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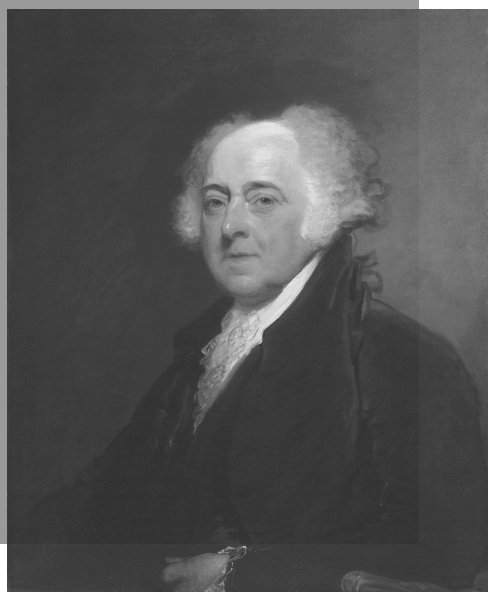
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Celebrating Independence

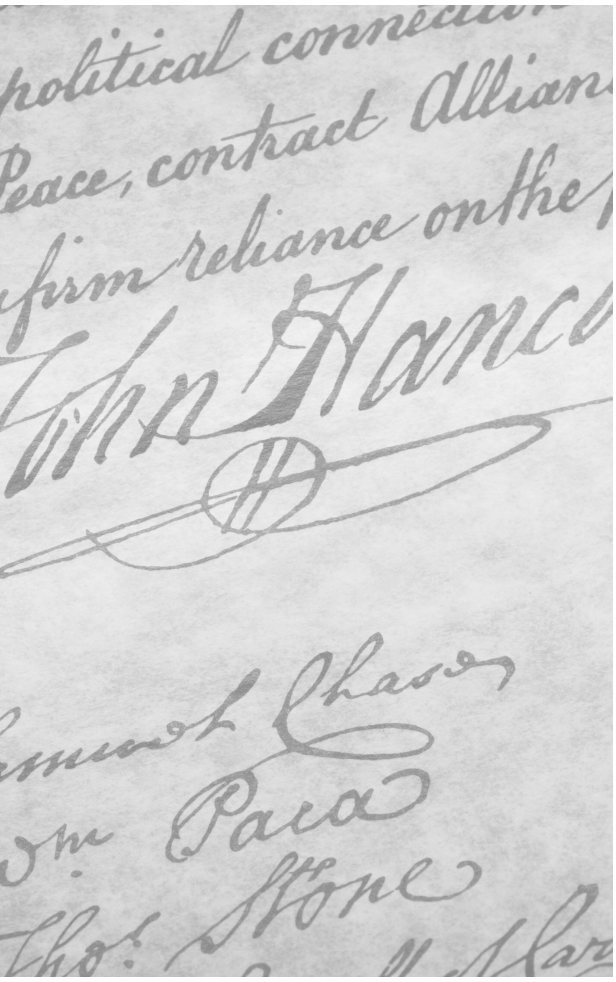
John Adams predicted that Americans would celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence for generations to come. While he was correct, we currently live in a time where there is fierce debate regarding the founding of the United States. Whether you believe it was 1619, 1763, or 1776, there is no doubt that any basic study of the American Revolution will confirm that the Declaration was just one step in a long sequence of steps that led the Colonies to independence and the formation of the Union. As we celebrate this 4th of July let us always remember those who continue to take the small and large steps to make our independence possible.

Nathan's Papers



> You will think me transported with Enthusiasm but I am not.—I am well aware of the Toil and Blood and Treasure, that it will cost Us to maintain this Declaration, and support and defend these States.
>
> JOHN ADAMS

Good Government



Historians could have a healthy debate about whether July 4, 1776 was the right time to declare independence. The military effort against Great Britain was in a terrible state. Although the British Army ended their occupation of Boston, it was not the result of a decisive military victory by the Continental Army. General George Washington was still struggling to recruit, supply, and manage the army with very little resources.

The young army also suffered a terrible military defeat in Canada where all of its dysfunctions were laid bare. There was a revolving door of generals assigned to the campaign. They were stressed due to lack of supplies, the officers were poorly trained, and soldiers were plagued by low morale and illness. Diplomatic efforts to bring Canada into the Colonies war with Great Britain also failed. All the while, the Continental Congress seemed to dawdle away most days trying to avoid the big question of declaring independence. John Adams wrote in his diary that "Little things were designedly thrown in the Way of Great Ones."

Despite Adams' assessment of Congress, the "little things" did add up to some fairly significant achievements in the months leading up to signing the Declaration. The Continental Congress established a Treasury Office of Accounts in order to strengthen the treasury system. It also created a Board of War to provide better oversight of the growing military. Most importantly, Congress recommended that Colonies begin establishing their own governments, which Adams called "...an Epocha, a decisive Event. It was a measure which I had invariably pursued for a whole year..."

In a perfect world, Adams wanted the Colonies to develop their governments, confederate, establish a Continental Constitution, declare independence, and then begin forming treaties with foreign governments. The Colonies did not follow this order and would suffer greatly in the intervening years before the U.S. Constitution would be signed and ratified. Nevertheless, the importance of good institutional government as part of the American ethos was also born in 1776. It would never be enough to just declare independence from Great Britain, the Colonies would also have to live it.

1776 by David McCullough

David McCullough is an iconic Pulitzer Prize winning historical nonfiction author. The book 1776 is the first title by McCullough reviewed by Nathan's Papers. While 1776 does not cover any new ground in terms of the key battles and events that took place that year, McCullough is an engaging writer who tells the story brilliantly.

One of the most interesting aspects of studying the American Revolution, or perhaps any point in history, is reading the accounts of the people who participated directly in the event. Thanks to the National Archives, the primary Founders' papers can be found online for all to enjoy. Authors often go the extra mile to visit key battlefields, review state historical archives, comb through pension files, and read hundreds of personal accounts beyond the Founders, among other things, to develop their stories. In this regard, McCullough is one of the best.

1776 follows the basic timeline of that pivotal year in the American Revolution. Beginning in the fall of 1775, McCullough describes the flagging efforts of the Continental Army as General George Washington tries to recruit new soldiers within miles of the British during the siege of Boston. He is terribly under-supplied and having a difficult time turning soldiers from all over the colonies into a cohesive fighting unit. Things begin to look up for the Patriot's after Henry Knox's successful mission to Ticonderoga to collect artillery that would eventually drive the British out of Boston. The Continental Army then moves to New York to set up defenses. After the Continental Congress declares independence, the army suffers an array of defeats that leaves it battered going into the winter season. The book ends with Washington's spectacular defeat of the Hessians at Trenton in December of 1776, which reinvigorated the American cause and breathed new life into the Revolution.

The strength of McCullough's take on 1776 is how he pieces together his research. This includes incredible quotes from key players like Generals George Washington, Charles Lee, Nathaniel Greene and Henry Knox, American and British officers and soldiers, and members of the public. His retelling of the story makes the reader connect with the experiences and feelings of the individuals who were there. He has been credited with one of the most detailed analyses of General Knox's expedition to Ticonderoga, a critical inflection point of the war. McCullough's success here is often what sets apart great historical nonfiction.

For the rest of this review, feel free to visit our website at www.nathanspapers.com..

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