

Trumbull's "The Declaration of Independence:" Keys and Dates

Author(s): Irma B. Jaffe

Source: *The American Art Journal*, Autumn, 1971, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Autumn, 1971), pp. 41-49

Published by: Kennedy Galleries, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1593908>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Kennedy Galleries, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The American Art Journal*

Trumbull's *The Declaration of Independence*: Keys and Dates

BY IRMA B. JAFFE

THE RECENT INVASIONS of John Trumbull's *The Declaration of Independence* have left some pockets of resistance.¹ We must now look into the problem of the *Key*, and also settle the question of the dating of the Yale painting (Fig. 1).

Gordon Hendricks was first to raise doubts about the traditional date of the Yale picture, given as 1786–1797² and believed it might not have come into existence until 1817.³ However, while it is correct that the eighteenth century dates are too early for the finished painting, and that the final revisions were not made until after 1817, most of the work had been done much before this late date and in fact one might say the first version of the painting was actually finished by 1808. In Trumbull's "Schedule of Property in my possession this 30th Nov. 1808"⁴ he includes in his list of paintings:

Declaration of Independance [sic] at Mr. Murray's house⁵ \$ 2,000.
Four other American subjects—partly finished, of which three are at Mr.
Murray's house 3,000.

Listing the other paintings as partly finished indicates the small *Declaration of Independence*—the actual *canvas* of the painting now at Yale (Fig. 1)—was at that time completed, at least in its first version, which I believe is approximately the Washington *composition* (Fig. 2).

In 1804, Trumbull held an exhibition of his paintings in New York. The catalogue lists only two American history subjects, *Bunker's Hill* and the *Death of Montgomery*. If the *Declaration* had been finished it would undoubtedly have been included, and we may reasonably assume this work was completed sometime after the 1804 exhibition, with a terminal date of 1808 except for some important revisions.

The evidence indicates that substantial progress had been made during the span of years assigned by Theodore Sizer. In April 1790, Trumbull published a

1. Gordon Hendricks, "Durand, Maverick and the *Declaration*," and Irma B. Jaffe, "Fordham University's Trumbull Drawings; Mistaken Identities in *The Declaration of Independence* and Other Discoveries." (both) *American Art Journal*, Vol. III, Number 1, Spring 1971.
2. Theodore Sizer, *The Works of Colonel John Trumbull*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967 (rev.). Originally published in 1950.
3. Hendricks, op. cit., p. 58.
4. New-York Historical Society, Trumbull Papers, hereafter NYHS Papers.
5. Further down the list Trumbull refers to some of his paintings at Mr. Murray's house in Peale Street. According to Longworth's *New York Directory* for 1808, this would be John Murray and sons, Merchants; the other Murrys on Peale were a brewer, a hairdresser and a druggist.

Irma Jaffe is Associate Professor of Art History and chairman of the Fine Arts Department at Fordham University. She is the author of the recently published book, Joseph Stella.

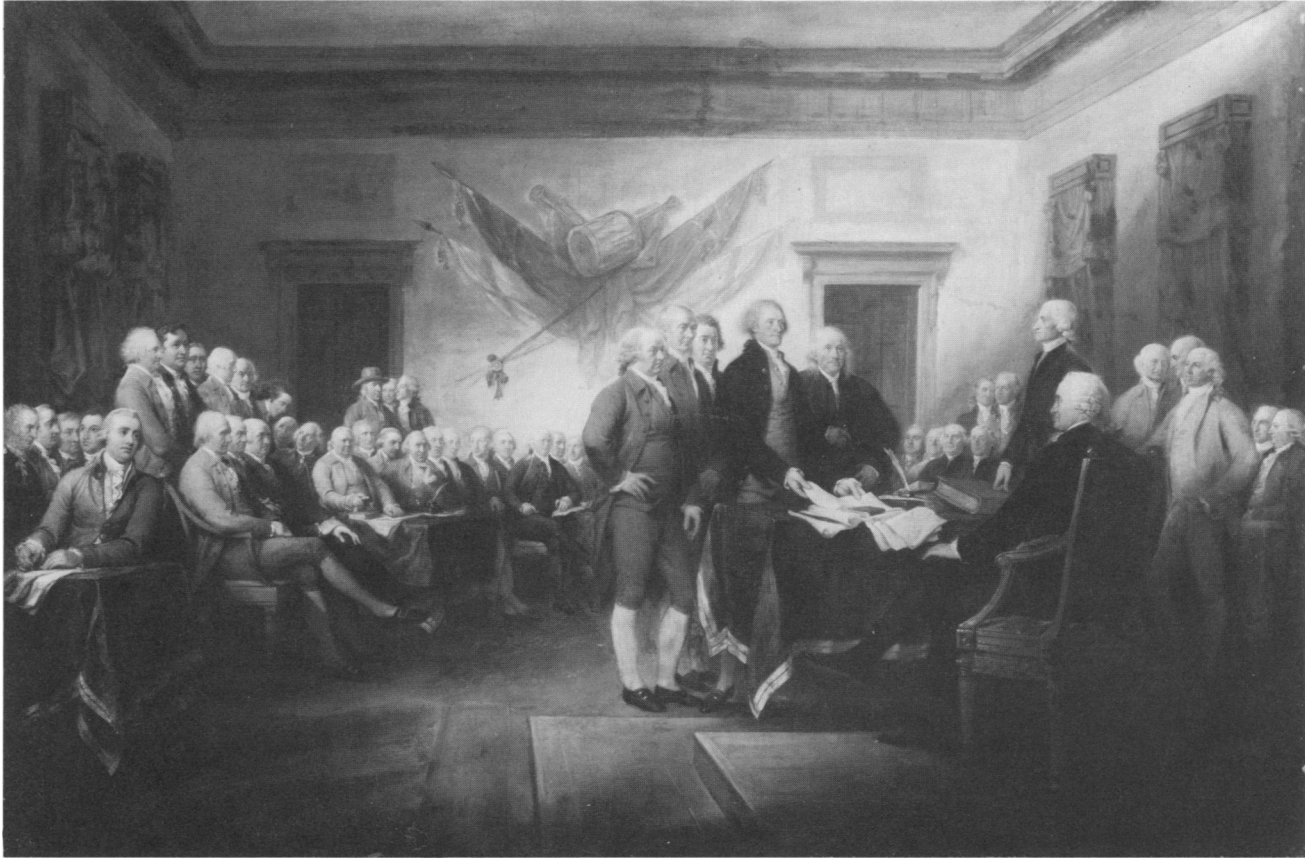


Fig. 1. JOHN TRUMBULL: *The Declaration of Independence*, oil on canvas, 21 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 31 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches. Yale University Art Gallery.

Prospectus in which he announced his proposal to sell subscriptions for prints of the *Bunker's Hill* and the *Montgomery* pictures, as the first of a series of engravings on American history subjects. He further announced "The Subjects proposed to be represented, in addition to the foregoing . . . are **The Declaration of Independence*, **The Battle of Trenton*, **The Battle of Princeton*, *Surrender of Gen. Burgoyne*, *Treaty with France*, *Battle of Entaw Springs*, **Surrender at Yorktown*, *The Treaty of Peace*, *The Evacuation of New York*, *The Arch at Trenton*, *The Inauguration of the President of the United States* . . . those marked with a star are considerably advanced." "Considerably advanced" is open to interpretation, of course. Judging from Trumbull's references in his *Autobiography* he began the composition in Paris during his stay with Jefferson in 1786⁶ and added thirty-six portraits,⁷ many of them directly on the canvas from life, between 1789 when he returned to the United States and 1794 when he left again for England.⁸ But it was not finished, as we infer from the exhibition record.

The date of 1808 cannot be considered the final date of the Yale painting, however, since it differs from the Washington picture (Fig. 2) for which the Yale

6. TheodoreSizer (ed.), *The Autobiography of Colonel John Trumbull*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958, p. 93.

7. Letter to Jefferson, December 28, 1817. Trumbull Collection, Historical Manuscripts Division, Yale University Library.

8. John Hill Morgan, *The Paintings of John Trumbull at Yale University*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1926, p. 39.

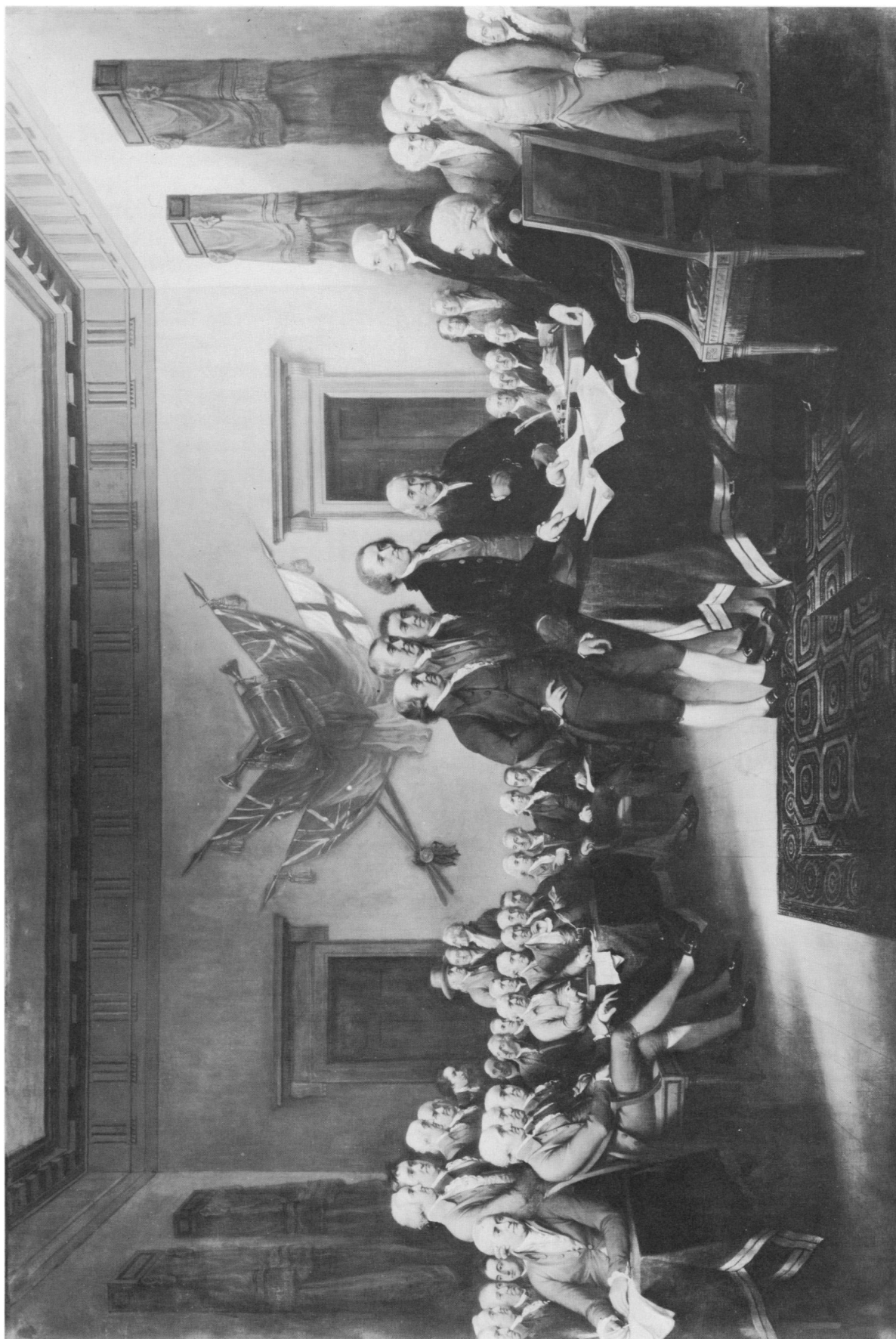


Fig. 2. JOHN TRUMBULL: *The Declaration of Independence*, 1817-1818, oil on canvas, 12 feet x 18 feet. National Capitol, Washington, D.C.

work was the “prototype,” as Trumbull referred to it,⁹ and as we shall see, at least some of the changes were made after the completion of the commissioned work. To understand what happened we have the evidence offered by three *Keys* for the painting (Figures 3, 4, 5).

The first *Key* (not one of the three referred to above) was made apparently by Trumbull himself as a line drawing. In a letter of February 19, 1819¹⁰ he writes that the small [Yale] painting hung in the Hall of Representatives for “more than a week in February 1817 accompanied with a *Key* and list of names.” It was at this time, February 6, 1817, and on the basis of the small *Declaration*, that the Congress passed the resolution commissioning the four Rotunda pictures. The composition must have included no more than forty-six portraits at this stage, for on February 3, 1818, General (later President) William Harrison wrote the artist that he had subscribed for a print of the proposed engraving, and reminded him of his promise to correct the omission of Harrison’s father who was not included in the “sketch.”¹¹ Trumbull had written Harrison as early as February 10, 1815, asking for a description of his father, Benjamin Harrison, and painted in the signer sometime after the painting’s exhibition in the Hall of Representatives in February 1817, when William Harrison must have seen it and noted the omission, and before December 28, 1817, when he wrote to Jefferson that he had painted Harrison and Whipple from “memory and description.”¹² Trumbull revised the Yale painting before the end of 1817 to include the forty-seventh portrait, and revised the *Key*, to agree with it. This we know from the wording of the broadside the artist published soliciting subscriptions for a proposed engraving of the *Declaration*. “Proposal by John Trumbull for publishing by subscription A Print from the original picture now painting by him By order of the Government of the United States and to be placed when finished in the Capitol; representing the *Declaration of Independence* and containing the Portraits of forty-seven of the members present in Congress on that memorable occasion. The plate will be engraved by the most eminent artist in Europe.” On the back page of the broadside the reader is informed that “the numbers opposite to the names refer to the Outline of the Heads, which is placed under the Painting as a *Key*.”¹³ Unfortunately the artist’s outline drawing with forty-seven heads has not turned up. John Hill Morgan believed that the numbering of the *Key* printed by C. and R. Metzgeroth in 1859 was copied from this broadside¹⁴ but this supposition does not account for the difference in the numbering of Lynch and Harrison—numbers four and five, respectively, on Trumbull’s list and on the Washington painting, but reversed on the Metzgeroth *Key*. However, this discrepancy, and the other differences of the Metzgeroth *Key* compared with the Washington painting are not without interest and should not, I believe, be viewed simply as printers’ errors. Joseph Hewes, facing to his right, as he must on the basis of the portrait from which Trumbull copied,¹⁵ is keyed as number twenty-seven, which position he has on the Washington picture, although he is number

9. Letter to the Virginia delegation in Congress, February 19, 1819. NYHS, *Papers*.

10. Ibid.

11. NYHS, *Papers*.

12. Yale, cited above, note 7.

13. A copy of the broadside is conserved in the Prints Division of the New York Public Library.

14. Morgan, op. cit., p. 38.

15. Jaffe, op. cit., p. 10.

twenty-six on the outline head holding the Hewes pose—the number and position given him on the Yale painting and its *Key*. The poses of numbers thirty-five and thirty-six have also been altered, and number twenty-nine has been moved to the left in the painting in order to be free from the overlap of John Adams' elbow which has had to be slightly more foreshortened to permit this space. Head number eighteen is not represented, although Thomas Willing is accounted for on the Metzgeroths' list for their *Key*, and this must be counted an error for the printers. Taking a clue from the Wadsworth Atheneum version of this work (Fig. 6), and taking into consideration the pose of the heads, we can surmise that Josiah Bartlett had occupied the place given to Harrison, as figure number four; Harrison then was given the number four, with Bartlett, pushed between him and Whipple, becoming number three, and Lynch number five. Trumbull then renumbered, and apparently forgot to correct the outline head for Hewes who was now to occupy position number twenty-seven in the painting.¹⁶ The Metzgeroth *Key* might therefore be based on an uncorrected Trumbull *Key* for the 1817 revision with Benjamin Harrison added.

The Yale painting differs in a number of respects from the Washington version. Since Asher B. Durand worked from the Yale painting for his engraving of the *Declaration of Independence*, the new *Key*, called the *Durand Key*, which was given to subscribers who bought the prints, allows us to identify the further changes in the Yale painting made after the completion of the Washington canvas. Inasmuch as these alterations have already been detailed¹⁷ we will focus only on the one that helps us date the final completion of the Yale painting: the added portrait of Thomas Nelson.

Let us return to Trumbull's letter of February 19, 1819, cited only briefly earlier. It was an answer to an indignant letter he had received a day earlier from the Congressmen from Virginia demanding to know why three members of the Virginia delegation to the Independence-voting Congress in 1776—Thomas Nelson, Frances L. Lee and Carter Bauxton—were omitted from the painting. Trumbull replied:

"The Three Gentlemen of the Virginia delegation . . . were *dead*, and I was not able to procure any portrait of them . . . No branch of the family of either of them ever expressed to me any dissatisfaction at the omission, or offered to procure or send me any portrait by means of which I could remedy it . . . the small painting which is the prototype of this hung in the Hall of Representatives more than a week in February 1817 without a word being said to me in objection to the omission . . . I am ready to add the portraits of the Gentlemen in question if you will have the goodness to procure for me authentic materials."¹⁸ The authentic material seems to have been provided in the person of Hugh Nelson, a son of Thomas, and Congressman from Virginia 1811–1823. John Adams described

16. When the Durand *Key* was made, the numbering for Lynch and Harrison was changed to accord with the sequence of their appearance from left to right. Later, in the Hartford painting, Bartlett appears to have been shifted to number twenty-seven, with Walton and Hewes each moved one down to twenty-six and twenty-five respectively.

17. Hendricks, op. cit., p. 61, note 8. However, I do not read the change in the dais on which Hancock sits as Hendricks does: following the pattern on the rug one sees there is also a two-tier dais "under the rug" of the Washington picture; in the Yale painting the rug is gone—possibly deleted for the engraving—but the dais is the same. One can see the repainting along the left edge of the lower tier.

18. NYHS, *Papers*.

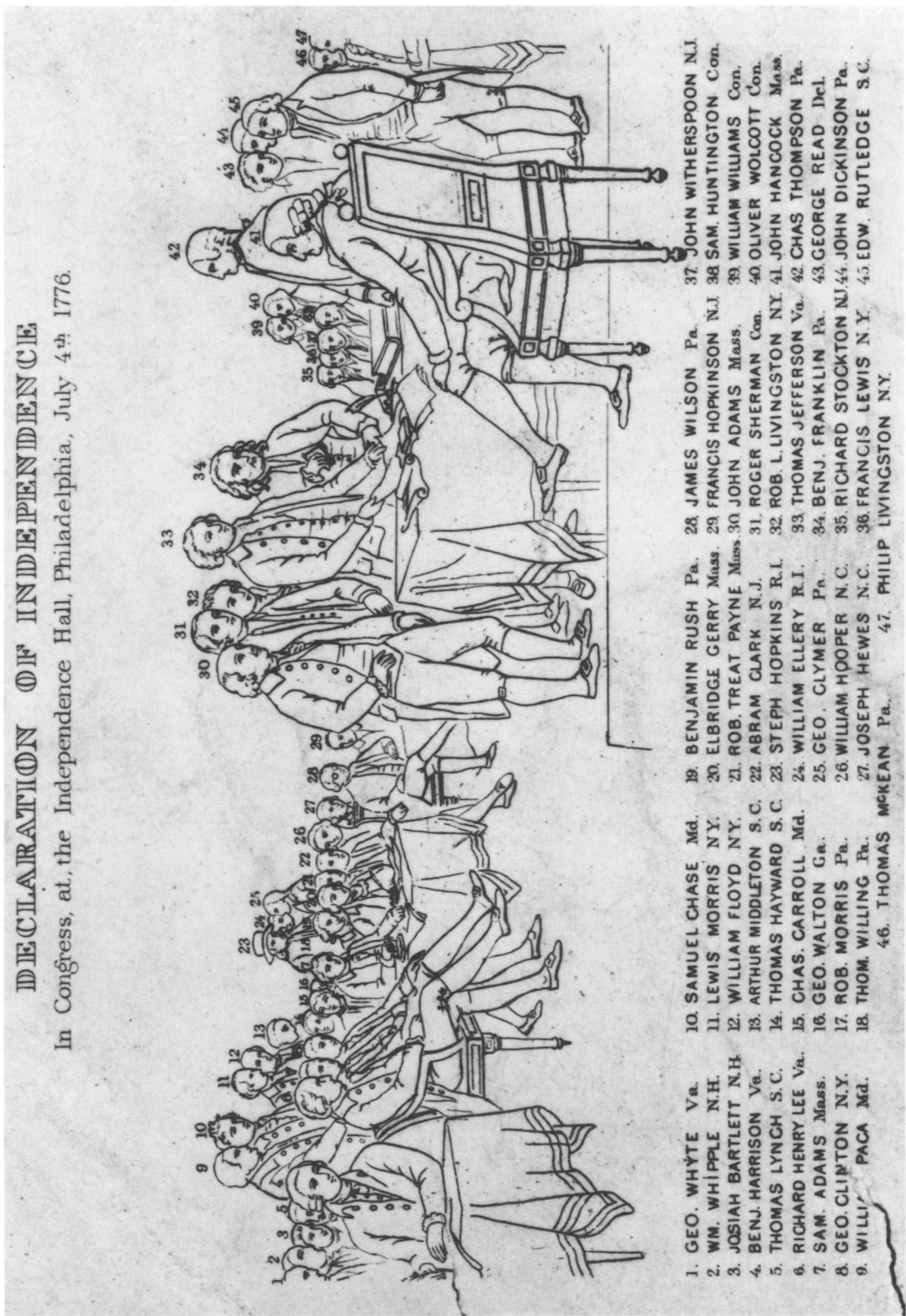


Fig. 3. C. AND R. METZGEROTH: Key for The Declaration of Independence.

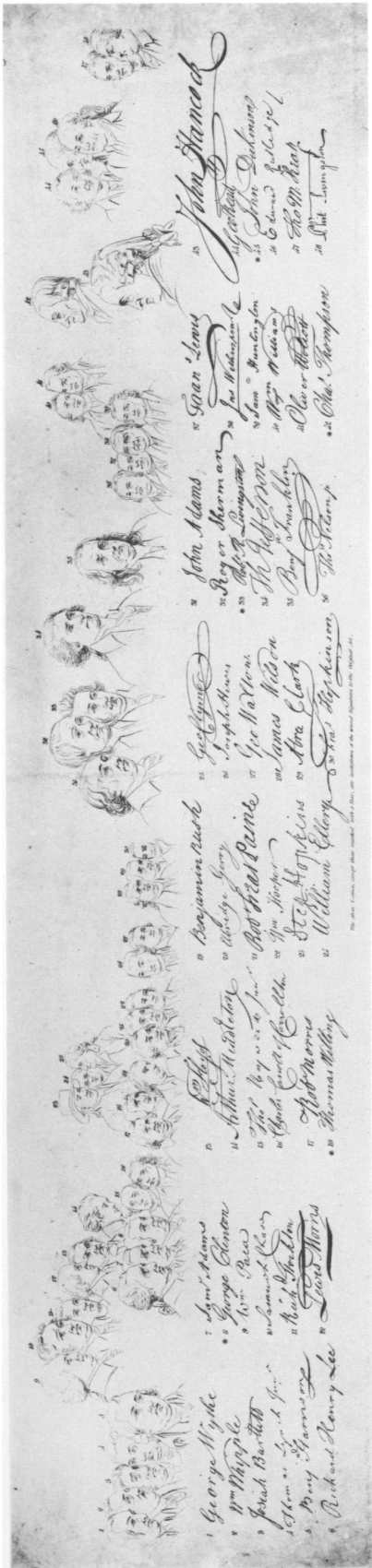


Fig. 4. ASHER B. DURAND: Key for The Declaration of Independence.

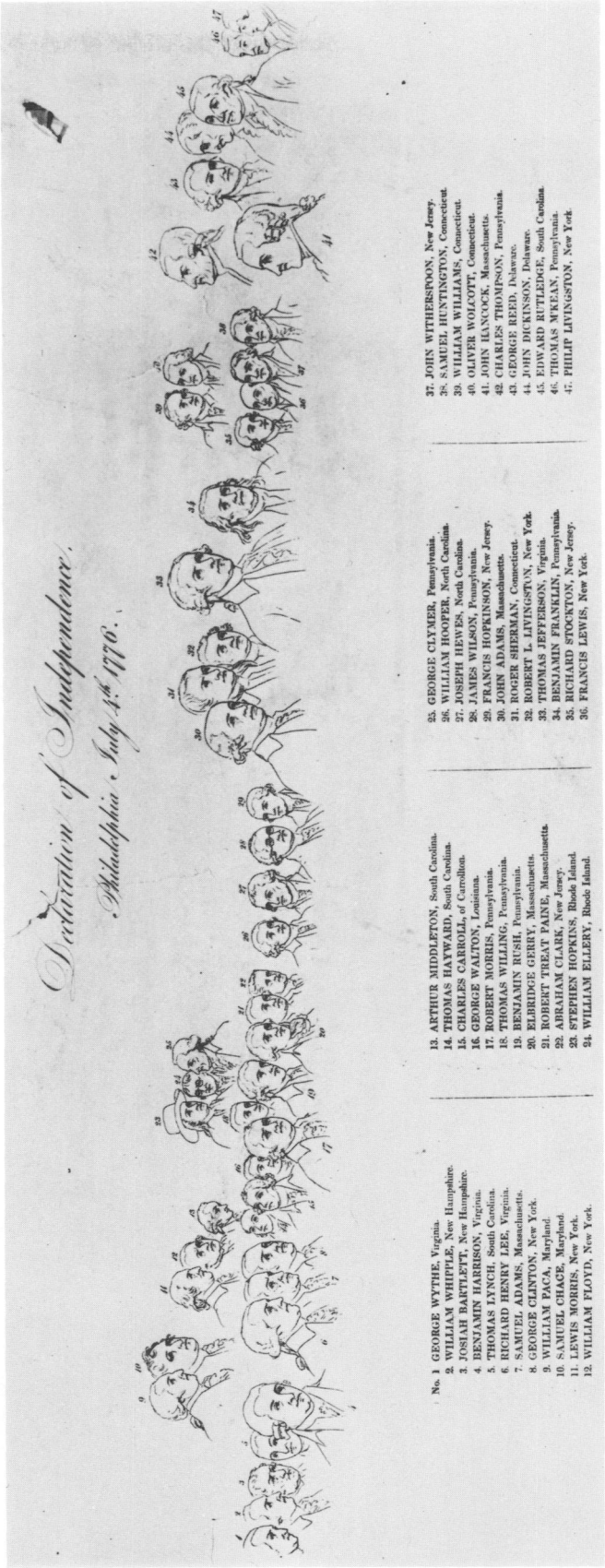


Fig. 5. WILLIAM A. MERCEIN: Key for The Declaration of Independence.

Thomas Nelson as “a fat man”¹⁹ and judging from the portrait of Hugh by Saint-Mémin²⁰ the son took after the father. There is also a portrait of Thomas Nelson himself, painted by Mason Chamberlain in 1754, when Nelson was only 15 years old. Although one sees a slight resemblance, the portliness of the figure in the *Declaration of Independence* indicates that son Hugh was the actual model, with the youthful portrait perhaps giving the artist some added clues. It is likely that Trumbull made the Nelson correction not long after the exchange of letters, so that this further modification of the Yale painting occurred during 1819, necessitating the further changes we see as well. One wonders why Trumbull did not correct the Washington picture, since that was the painting that had angered the Virginians, and the one they were going to see.

Durand took out a copyright for his engraving, dated December 20, 1820. One may assume that all figure changes were made, and the rug painted out, by this date, so that the correct dating for the final revised Yale painting is 1786–1819/20.

A *Key* for the final revised Washington picture was published in a small catalogue of the four Rotunda pictures printed by William A. Mercein in 1827. The Mercein *Key* (Fig. 5) has forty-seven heads, of course, with a corresponding numbered list of persons, but strangely, this *list* was repeated in subsequent exhibition catalogues where the *Yale* painting was shown: at the Academy of the Fine Arts, New York, 1831; at the Trumbull Museum, Yale University, 1835, in the artist’s lifetime; and in the Yale catalogue of the Trumbull paintings in 1865.²¹ One wonders again, futilely, I am afraid, why Trumbull permitted this error. The discrepancy seems not to have worried him, however, as we see from a letter of October 9, 1835, to a Mr. Mount.²²

Mr. Mount Sir,

You have disappointed me cruelly—you promised me that I should have the keys for my exhibition on the 1st of October—and then on the 7th but they are not here yet and fine weather is passing away and strangers are leaving the city—and winter approaching. The paintings are in their places, the Catalogues printed, and everything ready, delayed only by your want of Punctuality.

I beg of you not to disappoint me further, and to send the Keys without another day’s delay.

I am too angry to write another word.

Trumbull here refers to the catalogue of 1835, which lists forty-seven names; was the Mount print of the *Key* ordered from Durand’s, with forty-eight names and heads, or Mercein’s with forty-seven? If forty-eight, it would have differed from the catalogue; if forty-seven it would have differed from the painting. The artist, however, was only concerned that the *Key* prints were not ready when the exhibition was scheduled to open.²³

19. *Dictionary of American Biography*, Charles Scribners Sons, 1943, vol. XIII, p. 424.

20. F. Norfleet, *Saint-Mémin in Virginia*, Richmond, The Dietz Press, 1942, p. 81.

21. NYHS, Trumbull catalogues.

22. There is a Joseph Mount Copper plate printer, 213 Sullivan Street, listed in Longworth’s *New York Directory*, 1835. The following letter is at YUL, with a copy at NYHS, *Papers*.

23. The Durand *Key* measures 27 1/4" x 31"; a smaller copy, 9" x 21", in the collection of the Prints Division of the N.Y. Public Library, may be the Joseph Mount print.

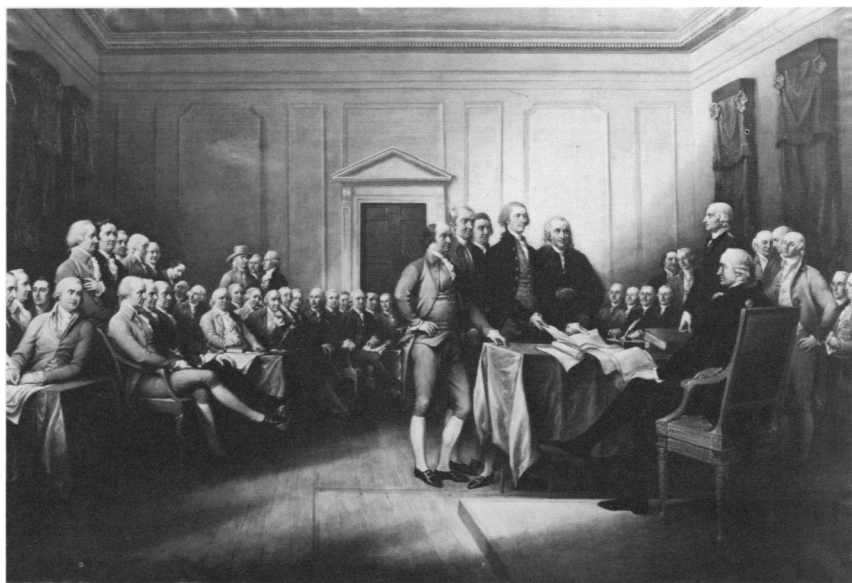


Fig. 6. JOHN TRUMBULL: *The Declaration of Independence*, 1832, oil on canvas, 72 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 108 $\frac{11}{16}$ inches. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn.



Fig. 7. B. I. PREVOST: *John Dickenson [sic]*, engraving after a drawing by Pierre Eugene du Simitiere. Emmet Collection, Manuscript Division, New York Public Library.

A seemingly minor point may be appropriate here since we are trying to put things in order: the terms “replica” and “enlargement” constantly applied to the Washington picture (and the Hartford picture), are not exactly correct; this usage has obscured the differences between the versions which are considerable. Since the sequence of changes and *Keys* I have described is hard to follow, it is useful to recapitulate:

First version:	46 heads	c. 1808	Trumbull <i>Key</i> , now lost.
Second version:	47 heads	1817	Variation of Metzgeroth-type <i>Key</i> .
Third version:	47 heads	1818	The Washington picture; Mercein <i>Key</i> , 1827.
Fourth version:	48 heads	1819/20	The Yale Picture; Durand <i>Key</i> .

With regard to the *Keys* and their reliability, I showed in the spring, 1971, issue of *The American Art Journal* that the “authentic” Durand *Key* was faulty in several of its identifications and reached the conclusion that figure 26, keyed as Stephen Hopkins, actually represented John Dickinson.²⁴ Further research tends to confirm this. The most accomplished drawing of Dickinson other than the two portraits by Charles Willson Peale, is a profile by Pierre Eugène du Simitiere (Fig. 7), which does not resemble figure 45, keyed as Dickinson. However, another engraving, from Nathaniel Ames’ *Astronomical Diary or Almanack* (Fig. 8), representing Dickinson with his head turned at an angle similar to that of figure 26 in the *Declaration*, gives us a striking resemblance to that “man with the hat.”

24. See note 1.



Fig. 8. Portrait of John Dickinson from Nathaniel Ames’ *Astronomical Diary or Almanack*, Boston, 1772.