

# THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

## A HISTORY

### Introduction

Nations come into being in many ways. Military rebellion, civil strife, acts of heroism, acts of treachery, a thousand greater and lesser clashes between defenders of the old order and supporters of the new--all these occurrences and more have marked the emergences of new nations, large and small. The birth of our own nation included them all. That birth was unique, not only in the immensity of its later impact on the course of world history and the growth of democracy, but also because so many of the threads in our national history run back through time to come together in one place, in one time, and in one document: the Declaration of Independence.

### Moving Toward Independence

The clearest call for independence up to the summer of 1776 came in Philadelphia on June 7. On that date in session in the Pennsylvania State House (later Independence Hall), the Continental Congress heard Richard Henry Lee of Virginia read his resolution beginning: "Resolved: That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved."

The Lee Resolution was an expression of what was already beginning to happen throughout the colonies. When the Second Continental Congress, which was essentially the government of the United States from 1775 to 1788, first met in May 1775, King George III had not replied to the petition for redress of grievances that he had been sent by the First Continental Congress. The Congress gradually took on the responsibilities of a national government. In June 1775 the Congress established the Continental Army as well as a continental currency. By the end of July of that year, it created a post office for the "United Colonies."

In August 1775 a royal proclamation declared that the King's American subjects were "engaged in open and avowed rebellion." Later that year, Parliament passed the American Prohibitory Act, which made all American vessels and cargoes forfeit to the Crown. And in May 1776 the Congress learned that the King had negotiated treaties with German states to hire mercenaries to fight in America. The weight of these actions combined to convince many Americans that the mother country was treating the colonies as a foreign entity.

One by one, the Continental Congress continued to cut the colonies' ties to Britain. The Privateering Resolution, passed in March 1776, allowed the colonists "to fit out armed vessels to cruize [sic] on the enemies of these United Colonies." On April 6, 1776, American ports were opened to commerce with other nations, an action that severed the economic ties fostered by the Navigation Acts. A "Resolution for the Formation of Local Governments" was passed on May 10, 1776.

At the same time, more of the colonists themselves were becoming convinced of the inevitability of independence. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, published in January 1776, was sold by the thousands. By the middle of May 1776, eight colonies had decided that they would support independence. On May 15, 1776, the Virginia Convention passed a resolution that "the delegates appointed to represent this colony in General Congress be instructed to propose to that respectable body to declare the United Colonies free and independent states."

It was in keeping with these instructions that Richard Henry Lee, on June 7, 1776, presented his resolution. There were still some delegates, however, including those bound by earlier instructions, who wished to pursue the path of reconciliation with Britain. On June 11 consideration of the Lee Resolution was postponed by a vote of seven colonies to five, with New York abstaining. Congress then recessed for 3 weeks. The tone of the debate indicated that at the end of that time the Lee Resolution would be adopted. Before Congress recessed,

therefore, a Committee of Five was appointed to draft a statement presenting to the world the colonies' case for independence.

### **The Committee of Five**

The committee consisted of two New England men, John Adams of Massachusetts and Roger Sherman of Connecticut; two men from the Middle Colonies, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania and Robert R. Livingston of New York; and one southerner, Thomas Jefferson of Virginia. In 1823 Jefferson wrote that the other members of the committee "unanimously pressed on myself alone to undertake the draught [sic]. I consented; I drew it; but before I reported it to the committee I communicated it separately to Dr. Franklin and Mr. Adams requesting their corrections. . . I then wrote a fair copy, reported it to the committee, and from them, unaltered to the Congress." (If Jefferson did make a "fair copy," incorporating the changes made by Franklin and Adams, it has not been preserved. It may have been the copy that was amended by the Congress and used for printing, but in any case, it has not survived. Jefferson's rough draft, however, with changes made by Franklin and Adams, as well as Jefferson's own notes of changes by the Congress, is housed at the Library of Congress.)

Jefferson's account reflects three stages in the life of the Declaration: the document originally written by Jefferson; the changes to that document made by Franklin and Adams, resulting in the version that was submitted by the Committee of Five to the Congress; and the version that was eventually adopted.

On July 1, 1776, Congress reconvened. The following day, the Lee Resolution for independence was adopted by 12 of the 13 colonies, New York not voting. Immediately afterward, the Congress began to consider the Declaration. Adams and Franklin had made only a few changes before the committee submitted the document. The discussion in Congress resulted in some alterations and deletions, but the basic document remained Jefferson's. The process of revision continued through all of July 3 and into the late afternoon of July 4. Then, at last, church bells rang out over Philadelphia; the Declaration had been officially adopted.

The Declaration of Independence is made up of five distinct parts: the introduction; the preamble; the body, which can be divided into two sections; and a conclusion. The introduction states that this document will "declare" the "causes" that have made it necessary for the American colonies to leave the British Empire. Having stated in the introduction that independence is unavoidable, even necessary, the preamble sets out principles that were already recognized to be "self-evident" by most 18th-century Englishmen, closing with the statement that "a long train of abuses and usurpations . . . evinces a design to reduce [a people] under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security." The first section of the body of the Declaration gives evidence of the "long train of abuses and usurpations" heaped upon the colonists by King George III. The second section of the body states that the colonists had appealed in vain to their "British brethren" for a redress of their grievances. Having stated the conditions that made independence necessary and having shown that those conditions existed in British North America, the Declaration concludes that "these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved."

Although Congress had adopted the Declaration submitted by the Committee of Five, the committee's task was not yet completed. Congress had also directed that the committee supervise the printing of the adopted document. The first printed copies of the Declaration of Independence were turned out from the shop of John Dunlap, official printer to the Congress. After the Declaration had been adopted, the committee took to Dunlap the manuscript document, possibly Jefferson's "fair copy" of his rough draft. On the morning of July 5, copies were dispatched by members of Congress to various assemblies, conventions, and committees of safety as well as to the commanders of Continental troops. Also on July 5, a copy of the printed version of the approved Declaration was inserted into the "rough journal" of the Continental Congress for July 4. The text was followed by the words "Signed by Order and in Behalf of the Congress, John Hancock, President. Attest. Charles Thomson, Secretary." It is not known how many copies John Dunlap printed on his busy night of July 4. There

are 24 copies known to exist of what is commonly referred to as "the Dunlap broadside," 17 owned by American institutions, 2 by British institutions, and 5 by private owners. (See Appendix A.)

## **The Engrossed Declaration**

On July 9 the action of Congress was officially approved by the New York Convention. All 13 colonies had now signified their approval. On July 19, therefore, Congress was able to order that the Declaration be "fairly engrossed on parchment, with the title and stile [sic] of 'The unanimous declaration of the thirteen United States of America,' and that the same, when engrossed, be signed by every member of Congress."

Engrossing is the process of preparing an official document in a large, clear hand. Timothy Matlack was probably the engrosser of the Declaration. He was a Pennsylvanian who had assisted the Secretary of the Congress, Charles Thomson, in his duties for over a year and who had written out George Washington's commission as commanding general of the Continental Army. Matlack set to work with pen, ink, parchment, and practiced hand, and finally, on August 2, the journal of the Continental Congress records that "The declaration of independence being engrossed and compared at the table was signed." One of the most widely held misconceptions about the Declaration is that it was signed on July 4, 1776, by all the delegates in attendance.

John Hancock, the President of the Congress, was the first to sign the sheet of parchment measuring 24¼ by 29¾ inches. He used a bold signature centered below the text. In accordance with prevailing custom, the other delegates began to sign at the right below the text, their signatures arranged according to the geographic location of the states they represented. New Hampshire, the northernmost state, began the list, and Georgia, the southernmost, ended it. Eventually 56 delegates signed, although all were not present on August 2. Among the later signers were Elbridge Gerry, Oliver Wolcott, Lewis Morris, Thomas McKean, and Matthew Thornton, who found that he had no room to sign with the other New Hampshire delegates. A few delegates who voted for adoption of the Declaration on July 4 were never to sign in spite of the July 19 order of Congress that the engrossed document "be signed by every member of Congress." Nonsigners included John Dickinson, who clung to the idea of reconciliation with Britain, and Robert R. Livingston, one of the Committee of Five, who thought the Declaration was premature.

## **Parchment and Ink**

Over the next 200 years, the nation whose birth was announced with a Declaration "fairly engrossed on parchment" was to show immense growth in area, population, economic power, and social complexity and a lasting commitment to a testing and strengthening of its democracy. But what of the parchment itself? How was it to fare over the course of two centuries?

In the chronicle of the Declaration as a physical object, three themes necessarily entwine themselves: the relationship between the physical aging of the parchment and the steps taken to preserve it from deterioration; the relationship between the parchment and the copies that were made from it; and finally, the often dramatic story of the travels of the parchment during wartime and to its various homes.

Chronologically, it is helpful to divide the history of the Declaration after its signing into five main periods, some more distinct than others. The first period consists of the early travels of the parchment and lasts until 1814. The second period relates to the long sojourn of the Declaration in Washington, DC, from 1814 until its brief return to Philadelphia for the 1876 Centennial. The third period covers the years 1877-1921, a period marked by increasing concern for the deterioration of the document and the need for a fitting and permanent Washington home. Except for an interlude during World War II, the fourth and fifth periods cover the time the Declaration rested in the Library of Congress from 1921 to 1952 and in the National Archives from 1952 to the present.

## Early Travels, 1776-1814

Once the Declaration was signed, the document probably accompanied the Continental Congress as that body traveled during the uncertain months and years of the Revolution. Initially, like other parchment documents of the time, the Declaration was probably stored in a rolled format. Each time the document was used, it would have been unrolled and re-rolled. This action, as well as holding the curled parchment flat, doubtless took its toll on the ink and on the parchment surface through abrasion and flexing. The acidity inherent in the iron gall ink used by Timothy Matlack allowed the ink to "bite" into the surface of the parchment, thus contributing to the ink's longevity, but the rolling and unrolling of the parchment still presented many hazards.

After the signing ceremony on August 2, 1776, the Declaration was most likely filed in Philadelphia in the office of Charles Thomson, who served as the Secretary of the Continental Congress from 1774 to 1789. On December 12, threatened by the British, Congress adjourned and reconvened 8 days later in Baltimore, MD. A light wagon carried the Declaration to its new home, where it remained until its return to Philadelphia in March of 1777.

On January 18, 1777, while the Declaration was still in Baltimore, Congress, bolstered by military successes at Trenton and Princeton, ordered the second official printing of the document. The July 4 printing had included only the names of John Hancock and Charles Thomson, and even though the first printing had been promptly circulated to the states, the names of subsequent signers were kept secret for a time because of fear of British reprisals. By its order of January 18, however, Congress required that "an authentic copy of the Declaration of Independency, with the names of the members of Congress subscribing to the same, be sent to each of the United States, and that they be desired to have the same put upon record." The "authentic copy" was duly printed, complete with signers' names, by Mary Katherine Goddard in Baltimore.

Assuming that the Declaration moved with the Congress, it would have been back in Philadelphia from March to September 1777. On September 27, it would have moved to Lancaster, PA, for 1 day only. From September 30, 1777, through June 1778, the Declaration would have been kept in the courthouse at York, PA. From July 1778 to June 1783, it would have had a long stay back in Philadelphia. In 1783, it would have been at Princeton, NJ, from June to November, and then, after the signing of the Treaty of Paris, the Declaration would have been moved to Annapolis, MD, where it stayed until October 1784. For the months of November and December 1784, it would have been at Trenton, NJ. Then in 1785, when Congress met in New York, the Declaration was housed in the old New York City Hall, where it probably remained until 1790 (although when Pierre L'Enfant was remodeling the building for the convening of the First Federal Congress, it might have been temporarily removed).

In July 1789 the First Congress under the new Constitution created the Department of Foreign Affairs and directed that its Secretary should have "the custody and charge of all records, books and papers" kept by the department of the same name under the old government. On July 24 Charles Thomson retired as Secretary of the Congress and, upon the order of President George Washington, surrendered the Declaration to Roger Alden, Deputy Secretary of Foreign Affairs. In September 1789 the name of the department was changed to the Department of State. Thomas Jefferson, the drafter of the Declaration, returned from France to assume his duties as the first Secretary of State in March of 1790. Appropriately, those duties now included custody of the Declaration.

In July 1790 Congress provided for a permanent capital to be built among the woodlands and swamps bordering the Potomac River. Meanwhile, the temporary seat of government was to return to Philadelphia. Congress also provided that "prior to the first Monday in December next, all offices attached to the seat of the government of the United States" should be removed to Philadelphia. The Declaration was therefore back in Philadelphia by the close of 1790. It was housed in various buildings--on Market Street, at Arch and Sixth, and at Fifth and Chestnut.

In 1800, by direction of President John Adams, the Declaration and other government records were moved from Philadelphia to the new federal capital now rising in the District of Columbia. To reach its new home, the Declaration traveled down the Delaware River and Bay, out into the ocean, into the Chesapeake Bay, and up the Potomac to Washington, completing its longest water journey.

For about 2 months the Declaration was housed in buildings built for the use of the Treasury Department. For the next year it was housed in one of the "Seven Buildings" then standing at Nineteenth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. Its third home before 1814 was in the old War Office Building on Seventeenth Street.

In August 1814, the United States being again at war with Great Britain, a British fleet appeared in the Chesapeake Bay. Secretary of State James Monroe rode out to observe the landing of British forces along the Patuxent River in Maryland. A message from Monroe alerted State Department officials, in particular a clerk named Stephen Pleasonton, of the imminent threat to the capital city and, of course, the government's official records. Pleasonton "proceeded to purchase coarse linen, and cause it to be made into bags of convenient size, in which the gentlemen of the office" packed the precious books and records including the Declaration.

A cartload of records was then taken up the Potomac River to an unused gristmill belonging to Edgar Patterson. The structure was located on the Virginia side of the Potomac, about 2 miles upstream from Georgetown. Here the Declaration and the other records remained, probably overnight. Pleasonton, meanwhile, asked neighboring farmers for the use of their wagons. On August 24, the day of the British attack on Washington, the Declaration was on its way to Leesburg, VA. That evening, while the White House and other government buildings were burning, the Declaration was stored 35 miles away at Leesburg.

The Declaration remained safe at a private home in Leesburg for an interval of several weeks--in fact, until the British had withdrawn their troops from Washington and their fleet from the Chesapeake Bay. In September 1814 the Declaration was returned to the national capital. With the exception of a trip to Philadelphia for the Centennial and to Fort Knox during World War II, it has remained there ever since.

### **Washington, 1814-76**

The Declaration remained in Washington from September 1814 to May 1841. It was housed in four locations. From 1814 to 1841, it was kept in three different locations as the State Department records were shifted about the growing city. The last of these locations was a brick building that, it was later observed, "offered no security against fire."

One factor that had no small effect on the physical condition of the Declaration was recognized as interest in reproductions of the Declaration increased as the nation grew. Two early facsimile printings of the Declaration were made during the second decade of the 19th century: those of Benjamin Owen Tyler (1818) and John Binns (1819). Both facsimiles used decorative and ornamental elements to enhance the text of the Declaration. Richard Rush, who was Acting Secretary of State in 1817, remarked on September 10 of that year about the Tyler copy: "The foregoing copy of the Declaration of Independence has been collated with the original instrument and found correct. I have myself examined the signatures to each. Those executed by Mr. Tyler, are curiously exact imitations, so much so, that it would be difficult, if not impossible, for the closest scrutiny to distinguish them, were it not for the hand of time, from the originals." Rush's reference to "the hand of time" suggests that the signatures were already fading in 1817, only 40 years after they were first affixed to the parchment.

One later theory as to why the Declaration was aging so soon after its creation stems from the common 18th-century practice of taking "press copies." Press copies were made by placing a damp sheet of thin paper on a manuscript and pressing it until a portion of the ink was transferred. The thin paper copy was retained in the same manner as a modern carbon copy. The ink was reimposed on a copper plate, which was then etched so that copies could be run off the plate on a press. This "wet transfer" method may have been used by William J. Stone

when in 1820 he was commissioned by Secretary of State John Quincy Adams to make a facsimile of the entire Declaration, signatures as well as text. By June 5, 1823, almost exactly 47 years after Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration, the (Washington) *National Intelligencer* was able to report "that Mr. William J. Stone, a respectable and enterprising Engraver of this City, has, after a labor of three years, completed a *fac simile* of the original of the Declaration of Independence, now in the archives of the government; that it is executed with the greatest exactness and fidelity; and that the Department of State has become the purchaser of the plate."

As the *Intelligencer* went on to observe: "We are very glad to hear this, for the original of that paper which ought to be immortal and imperishable, by being so much handled by copyists and curious visitors, might receive serious injury. The facility of multiplying copies of it now possessed by the Department of State will render further exposure of the original unnecessary." The language of the newspaper report, like that of Rush's earlier comment, would seem to indicate some fear of the deterioration of the Declaration even prior to Stone's work.

The copies made from Stone's copperplate established the clear visual image of the Declaration for generations of Americans. The 200 official parchment copies struck from the Stone plate carry the identification "Engraved by W. J. Stone for the Department of State, by order" in the upper left corner followed by "of J. Q. Adams, Sec. of State July 4th 1823." in the upper right corner. "Unofficial" copies that were struck later do not have the identification at the top of the document. Instead the engraver identified his work by engraving "W. J. Stone SC. Washn." near the lower left corner and burnishing out the earlier identification.

The longest of the early sojourns of the Declaration was from 1841 to 1876. Daniel Webster was Secretary of State in 1841. On June 11 he wrote to Commissioner of Patents Henry L. Ellsworth, who was then occupying a new building (now the National Portrait Gallery), that "having learned that there is in the new building appropriated to the Patent Office suitable accommodations for the safe-keeping, as well as the exhibition of the various articles now deposited in this Department, and usually, exhibited to visitors . . . I have directed them to be transmitted to you." An inventory accompanied the letter. Item 6 was the Declaration.

The "new building" was a white stone structure at Seventh and F Streets. The Declaration and Washington's commission as commander in chief were mounted together in a single frame and hung in a white painted hall opposite a window offering exposure to sunlight. There they were to remain on exhibit for 35 years, even after the Patent Office separated from the State Department to become administratively a part of the Interior Department. This prolonged exposure to sunlight accelerated the deterioration of the ink and parchment of the Declaration, which was approaching 100 years of age toward the end of this period.

During the years that the Declaration was exhibited in the Patent Office, the combined effects of aging, sunlight, and fluctuating temperature and relative humidity took their toll on the document. Occasionally, writers made somewhat negative comments on the appearance of the Declaration. An observer in the *United States Magazine* (October 1856) went so far as to refer to "that old looking paper with the fading ink." John B. Ellis remarked in *The Sights and Secrets of the National Capital* (Chicago, 1869) that "it is old and yellow, and the ink is fading from the paper." An anonymous writer in the *Historical Magazine* (October 1870) wrote: "The original manuscript of the Declaration of Independence and of Washington's Commission, now in the United States Patent Office at Washington, D.C., are said to be rapidly fading out so that in a few years, only the naked parchment will remain. Already, nearly all the signatures attached to the Declaration of Independence are entirely effaced." In May 1873 the *Historical Magazine* published an official statement by Mortimer Dormer Leggett, Commissioner of Patents, who admitted that "many of the names to the Declaration are already illegible."

The technology of a new age and the interest in historical roots engendered by the approaching Centennial focused new interest on the Declaration in the 1870s and brought about a brief change of home.

## **The Centennial and the Debate Over Preservation, 1876-1921**

In 1876 the Declaration traveled to Philadelphia, where it was on exhibit for the Centennial National Exposition from May to October. Philadelphia's Mayor William S. Stokley was entrusted by President Ulysses S. Grant with temporary custody of the Declaration. The *Public Ledger* for May 8, 1876, noted that it was in Independence Hall "framed and glazed for protection, and . . . deposited in a fireproof safe especially designed for both preservation and convenient display. [When the outer doors of the safe were opened, the parchment was visible behind a heavy plate-glass inner door; the doors were closed at night.] Its aspect is of course faded and time-worn. The text is fully legible, but the major part of the signatures are so pale as to be only dimly discernable in the strongest light, a few remain wholly readable, and some are wholly invisible, the spaces which contained them presenting only a blank."

Other descriptions made at Philadelphia were equally unflattering: "scarce bears trace of the signatures the execution of which made fifty-six names imperishable," "aged-dimmed." But on the Fourth of July, after the text was read aloud to a throng on Independence Square by Richard Henry Lee of Virginia (grandson of the signer Richard Henry Lee), "The faded and crumbling manuscript, held together by a simple frame was then exhibited to the crowd and was greeted with cheer after cheer."

By late summer the Declaration's physical condition had become a matter of public concern. On August 3, 1876, Congress adopted a joint resolution providing "that a commission, consisting of the Secretary of the Interior, the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, and the Librarian of Congress be empowered to have resort to such means as will most effectually restore the writing of the original manuscript of the Declaration of Independence, with the signatures appended thereto." This resolution had actually been introduced as early as January 5, 1876. One candidate for the task of restoration was William J. Canby, an employee of the Washington Gas Light Company. On April 13 Canby had written to the Librarian of Congress: "I have had over thirty years experience in handling the pen upon parchment and in that time, as an expert, have engrossed hundreds of ornamental, special documents." Canby went on to suggest that "the only feasible plan is to replenish the original with a supply of ink, which has been destroyed by the action of light and time, with an ink well known to be, for all practical purposes, imperishable."

The commission did not, however, take any action at that time. After the conclusion of the Centennial exposition, attempts were made to secure possession of the Declaration for Philadelphia, but these failed and the parchment was returned to the Patent Office in Washington, where it had been since 1841, even though that office had become a part of the Interior Department. On April 11, 1876, Robert H. Duell, Commissioner of Patents, had written to Zachariah Chandler, Secretary of the Interior, suggesting that "the Declaration of Independence, and the commission of General Washington, associated with it in the same frame, belong to your Department as heirlooms.

Chandler appears to have ignored this claim, for in an exchange of letters with Secretary of State Hamilton Fish, it was agreed-with the approval of President Grant-to move the Declaration into the new, fireproof building that the State Department shared with the War and Navy Departments (now the Old Executive Office Building).

On March 3, 1877, the Declaration was placed in a cabinet on the eastern side of the State Department library, where it was to be exhibited for 17 years. It may be noted that not only was smoking permitted in the library, but the room contained an open fireplace. Nevertheless this location turned out to be safer than the premises just vacated; much of the Patent Office was gutted in a fire that occurred a few months later.

On May 5, 1880, the commission that had been appointed almost 4 years earlier came to life again in response to a call from the Secretary of the Interior. It requested that William B. Rogers, president of the National Academy of Sciences appoint a committee of experts to consider "whether such restoration [of the Declaration] be expedient or practicable and if so in what way the object can best be accomplished."

The duly appointed committee reported on January 7, 1881, that Stone used the "wet transfer" method in the creation of his facsimile printing of 1823, that the process had probably removed some of the original ink, and

that chemical restoration methods were "at best imperfect and uncertain in their results." The committee concluded, therefore, that "it is not expedient to attempt to restore the manuscript by chemical means." The group of experts then recommended that "it will be best either to cover the present receptacle of the manuscript with an opaque lid or to remove the manuscript from its frame and place it in a portfolio, where it may be protected from the action of light." Finally, the committee recommended that "no press copies of any part of it should in future be permitted."

Recent study of the Declaration by conservators at the National Archives has raised doubts that a "wet transfer" took place. Proof of this occurrence, however, cannot be verified or denied strictly by modern examination methods. No documentation prior to the 1881 reference has been found to support the theory; therefore we may never know if Stone actually performed the procedure.

Little, if any, action was taken as a result of the 1881 report. It was not until 1894 that the State Department announced: "The rapid fading of the text of the original Declaration of Independence and the deterioration of the parchment upon which it is engrossed, from exposure to light and lapse of time, render it impracticable for the Department longer to exhibit it or to handle it. For the secure preservation of its present condition, so far as may be possible, it has been carefully wrapped and placed flat in a steel case."

A new plate for engravings was made by the Coast and Geodetic Survey in 1895, and in 1898 a photograph was made for the *Ladies' Home Journal*. On this latter occasion, the parchment was noted as "still in good legible condition" although "some of the signatures" were "necessarily blurred."

On April 14, 1903, Secretary of State John Hay solicited again the help of the National Academy of Sciences in providing "such recommendations as may seem practicable . . . touching [the Declaration's] preservation." Hay went on to explain: "It is now kept out of the light, sealed between two sheets of glass, presumably proof against air, and locked in a steel safe. I am unable to say, however, that, in spite of these precautions, observed for the past ten years, the text is not continuing to fade and the parchment to wrinkle and perhaps to break."

On April 24 a committee of the academy reported its findings. Summarizing the physical history of the Declaration, the report stated: "The instrument has suffered very seriously from the very harsh treatment to which it was exposed in the early years of the Republic. Folding and rolling have creased the parchment. The wet press-copying operation to which it was exposed about 1820, for the purpose of producing a facsimile copy, removed a large portion of the ink. Subsequent exposure to the action of light for more than thirty years, while the instrument was placed on exhibition, has resulted in the fading of the ink, particularly in the signatures. The present method of caring for the instrument seems to be the best that can be suggested."

The committee added its own "opinion that the present method of protecting the instrument should be continued; that it should be kept in the dark and dry as possible, and never placed on exhibition." Secretary Hay seems to have accepted the committee's recommendation; in the following year, William H. Michael, author of *The Declaration of Independence* (Washington, 1904), recorded that the Declaration was "locked and sealed, by order of Secretary Hay, and is no longer shown to anyone except by his direction."

World War I came and went. Then, on April 21, 1920, Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby issued an order creating yet another committee: "A Committee is hereby appointed to study the proper steps that should be taken for the permanent and effective preservation from deterioration and from danger from fire, or other form of destruction, of those documents of supreme value which under the law are deposited with the Secretary of State. The inquiry will include the question of display of certain of these documents for the benefit of the patriotic public."

On May 5, 1920, the new committee reported on the physical condition of the safes that housed the Declaration and the Constitution. It declared: "The safes are constructed of thin sheets of steel. They are not fireproof nor would they offer much obstruction to an evil-disposed person who wished to break into them." About the

physical condition of the Declaration, the committee stated: "We believe the fading can go no further. We see no reason why the original document should not be exhibited if the parchment be laid between two sheets of glass, hermetically sealed at the edges and exposed only to diffused light."

The committee also made some important "supplementary recommendations." It noted that on March 3, 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt had directed that certain records relating to the Continental Congress be turned over by the Department of State to the Library of Congress: "This transfer was made under a provision of an Act of February 25, 1903, that any Executive Department may turn over to the Library of Congress books, maps, or other material no longer needed for the use of the Department." The committee recommended that the remaining papers, including the Declaration and the Constitution, be similarly given over to the custody of the Library of Congress. For the Declaration, therefore, two important changes were in the offing: a new home and the possibility of exhibition to "the patriotic public."

### **The Library of Congress . . . and Fort Knox, 1921-52**

There was no action on the recommendations of 1920 until after the Harding administration took office. On September 28, 1921, Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes addressed the new President: "I enclose an executive order for your signature, if you approve, transferring to the custody of the Library of Congress the original Declaration of Independence and Constitution of the United States which are now in the custody of this Department. . . . I make this recommendation because in the Library of Congress these muniments will be in the custody of experts skilled in archival preservation, in a building of modern fireproof construction, where they can safely be exhibited to the many visitors who now desire to see them."

President Warren G. Harding agreed. On September 29, 1921, he issued the Executive order authorizing the transfer. The following day Secretary Hughes sent a copy of the order to Librarian of Congress Herbert Putnam, stating that he was "prepared to turn the documents over to you when you are ready to receive them."

Putnam was both ready and eager. He presented himself forthwith at the State Department. The safes were opened, and the Declaration and the Constitution were carried off to the Library of Congress on Capitol Hill in the Library's "mail wagon," cushioned by a pile of leather U.S. mail sacks. Upon arrival, the two national treasures were placed in a safe in Putnam's office.

On October 3, Putnam took up the matter of a permanent location. In a memorandum to the superintendent of the Library building and grounds, Putnam proceeded from the premise that "in the Library" the documents "might be treated in such a way as, while fully safe-guarding them and giving them distinction, they should be open to inspection by the public at large." The memorandum discussed the need for a setting "safe, dignified, adequate, and in every way suitable . . . Material less than bronze would be unworthy. The cost must be considerable."

The Librarian then requested the sum of \$12,000 for his purpose. The need was urgent because the new Bureau of the Budget was about to print forthcoming fiscal year estimates. There was therefore no time to make detailed architectural plans. Putnam told an appropriations committee on January 16, 1922, just what he had in mind. "There is a way . . . we could construct, say, on the second floor on the western side in that long open gallery a railed inclosure, material of bronze, where these documents, with one or two auxiliary documents leading up to them, could be placed, where they need not be touched by anybody but where a mere passer-by could see them, where they could be set in permanent bronze frames and where they could be protected from the natural light, lighted only by soft incandescent lamps. The result could be achieved and you would have something every visitor to Washington would wish to tell about when he returned and who would regard it, as the newspapermen are saying, with keen interest as a sort of 'shrine.'" The Librarian's imaginative presentation was successful: The sum of \$12,000 was appropriated and approved on March 20, 1922.

Before long, the "sort of 'shrine'" was being designed by Francis H. Bacon, whose brother Henry was the architect of the Lincoln Memorial. Materials used included different kinds of marble from New York, Vermont, Tennessee, the Greek island of Tinos, and Italy. The marbles surrounding the manuscripts were American; the floor and balustrade were made of foreign marbles to correspond with the material used in the rest of the Library. The Declaration was to be housed in a frame of gold-plated bronze doors and covered with double panes of plate glass with specially prepared gelatin films between the plates to exclude the harmful rays of light. A 24-hour guard would provide protection.

On February 28, 1924, the shrine was dedicated in the presence of President and Mrs. Calvin Coolidge, Secretary Hughes, and other distinguished guests. Not a word was spoken during a moving ceremony in which Putnam fitted the Declaration into its frame. There were no speeches. Two stanzas of America were sung. In Putnam's words: "The impression on the audience proved the emotional potency of documents animate with a great tradition."

With only one interruption, the Declaration hung on the wall of the second floor of the Great Hall of the Library of Congress until December 1952. During the prosperity of the 1920s and the Depression of the 1930s, millions of people visited the shrine. But the threat of war and then war itself caused a prolonged interruption in the steady stream of visitors.

On April 30, 1941, worried that the war raging in Europe might engulf the United States, the newly appointed Librarian of Congress, Archibald MacLeish, wrote to the Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau, Jr. The Librarian was concerned for the most precious of the many objects in his charge. He wrote "to enquire whether space might perhaps be found" at the Bullion Depository in Fort Knox for his most valuable materials, including the Declaration, "in the unlikely event that it becomes necessary to remove them from Washington." Secretary Morgenthau replied that space would indeed be made available as necessary for the "storage of such of the more important papers as you might designate."

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. On December 23, the Declaration and the Constitution were removed from the shrine and placed between two sheets of acid-free manila paper. The documents were then carefully wrapped in a container of all-rag neutral millboard and placed in a specially designed bronze container. It was late at night when the container was finally secured with padlocks on each side. Preparations were resumed on the day after Christmas, when the Attorney General ruled that the Librarian needed no "further authority from the Congress or the President" to take such action as he deemed necessary for the "proper protection and preservation" of the documents in his charge.

The packing process continued under constant armed guard. The container was finally sealed with lead and packed in a heavy box; the whole weighed some 150 pounds. It was a far cry from the simple linen bag of the summer of 1814.

At about 5 p.m. the box, along with other boxes containing vital records, was loaded into an armed and escorted truck, taken to Union Station, and loaded into a compartment of the Pullman sleeper Eastlake. Armed Secret Service agents occupied the neighboring compartments. After departing from Washington at 6:30 p.m., the Declaration traveled to Louisville, KY, arriving at 10:30 a.m., December 27, 1941. More Secret Service agents and a cavalry troop of the 13th Armored Division met the train, convoyed its precious contents to the Bullion Depository at Fort Knox, and placed the Declaration in compartment 24 in the outer tier on the ground level.

The Declaration was periodically examined during its sojourn at Fort Knox. One such examination in 1942 found that the Declaration had become detached in part from its mount, including the upper right corner, which had been stuck down with copious amounts of glue. In his journal for May 14, 1942, Verner W. Clapp, a Library of Congress official, noted: "At one time also (about January 12, 1940) an attempt had been made to reunite the detached upper right hand corner to the main portion by means of a strip of 'scotch' cellulose tape

which was still in place, discolored to a molasses color. In the various mending efforts glue had been splattered in two places on the obverse of the document."

The opportunity was taken to perform conservation treatment in order to stabilize and rejoin the upper right corner. Under great secrecy, George Stout and Evelyn Erlich, both of the Fogg Museum at Harvard University, traveled to Fort Knox. Over a period of 2 days, they performed mending of small tears, removed excess adhesive and the "scotch" tape, and rejoined the detached upper right corner.

Finally, in 1944, the military authorities assured the Library of Congress that all danger of enemy attack had passed. On September 19, the documents were withdrawn from Fort Knox. On Sunday, October 1, at 11:30 a.m., the doors of the Library were opened. The Declaration was back in its shrine.

With the return of peace, the keepers of the Declaration were mindful of the increasing technological expertise available to them relating to the preservation of the parchment. In this they were readily assisted by the National Bureau of Standards, which even before World War II, had researched the preservation of the Declaration. The problem of shielding it from harsh light, for example, had in 1924 led to the insertion of a sheet of yellow gelatin between the protective plates of glass. Yet this procedure lessened the visibility of an already faded parchment. Could not some improvement be made?

Following reports of May 5, 1949, on studies in which the Library staff, members of the National Bureau of Standards, and representatives of a glass manufacturer had participated, new recommendations were made. In 1951 the Declaration was sealed in a thermopane enclosure filled with properly humidified helium. The exhibit case was equipped with a filter to screen out damaging light. The new enclosure also had the effect of preventing harm from air pollution, a growing peril.

Soon after, however, the Declaration was to make one more move, the one to its present home. (See Appendix B.)

### **The National Archives, 1952 to the Present**

In 1933, while the Depression gripped the nation, President Hoover laid the cornerstone for the National Archives Building in Washington, DC. He announced that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution would eventually be kept in the impressive structure that was to occupy the site. Indeed, it was for their keeping and display that the exhibition hall in the National Archives had been designed. Two large murals were painted for its walls. In one, Thomas Jefferson is depicted presenting the Declaration to John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress while members of that Revolutionary body look on. In the second, James Madison is portrayed submitting the Constitution to George Washington.

The final transfer of these special documents did not, however, take place until almost 20 years later. In October 1934 President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed the first Archivist of the United States, Robert Digges Wimberly Connor. The President told Connor that "valuable historic documents," such as the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, would reside in the National Archives Building. The Library of Congress, especially Librarian Herbert Putnam, objected. In a meeting with the President 2 months after his appointment, Connor explained to Roosevelt how the documents came to be in the Library and that Putnam felt another Act of Congress was necessary in order for them to be transferred to the Archives. Connor eventually told the President that it would be better to leave the matter alone until Putnam retired.

When Herbert Putnam retired on April 5, 1939, Archibald MacLeish was nominated to replace him. MacLeish agreed with Roosevelt and Connor that the two important documents belonged in the National Archives. Because of World War II, during much of which the Declaration was stored at Fort Knox, and Connor's resignation in 1941, MacLeish was unable to enact the transfer. By 1944, when the Declaration and Constitution returned to Washington from Fort Knox, MacLeish had been appointed Assistant Secretary of State.

Solon J. Buck, Connor's successor as Archivist of the United States (1941-48), felt that the documents were in good hands at the Library of Congress. His successor, Wayne Grover, disagreed. Luther Evans, the Librarian of Congress appointed by President Truman in June 1945, shared Grover's opinion that the documents should be transferred to the Archives.

In 1951 the two men began working with their staff members and legal advisers to have the documents transferred. The Archives position was that the documents were federal records and therefore covered by the Federal Records Act of 1950, which was "paramount to and took precedence over" the 1922 act that had appropriated money for the shrine at the Library of Congress. Luther Evans agreed with this line of reasoning, but he emphasized getting the approval of the President and the Joint Committee on the Library.

Senator Theodore H. Green, Chairman of the Joint Committee on the Library, agreed that the transfer should take place but stipulated that it would be necessary to have his committee act on the matter. Evans went to the April 30, 1952, committee meeting alone. There is no formal record of what was said at the meeting, except that the Joint Committee on the Library ordered that the documents be transferred to the National Archives. Not only was the Archives the official depository of the government's records, it was also, in the judgment of the committee, the most nearly bombproof building in Washington.

At 11 a.m., December 13, 1952, Brigadier General Stoyte O. Ross, commanding general of the Air Force Headquarters Command, formally received the documents at the Library of Congress. Twelve members of the Armed Forces Special Police carried the 6 pieces of parchment in their helium-filled glass cases, enclosed in wooden crates, down the Library steps through a line of 88 servicewomen. An armored Marine Corps personnel carrier awaited the documents. Once they had been placed on mattresses inside the vehicle, they were accompanied by a color guard, ceremonial troops, the Army Band, the Air Force Drum and Bugle Corps, two light tanks, four servicemen carrying submachine guns, and a motorcycle escort in a parade down Pennsylvania and Constitution Avenues to the Archives Building. Both sides of the parade route were lined by Army, Navy, Coast Guard, Marine, and Air Force personnel. At 11:35 a.m. General Ross and the 12 special policemen arrived at the National Archives Building, carried the crates up the steps, and formally delivered them into the custody of Archivist of the United States Wayne Grover. (Already at the National Archives was the Bill of Rights, protectively sealed according to the modern techniques used a year earlier for the Declaration and Constitution.)

The formal enshrining ceremony on December 15, 1952, was equally impressive. Chief Justice of the United States Fred M. Vinson presided over the ceremony, which was attended by officials of more than 100 national civic, patriotic, religious, veterans, educational, business, and labor groups. After the invocation by the Reverend Frederick Brown Harris, chaplain of the Senate, Governor Elbert N. Carvel of Delaware, the first state to ratify the Constitution, called the roll of states in the order in which they ratified the Constitution or were admitted to the Union. As each state was called, a servicewoman carrying the state flag entered the Exhibition Hall and remained at attention in front of the display cases circling the hall. President Harry S. Truman, the featured speaker, said:

"The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights are now assembled in one place for display and safekeeping. . . . We are engaged here today in a symbolic act. We are enshrining these documents for future ages. . . . This magnificent hall has been constructed to exhibit them, and the vault beneath, that we have built to protect them, is as safe from destruction as anything that the wit of modern man can devise. All this is an honorable effort, based upon reverence for the great past, and our generation can take just pride in it."

Senator Green briefly traced the history of the three documents, and then the Librarian of Congress and the Archivist of the United States jointly unveiled the shrine. Finally, Justice Vinson spoke briefly, the Reverend Bernard Braskamp, chaplain of the House of Representatives gave the benediction, the U.S. Marine Corps Band played the "Star Spangled Banner," the President was escorted from the hall, the 48 flagbearers marched out, and the ceremony was over. (The story of the transfer of the documents is found in Milton O. Gustafson, "The Empty Shrine: The Transfer of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to the National Archives," *The American Archivist* 39 (July 1976): 271-285.)

The present shrine provides an imposing home. The priceless documents stand at the center of a semicircle of display cases showing other important records of the growth of the United States. The Declaration, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights stand slightly elevated, under armed guard, in their bronze and marble shrine. The Bill of Rights and two of the five leaves of the Constitution are displayed flat. Above them the Declaration of Independence is held impressively in an upright case constructed of ballistically tested glass and plastic laminate. Ultraviolet-light filters in the laminate give the inner layer a slightly greenish hue. At night, the documents are stored in an underground vault.

In 1987 the National Archives and Records Administration installed a \$3 million camera and computerized system to monitor the condition of the three documents. The Charters Monitoring System was designed by the Jet Propulsion Laboratory to assess the state of preservation of the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights. It can detect any changes in readability due to ink flaking, off-setting of ink to glass, changes in document dimensions, and ink fading. The system is capable of recording in very fine detail 1-inch square areas of documents and later retaking the pictures in exactly the same places and under the same conditions of lighting and charge-coupled device (CCD) sensitivity. (The CCD measures reflectivity.) Periodic measurements are compared to the baseline image to determine if changes or deterioration invisible to the human eye have taken place.

The Declaration has had many homes, from humble lodgings and government offices to the interiors of safes and great public displays. It has been carried in wagons, ships, a Pullman sleeper, and an armored vehicle. In its latest home, it has been viewed with respect by millions of people, everyone of whom has had thereby a brief moment, a private moment, to reflect on the meaning of democracy. The nation to which the Declaration gave birth has had an immense impact on human history, and continues to do so. In telling the story of the parchment, it is appropriate to recall the words of poet and Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish. He described the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as "these fragile objects which bear so great a weight of meaning to our people." The story of the Declaration of Independence as a document can only be a part of the larger history, a history still unfolding, a "weight of meaning" constantly, challenged, strengthened, and redefined.

## **Appendix A**

The 25 copies of the Dunlap broadside known to exist are dispersed among American and British institutions and private owners. The following are the current locations of the copies.

National Archives, Washington, DC  
Library of Congress, Washington, DC (two copies)  
Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore  
University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA  
Independence National Historic Park, Philadelphia  
American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia  
Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia  
Princeton University, Princeton, NJ  
New-York Historical Society  
New York Public Library

Pierpont Morgan Library, New York  
Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston  
Harvard University, Cambridge, MA  
Chapin Library, Williams College, Williamstown, MA  
Yale University, New Haven, CT  
American Independence Museum, Exeter, NH  
Maine Historical Society, Portland  
Indiana University, Bloomington, IN  
Chicago Historical Society  
City of Dallas, City Hall  
Visual Equities, Inc., Atlanta, GA  
Washington, DC (private collector)  
Public Record Office, United Kingdom (two copies)

## **Appendix B**

The locations given for the Declaration from 1776 to 1789 are based on the locations for meetings of the Continental and Confederation Congresses:

Philadelphia: August-December 1776  
Baltimore: December 1776-March 1777  
Philadelphia: March-September 1777  
Lancaster, PA: September 27, 1777  
York, PA: September 30, 1777-June 1778  
Philadelphia: July 1778-June 1783  
Princeton, NJ: June-November 1783  
Annapolis, MD: November 1783-October 1784  
Trenton, NJ: November-December 1784  
New York: 1785-1790  
Philadelphia: 1790-1800  
Washington, DC (three locations): 1800-1814  
Leesburg, VA: August-September 1814  
Washington, DC (three locations): 1814-1841  
Washington, DC (Patent Office Building): 1841-1876  
Philadelphia: May-November 1876  
Washington, DC (State, War, and Navy Building): 1877-1921  
Washington, DC (Library of Congress): 1921-1941  
Fort Knox\*: 1941-1944  
Washington, DC (Library of Congress): 1944-1952  
Washington, DC (National Archives): 1952-present

\*Except that the document was displayed on April 13, 1943, at the dedication of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC.

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