

# What Happened to the Signers of the Declaration?

## Part One

By Dani Crossley

As I mentioned in the previous newsletter, I have often wondered what happened to the fifty-six original signers of the Declaration of Independence. I try to imagine taking such an incredible risk today and at the same time I'm so thankful they did. Without doubt it was a treasonous act with tremendous consequences. What if things had turned out differently and the British remained in power? No confusion on what would've happened to these men then. My special thanks to Kay Todd for lending me her book, *Signing Their Lives Away*, by Denise Kiernan and Joseph D'Agnese. I will be summarizing what happened to the signers based on this book.

**New Hampshire.** New Hampshire was the first state to oust its royal governor and declare independence from Great Britain. The signers were designated to affix their signatures in order geographically from the north down the seaboard, so New Hampshire's representatives were the first to sign after John Hancock.

*Josiah Bartlett*, a physician who was 46 at the age of signing, 65 at his death. The son of a cobbler, he studied medicine with a local doctor. He became the first governor of New Hampshire.

*William Whipple*, fought for freedom with his slave, Prince, at his side. He also was 46 when he signed after retiring from the sea in 1759. He was named commander of a New Hampshire militia brigade. He fought in many Revolutionary War battles including Saratoga, a major turning point of the war. Even though his slave, Prince, also fought for freedom, more blacks fought on the side of the British, who had promised them their freedom. Whipple became a judge later in life and died at age 55 from clogged arteries.

*Matthew Thornton*, also a physician and about 62 years old when he signed. Thornton and his Scotch-Irish parents were Presbyterians and not always welcome in the new world neighborhoods, he having arrived with his parents around age 4. Involved early in politics, he was elected the colony's first president during its brief period as an independent country. He didn't sign the Declaration until September of 1776, one of the last signers. After a bout of smallpox, his eyesight was such that he couldn't work in Congress anymore and returned to farm life and running his ferry. He was 89 when he died.

**Massachusetts**, often thought of as the cradle of the revolution.

*John Adams*, well-known biggest force behind America's fight for independence, was a lawyer and age 40 when he signed. He was the nation's first vice-president and its second president. His son John Quincy Adams also became president. Adams was extremely intelligent, but also quite abrasive in his manner and words about his compatriots. He also slyly manipulated many while pushing for independence and Jefferson in particular into writing the Declaration draft. His rancorous relationship with Jefferson carried into their later years, when they finally reconciled and wrote long philosophical letters to each other. "*In an eerie coincidence, Adams and Jefferson died on the same day: July 4, 1826, fifty years after the adoption of the famous document. Adams, who was ninety years old, drifted in and out of a coma before dying. His last*

words were, “*Thomas Jefferson survives.*” Ah, but he was wrong: *Jefferson had died just hours earlier.*” Taken from *Signing Their Lives Away*.

*Sam Adams*, a merchant and brewer, cousin to John Adams, signed at age 53. He was known for his pranks, one of which was The Boston Tea Party. Not a good manager of finances, he squandered his small inheritance, his brewery went bust and he was broke the rest of his life. He and John Hancock were the ones warned in the famous ride by Paul Revere. Later in life served as Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts under John Hancock and then governor after Hancock died. He was 81 when he died.

*Elbridge Gerry* was a merchant, age 32 at signing, and the signer who gave us gerrymandering. Universally disliked for his vacillation in politics, he served 20 months as Vice President to James Madison. Before that, he lost the election for Massachusetts governor four times before becoming its ninth governor. During his tenure, he is famous for redrawing the election districts to favor his party. A political cartoonist said one of the redrawn districts looked like a salamander and thus the term “gerrymandering” was born. He neglected his finances and lived well beyond his means, finally ending up so broke that Congress picked up the tab for his Washington burial. He died of a severe lung hemorrhage in his carriage at age 71.

*John Hancock*, merchant and shipping magnate was 39 when he was the first to sign the document. Having lost his father at an early age, he went to live with his rich uncle, Thomas Hancock. He attended Boston Latin School, then Harvard. He wasn’t yet thirty when his uncle died leaving him the business, a lot of money and a house on Beacon Hill. Hancock was remarkably generous to anyone needing help at the same time as he was smuggling his goods in ships to avoid the onerous taxes. There was quite a price on his head by the British and he risked much to side with the patriots. He was elected President of the Continental Congress. He was also the first and third governor of Massachusetts, over a period of 13 years, dying in 1793 at age 56 while still in office.

*Robert Treat Paine*, a lawyer who was 45 at the time of signing. He was the prosecutor against the British soldiers involved in the Boston Massacre. No match for John Adams, who was defending them, he lost the case. He later served on the state’s Supreme Court. He could trace his lineage through multiple generations of Paines and Treats (his mother’s side). His son embarrassed him by marrying an actress, not accepted in respectable society. From *Signing Their Lives Away*: “...*imagine how he would react if he knew that one of his descendants and namesakes is, in fact, an actor: Treat Williams.*” Paine was 83 when he died.

### **Rhode Island**, the smallest colony.

*William Ellery*, a lawyer and merchant who was 48 when he signed. He married twice and had sixteen children, which kept up a drain on his finances. Not the state’s first choice for representative to Congress, he stepped in when Samuel Ward died of smallpox. He was appointed customs collector for Newport in 1790 by George Washington and kept the post for 30 years, finally establishing financial stability. He was 92 when he died and through a descendant who married into the Sedgwick family is only two degrees from Kevin Bacon, whose wife is Kyra Sedgwick.

*Stephen Hopkins*, second oldest signer after Ben Franklin at 69 was a farmer and merchant. He held many political offices in Rhode Island—town councils, Rhode Island legislature, delegate to Albany Congress, chief justice of the superior court, and governor ten times between 1755 and 1768. He introduced a bill to forbid the importation of slaves into Rhode Island. “Old Grape and

Guts” (his nickname) had one of the more memorable quotes on the day of signing: “My hand trembles, but my heart does not!” referencing his wobbly signature. He was 78 when he died. **Connecticut** had four signers.

*Samuel Huntington*, was a lawyer, 45 at signing, and some claim the first real president of the United States. A self-made man, he went from barrel maker to attorney by his mid-twenties. He was a member of Connecticut legislature by his mid-thirties and a judge by his early forties. Huntington served as President of Continental Congress after John Jay until July of 1781. On March 1<sup>st</sup> of that year the Articles of Confederation went into effect thus creating the United States out of the separate colonies and Huntington President of the United States in Congress Assembled. He was 51 when he died.

*Roger Sherman*, was a lawyer and the only cobbler to sign, age 55 at signing, and signer of four important founding documents. Married twice, he had fifteen children. He held many positions of importance and contributed to the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution, being the person who contributed the “Great Compromise”—the dual legislative system. He continued to serve Connecticut at the federal level until his death in 1793 at age 72.

*William Williams*, a merchant and signer at age 45. A son of a minister, he attended Harvard University, later serving in the military. He married Mary Trumbull, daughter of Governor Jonathan Trumbull and they had three children. Williams was convinced the British would be victorious and he would be hanged. He was very generous in his support of the cause, a true patriot. He lived to age 79. From *Signing Their Lives Away*: “*His tombstone includes the following description: “a firm, steady, and ardent friend of his country, and in the darkest times risked his life and wealth in her defense.”*”

*Oliver Wolcott*, a soldier and lawyer, was 49 at signing. He was the son (and fifteenth child) of the royal Governor of Connecticut and in 1796 become the governor of Connecticut himself. After a mob of soldiers and patriots stormed Bowling Green in the Wall Street area and toppled a huge statue of King George III, he had the remaining parts of the lead statue shipped to his home and he and his family melted it down and fashioned over 42,000 bullets. Pieces of the statue continue to be unearthed even as recently as the 1990s. Wolcott died in 1797 at 71 years of age.

**New York** also had four signers.

*Philip Livingston*, rich, land-owning merchant, signed at age 60. The amount of land the Livingston family owned earned them a seat in the New York royal legislature and they could act as judges within their territory. Fearful of his businesses and holdings, he took a moderate stance on the issues and wished the patriots would seek redress for their concerns as gentlemen. According to *Signing Their Lives Away*, he described the fight for independence as “the most vain, empty, shallow and ridiculous project.” He mellowed as time passed and was eventually converted, signing the declaration with the other New York delegates, after the state first abstained. Even though his house in Brooklyn was burned by the British, his family ultimately built forty mansions along the Hudson and acquired land whose area was greater than all of Rhode Island. He attended Congress in York in May of 1778 ultimately dying there of dropsy at age 62.

*William Floyd*, planter and land speculator, signed at age 41. Even though his was a rich family, his parents died while he was in his teens and he had to take over the family estate. His wife

died in the spring of 1781. When he collected his children and returned to his home on Long Island after the war, he found his house had been used as a stable and his crops destroyed. Late in life he wanted to see more of the world and ventured to the frontier of Westernville, NY (Oneida County). He died there at age 86. Two of his descendants are Abraham Lincoln and rock legend David Crosby.

*Francis Lewis*, merchant and one of the oldest signers at 63. He worked hard his entire life and was essentially retired when he signed the Declaration. Within months he had lost nearly everything. He came to the New World at 21 from Wales after being orphaned at an early age and raised by an aunt. He married Elizabeth, the sister of his business partner, Edward Annesley. He was imprisoned by the French for seven years after being captured in the French and Indian War. Shortly after the signing, the British attacked Long Island. Lewis's home was ransacked and his wife hauled off to prison. Washington arranged for two wives of prominent Philadelphia Tories to be held and exchanged for her. She died two years after her release. Lewis lived out his days with one of his sons and was almost ninety when he died.

*Lewis Morris*, planter, signing at age 50. His grandfather was the royal governor of New Jersey and Morris was also related to several other men of note. They owned thousands of acres and the family home was a grand estate in the South Bronx, which the British trashed. He married Mary Beekman Walton (of New York's Beekman Place, Beekman Street, etc.) He commanded the militia in Westchester, NY as a brigadier general and finished his days as a major general. He suffered major losses equivalent to many thousand pounds. He is buried at St. Anne's Episcopal Church in the Morrisania neighborhood of the Bronx, one of the poorest congressional districts in the country. He was 71 when he died.

**New Jersey.** There were five signers of the Declaration from New Jersey.

*Abraham Clark*, a lawyer and surveyor, aged 50 at signing. A hero of the middle class for his willingness to help folks with legal issues (although never admitted to the bar), he occupied a variety of public offices. His two sons, Aaron and Thomas, were captured during the war. What ultimately happened to them, and also to third son Andrew, is not certain. Most feel they died in prison, even aboard the *Jersey*, infamous prison ship. Clark opposed the Constitution until the Bill of Rights was added. He died of sunstroke at the age of 68.

*John Hart*, nicknamed "Honest John," he was a farmer and mill owner and 65 at signing. He truly represented the will of the common people. In October of 1776, his wife Deborah Scudder Hart, who had borne him thirteen children, fell sick and died. Shortly afterwards the British advanced and plundered his property. He slept in caves, dog houses and the snowy field for a year, eluding the British who were hunting him. He was 68 when he died of "gravel," another name for kidney stones.

*Francis Hopkinson*, lawyer, musician, Renaissance man, was a very young 38 when he signed. He never attained the recognition he desired for his many musical talents, nor for what was probably his greatest contribution, the American flag. There is much controversy about the exact design, who contributed what, Betsy Ross's input, etc. But his newer memorial after reburial in Philadelphia's Christ Church Burial Ground bears a bronze plaque that proclaims, "Designer of the American Flag." His father, Thomas, and Benjamin Franklin founded the University of Pennsylvania and Francis was in the first graduating class. He was fifty-three when he died of an epileptic seizure.

*Richard Stockton*, lawyer who was 45 at signing, recanted the Declaration. He had a privileged life and had a lot to lose by siding with the Revolutionists, but believed in the cause. He was betrayed after being recognized in Monmouth County and taken prisoner by the British. He gained his release by signing Howe's declaration of allegiance to the king. His long imprisonment weakened him, but cancer claimed him in 1781. He was only fifty years old.

*John Witherspoon*, minister and 53 at signing. Witherspoon left Europe to become the president of Princeton at Richard Stockton's request. A Scotsman, his dislike for the British was well established before he arrived in the colonies. He wrote "Thoughts on American Liberty" which cemented his reputation as a patriot. He was devastated by the loss of his son James at the Battle of Germantown. Princeton also suffered ransacking at the hands of the British with the loss of hundreds of books. His wife Elizabeth died in 1789 and two years later at age 68 he married twenty-four-year-old Ann Dill. They had two children! He died in 1794 at age 71. One of his descendants is actress Reese Witherspoon.