Historians identify rare copy of Declaration of Independence in British archive

April 21 2017

After discovering a highly rare copy of the Declaration of Independence in a small records office in the south of England, Harvard researchers were able to date the document to the 1780s, and say it sheds light on the tumultuous politics of the era just after the Revolutionary War.

"Manuscript copy, on parchment, of the Declaration in Congress of the thirteen United States of America" - in the catalog of a tiny records office in the town of Chichester in the south of England.

As part of an effort to assemble a database on every known edition of the Declaration of Independence, Emily Sneff, a researcher with the Declaration Resources Project, stumbled upon the listing in August 2015.

And though she didn't think much of it at the time, that short description would set her and Danielle Allen, the James Bryant Conant University Professor and Director of the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics, on a two-year journey into American history.

"I'd found vague descriptions of other copies of the Declaration that turned out to be 19th century reproductions of the signed parchment in the National Archives, so that was what I was expecting," Sneff said, of her initial impression based on the catalog listing. "What struck me as significant was that it said manuscript on parchment."

Sneff contacted the archive, the West Sussex Record Office, which was

unable to send images of the document online, and instead mailed her a disc with photos of the document.

"When I looked at it closely, I started to see details, like names that weren't in the right order - John Hancock isn't listed first, there's a mark at the top that looks like an erasure, the text has very little punctuation in it - and it's in a handwriting I hadn't seen before," she said. "As those details started adding up, I brought it to Danielle's attention and we realized this was different from any other copy we had seen."

"We knew we had a mystery," Allen said. "We had a big, big mystery."

"There are three key questions we want to answer," she continued. "One is: Can we date this parchment based on the material evidence? Second, who commissioned it and why, and third, how did it get to England?"

Allen and Sneff are providing some answers to that mystery with a pair of papers. The first, which is currently in the final revision stage with the *Papers of the Bibliographic Society of America*, uses handwriting analysis, examination of the parchment preparation and styling, and spelling errors in the names of the signers to date the Sussex Declaration to the 1780s.

The second paper, presented at a Yale University conference, argues that the document was probably commissioned by James Wilson of Pennsylvania, who later aided in drafting the Constitution and was among the original justices appointed to the Supreme Court.

But the document isn't simply a previously-unknown piece of American history - it also affords Allen and Sneff a unique window into the political upheavals of the early Republic.

In the immediate aftermath of its signing, Allen said, there was a period

of "breaking news" in which the Declaration was reproduced and printed in a variety of formats as the news spread through the colonies and eventually made its way across the Atlantic to England.

"The versions that people would have seen in July and August 1776 were broadsides and newspapers, starting with John Dunlap's broadsides, which was printed on the night of July 4," Sneff said. "Those copies would have made their way across to England as well - there are Dunlap broadsides in their National Archives."

But it wasn't until approximately a decade later that the Sussex Declaration was produced, amidst what was one of the most challenging periods for the new nation.

"Victory was not sweet," Allen said, describing the post-war atmosphere. "There was financial disaster, the Articles of Confederation were not working...so the 1780s were a period of great instability, despite victory. And this parchment belongs to that decade."

Among the chief political debates of the era, Allen said, was whether the new nation had been founded on the basis of the authority of the people or the authority of the states.

By re-ordering names of the signers, arguably the most conspicuous feature of the parchment, the Sussex Declaration comes down squarely on one side of the argument.

On most documents, Allen said, the protocol was for members of each state delegation to sign together, with signatures typically running either down the page or from left to right, and with the names of the states labelling each group. An exception was made for a small number of particularly important documents - including the Declaration, which was signed from right to left, and which omitted the names of the states,

though the names were still grouped by state.

"But the Sussex Declaration scrambles the names so they are no longer grouped by state," Allen said. "It is the only version of the Declaration that does that, with the exception of an engraving from 1836 that derives from it. This is really a symbolic way of saying we are all one people or 'one community' to quote James Wilson."

Going forward, Allen and Sneff will continue to pursue research into exactly how the parchment reached England from the U.S. Also, they are working on a project in collaboration with the West Sussex Record Office, the British Library and the Library of Congress to perform hyper-spectral imaging on the parchment and other non-invasive studies in the hope of reading some text that appears to have been scraped away at the top of the document.

Provided by Harvard University