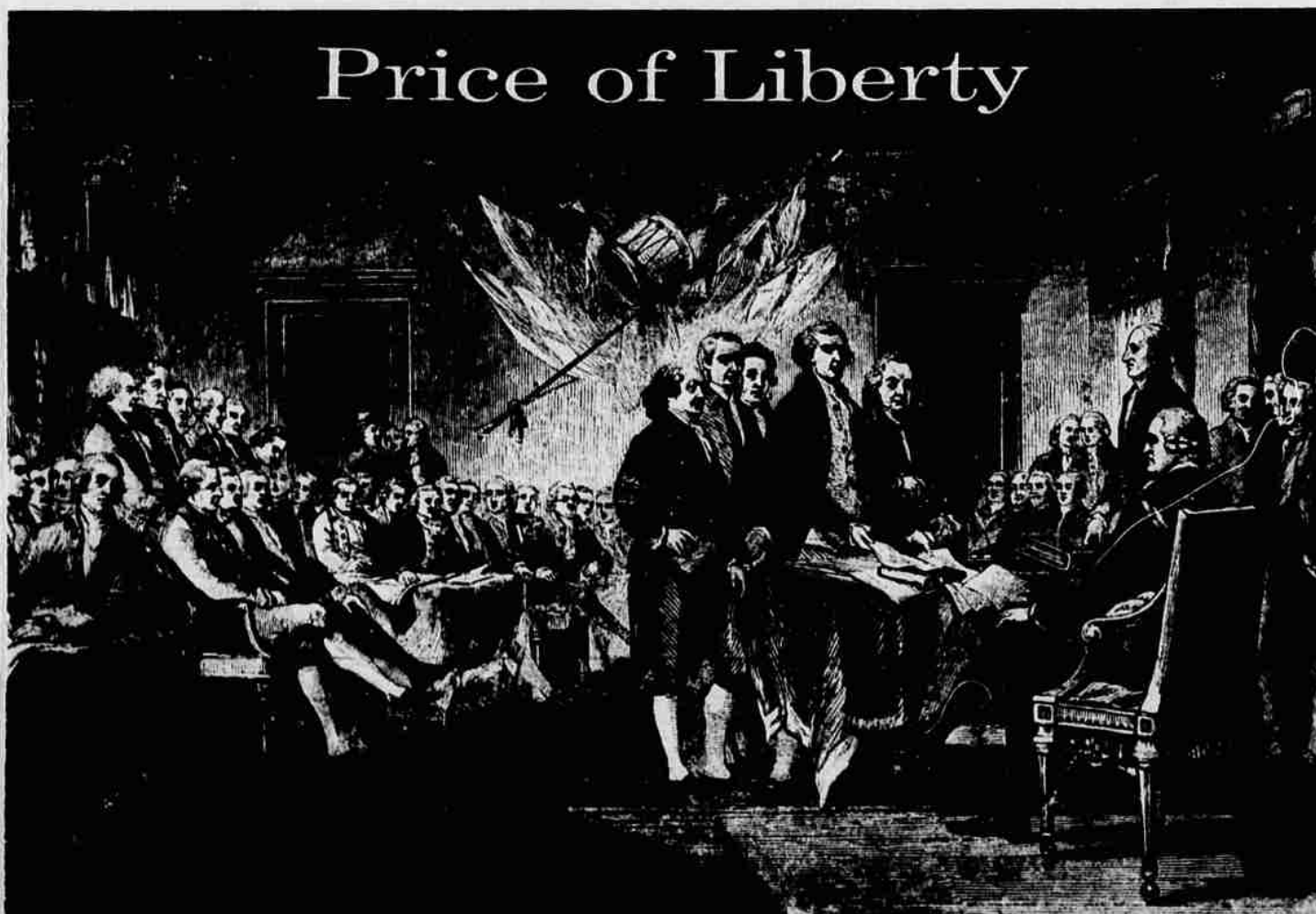


The 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence  
willingly risked loss of wealth, family,  
and life itself to give us our freedom.

## They Paid the Price of Liberty



by H. N. Ferguson

IT HAD BEEN an unusually fine day for that time of year: a comfortable 76 degrees in mid-afternoon; pleasant indeed for July.

But in the steepled, brick State House on Philadelphia's Chestnut Street, the atmosphere was anything but pleasant. The Continental Congress was in session. For long, tiring days the delegates had wrangled over a document they had tentatively titled, "A Declaration of Independence."

Now the oratory was drawing to an end, the final phase of the historic conference had been reached. Yet there was not a happy man there.

Each was faced with the most difficult decision of his life. For some it was an hour of heartbreak. For Thomas Heyward of South Carolina, whose family was divided in loyalty between the king and the colonies, it was a moment of deep sadness.

It was especially a time of decision for the Quakers and Moravians, who would not shed blood, yet loved their country as fervently as the others. So there were many painful dilemmas in the State House. The discussions droned on in the lemon-colored light of the candles.

What manner of men were these 56 patriots who were willing, by signing their names, to risk everything—including their lives? As a consequence of their act, some were to suffer imprisonment, exile, slander, and broken health. Others were to sacrifice their fortunes, have their homes pillaged and burned. And yet, few Americans today can name even 10 of this valiant band who put together a document establishing the greatest nation on earth.

As they painstakingly reworked each paragraph, every man in the room clearly understood the dangers, both personal and national, of signing.

There were wealthy men present, like Charles Carroll of Maryland, John Hancock of Massachusetts, and Robert Morris of Pennsylvania. With one stroke of the pen, they might well become paupers. Would they sign?

In a different way, Sam Huntington of Connecticut stood to lose even more. He had been a poor man, a barrelmaker, studying law at night. Now he was a justice of the supreme court and a member of the governor's council—by appointment from George III of England. Would he sign?

The afternoon wore on and the delegates were still far from agreement—they argued about the

contents of the paper, the timing, the phraseology, even the wisdom of the political step it proclaimed. And if they could have seen the future, one wonders how it might have affected their decision.

What if Francis Lewis of New York could have foreseen his home pillaged and burned, his wife captured and cast into a filthy prison for months? General Washington finally succeeded in securing her release because of her failing health, but she died two years later as a result of her confinement.

What if Richard Stockton of New Jersey could have foreseen he would die in poverty because the English would seize all his property? A judge of the state supreme court, he at first advocated reconciliation with the Crown, but later opposed England and joined the revolutionists.

Thomas Jefferson had written this declaration. "You are ten times a better writer than I," John Adams had said, pressing the task on him. Jefferson sat now, under the dim lights, undergoing the torture of literary vivisection. The Congress was busy cutting and changing the declaration.

In spite of the bickering, there was really little doubt in the minds of the leaders that the instrument would finally be signed. For a "phrenzy of revenge" had swept the colonies after Lexington and Concord, the Boston Massacre, and the new tax laws. As Adams said, "the real revolution occurred in the minds of the people" before this Congress convened.

The session was nearing its climax. With its conclusion, the delegates would scatter to await the workings of fortune. For some of them, tragic fates indeed lay ahead.

Some were the biggest financial backers of the Revolution and lost every cent they had. Carter Braxton of Virginia, richest of them all, died in debt, broken-hearted. His fortune had been in ships, and all were captured by the British.

The wife of John Hart, a New Jersey farmer, was dying when the Hessians reached his farm a few months after he signed the famous document. He was driven from her side, his property was ruined, and his 13 children scattered.

Hart managed to escape into the woods, where he lived as a fugitive for more than a year, oftentimes in a cave. He refused to leave the state on account of his wife, but by the time he was able to return home she was dead. Though almost 70, he joined Washington's army as a private!

As Lewis Morris was about to sign, he received word that the enemy was at the gates of his Long Island home, but that his property would be spared if he would withhold his vote for liberty. "There are plenty of homes, but only one country," he answered, and signed. Everything he possessed was taken from him, and his family was exiled.

Another signatory was Thomas Nelson, Jr., later governor of Virginia. He mortgaged his estates and raised \$2 million to help finance the fighting in his colony, but although he had given his entire fortune to his country, he was never reimbursed. He died penniless.

The candles in the State House were flickering out as a final reading of the declaration began:

"When in the course of human events . . ."

High in the steeple of the building, an old bellman had been patiently waiting since early morning to signal the ratification of the document. He had instructed a small boy to run to him with the news of the signing.

Suddenly the lad was streaking toward him. "Ring! Ring!" he cried.

The old man pulled the rope and the great bell began pealing forth its crucial message. On it was inscribed: "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."