

If the Declaration of Independence Kept a Diary



July 2, 1776—My birthday! Tom Jefferson, my creator, today submitted me to the Second Continental Congress. Phew, was it ever hot here in Williamsburg!

July 4, 1776—I'm exhausted! I've really been worked over. These guys changed a third of me—and between you and me, I don't think Tom's too pleased about it. But so be it, they've at last settled on the words I am now. Charlie Thomson signed me, as did John Hancock. Boy, that guy, what a signature! I swear he tickled me halfway up my back!

August 2, 1776—Another exhausting day. Fifty more delegates signed me. Some of these guys are really nervous. Once they've signed me, you know, they'll hang for treason if captured by those Brits.

January 7, 1790—Wow, what a wild four years this has been! When the British invaded Philadelphia, they put me in a trunk and everybody who had signed me had to run for their lives. Me, too. I've been to York, down in Pennsylvania. Over to Annapolis in Maryland, and then to New Jersey, in the city of Trenton. Hey, that's a lot of traveling for a chunk of paper like me. Then when the good guys finally won and that Washington fellow was elected President, he decided I ought to be here, in New York City, the nation's capital, to take up residence in the office of his secretary of state. And just guess who that is—my creator! Tom Jefferson! Really! Isn't that something? Back together after four of the wildest years the world's ever seen.

August 20, 1814—I'm in some minister's home in Leesburg—that's in Virginia—hiding from those Brits again. You know, I'd just like to get settled at some point, like most any other decent document. You see, after they hauled me up to New York City, they changed the capital to Philadelphia, so they hauled me down there. Then they decided this Washington place, in the District of Columbia, would make for a better capital, so they dragged me down here. And just when I thought my moving days were over, here come the British again, aiming to burn me. And they still are. That's why I'm hiding here in the dark, in Leesburg. Boring!

February 10, 1821—I think that maybe, just maybe, this time I'm settled. After those Brits were finally chased out of Washington, I returned from Virginia. But what a mess it was here! I swear half the buildings had been burned. So they've moved me time and time again. But now they've had me here at the Department of State for over a year. Let's keep our fingers crossed. One problem, though: I'm all rolled up. I'll get stiff and sore, I just know it.

December 31, 1841—What a year this was! The new Secretary of State, Daniel Webster, figured I should be on view. Smart man, that Webster. So he had me unrolled. Aahhh! That felt so good after 20 years! Then I was mounted and displayed. That's right—I'm the featured display in the Department of State's newest undertaking, the Patent Office.

August 2, 1875—This isn't good. I don't feel well. I've been hanging here for 35 years. I've gone yellow. It's that window over there, the one directly across from me. I'm fading in its light. Doesn't anybody care? Don't people notice? Are these government workers idiots?

July 4, 1876—I'm back in Philadelphia for the big Centennial Exposition! Has it really been 100 years since all those brave men put pen to me? But dear me, my yellowed and faded presentation would shame them all. Some of those great names can't even be read anymore. I can't help it. I just can't hold the inks, year-in and year-out, against the air and sun. At this rate, I'll never make it to the Bicentennial. Oh my, what an amazing thought—200 years! It boggles the imagination.

December 3, 1877—Holy smokes, that was close! They moved me, just this year, from that awful Patent Office to the Department of State library. And then, what do you know—the Patent Office burned just months after my move. I'd have been nothing but ashes!

January 5, 1894—They've got to do something. I feel awful and look worse. Been hanging here at the State Department library for 17 years. There's just got to be a better way.

January 1, 1900—1900! Amazing! I wonder if the boys of 1776 in Philadelphia ever thought we'd be around this long, and be this big! Anyway, since 1894 I've been tucked between two plates of glass and locked in here, a steel safe in the State, War, and Navy Building. It's restful and, for the most part, my health's not worsening.

December 31, 1921—Hey, what a year this has been! They put me into the strangest thing—a machine called a Model T—and moved me over to the Library of Congress. It's a much nicer section of town, but really, these senators and representatives fall far short of the great men who wrote all over me. You would really think that with all the people in this country now, you'd be able to find a few boys with brighter bulbs than they have here! Anyway, the really great news is that they brought all these fancy, high-brow document experts in from all over the country to examine me. And they decided to put me back up on display. This time, however, the lighting is perfect—real soothing—none of this harsh, burning stuff. I love it.

December 26, 1941—I'm on the run again. This time, though, it's not from the Brits. Now I'm running from the Germans and Japanese. The people in charge expect that plans are afoot to bomb buildings throughout Washington. So they stuck me in a bronze container, provided me with a Secret Service guard, and I'm traveling on a Pullman to Fort Knox, Kentucky. Evidently I'll be put in some underground vault within the Bullion Depository. So much attention for little old me, just a brittle of piece of paper!

October 1, 1944—This World War II mess isn't over yet, but I guess the enemy's on the run and it's safe to bring me back to the Library of Congress. The quarters here are really something! I'm sealed in insulating glass with the air expelled and they've put special paper next to my back to suck up moisture and help me endure any possible temperature change. And here, too, the lighting is perfect. But best of all, they've got these special guards from the Army, Navy, and Marines watching over me. I can't imagine better accommodations.

December 14, 1952—Wow, they did it. Even *better* accommodations. Yesterday they moved me to this new Archives Building. And what a move it was! I was in an Army armored personnel carrier, escorted by tanks, an Army band, and troops with machine guns. Then they put me in here, in this bulletproof, helium-filled display case. Better yet—and get a load of this—with the push of a button, my whole display goes through the floor, down 22 feet into a 55-ton vault built of steel and reinforced concrete. I think I'm safe now.