

The iconography of triumph and surrender

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Article Three of the Instrument of surrender of the British army at Yorktown, signed before sunrise October 19, 1781, stipulated that the garrison would: March out to a place to be appointed in front of the posts at 2 o'clock precisely, with Shouldered Arms. Colors cased and Drums beating a British or German March. They are then to ground

their Arms and return to the Encampment, where they will remain until they are dispatched to the place of their Destination.

There were eyewitnesses aplenty -- American, French, British, and German participants, as well as spectators -- on whose minds the scene was inscribed, and who confided it to their journals, letters, and reports. Williamsburg's St.

George Tucker, a Virginia militia officer, was one of the more able. But if among them was an artist, none committed what he had seen to canvas, or even to paper, then or later. At least, no such illustration seems to have survived. History's view of the instant when, in effect, the British letters on the United States were broken depends on an iconography of victory sometimes fanciful, sometimes faith-

ful, and often fascinating.

At about noon the 5,500 regulars of the Continental Army lined up on the east side of the road to Hampton -- the left if you were headed to that port -- with 2,500 state militia in the rear. Baron von Steuben said the regulars were drawn up in two ranks: those with more or less complete uniforms in front, behind them "a ragged set of fellows, very ill-looking."

Opposite them stood 9,500 well-dressed French soldiers in a line that stretched nearly two miles. Led by General Charles O'Hara, an Irishman and Lord Cornwallis's second in command, the column that marched out of Yorktown on that clear, cool, autumn day numbered 7,200 officers and men and 840 sailors. Cornwallis sent word that he was ill, and remained behind.

The closest we come to a depiction by someone who was there is a schematic drawing of the formations sketched with the help of Lieutenant Colonel David Humphreys of Derby, Connecticut. A Yale graduate, he was an aide to the American commander, General George Washington, from June 1780 to the end of hostilities.

Washington sent Humphreys to Congress in Philadelphia with official news of Cornwallis's surrender and the captured British flags. Afterward, on his way home, Humphreys stopped in New Haven to see his old teacher Ezra Stiles, president of Yale College. It was November 5, barely two and a half weeks after the surrender. Humphreys, so Stiles wrote in his Literary Diary, "gave an Account of the Siege & Capture of Ld Cornwallis, he having been present thro' the whole. He corrected my Plan."

Another one-time Continental officer from Connecticut, Colonel John Trumbull, painted the most accurate portrait of the scene and the men who people it. Born on June 6, 1756 in Lebanon, the sixth and youngest child of Governor Jonathan Trumbull and his wife, Faith Robinson, Trumbull always wanted to be an artist. After meeting John Singleton Copley in Boston and experimenting in the fine arts at Harvard, Trumbull served briefly as Washington's aide-de-camp, resigning in April 1777.

In 1780, he traveled to London to study with Benjamin West, but the British authorities soon jailed him for treason,

apparently in retaliation for Washington's decision to hang Major John Andre, a confederate of Benedict Arnold's, for a spy. Released in June 1781, Trumbull left for the continent but resumed his studies with West in 1783.

Paintings of the American Revolution became his passion. His best known work would be Surrender at Yorktown, a portrayal he thoroughly researched. Trumbull traveled across Europe calling on officers who had been in the French ranks that day, sketching onto the canvas their likenesses and uniform details.

On August 28, 1787 he wrote to the American ambassador to France, Thomas Jefferson, that "I shall soon be ready to paint my picture of the surrender of York Town, and must then come to Paris." He wanted to "meet the Principal Officers who served in America." Among them was the French commander, General Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, Comte de Rochambeau.

In a letter to his brother Jonathan the following February 6, Trumbull said: "I have been in this capital of dissipation and nonsense near six weeks for the purpose of getting the portraits of the French Officers who were at York Town, and have happily been so successful as to find all those whom I wished in town."

Shortly before his return to the United States in 1789, he wrote to Jefferson: "The greatest motive I had or have for engaging in or for continuing my pursuit of painting has been the wish of commemorating the great events of our country's Revolution."

Next he visited Yorktown to sketch the landscape in a drawing labeled "Yorktown, in Virginia, April 23, 1791, as seen from the point the British army entered between the lines of the Allied Troops of America and France at the surrender in '81; distance from the advanced works, 270 yards." But Trumbull

took liberties with the events as he completed his painting in the late 1790s; surely General Lincoln faced the other way as he received General O'Hara's sword. O'Hara was on horseback rather than on foot as he approached the victorious allies. Nevertheless, Trumbull's painting ranks among the best and most accurate depictions of the moment.

A rival is a painting by Trumbull contemporary, Louis Nicholas van Blarenbergh. Between 1779 and 1790, he executed twenty-two battle and siege scenes of the reign of Louis XV. In 1784, the king ordered him to add two more to the series -- paintings of the siege and surrender of Yorktown. To ensure their accuracy, Louis Alexandre de Berthier, Rochambeau's one-time aide-de-camp, mapmaker,

and surrender eyewitness was ordered to provide drawings and views to Blarenbergh. Rochambeau described the pictures to Washington on June 2, 1785: "They have been drawn, both by the truth and by an excellent design done by the young Berthier." Meticulous down to the details of people, uniforms, and flags, Blarenbergh's "Surrender at Yorktown" comes as close to a realistic depiction of the scene as possible.

Less can be said for the Yorktown surrender scenes that flooded the European market in the 1780s. Publishers rushed to feed the appetite of a news-hungry audience, and the imagination of many an artist ran wild. None had been to the New World, nor had any idea of how a

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FACT OR MYTH? This painting by JLG Ferris shows Betsy Ross (right) and the first American flag, which she purportedly sewed. The legend is traceable to none other than Ross herself, who told the story to her 11-year-old grandson in 1836, on her deathbed. He kept the tale to himself until 1870, when he presented it to the local historical society -- which enshrined it in American legend. Photo from Library of Congress (No. 49-14464).

The spirit of Independence

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Independence is of course most closely associated with Harry S. Truman. He made so many references to his hometown and its practical Midwestern values that the press took to calling him "The Man from Independence." Truman himself said, "I tried never to forget who I was and where I'd come from and where I was going back to," and explained that because one day he would be out of office and back in Independence, he had to make sure he did his best and made his neighbors proud.

Truman was born in Lamar, in southern Missouri, and moved with his family to Independence in 1890, when he was six. Around then he met

Bess Wallace, whom he married in 1919 after what was essentially a twenty-nine-year courtship. One of the nicest exhibits at the Truman Library, dedicated in 1957, is a display of some of the hundreds of letters Harry wrote to his beloved Bess over the years.

The library, which greets visitors with a Thomas Hart Benton mural titled Independence and the Opening of the West, is a fine starting point for learning about Truman the President, but his home at 219 North Delaware Street, the house where his wife grew up, offers intimate glimpses of his life in Independence. "It seems like a hollow week," Truman wrote to Bess Wallace in 1913, "if

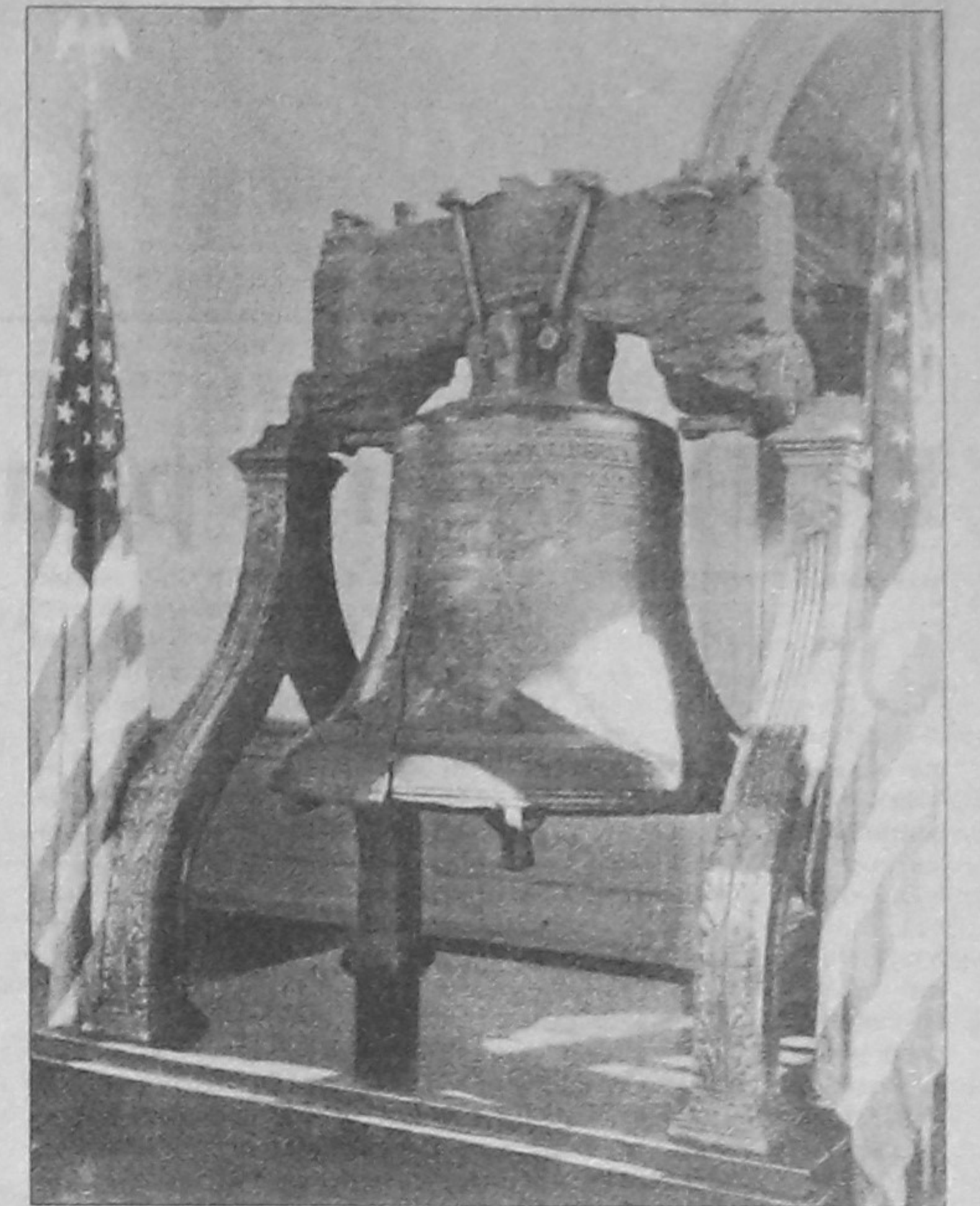
I don't arrive at 219 North Delaware at least one day in it." After their marriage they moved into the two-and-a-half-story structure, which Bess's grandfather had built in 1867. By the time she died, in 1982, she had lived in the house for seventy-eight years. Even when Truman was in the White House, she had rarely stayed away from 219 North Delaware for more than a few months at a time.

When Truman was courting her, the Wallace home was considered one of the finest mansions in Independence, though by today's standards it looks rather plain. The bedrooms are not open to view, since she stipulated in her will that though the house was to be given to the

public, her daughter, Margaret, must be permitted to spend the night whenever she chose. Still, you can stand on the porch where Truman pored over his newspaper and where, during his Presidency, he sought moments of solitude, and feel you are beginning to know the man who so dearly loved the simple pleasures of life. A piano stands in the parlor, along with a television that Truman refused to watch, preferring instead to read. The walls of his study are lined with books, and his worn blue reading chair looks as inviting today as it must have when he would snatch some free time there.

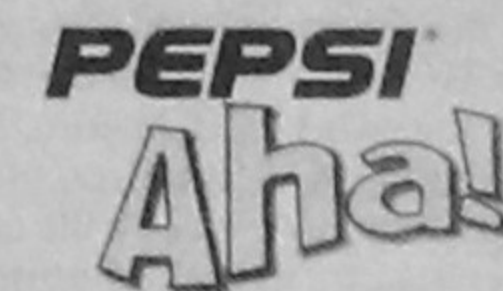
President or private citizen, Truman wanted his life in Independence to remain unchanged. Much to his chagrin, the Secret Service erected an iron fence around the lot in 1948 to protect the lawn from the increasingly large crowds that gathered to catch a glimpse of him at the "Summer White House." Bess Truman, tired of having her lowers tramped upon, had no such objections. Still, the Trumans were disappointed when they moved home after his final term as President and their neighbors couldn't bring themselves to treat them as regular folks. As one park ranger put it, "People wouldn't just drop by anymore, and if they did come over, they were very formal and never stayed more than half an hour. They figured the former President had better things to do with his time. Harry didn't see it that way, but there was nothing he could do to convince his guests of that."

During the years between his return to Independence and his death in 1972, Truman's daily routine included grabbing his hat, coat and cane -- his wife insisted after his death that they remain hanging where he'd left them -- and walking the short mile to his library (he and Bess are buried on the library grounds). He was notorious among his Secret Servicemen for walking everywhere, and he especially enjoyed striding through town. A statue of him erected outside the Jackson County Courthouse after his death shows him moving purposefully forward, as if marching into history. Truman so loved Independence that in 1971 he approved having the Department of the Interior make the twelve blocks around his home a national Historic District. As you stroll past the storefronts and through the quiet leafy neighborhoods, it's not hard to understand why the place meant so much to him.



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