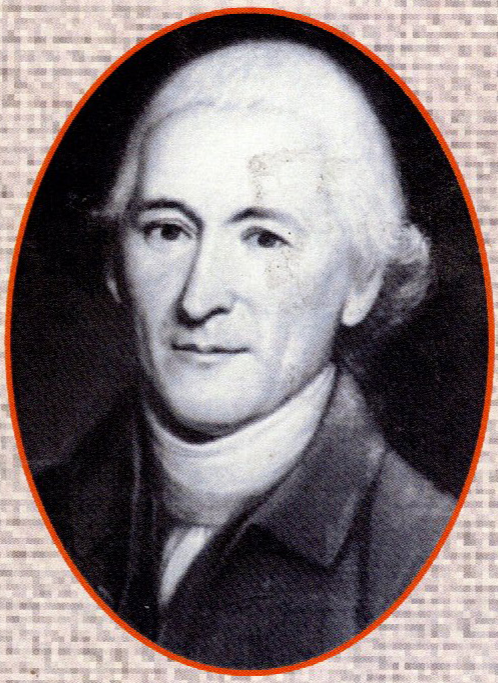

Charles Thomson

1729 - 1824

All proceeds from this booklet will go to

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Price: £2.00

Charles Thomson

Scholar, Revolutionary, Man of Truth

by Bruce Clark

All proceeds from this booklet will

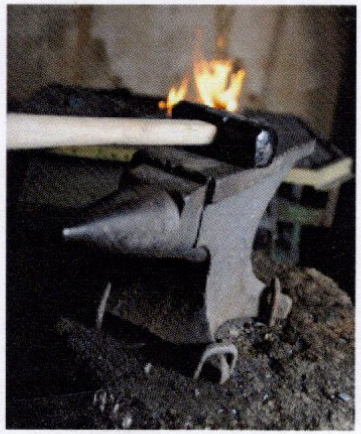
Save the Children

Thomson's home country

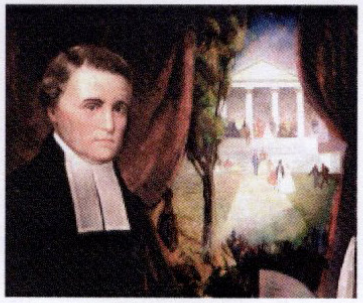
In all great political movements, there are some individuals who demand a place in the front ranks, using their charisma to rally supporters and thwart rivals. But there is another, equally vital category of people who prefer to stand a few paces back, drawing on wisdom and experience to encourage or restrain their leaders. That is a good way to describe the role of Charles Thomson in the early years of the American republic. Although he had the ability and force of character to act as a leader whenever the occasion demanded, he was a man who never pursued power for its own sake. Nor did he put personal advancement above principles or truthfulness.

Charles Thomson's story begins in rural Ireland where his father John was a linen bleacher. Although his recollections of Ireland were fleeting, Thomson always gave his birthplace as the townland of Gorteade in the parish of Maghera. The landscape of western Ulster, with its bogs, lakes and gorse-covered hills, was lodged somewhere deep in his heart.

As a boy, Charles had to contend with the sort of extreme adversity that can either make or break a character in its formative stages. His mother died young, and his father John Thomson decided in 1739 to sail to the New World with four of his sons, of whom Charles, aged ten, was the smallest. (It seems that two younger children were left behind, but went on to America later.) As their vessel was nearing land, John Thomson died, so his children were orphans when they arrived at New Castle, Delaware. The captain appropriated most of the cash which John Thomson had left in the ship's safe, leaving the four boys to fend for themselves. Charles was apprenticed to a blacksmith who was impressed by his dexterity. But the boy was already dreaming of a better future. He ran away, only to be picked up on the road by a lady who paid for his schooling at an academy which had been established by Francis Alison, a scholarly Presbyterian minister from Donegal. For a time Charles lodged in the Alison household, absorbing his guardian's belief that a Christian faith was compatible with a keen interest in science and the natural world.

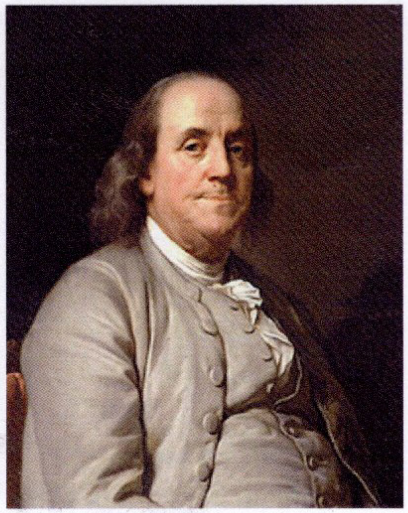


After briefly running his own small school, Charles moved in 1750 to Philadelphia, which was growing fast as a hub of commerce and ideas. He was given a teaching post at the Academy of Philadelphia which had just been started by Benjamin Franklin. This was the start of a long association between Franklin, a man whose quixotic, original mind towered over early America, and Thomson. Franklin encouraged his protégé, then aged only 21, to set up a club where young men could swap ideas about everything from business to science. But even as he made these glamorous connections, Thomson remembered his first benefactors. He helped his old teacher, Francis Alison, to win the job of rector of the Pennsylvania Academy, where many more of America's founders would be trained.



Francis Alison

Meanwhile Thomson's career moved on. In 1755, he was hired by a powerful group of Quakers to help run another Philadelphia institution, the Friends' Public School. But the Quakers wanted him to do more than teach. A contest over the future of Pennsylvania was starting, and Thomson was drawn in. Both the Quakers, with their pacifist ideas, and more hard-headed types like Franklin wanted to overturn the wealthy class of "proprietors" who held power in the colony. Meanwhile relations with the Indians were breaking down, as some tribes sided with the French in their war with the British empire. The proprietors wanted stronger military measures against the Indians; the anti-proprietor camp retorted that the Indians had been provoked by bad policies. In April 1756, after a winter of skirmishing, the colony's governor declared war on the Delaware Indians. The Quakers responded by opening talks with the Indians' leader, Teedyuscung. In several rounds of negotiations with the Indians over the next two years, Thomson acted as secretary and adviser to Teedyuscung, with the Quakers' blessing. His accurate record-keeping and strict interpretation of earlier treaties won him the esteem of the Delawares and the title "the man who talks the truth" – in their language, Wegh-wu-law-mo-end. Thomson also wrote a peppery tract on the "causes of alienation" of the Indians, which Franklin, by then in London, eagerly published. Some historians question the motives of the anti-proprietor camp, but nobody has doubted Thomson's sincerity. He genuinely believed that treaties should be respected, and that records should be truthful.

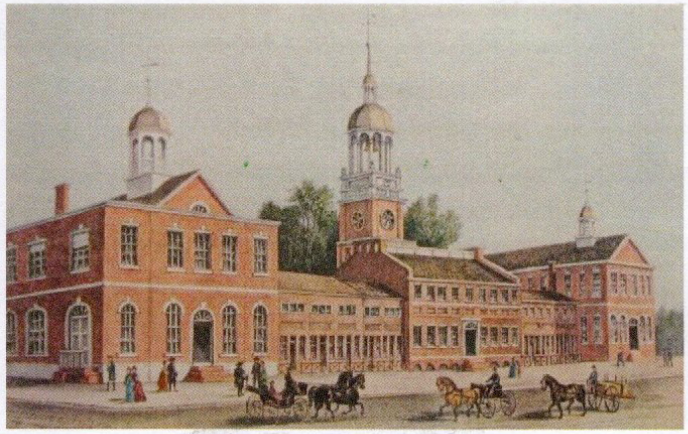


Benjamin Franklin

Teedyuscung

In 1760, a new phase in Thomson's career began. He resigned from his teaching post and expressed his intention, through a notice in the Pennsylvania Gazette, to start life as a merchant. His shop in Philadelphia's

Market Street would sell imports from London and Bristol, ranging from blankets and handkerchiefs to teas and spices. With his Quaker connections, Thomson was well acquainted with the town's leading businessmen, and he was already part of an important circle of thinkers and writers. His recent marriage to Ruth Mather, from a merchant family, had cemented those ties. This marriage seems to have been successful, though it ended in sadness. After bearing twin boys who died soon after birth, Ruth suffered a decline in her own health and eventually died in 1770.



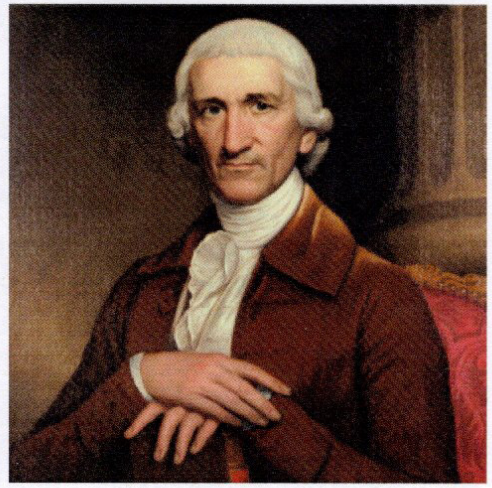
Independence Hall, Philadelphia

Meanwhile, life as a merchant presented many unexpected difficulties. In 1764, Thomson joined Franklin and several other people in offering money to start a "linen manufactory" near Philadelphia. So the son of a linen bleacher, now resident in a colony that exported flax to Ireland and imported cloth in return, joined an effort to give the colonies an independent economic base. But this was exactly what powerful interests in the mother country wanted to stop. Within a year or two, economic war had broken out between Britain and her American colonies.

Signing the Declaration of Independence: Thomson stands above the seated figure

Once again, Franklin started agitating in London, while Thomson fed him tips about the rapidly shifting scene in the colonies. Soon, the issue was not which camp or faction would rule the colonies in the name of the King; it was whether the American colonies would remain British at all. The British Parliament, having incurred a huge debt through war with the French, set out to raise more money from the colonies. In the first of several provocative actions, the law-makers of Britain decreed in 1765 that documents in the colonies (from legal papers to magazines) should be printed on paper carrying a stamp showing that tax had been paid on it. As Thomson informed Franklin, the colonies' reaction was angrier than anybody in London could realize; the tax would be impossible to collect. The Stamp Act was repealed in 1766, but the British Parliament still reserved the right to tax the colonies; the American colonies accepted no such right.

In a letter to Franklin in 1769, Thomson shows his clarity of vision and breadth of education. He pointed out that the issue which caused the English Civil War – who had the right to impose taxes? - was now dividing Britain and her overseas territories. "The very nature of freedom supposes that no tax can be levied on a people without their consent," Thomson thundered, accurately anticipating the question that would spark the American Revolution. By this time, Parliament in London was again trying to impose its will, slapping a series of duties on goods that the colonies imported from England. Every time Britain asserted its power, the disparate American colonies drew closer to one another. But after 1770, when Britain had made some concessions, Thomson faced a hard battle to maintain support



Charles Thomson in maturity

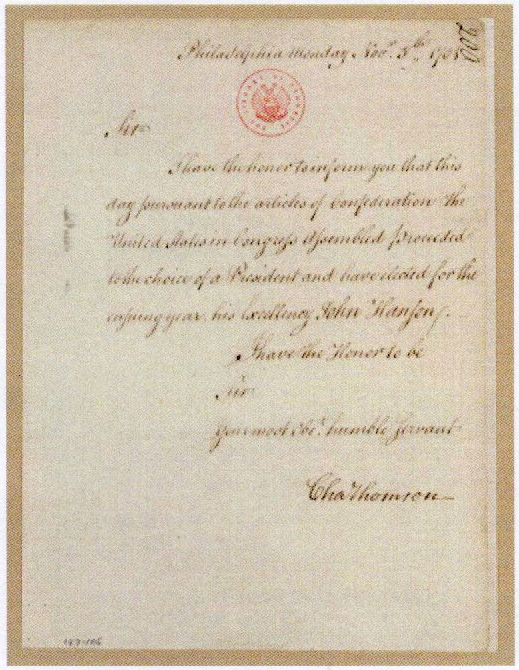
in his native Pennsylvania for the policy of boycott or "non-importation" of British goods. Both the wealthier merchants, and his old Quaker friends, wanted to resume commercial ties with England. Rallying support from workers and small tradesmen in Philadelphia, Thomson insisted that a boycott be maintained unless and until Britain accepted that the King's colonial subjects deserved the same political and legal rights as people in England. Things came to a head in 1773 after Parliament tried to reinforce the privileges of the London-based East India Company as suppliers of tea to the colonies – prompting a tea-dumping protest in Boston harbour, and retaliatory measures by Britain. With a handful of close allies, Thomson laboured to ensure that Pennsylvania would back Massachussetts in its standoff with London. He exchanged passionate but well-reasoned letters with Massachussetts revolutionaries like John and Sam Adams. Soon Thomson was hailed as the "Sam Adams of Philadelphia", while John Adams called him "the life of the cause of liberty."

In large part thanks to Thomson, support in Pennsylvania for the revolutionary cause was strong enough (albeit far from universal) to ensure that Philadelphia would serve as the emerging republic's first capital. In August 1774, the city hosted the first gathering of the aggrieved colonies, known as the Continental Congress, and Thomson was elected secretary. He received the news shortly after arriving in the city in a carriage with his new wife, Hannah Harrison. On July 4, 1776, when Congress took the fateful step of formally declaring independence, the document sent to the printer bore only two signatures: those of John Hancock and Charles Thomson. If the Revolutionary War had failed, both men would have faced certain execution for treason.

Having taken a radical line in the years immediately before independence, Thomson emerged as a more cautious and careful figure during the 15 years that he served as secretary to Congress. Among his jobs was to distribute accurate information about the assembly's decisions, and to record the progress of the Revolutionary War and other public events. His signature became a watchword for accuracy. But not all the information he handled could be made public. He corresponded, often in secret, with all 13 colonies making up the Union and with foreign powers. He had to maintain morale during the darkest periods of the war, including the times when the assembly had to flee Philadelphia. But he never issued comforting falsehoods. In 1782, he was asked to design a Great Seal, drawing on the ideas from some of his famous friends like Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, the main author of the Declaration of Independence. The result was the now-familiar bald eagle clutching arrows and an olive branch; and the more mysterious image of a pyramid topped with an eye. Thomson used his classical learning to choose the mottos: "Annuit coeptis" (He has favoured our cause) and "Novus Ordo Seclorum" (A New Order of the Ages.)

The Great Seal

Thomson's last public act a week-long ride in spring 1789 from New York, where Congress was then sitting, to Mount Vernon, the estate of George Washington. He bore the news that his host had been chosen as the first President of the United States. It was a journey "much impeded by tempestuous weather, bad roads, and the many large rivers I had to cross." But there was deep mutual respect between the two men, and Thomson was welcomed as a worthy emissary. As Washington's biographer notes, the secretary of Congress was a "a tall, austere man of inborn dignity and deep penetrating eyes"....whom the President-elect admired as a "faithful public servant and exemplary patriot." After receiving the mandate from Thomson, on April 14, 1789, Washington offered a gracious reply: "I wish there may not be reason for regretting the choice."


Philadelphia Monday Sept. 5th 1785

Sir

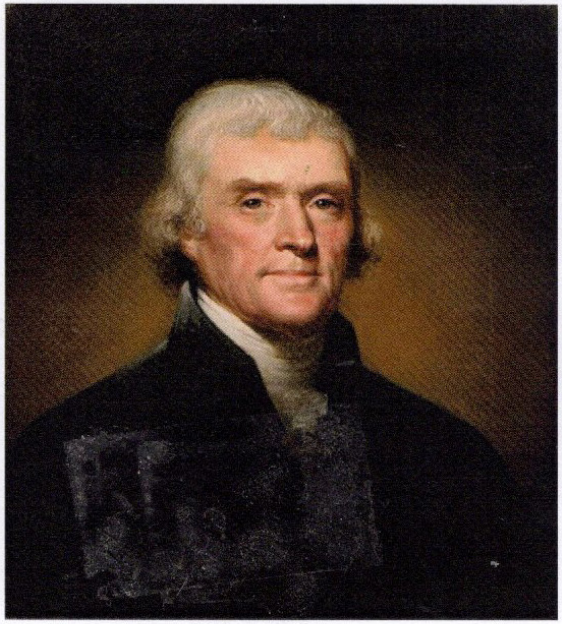
I have the honor to inform you that this day pursuant to the articles of confederation the United States in Congress assembled proceeded to the choice of a President and have elected for the ensuing year his excellency John Hancock.

I have the Honor to be
Sir
your most Obt. humble servant

Chas Thomson

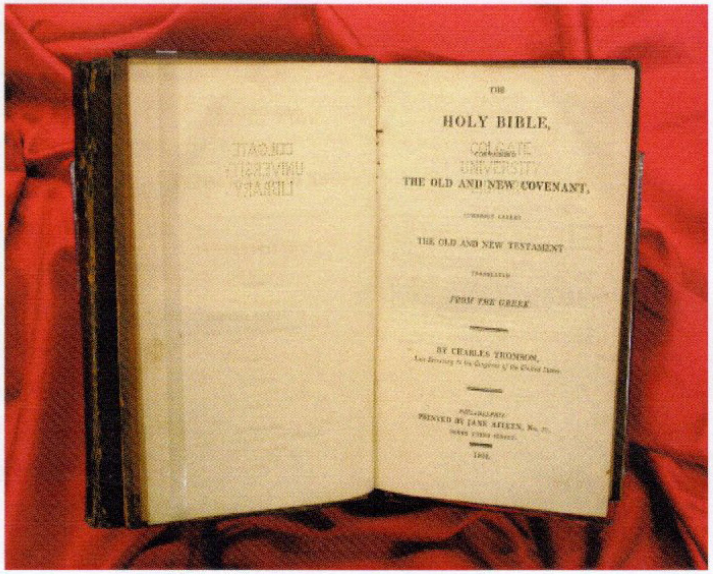
Thomson confirms John Hancock as president of Congress

After his retirement to Harriton, a small estate outside Philadelphia, Thomson was urged by some people to write a history of the revolution, and he began doing so. But it seems that he abandoned the task on grounds that an accurate account would destroy the reputation of some prominent families, and he would rather publish nothing than issue undeserved praise.



Thomas Jefferson

Instead he revived his classical skills and undertook a translation of the Bible, using a Greek version, known as the Septuagint, of the Hebrew scriptures. In some ways this was an inspired choice. Only in the 20th century did scholars realize that for certain key passages, the Septuagint offers crucial insights into the earliest versions of the text. Thomas Jefferson, although a sceptic in religious matters, warmly approved Thomson's labours on the Bible. The work seems to have brought Thomson satisfaction and serenity in his old age. When toiling on the translation, Thomson recalled, he had "sought the truth with the utmost integrity." The epitaph on Thomson's tomb, erected by his nephew John, paraphrases a famous Bible verse (John 1:14) to describe him as "*homo veritatis et gratiae*" – a man of grace and truth.



Thomson's Translation

Thomson's last home: Harriton House, Bryn Mawr, near Philadelphia

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776.

A DECLARATION

BY THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

IN GENERAL CONGRESS ASSEMBLED.

WHEN in the Course of human Events, it becomes necessary for one People to dissolve the Political Bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the Powers of the Earth, the separate and equal Station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the Separation.

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient Causes; and accordingly all Experience hath shewn, that Mankind are more disposed to suffer, while Evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the Forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long Train of Abuses and Usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object, evinces a Design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their Right, it is their Duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future Security. Such has been the patient Sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the Necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The History of the present King of Great-Britain is a History of repeated Injuries and Usurpations, all having in direct Object the Establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid World.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public Good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing Importance, unless suspended in their Operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the Accommodation of large Districts of People, unless those People would relinquish the Right of Representation in the Legislature, a Right inestimable to them, and formidable to Tyrants only.

He has called together Legislative Bodies at Places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the Depository of their public Records, for the sole Purpose of fatiguing them into Compliance with his Measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly Firmness his Invasions on the Rights of the People.

He has refused for a long Time, after such Dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative Powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the Dangers of Invasion from without, and Convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the Population of these States; for that Purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their Migrations hither, and raising the Conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary Powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the Tenure of their Offices, and the Amount and Payment of their Salaries.

He has erected a Multitude of new Offices, and sent hither Swarms of Officers to harrass our People, and eat out their Substance.

He has kept among us, in Times of Peace, Standing Armies, without the Consent of our Legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil Power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a Jurisdiction foreign to our Constitution, and unacknowledged by our Laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For quartering large Bodies of Armed Troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from Punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all Parts of the World:

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:

For depriving us, in many Cases, of the Benefits of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended Offences:

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an arbitrary Government, and enlarging its Boundaries, so as to render it at once an Example and fit Instrument for introducing the same absolute Rule into these Colonies:

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with Power to legislate for us in all Cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our Seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our Towns, and destroyed the Lives of our People.

He is, at this Time, transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the Works of Death, Desolation, and Tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty and Perfidy, scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous Ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized Nation.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the Executioners of their Friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

He has excited domestic Insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the Inhabitants of our Frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known Rule of Warfare, is an undistinguished Destruction, of all Ages, Sexes and Conditions.

In every Stage of these Oppressions we have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble Terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated Injury. A Prince, whose Character is thus marked by every Act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the Ruler of a free People.

Nor have we been wanting in Attentions to our British Brethren. We have warned them from Time to Time of Attempts by their Legislature to extend an unwarrantable Jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the Circumstances of our Emigration and Settlement here. We have appealed to their native Justice and Magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the Ties of our common Kindred to disavow these Usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our Connections and Correspondence. They too have been deaf to the Voice of Justice and of Consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the Necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of Mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace, Friends.

We, therefore, the Representatives of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in GENERAL CONGRESS, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the World for the Rectitude of our Intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly Publish and Declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES; that they are absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political Connection between them and the State of Great-Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which INDEPENDENT STATES may of right do. 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.

Signed by ORDER *and in* BEHALF *of the* CONGRESS,

JOHN HANCOCK, PRESIDENT.

ATTEST.
CHARLES THOMSON, SECRETARY.

PHILADELPHIA: PRINTED BY JOHN DUNLAP.