

# America's birthday

*Each year on July 4th, Americans decorate their homes with the National Flag and embark on a celebration of the birth of one of the mightiest modern nations on Earth. We join enthusiastically in parades, invite neighbors to a blueberry pancake breakfast with a blast from an antique cannon, and entertain family and friends to a cookout. Then, in the evening, we lift our eyes to the skies to marvel at awesome fireworks. We are proud of our country, inspired to do more and better, uplifted .... so let's go back and refresh our recollections of how this federal holiday came into being.*

**On July 4,** 1776, the Second Continental Congress unanimously adopted the Declaration of Independence which announced the separation of the American colonies from Great Britain. The U.S. Constitution provides the legal and governmental framework for the United States; however, the Declaration, with its eloquent assertion "all Men are created equal," is an embodiment of the ideas of liberty and freedom so beloved by the American people.

Philadelphians marked the first anniversary of American independence with a spontaneous celebration, which is described in a letter by John Adams to Abigail Adams. However, observing Independence Day only became commonplace after the War of 1812. Soon, events such as ground-breaking ceremonies for the Erie Canal and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad were scheduled to coincide with July 4th festivities.

In 1859, the Banneker Institute of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, urged African Americans to celebrate Independence Day while bearing witness to the inconsistencies between the ideals espoused in the Declaration of Independence and the practice of slavery. Banneker's orator of the day, Mr. Jacob C. White Jr., promised his audience a brighter future:

We have learned by experience and by the comparison of ourselves with people similarly situated, to hope that, at some day not very far in futurity, our grievances will be redressed, that our long lost rights will be restored to us, and that, in the full stature of men, we will stand up, and with our once cruel opponents and oppressors rejoice in the Declaration of our common country, and hail with them the approach of the glorious natal day of the Great Republic. [Jacob C. White Jr., Introductory Remarks, *The Celebration of the 83rd Anniversary of the Declaration of American Independence*, Banneker Institute, July 4, 1859. African American Perspectives: Pamphlets from the Daniel A.P. Murray Collection, 18-18-1907.]

By the early 1870s, the Fourth of July was the most important secular holiday on the calendar. Congress passed a law making Independence Day a federal holiday on June 28, 1870. Even far-flung communities on the western frontier managed to congregate on Independence Day. In an interview conducted for the American Life Histories project, Miss Nettie Spencer remembered the Fourth as the "big event of the year. Everyone in the countryside got together on that day for the only time in the year."



"There would be floats in the morning," she continued, "and the one that got the [girls'] eye was the Goddess of Liberty. She was supposed to be the most wholesome and prettiest girl in the countryside— if she wasn't she had friends who thought she was. But the rest of us weren't always in agreement on that. . . Following the float would be the Oregon Agricultural College cadets, and some kind of a band. Sometimes there would be political effigies.

Just before lunch—and we'd always hold lunch up for an hour—some Senator or lawyer would speak. These speeches always had one pattern. First the speaker would challenge England to a fight and berate the King and say that he was a skunk. This was known as twisting the lion's tail. Then the next theme was that any one could find freedom and liberty on our shores. . . In the afternoon we had what we called the 'plug uglies'—funny floats and clowns who took off on the political subjects of the day. . . The Fourth was the day of the year that really counted then. Christmas wasn't much; a Church tree or something, but no one twisted the lion's tail. [*Rural Life in the 1870s*, Portland, Oregon, Walker Winslow interview, December 15, 1938. American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940.]

Down South the celebration was much the same. Ninety-six-year-old Dr. Samuel B. Lathan recalled the Independence Day celebrations of his South Carolina childhood:

The Fourth of July was observed at Caldwell Cross Roads. The military companies of infantry would assemble here from the surrounding counties making up a brigade. A drill and inspection were had, and a dress parade followed.



There was an old cannon mounted on the field. The honor of firing it was assigned to Hugh Reed, who had been in the artillery of Napoleon's army at Waterloo and afterward emigrated to South Carolina. A great barbecue and picnic dinner would be served; candidates for military, state, and national offices would speak... [Dr. Samuel B.

Lathan, Winnboro, South Carolina, W. W. Dixon interview, ca. 1940. American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940].

The Library of Congress has a wealth of online information about the Declaration of Independence and Independence Day.

One of them focuses on the principal author of the Declaration, Thomas Jefferson. *Declaring Independence: Drafting the Documents* provides a chronology of Events leading up to the revolution and a fragment of an early draft of the Declaration.

Other great resources available online are the "Journals of the Continental Congress" and the "Letters of the Delegates to Congress," both encompassed in *A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1875*.

"Celebrating the Fourth," a chapter of Lewis Reimann's *Between the Iron and the Pine: A Biography of a Pioneer Family and a Pioneer Town* contains wonderful Independence Day recollections from Michinga, Minnesota, and Wisconsin circa 1820-1910.

For images of Independence Days past, turn to "The Northern Great Plains, 1880-1920: Photographs from the Fred Hultstrand and F. A. Pazandak Photograph Collections." And for songs, go to the Historic America section and look for "Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, 1820-1860 & 1870-1885."

## I Reaffirm My Allegiance

*This article appeared in The Washington Post on July 3, 2008, as a reprint of an anonymous letter to the editor of July 4, 1976.*

### Who am I?

I am a free man—a good and decent man—a man of compassion, generosity, and understanding—a true friend, a steadfast ally, and a bitter foe.

I owe my allegiance to a government founded in the belief that among the rights of man are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Indeed, I would acknowledge no other. I can redress my government for injury; not satisfied with redress, I can elect a new one. I have watched my government function smoothly during periods of transfer of power caused by re-election, assassination, and resignation.

While other nations have a distinct race, religion, and/or geographic denominator, I live among people of my home without fear of intrusion by anyone—citizen or government designee—unless they have my personal invitation or a duly authorized search warrant.

I have a press to keep me informed—a press free to write, without inhibition, the truth as they see it. A press that needs fear no repression, no retaliation, no censorship so long as it prints the truth.

I live under a system of justice, merciful and fairly administered, where I am assumed innocent until proven guilty—a system which provides me appellate privilege while denying it to the power of the state.

I am free to go anywhere I want, earn my living in any way that suits me and, based on that freedom, I have created a standard of living unequalled in the history of man and envied the world over.

I have suffered in humility at the consequences of my mistakes—economic deprivation, social injustice, unequal opportunity and racial prejudice to name a few—but, once aware of these mistakes, I have set out to right the wrongs they created.

I have faced challenges to my way of life. I have fought and died countless times from Lexington and Concord to Vietnam. I was humbled at Valley Forge, Pearl Harbor, Corregidor, and Malmady. But these experiences gave me the character I needed to go to Yorktown, Gettysburg, Midway, and Normandy. I cherish my freedom above all else—I bow to no tyrant.

I am two hundred years old today. I have never been so proud of my ancient heritage, so grateful for my present situation, and so confident of the future. Today, I reaffirm my allegiance to, faith in, and love of my country. To the proposition that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth, I do humbly pledge my life, my fortune, and my sacred honor.

**I am an American.**