

5 Forgotten Signers of the Declaration of Independence

On July 2, 1776, the Continental Congress made a momentous decision: it voted to “dissolve the connection” with Great Britain.

The war had entered a new stage and everyone knew it.

“We are in the very midst of a revolution,” John Adams wrote, “the most complete, unexpected, and remarkable of any in the history of nations.”

We celebrate the Declaration of Independence today, but the men signing it knew they could be signing their own death warrants. Bear in mind, up until July 1776, the conflict had been relatively tame. But by putting their name to a document declaring independence, the signers were committing public treason. There was no going back. If the colonies failed, they would likely hang. But they signed, putting their lives and fortunes at risk.

Many of the names of the signatories are familiar to us. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, future presidents. John Hancock, president of the congress and the first man to sign the Declaration. Richard Henry Lee and Francis Lightfoot Lee, members of the prestigious Virginia family. There was, of course, Ben Franklin, America’s renaissance man. Dr. Benjamin Rush, the enlightened surgeon. Other names—Livingston, Gerry, Morris, Wythe, etc.—are also familiar, if vaguely so.

But what about the rest? Fifty-six delegates signed the Declaration of Independence (probably on Aug. 2, 1776, but possibly on July 4, or a combination of the two dates). Who were they?

The majority of names on the Declaration mean nothing to us,

or almost nothing. They are forgotten to all but historians, history buffs, and a smattering of people claiming lineage to a signer of the Declaration of Independence. In many cases, they were men equally great or close to it. Here are five you may not be familiar with:

1. John Witherspoon (1723–1794)

Witherspoon was a Presbyterian minister born in Scotland. He attended the University of Edinburgh, graduating with a Master of Arts degree in 1739, but came to America to become president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton), where his students included a young Alexander Hamilton (whose request for accelerated study was rebuffed by Witherspoon).

A “pugnacious and outspoken man,” according to historian Ron Chernow, Witherspoon could intimidate both students and peers with his sharp intellect and abrupt manner. Historian Garry Wills called Witherspoon “probably the most influential teacher in the history of American education.”

Witherspoon, a fierce republican, joined the Continental Congress shortly after it was formed. In 1776 he delivered one of the legendary sermons in American history: “[The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men](#)”. When told that America was not yet ripe enough for independence, Witherspoon famously replied, “In my judgment, sir, we are not only ripe, but rotting.”

Though Witherspoon himself was into his 50s when war broke out, his eldest son, James, joined the Continental Army and rose to the rank of major before he was killed at [the Battle of Germantown](#) in 1777. That same year the Witherspoons saw their family home burned to the ground, a practice not uncommon during the Revolutionary War.

Following the war, Witherspoon spent several years working to rebuild Princeton, which had been badly damaged during the

battle there, and served as a member of the New Jersey convention that ratified the Constitution.

In 1791, at 68 years of age, and two years after the death of his wife Elizabeth, with whom he had 10 children, Witherspoon married a 24-year-old widow named Ann Dill. He fathered two more children before dying in 1794.

2. Thomas Nelson, Jr. (1738-1789)

Nelson was born in Yorktown, Virginia, but attended school in England, a common practice for families that could afford it. He returned to America in 1760 after stops at Newsome's School, Eton, and Cambridge. The following year he joined the Virginia House of Burgesses, married the daughter of prominent Virginia planter, and soon began a family that would one day total 11 children.

Nelson joined the Continental Congress in 1776, but left Philadelphia when he became ill. He returned in time to sign the Declaration and soon joined a committee that would begin outlining the plans for a constitution, which became the Articles of Confederation.

Several historical accounts say that during the pivotal Siege of Yorktown (Sept. 29 – Oct. 19, 1781) Nelson, a commanding general in the Virginia Militia, urged Gen. George Washington (or, perhaps, the Marquis de Lafayette) to fire on his own home, which British Gen. Charles Cornwall had taken as a headquarters.

He died in Hanover County, Virginia, at the home of his son. He was eulogized by a fellow military officer, [whose remarks](#) included the following:

"...[Thomas Nelson Jr.] was among the first of that glorious band of patriots whose exertions dashed and defeated the machinations of British tyranny, and gave United America

freedom and independent empire. At a most important crisis, during the late struggle for American liberty, when this state appeared to be designated as the theatre of action for the contending armies, he was selected by the unanimous suffrage of the legislature to command the virtuous yeomanry of his country; in this honourable employment he remained until the end of the war; as a soldier, he was indefatigably active and coolly intrepid; resolute and undaunted in misfortunes, he towered above distress, and struggled with the manifold difficulties to which his situation exposed him, with constancy and courage. In the memorable year 1781, when the whole force of the southern British army was directed to the immediate subjugation of this state, he was called to the helm of government; this was a juncture which indeed 'tried men's souls.' He did not avail himself of this opportunity to retire in the rear of danger; but on the contrary, took the field at the head of his countrymen; and at the hazard of his life, his fame, and individual fortune, by his decision and magnanimity, he saved not only his country, but all America, from disgrace, if not from total ruin."

3. John Hart (between 1706 and 1713 – 1779)

Historians are unsure precisely where or when Hart was born. We do know he was the son of a carpenter from Long Island, New York, served in the colonial militia during the French and Indian War, and became involved in New Jersey politics in the late 1750s, where he earned the nickname "Honest John."

Hart's signing of the Declaration of Independence was in some ways a stroke of luck. He was not in the original delegation that New Jersey sent, but that delegation was replaced because it was opposed to declaring independence. As part of this second delegation, Hart was elected Speaker of the Assembly, an honor that was accompanied with certain problems.

When British forces arrived in New Jersey in late 1776, Hart was a marked man. His home was raided and he was forced to take refuge in Sourland Mountains until the Continental Army reclaimed Trenton on Dec. 26.

Eighteen months later, prior to [the Battle of Monmouth](#) (June 28, 1778), Hart invited General Washington and his army to camp on his property. The offer was accepted, and for several days prior to the battle some 11,000 colonial troops occupied Hart's fields. (He dined with Washington on at least one occasion, records show.)

Hart developed kidney stones the following year and died shortly after. His obituary in *The New Jersey Gazette* ran a mere 129 words. (About half the text dedicated to [him here](#).)

4. Thomas McKean (March 19, 1734 – June 24, 1817)

McKean, the son of a tavern-owner, was born in the Province of Pennsylvania and studied law in Delaware.

Like many of the Founding Fathers, he was a lawyer before he turned to politics, signing both the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation. Though little known by posterity, McKean's record is quite impressive: he served as a President of Congress, Governor of Delaware, Chief Justice of Pennsylvania, and Governor of Pennsylvania.

An outspoken advocate of independence, he corresponded frequently with other republican firebrands, such as John Adams. As a colonel in the Pennsylvania Associators, he commanded a battalion of soldiers and fought with George Washington in the ill-fated defense of New York City.

A target of the British, McKean was forced to relocate his family on several occasions to keep them from the grasp of the Red Coats.

"[I am] hunted like a fox by the enemy, compelled to remove my family five times in three months," he wrote to Adams in one letter, "...at last [I] fixed them in a little log-house on the banks of the Susquehanna, but they were soon obliged to move again on account of the incursions of the Indians."

McKean died in 1817. Today there is [a county in Pennsylvania](#) named for him.

5. Francis Lewis (1713–1802)

Born in Wales and educated in Scotland, Lewis [arrived in America in 1734](#), where he took up residence in what is today Queens, New York, where he established himself as a merchant.

Little is known about Lewis (though some [are trying to change that](#)), but historians agree that he became active in colonial politics in the 1760s and joined the Continental Congress in 1775. After signing the Declaration of Independence and, two years later, the Articles of Confederation, Lewis would see his home destroyed by British mortars and his frail wife arrested during the British invasion of New York. She would die in 1779, two years after her release.

Today there is [a school in Queens](#) named after Lewis.

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