

Resources for Teachers

John Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence*

CONVERSATION STARTERS

- What is happening with the Declaration of Independence in this painting?
 - The Committee of Five is presenting their draft to the President of the Continental Congress, John Hancock.
- Both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson apparently told John Trumbull that, if portraits couldn't be painted from life or copied from other portraits, it would be better to leave delegates out of the scene than to poorly represent them. Do you agree?
 - Trumbull captured 37 portraits from life (which means that he met and painted the person). When he started sketching with Jefferson in 1786, 12 signers of the Declaration had already died. By the time he finished in 1818, only 5 signers were still living.
- If you were President James Madison, and you wanted four monumental paintings depicting major moments in the American Revolution, which moments would you choose?
 - Madison and Trumbull chose the surrender of General Burgoyne at Saratoga, the surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, the Declaration of Independence, and the resignation of Washington.

VISUAL SOURCES

John Trumbull, *Declaration of Independence* (large scale), 1819, United States Capitol
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Declaration_of_Independence_\(1819\),_by_John_Trumbull.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Declaration_of_Independence_(1819),_by_John_Trumbull.jpg)

John Trumbull, *Declaration of Independence* (small scale), 1786-1820, Trumbull Collection, Yale University Art Gallery
<https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/69>

John Trumbull and Thomas Jefferson, "First Idea of Declaration of Independence, Paris, Sept. 1786," 1786, Gift of Mr. Ernest A. Bigelow, Yale University Art Gallery
<https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/2805>

PRIMARY SOURCES

Autobiography, Reminiscences and Letters of John Trumbull, from 1756 to 1841
<https://archive.org/details/autobiographyre00trumgoog>

p. 96: "My two paintings, the first fruits of my national enterprise, met his [Jefferson's] warm approbation, and during my visit, I began the composition of the Declaration of Independence, with the assistance of his information and advice."

pp. 147-148: "In the course of the summer of 1787, Mr. Adams took leave of the court of St. James, and preparatory to the voyage to America, had the powder combed out of his hair. Its color and natural curl were beautiful, and I took that opportunity to paint his portrait in the small Declaration of Independence."

pp. 163-164: "With them I returned to New York, for the purpose of pursuing my work of the Revolution; all the world was assembled there, and I obtained many portraits for the Declaration of Independence, Surrender of Cornwallis, and also that of General Washington in the battles of Trenton and Princeton..."

pp. 262-263: "The choice of the subjects, and the size of each picture, was left to the president, Mr. Madison... This was so settled, and when we came to speak of the subjects, the president first mentioned the battle of Bunker's Hill. Observing me to be silent, Mr. Madison asked if I did not approve that. My reply was, 'that if the order had been (as I had hoped) for eight paintings, I should have named that first; but as there were only four commanded, I thought otherwise. It appeared to me, that there were two military subjects paramount to all others. We had, in the course of the Revolution, made prisoners of two entire armies, a circumstance almost without a parallel, and of course the surrender of General Burgoyne at Saratoga, and that of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, seemed to me indispensable.' 'True,' he replied, 'you are right; and what for the civil subjects?' 'The declaration of independence, of course.' 'What would you have for the fourth?' 'Sir,' I replied, 'I have thought that one of the highest moral lessons ever given to the world, was that presented by the conduct of the commander-in-chief, in resigning his power and commission as he did, when the army, perhaps, would have been unanimously with him, and few of the people disposed to resist his retaining the power which he had used with such happy success, and such irreproachable moderation. I would recommend, then, the resignation of Washington.' After a momentary silent reflection, the president said, 'I believe you are right; it was a glorious action.'"

List of subscribers for engravings of *Declaration of Independence* on p. 341 includes the following signers of the Declaration of Independence/delegates: John Adams, Charles Carroll, Richard Henry Lee, Robert Morris, George Clymer, William Floyd, Elbridge Gerry, Thomas Jefferson, Robert R. Livingston, Thomas McKean, Edward Rutledge, Lewis Morris, James Smith, Thomas Heyward, Francis Hopkinson, George Wythe, Oliver Wolcott, William Paca.

Letter from John Quincy Adams to John Adams

December 14, 1818

<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-03-02-3583>

"I rejoice that the Picture has been painted—As a collection of likenesses taken from life, of the founders of the greatest Nation, this Ball of Earth has seen or will see, which ours will certainly be, it has merit... Your Letter itself, written the day after the Event, forgive me my dear father for saying it—Your letter, profound, comprehensive and prophetic as it was, disclosed but a part of the mighty consequences of that Event."

Letter from Benjamin Waterhouse to Thomas Jefferson

January 15, 1819

<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-0035>

"As a composition & painting, it is not thought to be a happy specimen of the State of the art in America, at this period; neither is it allowed to be altogether correct as it regards historical fact, as far as Massachusetts is concerned: Elbridge Gerry for example, has a very conspicuous position, while Samuel Adams is scarcely discoverable in the crowd of ordinary members."

Letter from Samuel Adams Wells (grandson of Samuel Adams) to Thomas Jefferson

June 2, 1819

<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-0464>

"The painting executed by Col. Trumbull, representing the Congress at the declaration of independence will, I fear, have a tendency to obscure the history of the event which it is designed to commemorate."

Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Samuel Adams Wells

June 23, 1819

<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-0529>

"The painting lately executed by Colo Trumbull, I have never seen: but as far back as the days of Horace at least we are told that 'pictoribus atque poetis, Quidlibet audendi semper fuit aequa potestas.' he has exercised this licentia prictoris in like manner, in the surrender of York, where he has placed Ld Cornwallis at the head of the surrender, altho' it is well known that he was excused by General Washington from appearing."¹

"Trumbull's Independence," Article in the *New-York Daily Advertiser*, New York, NY

May 12, 1818

(Excerpt transcribed from Readex)

"It is well known that the Congress of the United States have employed Colonel John Trumbull, of this city, to paint several historical pictures, commemorative of some of the most important events of the war of Independence. These were—*The Declaration of Independence—The Capture of Burgoyne—The Capture of Cornwallis—and, The Surrendering of his Commission to Congress, by General Washington, after the Peace.* The first of these splendid paintings is nearly finished, and will be carried to Washington at the commencement of the next session of Congress. This picture covers a canvas measuring eighteen by twelve feet, and contains no less than forty-seven portraits, thirty-seven of them taken from the life by Col. Trumbull, and the remaining ten from likenesses drawn by other artists, the originals having deceased before Col. Trumbull had an opportunity to obtain them. It represents Congress in session, at the moment when Mr. Jefferson, attended by the committee appointed for the purpose of drawing the Declaration of Independence, and of which he was chairman, is presenting the draft of that now venerable instrument. The scene is one of the most solemn, and sublime, that can well be imagined; and the association of ideas to which it gives rise, is of the most impressive and interesting character. No inhabitant of this country can view it, without experiencing a deep sense of the hazards which the members of that illustrious assembly thus voluntarily assumed,—of the anxiety, the sufferings, and the triumphant success, by which that most important transaction was followed. Before this great and decisive step was taken, the people of the States considered themselves as only struggling against oppression—from that moment forward they contended for existence."

¹ "Pictoribus atque poetis, Quidlibet audendi semper fuit aequa potestas" is a line about artistic license taken from Horace's *Ars Poetica*.

Unsullied by Falsehood: No John Trumbull

Adapted from June 2016 Blog Post in Course of Human Events, the Declaration Resources Project Blog

In previews, the award-winning musical *Hamilton* included a short song at the top of Act 2 (between Thomas Jefferson's "What'd I Miss?" and "Cabinet Battle #1") that was cut before the musical moved to Broadway. The number was called "No John Trumbull," and antagonist/narrator Aaron Burr sang the following lines:

You ever see a painting by John Trumbull?
Founding Fathers in a line, looking all humble
Patiently waiting to sign a declaration, to start a nation
No sign of disagreement, not one grumble
The reality is messier and richer, kids
The reality is not a pretty picture, kids
Every cabinet meeting is a full-on rumble

What you 'bout to see is no John Trumbull

- Hamilton: An American Musical, Lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda

Note: "No John Trumbull" was recorded by The Roots and released as the first track on the *Hamilton Mixtape*.

The founding of the United States of America was certainly not the "pretty picture" John Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence* leads the viewer to believe. More specifically, the events surrounding the Declaration of Independence had very little resemblance to this now famous painting.

A note to start things off: it is often assumed that *Declaration of Independence* depicts the signing of the Declaration of Independence (an event which began on August 2nd, but continued for months as delegates arrived in or returned to Philadelphia). It could also be assumed that the painting depicts July 4th, Independence Day. In actuality, it is meant to depict the events of June 28th, 1776, when the Committee of Five (John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert R. Livingston, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin) presented their draft of the Declaration of Independence to President John Hancock and Congress.

Trumbull began work on *Declaration of Independence* while in Paris a decade after the Declaration of Independence. His painting was based in part on conversations with his friend Thomas Jefferson, then in Paris as U.S. Minister to France. Yale University Art Gallery has Jefferson and Trumbull's initial sketches of the Assembly room, though Jefferson misremembered certain details.

But Trumbull also took creative license based on the likenesses available to him. *Declaration of Independence* includes 42 of the 56 signers, as well as several men who did not sign, for a total of 47 portraits. 36 of these portraits were taken from life, and the others were copied from existing portraits or from relatives (see Benjamin Harrison, below). Though Trumbull worked on the painting for years in hopes of including all of the signers, the lesser-known delegates and the ones who died in the years just after the Declaration of Independence was signed didn't make the cut. Both Jefferson and Adams apparently advised Trumbull that, in cases where no portraits could be found to copy, the delegates should be left out rather than poorly represented. After decades

of work, Trumbull was commissioned to produce a monumental version of his *Declaration of Independence* for the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol. He completed the painting by 1818, and it was installed in the Rotunda with his other monumental works in 1826.

So, who was actually present in Congress on June 28th, 1776? In his *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, published in 1921, Edmund C. Burnett listed the attendance dates of delegates, based on clues in correspondence as well as the *Journals of the Continental Congress*. Based on his work, the following men were more than likely in Independence Hall on June 28th, 1776:

- **President** John Hancock
- **Secretary** Charles Thomson
- **New Hampshire:** Josiah Bartlett, William Whipple
- **Massachusetts:** John Adams, Samuel Adams, Elbridge Gerry, Robert Treat Paine
- **Rhode Island:** William Ellery, Stephen Hopkins
- **Connecticut:** Samuel Huntington, Roger Sherman
- **New York:** John Alsop, George Clinton, William Floyd, Francis Lewis, Robert R. Livingston, Henry Wisner
- **New Jersey:** Francis Hopkinson
- **Pennsylvania:** John Dickinson, Benjamin Franklin, Charles Humphreys, Robert Morris, John Morton, Thomas Willing, James Wilson
- **Delaware:** Thomas McKean, George Read
- **Maryland:** William Paca, John Rogers, Thomas Stone
- **Virginia:** Carter Braxton, Benjamin Harrison, Thomas Jefferson, Francis Lightfoot Lee, Thomas Nelson, Jr.
- **North Carolina:** Joseph Hewes, John Penn
- **South Carolina:** Thomas Heyward, Jr., Thomas Lynch, Jr., Arthur Middleton, Edward Rutledge
- **Georgia:** Button Gwinnett, Lyman Hall

44 men. Excluding Secretary Thomson, only 34 of the men who were present on June 28th, when the Declaration of Independence was presented to Congress, would subsequently sign the engrossed parchment on or after August 2nd. Of the 43 delegates present on June 28th, only 31 made it into Trumbull's painting.

Take a closer look at the historical inaccuracies and intriguing stories behind this iconic painting.

William Whipple (New Hampshire)

Present on June 28th

Signed Declaration of Independence

According to a letter Trumbull wrote to Jefferson in 1817, he painted Whipple from memory. Whipple is in another famous Trumbull painting, *The Surrender of General Burgoyne* (Brigadier General Whipple is the fifth figure from the right).

Samuel Adams (Massachusetts)

Present on June 28th

Signed Declaration of Independence

In 1819, after seeing Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence* in Boston, Benjamin Waterhouse wrote to Thomas Jefferson that "The picture has not given that general satisfaction the intimate friends of the painter probably anticipated." Waterhouse specifically pointed out Trumbull's treatment of Samuel Adams, one of the most recognizable patriots then and now, seated next to and almost entirely obscured by Richard Henry Lee: "Elbridge Gerry for example, has a very conspicuous position, while Samuel Adams is scarcely discoverable in the crowd of ordinary members."

John Adams (Massachusetts) and Thomas Jefferson (Virginia)

Present on June 28th

Signed Declaration of Independence

Some viewers believe that Jefferson is standing on Adams' foot, but this is just an optical illusion (though their feet more clearly overlap in engravings based on the painting). A more interesting note is that, though Jefferson is the star of the painting, due to his height, his red vest, and his hands on the Declaration of Independence, Adams is at the exact center of the painting. Adams' stockinged legs (along with a few other men's legs) are also front and center; in 1828, after the monumental painting had been installed in the Capitol Rotunda, John Randolph called it "the Shin-piece, for surely never was there before such a collection of legs submitted to the eyes of man."

William Williams and Oliver Wolcott (Connecticut)

Absent on June 28th

Signed Declaration of Independence

Williams was elected to replace Wolcott, who was seriously ill, but there is no record of Williams' attendance in Congress prior to the Declaration of Independence. Meanwhile, Wolcott likely left Philadelphia on June 28th, because he arrived in New York on July 1st. Williams arrived in Philadelphia in late July, while Wolcott returned on October 1st, and both men were able to sign the Declaration.

Stephen Hopkins (Rhode Island)

Present on June 28th

Signed Declaration of Independence

Hopkins is distinguishable as the only delegate wearing a hat. His hand trembled as he signed the Declaration of Independence (though his heart, famously, did not), and his poor health caused him to resign from Congress in September.

John Alsop, George Clinton, and Henry Wisner (New York)

Present on June 28th

Did not sign Declaration of Independence

Pictured: Clinton; Not Pictured: Alsop, Wisner

These three delegates were present for the debates and vote for independence, but abstained from voting (see below). Clinton, who would later serve as Vice President under Jefferson (post-Burr) and Madison, left shortly after July 4th. He was recalled to the New York headquarters of the Continental Army by General George Washington. Alsop resigned on July 16th, and Wisner left Congress about the same time, taking his seat in the New York Assembly on July 23rd.

Robert R. Livingston (New York)

Present on June 28th

Did not sign Declaration of Independence

Consider the fact that one of the five men responsible for drafting the Declaration of Independence did not actually sign it. Livingston was a member of the Committee of Five, and was present for the debates and the vote for independence, though he and the other delegates from New York abstained from the vote based on instructions from their constituents. Livingston returned to New York later in July and never actually signed the Declaration of Independence, though his cousin Philip Livingston did (see below). Actually, Robert R. Livingston was not a signer of *any* of the founding documents, but he did assume a prestigious role in 1789: as Chancellor of New York, he administered the first presidential oath of office to George Washington in New York City, then-capital of the United States.

Philip Livingston (New York)

Absent on June 28th

Signed Declaration of Independence

In the months before and after the Declaration of Independence, several states were working on their own constitutions, including New York. On June 26th, this Livingston petitioned the New York Assembly so that he could leave the state convention and rejoin Congress in Philadelphia. According to John Witherspoon, he arrived on or before July 3rd.

Abraham Clark, John Hart, Francis Hopkinson, Richard Stockton, and John Witherspoon (New Jersey)

Clark, Hart, Stockton, Witherspoon: Absent on June 28th; Signed Declaration of Independence

Hopkinson: Likely present on June 28th; Signed Declaration of Independence

Pictured: Clark, Hopkinson, Stockton, Witherspoon; Not Pictured: John Hart

New Jersey elected all new delegates on June 22nd. Hopkinson arrived in Philadelphia on June 28th, and was likely in Congress on that day. According to John Adams, Clark, Stockton, and Witherspoon all arrived on July 1st. Hart arrived sometime later in July. All five new delegates signed the Declaration of Independence for New Jersey.

John Dickinson, Charles Humphreys, Thomas Willing, and Robert Morris (Pennsylvania)

Dickinson, Humphreys, Willing: Present on June 28th; Did not sign Declaration of Independence

Morris: Present on June 28th; Signed Declaration of Independence

Pictured: Dickinson, Willing, Morris; Not Pictured: Charles Humphreys

AKA the Pennsylvania nay-sayers. Between June 28th and July 1st, Pennsylvania had seven delegates: two (Benjamin Franklin and James Wilson) in favor of independence, four (Dickinson, Humphreys, Willing, and Morris) against, and one (John Morton, see below) undecided. On July 2nd, Morris and Dickinson abstained from voting, and the Pennsylvania delegation was able to vote in favor of independence. It is doubtful that Dickinson, Humphreys, or Willing returned to Congress after July 4th (though Dickinson was later elected as a delegate from Delaware), but Morris did. Even though he voted against it, he later signed the Declaration of Independence.

John Morton (Pennsylvania)

Present on June 28th

Signed Declaration of Independence

Not Pictured

Morton was uncommitted on July 1st, and swayed in favor of independence on July 2nd. He was present on June 28th, and had a critical vote for independence, and yet he is absent from this iconic scene.

George Clymer, George Ross, Benjamin Rush, James Smith, and George Taylor (Pennsylvania)

Not yet elected on June 28th

Signed Declaration of Independence

Pictured: Clymer, Rush; Not Pictured: Ross, Smith, Taylor

AKA the Pennsylvania recruits. Pennsylvania voted for independence, but only by way of dissenters not showing up to the vote. To avoid such situations in the future, on July 20th, the Pennsylvania Assembly sent five new, staunchly patriotic delegates to Congress. A few arrived on the day they were elected (the convenience of Congress meeting in Philadelphia). There is no written evidence of Taylor *ever* attending a session of Congress, but since his signature is on the Declaration of Independence, he must have, on or after August 2nd. The other four men signed as well, even though they were all elected weeks after the vote for independence.

Samuel Chase, John Rogers, Matthew Tilghman, Thomas Stone, and Charles Carroll of Carrollton (Maryland)

Chase: Absent on June 28th; Signed Declaration of Independence

Rogers: Present on June 28th; Did not sign Declaration of Independence

Tilghman: Absent on June 28th; Did not sign Declaration of Independence

Stone: Present on June 28th; Signed Declaration of Independence

Carroll: Not yet elected on June 28th; Signed Declaration of Independence

Pictured: Chase, Carroll; Not Pictured: Rogers, Tilghman, Stone

As with New York, Maryland was at work on a state constitution and some of Maryland's delegates to the Continental Congress were also delegates to the state assembly at Annapolis. On June 21st, the Maryland Convention instructed its delegates to Congress to ask permission to return to Annapolis, but insisted that they "not leave the Congress without such permission, and with out first having obtained an order that the consideration of the questions of Independence, foreign alliance, and a further Confederation of the Colonies, shall be postponed until Deputies from this Province can attend Congress." But several delegates were already home or on their way. Chase and Tilghman left on June 14th; Chase returned on July 21st, and signed the Declaration of Independence with his colleagues on August 2nd, but Tilghman did not return to Congress until

late 1776 and did not sign the Declaration. Paca, Rogers, and Stone remained in Philadelphia to represent Maryland on June 28th. Rogers was likely in attendance on July 4th, but there is no record, and he left Congress soon after, if not before, the vote for independence. Carroll arrived on July 17th, and although he wasn't even elected as a delegate to Congress until July 4th, he signed the Declaration (and died in 1832 as the last living signer).

Richard Henry Lee and George Wythe (Virginia)

Absent on June 28th

Signed Declaration of Independence

Wythe is perhaps best known as Thomas Jefferson's mentor, and Lee presented the initial resolution "That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States..." back on June 7th. Both delegates left Philadelphia on June 13th; Lee returned in late August, Wythe in September. Despite missing the debates and the vote for independence, both men signed the Declaration of Independence upon their returns to Congress. In fact, if you look at the order of the signatures of the Virginians, it appears as though Thomas Jefferson intentionally left room above his name for these two elder statesmen. Both men also received drafts of the Declaration of Independence from Jefferson, annotated so that they could distinguish between the original text and the text as debated and amended by Congress. After receiving his copy, Lee wrote to Jefferson that "the Thing is in its nature so good, that no Cookery can spoil the Dish for the palates of Freemen."

Benjamin Harrison (Virginia)

Present on June 28th

Signed Declaration of Independence

Since there was no existing portrait of Benjamin Harrison, Trumbull painted his son, Benjamin Harrison VI, who apparently resembled him more than Harrison's other son, future (short-lived) President of the United States William Henry Harrison. Harrison was Chairman of the Committee of the Whole, which explains his prominent position in the painting and his note-taking.

Carter Braxton, Francis Lightfoot Lee, and Thomas Nelson, Jr. (Virginia)

Present on June 28th

Signed Declaration of Independence

Not Pictured

Two delegates from Virginia who were absent on June 28th were included in this painting (Richard Henry Lee and George Wythe, see above), while three delegates who were present were left out. Braxton was one of a handful of delegates (including the nay-sayers from Pennsylvania) who believed the Declaration of Independence was premature.

William Hooper and John Penn (North Carolina)

Hooper: Absent on June 28th; Signed Declaration of Independence

Penn: Present on June 28th; Signed Declaration of Independence

Pictured: Hooper; Not Pictured: Penn

North Carolina was another state forming its constitution in the summer of 1776, and Hooper was in North Carolina when the vote for independence took place. Hooper and Penn had both left Philadelphia back in March, though Penn returned earlier, around June 20th. Hooper returned later in July, and was able to sign the Declaration of Independence. It is fascinating that Trumbull depicted Hooper (who was absent on June 28th) and not Penn (who was present).

Button Gwinnett, Lyman Hall, and George Walton (Georgia)

Gwinnett, Hall: Present on June 28th; Signed Declaration of Independence

Walton: Likely absent on June 28th; Signed Declaration of Independence

Pictured: Walton; Not Pictured: Gwinnett, Hall

Gwinnett and Hall were present on June 28th and signed the Declaration on August 2nd, but they were not depicted by Trumbull. The *Journals of the Continental Congress* do not mention George Walton until July 17th, but it is likely that he was in attendance as early as June 29th, when he delivered a letter to John Adams. So, the one Georgia delegate Trumbull included was the only one (most likely) not in the room on June 28th.

Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence* can also be found on the back of the \$2 bill. But this engraved version includes even fewer Founding Fathers; five figures on the left (Wythe, Whipple, Bartlett, Lynch, and Walton) and two figures on the right (McKean and Philip Livingston) are cut off, and two unidentified figures were added.

So yes, "the reality is messier and richer, kids." Or, as Samuel Adams Wells (grandson of Sam Adams) wrote to Thomas Jefferson, "The painting executed by Col. Trumbull, representing the Congress at the declaration of independence will, I fear, have a tendency to obscure the history of the event which it is designed to commemorate."