

The Sussex Declaration

Press Release: April 20, 2017

Released by Declaration Resources Project, Harvard University

Contact: Emily Sneff (emilysneff@fas.harvard.edu)

A duo of researchers at Harvard (Danielle Allen and Emily Sneff) have uncovered a large format **parchment manuscript** of the Declaration of Independence, which they have dated, based on material evidence, to the 1780s, the period of political contestation leading up to the Constitutional Convention. At 24” x 30” it is on the same ornamental scale as the Matlack Declaration housed in the National Archives, the only other known **parchment manuscript**. They have designated this as “The Sussex Declaration.”

There are other printed parchments, and other handwritten versions of the Declaration. These two are the only ceremonial parchment manuscripts.

Allen is the James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard University. Sneff is the Research Manager for the [Declaration Resources Project](#).

Allen and Sneff’s paper describing the material evidence is currently in the final revisions stage with the *Papers of the Bibliographic Society of America* and has been posted to the [Declaration Resources Project website](#). The draft of their paper identifying James Wilson as the most likely commissioner has also been posted to the site. They presented this paper April 21st at Yale, for a conference celebrating the 50th anniversary of Bernard Bailyn’s publication of *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. The 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. It is even possible that the parchment did not move to the UK until well after the death of the Third Duke. The team has linked the parchment to two 19th century engravings of the Declaration of Independence made in the U.S.: the Benjamin Owen Tyler engraving of 1818 and the L.H. Bridgham miniature of 1836.

The team continues to work on the question of whether the parchment moved to the UK in the 1780s or 1790s or in the period after the engraving of 1836 was made. If the former is true, then there would have to have been multiple copies of this parchment.

The most interesting feature of this parchment manuscript 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.

On this parchment, the phrase “pursuit of happiness” is followed by a dash only, and not by a period. The phrase “consent of the governed” is, however, followed by a period.

The team is currently developing a collaborative project with the West Sussex Record Office, the British Library, and the Library of Congress to conduct hyperspectral imaging and other non-invasive analyses of the parchment.

Images of the Sussex Declaration and contextual documents are available [here](#). See the Please Read document in the Dropbox folder or contact emilysneff@fas.harvard.edu for information about image credits.

For Harvard Communications, please contact:

Peter Reuell
Communications Officer
Faculty of Arts and Sciences
Harvard University
Cambridge, MA 02138
617-496-8070
preuell@fas.harvard.edu

For West Sussex Record Office Communications, please contact:

Jo Steele
Senior Press Officer, West Sussex County Council
Tel: +44 (0)33 022 25979
Email: Jo.Steele@westsussex.gov.uk