

# 21 Signing Up



Fifty-six men signed the Declaration of Independence. John Hancock (above) was the first.

It took courage to sign that Declaration. John Hancock was first to put his name down. He did it with a big, bold signature. "So the king doesn't have to put on his glasses," he is supposed to have said. (Because of that, today, when you sign a document, people sometimes call your signature a "John Hancock.")

John Dickinson of Pennsylvania wouldn't sign. He believed the Declaration was foolhardy. He thought the colonists should work to gain the rights of free citizens within the British Empire. "I had rather forfeit popularity forever, than vote away the blood and happiness of my countrymen," he said. Independence! To Dickinson that was "like destroying our house in winter...before we have got another shelter." But he loved America dearly, so after he refused to sign the Declaration of Independence, he enlisted in the Continental army as a private and fought for his country. And he was right; he did lose his popularity.

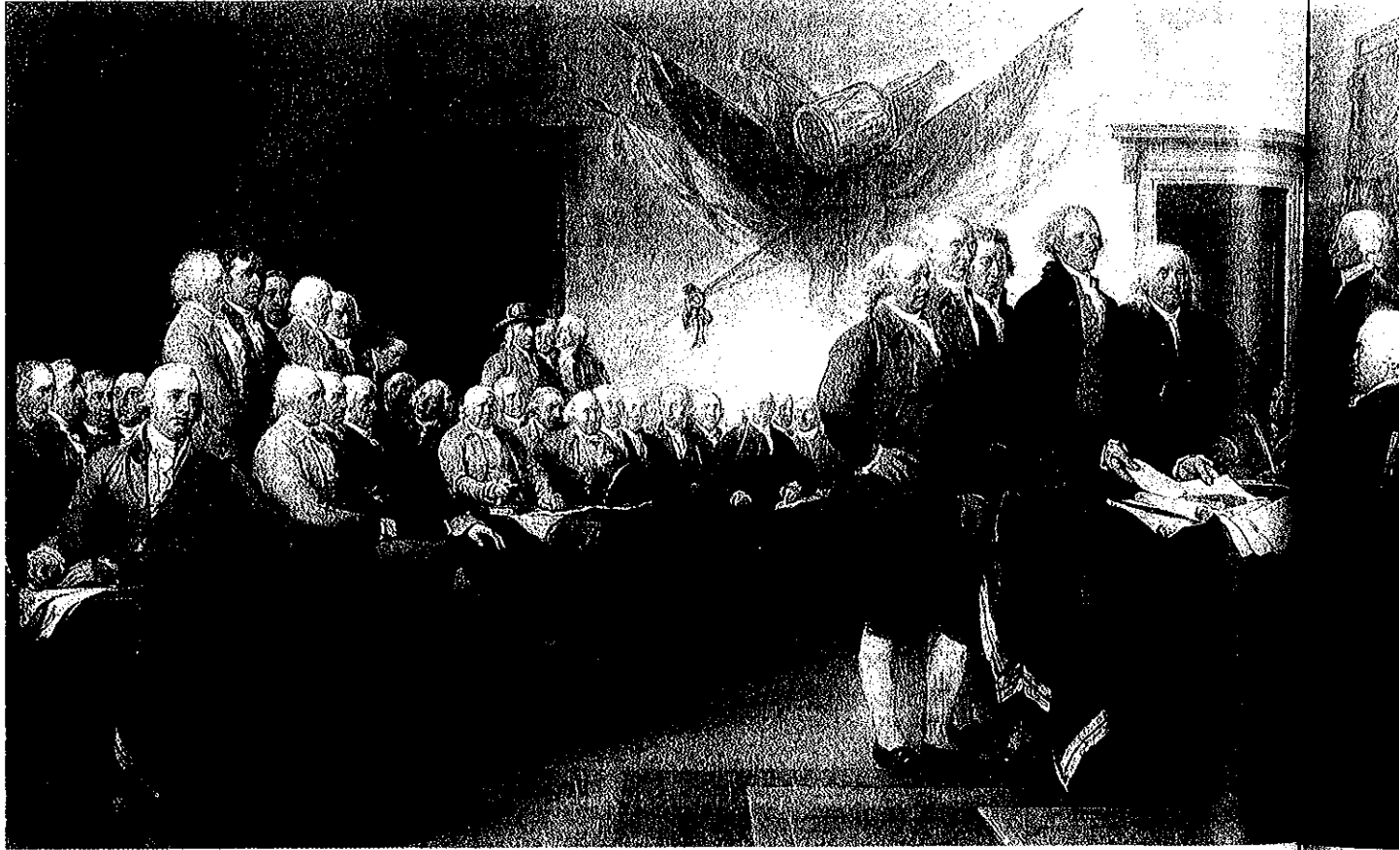
The citizens outside the red-brick Pennsylvania State House, where the delegates voted, were now screaming for independence. That didn't make it easy for the men inside. They knew they would pay with their lives if the colonial army was squashed by Britain. And all the power seemed on Great Britain's side.

When the Declaration was read in New York, a mob pulled down the statue of George III in Bowling Green. It was made of 4,000 pounds of lead, from which it was estimated that 42,000 bullets could be cast.

**The Pennsylvania State House was soon to be called Independence Hall. Why?**

**On July 4, 1776, the Declaration was officially approved by the delegates.**





Standing by the table (left to right), John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin present the Declaration of Independence to Congress.

It was John Adams, perhaps more than anyone else, who got the delegates to sign the Declaration. Adams was a talker as well as a thinker. At the Second Continental Congress he kept talking and talking until finally he convinced the delegates.

Then John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail:

*Yesterday, the greatest question was decided which ever was debated in America, and a greater, perhaps, never was nor will be decided among men. A Resolution was passed without one dissenting Colony, "that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States...." You will see, in a few days, a Declaration setting forth the causes which have impelled us to this mighty revolution, and the reasons which will justify it in the sight of God and man.*

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Copies of the Declaration were still warm from the printing press when they were put on coastal vessels or stuffed into saddlebags so they could be sped on their way to each of the 13 colonies. On July 9, the document reached New York and was read to General Washington's troops, who shouted hurrah and tossed their hats in the air. That night a gilded statue of George III was pulled down from its pedestal on Manhattan's Bowling Green. (The statue was soon melted and turned into bullets.)

On July 19, the Declaration arrived in Boston, and Tom Crafts, a house painter, stepped out on a small square balcony in front of the Massachusetts State

House and read it aloud. "When, in the course of human events," he began in his flat New England tone. When he finished a voice rang out, "God save the American States," and the crowd cheered mightily. Two days later Abigail Adams wrote to John:

*The bells rang, the privateers fired the forts and batteries, the cannon were discharged, the platoons followed, & every face appeared joyful.... After dinner the King's [coat of] Arms were taken down from the State House & every vestige of him from every place in which it appeared, & burnt.... Thus ends royal Authority in this State. And all the people shall say Amen.*

### An Awful Silence

*Benjamin Rush was one of the first doctors in America to have an interest in psychiatry, which is the study of illnesses of the mind. After the Revolution was over, Dr. Rush remembered the "fears and sorrows and sleepless nights" of those who signed the Declaration. Here is part of what he wrote in a letter to John Adams:*

**D**ear Old Friend.... Do you recall your memorable speech upon the day on which the vote was taken? Do you recall the pensive and awful silence which pervaded the house when we were called up, one after another, to the table of the President of Congress to subscribe what was believed by many at that time to be our own death warrants? The silence and gloom of the morning were interrupted, I well recollect, only for a moment by Colonel [Benjamin] Harrison of Virginia [who was heavy], who said to Mr. [Elbridge] Gerry [who was skinny] at the table: "I shall have a great advantage over you, Mr. Gerry, when we are all hung for what we are now doing. From the size and weight of my body I shall die in a few minutes, but from the lightness of your body you will dance in the air an hour or two before you are dead." This speech procured a transient smile, but it was soon succeeded by the solemnity with which the whole business was conducted.... Benjn. Rush