

Spirit of '76

Before Americans were American, they were British. Before Americans governed themselves, they were governed by a distant British king and a British Parliament in which they had no vote.

Before America was an independent state, it was a dependent colony. Before Americans expressed support for equality, their government and society were aristocratic and highly hierarchical.

These transformations were complex, but the changes owe a great deal to the Declaration of Independence of 1776, what has been properly termed "America's mission statement." (Monticello)

"The year 1776 is over. I am heartily glad of it, and hope you nor America will ever be plagued with such another.: (Letter to George Washington from George Morris, Philadelphia, 1 January, 1777)

Washington shared that feeling. We celebrate 1776 as the most glorious year in American history; they remembered it as an agony, especially the "dark days" of autumn.

1776 was pivotal moments of American history, from the decision for independence to the military disasters that followed. In early December, British commanders believed they were very close to ending the rebellion, and American leaders feared that they might be right.

Yet three months later the mood had changed on both sides. By the spring of 1777 many British officers had concluded that they could never win the war. At the same time, Americans had recovered from their despair and were confident that they would not be defeated. (American Heritage)

Besides representative government, participatory politics, and popular sovereignty, Americans believed that public virtue (the subordination of self-interest to the common good) was absolutely essential in a democratic republic. Moreover, they felt that there could be no virtue in public life without corresponding virtue in private life. (NJ State Library)

Drafting the Declaration of Independence in 1776 became the defining event in Thomas Jefferson's life. Despite Jefferson's desire to return to Virginia to help write that state's constitution, the Continental Congress appointed him to the five-person committee for drafting a declaration of independence.

That committee subsequently assigned him the task of producing a draft document for its consideration. Drawing on documents, such as the Virginia Declaration of Rights, state and local calls for independence, and his own draft of a Virginia constitution, Jefferson wrote a stunning statement of the colonists' right to rebel against the British government and establish their own based on the premise that all men are created equal and have the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Through the many revisions made by Jefferson, the committee, and then by Congress, Jefferson retained his prominent role in writing the defining document of the American Revolution and, indeed, of the United States.

Jefferson was justly proud of his role in writing the Declaration of Independence and skillfully defended his authorship of this hallowed document. (LOC) The Spirit of '76 is a patriotic sentiment referring to freedom begun by the Declaration of Independence.

To those who risked their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor in behalf of American independence, Thomas Jefferson and his congressional colleagues promised the creation of a governmental system that would be “most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness” ...

“... and derive its “just powers from the consent of the governed” as well as a social order in which all men would be “created equal” and enjoy the “unalienable Rights of Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

The most important challenge to members of the revolutionary generation - indeed to subsequent generations of Americans - was translating Jefferson's idealistic rhetoric into everyday reality.

To Whigs everywhere the grand objective could only be achieved through the establishment of republican government and the inauguration of humanitarian reforms.

And while the winning of independence took precedence at first over the creation of a republican society, the public record of the war years provides abundant information about the new order thoughtful Jersey men were striving eventually to establish. (NJ State Library)

The principles outlined in the Declaration of Independence promised to lead America - and other nations on the globe - into a new era of freedom. The revolution begun by Americans on July 4, 1776, would never end.

It would inspire all peoples living under the burden of oppression and ignorance to open their eyes to the rights of mankind, to overturn the power of tyrants, and to declare the triumph of equality over inequality. (Monticello)

Thomas Jefferson recognized as much, preparing a letter for the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration less than two weeks before his death, he expressed his belief that the Declaration

be to the world what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all.) the Signal of arousing men to burst the chains, under which Monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves,

and to assume the blessings & security of self government. the form which we have substituted restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. all eyes are opened, or opening to the rights of man.

the general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth that the mass of mankind has not been born, with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of god.

these are grounds of hope for others. for ourselves let the annual return of this day, for ever refresh our recollections of these rights and an undiminished devotion to them.

Thomas Jefferson to Roger Chew Weightman, June 24, 1826. (Monticello)



One of the first instances of writing the phrase “Spirit of ’76” was in a court case, Commonwealth V. Pullis (Philadelphia Mayor’s Court (1806)). Recorder Levy charged the jury, in part,

In the profound system of law, (if we may compare small things with great) as in the profound systems of Providence ... there is often great reason for an institution, though a superficial observer may not be able to discover it.

If obedience alone is required in the present case, the reason may be this. One man determines not to work under a certain price and it may be individually the opinion of all: in such a case it would be lawful in each to refuse to do so, for if each stands, alone, either may extract from his determination when he pleases.

In the turnout of last fall, if each member of the body had stood alone, fettered by no promises to the rest, many of them might have changed their opinion as to the price of wages and gone to work; but it has been given to you in evidence, that they were bound down by their agreement, and pledged by mutual engagements, to persist in it, however contrary to their own judgment. The continuance in improper conduct may therefore well be attributed to the combination.

The good sense of those individuals was prevented by this agreement, from having its free exercise.... Is this like the formation of a society for the promotion of the general welfare of the community, such as to advance the interests of religion, or to accomplish acts of charity and benevolence?

... is this freedom? Is it not restraining, instead of promoting, the spirit of ’76 when men expected to have no law but the Constitution, and laws adopted by it or enacted by the legislature in conformity to it?

Was it the spirit of ’76, that either masters or journeymen, in regulating the prices of their commodities should set up a rule contrary to the law of their country?

General and individual liberty was the spirit of ’76. It is our first blessing. It has been obtained and will be maintained.... (Law of Strikes, Cogley)

Spirit of ’76 Painting

One of America’s most iconic paintings - Spirit of ’76 - can be seen in the Selectmen’s Room at Abbot Hall at Marblehead, Massachusetts. Although a number of copies of the painting were subsequently created, this is the original. (Marblehead)

The Spirit of 76 is a painting that first went on display in 1876 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the United States declaring independence from Great Britain in 1776. It also celebrated the American Revolution and the people's spirit of independence and love of their country.

The painting depicts a flag bearer, drummer boy and fifer marching across a battlefield during the American Revolution. The 8' x 10' oil painting was created by Archibald Willard at the suggestion of Cleveland photographer Jas. F. Ryder, who felt that a patriotic painting would be appropriate for showing at the 1876 US centennial exhibition in Philadelphia.



Originally entitled Yankee Doodle, the painting was begun by Willard at his home in Wellington, OH, and moved in February 1876 to Willis Ame's studio in the old Union Natl. Bank Bldg. at 308 Euclid Ave. to facilitate modeling sessions.

Hugh Moser, a Civil War veteran and friend of Willard's, posed as the fifer; Henry K. Devereux, son of Gen. John H. Devereux, another neighbor, served as the model for the drummer; and Willard's father, Rev. Samuel Willard. Willard chose his father as the white-haired drummer figure because of the grave and determined expression in the old man's eyes. Samuel, incidentally, died during the centennial year of 1876. Charles Spicer, another neighbor, posed as the wounded soldier.

After the exhibition, the painting was shown in several large cities, acquiring its present name of Spirit of '76 in Boston before being returned to Ryder's gallery, where it was purchased by Gen. Devereux. (Case)

The Spirit of 76 reappeared again and again after the American Revolution as an idea, as a symbol and as a propaganda tool aimed at a public not terribly keen on going to war in Europe.

In the year leading up to the American entry into World War I, the conflict was unpopular with large swaths of the American public. For many Americans, the European War was just that—a war about and for Europeans.

The campuses of elite colleges such as Yale were the exception. Many students dropped out to join foreign forces or American volunteer efforts.

But, by and large, Americans went about their business - and business for the country's burgeoning manufacturing base was very good. American factories cranked out all sorts of materiel to fill the Allied needs for war.



But total participation in the war effort was essential. How could the American people be persuaded to support it by Congress, local governments and all of the supporting organizations?

Congress had the power, and used it, to institute the selective service (draft), but, much more was needed to win the hearts and minds of Americans. Federal and local governments used propaganda that was hard to ignore.

Images of the American Revolution were revived, especially the Spirit of 76. It was seen everywhere: the library, the post office and the bank. (New England Historical Society)

Information here is primarily from American Heritage; Case Western Reserve University; The Jefferson Monticello; New Jersey Public Library; Marblehead Historical Commission; The Law of Strikes, Lockouts and Labor Organizations, Thomas Sydenham Cogley; New England Historical Society

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young