

Founders' Days II: 1776

Joan L. Roccasalvo, C.S.J.

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In 1969, the musical *1776* premiered on Broadway and ran for 1,217 performances. The production was nominated for five Tony Awards and won three, including the award for Best Musical. *1776* was adapted for film in 1992. The story is based on the events surrounding the signing of the Declaration of Independence; it dramatizes the efforts of John Adams to persuade his colleagues to vote for American independence and to sign the document.

No musical or film can begin to capture the thrilling story of American independence and the remarkable steps leading up to it. In his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *1776*, David McCullough gives the reader an engrossing account of the steps leading to the signing of the Declaration in the early days of July 1776. In fact, using his talent for narrative, description, and composition of place, McCullough lifts you from your reading chair and transports you to the scenes, the persons and events of those early years; you are there walking, struggling, and fighting alongside of General George Washington's make-shift army.

King George III

King George III was no dullard but a man of high culture. He had a genuine love for the music of Handel and Bach and for beautiful painting and architecture. He collected clocks, ship models, books on art, and took great interest in astronomy. He played both violin and piano. Yet, there were limits to what he would tolerate from the subversive activities of his subjects 3000 miles away. He would abide neither their ambition nor insolence, and certainly not their independence from the homeland. Spies strategically placed kept him abreast of the comings and goings of his subjects. They were establishing a naval force, monitoring public revenue, and

claiming for themselves legislative, executive, and judicial powers. This could not stand. Sufficient force had to be applied to defeat them.

These “unhappy people of America” are intent to engage in a “rebellious war to establish an independent empire. No, God has blessed Britain with pride and numerous resources to give up so many colonies which she has planted with great industry, nursed with tenderness, encouraged with many commercial advantages, and protected and defended at much expense of blood and treasure.” The words of George III.

A speedy end to such disorders—this goal prompted the increase of the King’s naval and land forces to defeat the rabble rousers.

The Colonists

“It was the first “American” army composed of everyone, men of every shape and size and makeup, different colors, different nationalities, different ways of talking, and all degrees of physical condition. Many were missing teeth or fingers; faces were pitted by smallpox or scarred by past wars or the all-too-common hazards of life and toil in the eighteenth century.

Some were not even men but smooth-faced boys of fifteen or less. A sixteen-year old fifer volunteered with his father; he served as messenger and cook’s helper. This was the pathetic-looking ‘army’ without uniforms: they wore heavy homespun coats and shirts, these often in tatters, britches of every color and condition, cowhide shoes and moccasins, and on their heads, old broad-brimmed felt hats, weathered and sweat-stained, and striped bandannas. Many succumbed to dysentery, the camp fever; contaminated food, the infection of filth coming from open latrines.

These soldiers were really not soldiers, squishing and trudging through the mud and driving snow, soldiers hungry, thirsty, dressed in rags, ill-equipped for even a minor skirmish, heartbreaking deaths, defections, and treachery. Though in good spirits, they had yet to grasp the necessity of order or obedience.

What a sorry sight! And for what?

They had volunteered for the sake of a cause greater than themselves. The might of England's militia would face a mere 14,000 colonials, 11,000 of whom were unfit for war. Boys, young men, and the elderly enlisted to fight for a great cause. They encountered hardships of all kinds for the sake of their very existence as free men.

Why were they fighting?

At first, they were fighting "for our common rights, a defense of all that is dear and valuable in life." Independence was not yet mentioned. Only gradually did a declaration of independence enter their minds. Then the idea began to grow, and soon, most agreed that independence from Britain was the only answer. Most of all, the establishment of civil and religious liberty induced them to soldier on in the field of battle,

Could the stakes have been any higher? They would have to fight a full-throated war for which they were unfit and incapable of fighting. They would face a militia of Loyalists to the Crown, well-trained and disciplined in war craft, supplied with all the armaments they needed. They were mere civilians who had never donned a uniform. The odds were against them from beginning to end. But push ahead they did steeling themselves for whatever came. They won the war, but barely. It was the courage and perseverance of General Washington and the generosity of his men that brought them to that summer of 1776.

Finally . . .

It was in the days of that early July when representatives of the thirteen colonies finally voted unanimously to declare their independence from King George III. The only blot on their decision concerned of the issue of slavery. Despite the North's conviction that slavery must be abolished, the South would not relinquish its prerogative to own slaves. Nor would they allow the question to carry any weight in the deliberations. Lest they refuse to sign the "Declaration," the remaining delegates omitted any mention of it in the final draft. The immorality of slavery would come to an ugly head in the nineteenth century with the Civil War.

Today

On July 4th, Americans observe Independence Day, the most important civil holiday of the year. The precious freedoms for which the colonial army fought under General Washington are concisely expressed in the Preamble of the U.S. Declaration of Independence:

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

There are two songs whose lyrics complement the Preamble. The first is by Emma Lazarus and is called "The Statue of Liberty Song:"

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free;
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless,
Tempest-tossed to me
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame is the imprisoned lightning,
And her name, Mother of Exiles.

From her beacon-hand glows world-wide welcome;
Her mild eyes command the air-bridged harbor
That twin cities frame.
"Keep, Ancient Lands, your storied pomp!"
Cries she with silent lips.

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free;
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless,
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I lift my lamp beside the golden door!



The Statue of Liberty Welcomes Our Families to the United States

The second set of lyrics by Robinson and Allen uses the metaphor of a house—connoting home. America is the ‘house we live in.’ Because the words meant so much to him, Frank Sinatra owned the song by making it famous:

The House I Live In

What is America to me
A name, a map, or a flag I see
A certain word, democracy
What is America to me

The house I live in
A plot of Earth, a street
The grocer and the butcher
And the people that I meet

The children in the playground
The faces that I see
All races and religions
That's America to me

The place I work in
The worker by my side
The little town the city
Where my people lived and died

The howdy and the handshake
The air a feeling free
And the right to speak your mind out
That's America to me

The things I see about me
The big things and the small
The little corner newsstand
Or the house a mile tall

The wedding and the churchyard
The laughter and the tears
The dream that's been a growing
For a hundred and fifty years

The town I live in
The street, the house, the room
The pavement of the city
Or the garden all in bloom

The church the school the clubhouse
The million lights I see
But especially the people
That's America to me.



The Statue of Liberty Welcomes You to New York

This will be the last essay sent to you until the end of the summer.