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### The Forgotten Fourth

Soon after the Second Continental Congress ratified the Declaration of Independence, John Adams declared in a letter to his wife Abigail “the second of July will be the most memorable epocha in the history of America. I am apt to believe it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great Anniversary Festival.”<sup>1</sup> Adams always had an eye on posterity, and his prediction was remarkably prescient. Commemorating the moment of independence has become a quintessentially American ritual. But Adams did not get it quite right; it was the fourth of July, not the second, that became associated with American independence and gained prominence as the national holiday of the new nation.

The forms and content of celebrations and commemorations that took place on succeeding Independence Days reveal a great deal about American politics and society in the early years of the republic. Federalists and Democratic-Republicans marked the Fourth of July in strikingly different manners that reflected their divergent political agendas and the social position of their partisan supporters. Yet just as telling as what was remembered about what happened in July of 1776 is those elements of the moment of independence that were *not* remembered in the years following the Revolution. While early celebrations of the Declaration of Independence focused on the disposal of monarchical rule in the United States, later Fourth of July commemorations moved towards a memory of the Fourth divorced from its historical context and rarified Independence Day to an idea rather than an event. In other words, certain facts about the independence movement were “forgotten” in public consciousness and

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Matthew Dennis, *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days: An American Calendar* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 16.

celebrations. In forgetting certain historical details of the move towards independence, elite Americans in the early republic highlighted the idea of independence at the expense of remembering how independence had been achieved.

Historian Pierre Nora pioneered the concept of *lieux de memoire* or, roughly translated, memory sites. *Lieux de memoire* are not limited physical locations, but can include parades, speeches, books, and any number of other “sites.” What unites such *lieux de memoire* is their origin and function. *Lieux de memoire* emerge when *milieux de memoire* (“memory environments”) cease to exist. Nora distinguished *lieux de memoire* from *milieux de memoire* in the ways in which people engage with them. Interactions with *milieux de memoire* are naturally occurring; Nora cited peasant culture, the “quintessential repository of collective memory,” where memories are part of everyday life, as such a *milieu de memoire*. *Milieux de memoire*, then, are all-encompassing in their scope.

The fragmentation of “primitive” societies brought about by the process of modernization also brings about the destruction of *milieux de memoire*. “*Lieux de memoire* originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally.” Environments of memory are replaced by sites of memory when the environment no longer exists. Societies purposefully look to remnants of the past as a means of recapturing or reaffirming their identities.

Not all historical relics, however, function as *lieux de memoire*. In fact, Nora argued, “*lieux de memoire* have no referent in reality” but are rather “pure, exclusively self-referential signs.” Nora carefully pointed out that this does not mean memory sites “are without content, physical presence, or history,” but rather that “what makes them *lieux de memoire* is precisely

that by which they escape history.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, *lieux de memoire* are those objects, images, and concepts that have left the historical record and function instead as places where a group enacts and affirms its identity through recalling the past.

The Fourth of July was one such *lieu de memoire* in the United States following the American Revolution. American culture was too scattered, too fragmented, and too diverse throughout the colonies to be an all-encompassing *milieu of memoire*. Only a few Americans had direct contact with the Declaration of Independence on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776. The first newspaper printing of the Declaration did not appear until July 6<sup>th</sup>, and the first public reading did not take place until July 8<sup>th</sup>. Americans heard news of the Declaration over a period of weeks. It is impossible, therefore, to imagine a collective American memory of the Fourth based on direct experiences for the simple reason that, for most Americans, there was nothing special about the Fourth until after word of the Declaration of Independence spread.

It was just this lack of personal memories of July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776 that allowed the Fourth of July to become a *lieu de memoire*. If only the city of Philadelphia had declared its independence from Britain, it is plausible that Philadelphia itself could have functioned as a *milieu de memoire*, for all Philadelphians would have shared in a similar experience of the Fourth. No such possibility existed for the American people as a whole. If Americans were to develop a collective memory of the Fourth, it would have to be constructed. As argued by Patrick Hutton, one means of constructing and stabilizing diverse, provisional personal memories is commemoration.<sup>3</sup> In the case of the Fourth of July, annual commemorations and celebrations of the Fourth fostered

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Memoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Hutton, "Recent Scholarship on Memory and History," *History Teacher* 33, no. 4 (2000): 537.

“national consciousness in the Revolutionary and Confederation periods, a time when real political union among the thirteen states was tenuous at best.”<sup>4</sup>

That July 4<sup>th</sup> celebrations led to the emergence of a national consensus did not, however, mean that there were no conflicts about how to commemorate Independence Day. In fact, as several historians have pointed out, Fourth of July celebrations varied considerably in their presentation of Independence Day and the Revolution in general.

The earliest celebrations of independence, those that took place in the weeks following the Declaration of Independence, transformed the traditional celebration of the King’s birthday “into a funeral for monarchy.”<sup>5</sup> It should be remembered, after all, that the majority of the Declaration of Independence is a laundry list of complaints against the person of King George III. In that respect, the Declaration was, fundamentally, a statement against monarchy, with the need for independence arising from the perceived design to “reduce [the colonies] under absolute Despotism.” These early celebrations, then, closely mirrored the content of the Declaration itself.

From the 1780s through the 1820s, in Boston at least, conservatives dominated the political scene and consequently controlled commemorations of Independence Day. The rituals involved with these celebrations were well-ordered and hierarchical. The speakers at Federalist-organized commemorations “usually had little to say about what happened in the Revolution and much to say about current issues.”<sup>6</sup> A Grand Federal Procession that took place in Philadelphia on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1788 offered “as its climax a Constitution float crowned with a thirteen-foot-high eagle.” Independence Day in Philadelphia in 1788 was more about the Constitution than the

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<sup>4</sup> Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 225.

<sup>5</sup> David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 12.

<sup>6</sup> Alfred Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 110-11.

Declaration of Independence.<sup>7</sup> In short, conservative Federalists showed little interest in remembering the details of the Revolution, least of all the radical notion, cogently expressed in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence, that the body of people had the right to overthrow any government which did not secure the “Safety and Happiness” of the governed.

The Federalists’ political opponents, the Democratic-Republicans, “looked back to the spirit and language of the Declaration of Independence to stress a Revolutionary legacy of individual liberty.” Republican celebrations of the Fourth always involved reading the Declaration, and one Boston Republican newspaper printed the Declaration on their front page each July 4<sup>th</sup>. Thomas Jefferson, leader of the Republicans in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was also the author of the Declaration of Independence. This personal connection to independence allowed Jeffersonians to present “the Revolution itself as their own achievement.”<sup>8</sup> When remembering and commemorating the Fourth of July, Republicans emphasized the political philosophy expressed in the Declaration, the very philosophy that so concerned Federalists. Independence Day provided Republicans an opportunity to express their vision of the ideal American nation by tying that vision to the birth of the nation on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776.

Political parties were not the only groups to use the Fourth for partisan purposes. In the middle of the 1830s, a rising labor movement in Boston appropriated certain aspects of Independence Day in an effort to claim the American Revolution as its own and thus increase the legitimacy of the movement. As described by Alfred Young, the labor movement emphasized the following:

a recognition that mechanics had played an important part in the political events of the Revolution and in the war; that the revolution of '76 was incomplete, the

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<sup>7</sup> Dennis, *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days*, 19-20.

<sup>8</sup> Charlene Mires, *Independence Hall in American Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 55, Waldstreicher, *Perpetual Fetes*, 205, Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, 112.

promise of the Declaration unfulfilled, and working men now confronted a new “tyranny”; and a conviction that it was necessary for workers to act collectively, as had the patriots, forming “combinations” to confront employers and politicians.<sup>9</sup>

Like the Federalists and the Republicans, the mechanics of Boston highlighted the aspects of the Fourth and the Revolution in general that resonated with their contemporary concerns. For the Federalists, the Revolution was about independence, the break from Britain. The Fourth of July represented the moment of that independence. To Republicans, the Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson, encapsulated their beliefs about liberty and government. Laborers in the 1830s, challenging commercial interests, looked to the Declaration of Independence the *ne plus ultra* of throwing the shackles of tyranny.

It should be clear that collective memories of the past have as much to do with the present as with the past itself. Groups and individuals highlight those elements of the past that have contemporary resonance and ignore those that have no obvious application to present issues. Historians of memory are remiss, then, if they only examine what aspects of the past are remembered and affirmed. We can learn just as much by exploring historical facts that could have entered collective memory but did not. By exploring what the Fourth of July did *not* mean to Americans of the early republic, we can get a better sense of what significance the Fourth did have.

Surprisingly, given its current strong associations with the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the birth of the nation, the Pennsylvania State House (now known as Independence Hall) did not figure prominently in American memories of July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776.

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<sup>9</sup> Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, 146-47.

Charlene Mires has provided striking evidence that Americans, by and large, did not link the building that stood at Fifth and Chestnut Streets in Philadelphia with the American Revolution.

John Stevens Cogdell of South Carolina visited Philadelphia in 1808. An artist and lawyer, Cogdell was drawn to Charles Wilson Peale's museum of portraits and natural science housed in the Pennsylvania State House. Cogdell, whose father had served in the Revolutionary War "either did not notice or did not consider it notable that in visiting Peale's museum, he was also entering the building where the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution were issued."<sup>10</sup> Visitors to Philadelphia saw the Pennsylvania State House as an artistic and scientific attraction, not the birthplace of the United States.

Debates on a permanent location for the national capital also reveal how weakly ingrained in American collective memory the Pennsylvania State House was. Philadelphia, located on the easily navigable Delaware River and in the middle state of Pennsylvania, might have appeared an obvious choice for the national capital. It was Philadelphia's geographical convenience that led to the Continental Congress and Constitutional Convention taking place there.<sup>11</sup> Philadelphia's case was also strengthened by its claim to be the birthplace of both American independence and the new government outlined by the Constitution. Yet, according to Mires, "Philadelphia did not emerge as a sentimental choice tied to the memory of the American Revolution or the recent Constitutional Convention."<sup>12</sup> To be sure, there were a wide range of factors that led to the decision to build a new city as a national capital on the banks of the

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<sup>10</sup> Mires, *Independence Hall in American Memory*, 45.

<sup>11</sup> The heat and humidity of Philadelphia summers, apparently, was not a deterrent. A similar lack of consideration to climate was made in the decision to locate the national capital on swampland between Virginia and Maryland.

<sup>12</sup> Mires, *Independence Hall in American Memory*, 33.

Potomac River.<sup>13</sup> Yet it cannot be denied that Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania State House failed to capture the American imagination as key sites in the memory of independence.

The architectural style that emerged in the new capital of Washington, D.C., also reveals just how little sentiment Americans felt towards the Pennsylvania State House. Mires described the decision to move away from the architecture of the State House as follows:

In the competition to design the new U.S. Capitol, the government rejected Georgian designs similar to the old State House in favor of buildings that evoked the classical past. Architecturally, the United States distanced itself from the British past (represented by the red-brick State House) to a style reminiscent of Greece and Rome, more ancient, but symbolic of the birth of a new republic.<sup>14</sup>

In seeking to evoke a classical republican tradition, politicians abandoned the architectural style of the State House, even though the building served as the site where the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the two key documents of the new American nation and state.

It is possible to speculate on a number of reasons why the Pennsylvania State House and Philadelphia did not emerge in American collective memory as shrines to the new nation. First, the State House continued to serve practical purposes throughout the period in question. Through the 1790s, the Pennsylvania Assembly met in the building.<sup>15</sup> From 1802 to 1827, as mentioned above, the Pennsylvania State House housed the museum of art and natural science run by Charles Wilson Peale.<sup>16</sup> In one sense the State House did not serve as a shrine to the memory of the American Revolution because it was busy doing other things. It could be argued,

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<sup>13</sup> For a recent account of the decision to move the capital to the Potomac, see Kenneth R. Bowling, *The Creation of Washington, D.C.: The Idea and Location of the American Capital* (Fairfax: George Mason University Press, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> Mires, *Independence Hall in American Memory*, 39.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-33. Pennsylvania moved its capital westward to Lancaster in 1799.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.

however, that the persistence of non-commemorative activities in the State House, far from explaining why the State House did not enter American collective memory, merely shows that it did not do so. These two developments likely fed off each other and helped ensure that Americans showed little interest in linking independence and the State House until a later moment.

The existence of a wide range of sites with revolutionary associations also helps explain why the Pennsylvania State House did not, in the early years of the republic, become a shrine to American independence or the Revolution in general. Virtually all Revolutionary War battlefields could have served as sites of commemoration, either to recall crucial American victories or remember the sacrifices made by American soldiers during British victories. Boston had a slew of locations associated with the Revolution, from Faneuil Hall to Bunker Hill. Even within Philadelphia, the State House was not alone in buildings with ties to the Revolution. Nearby Carpenters Hall had hosted the First Continental Congress. In a vast new nation with distinct regional and state cultures, it should come as little surprise that it took decades for particular buildings and locations to emerge as national symbols.

These speculative explanations aside, the crucial observation to be made with respect to Independence Hall is that early Fourth of July celebrations did not incorporate memories of the site in which independence was declared. The details of the independence movement were not as important to Independence Day celebrants as the idea of independence itself.

Examining another aspect of the Declaration of Independence that went largely ignored in the early republic leads to a similar conclusion. As Woody Holton persuasively argued, Virginia's elites moved towards independence not solely based on deeply held republican beliefs but were instead profoundly influenced by slaves and small farmers that challenged their

authority. The threat of slave revolts, Indian wars, and widespread debt pushed Virginia gentry to rebel against British rule.<sup>17</sup> If Holton's conclusion that non-elites had a considerable impact on the revolutionary movement holds for the rest of the colonies, the claim that the American Revolution was driven by elites must be abandoned. Instead, a far more complex picture of the Revolution emerges, one in which both elite and non-elite members of society influenced the course of history.

It is almost comical to imagine official celebrations of the Fourth praising slaves, Indians, and small farmers for their role in leading the nation towards independence. And, as would be expected, this did not occur. In their commemorations of the Fourth of July, Federalists celebrated independence, but not the Declaration of Independence. Republican celebrations centered on the Declaration of Independence, but were largely lacking in explicit recognition of the process and events that led to Independence. Only Boston mechanics (of the groups examined here) sought to recall the historical events of the years leading up to the Revolution as part of their July 4<sup>th</sup> celebrations and their interest was restricted to laborers like themselves.

The Fourth of July had become a *lieu de memoire*, "a site of excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name, but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations."<sup>18</sup> The historical context of the Declaration of Independence was ignored as different segments of society selected elements of the past to remember. In doing so, the Fourth of July ceased to be a particular historical event and came to stand out of time. It symbolized different things for different people, but it was a symbol through and through. Independence and liberty were decontextualized and universalized. The frontispieces of almanacs published soon

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<sup>17</sup> Woody Holton, *Forced Founder: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), xiii-xxi.

<sup>18</sup> Nora, "Les Lieux De Memoire," 23-24.

after independence declared, “Being the FIRST YEAR OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE.”<sup>19</sup>

In the American collective memory of the early republic, independence had not achieved or accomplished. Independence simply was.

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<sup>19</sup> Waldstreicher, *Perpetual Fetes*, 47.

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