

Real Courage

P. Donohue Shortridge

August 2, 1776.

On that day, fifty-six Americans modeled real courage that we Americans now marvel at from the safe distance of centuries and our own comfort. Yet, in honoring their courage, we are challenged to ask ourselves if we could do the same.

What did they do? They signed their names to the Declaration of Independence. Their signing was not merely a formality; it was an act of ultimate personal courage.

Here's the story. What would you do?

On July 4, 1776, the members of the second Continental Congress finally agreed to declare independence and John Hancock affixed his signature to memorialize the agreement. The other members remained anonymous for the moment. But each delegate knew the day was coming when the whole world would learn the name of every man who had declared independence from England. And it could cost them their lives.

Over eighty copies of the declaration were then printed and circulated throughout the colonies. Excitement for independence rose among the colonists, a new country was about to be born. However, from the British point of view, this declaration was an act of treason against the British crown, punishable by death.

Meanwhile the delegates went home, contemplating what they had just agreed to. In less than a month, each of their names would become known as signers of this treasonous break from Britain.

Could we have done it? Could we have told our families and friends about the peril they were all now in; preparing our wives for disaster and looking in on sleeping children and surveying

our homes and estates, knowing we may likely lose it all? Would we face death for freedom?

Indeed the threats were real. The British were not about to let this rebellion coalesce into American sovereignty without a fight. And the delegates knew it. What would happen to each of them and their families they did not know, but the mood was ominous. The British offered immunity from prosecution as well as safe harbor and money to any of the fifty-six delegates who would repudiate their agreement to declare independence. One can imagine the or-else that was put to them. The fifty-six delegates and their families had twenty-nine days to weigh the options and imagine the worst.

Meanwhile, a formal parchment original of the Declaration of Independence was being prepared for signature. Finally that day came, the

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delegates reconvened in Philadelphia on August 2nd. Each man's name was called and soberly, deliberately, each one affixed his signature to the document. From that day forward, they were marked men. The British relentlessly pursued them for five years. If caught, they knew they would die by hanging.

*Many of the fifty-six suffered grave hardship; nine died during the war, five were captured and tortured, the estates of twelve men were burned down and seventeen men lost everything. Many had to witness their wives

watching the destruction of their homes. One delegate, Richard Stockton of New Jersey, was forced to watch while his fine library, one of the most excellent in America, was torched and then he was forced to ride naked on a horse to prison. Abraham Clark refused to repudiate the declaration even to save his sons whom the British held on their infamous prison ship in New York harbor.

Even though some of the signers went on to lead successful lives, not one of them could be certain on that August day in 1776 that he wouldn't personally lose everything. Yet not one of them hesitated to sign his personal death warrant, the Declaration of Independence.

The 4th of July is a grand day to celebrate the idea of a country founded on the principle of individual sovereignty and equality before the law. Let us also remember August 2nd as a day to honor and thank those individuals who personally risked everything for that idea. They are:

John Hancock
Samuel Chase
William Paca
Thomas Stone
Charles Carrol of Carrolton
George Wythe
Richard Henry Lee
Thomas Jefferson
Benjamin Harrison
Thomas Nelson, Jr.
Francis Lightfoot Lee
Carter Braxton
Robert Morris
Benjamin Rush
John Morton
George Clymer
James Smith
George Taylor
James Wilson
George Ross

Caesar Rodney
George Read
Thomas McKean
William Floyd
Philip Livingston
Arthur Middleton
Button Gwinnett
Francis Lewis
Lewis Morris
Richard Stockton
John Witherspoon
Francis Hopkinson
John Hart
Abraham Clark
Josiah Bartlett
William Whipple
Sam Adams
John Adams
Robert Trent Paine
Elbridge Gerry
Stephen Hopkins
William Ellery
Roger Sherman
Samuel Huntington
William Williams
Oliver Wolcott
Matthew Thornton
William Hooper
Joseph Hewes
John Penn
Edward Rutledge
Thomas Heyward, Jr.
Thomas Lynch, Jr.
Lyman Hall
George Walton

Historical details from John Ridpath's **The Declaration of Independence, available at **Second Renaissance Books***

*Donohue Shortridge, a Montessorian since 1980 speaks and write on topics related to children and their families in the American culture.
pds@pdonohueshortridge.com*

P. Donohue Shortridge



fostering the authentic life of children and their families in the American culture