

56 great risk-takers

By Jeff Jacoby, Globe Columnist, 7/3/2000

On July 2, 1776, the Continental Congress voted 12-0 - New York abstained - in favor of Richard Henry Lee's resolution "that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States." On July 4, the Declaration of Independence drafted by Thomas Jefferson - heavily edited by Congress - was adopted without dissent. On July 8, the Declaration was publicly proclaimed in Philadelphia. On July 15, Congress learned that the New York Legislature had decided to endorse the Declaration. On Aug. 2, a parchment copy was presented to the Congress for signature. Most of the 56 men who put their name to the document did so that day.

And then?

We tend to forget that to sign the Declaration of Independence was to commit an act of treason - and the punishment for treason was death. To publicly accuse George III of "repeated injuries and usurpations," to announce that Americans were therefore "Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown," was a move fraught with danger - so much so that the names of the signers were kept secret for six months.

They were risking everything, and they knew it. That is the meaning of the Declaration's soaring last sentence:

"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."

Most of the signers survived the war; several went on to illustrious careers. Two of them became presidents of the United States, and among the others were future vice presidents, senators, and governors. But not all were so fortunate.

Nine of the 56 died during the Revolution, and never tasted American independence.

Five were captured by the British. Eighteen had their homes - great estates, some of them - looted or burnt by the enemy. Some lost everything they owned. Two were wounded in battle. Two others were the fathers of sons killed or captured during the war.

"Our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor." It was not just a rhetorical flourish.

We all recognize John Hancock's signature, but who ever notices the names beneath his? William Ellery, Thomas Nelson, Richard Stockton, Button Gwinnett, Francis Lewis - to most of us, these are names without meaning. But each represents a real human being, some of whom paid dearly "for the support of this Declaration" and American independence.

Lewis Morris of New York, for example, must have known when he signed the Declaration that he was signing away his fortune. Within weeks, the British ravaged his estate, destroyed his vast woodlands, butchered his cattle, and sent his family fleeing for their lives.

Another New Yorker, William Floyd, was also forced to flee when the British plundered his property. He and his family lived as refugees for seven years without income. The strain told on his wife; she died two years before the war ended.

Carter Braxton of Virginia, an aristocratic planter who had invested heavily in shipping, saw most of his vessels captured by the British navy. His estates were largely ruined, and by the end of his life he was a pauper.

The home of William Ellery, a Rhode Island delegate, was burned to the ground during the occupation of Newport.

Thomas Heyward Jr., Edward Rutledge, and Arthur Middleton, three members of the South Carolina delegation, all suffered the destruction or vandalizing of their homes at the hands of enemy troops. All three were captured when Charleston fell in 1780, and spent a year in a British prison.

"Our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."

Thomas Nelson Jr. of Virginia raised \$2 million for the patriots' cause on his own personal credit. The government never reimbursed him, and repaying the loans wiped out his entire estate. During the battle of Yorktown, his house, which had been seized by the British, was occupied by General Cornwallis. Nelson quietly urged the gunners to fire on his own home. They did so, destroying it. He was never again a man of wealth. He died bankrupt and was buried in an unmarked grave.

Richard Stockton, a judge on New Jersey's supreme court, was betrayed by loyalist neighbors. He was dragged from his bed and thrown in prison, where he was brutally beaten and starved. His lands were

devastated, his horses stolen, his library burnt. He was freed in 1777, but his health had so deteriorated that he died within five years. His family lived on charity for the rest of their lives.

In the British assault on New York, Francis Lewis's home and property were pillaged. His wife was captured and imprisoned; so harshly was she treated that she died soon after her release. Lewis spent the remainder of his days in relative poverty.

And then there was John Hart. The speaker of the New Jersey Assembly, he was forced to flee in the winter of 1776, at the age of 65, from his dying wife's bedside. While he hid in forests and caves, his home was demolished, his fields and mill laid waste, and his 13 children put to flight. When it was finally safe for him to return, he found his wife dead, his children missing, and his property decimated. He never saw any of his family again and died, a shattered man, in 1779.

The men who signed that piece of parchment in 1776 were the elite of their colonies. They were men of means and social standing, but for the sake of liberty, they pledged it all - their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. We are in their debt to this day.

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1. Explain which one of these personal acts you read about was the most compelling, or dramatic, example of “risk” taken. How might you have reacted in a similar situation?

2. Why does the author continue to repeat the last sentence of the Declaration of Independence - "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.*" – throughout the reading?

3. Is there anything that you value or support that you would be willing, like these 56 risk takers, to pledge *your* life, *your* fortune and *your* honor, to protect or achieve? Explain.

4. In your opinion, what would be the most appropriate way to honor these individuals who risked everything?