



Written by [Wallis W. Wood](#) on July 1, 2011

The Signers of the Declaration of Independence: Would You Be So Brave?

Thirteen colonies voted to become something new: the United States of America. All they had to do was to win their independence from a government that would consider them traitors.

Fifty-six men bravely affixed their signatures to the Declaration of Independence. What sort of men were they? And what became of them?

Twenty-four were lawyers and jurists, 11 were merchants, nine were farmers or plantation owners. They were well-educated men of means. All of them had a great deal to lose when they voted to defy what was then the most powerful nation on Earth.



One of the signers was Richard Stockton, a distinguished jurist from New Jersey. At the conclusion of the meetings, he proudly affixed his signature to the Declaration, joining 55 other delegates. Each of them willingly risked everything when they pledged to each other “our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”

Sadly, the revolution was to cost Judge Stockton the first two. But he would never surrender the third. As he returned from Philadelphia to his home in New Jersey, Judge Stockton was warned that British troops were coming to arrest him. He fled to a neighbor’s house with his wife and children. But a Loyalist, a supporter of the British cause, betrayed the family’s hiding place. Here is what happened next, as described in a [wonderful little book](#) Personal Liberty has made available in PDF form:

The judge was dragged from bed and beaten, then thrown into prison. This distinguished jurist, who had worn the handsome robes of a colonial court, now shivered in a common jail, abused and all but starved.

A shocked Congress arranged for his parole. Invalided by the harsh treatment he had received, he returned to (his home at) Morven to find his furniture and clothing burned, his fine horses stolen, and his library — one of the finest private collections in the country — completely destroyed. The hiding place of exquisite family silver, hastily buried, had been betrayed by a servant.

The Stocktons were so destitute that they had to accept charity. For the judge’s fortune was gone, too. He had pledged it and his life to his country. He lost both. He did not live to see the Revolution won.

That account comes from the little book [They Signed For Us](#). It was written half a century ago by Merle Sinclair and Annabel Douglas McArthur, two patriotic ladies who wanted to help others learn more about the remarkable men who signed the Declaration of Independence.



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Here's another excerpt from They Signed For Us.

SUDDENLY THE BIG BELL in the State House steeple pealed joyously. The appointed signal! Cheers rose from the waiting crowds.

"Proclaim liberty throughout the land...."

Cannon boomed, drums rolled. Church bells rang, sounding the death knell of British domination!

News of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence spread like wildfire. Ready messengers leaped into their saddles to ride and spread the word. The Declaration had been ordered printed on a single large sheet, '45.5 x 37.5 cm.,' or approximately eighteen by fifteen inches. These broadsides were distributed with all possible speed, to be read in the provincial assemblies, pulpits, market places, and army camps.

The story continues:

On July 8, the Liberty Bell summoned citizens of Philadelphia to the State House yard for a public reading of the document. Colonel John Nixon mounted a high platform and spoke the noble lines in a strong, clear voice. The crowd, now hushed, listened intently throughout.

"... 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."

It was almost a month later that the Declaration was engrossed on parchment and ready for signing by the delegates to the Continental Congress. Members gathered on August 2 for the ceremony.

The only person who had signed the Declaration on July 4, 1776 was John Hancock, a delegate from Boston who had been elected president of the Continental Congress. He wrote his signature in large, bold letters and as he did, in a reference to the near-sightedness of the British king, he declared, "There! John Bull can read my name without spectacles and may now double his reward of £500 for my head. *That* is my defiance."

As the delegates gathered around a desk to sign the Declaration, William Emery, one of the representatives from Rhode Island, moved as close as he could. "I was determined to see how they all looked as they signed what might be their death warrants," he later wrote. "I placed myself beside the secretary, Charles Thomson, and eyed each closely as he affixed his name to the document. Undaunted resolution was displayed on every countenance."

Contrasting with Hancock's confident signature was the shaky scratch of Stephen Hopkins from Rhode Island. Hopkins, the second-oldest signer, suffered from palsy. As he handed the quill to the next person, he valiantly proclaimed, "My hand trembles, but my heart does not!"

As one or two delegates hung back, seemingly reluctant to add their signatures to such a momentous declaration, John Hancock encouraged them. "We must be unanimous," he said. "There must be no pulling different ways. We must all hang together."

Legend has it that Benjamin Franklin replied, "Yes, we must all hang together. Or most assuredly, we shall all hang separately."

Happily, none of the signers was hanged by the British. But all of them were considered traitors to the Crown. And many of them suffered terribly for the cause they so ardently supported.

John Morton, a delegate from Pennsylvania, was the first of the signers to die. His last words for his



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family, before his death in April 1777 (just eight months after he signed the Declaration), were, "...tell them that they will live to see the hour when they shall acknowledge it to have been the most glorious service I ever rendered to my country."

The following month, Button Gwinnett, the commander in chief of Georgia's militia, was badly wounded in a duel with a political opponent. He died a few days later — the second signer to die.

But by and large, the signers of the Declaration of Independence were a hardy bunch. Three of them lived until their 90s — a remarkable accomplishment in a time when most men did not see their 50th birthday.

Only two of the signers were bachelors. Sixteen of them married twice. Records indicate that at least two, and perhaps as many as six, were childless. But the other 50 signers were a prolific lot, having a total of 325 children between them. William Ellery of Rhode Island had 17 children; Roger Sherman of Connecticut had 15.

Fifty years after the united colonies declared their independence from Britain, plans were made for jubilant celebrations on July 4, 1826. Only three of the original signers were still alive: Charles Carroll, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Here is how Sinclair and McArthur describe what occurred that day:

In a dramatic climax that even their agile minds would not have contemplated, these two principals in the struggle for Independence left the nation awestricken and touched, by dying hours apart on the Fourth of July. Jefferson died at one o'clock in the afternoon, Adams toward evening.

Ten days earlier, Jefferson had written the mayor of Washington, expressing his regret that ill health prevented him from coming to the nation's new Capitol to join the festivities.

I should, indeed, with peculiar delight, have met ... with the small band, the remnant of that host of worthies, who joined with us on that day, in the bold and doubtful election we were to make for our country, between the submission or the sword.

He concluded by writing, "Let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollection of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them."

As part of that "undiminished devotion," we are delighted that Personal Liberty has made easily available a PDF version of the wonderful little book *They Signed For Us*. Please [click here](#) for it.

Until next time, keep some powder dry.

Chip Wood was the first news editor of *The Review of the News* and also wrote for *American Opinion*, our two predecessor publications. He is now the geopolitical editor of *Personal Liberty Digest*, where his *Straight Talk* column appears weekly. This article first appeared in [PersonalLiberty.com](#) and has been reprinted with permission.



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