

# How Thomas Jefferson Spent America's First Fourth of July

by John Kord Lagemann

No newspaper reporters were present in 1776 when the Continental Congress debated and finally adopted America's Declaration of Independence. But by taking historical facts and details from letters written by the participants, and fitting in what is known of the habits and personalities of the leading US patriots of the time, the author was able to reconstruct in authentic detail the events of July 4, 1776, as Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration, probably experienced them.

THOMAS Jefferson woke just after dawn in his lodgings in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The date was July 4, 1776 — and in a few hours, the Continental Congress was scheduled to debate for the third day a document drafted by Jefferson and described in the official Record as "the declaration respecting independence."

Yet in the bright stillness of early dawn, there was nothing about the rural war capital of America's 13 rebellious Colonies to suggest that a decision to be made there that day would profoundly change the conditions and expectations of life for all humankind.

Jefferson went unhurriedly about his usual morning routine in the second-floor bedroom and front parlor he rented from the bricklayer Jacob Graff at 7th and High Streets, on the outskirts of town.

He brushed his teeth, scrubbed himself with soap and cold water from a pitcher on the washstand, and put on his clothes — white linen shirt with wrap-around collar, red vest, plain black jacket and knee breeches, white cotton stockings and black leather pumps, with silver buckles. He dressed swiftly, humming to himself (a habit of his when he was alone or riding horseback), his mind occupied with the business of the day.

The Declaration of Independence was not the 33-year-old Virginian's only concern. In Williamsburg, the Virginia Convention had just drafted a new constitution and Jefferson feared that his political enemies had taken advantage of his absence to preserve the rule of the aristocracy over the common people. At his home in Monticello, Virginia, his beloved wife Martha was ill and the news he read between the lines of her letters was not encouraging. A few months earlier, their baby daughter, Jane, had died, and now his thoughts dwelt all the more anxiously on their three-year-old Martha, or "Patsy" as Jefferson called her. The Monticello home was only half finished and the farm crops on his 4,000-hectare estate had been declining steadily in his absence. British warships had set fire to Norfolk, Virginia, six months earlier and nobody knew when the war would sweep inland to engulf the whole state.

Dressed, Jefferson entered the front parlor and leaned down with his elbows on the sill to glance at a thermometer he'd screwed on the frames of one of the windows. Every morning, and again every night when he returned home at 11 pm or midnight, he jotted down the weather in his account book. His notation that morning was:

"July 4. Fine sunshine. Pleasant morning. Wind SE 6 am 68 degrees."

American can picture the face of this weatherman-statesman by subtracting a few years and adding a few details

to the Jefferson likeness on the American nickel — the unruly, sandy-colored hair brushed back in a careless pompadour and tied at the back of the neck; the freckled skin that reddened quickly on exposure to the sun or to a slur; the widely-spaced gray-blue eyes, serenely alert under the level eyebrows; the muscular jaws and clenched fist of a chin, relieved of stubbornness by the wide, sensitive mouth turned up slightly at the corners as if about to speak or smile.

Big, deep-cut features like his need height to put them in perspective. Jefferson was lean, square-shouldered, and almost two meters tall — "a straight-up man," as one of his servants back in Virginia described him, "back bone straight as a rifle barrel." In walking he had the typical wading gait of a long-legged man, and when talking he usually folded his arms, tilted his head to one side, and bent forward slightly from the waist.

The two or three hours between getting up in the morning and leaving for the 9 am session of the Continental Congress, plus a brief period before he retired at night, were just about the only times when Jefferson could write without interruption. Sitting down near the open windows of the little low-ceilinged parlor, he wrote steadily in his clear, swift hand, pausing once or twice perhaps to pick up the violin that was always part of his baggage, and refreshing his mind with five or ten minutes of the music of Mozart or Haydn.

His desk was a plain table on which he placed a small slant-top writing box made by his former landlord, a Philadelphia cabinetmaker named Benjamin Rudolf, from a design Jefferson sketched out on a piece of wrapping paper. Through the windows came the soft humming and pulsing of a summer morning — the distant shout of field hands harvesting rye and barley, the banter of crows over a pine grove, the whine of a rusty hand pump, the cries of children playing hopscotch in the street. From the kitchen basement came the familiar rattle of pots and pans, the smell of wood smoke and newly-baked bread.

It was on this writing desk during the early morning hours of the previous weeks that Jefferson had done the biggest job Congress had given him — the writing of a statement to present the case for American independence to the Colonies and to the world.

On June 7th, acting on instruction from Williamsburg, Richard Henry Lee had risen from his seat to move for the Virginia delegation, "That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States..." The motion finally brought out into the open the great issue of independence — the ultimate "to be or not to be" of the Colonies.

Opponents of independence fought a bitter delaying battle and doubtful Colonies asked time to call special assemblies to find out how the people felt. On June 10th, after two days of debate, Congress postponed the showdown to July 1st and elected a committee to draft a declaration to serve as the basis of a new government.

The committee comprised Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, John Adams of Massachusetts, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, and Robert R Livingston of New York.

As in many committees, most of the actual work had to be done by one man, and Jefferson, already known as the author or coauthor of several revolutionary papers, was a logical choice.

"I will do as well as I can," said Jefferson, and sat down next morning at the writing box in his front parlor to write what he called "an expression of the American mind."

When it was done, he showed it first to Franklin, then to Adams — "of whose judgments I most wished to have the benefit." Each penciled in minor amendments.

In the meantime, Virginia's independence resolution had been brought up again, debated hotly and passed on July 2. Thus the fact of independence had become official, but its meaning remained to be decided. The resolution told the American people what they were not — subjects of Great Britain; in the Declaration, Jefferson told them what they were — self-governing people, politically equal, with certain unalienable rights as human beings.

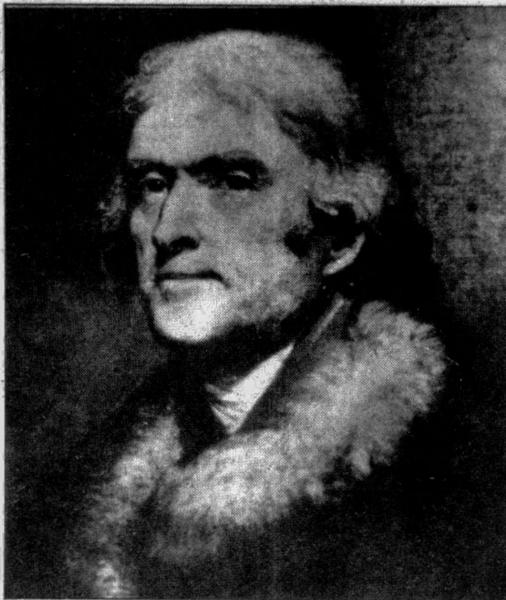
It no longer was a question of rebellion against the British crown. It was revolution, and nobody knew it better than Jefferson, who was later to say: "I have sworn on the altar of God, eternal hostility against every tyranny over the mind of man."

Such, then, was the situation as Jefferson sat writing at his desk on the morning of July 4th. Around 7 am there was a knock at the parlor door, and the servant Jefferson brought with him from Monticello carried in the usual tray of coffee, hot rolls and home-churned butter.

While Jefferson sipped the coffee, he talked with the servant about the day's chores, including the shoeing of the horses for the return journey to Virginia, which Jefferson hoped would be soon.

At 8:50 am, Jefferson sealed up his letters with wax, tucked them in his coat pocket, put on his straw hat, and set out for the State House.

Philadelphia, with a population of 28,000, was the



Thomas Jefferson

biggest, richest, and most colorful town in the Colonies. Thanks to the efforts of its leading citizen, Benjamin Franklin, many of the streets were paved with a narrow strip of cobblestone and some even had brick footpaths along the sides and whale-oil lamps on wooden posts to light the way at night.

At intervals along High Street, as on most other streets, were hand pumps and watering troughs — the town's only water supply. The stores and houses were brightly colored green, blue, red and yellow with contrasting trim, and almost every shop front had a large, brightly illustrated sign suspended from wrought-iron beams.

As Jefferson approached the center of the town, he noted the tension in the air. The Colonies had been waiting with mounting excitement for the final break with Britain, and that morning the downtown streets were alive and stirring with townsfolk converging on the State House.

At the north entrance to the State House, half a dozen militiamen stood guard to keep an open passageway for the delegates. A cheer went up as two husky liveried servants trotted up and deposited a sedan chair. Out stepped Benjamin Franklin, lately delivered from a siege of gout. He looked hearty despite his 70 years and his eyes darted around the crowd with interest and amusement. Seeing Jefferson approaching, he held out his hand to the younger man and led him into the hall.

The broad vestibule was jammed with delegates drifting slowly into the meeting room. Jefferson's eyes immediately sought out his friend John Adams, the Boston lawyer who headed the Massachusetts delegation and now led the fight for the Declaration. He spotted Adams almost at once — as usual the center of a group of delegates who flocked around him to seek guidance on every important issue that came before Congress.

Adams detached himself from the group around him and joined Franklin and Jefferson. They walked into the meeting room together and placed their chairs in a small group beside one of the writing tables. "We should have adopted the Declaration seven months ago," Adams told them. "We might have formed alliances with foreign states. But on the other hand the delay has many great advantages — the hope of reconciliation with England has been gradually and at last totally extinguished. Time has been given for the whole people to consider this great question maturely. This will cement the nation."

At the far end of the room, John Hancock, president of Congress, seated himself behind his desk and raised his hand to call the meeting to order. The first item on the agenda that morning was a resolution asking the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety to dispatch a supply of flints to the troops in New York. It passed routinely; and so did a resolution urging the Colonies of Delaware and Maryland to hasten their military arrangements.

Then the Congress resolved itself into a committee of the whole with Benjamin Harrison of Virginia as chairman and got back to the main business of the day — the reading and amending of the Declaration of Independence.

Throughout the debate on the Declaration, Jefferson did

Hatter, Makes and Sells Hats for Ready Money." Each of his friends found something wrong with this or that word until at last all that remained was the figure of the hat and the simple inscription, "John Thompson."

"If you imagine that I expect this Declaration will ward off calamities from this country you are much mistaken," Adams said. "A bloody conflict we are destined to endure. But Freedom is a counter balance for poverty, discord and war, and more ... that is the common sense of the matter."

When he sat down the Declaration was submitted to a vote. The minutes of the Continental Congress for July 4, 1776, tell the rest of the story.

"Mr Harrison reported that the committee of the whole Congress have agreed to a Declaration which he delivered in."

"The Declaration being again read was agreed to as follows: In Congress, July 4, 1776, A Declaration by the representatives of the United States of America in General Congress Assembled..."

"When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the Powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation."

Harrison had started the reading in a matter-of-fact tone. But as he continued his voice began to shake with emotion.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these, rights,

governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness..."

... And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."

After this final reading, the delegates sat for a moment in silence. Then, in a sudden release from tension, they rose from their seats, shook hands, laughed and clapped one another on the back.

The signing of the Declaration by the members was postponed until the text could be engraved on parchment. But broadsides were to be printed immediately for distribution to the troops and to the various state assemblies. Since these would bear the signature of Hancock as president of Congress and Charles Thompson as secretary, the delegates gathered around John Hancock's desk to watch them sign.

"Well, gentlemen," said Hancock, "from now on there must be no pulling in different ways. We must all hang together."

To which Franklin replied: "We must, indeed, or we shall most certainly hang separately."

The quill point hissed against the paper as Hancock signed with a flourish.

News of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence spread rapidly through the crowds waiting outside the State House. "The excited multitude in the streets," reports a chronicler of the times, "responded with loud acclamations and with cannon-peals, bonfires and illuminations, the patriots held glorious carnival that night in the quiet city of Philadelphia."

After Congress adjourned late in the afternoon, most of the delegates met again around the dining tables of nearby Smith's City Tavern, the unofficial headquarters and news

center of the Revolution. Stage wagons from all the Colonies arrived or departed in front of its doors. Reports of battles won or lost arrived there first, often in the person of men who had been in the thick of them.

On his way to City Tavern that July 4th night, Jefferson stopped by Sparhawk's and picked up his thermometer. Then, noticing a ribbon shop nearby, he picked out seven pairs of gloves for his wife and had them wrapped to send back to Virginia along with the letters still in his pocket.

Outside the Tavern the passing throngs were in a festive mood, beating on pots and pans, singing "Yankee Doodle," and piling up wood in the middle of the street for a bonfire. Inside the Tavern, Jefferson left his package and letters at the mail desk to be forwarded to Monticello on the first southbound stage wagon.

"To the world's best hope," was Jefferson's toast at the dinner table. It was an exciting night at the Tavern, and speculation and argument over the future of the nation born that day waxed until a late hour.

Not until almost 11 pm did Jefferson climb the stairs to his front parlor in the Graff house, light a couple of candles, and sit down at his writing box.

Methodical as always, he recorded the weather ("fine, cool moonlight night"). Then he began letters reviewing the day's events for his wife and his colleagues in Virginia. "It is a heavenly comfort," he wrote, "to see these principles of liberty are so strongly felt. I pray God they may be eternal."

Toward midnight he picked up his violin, tuned it, then put it down again. The bells of the town were still ringing and their sound was music enough.

For a long time after blowing out the candles, Jefferson stood by the open window, listening to the bells ringing in celebration of the birth of the United States of America.

The late John Kord Lagemann was a free-lance writer who contributed numerous articles on colonial America to US publications. This article appeared in the July 4, 1953, issue of *Collier's*.

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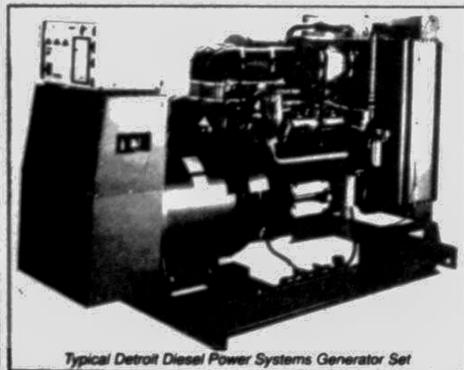
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