THE HISTORICAL VALUE OF TRUMBULL'S "DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE."

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Probably no written instrument has received more consideration in histories or more often filled the thoughts of men than the Declaration of Independence. It is a part not only of the history of the United States but of the history of the world. It linked the Magna Charta with the Proclamation of Emancipation.

It, indeed, "has grown so great"—keeping pace almost in fame, one might say, with the Nation whose birth it heralded—that now, when nearly 181 years have elapsed since its adoption, the most minute details of its history hold for us large significance and deep and lasting interest.

We wonder what were the thoughts of Jefferson as he penned, at the home of Graff, in Philadelphia, his "Rough draught" of this immortal document.

We wonder if, as he wrote, in the parlor of the "2d floor consisting of a parlour and bed room ready furnished" of this then "new brick house 3 stories high", now demolished, at the Southwest corner of Seventh and Market Streets, he realized what his work was to mean for ages yet unborn, and for himself? We wonder if he felt within himself what Shakespeare must have felt when he wrote:

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme; . . . ?

Perhaps Jefferson himself could not have told us.

We know little other than that he was thirty-three years of age; that he was "here in the same uneasy anxious state I was last fall without mr's Jefferson who could not come with me"; that he had communicated to Dr. Gilmer, his
friend, and to Edmund Pendleton, President of the Convention of Virginia, his inclination to resign; that, just before moving to Graff’s, he had written to Thomas Nelson, Jr., also a Delegate to the Continental Congress, who was absent in Virginia: “I am at present in our old lodgings, though I think, as the excessive heats of the city are coming on fast, to endeavour to get lodgings in the skirts of the town where I may have the benefit of the freely circulating air”; that his landlord, where he wrote, was a newly married bricklayer of German descent; that he dined usually at Smith’s, the “new” City Tavern; and that, on June 23d, he “p’d Graaf 2 weeks lodging etc £3—10”, on the 25th, “p’d for a straw hat 10/”, on the 27th, “p’d Byrne for 6 weeks shaving and dressing 30/”, and, on the 28th, “p’d m’rs Lovemore washing in full 39/9”.

His correspondence would seem to indicate that, at the time, he took much more pride and interest in the draft of a Constitution which he penned for his native Virginia, and which he can barely have completed when the committee of five to prepare the Declaration was chosen.

We wonder what was said when he submitted his “Rough draught” to the aging Franklin, not long returned from Canada, who had been, since June 5th, and probably still was, kept “from Congress & Company almost” by illness; and we wonder what was said when he submitted it to John Adams, soon to be “the pillar of it’s support on the floor of Congress, it’s ablest advocate and defender against the multifarious assaults it encountered”, who, as well as Jefferson, was in Philadelphia without his wife, and who was “without a servant and a horse.”

We wonder why John Adams, in his own handwriting, made a copy of the “Rough draught” as submitted to him. It is not at all strange, therefore, that such a work as the “Declaration of Independence” by John Trumbull, purporting to depict in color the scene in “Independence Hall” and representing so much of the life-work of this son of “Brother Jonathan”, Governor of Connecticut when the
instrument was adopted, has attracted such wide attention,—attention far in excess of that received ordinarily by even historical paintings.

Whether or not this work of Trumbull is the highest form of art, or even whether or not it is the best of Trumbull’s art (as many believe), it will, we think, always have a place in the Nation’s regard—because of the subject, and because it contains authentic likenesses of so many of the members of this, to us, so important Continental Congress.

It is these likenesses which must accredit the painting to the ages yet to be.

Aside from them, and looking at the painting more particularly as an accurate picture historically of the event which it seemingly portrays, much may, and perhaps ought to, be said.

The original of the painting is now in the School of the Fine Arts of Yale University; the larger painting in the rotunda of the Capitol, in Washington. With each is a key, showing who are represented.

The larger painting (12 x 18 feet), mainly perhaps because of its place of hanging, where thousands upon thousands annually see it, is the one more generally known.

This was painted, by Trumbull, from the smaller painting.

By a joint resolution of February 6, 1817, Congress authorized the President, James Madison, “to employ John Trumbull, of Connecticut, to compose and execute four paintings commemorative of the most important events of the American Revolution, to be placed, when finished, in the capitol of the United States.”

Trumbull had written to Jefferson from New York under date of December 26, 1816:

Twenty-eight years have elapsed since, under the kind protection of your hospitable roof at Chaillot, I painted your portrait in my picture of the Declaration of Independece, the composition of which had been planned two years before in your library: the long succeeding period of War & Tumult palsied & suspended my work, and threw me, as you know into other pursuits . . .
The Government of the U. S. are restoring to more than their original Splendor the Buildings, devoted to National purposes, at Washington, which were barbarously sacrificed to the Rage of War [by the British, in 1814].—& I have thought this a proper opportunity to make my first application for public patronage & to request to be employed in decorating the Walls of those Buildings with the paintings which have employed so many years of my Life.

The Declaration of Independance is finished—Trenton Princeton & York Town which were long since finished & engraved—I shall take them all with me to the Seat of Government, in a few days that I may not merely talk of what I will do, but show what I have done: and I hope it will be thought that the declaration of Independance with portraits of those eminent Patriots & Statesmen who then laid the foundation of our Nation; and the military pictures with portraits of those Heroes who either cemented that foundation with their Blood, or lived to aid the Superstructure, will be appropriate Ornaments for the Halls of the Senate & the House of Representatives.

and, in response, Jefferson had, January 10, 1817, replied:

I inclose you a letter to Colr. Monroe, who without it would do everything he could for you, and with it not the less. his warm heart infuses zeal into all his good offices.—I give it to him the rather also because he will be in place when you will need them. M'r Madison will be away and it would be useless to add to the labors of his letter-reading and I know moreover his opinions and dispositions towards you to be as favorable as can be wished. I rejoice that the works you have so long contemplated are likely to come to light. if the legislature, to the reedification of the public buildings will take up with spirit their decoration also, your's must be the first objects of their attentions.

I hope they will do it, and honor themselves, their country, and yourself by preserving these monuments of our revolutionary achievement.

In the debate on the third reading of the resolution in the House of Representatives, it was, among other things in support of the resolution, argued "that the time now was, which once passed away could never be regained, when a living artist of great ability, and a compatriot of the Revolutionary sages and heroes, could transmit accurate likenesses of them to posterity, &c."
All of the four paintings finally decided upon, "Declaration of Independence", "Surrender of General Burgoyne", "Surrender of Lord Cornwallis" and "General Washington resigning his Commission", the last of which "was scarcely finished in April, 1824," now hang in the rotunda of the Capitol, rather than in "the Halls of the Senate & House".

The "Declaration of Independence" was first "placed temporarily in a room of the north wing" of the Capitol "then used for the sittings" of the Supreme Court of the United States.

On December 28, 1817 (evidently), following the passage of the joint resolution and the selection of subjects, but, of course, before the (large) "Declaration of Independence" was finished, Trumbull writes, again to Jefferson, from New York:

I have made considerable progress in the large picture of the Declaration of Indepandence, for the Capitol. I devote my time entirely to that as being most interesting to the Nation, and most important to my own reputation: and not forgetting that time or Health may fail me—

You recollect the Composition, which you kindly assisted me to sketch at Chaillot:—the Committee who drew up the Declaration form the principal Group, by which means I place yourself & some other of the most eminent Characters conspicuously—the figures large as Life.

The Picture will contain Portraits of at least Fortyseven Members,—for the faithful resemblance of Thirty Six I am responsible as they were done by myself from the Life, being all who survived in the year 1791.—of the remainder Nine are from pictures done by others:—One Genl Whipple of New-Hampshire, is from memory,—and one Mr. B. Harrison of Virginia, from Description aided by Memory.

I at first dreaded the Sire of my Work—but I have proceeded far enough to have conquered my timidity, and to be satisfied that this Picture as a mere work of Art will be superior to those which have been heretofore engraved.

The universal interest which my Countrymen feel, and always must feel in an Event important above all others, must in some degree attach to the painting which will preserve the likeness of Forty Seven of those Patriots to whom we owe that memorable act and all its glorious consequences . . .
Unfortunately, he does not tell us the names of the thirty-six for whose "faithful resemblance" he himself was "responsible"—though some of them he tells us elsewhere, as we shall see.

Indeed, he was still at work upon the painting late in the next year; for, on October 29, 1818, he writes, from New York to John Vaughan:

I have received two letters from Philadelphia, proposing to me to exhibit my picture of the Declaration of Independence in that City, and mentioning two places proper for the purpose, & probably attainable. . . In the mean time I am offered the use of Faneuil Hall in Boston, the Cradle of the Revolution, for this purpose—and this liberality has suggested the possibility of obtaining in Philadelphia the very room in which the Scene passed. I know no friend to whom I can suggest such an idea with so much propriety as to you: will you do me the favor to make the proper enquiries?—of course I cannot have the painting in Phil., sooner than Christmass.

The painting early elicited criticism, as well as praise.
Under date of September 1, 1818, John Quincy Adams writes in his Diary:

Called about eleven o'clock at Mr. Trumbull's house [in New York City], and saw his picture of the Declaration of Independence, which is now nearly finished. I cannot say I was disappointed in the execution of it, because my expectations were very low; but the picture is immeasurably below the dignity of the subject . . . I think the old small picture far superior to this large new one. He himself thinks otherwise. He has some books on the President's table which Abbé Correa advised him to letter on the backs, Locke and Sidney, I told him I thought that was not the place for them. They were books for the members to read at home, but not to take with them there. I advised him to letter them simply "Journals."

Following its completion, Samuel A. Wells, a grandson of Samuel Adams, under date of June 2, 1819, writes to Jefferson, at Monticello:

The painting executed by col. Trumbull, representing the Congress at the declaration of independence, will, I fear, have a tendency to obscure the history of the event which it is designed to commemorate . . .
I confess, that I am not a little surprised at the favorable reception, which this badly executed performance has met, from the public. I will frankly avow that I was much disappointed at not finding it (according to my idea) executed in a style worthy of the subject. I expressed my opinions with freedom on the work, through the medium of the newspapers under the signature of Historicus . . .

Jefferson replies, June 23d:

The painting lately executed by Col'. Trumbull, I have never seen . . .

It is to be regretted, historically, that we have not, so far as we know, an opinion of the painting from any of the men represented in it.

As early as January 27, 1817, however, in the debate referred to, in the House of Representatives, if the chronicler can be believed, at least "The talents of the artist were acknowledged on all hands, and the excellence of those paintings, exhibited as the models from which the large paintings are to be taken, was generally admitted".

Naturally, the historical data which we have bearing directly upon the subject at issue deal with the earlier painting, already referred to in Trumbull's letters to Jefferson, which John Quincy Adams in his Diary calls "the old small picture" (20x30 inches) and which hangs in the School of the Fine Arts of Yale University.

Speaking of this, Trumbull, in his Autobiography, Reminiscences and Letters, etc., (1841) says:

In November, 1786, I returned to London . . .

I resumed my labors, however, and went on with my studies of other subjects of the history of the Revolution, arranged carefully the composition for the Declaration of Independence, and prepared it for receiving the portraits, as I might meet with the distinguished men, who were present at that illustrious scene. In the course of the summer of 1787, Mr. Adams took leave of the Court of St. James, and preparatory to the voyage to America, had the powder combed out of his hair. Its color and natural curl were beautiful, and I took that opportunity to paint his portrait in the small Declaration of Independence . . .

In the autumn of 1787, I again visited Paris, where I painted the
portrait of Mr. Jefferson in the original small Declaration of Independence... I regard these as the best of my small portraits; they were painted from the life, in Mr. Jefferson's house.

... I arrived in New York on the 26th of November, 1789, where I found the government of the United States organized under the new constitution, George Washington president... My brother, and my friend, Col. Wadsworth of Hartford, were members of the house of representatives in Congress, which was to meet in New York early in December. [Congress, in fact, had adjourned, September 29th, to the first Monday in January, 1790.] With them I returned to New York, for the purpose of pursuing my work of the Revolution; all the world was assembled there, and I obtained many portraits for the Declaration of Independence... [Robert Morris, R. H. Lee (?), Gerry, Sherman, Floyd and Clymer attended upon the session of Congress beginning January 4, 1790.]

... In February [1791] I went to Charleston, S. C., and there obtained portraits of the Rutledges... Middleton... Heyward, &c... On the 17th of April, I sailed for Yorktown in Virginia... thence rode to Williamsburg; and obtained a drawing of Mr. Wythe for the Declaration; thence to Richmond; thence to Fredericksburg...; thence to Georgetown, where I found Major L'Enfant drawing his plan of the city of Washington; rode with him over the ground on which the city has since been built—where the Capitol now stands was then [May, 1791] a thick wood...

In 1793 I again went to Boston by the way of Newport and Providence, and there obtained drawings of Mr. Ellery...

He says also, in a Catalogue of Paintings, by Colonel Trumbull, etc., which seems to have been compiled after 1831:

Important difficulties presented themselves to the artist at the outset; for although only ten years had then elapsed since the date of the event, it was always difficult to ascertain who were the individuals to be represented. Should he regard the fact of having been actually present in the room on the 4th of July, indispensable? Should he admit those only who were in favor of, and reject those who were opposed to the act? Where a person was dead, and no authentic portrait could be obtained, should he admit ideal heads? These were questions on which Mr. Adams and Mr. Jefferson were consulted, and they concurred in the advice, that with regard to the characters to be introduced, the signatures of the original act, (which is still preserved in the office of state,) ought to be the general guide. The portraits ought, however, to be
admitted, of those who were opposed to, and of course did not sign, as well as of those who voted in favor of the declaration, and did sign it, particularly John Dickinson... they particularly recommended, that... in case of death, where no portraits could be obtained... he should by no means admit any ideal representation...

The artist was governed by this advice... Mr. Adams was painted in London; Mr. Jefferson in Paris; Mr. Hancock and Samuel Adams in Boston; Mr. Edward Rutledge in Charleston, South Carolina; Mr. Wythe at Williamsburg, in Virginia; Mr. Bartlett at Exeter, in New Hampshire, &c. &c.

In order to give some variety to his composition, he found it necessary to depart from the usual practice of reporting an act, and has made the whole committee of five advance to the table of the president, to make their report, instead of having the chairman rise in his place for the purpose...

The room is copied from that in which Congress held their sessions at the time, such as it was before the spirit of innovation laid unhallowed hands upon it, and violated its venerable walls by modern improvement, as it is called.

Indeed, Trumbull has departed not only "from the usual practice of reporting an act" by making the entire committee advance to the table of the President but (as shown by this Catalogue, etc., and by the keys) has made the committee report on July 4th when in fact they reported on June 28th; and, more than that, it seems to us at least very doubtful whether Franklin and at least very improbable whether R. R. Livingston—the latter of whom, though also, as we shall see, a member of the committee to draft the Declaration, was not in favor of its adoption—was present in Congress (on June 28th) when the draft of the Declaration was reported to Congress.

It will be remembered that the initial resolution, that the "Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States," which is still preserved, in the handwriting of R. H. Lee, was introduced on June 7th; that this was debated on the 8th (Saturday) and on the 10th; that, on the 10th, the further consideration of the resolution was postponed to July 1st, though it was resolved that meanwhile, lest any time be lost, a committee should be appointed to
draft a Declaration; that this committee, consisting of Jefferson, John Adams, Franklin, Sherman and R. R. Livingston, was appointed on the 11th; that the draft of the Declaration, in the handwriting of Jefferson, was reported to Congress on the 28th, when it was ordered to lie on the table; that the resolution was again debated in the committee of the whole on July 1st, and adopted; that it was adopted by Congress on the 2d; that the draft of the Declaration itself was debated on the 2d, 3d and 4th of July, and, after numerous amendments, adopted on the 4th; that, on July 19th, it was resolved that the Declaration "be fairly engrossed on parchment . . . and that the same when engrossed be signed by every member of Congress"; and that the Declaration on parchment was signed on August 2d, though not then by all of the members who signed it.

As to the statement that the original document was "the general guide" but that the portraits "of those who were opposed to, and of course did not sign," also were admitted, the key to the painting in the rotunda of the Capitol or that to "the old small picture" now at the school of the Fine Arts of Yale University—for they are the same except that the heads only are shown, in their relative positions, in the latter key—shows us, as stated, by name, who were represented. It is true that we have found no direct proof that these keys were prepared by Trumbull or under his direction, but everything indicates, and we do not believe there can be any serious question, that they were.

Comparing the picture with the Declaration on parchment, we find that Trumbull has represented Clinton, Willing, R. R. Livingston and Dickinson, whose names do not appear upon that instrument, and has not represented Morton, Smith, Taylor, Ross, Penn, Stone, Nelson, F. L. Lee and Braxton, whose names appear upon that instrument.

Clinton seems very properly to have been represented—though he did not vote either for or against a declaration; but Penn, Stone, Nelson, F. L. Lee and Braxton were unquestionably present on both days and should also, of
course, have been represented. Braxton was bitterly opposed to the measure. Of the others we shall speak later.

Even had Trumbull (been able to follow and) followed absolutely "the signatures of the original act," now in a steel safe in the Library of the Department of State, in Washington, however, he would not necessarily have been correct.

The following Delegates signed the Declaration on parchment, and yet: R. H. Lee, who departed for Virginia on June 13th, Wythe, who seems to have journeyed part way at least with him, both of whom were in attendance upon the Convention, in Williamsburg, as early as June 29th, Chase, who did not return from Canada until June 11th and who departed probably on the 14th for Maryland, where he was very instrumental in securing new instructions to her Delegates in Congress, to concur with the other Colonies or a majority of them in declaring independence, and Hooper, who left Philadelphia after March 13th and attended upon the Provincial Congress of North Carolina on April 15th, with Penn, but who did not return with Penn, were absent from Philadelphia on both June 28th and July 4th; Carroll—though he had been one of the Commissioners to Canada, with Franklin and Chase—was not elected to Congress until July 4th and did not arrive in Philadelphia, following his election, until July 17th; Robert Morris, a strong patriot but opposed to a declaration, according to McKean (and Jefferson), was absent from Congress on July 4th, though it seems to us probable that he was absent on the 2d rather than on the 4th; Rush, Clymer, Smith, Taylor and Ross were not elected until July 20th; Clark, Stockton, Hart and Witherspoon were not elected until June 22d and—though Hopkinson, the other new Delegate, presented the credentials on the 28th—seem not to have attended upon Congress before July 1st; Philip Livingston was absent from Philadelphia on June 28th, in attendance upon the Convention, though he had arrived, we know, from New York City, on July 3d; Thornton was not elected until
September 12th; Williams, who was an alternate, did not leave Hartford for Philadelphia until on or after July 22d; Lewis Morris, who was made Brigadier-General of the Militia of Westchester County, N. Y., on June 7th, was in White Plains on July 9th, and was absent probably, from Philadelphia, on both June 28th and July 4th; Wolcott was in New York City, on his way to Connecticut, certainly on July 1st, and left Philadelphia probably on June 27th; and Franklin, on June 21st, was "just recovering from a severe Fit of the Gout," so that he may not have been present on the 28th.

At the same time, the following Delegates did not sign the Declaration on parchment, and yet: Alsop—who resigned his seat upon hearing of the ratification, on July 9th, by New York—was present doubtless on both June 28th and July 4th; Dickinson—the leader of the opposition—"tall, but slender as a reed; pale as ashes"—was doubtless present on the 28th, though McKean says that he was absent on the 4th, and, we feel sure, that he was absent at least on the 2d, when the initial resolution was adopted, if not on the 4th; Willing and Humphreys, who also did not favor a declaration, were doubtless present on June 28th, though, according to Jefferson, they "had withdrawn", on July 4th; Biddle and Allen, the latter of whom soon put himself under the protection of the British, at Trenton, may have been present on both June 28th and July 4th, though we believe they absented themselves on or before June 14th, when the Assembly of Pennsylvania paid her Delegates; Rogers was present on June 25th and, we believe, until after July 4th; Clinton and Wisner were present doubtless on both June 28th and July 4th; and Thomas Lynch, Sr., was in Philadelphia certainly as late as July 25th, and, though evidently in ill health, having "had an appoplectic stroke" on February 18th, may have been in Congress on both June 28th and July 4th.

We doubt very much, however, whether Trumbull, in his life time, could have ascertained all of these facts, for
much of the correspondence of the members of this Continental Congress was not then available, and certainly not without a vast amount of research; and, indeed, in any event, perhaps an accurate representation, showing those members, and those only, who were present on June 28th, or those members, and those only, who were present on July 4th, as to some of whom even now there is more or less doubt, as seen, would scarcely have been fair, especially to R. H. Lee and Wythe, the first of whom was the mover of the initial resolution and both of whom were important factors in Congress in the great event, both speaking in favor of a declaration, but neither of whom was present in Congress on either of these days.

Certainly we can thus see how difficult, if not impossible, it is to make Art and History agree; and that, in this instance, Art and History do not wholly agree.