

Lesson Sixteen

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 of this lesson.)

WHEN JOHN ADAMS, stood before the Second Continental Congress to argue for independence from England, the New Englander expressed the sentiments of many of his colleagues who supported the Declaration of Independence when he thundered, "Sink or swim, live or die, survive or perish, 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."

Such principled determination was not Adams' alone. John Hancock, President of the Congress, was a handsome young bachelor with a sizeable fortune and a price of £500 on his head. Do you know what a British pound is? [It is the basic money unit, like a dollar. In colonial times a British pound was equivalent to slightly more than \$3.33. So the reward for Hancock's capture was approximately \$1,665, a large amount for that time.] If captured, Hancock would have been tried for treason in England, and probably hanged. No pardon would have been possible, as it would have been for lesser rebels.

YET, HANCOCK SIGNED the Declaration without hesitation on July 4, 1776 the day it was approved by Congress. In fact, his (as President of the Congress) and that of Charles Thomson (the Secretary) were the only signatures on the original document. When the Declaration was engrossed on parchment and signed by all 56 congressional delegates on August 2nd, Hancock

joked about the large, shaded letters of his signature. "John Bull [King George]," he said, "can read my name without spectacles, and may now double his reward of 500 pounds for my head. That is my defiance!"

All members of Congress who

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

The four New York delegates: Francis Lewis,



The brave patriots pledge "their live, their fortunes, and their sacred honor."

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 signing away their property and endangering their families. This they knew, yet signed without hesitation.

Suppose we were all to find ourselves in a similar situation today because of our opposition to the New World Order? Would we be willing to leave our home? Or would we play it safe by hiding our opposition to, say, the United Nations? [Describe enough specific details to make the situation realistic for each family member. Ask what each 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 rampage of destruction and theft. Everything of value — silver, clocks, clothing, china, food and drink — was taken. Furnishings that could not be carried away were destroyed. All of Lewis' books and papers were piled in a heap and burned. Mrs. Lewis, forced to watch the pillage of her property, was brutalized and treated with contempt. Imprisoned in a dingy, unheated room, she was not allowed to sleep on a bed or change clothes for many weeks. General Washington eventually arranged for her release in a prisoner exchange, but her health rapidly deteriorated and she died within two years. When Lewis returned to his estate after the war, he found most of it damaged or destroyed.

The other New York signers suffered a similar fate. Although the families of William Floyd and Lewis Morris escaped before the British arrived, their estates were looted, their houses stripped, farm tools and livestock were stolen, and timberlands were razed. Morris' family was scattered and all of his servants and tenants were driven from their homes. The Floyd estate, after serving as British headquarters, was left in shambles.

Morris, deprived of his property and income, left Congress to join Washington's army as a militia brigadier. Three of his sons also served as officers with distinction. Morris was eventually reunited with his wife, and after the war they

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

The 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence were a young and hardy lot: Only seven were over sixty, 18 were still in their thirties, and three were in their twenties.

Two of the signers died on July 4, 1826, 50 years after the historic event. One lived to spade the first earth for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad at age 91; the other 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.

returned to Westchester County, New York, and rebuilt Morrisania (the family home). It remains a tourist attraction to this day. He used much of his property and fortune to pay his private debts to British citizens; he felt morally obligated to do so despite the war.

Philip Livingston had given up much of his fortune before signing the Declaration. He was in importer, buying and selling British goods. When the colonists began boycotting Britishmade clothing, tea, and furnishings, Livingston supported the policy despite losing much of his income.

A comparable situation today would be owning a store that sells goods imported from Communist China which fill the treasury of the China's ruling despots. Many patriotic customers might refuse to buy such products, but we could continue to sell the slave-made goods to customers who either would not know or care where they come from. Or, we could refuse to sell such imports and suffer a loss in income. What do you think would be the right thing to do? [Remind family members that Philip Livingston chose not to sell the enemy's goods even though it meant foregoing a large sum of money of money.]

In the fall of 1776, after the American army was driven from New York, all of Livingston's business properties were confiscated. Homeless, the members of his family were forced to flee. The Livingston mansion on Duke Street was converted into a British barracks, while his estate in Brooklyn Heights was turned into a Royal Navy hospital. In the months that followed, he sold some of the properties he owned elsewhere in the State to help maintain the credit of the United States. Never having a chance to return home, he

died in 1778 while serving in Congress.

THOMAS NELSON, JR. of Virginia was another wealthy merchant who did not hesitate to support the drive for independence. In 1775, when the British Navy was threatening to bombard Yorktown, Nelson's family and much of his property were in the targeted area. He also had vast sums of money in English banks. Yet his response 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 1781, as the tide of the war turned in America's favor, the British were cornered in Yorktown and bombarded by 70 colonial cannons. Nelson, knowing that the English were headquartered in his uncle's home, watched from the American lines as the firing on his neighborhood began. According to historical tradition, upon noticing that his own home was unscathed he demanded of a gunner, "Why do you spare my house?"

"Out of respect to you, Sir," the soldier replied.

Nelson then ordered the cannon fire directed at his own stately dwelling, which incurred heavy damage.

Before the war, Nelson had been one of the richest men in Virginia. After, his wealth was virtually dissipated.

In 1778 he raised and commanded a company of Virginia cavalry to fight in Pennsylvania. Most of the funds for its food, uniforms, and ammunition came from his own pocket. He also paid the bills for two other regiments (in New York and Williamsburg). He donated the fine hunting and carriage horses from his plantation to the army, fed hungry soldiers from his granary, and neglected his own tobacco crop by sending slaves and tenants to harvest the crops of small farmers serving in the militia who had no hired help.

When money was desperately needed, Nelson raised, virtually overnight, raised some \$2 million (by today's standards), offering his own properties as security for the loans. The properties were forfeited as the loans came due. He was never reimbursed by his government. After the war, his health deteriorating and most of his fortune gone,

Nelson retired with his wife and children to a modest home in Hanover County, Virginia, where he died eight years later.

Concluding Thought

Virtually all of the signers would have been better off personally and financially had they never served in Congress. According to some historical calculations, of the 56 who pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor for independence, nine died of injuries or hardship during the war; five were captured, imprisoned, and sometimes brutally treated; one was driven from his wife's deathbed; the wives, sons, and daughters of others were killed, jailed, mistreated, and/or left penniless; the homes of 12 signers were burned to the ground; and 17 lost virtually everything they owned.

Every signer was branded a traitor and hunted by the British. Most were offered bribes, pardons, rewards, or the release of loved ones if they would break their word or accept protection from the King. But none switched or defected. And what did their incredible acts of sacrifice and courage gain? In the end, their personal honor remained intact and a new, free, and independent nation was born. That was all they had sought.

Looking Ahead

In our modern era, another group of revolutionaries has claimed to be led by contemporary George Washingtons while taking their stand against America as the signers of the Declaration of Independence did against England in 1776. In the next lesson we will compare one of these Marxist revolutionaries to Washington, and determine the extent to which the comparison is valid.

DURING THE WEEK

Urge each member of the family to memorize all or part of the excerpt from John Adams' "Sink or swim" address. Prepare cards for each, adjusting the length of the excerpt to suit ages and abilities. Check progress at family meal-time during the week.

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,

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Photograph courtesy of John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company