

In the summer of 1776, fifty- six men met in a Philadelphia hall to knowingly commit an act of blatant treason against the Crown of Great Britain. Coming from all walks of life, lawyers, politicians, farmers, doctors, diplomats, and even a scientist, made up the ranks of this diverse collection of men (Kindig). Their crime against the Crown was committed with, of all possible weapons, a pen. All fifty- six men placed their signatures on a one- page document that was to be sent to King George III, ruler of Great Britain. That document was the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America.

Each man knew the consequences of signing his name on this declaration of freedom. A signature on this document meant a public admittance of treason against the British Empire, an act punishable by death. Signers put their reputations, wealth, land, and safety at risk as they penned their names and confirmed their treason against Great Britain (Valis). The men that signed the Declaration of Independence willingly sacrificed all they had to further the cause of freedom.

One of the particularly exemplary Signers who “voluntarily incurred the greatest degree of suffering, without any possibility of individual gain” was John Hart. “Honest John Hart”, as he was known in his state, served as a delegate to New Jersey in the Continental Congress as a man in his sixties, making him one of the oldest men to sign the Declaration of Independence (Kiernan and D’Agnese). No act could be more “inimical to Mr. Hart’s private interests” (Lossing) than this, as his property and fortune were exposed to the onslaught of the British army under General Howe marching across New Jersey in pursuit of George Washington. John’s bedridden wife Deborah and his thirteen children were forced to abandon their property, which was ravaged by Hessian troops (Sanderson). The British then sought in earnest to capture John Hart. He was “driven from the bedside of his dying partner” and “hunted like a noxious beast” (Kiernan and D’Agnese), not daring to sleep two nights under the same roof. Exiled to the New Jersey

wilderness, even as an elderly man, John slept in caves and, on occasion, with dogs, throughout the remainder of the year 1776, during which time his beloved wife died (Lossing). Shortly after this ordeal, several of John's friends and fellow members of the colonial legislature forsook the cause of freedom and signed oaths of loyalty to the British. Even during this time of crisis, John Hart was not discouraged and remained true to the cause of independence. He died without fortune or a knowledge of what this nation would become a few short years later in 1779, still serving in the New Jersey state assembly (Valis).

John Hart and the fifty- five other signers of the Declaration of Independence were true patriots of liberty and freedom. Even though these men wielded pens instead of muskets, they were willing to sacrifice everything they had for a chance to win independence. As John Hart's story reveals, many suffered great personal trials to do so. These fifty- six men provided hope to an oppressed world with their undeniable courage, as they boldly stood up to the greatest power of their age, and pushed for the freedoms of speech, worship, and representation that Americans enjoy today.

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