

“It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible.”
—George Washington.

Fate of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence

Have you ever wondered what happened to the fifty-six men who signed the Declaration of Independence? This is the price they paid:

George Walton, Thomas Heyward, Jr., Arthur Middleton, and Edward Rutledge were captured by the British in the Siege of Charleston as prisoners of war.

Richard Stockton was dragged from his bed by night and taken prisoner because he had signed the Declaration, and was imprisoned in New York City’s infamous Provost Jail.

Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned. John Witherspoon saw his eldest son killed in the Battle of Germantown. Abraham Clark saw two sons captured and incarcerated on the prison ship Jersey.

These men signed, and they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. What kind of men were they? Twenty-four were lawyers and jurists. Eleven were merchants. Nine were farmers and large plantation owners. All were men of means, well educated. But they signed the Declaration of Independence knowing full well that the penalty could be death if they were captured.

Carter Braxton of Virginia, a wealthy planter and trader, saw his ships swept from the seas by the British Navy.

Thomas McKean wrote to John Adams that he was “hunted like a fox by the enemy...compelled to remove his family five times in three months.” His wife and children were kept in hiding while he served in the Congress and as a volunteer leader of the militia.

Vandals or soldiers, or both, looted the properties of Ellery, Clymer, Hall, Walton, Gwinnett, Heyward, Rutledge, and Middleton during warfare. The homes of Samuel Adams, John Hancock, Benjamin Franklin, James Wilson, Benjamin Rush, and Robert Morris were also occupied by the British during the war, but those structures were left intact.

A most inspiring example of “undaunted resolution” was at the Battle of Yorktown. Thomas Nelson, Jr. was returning from Philadelphia to become Governor of Virginia and joined Gen. Washington just outside of Yorktown. He then noted that British Gen. Cornwallis had taken over the Nelson home for his headquarters, but that the patriots were directing their artillery fire all over the town except for the vicinity of his own beautiful home. Nelson asked why they were not firing in that direction, and the soldiers replied, “Out of respect to you, Sir.” Nelson

quietly urged to open fire, and stepping forward to the nearest cannon, aimed at his own house and fired. The other guns joined in. A shell went through a window, landed on the dinner table surrounded by a large party of British officers, killing or wounding a number of them. As part of the Colonial National Historical Park, the southeast face of the residence shows evidence of damage from cannon fire to this day.

Francis Lewis' Long Island home was raided and properties were destroyed while he was in Philadelphia attending to congressional matters. His wife was thrown into a damp dark prison cell without a bed. Health ruined, Mrs. Lewis eventually died from the effects of confinement. Lewis' son would later die in British captivity.

"Honest John" Hart's wife died several weeks earlier than Mrs. Lewis, having suffered a similar fate. British and Hessian troops invaded New Jersey months after he signed the Declaration, looting the Speaker of the Assembly's home. The father of 13 mostly-grown children was eventually re-elected to the New Jersey assembly, having invited the American Army to encamp on his farmland.

Lewis Morris' home was overtaken as barracks and his horses and livestock were commandeered by the Continental Army, as many others were, then looted and burned by the British. Three of Morris' sons fought the British.

Philip Livingston lost several properties to the British occupation and sold off others to support the war effort. He died in 1778 before he could recover the loss.

New Jersey's Richard Stockton, after rescuing his wife and children from advancing British troops, was betrayed by a loyalist, imprisoned, beaten and nearly starved. He returned an invalid to find his home gutted, and his library and papers burned. He never recovered, dying in 1781 a broken man.

Arthur Middleton, Edward Rutledge and Thomas Heyward, Jr. went home to South Carolina. In the British invasion of the South, Heyward was wounded and all three were captured. As he rotted on a prison ship in St. Augustine, Heyward's plantation was raided, buildings burned, and his wife, who witnessed it all, died. Other Southern signers suffered the same general fate.

Among the first to sign had been John Hancock, who wrote in big, bold script so George III "could read my name without spectacles and could now double his reward of 500 pounds for my head. If the cause of the revolution commands it," roared Hancock, "burn Boston and make John Hancock a beggar!"

Here were men who believed in a cause far beyond themselves even while uncertain of the outcome. Such were the stories and sacrifices of the America Revolution. These were not wild-eyed, rabble-rousing ruffians. They were soft-spoken, educated men. They had security, but they valued liberty more. Standing tall, straight, and unwavering, they pledged:

“For the support of this Declaration, with firm reliance on the protection of the Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

—Condensed from a piece by Gary Hildrith http://www.whatreallyhappened.com/.../DOCUMENTS/the_signers.html from a reading by Paul Harvey, “The Rest of the Story”, aired on KNOF-FM, July 4, 1976, 1983.

Invisible Enemies

Three of us made our way to the cabin about dawn,
Determined to help Sarah, who'd taken a fever.
Fierce it was.
Her husband, a Minuteman¹ in hiding,
Couldn't risk exposure;
It fell (as it usually did) to womenfolk to care for her.

We'd provided her morning constitutional,
Set the house in order: fetched water,
Changed her bed, hung out the laundry,
Put bread to rise, chopped kindling;
'Twas Sally suggested we go out through the woods
To the meadow for broth herbs.

The baking bread drew them.

Only a spline of tall grass between us,
Redcoats broke down the door,
Commandeered what they saw,
Hastily butchered two just-whelped sows
Beside the house,
Bloody meat loaded on horses' rumps.
Heavy hoofbeats away.

Sarah was left untouched;
Her fever saved her.

—Based on a letter to Albert from an elderly Aunt Minty recounting oral history from The Revolution. From family archives.

¹Patriot Militiaman who pledged to drop everything and grab a gun when a skirmish with the British materialized.



To the Point/à la pointe

143 years after establishing a pattern
Lives are unraveling;
Their verve of ease set aside like
An embroidery hoop in the parlor,
The European gentility of velvet, dimity, taffeta
In a New World now Torn Asunder.

Even while battles are being stoked,
Homefires are kindled by women.
Without skipping a stitch,
Debutantes set aside their fancy needlework
To manage business at hand:

Pack provisions
Attend underground meetings
Hem in livestock
Tear strips for bandages
Stitch wounded flesh
Prepare ammunition
Fervently pray.

Sewing circles become war councils
To take on the affairs of estate:
Some redirect dowries to the war effort
(Fathers and fiancés up-taking arms);¹
Some, quarters ransacked, houses burned;
A few, their virtue wrestled from them.
Yet they persevere.

The rhythm of life still pulses;
Clothing wears out
Is recommissioned to quilt
Goes up in smoke
Needs to be replaced.
So warp and weft,
Women keep stitching
To bind all the pieces together,
The Great Experiment,² begun.

¹Families mustered and provisioned their own militiamen.

²“Self-governed people with an education system designed to create informed citizens who developed critical thinking skills by the 2nd grade” was called “The Great Experiment.”



Realizing Britain had such a lucrative idea to tax documents, the U.S. developed its own set of stamps for the purpose after the war.



U.S. Commemorative postage stamp, 1775-1975.



At least 2 of the author's relatives served in the militias before subsequent generations moved west for Nebraska, then into Iowa, and finally arrived in Minnesota. This quilt, circa 1778-1812, was most probably made by May-flower-passenger Sarah's great-granddaughter. It was hand-sewn from new pieces of fine fabric which suggests that its maker led a genteel life in the colonies. Note what appear to be bombs bursting in air in the center-right panel. From family archives.