

Independence Day (Fourth of July)

**by
Walter Gable, Seneca County Historian
July 2009**

July 4th is commonly known as Independence Day in the United States. It was officially made a paid federal holiday in 1938. This holiday commemorates the adoption of the document known as the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, in which delegates at the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia declared independence from Great Britain.

Independence Day is commonly associated with fireworks, parades, barbecues, carnivals, picnics, concerts, baseball games, political speeches and ceremonies, and various other public and private events celebrating the history, government and traditions of the United States.

The legal separation of the American colonies from Great Britain occurred on July 2, 1776, when the Second Continental Congress voted to approve a resolution of independence. This resolution had been proposed in June by Richard Henry Lee of Virginia. After adopting the resolution for independence, the Congress turned its attention to the draft document that was to become known as the Declaration of Independence. This document was a statement explaining the decision of the Congress to declare independence. This document had been prepared by a Committee of Five, with Thomas Jefferson as its principal authored. While it was being debated, on July 3rd, John Adams, a Massachusetts delegate to the Congress, wrote home to his wife Abigail, these words:

“The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to the God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forever more.”

We have, of course, celebrated July 4th rather than July 2nd. We have, however, celebrated much in the way that John Adams had suggested.

There are some interesting comments to be made about how the Fourth of July was celebrated in the early history of our nation. These include the following:

- In 1777, just one year after the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, thirteen gunshots were fired, once at morning and again as evening fell, on July 4 in Bristol, Rhode Island. Philadelphia celebrated the first anniversary in a manner a modern American would find quite familiar: an official dinner for the Continental Congress, toasts, 13-gun salutes, speeches, prayers, music, parades, troop reviews and fireworks. The fireworks were specifically authorized by act of Congress. Ships were decked with red, white, and blue bunting.
- In 1778, General George Washington marked July 4th with a double ration of rum for his soldiers and an artillery salute. Across the Atlantic Ocean, ambassadors John Adams and Benjamin Franklin held a dinner for their fellow Americans in Paris, France.
- In 1779, the Fourth of July fell on a Sunday, so the holiday was celebrated on Monday, July 5th.

- In 1781, the Massachusetts General Court became the first state legislature to recognize July 4 as a state celebration.
- In 1791, the first recorded use of the name “Independence Day” occurred.
- In 1870, the U.S. Congress made Independence Day an unpaid holiday for federal employees.
- In 1916, the annual Nathan’s Hot Dog Eating Contest in Coney Island, NYC started, supposedly as a way to settle a dispute among four immigrants as to who was the most patriotic.
- In 1930, at Mt. Rushmore in South Dakota, Gutzon Borglum’s 60-foot face of George Washington was unveiled.
- In 1938, Congress changed Independence Day to a paid federal holiday.
- In 1959, the cities of Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario, started the International Freedom Festival during the last week of June as a mutual celebration of Canada Day (July 1) and Independence Day.

One of the most enduring myths about Independence Day is that Congress signed the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. Most delegates actually signed the document on August 2, 1776, because it took time for a printer to prepare a printed version to be signed.

Interestingly, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, both signers of the Declaration of Independence and presidents of the United States, both died on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. One other president, James Monroe, died on July 4, 1831. One U.S. President was born on July 4th. That was Calvin Coolidge in 1872. Some famous Americans born on the Fourth of July include:

- songwriter Stephen Foster
- actor/politician George Murphy
- actress Gloria Stuart, who played the old lady in the movie *Titanic*
- twin sisters and advice columnists Ann Landers and Abigail Van Buren
- playwright Neil Simon
- New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner
- actress Karolyn Grimes who played ZuZu in the film *It’s A Wonderful Life*

Some more interesting facts about the Fourth of July are as follows:

- In terms of our nation’s population, it was estimated to be 2.5 million on July 4, 1776, and 307 million on July 4, 2009.
- Thirty-one places in the United States have the word “liberty” in their name. Also, thirty-one places have the word “eagle” in their name. Eleven places have “independence” in their name, and five have “freedom” in their name. One place has “patriot” in their name. Lastly, five places have “America” in their name.