

# The Founding Fathers took some liberties with our born-on date

by William C. Kashatus

**O**n Sunday, Americans will celebrate the 223rd anniversary of our nation's birth.

Those who pause to reflect on the significance of the holiday will undoubtedly recall that our Founding Fathers declared American independence from Great Britain on that day.

And they will be wrong.

In fact, July 4, 1776, was the day that the founders — delegates to the Second Continental Congress meeting at the Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia — adopted Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. They already had committed themselves to American independence two days earlier, on July 2.

A public declaration of that fact was not made until July 8 in the courtyard behind the State House, a building we know today as Independence Hall.

A careful examination of American history will reveal that there are other dates that deserve just as much, if not more, consideration as the birthday of our nation than the Fourth of July, including:

**Jan. 10, 1776**, when Thomas Paine's incendiary pamphlet "Common Sense" was published, declaring what Americans had been unable to say for themselves — that monarchy was an institution rooted in superstition, dangerous to liberty and inappropriate for Americans.

Not only did Paine anticipate Jefferson's Declaration, the more than 100,000 copies of his pamphlet that sold within three months of its publication mobilized popular support for the Revolution.

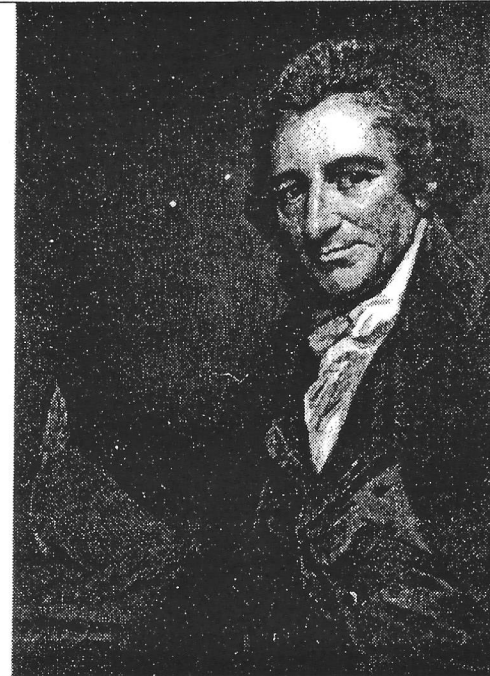
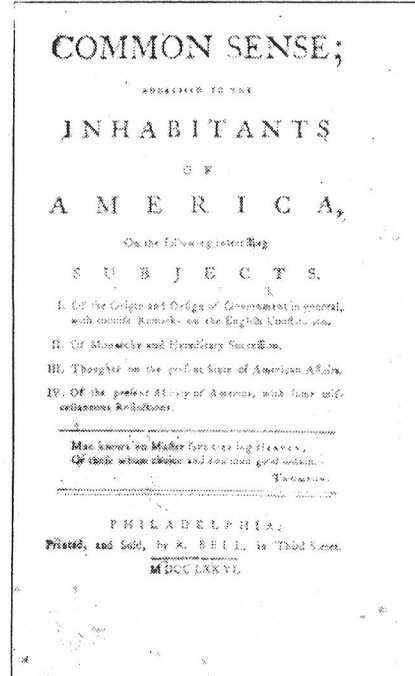
**July 2, 1776**, when the Second Continental Congress first declared independence by adopting Virginia delegate Richard Henry Lee's resolution that "these united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown, and that all political connection be-

tween them and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved."

Convinced that this date would be the most memorable in the history of America, John Adams of Massachusetts wrote that he was "apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival."

**Sept. 17, 1787**, when the present Con-

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Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" was published on Jan. 10, 1776, and quickly marshaled grass-roots support for the Revolution



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stitution of the United States was approved by the founding fathers, again meeting at the Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia. This document — which institutionalized the Revolutionary principle of “government by the consent of the people” while also reconciling liberty with order and unity with diversity, defined the principles by which Americans have governed themselves for over two centuries.

Yet the Fourth of July was destined to become the most important date because of its association with the Declaration of Independence and the popular mythology surrounding it.

The obvious question is: “Why have a declaration at all if the Congress already had taken the decisive action by adopting a resolution for independence on the 2nd?”

The answer is simply that in order to limit debate and save time, the founders chose to vote on the resolution first and then, if necessary, agree on a statement of reasons for independence.

But Daniel J. Boorstin, in his work, “The Americans: The National Experience” (Random House, 1965) offered another, more provocative theory.

“Older nations assumed their existence had been ratified by God and History without their needing to produce a declaration of the reasons for their existence.” But America had been “born in an act of justification” and the Declaration was a necessary statement to “justify its [democratic] mission to the world.” By fixing on the Fourth of July — the day the Declaration was adopted by Congress — Americans “had chosen the strange course of making their chief patriotic holiday a day of re-explaining their nation’s purpose and justifying it to all mankind.”

So determined were Americans to celebrate the Fourth that they exaggerated the chronology of events surrounding independence and even compounded the inaccuracies by repetition and factual error. The signing of the Declaration is a fine example.

Although not all of the signers affixed their names to the document until Aug. 2, 1776, the popular notion that the Declara-

tion was signed by all on July 4 was given credibility by the personal misrecollections of Adams, Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, all of whom stated that point in writing within a decade after the event.

The confusion was compounded by the fact that Congress first made public the names of the signers the following year, in 1777, and actually doctored its own records to indicate that the Declaration had been signed on July 4.

Subsequently, Congress voted Fourth of July celebrations in 1795 and 1786.

By the 1790s, when partisan differences dominated the American political culture, the Fourth of July had become a popular occasion for airing those differences over the nature of patriotism and the future of the nation.

Each party held its own celebration to rally the people behind their respective platforms. Not until the semi-centennial year of 1826 was the holiday given a new national significance.

Having survived a second war against Britain in 1812 as well as repeated threats to domestic tranquility, Americans once again rallied behind the democratic principles of the Declaration and celebrated their mutual enjoyment of

“life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Plans were made throughout the country to observe the Fourth of July by military processions, orations, picnics, private parties and public dinners.

That practice was formally recognized by Congress in 1941 when it made the date an official national holiday.

Regardless of its origins, the Fourth of July occupies a sacred spot in America’s historical consciousness because of the larger meaning of the American Revolution. Not only did the Revolution mark a complete break between the colonies and England, but introduced a wholly new concept of government based on popular sovereignty, or government by the consent of the people.

That uniquely American concept continues to serve as a national source of pride and inspiration today. ■

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