

Today, we observe the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It is fitting and proper that we take a moment and remember what happened to the 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence.

Five signers were captured by the British as traitors, and tortured before they died. Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned. Two lost their sons serving in the Revolutionary Army; another had two sons captured. Nine of the 56 fought and died from wounds or hardships of the Revolutionary War. They signed and they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor.

What kind of men were they? Twenty-four were lawyers and judges. Eleven were merchants, nine were farmers and large plantation owners; men of means, well educated. But they signed the Declaration of Independence knowing full well that the penalty would be death if they were captured.

Carter Braxton of Virginia, a wealthy planter and trader, saw his ships swept from the seas by the British Navy. He sold his home and properties to pay his debts, and died in rags.

Thomas McKeam was so hounded by the British that he was forced to move his family almost constantly. He served in the Congress without pay, and his family was kept in hiding. His possessions were taken from him, and poverty was his reward.

British soldiers looted the properties of Dillery, Hall, Clymer, Walton, Gwinnett, Heyward, Rutledge, and Middleton. At the battle of Yorktown, Thomas Nelson, Jr., noted from a distance that the British General Cornwallis had taken over the Nelson home for his headquarters, because he believed it would not be targeted. He quietly urged General George Washington to open fire. The home was destroyed, and Nelson died bankrupt.

Francis Lewis had his home and properties destroyed. The enemy jailed his wife, and she died within a few months.

John Hart was driven from his wife's bedside as she was dying. Their 13 children fled for their lives. His fields and his gristmill were laid to waste. For more than a year he lived in forests and caves, returning home to find his wife dead and his children vanished. A few weeks later he died from exhaustion and a broken heart.

Such were the stories and sacrifices of the American Revolution. These were not wild-eyed, rabble-rousing ruffians. They were soft-spoken men of means and education. They had security, but they valued liberty and independence more. Standing tall, straight, and unwavering, they pledged: "For the support of this declaration, with firm reliance on the protection of the divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other, our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

They gave you and me and our children a free and independent America. We dare not forget the sacrifices of those men and women who established the liberty we know today. Since our country was founded, each generation of Americans has been summoned to preserve our freedoms. The

graves of those men and women who answered that call surround the globe.

Today, it could be easy to forget the sacrifices of those patriots who created our republic and have kept it free for over two centuries.

Our challenge today is to remember the sacrifices of those who came before us and to teach our children and grandchildren the stories of those patriots. Teach them that freedom can only be earned by sacrifice, diligence and courage. It is that sacrifice, diligence and courage that we celebrate today. Have a wonderful 4th of July.