Independence Day 2016

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Tomorrow is the 240th celebration of Independence Day, the first being on July 8th, 1776 in Philadelphia.

It’s widely believed that America’s first Continental Congress declared their independence from the British monarchy on July 4th, 1776. However, the official vote, and therefore the determination of freedom, actually took place two days before the final draft was accepted and the “Declaration” was published in the Pennsylvania Evening Post on July 4th.

Another misconception is that the Declaration of Independence was fully signed on the Fourth of July. However, it wasn’t until August 2nd that all 56 delegates had inked their “John Hancock” on the document. In fact, the only two people who signed the document on July 4th were John Hancock, its first signer, and Charles Thompson, the Secretary of Congress.

There were 2.5 million Americans at the time of the signing of the Declaration. Today there are 323.9 million; growing by one more person every 11 seconds, or 7855 people per day.

It’s said the following is written upside down and backwards: “Original Declaration of Independence dated 4th July 1776.” It’s not known who wrote it, or when. In Revolutionary War years, parchment was rolled up, so this probably served as a message.

Because the vote for freedom occurred on July 2nd, John Adams thought ‘the Second of July’ would become Independence Day. Adams wrote a famous series of memorable letters to his beloved wife Abigail detailing the events that led to the nation’s founding. The one he sent announcing the Congress’ vote regarding the official Declaration of Independence predicted, “The Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more.”

Fourth of July celebrations these days are filled with fireworks, clothes and ornaments covered in red, white and blue. Such colors weren’t widely available for decoration in the shadow of the nation’s birth, especially in the heat of battle during the Revolutionary War. But primarily, the early first few Independence Day celebrations used greenery as decorations instead. They also fired artillery used in battles following the completion of the war for the Fourth of July, but the practice dissipated as the cannons fell apart over time and were slowly replaced with fireworks. The first use of fireworks was in 1777. Congress chose fireworks as a way to celebrate the first anniversary. They were ignited over Philadelphia. The celebration also included bonfires and bells.

According to some researchers, Americans began observing the Fourth of July as early as 1777, when the first-ever major celebration in Philadelphia included a parade, a thirteen-shot cannon salute and fireworks, but Congress didn’t make it official until 1870, when it was part of a bill passed to recognize major state holidays at a federal level -- like Independence Day, Christmas and New Year’s Day.

The oldest, continuous Independence Day celebration in the United States is the 4th of July Parade in Bristol, Rhode Island; it began in 1785.

The publication of the Declaration of Independence may have accidentally made the Fourth of July the official day of independence for America, but the deaths of two of its founders cemented its creation of the date’s designation. US Presidents Thomas Jefferson and John Adams passed away on July 4th. The even more amazing coincidence is that both died on the same day in the same year of 1826, the 50th anniversary, by a difference of five hours; Jefferson passed first at age 82 and Adams at age 90. James Monroe also died five years later on July 4, 1831.

In the Southeast Asian nation of the Phillipines, July 4, known as "Republic Day," marks the date when the United States officially recognized that country as an independent state in 1946. (However, though the day is still significant to Filipino history, June 12 has been the country's official Independence Day since 1962.)

Rwandans, on the other hand, celebrate "Liberation Day" on July 4. According to one source July 4, 1994 the date marks the “end of the Rwandan Genocide, and the birth of the new government that rose from the ashes.”

If you celebrate the Fourth of July outside the U.S., you still might see fireworks in Denmark, England, Norway, Portugal and Sweden. This is because thousands of people emigrated to the U.S. in the early 1900s. Some European celebrations on the Fourth take place near tourist destinations -- to attract U.S. travelers -- or near American military bases.

Calvin Coolidge, the country's 30th president, was born on Independence Day. Others celebrating birthdays on July Fourth include, Nobel laureate and economist Gerard Debreu, Olympic gold medalist and tennis Hall of Famer Pam Shriver, "Ugly Betty" actress Becki Newton and current first daughter Malia Obama. My grandmother was born on the fourth, and of course our very own CJ Johnson.

[Sing happy birthday to July birthdays.]

We are going to be singing a medley of patriotic songs in just a few more minutes. I found it interesting that Irving Berlin did not think his song ‘God Bless America’ was worthy of being sung and it stayed in his rejection pile for 20 years. It wasn’t until singer Kate Smith wanted a patriotic song to sing on the radio as war broke out across Europe that the song was presented. The song became one of the most requested patriotic ditties almost overnight and a staple in American songbooks.

Another United States patriotic song, “Yankee Doodle” was originally sung by British military officers prior to the Revolution as a means to mock the disorganized American colonists who fought alongside them during the French and Indian Wars.

So we celebrate our nation’s birthday the same as we do our own birthdays, with singing, celebration, parades, and games. We express our joy, and love, and gratitude for our nation. We are blessed to live in this country, and my prayer is that through our patriotism we can continue to make America the land of the free and the home of the brave.

We know that some of our founders held a strong belief in God, and they established a free nation so that we could worship and believe the way we wanted, and not dictated by a government or dominating society. Although America began as a predominantly pluralistic Christian nation, I believe the Founders are smiling upon us as we make a home for all thoughts and all beliefs. That was their intention, goal, and desire.

We have come a long way as a nation as we have tried to absorb, understand, and apply the principles espoused by our Founding Fathers – "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent and inalienable rights; that among these, are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness…”

Although we are still working on that, I pray that we can open our hearts to God and accept the diversity that we are as Americans. I pray that we can keep America strong through our acknowledge-ment, acceptance, and appreciation of our multifarious ethnicities and cultures. As the song states: it is our diversity that makes us strong.

I pray that just as our Declaration of Independence has inspired other countries that as our individual and nationalistic awareness of God continues to expand our country can serve as a shining example and inspiration in how to treat each other, in how to allow people to be who and what they are, and appreciate them for the gifts that they uniquely bring.

So, Happy Birthday America, and happy Independence Day to all of us!

The American flag has gone through many alterations as the regions grew and even reached beyond its borders. The modern “50 star flag,” however, has an interesting story behind its creation. High school student Robert G. Heft of Lancaster, Ohio was assigned to create a new “national banner” for America that would recognize the statehood of Alaska and Hawaii. Heft simply added two extra stars to the flag to give it an even 50 and stitched his own design. His teacher only gave him a “B-minus” for his effort, so he sent his project to President Dwight D. Eisenhower for consideration and a change of grade. Eisenhower chose his design personally and the new flag was officially adopted in 1960. His teacher then gave him an “A” instead.

The phrase “as American as apple pie” has made the dessert treat a staple of any patriotic holiday or celebration. The truth is that apple pie had its roots embedded in other cultures long before America came along and joined the world. All but one breed of apples aren’t indigenous to American soil and came to the States by way of early European settlers who brought the fruit and the original pie recipe with them.

July Fourth is the "biggest hot dog holiday of the year," according to TIME magazine, with Americans reportedly consuming about 155 million of them on Independence Day alone. But despite a nationwide love for the salty snack, no one really knows where the hot dog came from. According to the National Hot Dog and Sausage Council, it is "likely that the North American hot dog comes from a widespread common European sausage brought here by butchers of several nationalities." The meaty treat's origin story remains murky, however.

Though hot dogs, french fries and barbecued treats are typical Fourth of July fare nowadays, our Founding Fathers feasted on some pretty different foods to celebrate the country's independence back in the day. "According to legend, on July 4, 1776, John Adams…and his wife, Abigail, sat down for a celebratory meal of turtle soup, New England poached salmon with egg sauce, green peas and boiled new potatoes in jackets. They followed the meal with Indian pudding or Apple Pandowdy," wrote Justine Sterling for Delish.com in 2011.

Is Pennsylvania the country's most patriotic state? According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the so-called "State of Independence," where the Declaration of Independence was debated and signed, is home to 11 places with the word "liberty" in their name and 33 with the word "union" in them, leading the country for the number of places with such names. (Only one place in the nation has "patriot" in its name, according to the bureau. Patriot, Ind., is said to have an estimated population of 209.)

In a letter to his daughter Sarah Bache in 1784, Benjamin Franklin wrote that he was displeased that the bald eagle had been chosen as the symbol for the nation. "He is a Bird of bad moral character. He does not get his Living honestly," he wrote. "You may have seen him perched on some dead Tree near the River, where, too lazy to fish for himself, he watches the Labour of the Fishing Hawk." A turkey, Franklin went on to argue, is a far "more respectable" bird. "Turk'y… [is a] true original Native of America," Franklin wrote. "He is besides, though a little vain & silly, a Bird of Courage, and would not hesitate to attack a Grenadier of the British Guards who should presume to invade his Farm Yard with a red Coat on."

Due to concerns about cracking the iconic instrument, the Liberty Bell has not been rung since 1846. Instead, every year, to mark the Fourth of July, the 2,000-pound bell is tapped 13 times to signal for bells across the country to start ringing.