

The First Fourth of July Celebration

While it's only been a paid federal holiday since 1938, the Fourth of July has been celebrated by Americans stretching back to that first momentous day in 1776.

Before the American Revolution, the King George III's June 4 birthday was a celebration marked with bonfires, speeches, and the ringing of bells. But in 1776, as patriotic fervor swept through the colonies, praising birthday celebrations turned to mock funerals for the King.

So was the mood of the colonies on July 2, 1776, when the Continental Congress voted in favor of American independence. On July 4, after making several minor changes to Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, Congress officially adopted the document.

While many parades, bonfires, and the firing of muskets and cannons greeted the document's public readings on July 8 of that year, the first organized July 4 celebration would take place in 1777 in Philadelphia and Boston.

According to the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* on July 5, 1777:

Yesterday the 4th of July, being the anniversary of the Independence of the United States of America, was celebrated in this city with demonstrations of joy and festivity. About noon all the armed ships and gallies in the river were drawn up before the city, dressed in the gayest manner, with the colors of the United States and streamers displayed. At one o'clock, the yards being properly manned, they began the celebration of the day by a discharge of thirteen cannon from each of the ships, and one from each of the thirteen gallies, in honor of the Thirteen United States ... The evening was closed with the ringing of bells, and at night there was a grand exhibition of fireworks (which began and concluded with thirteen rockets) on the Commons, and the city was beautifully illuminated.



"Pulling down the Statue of George III by the 'Sons of Freedom' at the Bowling Green, City of New York July 1776."

In Boston that same day, Col. Thomas Craft of the Sons of Liberty is said to have fired off fireworks and shells over Boston Common.

Following Congress's July 2 vote in favor of independence, John Adams wrote to his wife Abigail:

The Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America.—I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more.

Adams appears to have eventually capitulated to July 4 as Independence Day; according to David McCullough's biography of the second president, when Adams, on his deathbed, was told it was the Fourth of July, he answered clearly, "It is a great day. It is a good day."

Adams and Thomas Jefferson would both die on the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Five years later, another Founding Father and U.S. president, James Monroe, would also die on July 4.