



First "4th of July" Celebration By John Dickinson Sherman

THOUSANDS of anxious citizens had gathered in the streets of Philadelphia where congress was assembled, for it was known that the final vote on the Declaration of Independence would be taken that day. Since the hour of the assembly of congress the old bellman of the Liberty Bell in Independence Hall had been in the streets. He had given his little grandson at the door to give him the word when the announcement should be made. As hour after hour passed by and no announcement came the old man shook his head and said sadly, "They will never do it."

Suddenly a shout came up from below and there stood the little blue-eyed lad clapping his hands and shouting, "Ring, grandfather, ring!"

So the old grandfater swung the big iron tongue and the Liberty Bell, clanging 100 times, sent its breezy notes throughout the land proclaiming that the United Colonies were to be free and independent, and there was a tumult of rejoicing in the city.

This in effect is the first Fourth of July 35 thirty an American schoolboy has been taught it. It reads well and there is a thrill in it. But it has one large fault—it isn't true. As a matter of fact there wasn't any real "Fourth of July Celebration" at all in 1776. There couldn't be, for the reason that the Declaration of Independence was a continuing operation that lasted pretty much the whole summer of that year. Incidentally, its culmination was July 2, instead of July 4. Moreover, it was not until 1777 that July 4 was fixed upon as "the day we celebrate." And it was in 1777 in Philadelphia that the Fourth of July celebration was held.

To get the history of the Declaration of Independence straight, we must start with the fact that the American Revolution was not begun for the achievement of the independence. The American colonists began with the idea of securing the right guaranteed them by Englishmen by Magna Charta, the Bill of Rights, and their own charters. The idea of separation and independence was an afterthought and an outgrowth of the hostilities faced by the British at Lexington and Concord.

The historic declaration of the citizens of Mecklenburg county, North Carolina, in May, 1776, was one of the earliest manifestations of the trend of public opinion. In January of 1776, Thomas Paine's pamphlet "Common Sense" appeared and gave the movement tremendous impetus. June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee, under instructions from Virginia, presented to the continental congress his famous resolution which reads:

"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;

"That it is expedient forthwith to take the most effectual measures for forming foreign alliances;

"That a plan of confederation be prepared and transmitted to the respective colonies for their consideration and approbation."

Here, in fact, was the Declaration of Independence in a nutshell. June 8, congress went into a committee whole to consider the resolution. For various reasons the delegates were not

ready to vote on it. June 10, congress postponed final consideration for 2 weeks. June 11, congress appointed a committee of five to draw up the Declaration of Independence. Lee would naturally have been made chairman, but he had been called home by the illness of his wife. Thomas Jefferson of Virginia was made chairman and his colleagues were John Adams of Massachusetts, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Roger Sherman of Connecticut and Robert L. Livingston of New York. The committee instructed Jefferson to write out a draft of the Declaration. Jefferson did so. The committee made some changes and Jefferson then made a clean copy. Congress reassembled July 1, and the Lee resolution was passed July 2. How this action was then regarded is shown by John Adams' letter to his wife, in which he said:

"The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, bells, bonfires, and illumination from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forevermore."

Jefferson then presented the report of the Declaration committee, the document now known as the Declaration of Independence. It was adopted the afternoon of July 4. John Hancock, as president of the congress, affixed his signature. Charles Thompson countersigned as secretary. It was then printed and sent off to the several colonies. July 15, the clerk was instructed to prepare the document for signatures. Properly engrossed, it was signed by all who were present—55 members. Others signed in September and one member, Colonel McKean, did not sign until 1781. Seven members, for one reason or another, never did sign it.

Pennsylvania, being the first colony to receive its Declaration of Independence, was the first formally to make public the action of congress. July 8, a general election day in Pennsylvania, was chosen as the time. A crowd of about 1,000 gathered near the platform erected by the Philosophical society seven years before that when Rittenhouse observed the transit of Venus. Mounted upon this, Colonel John Nixon read the document in his big voice and eloquent Deborah Logan, leaning over the wall of the Norris homestead, which was upon the present site of the customs house, heard him utter the words.

She and Charles Blidie, writing of the scene in their diaries, make the comment that "few respectable persons were present." This was not remarkable, for Philadelphia was the scene of that day was caught in Tory to its sympathy and John Dickinson, Edward Blidie, Thomas Willing and the others expressed his sentiments accurately when they voted against the Lee resolution.

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