

July 4, 2021; Keynote Address prepared by Constance M. Kehoe * for Public Ceremony at St. Paul's Church National Historic Site, Mt. Vernon, New York

Title: Jul 4, 2021: *Pathways to our Past – Avenues to our Future*

First, I want all of you – on the lawn chairs, on the dais here - to know how thrilled and honored I am to be asked to share some thoughts with you today. I think you have established a valuable tradition here on the 4th of July, a tradition that essentially acts as a teachable moment, and a moment of contemplation about the real events surrounding the founding of the United States.

Now, in New York State we could commemorate July 9 instead of July 4th as that is the day New York's provincial congress – the governing body of that time - meeting in White Plains, voted to authorize and accept the Declaration. To be clear, the other 12 of the 13 colonies had already approved the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, in Philadelphia, but the New York delegation there had to abstain because they were not given authorization to vote, but instead were required to first get approval from the colony's provincial congress back in White Plains. They got that OK on July 9. So maybe in NY we should have a holiday for all 6 days – 4th through 9th of July!

Also on July 9, George Washington, already in New York City, read the Declaration to his troops at 6 pm, and the crowd then went a bit wild and tore down a statue of King George III. By the way, Washington was a bit perturbed that his troops had been so undisciplined. Today, part of the statue, the gilded tail of the King's larger-than-life horse and fragments of the King's cape and several other chunks are in the New York Historical Society, while other lead "body parts" from the statue – most recently a 21" arm and hand - have been found in and around Litchfield and Wilton CT. We know that Patriot women and children made over 42 thousand bullets out of the statue's lead brought there, but we also know local Loyalists buried some sections. The defaced King's head was said to have been buried in Washington Heights at Fort Washington. So, I guess I'll hold on to the dream that we could find some fragments here in Westchester!

Also on July 9, 1776, the printer John Holt in downtown NYC was directed to print copies of the Declaration as "Broadsides" – one pagers on newsprint type paper – and on July 11 he rolled 500 of them off his presses. These 500 Broadsides had an introductory sentence or two at the top that was an excerpt from the minutes of that critical meeting in the White Plains Courthouse. That section was specifically directed to the people of New York State – so they would

know what had just happened in White Plains. Imagine these 500 special New York Broadsides being passed around and read aloud by those who could read - on Village greens – like here – the Eastchester Village Green - and at small gathering at shops or taverns or - held in the hands of the farmers, tailors, blacksmiths – families, including the enslaved and free persons of African ancestry living here and across the state. Most would now understand that major disruptions in their lives were probably coming, though many - perhaps a third - still opposed this Declaration. Some others may just have read Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* – I think some of you here are from New Rochelle where Thomas Paine is well known - and were stirred to wish for a quick and complete break with the Great Britain, the “Mother County”. Many were no doubt relieved that the break was finally happening. Many others feared taking either side, but rather worried for the safety of their families and crops and livelihood. All were about to face a momentous conflict with the great power - Great Britain - that unbeknownst to them at the time - would last for the next 7 years. Here in Westchester, besides the battles – Pell’s Point – right over there - and White Plains specifically – this played out day by day as essentially guerilla warfare in the woods, and hills, fields, homes, and taverns of Westchester County. I’ll now read

the words that those New Yorkers heard or read back in 1776: Title: Convention of the Representatives of the STATE of New York

“Resolved unanimously, that the reasons assigned by the Continental Congress, for declaring the united colonies free and independent states, are cogent and conclusive, and that while we lament the cruel necessity which has rendered that measure unavoidable, we approve the same, and will at the risk of our lives and fortunes, join with the other colonies in supporting it.”

The Die Was Cast!

To quickly finish the story of the 500 Holt “Broadsides”: right now, in 2021, some of these delicate documents have survived the 245 years since they came off the presses. As you can image, they are considered very special. Any guesses on how many we know exist today? 100? 10? 50? 245?

The answer is 5. The 5th copy surfaced in 2017 and was sold at auction. You may want to silently guess at the cost paid at the auction, and perhaps some of you may even know the story of that 5th copy and how it involves this city, Mt. Vernon.

But first, of the 4 others - one is carefully protected in our own Westchester County’s Archives in Elmsford, and another is in the [New York Public Library](#); the other 2 are in libraries/archives in Ohio and one California.

So, that 5th copy was put up for sale by an anonymous descendant of Col. David Mulford, a Patriot who served in the Revolutionary War and received a copy at his home in South Hampton, Long Island, delivered to him by a fellow Patriot, Uriah Rogers who was serving as a Major in Mulford's regiment and who rode by horseback across Long Island to deliver the copy. We know this because he wrote on the back of it, a note admitting he had boldly read it himself - already.

Do some of you know Second Avenue in Mt. Vernon? Well, if you had been reading the July 13, 1895 (that is 1895, not 1995) *Mount Vernon Argus*, the local newspaper, you would have learned that Robert L. Mulford, the great grandson of Col. Mulford, was putting on public display that copy of the Colonel's 1776 copy of the Declaration, in his home on Second Avenue. From the information shared at the auction, the document had been lovingly kept in a bureau drawer, rarely touched, or exposed to the light. So, after another 100 years or so, the copy at the auction in 2017 sold for 1.8 million and the owner recently loaned it to the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia, and it was seen again by the public.

So why am I recounting this story? Well, first, check the really old stuff you find your attic before tossing it out. But also, think about the various avenues –

pathways - that we take to find a connection to our history. We all don't have 1.8 million to own our own copy of a piece of that era of history, but we sure do have the chance – and I'd almost say obligation – to become aware of our history by whatever approach works for us. For many of you, and for me, the place where it actually happened brings a sense of immediacy. Objects. Imagine that bronze bell - over there – being hidden away during the revolutionary war years so that it wouldn't be melted down for ammunition, or image the walls of St Paul's only 2/3 built and the bloodied and dying patriots, British and Hessian soldiers all brought here because the unfinished church building became a hospital during the war years. Image the room where Washington met with the French general Rochambeau, our most important ally, in the Odell House right now being restored in Hartsdale. I'd suggest libraries and historical societies are excellent resources as are informational videos – short or long – and popular culture such as movies and TV shows – dissected and discussed of course to separate “fact from fiction”. Some of you watched, *Turn*, right? Surely, we need to keep this history alive for the next several generations and I think all of you who have come here today will do that. I hope that the work of Revolutionary Westchester 250, including the making of factual videos of local places and people, and publicizing and holding events, will be helpful to you and others.

I'd like to end with something I remember from the 1963, an excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech. He brought the words of the Declaration of Independence to us in a way that I found so compelling then and still feel now. In the speech, Dr. King drew directly on the promises made in the Declaration and the Constitution to call for civil rights and an end to racism. "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.'" Thank you.

* copyright © Revolutionary Westchester 250, 2021