

What Happened to the Signers of the Declaration of Independence, Part 2 Conclusion

By Dani Crossley

Pennsylvania. The Declaration was signed in Philadelphia, and Pennsylvania had nine signers!

John Morton, farmer and surveyor, about 52 when signing, and first of the signers to die. Born on a Pennsylvania farm shortly after his father's death, he was educated by his stepfather. Morton started early in the world of politics holding many positions before presiding over the state government as speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly. When it came time to vote on the critical Lee Resolution, Pennsylvania was firmly on the fence with Quaker John Dickinson very much against it and Benjamin Franklin already renouncing allegiance to the king. The other delegates were spread in between. It was Morton's ye a vote that tipped Pennsylvania into the "for" column. He was ostracized back home for this deed. On his deathbed shortly thereafter, he dictated this message to his friends and neighbors, "*Tell them that they will live to see the hour when they shall acknowledge it to have been the most glorious service I ever rendered to my country.*" These words are engraved on the obelisk over his grave. He was about 52 when he died.

Benjamin Franklin, printer and scientist, probably the most famous of the signers, was 70 at signing. Son of a candlemaker, this self-made man was a printer, publisher, writer, scientist, philosopher, inventor and philanthropist. He was born in Boston, the youngest of 17 children, and apprenticed to brother James as a printer. He ran away to Philadelphia as a teenager. He connected with the common man, but distinguished himself early becoming wealthy by age forty-two. His *Poor Richard's Almanack* was found in nearly every home in America. He worked hard to make life easier, improving the mail system (as Postmaster General) and inventing the Franklin stove, the lightning rod and bifocals. He spent nearly thirty years in England and France. After coming under attack for his revolutionary views, he hightailed it back to Philadelphia. Although Jefferson wrote the final draft of the declaration, Franklin changed one of Jefferson's lines to read "*We hold these truths to be self-evident.*" His illegitimate son, William, sided with the British and they were estranged until William was released from prison and they were reconciled. He had two children with his common-law wife, Deborah Read. Because of Franklin's charm and efforts, France supported the war with cash and troops. He helped craft the Treaty of Paris at the end of the war. He died in 1790 at 84 years of age and is buried in Philadelphia.

James Wilson, lawyer, judge and land speculator, 33 at signing. A fine lawyer, he took a wrong turn and ended up in debtors' prison over misguided land speculation. His fellow Americans attacked his house after he made several unpopular decisions. He and his cronies barricaded themselves inside until another group of militia could rescue them in the "Fort Wilson" incident. He was influential in the creation of the U.S. Constitution behind James Madison. Because of his difficulties and indebtedness, he suffered mental distress and died around the time of his fifty-sixth birthday.

Robert Morris, merchant and land speculator, 42 at signing. Extremely wealthy, he helped finance the war, then squandered his estate on land speculations and died in obscure poverty.

This man almost singlehandedly financially assisted the government to support the war; it is a shame he ended his days dependent on his loyal wife and sons. He was seventy-two when he died.

George Clymer, a wealthy merchant who signed at 37. A shrewdly intelligent orphan who was raised by a rich uncle, he raked in the cash from business deals. British troops purposely detoured after their victory at Chadds Ford to ransack Clymer's home in Chester County. It didn't faze Clymer, though. Twenty years after the signing he was bailing out the University of Pennsylvania. He died in Morrisville, PA in 1813 at 74 years old.

George Ross, a 46-year-old lawyer at signing. Starting out as a loyal Tory, it's a surprise he was even at the signing at all. He eventually committed himself fully to the patriots' cause. Ross, uncle to John Ross (husband of Betsy), supposedly along with Washington and Robert Morris, visited Betsy one night to ask her to sew the flag. There is much disagreement about the details of that first flag, although she surely sewed quite a few of the early flags. Ross died after a severe gout attack in 1779, aged 49.

Benjamin Rush, a physician who was 30 at signing. His father died when he was a child and he was raised by his single mother, who managed to provide him with an education. He ended up being one of the most famous physicians and medical teachers of his time. He had a knack for writing about just about anything, especially his opinions about the others. He made the mistake of criticizing George Washington. That was the end of his military career. He was even accused of contributing to Washington's death by his practice of bloodletting. Despite questionable medical practices, his other humanitarian contributions were many. In the end, typhus took his life in 1813 at age 67.

George Taylor, a merchant and ironmaster, he was about 60 when he signed. He was about 20 when he left his homeland of Ireland and headed to Philadelphia. He was indentured to a Mr. Savage in his iron business. His future looked bleak until Mr. Savage died and Taylor married his widow, Anne. His forge contributed to the cause with ammunition and cannons, for which he was not compensated. His business suffered and was confiscated. He began again in New Jersey. He outlived his wife and son, dying in 1781 at the age of 65.

James Smith, lawyer, surveyor and ironmaster from the "wrong" side of the Susquehanna River, was about 57 at signing. After failing to make a living as a lawyer and surveyor west of the Susquehanna (Shippensburg and York), he bought a local forge. He was a staunch Whig and worked diligently for independence. His business failed while he was in Congress due to mismanagement by the two men he left in charge. He kept his age a mystery and most historians put him at about 85 or 86 when he died in 1806.

Delaware, the first state.

Caesar Rodney, planter, 47 at signing. Delaware was in danger of thwarting the unanimous vote for Lee's Resolution when Rodney had to rush home to deal with a Loyalist uprising near his home. His pro-revolution leaning compatriot sent a messenger to get him to return post-haste. He covered the 80 miles in a single stormy night, a journey that usually takes two full days. He

made it in time to cast the 2-1 vote in favor of independence for Delaware. In a letter to his brother on July 4, 1776, he wrote, “*I arrived in Congress (tho detained by thunder and rain) time enough to give my voice in the matter of independence... We have now got through with the whole of the declaration and ordered it to be printed so that you will soon have the pleasure of seeing it.*” ~ Signing Their Lives Away. He didn’t live to see Delaware become the first state to ratify the U.S. Constitution, dying in June 1784 at age 56.

George Read, only signer who voted against independence, a lawyer who was 43 at signing. Read was the Delaware delegate who was going to (and did) vote nay on the resolution causing the frantic message to be dispatched to bring Rodney back. Once the resolution passed, Read changed his tune and supported the effort in a big way. He was 65 when he died in 1798.

Thomas McKean, lawyer, about 46 when he finally signed five years after voting for the Lee Resolution. He was the governor of Delaware while serving as chief justice of Pennsylvania. He was the very last man to sign, just before he died at age 83. He thought he had signed earlier, but the official version did not include his signature. So, when he finally got a break in his hectic schedule, he made sure his signature was on it. McKean led a Pennsylvania militia group to assist George Washington in NYC. That’s where he was on August 2nd, when everybody else was signing. The British were constantly after him and he was forced to move his family five times in a few months, finally landing in a log house on the banks of the Susquehanna—only to be chased from there by incursions of the Indians. He died a wealthy man in 1817 at age 82.

Maryland, four signers.

Charles Carroll, merchant and planter, 38 at signing. Even though he started out life auspiciously as the son of a wealthy tobacco planter, he was persecuted for his Catholic religion, which made life very difficult as they were not allowed to vote, hold public office, teach, practice law, etc. After taking the side of the people and supporting the patriotic cause, his popularity soared and he spent his life serving the people of Maryland—he was one of Maryland’s first two United States senators. He owned many thousands of acres and hundreds of slaves. Later in life he manumitted some of his slaves before he died. He was the last of the signers to die at age 95 in 1832, outliving Jefferson and Adams by six years.

Samuel Chase, nicknamed “Old Bacon Face,” was a lawyer who was 35 at signing. Son of a preacher whose mother died shortly after childbirth, his family moved to Baltimore. He was instrumental in convincing Maryland to vote for independence. His abrasive nature finally caused him to lose favor and he left Congress discredited in 1778. He was appointed to the Supreme Court by Washington. Attempts to impeach him failed and he was acquitted in 1805. This trial set the precedent that judges cannot be impeached, sued or removed from office because of their beliefs. He was forced to retire because of gout and died at age 70, buried not too far from the tomb of Francis Scott Key.

William Paca, a lawyer and planter who was 35 at signing. His parents were wealthy Maryland planters; he received a good education. He married young, but continued carousing with Samuel Chase. He lost many of his loved ones—his first wife died ten years after their marriage and two of their three children also died during his lifetime. He remarried, only to have his second wife

die three years later, followed by their only child together. He had a child out of wedlock with a free black woman. He acknowledged this child and sent her to the finest schools. He died at age 58 at his posh estate on Maryland's eastern shore.

Thomas Stone, lawyer and planter, about 33 at signing. He was a conservative who at first didn't support the patriots' cause. He eventually went along. He was attending the Constitutional Convention in 1787 when his wife fell victim to a smallpox inoculation gone bad. In those days it involved getting the pus from an existing small pox victim and transferring it to an incision under the skin of an individual who had not yet been exposed. In most cases, the person got a mild case of smallpox, was quarantined, recovered and became immune. In the case of Stone's wife, she became ill from her inoculation in 1777 and lived in worsening health for ten years. She died while he was at the Constitutional Convention and he never recovered. While waiting for his ship to England, he suddenly collapsed and died at age 44, just four months after losing his wife.

Virginia, seven signers including the author, Thomas Jefferson

Carter Braxton, planter and businessman, 39 at signing. He was a very reluctant signer. With 18 children and vast wealth, he had a lot to lose. He was orphaned in his teens, raised by family friends and graduated from the College of William and Mary. His first wife died after the birth of their second child. He had sixteen more with his second wife. Deeply entrenched in Virginia's power elite as a member of the House of Burgesses, it was only expected that he would be sent to Continental Congress. Even though he was reluctant, he helped the cause with supplies and financing. His homes are still standing today, but he lost a lot of his vast wealth during the war. He died at age 61 and is buried in an unmarked grave at Chericoke, one of his residences.

Benjamin Harrison, planter, aged about 50 at signing and cousin of Carter Braxton and Thomas Nelson. He was involved early on with the patriots' cause, but was still rather conservative. He was a large, imposing, and jocular figure. He felt strongly that the Bill of Rights be included before ratification of the Constitution. His Berkeley Plantation still stands and is open to tourists. He died of gout at age sixty-five. His descendants include presidents William Henry Harrison and Benjamin Harrison.

Thomas Jefferson, the most famous signer/author of the Declaration, he was a planter, lawyer, violinist, inventor, botanist and architect, age 33 at signing. The man who doubled the size of the country with the Louisiana Purchase during his presidency was accomplished in so many areas. Rather shy, he was a much better writer than speaker, a natural for authoring the Declaration. Paying attention to the cadences and rhythms of his sentences, he took inspiration from John Locke, George Mason, and the discussions in Congress. He was Washington's first Secretary of State. After being Vice President under John Adams, he became the country's third president and served two terms. He founded the University of Virginia, but was functionally bankrupt at his death on July 4, 1826 at age 83, just hours before his friend John Adams.

Richard Henry Lee, planter and merchant, age 44 at signing. His was the resolution for separation from Great Britain which led to the creation of the Declaration of Independence. One

of two brothers who signed, he was a justice of the peace and a member of the House of Burgesses and also a member of the Virginia Sons of Liberty. A great orator, he put forth the famous resolution that read, “*Resolved, 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 between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.*” Lee fought in the Virginia militia during the war. He also led the charge to incorporate the Bill of Rights. He also suffered from gout, dying in 1794 at age 62.

Francis Lightfoot Lee, planter, age 41 at signing, the other Lee brother. Even more of a patriot than Richard Henry, he was a great defender of the cause. Mark Twain described him, “*This man’s life-work was so inconspicuous, that his name would be wholly forgotten, but for one thing—he signed the Declaration of Independence. Yet his life was a most useful and worthy one. It was a good and profitable voyage, though it left no phosphorescent splendors in its wake...In short, Francis Lightfoot Lee was a gentleman—a word which meant a great deal in his day, though it means nothing whatever in ours.*” Lee and his wife (they were childless) died within a short time of each other in 1797, he at age 62.

Thomas Nelson, Jr., a planter and merchant, age 37 at signing. He was a life-long sufferer of asthma, which ultimately cost him his life. Of a wealthy family in Yorktown, Virginia, he was educated at Cambridge. He married Lucy Grymes and they had eleven children. He and some of his compatriots staged the Yorktown version of the Tea Party in sympathy with the New Englanders. He became a brigadier general and was placed in charge of the state’s militia, despite his health issues. He was involved in the siege of Yorktown and even ordered the shelling of his own home, thinking Cornwallis was headquartered there. In addition to damage to his house, his fortune suffered also. He had financed much support for the war and fledgling government and was never repaid. He died at age 50 of asthma and is buried in Yorktown.

George Wythe, lawyer and professor, about 50 at signing. He was a father figure for Thomas Jefferson, “my faithful and beloved mentor in youth and my most affectionate friend through life.” George was one of two signers to die violently: Button Gwinnett in a duel only a year after signing and George murdered when in his eighties. He lost his parents at a young age and studied law in his uncle’s firm, passing the bar at age twenty. He drafted Virginia’s state constitution and designed the state seal. Planning to leave a good portion of his estate to two of his freed slaves who stayed on to care for him, Wythe was poisoned by his sister’s greedy grandson, George Wythe Sweeney. He lingered in agony for two weeks before succumbing on June 8, 1806, approximately eighty years old. His murderer was set free on a legal technicality.

North Carolina, three signers

Joseph Hewes, merchant, shipping magnate, 46 at signing. From *Signing Their Lives Away*: “A Quaker who supported revolution, a bachelor who died with a broken heart, Joseph Hewes buried himself in his work and drove himself to an early grave. But before he checked out, he played a pivotal role in securing the vote for independence.” Moving from Philadelphia, after attending Princeton and starting his own business, Hewes moved to Edenton, NC. His fiancée died just days before their wedding. He broke with his Quaker faith, even though he initially opposed Lee’s resolution. According to John Adams, “Mr. Hewes, who had hitherto constantly

voted against it, started upright, and lifting up both hands to Heaven...cried out, 'It is done! and I will abide by it.'" Adams later said, "The unanimity of the States finally depended upon the vote of Joseph Hewes, and was finally determined by him." He helped establish the Continental navy, appointing John Paul Jones as an officer. In the fall of 1779, too sick to travel, he died in Philadelphia at age forty-nine.

William Hooper, lawyer, age 34 at signing. A minister's son and fine speaker, Hooper was born in Boston and graduated from Harvard while still in his teens. Early in his career he moved down to North Carolina. Due to an unpleasant time with the Regulators (protestors against oppressive and corrupt rule in North Carolina's government), he feared democracy the rest of his life. Hooper suffered greatly during the war. Both his homes in Wilmington were destroyed by the British. When he fled to the back-country, he contracted malaria which plagued him until the end of his days. Straddling the middle of the road in his beliefs, he was hated by the Loyalists and patriots hated him for blocking reprisals against the Loyalists. He was generally mistrusted and a misunderstood patriot. He lived just long enough to see the Constitution ratified, dying in Hillsborough at age forty-eight.

John Penn, lawyer, 36 at signing. He taught himself to read and write and eventually was admitted to the bar by age twenty-one. He had a short career, with just the one shining moment, signing the Declaration of Independence as one of North Carolina's representatives. He is also remembered for talking his way out of shooting a man in a duel. Survived by his wife and three children, he was dead at forty-eight.

South Carolina, four signers

Thomas Lynch, Jr., lawyer and planter, 26 at signing. An unlikely supporter of the cause, he and his other three South Carolinian representatives voted for and signed the Declaration. Thomas, Jr. was filling in for his father who had had a stroke and couldn't leave his bed. All four were privileged, rich, entitled young men. His father never did sign, dying in Annapolis on his way back home. Thomas, Jr. had contracted malaria in South Carolina and was ill himself. He was advised to nurse himself back to health in a sunny locale. At age 30, he and his wife set sail for France via the West Indies. They made it as far as the Netherlands Antilles. Their next ship was most likely lost in a storm as the two were never seen again. He was the second-youngest signer and the youngest of all fifty-six to die.

Arthur Middleton, planter and lawyer, 34 at signing. A very rich man, he was imprisoned by British soldiers for over a year, captured during the siege of Charleston. He was also very patriotic. He was described by fellow signer Benjamin Rush as "a man of cynical temper, but of upright intentions toward his country..." He died on New Year's Day, 1787, leaving a wife and nine children behind. He was forty-four years old.

Edward Rutledge, lawyer and planter, 26 at signing. He joined his fellow South Carolinian representatives described as dandies, men who cared too much for clothes and finery. Henry Middleton was his father-in-law, Arthur his brother-in-law. Being an effectual speaker in Congress, Rutledge was one of the main reasons the vote on Lee's Resolution was delayed until July. John Adams described him as "a perfect Bob-o-Lincoln—a swallow, a sparrow, a peacock;

excessively vain, excessively weak, and excessively variable and unsteady; jejeune, inane and puerile.” Overcoming his concerns about the prematurity of the vote, he sided instead with unanimity and his South Carolina delegation voted for independence in the second vote. He was also taken prisoner in the siege of Charleston and his mother placed under house arrest. He recovered his property and finances after the war and served as South Carolina’s governor. He died before completing a full term in January of 1800 at age fifty.

Thomas Heyward, Jr., lawyer and planter, 30 at signing. He supposedly wrote a song about the Revolution. Heyward worked on the committee to draft a new South Carolina constitution following the ousting of the royal governor. He served as a captain in the militia and was wounded in 1779. He was captured and imprisoned along with Rutledge and Middleton. He retired from politics and devoted himself to his plantation. He died in 1809 at age sixty-three.

Georgia, the southernmost colony, three signers

Lyman Hall, physician, minister, planter, 52 at signing. He convinced a reluctant Georgia to join the Union. After attending Yale and a false start as a minister, he and second wife Mary Osborn and son headed south from Connecticut. He apprenticed as a physician in Sunbury, a community of New England transplants. Hall represented a single Georgia county at Continental Congress, as the rest of the colony really wasn’t interested in separating from Great Britain. After Lexington and Concord, Georgia finally got on board and sent additional delegates to represent them. They eventually voted for independence. Hall’s plantation was destroyed by the British in 1778, so after a brief stay in Connecticut, he returned to Georgia and was its governor from 1783-1784. He was instrumental in the beginnings of Franklin College and the University of Georgia. He died in 1790 at age 66.

George Walton, lawyer, about 35 at signing. *Signing Their Lives Away* describes him as the signer who was orphaned, impoverished, abused, shot and imprisoned!! He was an active patriot and fought with the militia. Receiving a bullet wound in his thigh, he was captured and held for over a year. He eventually served as Georgia’s chief justice, governor and U.S. senator. He died in 1804 at about age 65.

Button Gwinnett, merchant, planter, about 41 at signing. Born in England, the son of a Welsh clergyman, he was given the last name of his godmother, Barbara Button. Most Declaration of Independence autograph seekers hope to score a Button Gwinnett autograph. He got into a disagreement with Colonel Lachlan McIntosh and challenged him to a duel. Not a wise move. He died a few days later from his mortal wound, less than a year after signing the Declaration, at about 42 years old. His name is often equated with pettiness and short temper.

This great little book was an informed look into the politicians and the times leading up to and including the years of the Revolutionary War. I have a much better understanding of the issues and pressures surrounding the decisions made for our country back in 1776. I highly recommend it.