

Who knows where it started – this spark, this freedom – that makes us Americans. By April 1775, the spark had set off wildfires. As the King's troops advanced to Concord, Paul Revere sounded the alarm. Shortly thereafter, the "shot heard 'round the world" was fired, and the colonies were at war.

In June 1776, at the Second Continental Congress, a committee was formed to draft a formal Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Phillip Livingston and Roger Sherman were just some of the powerhouses involved. (Has there been a committee like that since?)

Late in the afternoon of July 4, twelve of the thirteen colonies voted in favor of the Declaration (New York abstained from the vote). By July 8, the spark that became a wildfire was a conflagration. The Declaration was read to cheering crowds, and church bells pealed. Nearly 50 years later, the fire continued to burn brightly. In his last letter, on June 24, 1826, Thomas Jefferson wrote,

May it be to the world, what I believe it will be . . . the signal of arousing men to burst the chains . . . and to assume the blessings and security of self-government. The form which we have substituted restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened or opening, to the rights of man . . . these are grounds of hope for others – for ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them.

And this you may not know: Thomas Jefferson and John Adams both died July 4, 1826. Jefferson had been in a coma, and on the evening of July 3, he awoke briefly. His last words were, "Is it the fourth?" He died the next day at 12:20 pm. At almost that exact moment, Adams fell ill, eventually dying at 6:00 pm. His last words were, "Thomas Jefferson survives."

It's as if Jefferson and Adams came here to secure our freedom. To make sure we kept it, they must have been told, "You must guard it carefully for fifty years and make sure it stays."

With their job done extremely well, they left us on the same day, fifty years to the day after the Declaration was passed.

Yes, Jefferson survives, as do Adams, Franklin, Washington, and the others who signed this pledge. 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."

Every day that we walk freely, talk freely, practice our faith freely, change jobs, or cross state lines without a thought of barriers and borders, we are in their debt.

No words, save their own, really suffice.

Have a wonderful Fourth of July, and Happy Birthday America!

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