**The Sussex Declaration**

**Press Release: July 2, 2018 (6 a.m. Eastern)**

**Released by Declaration Resources Project, Harvard University**

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Harvard researchers, Danielle Allen and Emily Sneff, in collaboration with researchers at the West Sussex Record Office, British Library, Library of Congress, and University of York have completed non-invasive testing on the parchment manuscript of the Declaration of Independence housed at the West Sussex Record Office in the United Kingdom and now known as the Sussex Declaration. The testing has revealed a date beneath an erasure on the document. The date reads either “July 4, 178” or “July 4, 179”.

At 24” x 30.5” this parchment is on the same ornamental scale as the only other known contemporary manuscript of the Declaration of Independence on parchment, the engrossed parchment at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., which was signed by the delegates to Continental Congress. In contrast, the Sussex Declaration lists the signatories, but with all the names written in the hand of a single clerk. There are other printed parchments of the Declaration, and other handwritten versions of the Declaration. These two are the only ceremonial parchment manuscripts.

Conservation scientists at the British Library, Library of Congress, and the University of York conducted multi-spectral imaging, X-ray fluorescence (XRF) capture, and protein analysis (DNA testing). The imaging revealed a date beneath a scraped erasure to the right of the document’s title. Beneath the scraping, researchers found a partially inscribed date, reading either “July 4, 178” or “July 4, 179”. It is impossible to say whether there was originally a fourth digit in the year.

The erased date was written along a slight downward slant, indicating that the clerk made two errors in the initial calligraphy for the date: he (or she) erred with regard to the date itself, using (presumably) the year of production rather than the year in which the Declaration was enacted, and also failed to maintain a horizontal line. Imaging revealed that the inked lines establishing horizontal margins for the parchment, and the lining of the parchment used by the clerk to keep the rest of the text properly aligned were added after this failed inscription was scraped off the parchment. There is congruency in the iron gall ink used throughout the document, indicating that the initial titling, the corrected titling, the body of the text, the list of signatories, and the corrections within the body of the text were written in a relatively short window of time; in other words, the corrections were made almost immediately.

These discoveries support the date of the 1780s for the Sussex Declaration proposed by Allen and Sneff in their paper, “The Sussex Declaration,” forthcoming in the *Proceedings of the Bibliographic Society of America* this fall. The findings also support their hypothesis that the clerk was inexperienced.

In addition, through XRF analysis, the researchers discovered high iron content in holes in the corner of the parchment, providing supporting evidence for the use of iron nails to hang the parchment at some point. The protein analysis, or DNA testing, revealed that the parchment was prepared from sheepskin, rather than more expensive calfskin.

The technical reports from the testing are posted at the Declaration Resources Project website.

Allen is the James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard University. Sneff is the Research Manager for the [Declaration Resources Project](https://declaration.fas.harvard.edu).

Allen and Sneff’s paper describing the material evidence will be published this fall the *Papers of the Bibliographic Society of America*. Their paper identifying James Wilson as the most likely commissioner, and preparation for the Constitutional Convention as the most likely context of production, is forthcoming in the *Georgetown Law Review*. That paper argues that Wilson, or a political ally, looks likely to have commissioned this parchment as a part of advocacy efforts on behalf of the federal Constitution.

The parchment is housed at the West Sussex Record Office in the United Kingdom and was believed to have been held originally by the Third Duke of Richmond, known as the “Radical Duke” for his support of the Americans during the Revolution. The parchment is, however, American and is most likely to have been produced in New York or Philadelphia. The team continues to work on the question of when and how the parchment moved to the UK.

The most interesting feature of the Sussex Declaration is its treatment of the list of names of signatories. In contrast to all other 18th century versions of the Declaration, on this parchment the list of signatories was not grouped by states. The team hypothesizes that this detail supported efforts, made by Wilson and his allies during the Constitutional Convention and ratification process, to argue that the authority of the Declaration rested on a unitary national people, and not on a federation of states.

Images of the Sussex Declaration and contextual documents are available [here](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/un65xt20ttsia2c/AABsr4hHxeV-UbVd2BQ3Mv72a?dl=0). See the Please Read document in the Dropbox folder or contact emilysneff@fas.harvard.edu for information about image credits.

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