days. Jefferson later explained that "he was not striving for originality of principal or sentiment." Instead, he hoped his words served as an "expression of the American mind." Thomas Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration of Independence is held in the manuscript collections at the Library of Congress in Washington.

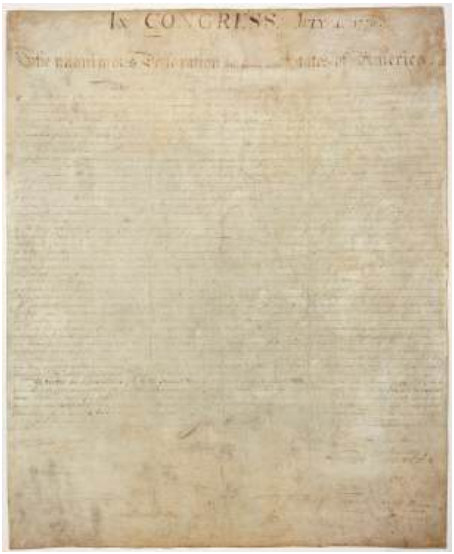
In the opening, "We hold these truths to be sacred & undeniable" (later edited by Franklin to read "We hold these truths to be self evident") and the rest of the introductory statement, Lepore writes, Jefferson "…established that a right of revolution exists if certain conditions are met…" (99) Much of the rest of that draft was a list of 27 grievances and charges against the king that gave evidence to those conditions. In the longest passage, Jefferson, a slaveholder himself, condemned King George III for the sin of African slavery and its aftereffects, "this assemblage of horrors."

Adams and Franklin made some changes, and on June 28, a Friday, the committee presented the draft to Congress, where it was read aloud.

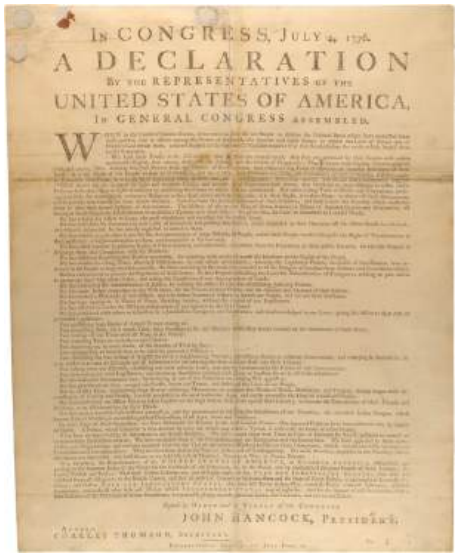
Members of the Continental Congress debated and made revisions to the document the following week. (Jefferson would later criticize the changes, alleging the members "mangled" his language.) They struck the section on African slavery and added the "independence" section of Richard Henry Lee's resolution. On July 2, the Second Continental Congress declared the American colonies to be independent from Britain.

Jill Lepore describes the document: "The Declaration that Congress did adopt was a stunning rhetorical feat, an act of extraordinary political courage. It also marked a colossal failure of political will, in holding back the tide of opposition to slavery by ignoring it, for the sake of a union that, in the end, could not and would not last" (99).

"Declaration," *cont.*



The original, engrossed parchment Declaration of Independence is displayed in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. It's faded and almost impossible to read.



Printer John Dunlap originally produced 200 broadside copies of the Declaration on the night of July 4, 1776. The document alerted colonists far and wide to the fact of American independence.



By 1820, the Declaration was fragile and showing its age. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams commissioned William Stone to create a copperplate facsimile on parchment, producing 200 copies.

On July 4, Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence, as we know it today, and ordered it printed. The official printer of the Continental Congress, John Dunlap, made 200 copies (historians believe) of the Declaration, which was signed only by John Hancock, the President of the Congress, and Charles Thomson, the Secretary, as was customary. The circulation and public reading of these broadsides throughout the colonies was one way colonists learned of American independence. Another was through newspapers. The first newspaper printing was July 6, in Philadelphia; two days later a crowd of Philadelphians, summoned by the ringing of bells and cannon fire, gathered at noon to hear the Declaration read in the Yard of the State House, now Independence Hall. Because distribution of the document depended on riders and couriers, the news reached the 13 colonies at different times over that summer.

The more formal Declaration of Independence, of which there is only one copy, is the "engrossed" version. Engrossing is the process of copying an official document in large and perfect penmanship.

On July 19, Congress ordered the Declaration engrossed on parchment. Timothy Matlock, an assistant to the Secretary, undertook this task. The Declaration also acquired a new title: "the unanimous declaration of the thirteen united states of America."

Hancock signed the engrossed copy with a large and bold signature August 2. The other delegates, following custom, signed in columns, beginning at the right with the signatures arranged by states, from northernmost New Hampshire. continuing left to southernmost Georgia. Although not all delegates were present that day, 56 eventually signed the document. The last sentence reads, "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."

This was not rhetorical flourish. They knew what they were risking with this act of treason.



In the Rotunda of the National Archives, in Washington, June 26, visitors queued to see the original Declaration of Independence. Most people I spoke with told me their experience made them aware they shouldn't take their freedom for granted.

To learn more:

Daugherty, Greg. "Meet the Defiant Loyalists Who Paid Dearly for Choosing the Wrong Side in the American Revolution." *Smithsonian* magazine. 4 June 2025. smithsonianmag.com

"The Declaration of Independence: A History." The National Archives. https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-history

Freeman, Joanne. "Lecture 11-Independence." *HIST 116: The American Revolution*. Open Yale Courses. https://www.oyc.yale.edu

Lepore, Jill. *These Truths*. W.W. Norton. New York: 2018.

McCullough, David. *1776*. Simon & Schuster. New York: 2005.

"'Upon the Shoulders of Giants': Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence." *Civics Literacy Initiative.* Purdue University. https://www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/communication/cspan/ccse/civics-literacy-initiative/1-upon-the-shoulders.html

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, 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, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.--Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harrass our people, and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:

For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences:

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:
For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:
For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.
He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.
He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.
He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.
He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.
He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.
Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our Brittish brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.
We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, 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; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

What some folks had to say

I talked to a number of people who were visiting the National Archives in late June, most specifically to see the "founding documents." Many talked about the importance of the foundational principles of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." One man pointed out, "All those things they encoded in the documents were based on abuses we haven't seen in our time, and so we don't realize quite how critical they are."

A question I asked was, "Do you have any hopes or fears for the United States, 250 years into this 'grand experiment?'" A man named Victor, who was visiting with a Ukrainian friend—and who happened to be playing a role in a local production of *1776*—had this to say:

"There are points in our history where others questioned whether our grand experiment failed. And yet, it has stood the test of time. It comes down to whether there still exist people willing to stand up and recognize these fundamental rights [laid down in the Declaration of Independence.] As long as those people exist, then democracy and respect for individual rights of all people remain in place.

"It is a constant trial and error, a constant battle to push against tyranny and oppression. There are years when the the fight is easier and years when it's less so. As long as people continue to stand up and do what is right and respect these fundamental truths, that our founders declared "self-evident," then we will continue to persevere in our "grand experiment."



Groton Residents Enjoy a Day in Their Village

Under sunny skies June 27, more than 120 visitors to Groton's second "A Day in Our Village" event learned about community resources in the Northeast Kingdom and sampled a variety of entertainments. John Gordon, the Granite Calliope Man, played Bach, Sousa and rock; Michael Evans and Friends played mostly rock, and Marko the Magician thrilled the crowd with his tricks. The Baptist and Methodist Churches, as well as the Groton Historical Society and the Fire Department, held open houses.

Attendees could get their "passports" stamped at any of the booths or destinations. A fully stamped passport earned a visitor an ice cream sandwich from Miss Terri. New this year was a shuttle bus, sponsored by the Groton Library and the Groton Recreation Committee, which ran from the Community Building to the Baptist Church and back continuously throughout the day.

More than 30 community organizations participated in the the event, organized by Groton Library Director Sarah Spira and supported by 16 volunteers. The objective for "A Day in Our Village," Spira said, "is to give community members the opportunity to discover and connect with their neighbors and the wide range of civic and cultural organizations that enrich our lives in Groton."















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