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Independence Day!

by
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America celebrates July 4 as Independence Day because it was on July 4, 1776, that members of the Second Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia, adopted the final draft of the Thomas Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*. Following its adoption, the *Declaration* was read to the public in various American cities. Whenever they heard it, patriots erupted in cheers and celebrations.

In 1777, Philadelphians remembered the 4th of July. Bells were rung, guns fired, candles lighted, and firecrackers set off. However, while the War of Independence dragged on, July 4 celebrations were modest at best. When the war ended in 1783, July 4 became a holiday in some places. In Boston, it replaced the date of the Boston Massacre, March 5, as the major patriotic holiday. Speeches, military events, parades, and fireworks marked the day. It wasn't until 1941, though, that Congress declared July 4 a federal holiday.

Over time, various other summertime activities also came to be associated with the Fourth of July, including historical pageants, picnics, baseball games, watermelon-eating contests, and trips to the beach. Common foods include hot dogs, hamburgers, corn on the cob, apple pie, cole slaw, and sometimes clam bakes.

While the Fourth is celebrated across the country, historic cities like Boston and Philadelphia draw especially huge crowds



to their festivities. In Boston, the USS John F. Kennedy often sails into the harbor, while the Boston Pops Orchestra holds a televised concert on the banks of the Charles River, featuring American music and ending with the 1812 Overture. Philadelphia holds its celebrations at Independence Hall, where historic scenes are reenacted and the Declaration of Independence is read. Other interesting parties include the American Indian rodeo and three-day pow-wow in Flagstaff, Arizona, and the Lititz, Pennsylvania, candle festival, where hundred of candles are floated in water and a "Queen of Candles" is chosen.

The second president, John Adams, would have approved. "I believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival," he wrote his wife, Abigail. "It ought to be celebrated by pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations from one end of this continent to the other..."

John Hancock, the president of the Second Continental Congress, was the first to sign the Declaration. With its ornate capitals, Hancock's sprawling signature is prominent on the document. Since then, when people are asked for their "John Hancock," they are being asked to sign their names. All 56 men who ultimately signed the Declaration showed great courage. Announcing independence from Great Britain was an act of treason, punishable by death. The Declaration of Independence itself has become one of the most admired and copied political documents of all time. It was written by Thomas Jefferson and revised by John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Jefferson. The Declaration of Independence is a justification of the American Revolution, citing grievances against King George III.

It is also a landmark philosophical statement, drawing on the writings of philosophers John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau, famed philosophers of the Age of Reason, both of whom argued against the prevailing absolutism of their times and for the rights of people to determine their own governments and their own destinies. It affirms that since all people are creatures of God, or nature, they have certain natural rights, or liberties, that cannot be violated. The Declaration and the American Revolution have since inspired freedom-seekers the around the world.

Indeed, although the Age of Reason, or the Enlightenment was born in Europe and crafted by Europeans, it was not in Europe, but in the Thirteen Colonies, with the American Revolution, that people first attempted to put those ideas into action. And, with the success of that venture, the American Revolution served as an example to peoples all across Europe. Four years after the Thirteen Colonies gained their independence, the French began their own ten-year, bloody revolution against the Bourbon dynasty. By the 1800's, every major European *city* [not just country, but *city!*] was embroiled in similar revolutions...except those of England. England had already settled the question for itself in its own civil war in the mid-1600's.—Charles I and the Cavaliers vs. Cromwell and the Roundheads and all that...

Some interesting Independence Day-related figures:

- The U.S. imported \$128.9 million worth of fireworks in 2001.
- We imported \$51.7 million worth of American flags in 2001 (and about half of those were from China...!!!) Interestingly enough, Mexico purchased \$162,900 worth of those flags from us.
- As of 1999, 66 million Americans said they had attended a barbecue during the previous year and some 32 million had attended a picnic. [<http://www.factmonster.com/spot/july4census1.html>]

It's important to remember [*and sometimes we do have to consciously remember*] that Independence Day is not just fireworks and hot dogs...it's the day we celebrate the ideals that this country was founded upon.