

Republican Perspective
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by Ed Manning

THE GREAT 56

“The Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, the constitutions of the several states, and the organic laws of the territories all alike propose to protect the people in the exercise of their God-given rights. Not one of them pretends to bestow rights.” Susan B. Anthony

Hope you enjoyed the 4th of July holiday — hot dogs, ice cream, music and fireworks! But let's reflect how this national holiday came about?

Most of us think of July 4, 1776, as a day that represents the Declaration of Independence and the birth of the United States of America as an independent nation. But that occurred on July 2, 1776 when the Continental Congress declared its independence from the British Crown. July 4th was the date that the Continental Congress approved the final wording of the Declaration of Independence after laboring over several drafts. Actual signing took place in August.

All 13 Colonies were represented in Philadelphia that hot summer. There were 56 representatives ranging in age from 26 (Edward Rutledge) to 70 (Ben Franklin), but the majority were in their thirties or forties. Most were men of means — lawyers, merchants and shippers. Their fortunes were at risk should they lose the war. 48 were native born Americans but 8 were born in Britain.

The Declaration itself was written by Thomas Jefferson as part of the “Committee of Five,” appointed by Congress. The five were: John Adams of Massachusetts, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, Robert R. Livingston of New York, and Roger Sherman of Connecticut.

Jefferson did not want to write the Declaration and thought John Adams was better suited. But Adams thought differently, as he later wrote to his friend Thomas Pickering. *“Jefferson proposed to me to make the draft. I said, 'I will not,' 'You should do it.' 'Oh! no.' 'Why will you not? You ought to do it.' 'I will not.' 'Why?' 'Reasons enough.' 'What can be your reasons?' 'Reason first, you are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason second, I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular. You are very much otherwise. Reason third, you can write ten times better than I can.' 'Well,' said Jefferson, 'if you are decided, I will do as well as I can.' 'Very well. When you have drawn it up, we will have a meeting.'*

After the signing, there was an uneasy silence in the room as the men contemplated the magnitude of their action. Some wept, while others bowed in prayer. Signing with unusually large writing, the President of the Continental Congress, John Hancock

declared, *“His majesty can now read my name without glasses. And he can also double the price on my head.”*

Hancock added, *“We must be unanimous; there must be no pulling different ways; we must all hang together.”* Benjamin Franklin responded in his characteristic wit, *“Yes, we must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately!”*

The Signers were troubled that their efforts to preserve liberty might be forgotten. A letter from Pennsylvania’s Dr. Benjamin Rush to John Adams in 1811 made it clear:

“The 4th of July has been celebrated in Philadelphia in the manner I expected. The military men, and particularly one of them, ran away with all the glory of the day. But scarcely a word was said of the solicitude and labors and fears and sorrows and sleepless nights of the men who projected, proposed, defended, and subscribed [signed] the Declaration of Independence. Do you recollect your memorable speech upon the day on which the vote was taken? Do you re collect 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 [John Hancock] to subscribe what was believed by many at that time to be our own death warrants? The silence and the gloom of the morning were interrupted, I well recollect, only for a moment by Colonel Harrison of Virginia [a large and powerful man], who said to Mr. Gerry [a frail and tiny man] at the table [just before he signed the Declaration]: 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!”

Do we have 56 men/women in Congress today that wish to preserve liberty? Or do we have men/women that wish to preserve their own power and wealth?