

3Qs: Celebrating America's independence

July 4 2012, by Greg St. Martin

Wednesday marks the country's annual celebration of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. But there are many interesting historical facts that surround that date and how the Declaration's impact changed over time, according to William Fowler, Northeastern's Distinguished Professor of History. Northeastern University news office asked Fowler to explore these fascinating tales and explain how the Declaration inspired similar documents in other countries.

Most Americans celebrate the Fourth of July and are familiar with the Declaration of Independence. But what are some little-known historical facts about the holiday and the document that you find most interesting?

A few come to mind. First, July 4 is not Independence Day. Rather, it took place on July 2, 1776 when Congress approved the resolution offered by Richard Henry Lee of Virginia. On July 3, John Adams wrote the following to Abigail: "But the Day is past. The Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America."

Then on July 4, Congress approved a Declaration, originally drafted by Thomas Jefferson, explaining what had been done on July 2. In fact, Jefferson kept a "Memorandum Book" recording his daily activities. On July 4, he recorded that he bought a thermometer, seven pair of women's gloves and gave money to charity. He said nothing about the Declaration.

Another interesting note is that contrary to the painting by John Trumbull after the approval of the Declaration, there was no grand signing ceremony. As President of the Congress, John Hancock did sign the Declaration on the 4th, as did the Secretary of the Congress Charles Thomson. Others signed over a period of several weeks.

Immediately after the vote on July 4, a Philadelphia printer, John Dunlop, printed about 200 copies of the Declaration to be distributed to the states and to the army. The Declaration was first read in Boston from the balcony of the Old State House, on the corner of State and Congress Streets, on July 18, 1776.

How has the Declaration's impact and meaning changed over time?

In the period after the Revolution, the Declaration was shunted aside. It was hard to reconcile the language of the Declaration in a nation that embraced slavery. Abraham Lincoln revived reverence for the Declaration when he declared at Gettysburg, on November 19, 1863: “Four score and seven years ago [1776] our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Lincoln’s words enshrined the Declaration as a statement of American ideals.

In what way was the Declaration of Independence an unprecedented document, and what other documents has it since inspired?

Other nations have followed the American example and echoed the Declaration. Haiti was the first to do so in 1804. Since that time dozens of nations have followed, including several Latin American republics as well as Texas when she declared independence from Mexico in 1836 and

South Carolina when the state seceded from the Union in 1860. In 1848, the Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, N.Y., invoked Jefferson's words in demanding rights for women. Perhaps the most ironic invocation of Jefferson's words came in the Republic of Vietnam. Written by Ho Chi Minh, in Hanoi, on September 2, 1945, the Declaration of Independence, Democratic Republic of Vietnam begins: "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Provided by Northeastern University

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