

THE FAMILY HERITAGE SERIES



A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those “heirs of all the ages” who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom.

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They Signed For Us

LESSON IDEA

The courage, character, and sacrifices of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence.

PREPARATION

Prepare cards for each member of the family containing the first two paragraphs of John Adams’ “Sink-or-swim” speech. (See last page.)

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WHEN JOHN ADAMS, stern New Englander, stood before the Second Continental Congress to argue for independence from England, he put into words the thoughts that must have been in the minds of many of the supporters of the Declaration.

“Sink or swim, live or die, survive or perish,” thundered Adams, “I give my hand and my heart to this vote.... You and I, indeed, may rue it. We may not live to the time when this Declaration shall be made good. We may die; die colonists; die slaves; die, it may be, ignominiously and on the scaffold.

“Be it so, be it so.

“If it be the pleasure of Heaven that my country shall require the poor offering of my life, the victim shall be ready.... But while I do live, let me have a country, or at least the hope of a country, and that a free country....

“Sir, before God, I believe the hour is come. My judgment approves this measure, and my whole heart is in it. All that I have, and all that I am, and all that I hope, in this life, I am now ready here to stake upon it; and I leave off as I began, that live or die, survive or perish, I am for the Declaration. It is my living sentiment, and by the blessing of God it shall be my dying sentiment,

Independence now, and Independence forever.”

Determination and boldness were not Adams’ alone. John Hancock, President of the Congress, was a handsome young bachelor with a sizeable fortune and a price of five hundred pounds on his head. Do you know what a British pound was? [*It is a basic money unit, like a dollar. In colonial times a British pound equaled three and one-third dollars. So the reward offered for Hancock’s capture was approximately \$1,665 — a large amount for that time.*] If captured, Hancock would be tried in England for treason, and probably hanged. No pardon was possible, as it was for other rebels.

YET, HANCOCK SIGNED the Declaration on July 4, 1776 — the day it was approved by Congress — without hesitation. In fact, Hancock’s name, as President of the Congress, and Charles Thomson’s, as Secretary, were the only signatures to appear on the original document. When the Declaration was engrossed on parchment and signed by all fifty-six of the Congressional delegates on August 2, Hancock joked about the large, shaded letters of his signature. “John Bull [meaning King George],” he said, “can read my name without spectacles, and may now double his reward of £500 for my head. *That* is my defiance!”

All members of Congress who signed for independence were marked by the British for special vengeance. So were their families, their properties, and their businesses. The danger was greatest in New York where English troops were gathering for battle with Washington’s fledgling army.

The four New York delegates — Francis Lewis, William Floyd, Philip Livingston, and Lewis Morris — had millions of dollars at stake. They were all

wealthy businessmen with luxurious town houses and country estates. Putting their names to the Declaration would mean, for all practical purposes, signing away their property and endangering their families. This they knew and, yet, they signed.

Suppose our family would be in a situation like that today because of our opposition to Communism. Would all of you be willing to leave this house? Or would you expect us to play it safe and not do anything to show our opposition to Communism? [*Add enough specific details to make the situation realistic for your family. Ask each what he would choose to do.*]

WITHIN A MONTH British troops were at the door of Francis Lewis' country estate, intent on hanging the signer who dared to defy England. Booted and spurred, they forced their way into the mansion, seized Mrs. Lewis, and began a sweep of destruction. Everything of value — silver, clocks, clothing, china, food, and drink — disappeared into British saddlebags. The furnishings that could not be carried away were mercilessly destroyed. All of Lewis' books and papers were piled in a heap and set afire. Mrs. Lewis, forced to watch the destruction of her property, was handled with brutality and contempt. Imprisoned in a dingy, unheated room, she was not permitted to have a bed and for many weeks had no change of clothes. Even though General Washington arranged for her release in a prisoner exchange, her health had been broken and she died soon after. When Lewis returned to his estate after the war, nothing remained but rubble.

The other New York signers also fared badly. Although the families of William Floyd and Lewis Morris escaped before the British arrived, their estates were looted, the houses stripped of everything, farm tools and livestock stolen and timberlands razed. All of Morris' servants and tenants were driven from their homes; and the Floyd estate, used as British headquarters, was left in shambles.

Morris, deprived of his property and income, left Congress and joined Washington's army, serving as a militia brigadier. Three of his sons also served as officers, all with distinction. After the war, Morris used what remained of his property and fortune to pay his private debts to British citizens, an act he felt morally obligated to do despite the war.

Philip Livingston had already given up much of his fortune before signing the Declaration. His business was imports — the buying and selling of British goods. When the colonists began to boycott British-made

clothing, tea and furnishings, Livingston gave his full support and lost much of his income.

A similar situation today would be owning a fruit and vegetable market and knowing the lettuce and grapes we were selling would put money into the pockets of Caesar Chavez' Communist-controlled labor union. Many patriotic customers would refuse to buy these products, and we would lose their business. We could continue selling lettuce and grapes to people who didn't know or care where they came from, or we could refuse to sell them and take a loss in income. What do you think we should do? [*Ask family members what they would choose to do. Remind them that Philip Livingston chose not to sell the enemy's goods even though it meant losing large sums of money.*]

In the fall of 1776, when the defeated American army was driven from New York, all of Livingston's business properties were confiscated. His mansion on Duke Street was turned into a British barracks; his estate on Brooklyn Heights was made into a Royal Navy hospital. In the months that followed, he sold the properties he owned in other parts of the State to help maintain the credit of the United States. Two years later, in 1778, he died, deplete of income and separated from his family.

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

The fifty-six men who signed the Declaration of Independence were a young and hardy lot. Only seven were over sixty; eighteen were still in their thirties; and three in their twenties. Not one wore a beard or mustache.

Two of the signers died on July 4, 1826, fifty years after the historic event; one lived to spade the first earth for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad at the age of 91; another was poisoned by a grandnephew impatient for his inheritance. The details of their lives would make an excellent subject for history reports or English themes.

We recommend reading *They Signed For Us* by Sinclair and McArthur.

THOMAS NELSON, JR. of Virginia was another of the wealthy merchants who did not hesitate to give whatever was required in the fight for independence. In 1775 when the British Navy was threatening to bombard Yorktown, Nelson had property and family in the target area and vast sums of money in English banks, but his reaction to the threat was bold and decisive.

"Let my trade perish," he thundered to the delegates of the House of Burgesses. "I call God to witness that if any British troops are landed in the County of York,

of which I am Lieutenant, I will wait no orders, but will summon the militia and drive the invaders into the sea!”

Nelson meant what he said. In October of 1781, when the tide of the war turned in America’s favor, the British were cornered in Yorktown under bombardment from seventy colonial cannons. Nelson, knowing that the English were headquartered in his home, watched from the American lines as the firing began in his own neighborhood.



“Why do you spare my house?” he demanded of a gunner.

“Out of respect to you, sir,” the soldier replied.

“Give me the cannon!” Nelson ordered. He directed the fire upon his own stately dwelling.

Before the war, Nelson had been one of the richest men in Virginia. When it was over, his income was one of the most modest. In 1778 he raised a company of Virginia cavalry to fight in Pennsylvania. He was its commander and banker, most of the funds for its food, uniforms, and ammunition coming out of his own pocket. In addition, he paid the bills for two other regiments, one in York and one in Williamsburg. He stripped his plantation of fine hunting and carriage horses to give to the army, fed hungry soldiers from his own granary, and neglected his tobacco crops to send slaves and tenants to harvest the crops of small farmers who were serving in the militia and had no hired help.

When money was desperately short, Nelson raised two million dollars almost overnight by offering his own properties as a guarantee for the loans. These he forfeited when the loans came due. His government never reimbursed him. At war’s end, his health broken and fortune gone, Nelson retired to a small house in Hanover County, Virginia, with his wife and children. He died eight years later.

Concluding Thought

Virtually all of the signers would have been better off financially and personally if they never had been in Congress. Of the fifty-six who pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor for independence, nine died of wounds or hardships during the war. Five were captured and imprisoned, sometimes brutally treated. The wives, sons, and daughters of others were killed, jailed, mistreated, and left penniless. The houses of twelve signers were burned to the ground. Seventeen lost everything they owned. One was driven from his wife’s deathbed.

Every signer was proclaimed a traitor, and each was hunted by the British. Most were, at one time or another, barred from their families or homes. Most were offered bribes, pardons, rewards, or the release of loved ones if they would break their pledged word or take the King’s protection. But no signer defected or changed his stand through the darkest hour. What did their acts of sacrifice and courage gain? In the end, honor remained and a new nation was born. That was all they asked.

Looking Ahead

Today we see another group of revolutionaries of our country. They claim to be modern George Washingtons and Thomas Nelsons, making a stand against America just as the signers of the Declaration of Independence did against England in 1776. Next week we’ll talk about these modern revolutionaries and see if their claims are true or false.

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DURING THE WEEK

After the lesson tonight, ask each member of the family to memorize all or part of John Adams’ “Sink-or-swim” speech. Cards for this purpose should be prepared prior to the lesson and the quote adjusted in length to suit the age and capabilities of the family. Use the dinner or breakfast hour to test the memorization progress.

JOHN ADAMS’ QUOTE

“Sink or swim, live or die, survive or perish, I give my hand and heart to this vote.... You and I, indeed may rue it. We may not live to the time when this Declaration shall be made good. We may die; die colonists; die slaves; die, it may be, ignominiously and on the scaffold.

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The Family Heritage Series

For parents who wish to teach their children the true meaning of liberty, responsibility, and our Americanist heritage.

The Family Heritage Series is published by the Movement To Restore Decency, a project of The John Birch Society. Address all inquiries to The John Birch Society, 770 N Westhill Blvd, Appleton, WI 54914. Please visit the website at jbs.org for more information. For more books about this topic, please visit westernisland-publishing.com.

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