

A Celebration of Independence

Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon

Sunday, July 1, 2007

I thank all of you for the invitation to speak at your service and I especially thank member Ned Goodrich for the personal invitation and keeping me informed on the progress of this service and for his many suggestions.

You can tell by talking with Ned that he has a great love of our history and also a love of this nation and all of its freedoms, including the freedom to worship in accordance with our own personal beliefs. I think it is fitting that we celebrate our Independence and our freedoms. With July 4th just a few days from now, it is a fitting time to do so.

Ned has suggested I cover all of the events of the United States from before Lexington and Concord through the end of the American Revolution and on to the War of 1812 and the writing of the Star Spangled Banner. He has also suggested reading certain passages from his favorite authors. Ned has an impressive list of authors that he admires and all of his suggestions are worthy.

But I'm afraid if I follow to the letter the suggestions made from Ned's exuberance that my talk would last a lot more than the 15 minutes I've been asked to speak. As a matter of fact, if we lock the doors, and don't take any breaks, we may be able to cover all of the material Ned suggested by the Fourth of July ... 2008.

Seriously, Ned, thank you again for helping to organize this celebration of Independence. And thank you for your love of our history.

It has been said that King George III of England wrote on July 4, 1776, in his diary that nothing of importance happened this day.

Was the King ever wrong on that diary entry. On that day in Philadelphia, just a few miles east of where we are today, members of the Second Continental Congress adopted the final draft of the Declaration of Independence. This final draft was accepted after much debate and disagreement among our founding fathers. Jefferson's magnificent draft would undergo some alterations along the way. On that day King George III's world changed forever and the day would become for us, a day to celebrate freedom.

You have to wonder what King George III would have considered a significant event.

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On July 4, those 56 patriots in Philadelphia put their lives on the line as they knew full well that by signing the Declaration of Independence that they were committing treason against King George III. Of course John Hancock, president, was the first one to sign. And, indeed he put this John Hancock to the historic document.

The beginning of the Declaration says:

“When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Law of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes, which impel them to the separation.”

The Declaration does go on to list those reasons for separation but the crucial lines for most of us, at least me, come at the beginning of the second paragraph:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” I think we all smile when we hear those words: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

I need to do a modern day edit here, We should say that all men – and women – are created equal.

Wild celebrations did not break out in Philadelphia and across the colonies on that Fourth of July. We did not have instant communications, cell phones, emails the internet and the such. For most of the nation, they wouldn’t find out about the Declaration of Independence until several days later. As the word was spread and the document was read in town squares throughout the land, celebrations did take place, as did the hard work to earn freedom and to keep our freedom. We all know those struggles continue to this day.

Attaining and keeping a free country is not easy and those who lived in this area in 1776 and 1777 found out first hand the difficulty. In 1777 the British army, under General William Howe, made Philadelphia its objective. He did so for three reasons – one, the Continental Congress was in Philadelphia and he would like nothing better than to bag those who signed the Declaration of Independence, two, this area supplied Washington’s troops with many supplies and three, there was a belief that many of the

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citizens in this area were actually loyal to King George III and they would rally about the King's army.

From my reading, I believe about a third of those in this area wanted freedom, about a third wanted to remain under the rule of King George III and the other third didn't care one way or the other, they just wanted to be left alone.

The Philadelphia campaign, which included Couch's Bridge in Delaware, Brandywine – the main engagement that took place on September 11th, 1777 – Paoli, Germantown and other conflicts raged in this area from the end of August 1777 until Washington went into winter quarters at Valley Forge in December.

For many years after Valley Forge the local citizens felt the effects of the campaign. The Chadds Ford Historical Society a few years ago had a great exhibit and display on the losses incurred by the public - lost clothing, food and personal items. Freedom caused hardship to those who lived in Chester County after Brandywine.

The history of our country attaining Independence is really about those citizens who lived through the era and their stories. History is what you and I do and it isn't so much the dates and events – even though September 11 is important to us for a number of reasons.

History is very personal. In the past few many interesting biographies have been penned about our founding fathers, Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, Washington and others. They are fascinating people. I know I would rather read a study of a person's life than a work of fiction.

We received a lot of help from courageous individuals during our struggle for independence. One was General Lafayette of France. I mention him because he came to the colonies especially because of his belief in personal freedom. He was a teenager at the time, newly married and had been ordered by his king to not come to these shores. France wasn't ready to join our side against England. In France Lafayette interacted with representatives from the colonies and embraced the thought of individual freedom.

Lafayette defied his king and left his family and made it to Philadelphia in the summer of 1777 just before the Philadelphia campaign began. Washington's officers didn't immediately accept Lafayette as an equal, as here was a youngster who hadn't fought along side Washington as they had. English wasn't his first language. But Lafayette soon earned that acceptance. On a hot late summer's day – September 11, 1777, to be exact at Brandywine – Lafayette rushed to the area where Washington's

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troops were endangered and led men in fighting, incurring a wound, thus spilling his own blood for our freedom.

Documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, are important to us. As a nation we haven't always taken care of the physical document, the Declaration of Independence. The government is looking for ways to better preserve the document. On a typical day in Washington, it is said about 6,000 people stand in line to view the Declaration of Independence.

After the signing, the paper was rolled up and transported from Philadelphia to New York and eventually to Washington. During one of its trips it actually became wet and suffered damage. During the 19th century the Declaration hung in the Patent Office near a window and the document sustained severe light damage. It wasn't until 1903 that preservationists made sure it wasn't exposed to harmful light.

While we may not have always protected the physical document we have protected essence of the document, our freedom and liberties and our rights as defined by the Bill of Rights.

I'll close with some of the words from our Liberty Bell: "*Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.* " and the closing line of the Declaration: "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."

That is unless you want to lock the doors and start from the beginning.

Thank you Ned and thank all of you.