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The Price They Paid

Claim: Essay outlines the fates of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.



MIXTURE OF TRUE AND FALSE INFORMATION

Example: *[Collected via e-mail, 1999]*

THE PRICE THEY PAID

Have you ever wondered what happened to the 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence?

Five signers were captured by the British as traitors and tortured before they died.

Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned.

Two lost their sons serving in the Revolutionary Army, another had two sons captured.

Nine of the 56 fought and died from wounds or hardships of the Revolutionary War.

They signed and they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor.

What kind of men were they?

Twenty-four were lawyers and jurists. Eleven were merchants, nine were farmers and large plantation owners; men of means, well educated. But they signed the Declaration of Independence knowing full well that the penalty would be death if they were captured.

Carter Braxton of Virginia, a wealthy planter and trader, saw his ships swept from the seas by the British Navy. He sold his home and properties to pay his debts, and died in rags.

Thomas McKeam was so hounded by the British that he was forced to move his family almost constantly. He served in the Congress without pay, and his family was kept in hiding. His possessions were taken from him, and poverty was his reward.

Vandals or soldiers looted the properties of Dillery, Hall, Clymer, Walton, Gwinnett, Heyward, Rutledge, and Middleton.

At the battle of Yorktown, Thomas Nelson, Jr., noted that the British General Cornwallis had taken over the Nelson home for his headquarters. He quietly urged General George Washington to open fire. The home was destroyed, and Nelson died bankrupt.

Francis Lewis had his home and properties destroyed. The enemy jailed his wife, and she died within a few months.

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John Hart was driven from his wife's bedside as she was dying. Their 13 children fled for their lives. His fields and his gristmill were laid to waste. For more than a year, he lived in forests and caves, returning home to find his wife dead and his children vanished. A few weeks later, he died from exhaustion and a broken heart.

Norris and Livingston suffered similar fates.

Such were the stories and sacrifices of the American Revolution. These were not wild-eyed, rabble-rousing ruffians. They were soft-spoken men of means and education. They had security, but they valued liberty more.

Standing tall straight, and unwavering, they pledged: "For the support of this declaration, with firm reliance on the protection of the divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other, our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

They gave you and me a free and independent America. The history books never told you a lot about what happened in the Revolutionary War. We didn't fight just the British. We were British subjects at that time and we fought our own government!

Some of us take these liberties so much for granted, but we shouldn't.

So, take a few minutes while enjoying your 4th of July Holiday and silently thank these patriots. It's not much to ask for the price they paid. Remember: Freedom is never free!

I hope you will show your support by please sending this to as many people as you can. It's time we get the word out that patriotism is NOT a sin, and the Fourth of July has more to it than beer, picnics, and baseball games.

Origins: In the waning years of their lengthy lives, former presidents (and Founding Fathers) John Adams and Thomas Jefferson reconciled the political differences that had separated them for many years and carried on a voluminous correspondence. One of the purposes behind their exchange of letters was to set the record straight regarding the events of the American Revolution, for as author Joseph J. Ellis noted, they (particularly Adams, whom history would not treat nearly as kindly as Jefferson) were keenly aware of the "distinction between history as experienced and history as remembered":

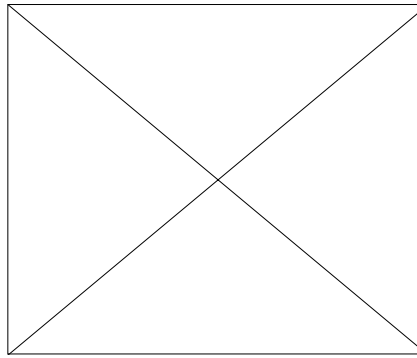
Adams realized that the act of transforming the American Revolution into history placed a premium on selecting events and heroes that fit neatly into a dramatic formula, thereby distorting the more tangled and incoherent experience that participants actually making the history felt at the time. Jefferson's drafting of the Declaration of Independence was a perfect example of such dramatic distortions. The Revolution in this romantic rendering became one magical moment of inspiration, leading inexorably to the foregone conclusion of American independence.

Evidently Adams was right: So great is our need for simplified, dramatic events and heroes that even the real-life biographies of the fifty-six men who risked their lives to publicly declare American independence are no longer compelling enough. Through multiple versions of pieces like the one quoted above, their lives have been repeatedly embellished with layers of fanciful fiction to make for a better story. As we often do, we'll try here to strip away those accumulated layers of fiction and get down to whatever kernel of truth may lie underneath:

- *Five signers were captured by the British as traitors and tortured before they died.*

It is true that five signers of the Declaration of Independence were captured by the British during the course of the Revolutionary War. However, none of them died while a prisoner, and four of them were taken into custody not because they were considered "traitors" due to their status as signatories to that document, but because they were captured as prisoners of war while actively engaged in military operations against the British: George Walton was captured after being wounded while commanding militia at the Battle of Savannah in December 1778, and Thomas Heyward, Jr., Arthur Middleton, and Edward Rutledge (three of the four Declaration of Independence signers from South Carolina) were taken prisoner at the Siege of Charleston in May in 1780. Although they endured the ill treatment typically afforded to

prisoners of war during their captivity (prison conditions were quite deplorable at the time), they were not tortured, nor is there evidence that they were treated more harshly than other wartime prisoners who were not also signatories to the Declaration. Moreover, all four men were eventually exchanged or released; had they been considered traitors by the British, they would have been hanged.



Richard Stockton of New Jersey was the only signer taken prisoner specifically because of his status as a signatory to the Declaration, "dragged from his bed by night" by local Tories after he had evacuated his family from New Jersey, and imprisoned in New York City's infamous Provost Jail like a common criminal. However, Stockton was also the only one of the fifty-six signers who violated the pledge to support the Declaration of Independence and each other with "our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor," securing a pardon and his release from imprisonment by recanting his signature on the Declaration and signing an oath swearing his allegiance to George III.

- *Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned.*

It is true that a number of signers saw their homes and property occupied, ransacked, looted, and vandalized by the British (and even in some cases by the Americans). However, as we discuss in more detail below, this activity was a common (if unfortunate) part of warfare. Signers' homes were not specifically targeted for destruction — like many other Americans, their property was subject to seizure when it fell along the path of a war being waged on the North American continent.

- *Two lost their sons serving in the Revolutionary Army, another had two sons captured.*

Abraham Clark of New Jersey saw two of his sons captured by the British and incarcerated on the prison ship *Jersey*. John Witherspoon, also of New Jersey, saw his eldest son, James, killed in the Battle of Germantown in October 1777. If there was a second signer of the Declaration whose son was killed while serving in the Continental Army, we have yet to find him.

- *Nine of the 56 fought and died from wounds or hardships of the Revolutionary War.*

This statement is quite misleading as phrased. Nine signers died during the course of the Revolutionary War, but none of them died from wounds or hardships inflicted on them by the British. (Indeed, several of the nine didn't even take part in the war.) Only one signer, Button Gwinnett of Georgia, died from wounds, and those were received not at the hands of the British, but of a fellow officer with whom he duelled in May 1777.

- *Carter Braxton of Virginia, a wealthy planter and trader, saw his ships swept from the seas by the British Navy. He sold his home and properties to pay his debts, and died in rags.*

Before the American Revolution, Carter Braxton was possessed of a considerable fortune through inheritance and favorable marriages. While still in his teens he inherited the family estate, which included a flourishing Virginia tobacco plantation, upon the death of his father. He married a wealthy heiress who died when he was just 21, and within a few years he had remarried, this time to the daughter of the Receiver of Customs in Virginia for the King. As a delegate representing Virginia in the Continental Congress in 1776, he was one of the minority of delegates reluctant to support an American declaration of independence, a move which he viewed at the time as too dangerous:

[Independence] is in truth a delusive Bait which men inconsiderably catch at, without knowing the hook to which it is affixed ... America is too defenceless a State for the declaration, having no alliance with a naval Power nor as yet any Fleet of consequence of her own to protect that trade which is so essential to the prosecution of the War, without which I know we cannot go on much longer.

Braxton invested his wealth in commercial enterprises, particularly shipping, and he endured severe financial reversals during the Revolutionary War when many of the ships in which he held interest were either appropriated by the British government (because they were British-flagged) or were sunk or captured by the British. He was not personally targeted for ruin because he had signed the Declaration of Independence,

however; he suffered grievous financial losses because most of his wealth was tied up in shipping, "that trade which is so essential to the prosecution of the War" and which was therefore a prime military target for the British. Even if he hadn't signed the Declaration of Independence, Braxton's ships would have been casualties of the war just the same.

Although Braxton did lose property during the war and had to sell off assets (primarily landholdings) to cover the debts incurred by the loss of his ships, he recouped much of that money after the war but subsequently lost it again through his own ill-advised business dealings. His fortune was considerably diminished in his later years, but he did not by any stretch of the imagination "die in rags."

- *Thomas McKean was so hounded by the British that he was forced to move his family almost constantly. He served in the Congress without pay, and his family was kept in hiding. His possessions were taken from him, and poverty was his reward.*

As one [biography](#) describes Thomas McKean (not "McKean"):

Thomas McKean might just represent an ideal study of how far political engagement can be carried by one man. One can scarcely believe the number of concurrent offices and duties this man performed during the course of his long career. He served three states and many more cities and county governments, often performing duties in two or more jurisdictions, even while engaged in federal office.

Among his many offices, McKean was a delegate to the Continental Congress (of which he later served as president), President of Delaware, Chief Justice of Pennsylvania, and Governor of Pennsylvania. The above-quoted statement regarding his being "hounded" by the British during the Revolutionary War is probably based upon a letter he wrote to his friend John Adams in 1777, in which he described how he had been "hunted like a fox by the enemy, compelled to remove my family five times in three months, and at last fixed them in a little log-house on the banks of the Susquehanna, but they were soon obliged to move again on account of the incursions of the Indians."

However, it is problematic to assert that McKean's treatment was due to his being a signer of the Declaration of Independence. (His name does not appear on printed copies of that document authenticated in January 1777, so it is likely he did not affix his name to it until later.) If he was targeted by the British, it was quite possibly because he also served in a military capacity as a volunteer leader of militia. In any case, McKean did not end up in "poverty," as the estate he left behind when he died in 1817 was described as consisting of "stocks, bonds, and huge land tracts in Pennsylvania."

- *Vandals or soldiers looted the properties of Dillery, Hall, Clymer, Walton, Gwinnett, Heyward, Rutledge, and Middleton.*

First of all, this passage has a couple of misspellings: the signers referred to are William Ellery (not "Dillery") and Edward Rutledge (not "Rutledge"). Secondly, this sentence is misleading in that it implies a motive that was most likely not present (i.e., these men's homes were looted because they had been signers of the Declaration of Independence).

The need to forage for supplies in enemy territory has long been a part of warfare, and so it was far from uncommon for British soldiers in the field to appropriate such material from private residences during the American Revolution. (Not only were homes used as sources of food, livestock, and other necessary supplies, but larger houses were also taken over and used to quarter soldiers or to serve as headquarters for officers.) In some cases, even American forces took advantage of the local citizenry to provision themselves. Given that many more prominent American revolutionaries who were also signers of the Declaration of Independence (e.g., Samuel Adams, John Hancock, Benjamin Franklin, James Wilson, Benjamin Rush, Robert Morris) had homes in areas that were occupied by the British during the war, yet those homes were not looted or vandalized, it's hard to make the case that the men named above were specifically targeted for vengeance by the British rather than unfortunate victims whose property fell in the path of an armed conflict being waged on American soil.

It's also a common misconception that the signing of the Declaration of Independence was the event that triggered the Revolutionary War, so the signers were directly responsible for whatever misfortunes befell them (and their fellow Americans) as a result of that war. The war actually began more than a year before the signing of the Declaration of Independence — revolutionary events involving armed conflict, such as the battles of Lexington and Concord, the seizure of Fort Ticonderoga by Ethan Allen and his "Green Mountain Boys," the Battle of Bunker Hill, and the capture of Montreal by General Richard Montgomery, all took place in 1775.

- *At the battle of Yorktown, Thomas Nelson, Jr., noted that the British General Cornwallis had taken over the Nelson home for his headquarters. He quietly urged General George Washington to open fire. The home was destroyed, and Nelson died bankrupt.*

The tale about Thomas Nelson's urging or suggesting the bombardment of his own house is one of several Revolutionary War legends whose truth may never be known. Several versions of this story exist, one of which (as referenced above) holds that Nelson encouraged George Washington to shell his Yorktown home after British Major General Charles Cornwallis had taken it over to use as his headquarters in 1781:

Cornwallis had turned the home of Thomas Nelson, who had succeeded Jefferson as governor of Virginia, into his headquarters. Nelson, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, had led three Virginia brigades, or 3,000 men, to Yorktown and, when the shelling of the town was about to begin, urged Washington to bombard his own house. And that is where Washington, with his experienced surveyor's eye, reputedly pointed the gun for the first (and singularly fatal) allied shot. Legend has it that the shell went right through a window and landed at the dinner table where some British officers, including the British commissary general, had just sat down to dine. The general was killed and several others wounded as it burst among their plates.

Other versions of the story have Nelson directing the Marquis de Lafayette to train French artillery on his home:

The story goes that the new Virginia Governor Thomas Nelson (who'd been held at Yorktown but released under a flag of truce) was with American forces that day. Lafayette invited Nelson to be present when Captain Thomas Machin's battery first opened fire, as both a compliment and knowing Nelson lived in Yorktown and would know the localities in the riverport area. "To what particular spot," Lafayette reportedly asked Nelson, "would your Excellency direct that we should point the cannon." Nelson replied, "There, to that house. It is mine, and . . . it is the best one in the town. There you will be almost certain to find Lord Cornwallis and the British headquarters."

"A simultaneous discharge of all the guns in the line," Joseph Martin wrote, was "followed [by] French troops accompanying it with 'Huzza for the Americans.'" Sounding much like the Nelson legend, Martin's account added that "the first shell sent from our batteries entered an elegant house formerly owned or occupied by the Secretary of State under the British, and burned directly over a table surrounded by a large party of British officers at dinner, killing and wounding a number of them."

Still other accounts maintain this legend is a conflation of two separate events: Thomas Nelson, acting as commander in chief of the Virginia militia, ordered a battery to open fire on his *uncle's* home, where Cornwallis was then ensconced. Later, Nelson supposedly made a friendly bet with French artillerymen in which he challenged them to hit his home, one of the more prominent landmarks in Yorktown.

Whatever the truth, the Nelson home was certainly not "destroyed" as claimed. The [house](#) stands to this day as part of Colonial National Historical Park, and the National Park Service's description of it notes only that "the southeast face of the residence does show evidence of damage from cannon fire."

- *Francis Lewis had his home and properties destroyed. The enemy jailed his wife, and she died within a few months.*

Francis Lewis represented New York in the Continental Congress, and shortly after he signed the Declaration of Independence his Long Island estate was raided by the British, possibly as retaliation for his having been a signatory to that document. While Lewis was in Philadelphia attending to congressional matters, his wife was taken prisoner by the British after disregarding an order for citizens to evacuate Long Island. Mrs. Lewis was held for several months before being exchanged for the wives of British officials captured by the Americans. Although her captivity was undoubtedly a hardship, she had already been in poor health for some time and died a few years (not months) later.

- *John Hart was driven from his wife's bedside as she was dying. Their 13 children fled for their lives. His fields and his gristmill were laid to waste. For more than a year, he lived in forests and caves, returning home to find his wife dead and his children vanished. A few weeks later, he died from exhaustion and a broken heart.*

John Hart's New Jersey farm was looted in the course of the Revolutionary War, and he did have to remain in hiding for a while afterwards. However, the claim that he was "driven from his [dying] wife's bedside" as his "13 children fled for his lives" is dramatic fiction. The British overran the area of New Jersey where he resided in late November

of 1776, but his wife had already died on 8 October, and most of their children were adults by then. He also did not die "from exhaustion and a broken heart" a mere "few weeks" after emerging from hiding – he was twice re-elected to the Continental Congress, served as Speaker of the New Jersey assembly, and invited the American army to encamp on his New Jersey farmland in June 1778 before succumbing to kidney stones in May 1779.

- *Norris and Livingston suffered similar fates.*

Lewis Morris (not Norris) indeed saw his Westchester County, New York, home taken over in 1776 and used as a barracks for soldiers, and the horses and livestock from his farm commandeered by military personnel, but he suffered those deprivations at the hands of the Continental Army, not the British. Shortly afterwards his home was appropriated by the British, but Morris and his wife reclaimed the property and restored their home after the war.

Philip Livingston lost several properties to the British occupation of New York and sold off others to support the war effort, and he did not recover them because he died suddenly in 1778, before the end of the war.

What should we take from all of this? The signers of the Declaration of Independence did take a huge risk in daring to put their names on a document that repudiated their government, and they had every reason to believe at the time that they might well be hanged for having done so. That was a courageous act we should indeed remember and honor on the Fourth of July amidst our "beer, picnics, and baseball games." But we should also not lose sight of the fact that many men (and women) other than the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence – some famous and most not – risked and sacrificed much (including their lives) to support the revolutionary cause. The hardships and losses endured by many Americans during the struggle for independence were not visited upon the signers alone, nor were they any less ruinous for having befallen people whose names are not immortalized on a piece of parchment.

Last updated: 3 July 2010

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