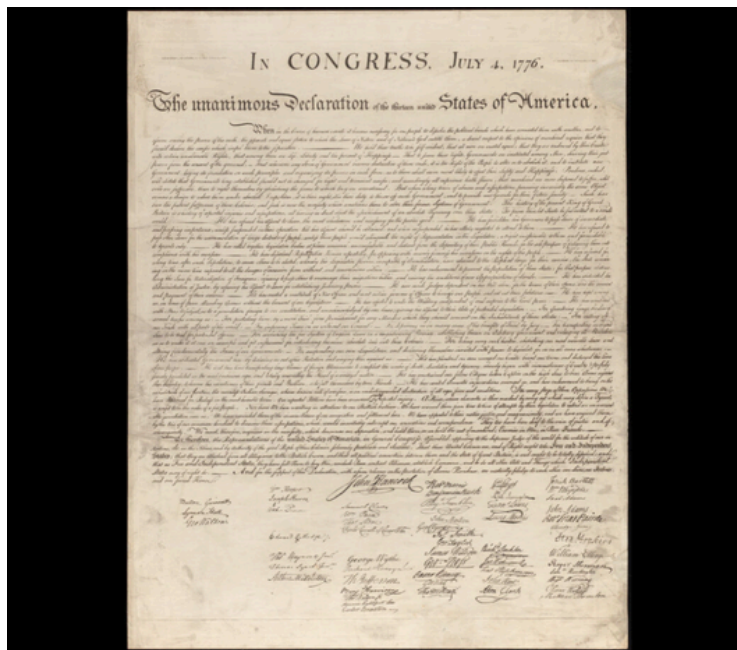


Fighting words — the Revolutionary kind

5 shows look at American independence from a mostly verbal perspective

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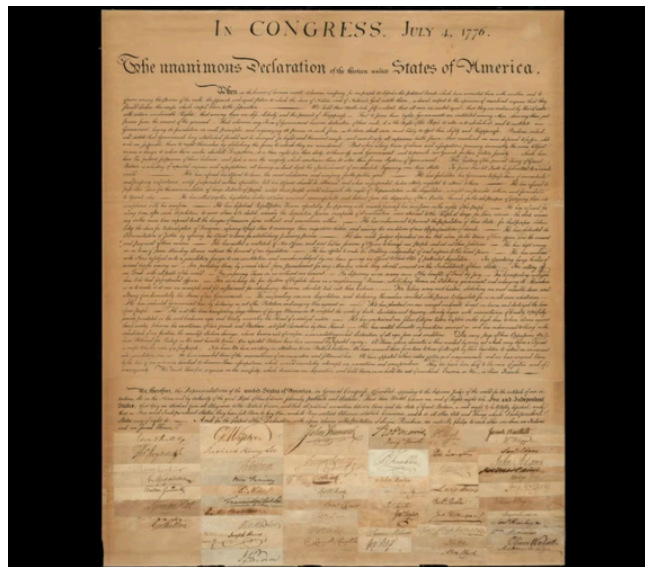


William Stone, "In Congress, July 4, 1776: the unanimous declaration of the thirteen United States of America," 1823. • Boston Public Library

Fireworks, the pyrotechnic kind, are what's most commonly associated with the Fourth of July: loud, colorful celebration. A more fitting association would be with words, the fighting kind: loud, polemical celebration.

Five new exhibitions keyed to the imminent 250th anniversary of American independence remind us that the Revolution really was a war of words. The title of one of the shows says just that. "War of Words: A Citizen's Eye View of the Revolution" runs through Aug. 7 at Harvard's Houghton Library. The library's John Overholt curated.

The Declaration of Independence was, in effect, a set of fighting words, 1,320 of them. Three of the five shows feature multiple copies of the Declaration. The printing of all but one copy was either soon after July 4, 1776, or from the 19th century. The one that isn't, well, save that for later.



Mellen Chamberlain (compiler), facsimile of the Declaration of Independence, with clipped signatures, 1837-1870. Boston Public Library

“War of Words” has two copies. “Declarations: Printing a New Nation” has eight. It runs at the Leventhal Map & Education Center at the Boston Public Library through Sept 13. It was curated by the BPL’s Jay Moschella and the center’s Garrett Dash Nelson. “Pressing Importance: Salem and the Declaration of Independence” has seven. It runs at the Peabody Essex Museum through July 25 of next year. Dan Lipcan, director of PEM’s Phillips Library, curated.

But if the Declaration is the verbal summit of the Revolution, the approaches to it are covered with many other examples of written material to be found in those shows and the two others — “Charting Independence,” at the Harvard Map Collection, through Nov. 30, curated by the collection’s Molly Taylor-Poleskey; and “Harvard and the American Revolution,” at Harvard’s Pusey Library through Dec. 18, curated by Emily Atkins, Ariana Cook, Hannah Hack, Virginia Hunt, Juliana Kuipers, and Sarah Martin. That’s almost as many curators as the number of years between Lexington and Concord and Yorktown.



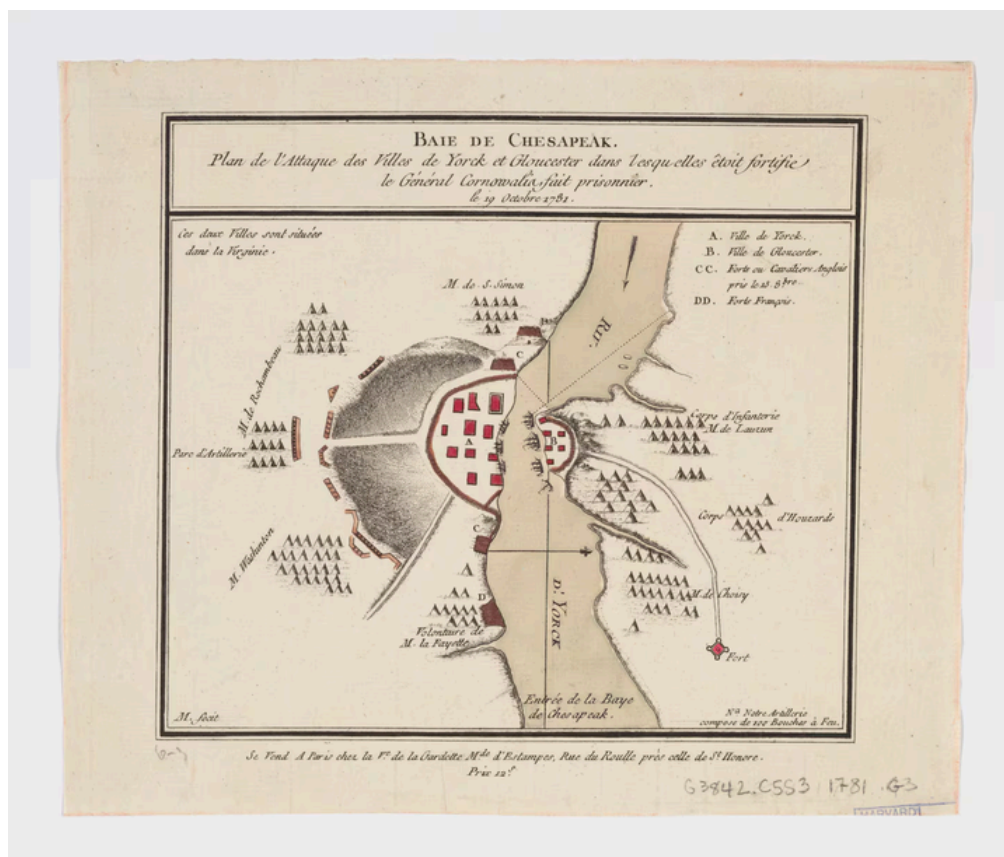
Continental paper money. Philadelphia, 1778. Houghton Library

Those examples include broadsides, books, letters, diaries, newspapers, almanacs, prints, poems, sheet music, song lyrics, maps, a royal proclamation (giving equal time to the other side of the Atlantic). One of the books in “War of Words” includes a photograph taken in 1864 of a centenarian veteran.

There are works from famous contemporaries: Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, Alexander Hamilton, Samuel Johnson (who relished pointing out the hypocrisy of Americans who proclaimed their allegiance to liberty yet owned slaves). There are works from famous writers looking back on the Revolution. “War of Words” includes both a manuscript copy of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere” and Frederick Douglass’s Corinthian Hall oration, from 1852, also known as “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?”

Most interesting of all, perhaps, are anonymous documents: paper money, a Continental enlistment form, a Massachusetts war bond, a Stamp Act stamp, an invoice from Harvard for damages from Continental troops to three buildings during the siege of Boston. The Legislature reimbursed the university, but not until 1778.

Tea and (liberty) trees, midnight rides and muskets: All played a Revolutionary role. None of them, not even muskets, mattered as much as words on paper did. This was the Age of Reason, and America was the land of literacy. The number of white males in the 13 colonies who could read in 1770 is estimated to have been between 85 and 90 percent. In Britain, it was 60 percent. Yes, words mattered there, too, but not as much as monarchy.



Marie Madeleine Folleville Gardette, "Baie de Chesapeak: plan de l'attaque des villes de Yorck et Gloucester . . .", c. 1781.Harvard Map Collection

All of the shows take note of the dominance of white males. Lest we forget, George III was a white male, too. The noting is invariably pertinent without being overly tendentious. Sometimes it's indirect, the point made through presenting exceptions. A 1777 copy of the Declaration in the BPL show was published by a female printer, Mary Katherine Goddard. "Mapping Independence" include Marie Madeleine Folleville Gardette's map of the "plan de l'attaque" at Yorktown.

(Gardette's map is among more than 2000 vintage Revolutionary-era maps available online via ARGO, [American Geographies Online](http://AmericanGeographiesOnline.com), at argomaps.org. The site is organized by the Leventhal Center and the George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon. Participating local institutions include the Harvard Map Collection, Boston Athenaeum, Massachusetts Historical Society, and Knafel Map Collection at Phillips Andover Academy. Go and expect to be engrossed. The site is a terrific example of public-spirited scholarly collaboration.)

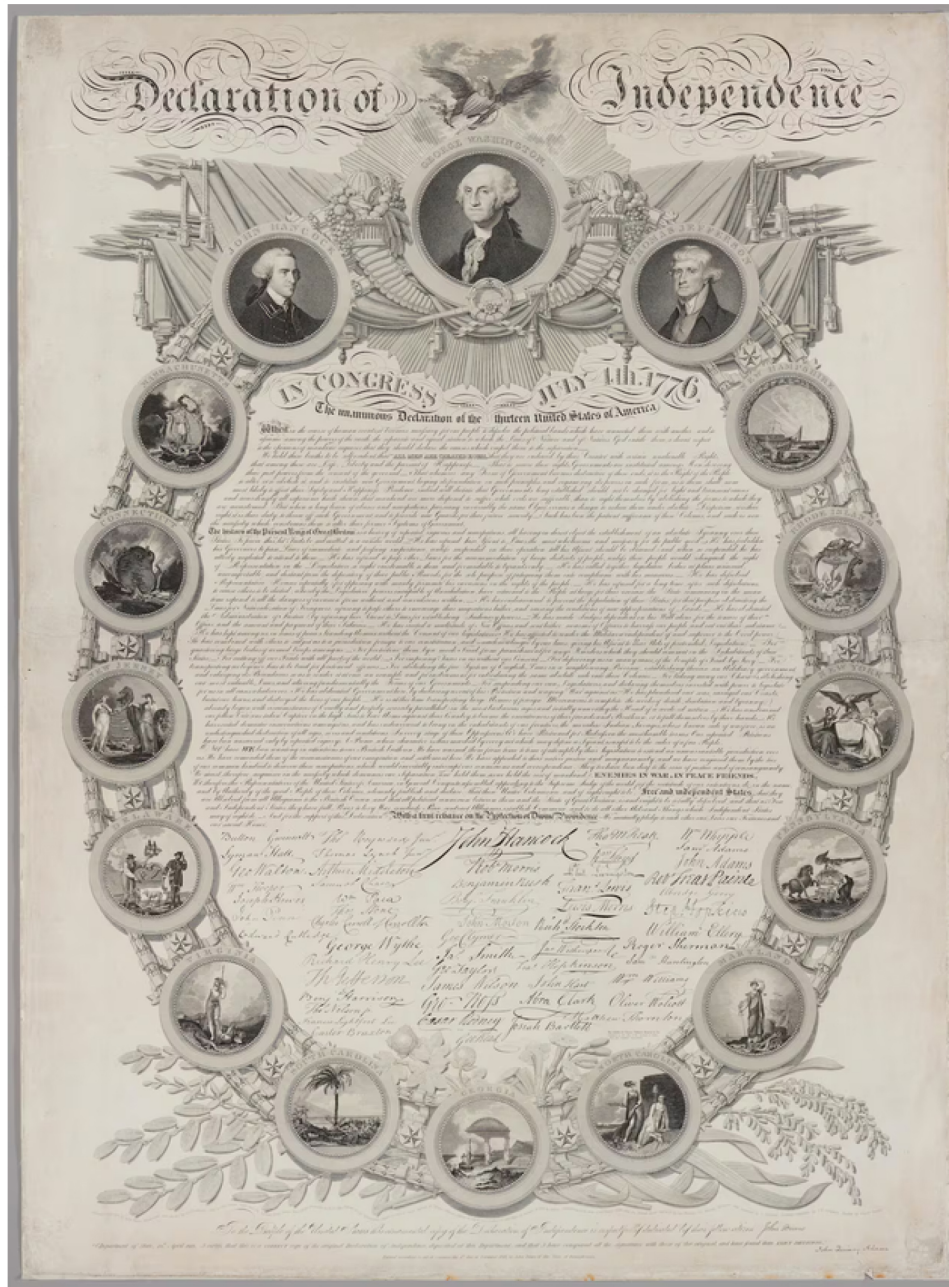


Revolutionary-era musket balls found in Harvard's Hollis Hall. Harvard University Archives

Terms like "war of words" and "fighting words" scant the fact that the Revolution was an actual war, with actual fighting. Our rote hagiography about the Revolution often ignores how brutal it was. Among the many virtues of the "The American Revolution," the 12-hour PBS documentary directed by Ken Burns, Sarah Botstein, and David Schmidt that aired last fall, was its being so clear eyed about that brutality.

Amid all the documents on display at Harvard, the BPL, and PEM, it's startling to see the sheer materiality of a button from a Redcoat's uniform, in "War on Words," and, in "Harvard and the American Revolution," five musket balls. That they look harmless, like marbles or jaw breakers, makes their intent no less deadly.

Really, the Revolution was the first American Civil War. Instead of North vs. South, it was Tory (or Loyalist) vs. Patriot (or Rebel). The term used indicated which side the user was on. How many of us, teleported back to 1776, would find ourselves more inclined to be Tories? Be honest, now. Never underestimate the lure of the status quo.

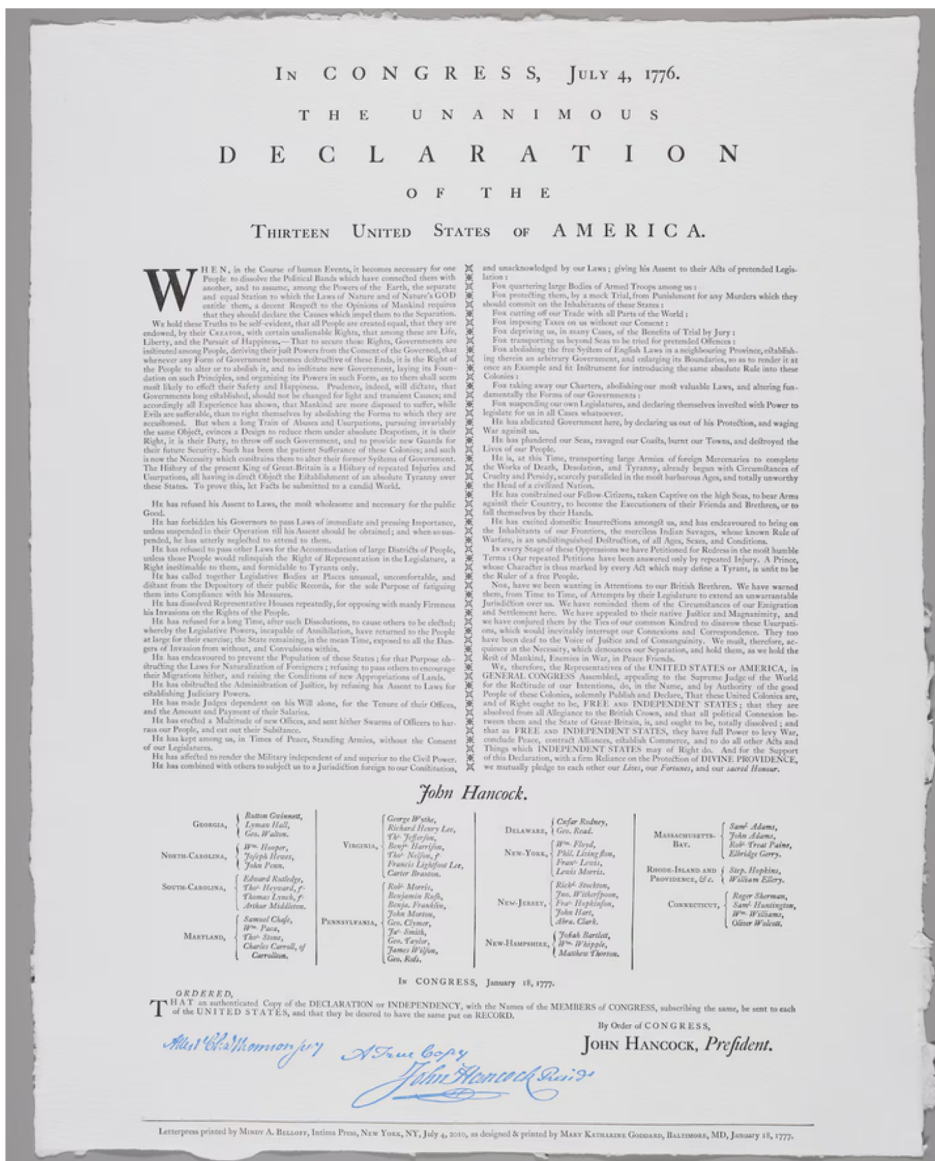


John Binns, "In Congress, July 4th, 1776 : the Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America," 1819. Phillips Library

A demonstration of how divided American society was back then comes from Ezekiel Russell (1743-1796). A Salem printer — his place of business was close to where PEM now is — he's the centerpiece of "Pressing Importance." Russell printed three of the Declarations in the show, including the "official" version, printed by order of the Massachusetts state government. Yet prior to moving from Boston to Salem, in 1774, Russell printed publications supporting British rule as well as opposing it. One was a defense of the Tea Act, the legislation that inspired the Boston Tea Party.

"Declarations," at the BPL, has that official Massachusetts copy, too. It also has a particularly charming 19th-century copy of the Declaration, a reproduction with clipped autograph signatures of all but one of the signers attached at the bottom. Another 19th-century version, in the PEM show, from 1819, includes facsimile signatures, portraits of several Founders, and 13 allegorical engravings encircling the text, one for each of the original colonies.

The show concludes with Mindy Belloff's 2010 "Unambiguous Edition" of the Declaration. It pays homage to Goddard's 1777 version by reproducing it with one key difference: The two references to "men" become "people." You have to look closely to see the difference. But once you know it's there, you feel it. This isn't updating. It's improving. It's also a reminder that the best celebrations are about the present and future as well as the past.



Mindy Belloff, Intima Press, and Mary Katharine Goddard, "The Unanimous Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776: Second Unambiguous Edition," 2010. Phillips Library