

INTRODUCTION



A Moving Document

The Declaration of Independence is the founding document of the United States. Americans have learned to cherish it and read it in different ways, depending on their political principles, their interpretation of the past, and their aspirations for the future. It is the birthright of the nation, a political testament, a social compact signed by patriots who justified a revolution. They stated their reasons in writing, in an engrossed parchment expressing their commitment and convictions. They also announced their decision in printed form, the epochal broadside dated July 4, 1776. The drama of that moment captured the public imagination, which is why we celebrate independence on the Fourth. During the nineteenth century, the national holiday could be a spectacle far more impressive than the customary concert in the bandstand, speeches in the afternoon, and fireworks at night. If the timing was right, it could galvanize an entire city and fill the streets with devotees of this iconic text.

More than fifty thousand people turned out for the Grand Civic Procession in Baltimore on July 4, 1828. The parade organizers had chosen that auspicious day for the groundbreaking ceremony of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. The procession would lead to a field on the western edge of the city, where the venerable Charles Carroll, the last surviving Signer of the Declaration, would lay the First Stone of the Great Road (fig. 3). Then nearly ninety-two years of age, Carroll was one of the directors of the newly chartered company, an audacious attempt

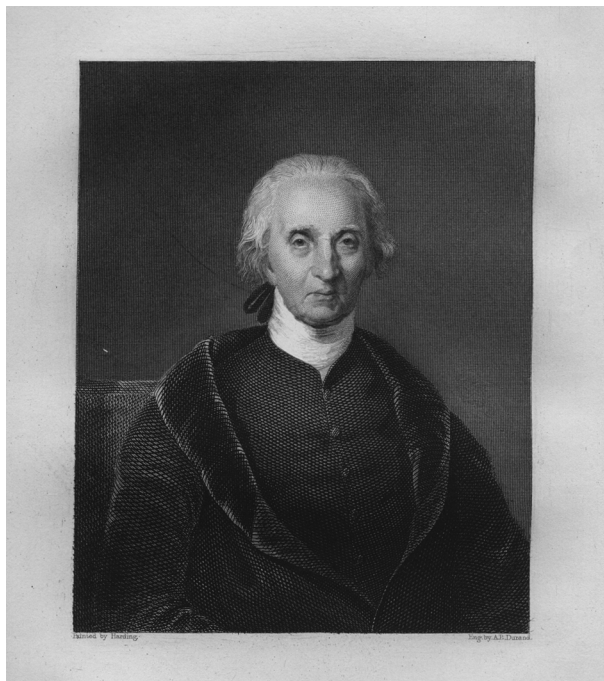
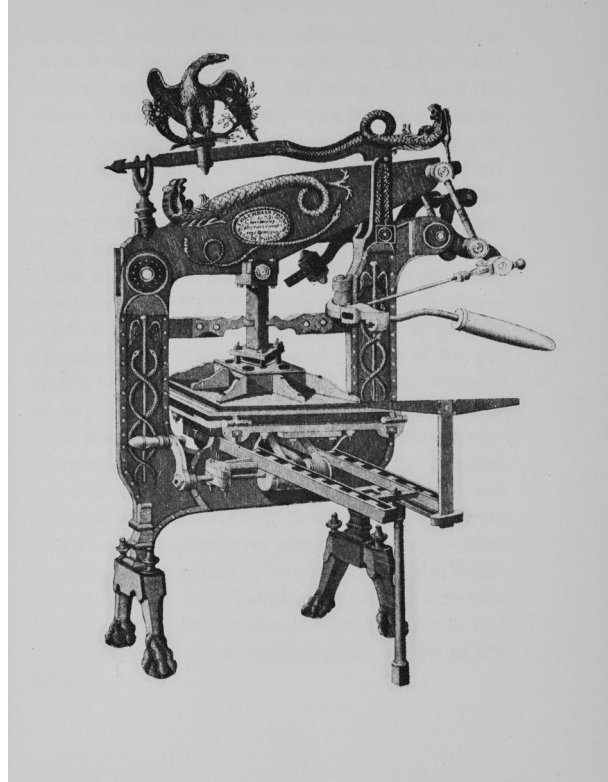


FIGURE 3
 Asher B. Durand, *Charles Carroll, of Carrollton*.
 Engraving after a painting
 by Chester Harding,
*The National Portrait Gallery
 of Distinguished Americans*,
 1834. Courtesy of Princeton
 University Library.

to open a trade route beyond the Alleghenies. The Erie Canal had ensured the prosperity of New York City. Just as the steamboats plied the Hudson River, so would the railway bring to Baltimore a cornucopia of commodities from the hinterland around the Ohio River. Maybe, someday, steam locomotives would expedite commerce between East and West. What better way to implement independence than to plan internal improvements and tap valuable resources for a thriving city and a growing nation?

It was a fine day for a parade. The temperature stayed in the low seventies under a partly cloudy sky. Clustered ten deep in some places, the spectators lined the route from Bond Street in the city center two miles down Baltimore Street and a quarter mile beyond the first turnpike gate to the field near Carroll's upper mills at Gwynn's Falls. Stands were built on vacant lots to accommodate the crowds. Some eager onlookers occupied roofs and windows to get a better view. The proceedings began just before eight in the morning when a detachment of the Baltimore Hussars started the cavalcade, followed by pioneers in straw hats, a troop of masons, the grand marshal, and the guest of honor, Carroll, in a landaulet drawn by four horses. Next in line was a barouche carrying the orator of the day, who would read the Declaration out loud during the inauguration ceremony.

FIGURE 4
Columbian press, ca. 1816.
In Jacob Kainen, *George
Clymer and the Columbian
Press*, 1950. Courtesy of
Princeton University Library.



Marylanders from all walks of life had a place in the procession. Twenty-four farmers on horseback led the way, one for each state in the union, accompanied by a seedsman dressed in homespun who sowed handfuls of grain along the line of march. Carpenters built for the occasion a Doric temple mounted on a wagon drawn by four white horses. Each profession displayed symbolic attributes. Tanners wore leather sashes, gardeners sported sprays of flowers, victuallers shouldered sharpening steels, and shipwrights launched a model sixty-four-gun frigate, fifteen feet stem to stern. By all accounts, the main attraction of the day was the ship *Union*, an even larger model, measuring twenty-seven feet long, sails set and fully rigged, bound on an overland voyage of discovery from Baltimore to Ohio. Her crew sang a rousing chorus in praise of Carroll and the railroad to the tune of “Hail to the Chief.”

The *Union* was not the only spectacle on wheels. Farmers harvested wheat and rye on a flatbed truck, dairymen milked a cow, turners worked a lathe, a master painter daubed a portrait, and blacksmiths tended a furnace on a parade car escorted by the sons of Vulcan wearing aprons emblazoned with the hammer and

anvil. Artisans prepared gifts for Carroll while performing on these rolling stages. Hatters demonstrated each stage of manufacture as they fashioned a beaver hat for the Signer. Cordwainers produced en route a pair of green morocco slippers. On a stage festooned with fringe and tassels, weavers sat at a loom to make chambray cloth, which they turned over to the tailors, who used it to sew a coat for Carroll. The stonecutters brought him the First Stone, which they had carved out of marble and would convey to the spot where he would mark the beginning of the railroad. Tools in hand, menial laborers and skilled mechanics acted out their pride in their professions and congratulated their civic leaders on this courageous venture.

The Baltimore Typographical Association was the most conspicuous of the trades in the procession. About ninety masters, journeymen, and apprentices marched behind the Printers' Car, a platform sixteen feet long and nine feet wide on wheels concealed behind white cloth festooned with blue muslin. Four stout bays were needed to draw this vehicle, which carried a complete printing shop equipped with two typesets on stands and a Columbian printing press (fig. 4). Paintings of statesmen and military heroes were hung on the front and sides. Also along the sides were railings decorated with oak leaves, flowers, and inscriptions such as *The Art Preservative of All Arts* and *We Appeal to Reason*. A half hogshead of wine masqueraded as a cask of ink, another hogshead purported to be type wash, but their contents were revealed when the chief printer raised a glass of wine to toast the captain of the *Union*.

Invented in 1813, the Columbian press was a patriotic allegory in itself. A cast-iron American eagle counterweight, its talons grasping an olive branch and a cornucopia, helped raise the platen. The eagle took flight when the pressman pulled at the bar. Thus, at each impression, the Black Art took credit for the triumph of Columbia, the peace and prosperity of the nation, and the benefits of independence. The cheeks of the press displayed the caduceus emblem of the winged messenger Mercury, patron deity of the printing profession. Two apprentices in winged helmets and flesh-colored tights played the part of Mercury. Each had his own caduceus, a long pole they wielded like a grabber tool to distribute the products of the press. As the Printers' Car passed down the street, the Mercuries affixed freshly printed broadsides to the tips of the poles and leaned over the railings to extend their offerings to the ladies in the windows and the gentlemen on the sidewalks.

One of the broadsides was the Declaration of Independence (fig. 2). This was not the first or last time that the Declaration was paraded before Americans on the anniversary of its publication. Nor was this the only civic procession to include a horse-drawn printing office with a press in action. In 1788 at least two cities

feted the ratification of the Constitution by putting on parades with a vehicular Federal Printing-Press and, anticipating the *Union*, a metaphorical ship of state. The printers of New York worked off an ode to the Erie Canal during the opening festivities in 1825. Marching orders for the celebrations on July 4, 1811, in Windsor, Vermont, called for the Declaration to be printed on a press in transit, but no copy has been identified, and it is not clear whether the printers rose to the occasion. Members of the Typographical Association in Evansville, Indiana, outfitted a wagon with a gilded printing press for the July 4th holiday in 1860. They produced a broadside Declaration for the bystanders to keep as a memento of the event. To my knowledge only one copy survives (no. 65), a creditable specimen of layout and design, although two of the Signers' names were misspelled and three were listed under the wrong state due to an accident in makeup.

The Baltimore broadside suffered similar typesetting accidents, and it is almost as rare—I have found only two copies—but it is a good starting place for an account of Declaration prints and broadsides. It epitomizes the performative part in the cult of the Signers. It is an excellent example of letterpress typography with stylistic traits that can be traced back to the origins of the genre. Like others of its kind, it imitates design motifs popularized by two of the earliest and most influential prints, a calligraphic rendering issued in 1818 (no. 3) and a pictorial allegory first advertised in 1816 but not completed until 1819 (no. 6). Emulating decorative scripts, the Baltimore compositor set words in italics, italic caps, all caps, small caps, bold caps, a bold Antique typeface, and an open black letter. This typographic medley served a rhetorical purpose, a means to draw the eye and raise the voice. In the same spirit, the broadside designers tried to copy the illustrations and ornaments they had seen in the allegorical engravings. They adapted for relief printing visual conceits originally intended for intaglio technology. For sure they could not aspire to that degree of detail, but they could at least replicate the basic concepts with stock cuts and typefounders' flowers. They too gave the text the embellishments it deserved: an intricate border composed of rosettes, American eagles in corner-piece compartments, and medallion portraits of Washington on the sides. To complement the eagles in the border, they placed another one at the head of the composition, more of an illustration than an ornament, an impressive creature flying through a night sky, clutching arrows and olive branches in its talons, and clenching the *E Pluribus Unum* motto in its beak. Those stock cuts were readily available at that time. Typefounders charged two dollars for the eagle in the center, fifty cents each for the corner pieces on the top, and seventy-five cents each for the corner pieces at the bottom. The two-dollar block was a favorite in the trade and had already appeared in a Boston edition (no. 19). It would show up again in another Baltimore edition (no. 22), along with other designs derived from

the civic procession broadside. Just as the Printers' Car contingent looked to letterpress and engraved precedents for design ideas, their work would also be influential and take a place in the chain of transmission.

In the following I will cite other examples of derivative Declarations—artistic adaptations like this one as well as facsimiles, reprints, imitations, abridgments, and piracies. I will trace a genealogy of Declarations from the progenitors of the genre in 1816 until the end of the century. Altogether I have identified more than two hundred prints and broadsides, almost all of them members of four main families: straight letterpress reprints, calligraphic versions, allegorical interpretations, and unadorned facsimiles. By 1828 these families were already beginning to intermarry, hence the mixed ancestry of the Baltimore broadside. No doubt I have failed to detect the lineage of some editions. Some are so rare that there must be others that have disappeared entirely. I cannot claim that the appended checklist is comprehensive. Nonetheless I believe that the sample is large enough to delineate the growth of the trade and the part it played in popularizing the Declaration. The checklist explains how the prints created a cultural icon, a belief system epitomized in an image meant to be treasured and revered.

The Declaration became a mass-market commodity during the Industrial Revolution. Stereotyping, steel engraving, lithography, and other technological developments made it possible for publishers to saturate the market with cheap reprint editions. The easier it was to set up new editions, the more often they went back to press. In making my listing, I have had to sort through a multitude of variants in stereotype reprints, reworked engravings, and—to take an extreme example—a lithograph that went through at least eleven commutations and permutations during the Centennial, not counting a number of inserted advertisements. The tools of analytical bibliography have been helpful here, although my listing is by no means a full-dress bibliography. I have tried to record sufficient detail to distinguish editions, issues, and states—evidence useful for identifying the most influential prints and ranking them in order of importance. This systematic approach will, I hope, reveal how Americans visualized the Declaration and kept it in the public eye.

Artists, printers, and publishers succeeded in making money in the Declaration business. They built distribution networks, organized subscription campaigns, and sought opportunities to advertise their wares. Others learned from them and tried their hand with competing ventures, which also turned a profit. Some depended on steel engravings or stereotype plates to replenish their stock of an article always in demand. It could be a steady source of income, a sudden windfall—or the ruination of those who invested in a publication project beyond their means. Expensive publications were exposed to the ups and downs of the

American economy like other luxury goods and capital-intensive products. But many were willing to take the risk even if they had to contend with payment problems, bad debts, poor credit, and other financial tribulations. I have made a special effort to collect biographical information about Declaration publishers, winners as well as losers, but especially the leading members of the trade who first perceived its commercial potential. For many of them, the Declaration was the high point of a graphic arts career worth examining here as context for their design ideas and merchandising techniques. Among other motivations, they conceived and promoted their work with a political agenda, a matter of principle, or a means of advancement. The earliest attempts to extol the document were tinged with party politics. By some accounts, the founding document began to attract public notice during the Era of Good Feelings, when it became a symbol of peace and prosperity. In 1818, however, it came into view mainly because of a newspaper war between John Binns and a rival publisher, who picked a fight over John Adams's role as an advocate of independence.

A firebrand Republican and a sometime enemy of Adams, Binns was the first to sell the Declaration as a work of art. In March 1816 he solicited subscriptions for a large allegorical engraving adorned with patriotic emblems and facsimile signatures of the Founding Fathers (no. 6). He distributed his proposals far and wide, starting with a newspaper he published in Philadelphia and then going on to other periodicals such as *Niles' Weekly Register*, which contained more information about the project. He noted the immense size of the print, described the pictorial content, named the artists involved, predicted a delivery date, and set prices for plain and colored copies. Subscribers were assured that the artwork would reflect credit on native genius and that the accuracy of the text would be certified with "proofs of authenticity." True patriots would want to have it framed and keep it on display for constant contemplation by friends and family. His proposals mark the beginning of the Declaration business. They introduced new ways of depicting the document, broached the subject of its inspirational value, and heralded changes in its meaning during the Civil War and the Centennial.

They directly influenced the management of the Printers' Car in 1828. Those selected to ride on it that day represented different ranks in the hierarchy of the trade: masters, journeymen, and apprentices. One of the masters was Hezekiah Niles, publisher of the *Register* and a staunch supporter of Binns. Besides publishing a full-length version of the proposals, he continued to promote the project during a long and difficult gestation period, an aggravating delay that could antagonize subscribers. In the *Register* for May 22, 1819, Niles told them it was "nearly ready" and predicted that it would be worth the wait: "We have good reason to hope that, whilst it may serve to warm the heart of the patriot, or embellish the

parlours of the opulent, it will also stand as a test of excellence in the various arts at its period, and give to posterity a correct idea of their perfection at this time.”

The subscribers had to wait six more months, but the print finally appeared at the end of October 1819. Niles commended it again on that occasion and noted the costs incurred by Binns in case anyone was put off by its ten-dollar purchase price. The editor of the *Register* championed the engraving, which he probably saw in proof as well as its finished state. When it came time to plan for the parade, he knew that the Declaration should take center stage and seized the opportunity to produce a letterpress version of Binns’s engraving. Afterward he composed a description of the Printers’ Car for a Baltimore newspaper and reprinted his piece in the *Register*. That is another reason why I make an example of the Baltimore parade: here, as elsewhere, biographical information helps explain the publication process.

Historians have noticed a quickening of interest in the Declaration during the years 1816–19 and mention the early engravings as a factor in this change of heart. But they touch on this topic only briefly and rely on a single secondary source that downplays the impact of Binns’s publicity campaign. Usually they have other priorities, directing more attention to the text than the document. For them the text is more important because of its exegetical attractions. They have analyzed its authorship, composition, transmission, and reception. Some look at its origins and survey its sources. Others consider the consequences of its different interpretations, its intellectual legacy, and its significance as a statement of human rights and a vindication of popular sovereignty. Modestly, Thomas Jefferson called it “an expression of the American mind,” but an entire scholarly industry has been built on its meaning, mystique, and authority. The close reading by Carl Becker and the revisionist treatment by Garry Wills have become classics in their own right, reassessed by other historians who disagreed with their findings but admired their accomplishments. Pauline Maier acknowledged their work in her comprehensive history of the Declaration, tracing its changing reputation from Jefferson to Lincoln with a colorful account of its current status in the National Archives. The labor historian Philip S. Foner edited and introduced a collection of “alternative declarations,” adaptations issued by socialists, suffragists, and African Americans who paraphrased the original to assert moral and economic rights grounded on the same basic principles. Looking outward, David Armitage shows how other countries followed the American example in their own foundation documents, sometimes translating their model word for word. The political philosopher Danielle Allen draws on personal experience to probe the arguments of the Signers and question what they meant by equality and

justice. Liberal or conservative, the ideological agendas of these historians have helped kindle debates about the text.

Here, however, my task is to show how Americans learned about the document, how they visualized it, and how they came to treasure it as a relic of the Revolution. I will discuss the political theory and philosophical precepts of the text only inasmuch as they influenced its iconography. More to the point, I will explain how it became an object of veneration in prints and broadsides, in single-sheet formats commensurate with its iconic status. The Binns print was not the only one suitable for framing. The Declaration appeared in other kinds of printed matter—newspapers, books, and pamphlets—but tightly focused in this way, it gained a new graphic function capable of stirring the emotions and reaching hearts and minds.

Along with their inspirational value, many of these prints offered Americans reassuring tokens of accuracy and verisimilitude. Binns promised his subscribers that his transcription of the text would be wholly reliable, “word for word, letter for letter and point for point.” Instead of transcribing the fifty-six signatures, his artists would render them in facsimile—that is, they would replicate the original handwriting as faithfully as possible in the engraving medium. He was the first to recognize the importance of the autographs and the first to make them a selling point of a patriotic print (although he was accused, wrongly in my opinion, of plagiarizing another project). Binns warned Americans that the historical record had already been corrupted forty years after the event. In the course of his research, he was appalled to learn that most printings were titled *A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America in Congress Assembled*, whereas the original begins *The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America*. Of course, we now know that there are two originals with variant titles and different functions—the John Dunlap broadside printed on July 4, 1776, and the engrossed parchment signed on August 2, 1776—but Binns, like many other Americans, misconstrued the versions in script and print even while he thought he was setting the record straight. His successors were no more successful in their struggle against human error, accidents of history, and the ravages of time. They realized that the engrossed parchment might have been destroyed when British soldiers sacked the Capitol in the War of 1812. They were distressed to see that it was in poor condition and that it was still deteriorating in ways they did not understand. While its words were fading, so were the memories of those who could testify about its origins and meaning. We shall see that Jefferson was responsible for some of the most egregious errors in the depiction of the Declaration. Carroll personified the document in the 1828 parade, but the nonagenarian was not expected to last for long.

The facsimile signatures invoked the living presence of the Founding Fathers. They were a profession of faith, a testament of courage, a roll call of honor. They were the essential ingredient in prints designed to dramatize the moment, although they were often the only part visually related to the original. The designers recast the text in decorative scripts and surrounded it with patriotic imagery such as state seals, historical vignettes, and presidential portraits. Sometimes they rearranged the signatures to fit them in these elaborate allegorical compositions. They did not think that they were distorting the viewing experience but believed they were enhancing it and fulfilling the artistic expectations of their customers. As much as one would expect their work to defeat the function of a facsimile, this style did not go out of fashion until the end of the century. Then, finally, an unadorned facsimile commissioned by John Quincy Adams (no. 11) became the standard visualization of the document and the source of reproductions published by the government, expounded in textbooks, sold as souvenirs, and printed on Independence Day in the *New York Times*.

I have already published an account of the nineteenth-century facsimiles in the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, vol. 98 (1988). Based on a lecture I had given at the American Antiquarian Society, this article contains a short narrative introduction, a checklist describing forty-eight typical examples, and five illustrations. The checklist does not claim to be comprehensive, and the commentary acknowledges the limitations of a lecture. Thirty-five years later, I am in a better position to write about the print trade and describe its products with a larger sample in greater detail. I can identify publishers and date their publications by using online resources such as library catalogs, digitized newspapers, and auction house websites. I can compare copies with high-resolution digital photographs, some of which have revealed variants worth noting here as evidence for the publication process. Two important private collections are now easily accessible in institutional libraries. The collector Daniel Hamelberg very kindly answered my questions about his holdings, second only to those of the American Antiquarian Society in size and scope.

Hitherto unrecorded prints have occasionally surfaced in the trade. Antiquarian booksellers and auction house cataloguers sometimes give the sobriquet “not in Bidwell” to newly proffered merchandise I failed to mention in 1988. Perhaps now it will be harder to profit from my mistakes, but the rarity of these prints is indisputable. I tracked down one of the truant editions (no. 40) in Hamelberg’s collection after seeing references to it in auction and booksellers’ catalogues. It was printed from a stereotype block, which was probably sold to other publishers. I have not yet found other stereotype editions, but I am confident that one or more will emerge in private hands, a library, or a bookseller’s catalogue.

As much as I have tried to make amends for my work in 1988, I know that this larger listing must also be incomplete and must be corrected in years to come. Its lapses and elisions will be obvious, but it is still substantive enough to show how Americans commodified the Declaration and turned it into artwork that could be bought and sold.