The Men Who Signed Their Name on the Declaration of Independence

My name is Don Pemberton and today I want to talk with you about LIVES FORTUNES AND SACRED HONOR.

My inspiration for this program came from a speech given by Rush Limbaugh, Jr., a friend to our Rotary club in 1965. This friend was a WWII veteran who was a P-51 fighter pilot and squadron leader during the Pacific War. No doubt his efforts helped win the war. After the war he came home, went to Law School and became a partner with his father who was a prominent lawyer in Cape Girardeau, Mo.

This young man also became a prominent lawyer. He was a civic leader, historian, and a great orator. Unfortunately, he passed away about 15 years ago. Many of you may recognize

the name of his son; Rush Limbaugh III who is a conservative radio talk show host 3 hours per day 5 days per week.

The remarks I listened to that day 45 years ago are the source of some of this report. Other sources were the internet and history books.

The subject of this report is "What happened to the 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence" in 1776.

First, I would like to go back a few years and give you a little background.

The first Pilgrims came from Great Britain in November

1620 and landed at Plymouth Rock, MA which was virgin

country (no towns, stores, homes, and no people other than a

few Indians. There was abundant wildlife and this was about

the only source of food the first winter. Of the 104 people who

came on that first ship, "Mayflower", one half died the first winter.

Over the next 150+ years many more Immigrants came, mostly from Great Britain and the 13 colonies were formed along the coast from Georgia to MA. Among the people who came we find farmers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, ministers, engineers, politicians, school teachers, and carpenters. By 1776 more than 2 million people lived there. Factories, schools, businesses were developed, and farming operations were expanded. A limited amount of government organization took place in each colony and delegates were appointed to represent the various colonies at the Constitutional Convention. No major rules or regulations could be implemented without approval of Great Britain. This was the problem! Over the years the Patriots built factories, produced

many items for sale, expanded farming operations and produced a surplus of farm products available for sale or trade.

Under British rule all items bought or sold in foreign trade had to be through Great Britain.

Patrick Henry ended his speech to the Virginia Convention in March 1775 to react to British oppression. ("Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death.")

Delegates to the Constitutional Convention in June 1776
discussed a Declaration of Independence (Freedom from
Britain) so they could make their own laws and regulations, to
become united and willing to fight if necessary to preserve their

freedom. They wanted to be able to sell their own commodities and engage in trade with other countries without being taxed by Britain.

56 men from the 13 colonies were delegates to the Constitutional Convention in early June 1776. They appointed a committee of 5 to write the "Declaration of Independence"; Thomas Jefferson of VA, John Adams of MA, Roger Sherman of CN, Phillip Livingstone of NY, and Benjamin Franklin of PA. These were all educated men and financially secure. As individuals they had more to lose than to gain. They wanted what was right for their country. They selected Jefferson to write the document since he had a good reputation for putting words together. When he finished he had Ben Franklin check and approve it. Then it was presented to the other delegates for adoption. The body of delegates for three days debated,

discussed, added to and deducted from and after making 86 changes they approved it July 4, 1776. After 2/3 of the colonies approved the document it was presented to Great Britain and others interested. Britain was most unhappy. The 56 men did commit and act of treason against Great Britain by signing.

The penalty for treason was death by hanging. Ben
Franklin wryly noted "We must all hang together or we will
most assuredly hang separately". By unanimous vote the
delegates pledged to each other "Our lives, our fortunes, and
our sacred honor". They all lived up to that pledge.

August 2, 1776 the delegates met again in Philadelphia and actually signed the "Declaration of Independence".

What happened to the 56 men follows.

What kind of men were they who committed treason against the British by signing the "Declaration of Independence"?

Interesting that the names: Washington, Hamilton, and Patrick Henry were not among the signers. These men were elsewhere.

Ben Franklin was 70, eighteen were under 40, three were in their 20s, 24 were judges and lawyers, 11 were merchants, 9 were land owners and farmers, the 12 remaining were doctors, ministers, and politicians.

With the exception of a few including Samuel Adams of MA, the men owned substantial property. They were men of means and all but two had families. They were educated men in good standing in their communities. They knew the penalty

for treason was death by hanging and also knew part of the British Fleet was at anchor in NY Harbor. There were no draft card burners here. They simply asked for status quo. It was equality with the mother country they wanted. It was taxation WITH representation they wanted.

Two of the men became Presidents of the United States,

Jefferson and Adams. Seven became state governors, one died
as vice president, several became US Senators. One from

Philadelphia, the richest man in America founded the Baltimore
and Ohio Railroad. It was he not Betsy Ross who designed the

US Flag-Francis Hopkinson.

Even before the list was published, the British marked down every member of Congress suspected of having put his name to treason. All of them became the objects of vicious

manhunts. Some were taken. Some, like Jefferson, had narrow escapes. All who had property or families near British strongholds suffered.

(The following paragraphs were left out of WCM Presentation due to time constraints.)

[Francis Lewis, NY delegate, saw his home plundered and his estates, what is now Harlem, completely destroyed by British soldiers. Mrs. Lewis was captured and treated with great brutality. Though she was later exchanged for two British prisoners through efforts of Congress, she died from the effects of her abuse.

William Floyd, another NY delegate, was able to escape with his wife and children across Long Island Sound to Connecticut, where they lived as refugees without income for

seven years. When they came home, they found a devastated ruin.

Phillips Livingstone had all his great holdings in NY confiscated and his family driven out of their home.

Livingstone died in 1778 still working in Congress for the cause.

Louis Morris, the fourth NY delegate, saw all his timber, crops, and livestock taken. For seven years he was barred from his home and family.

John Hart of Trenton, New Jersey, risked his life to return home to see his dying wife. Hessian soldiers rode after him, and he escaped in the woods. While his wife lay on her deathbed, the soldiers ruined his farm and wrecked his homestead. Hart, 65, slept in caves and woods as he was hunted across the countryside. When at long last, emaciated

by hardship, he was able to sneak home, he found his wife had already been buried, and his 13 children taken away. He never saw them again. He died a broken man in 1779, without ever finding his family.

Dr. John Witherspoon, signer, was president of the College of New Jersey, later called Princeton. The British occupied the town of Princeton, and billeted troops in the college. They trampled and burned the finest college library in the country. Judge Richard Stockton, another New Jersey delegate signer, had rushed back to his estate in an effort to evacuate his wife and children. The family found refuge with friends, but a sympathizer betrayed them. Judge Stockton was pulled from bed in the night and brutally beaten by the arresting soldiers. Thrown into a common jail, he was deliberately starved.

Congress finally arranged for Stockton's parole, but his health was ruined. The judge was released as an invalid, when he could no longer harm the British cause. He returned home to find his estate looted and did not live to see the triumph of the evolution. His family was forced to live off charity.

Robert Morris, merchant prince of Philadelphia, delegate and signer, met Washington's appeals and pleas for money year after year. He made and raised arms and provisions which made it possible for Washington to cross the Delaware at Trenton. In the process he lost 150 ships at sea, bleeding his own fortune and credit almost dry.

George Clymer, Pennsylvania signer, escaped with his family from their home, but their property was completely

destroyed by the British in the Germantown and Brandywine campaigns.

Dr. Benjamin Rush, also from Pennsylvania, was forced to flee to Maryland. As a heroic surgeon with the army, Rush had several narrow escapes.

John Morton, a Troy in his views previous to the debate, lived in a strongly loyalist area of Pennsylvania. When he came out for independence, most of his neighbors and even some of his relatives ostracized him. He was a sensitive and troubled man, and many believed this action killed him. When he died in 1777, his last words to his tormentors were: "Tell them that they will live to see the hour when they shall acknowledge it [the signing] to have been the most glorious service that I rendered to my country".

William Ellery, Rhode Island delegate, saw his property and home burned to the ground.

Thomas Lynch, Jr., South Carolina delegate, had his health broken from privation and exposures while serving as a company commander in the military. His doctors ordered him to seek a cure in the West Indies and on the voyage he and his young bride were drowned at sea.

Edward Rutledge, Arthur Middleton, and Thomas Heyward Jr., the other three South Carolina signers, were taken by the British in the siege of Charleston. They were carried as prisoners of war to St. Augustine, FL, where they were singled out for indignities. They were exchanged at the end of the war, the British in the meantime having completely devastated their large land holdings and estates.

Thomas Nelson, the signer of Virginia, was at the front in command of the Virginia military forces. With British General Charles Cornwallis in Yorktown, fire from 70 heavy American guns began to destroy Yorktown piece by piece. Lord Cornwallis and his staff moved their headquarters into Nelson's palatial home. While American cannonballs were making a shambles of the town, the house of Governor Nelson remained untouched. Nelson turned in rage to the American gunners and asked, "Why do you spare my home?" They replied, "Sir, out of respect to you." Nelson cried, "Give me the cannon!" and fired on his magnificent home himself, smashing it to bits. But Nelson's sacrifice was not quite over. He had raised \$2 million for the Revolutionary cause by pledging his own estates. When the loans came due, a newer peacetime Congress refused to honor them, and Nelson's property was forfeited. He was

never reimbursed. He died, impoverished, a few years later at the age of 50.]

Of those 56 who signed the Declaration of Independence, nine died of wounds or hardships during the war. Five were captured and imprisoned, in each case with brutal treatment. Several lost wives, sons, or entire families. One lost his 13 children. Two wives were brutally treated. All were at one time or another victims of manhunts and driven from their homes. Twelve signers had their homes completely burned. Seventeen lost everything they owned. Yet not one defected or went back on his pledged word. Their honor, and the nation they sacrificed so much to create, is still intact.

And finally, there is the New Jersey signer, Abraham Clark.

He gave two sons to the officer corps in the Revolutionary Army. They were captured and sent to the infamous British prison hulk afloat in New York harbor known as the hell ship "Jersey", where 11,000 American captives were to die. The younger Clarks were treated with a special brutality because of their father. One was put in solitary and given no food. With the end almost in sight, with the war almost won, no one could have blamed Abraham Clark for acceding to the British request when they offered him his sons' lives if he would recant and come out for the King and Parliament. The utter despair in this man's heart, the anguish in his very soul, must reach out to each one of us down through 200 years with his answer: "No!"

The 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence proved by their every deed that they made no idle boast when they composed the most magnificent curtain line in history. "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."

Summary

This Declaration of Independence signed by 56 brave patriots in 1776 has survived for over 234 years. It was strengthened by the United States Constitution in 1787 when the delegates to the Constitutional Convention agreed to the preamble: "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessing of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

Then during the Civil War in 1863, after the Battle of Gettysburg, President Abraham Lincoln was invited to say a few words at the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, PA. It is interesting that Mr. Lincoln's speech was given after the principal orator, Edward Everett, had spoken for two hours. Today, Mr. Everett's words are largely forgotten.

However, Mr. Lincoln's speech of a little more over two minutes about the greatness of this nation and its challenges, was so moving that it was printed in history books all across the nation and around the world, even translated into other languages. It is still quoted today by people in my generation.

As far as I'm concerned, these three documents: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United

