

BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

Episode 439: Emily Sneff, "When the Declaration of Independence Was News"

[00:00:00] Announcer: You're listening to an Airwave Media podcast.

[00:00:04] Liz Covart: *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of Clio Digital Media, and support for this episode comes from the Massachusetts Historical Society, the first historical society founded in the United States in 1791.

[00:00:15] Emily Sneff: So the one response that we actually have from one of the chiefs that was present is from Ambrose Bear, who was Wolastoqey. And he responds, "we like it well." Now that's his response that he gives to a bunch of other things that happen during the treaty proceedings. So it might just be the translator or the secretary kind of interpreting his words for him.

But that act of verbally responding to the Declaration of Independence, that is the first formal acknowledgement of the independent United States by a foreign power. So it's incredibly important and it's incredibly important that it comes out of the mouth of a Native American, a neighbor, and not someone on the other side of the Atlantic in one of the courts of Europe.

[00:01:10] Liz Covart: Hello and welcome to episode 439 of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present-day world we live in. And I'm your host, Liz Covart.

The Second Continental Congress voted to declare independence on July 2nd, 1776. It wrote one of the most iconic documents in history to ensure the world knew why the United States was now a free and independent country. The only problem, the Second Continental Congress had absolutely no plan for telling the world about their Declaration.

Now, Congress did send one copy of its Declaration to France. That copy was lost at sea. Printers across the new nation printed the text however they liked, and most often they just relied on copies made by other printers, which increased the number of forgotten words in the Declaration or misspelled words.

And no plans were made for translating the Declaration outside of English. So the translations that happen took place because individuals and state governments decided to have the document translated, including verbally translating it for many Indigenous nations.

Emily Sneff, author of *When the Declaration of Independence Was News*, joins us to explore how news of the Declaration of Independence spread in 1776. Now during our investigation, Emily reveals why the Declaration of Independence was the product of the Second Continental Congress and not Thomas Jefferson alone, how the text of the Declaration of Independence spread in ways that Congress never anticipated, and why Congress never sent an official copy of the Declaration to King George the Third or Parliament.

But first, do you push past the easy version of history? Do you wonder who actually wrote the Declaration of Independence and whether the answer you've got in school holds up? If so, you need the History Explorers Club. The History Explorers Club is a historian led membership for curious adults who want to go deeper into early American history with expert guidance, historical context, and a community of like-minded history lovers.

Each month you speak with guest historians in live conversations, go behind the scenes of how historians actually work and are quarterly workshops, and join informal club calls to share your discoveries and to trade recommendations. No scholarly background is needed, and we record everything so that you can participate on your own schedule. Find your people at historyexplorers.club. That's historyexplorers.club, historyexplorers.club. Alright, are you ready to investigate what the Declaration of Independence was like when it was news? Let's go meet our guest historian.

Joining us is a leading expert on the United States' Declaration of Independence. She's a consulting curator on exhibits like *The Declaration's Journey* at the Museum of the American Revolution and *Window to Revolution: Pennsylvania Germans and the War Independence* at Historic Trappe. She joins us today to discuss how people learned about the Declaration of Independence with details from her new book, *When the Declaration of Independence Was News*. Welcome back to *Ben Franklin's World*, Emily Sneff.

[00:04:35] Emily Sneff: Thank you, Liz. It's so good to be back.

[00:04:38] Liz Covart: And it's so fitting that we have you back, Emily, because you joined us last year in episode 415 where we talked about how there's not just one definitive copy of the Declaration of Independence. And during that conversation you told us that you were working on a book manuscript that is now published as *When the Declaration of Independence Was News,* and it's out now.

[00:04:58] Emily Sneff: Yeah, it's very exciting, and you've been in the trenches with me as I've worked on this book. And it's so exciting to have it actually come into existence, especially during this anniversary year. It's been a long time coming, and it's a good time to have something new to read about the Declaration.

[00:05:15] Liz Covart: Well, congratulations, Emily. I am so excited to see your book out because as you said, I was kind of in the trenches with you as you were writing it, because we're both in a writing group together. But in all honesty, I really do think *When the Declaration of Independence Was News* is a great book and I'm excited for us to talk about it.

So before we dive into specific examples of how the Declaration of Independence was news, I wonder if we could talk about the memory of the Declaration of Independence. Because in the introduction to your book, you start by noting that in the 1800s, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams wrote back and forth to each other. We know about their favorite

correspondence. And part of their writing back and forth to each other was them trying to firm up their memories about who wrote what of the Declaration of Independence.

And you remind us in this vignette, that while Jefferson and Adams considered their involvement in drafting the Declaration of Independence—they're talking about their personal involvement—they conveniently forgot that it was really the work of the Second Continental Congress to turn the Jefferson draft into today's iconic document. So would you tell us a bit more about Congress's efforts to write the Declaration of Independence?

[00:06:28] Emily Sneff: Exactly. You know, 250 years later, we tend to think of the Declaration of Independence as Thomas Jefferson's writing. He was certainly the principal author. He was the one who put words to paper, thought about the structure of the Declaration. We know what John Adams and Ben Franklin contributed to the text because there are annotations on Jefferson's rough draft.

But we forget that in 1776, the Continental Congress was the author of the Declaration of Independence. It was not attributed to a single person, and if it ever was, it was to John Hancock as President of the Continental Congress, and the key name at the bottom of the document, along with Charles Thomson, the Secretary of Congress.

So at the time, there was a committee, but also the larger Committee of the Whole that was actively working on the Declaration of Independence, thinking about the content, refining the text. And so it was the product of many people. But over time, that list of the people who worked on the Declaration dwindles down to John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, and that coincides with them competing against each other for the presidency and being on opposite sides of a real political feud. So obviously their recollections are informed by that.

I wish that we had more accounts from 1776 from some of those key people, not just John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, but Ben Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston, the other members of the drafting committee. Even people like John Hancock and Charles Thomson. Having a clearer account of exactly what happened in those weeks of June and July and the drafting of the Declaration would've been beneficial to everyone.

But if we really step back into 1776, and that's what I try to do with the book, not think about what was to come and the legacy of the Declaration, then we can see the Declaration as people viewed it then, as the product of the Continental Congress and as a resolution, something that has the title "In Congress" on a specific date, just like any other resolution of the Congress. It's just that this particular one was monumental.

[00:08:42] Liz Covart: It was also really interesting for me to read *When the Declaration of Independence Was News* to find out that, yeah, in the 1800s, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams would go back and forth to talk about Jefferson's important role in writing and drafting the Declaration of Independence.

By the 1800s, Jefferson wanted to be known as the author for the Declaration of Independence. But at the time in 1776, Jefferson seemed to not want his name to appear too prominently on the document that he helped author. Like he wasn't interested in trying to attempt a large signature like John Hancock. He just seemed to want to fade into the crowd of signatures that appear on that document.

[00:09:22] Emily Sneff: It's really interesting because Thomas Jefferson over time really takes on the mantle of author of the Declaration. He puts it on his tombstone. He doesn't push back when the Democratic-Republicans use his authorship of the Declaration as a reason to vote for him for president.

But in 1776, although he takes great pride in having drafted the Declaration. And he wants his friends and colleagues to know what the text looked like before the Continental Congress butchered it, in his opinion.

When it came to actually signing the Declaration of Independence, yeah, his signature is about the same size as all of the other delegates. It's not in a particularly prominent position. And in fact, within the Virginia delegation, Thomas Jefferson left room above his name for his colleagues, Richard Henry Lee and George Wythe to sign the Declaration because when signing of the parchment copy of the Declaration began on August 2nd, 1776, Lee and Wythe were both in Virginia.

So Jefferson, rather than signing his name first and leaving them to sign at the bottom of the list of the Virginia delegation, which is what happened for most of the other men who were not in Philadelphia when signing began, he leaves space for these two individuals who are mentors and friends of his to sign above him. So he really is deferential.

And this is an aspect of the signing of the Declaration that, as far as I can tell, has not been identified before. So it's one of the benefits of really focusing on the process of declaring independence. You start to notice these little details that actually tell you quite a bit about what the cast of characters that we associate with the Declaration thought about it in 1776 and the how they approached their own contributions to the Declaration.

[00:11:10] Liz Covart: Speaking of that cast of characters, I'd like to return to the Second Continental Congress, which authored the Declaration and issued it in its name. Now, one of the curious things I found while reading *When the Declaration of Independence Was News* is that the Second Continental Congress had very little control over how the Declaration was circulated in 1776.

Emily, I wonder if you could help us better understand Congress's lack of control in circulating the Declaration of Independence, because when we think of governments issuing an important document or idea today, we can see the full on press corps and the curated social media posts and the government just taking control of its message and putting it out into the

world. So how was this not the case when the Second Continental Congress issued the Declaration of Independence?

[00:11:59] Emily Sneff: No, definitely not. And I'm thinking fondly back to one of our writing group conversations where I think we spent a full half hour just complaining about how could the Continental Congress be this terrible at communication? Is this really accurate? Like they really did not have a good plan.

And it's true, there's only so much that you can do when it comes to transatlantic communication at this time. There's going to be a delay of weeks between when you send something to the other side of the Atlantic and when you get a response. There's only so much that you can do in terms of oversight of printers. They're going to make mistakes, they're going to make typos. But the Continental Congress certainly could have done more to be strategic in their communication.

In the book, I highlight the speech that John Dickinson gave, this last-ditch effort to encourage the Continental Congress against voting for Independence at that particular moment in July 1776, before the Congress had secured foreign alliances or formed a confederation. And one of the most evocative parts of Dickinson's speech is that he says, "declaring independence would be like sending a skiff made of paper out into the Atlantic."

And that was completely true of the Declaration of Independence. It really was "a skiff made of paper," a skiff being a boat. And at this time, paper was made of rags. It was water soluble. So if you were to send a paper boat out into the Atlantic, it's not going to last very long.

So when it comes to actually trying to send the Declaration to the people who needed it the most—especially Silas Deane, who was supposed to be advocating for the Continental Congress and eventually the independent United States and France—you would think that the Continental Congress would send multiple ships with multiple copies of the Declaration. That they would think about the visual and material aspects of the Declaration and send a parchment copy, something more durable than paper, or something with a seal.

There's all these different aspects that Congress really, as far as we can tell from the records that survive, they either didn't consider at all or didn't prioritize. So their efforts to get the Declaration out were really focused on just sending it in a letter and hoping for the best, hoping it reached its destination.

Whereas later in 1776, thinking about France, when they send ambassadors to France they put them on different ships. They send the instructions on different ships. They really think about the safety and security of their diplomatic envoys. You would think that something as important as the Declaration would get that same treatment, but unfortunately not.

[00:14:45] Liz Covart: It is funny to think about all the different committees that the Second Continental Congress had, and they had a lot of different committees, and not one committee

was about public relations or communications. I mean, imagine if Benjamin Franklin had been in charge of that committee, things just would've been done a lot differently I think

[00:15:02] Emily Sneff: That's a great "Time Warp" question. What if they had actually had a communications department within the Continental Congress? And that's one of the questions that I have with Ben Franklin's involvement in the Declaration of Independence.

You would think that someone with his print savvy would have wanted a bit more oversight into exactly how the Declaration was being disseminated. And that's not to say that John Dunlap did a bad job as the first printer of the Declaration. He did a fantastic job. He probably had some oversight from the Continental Congress, whether it was one of the members of the drafting committee or Charles Thomson. You know, someone was making sure that he was printing the text as agreed to by the Continental Congress.

But outside of Philadelphia, printers basically did what they wanted to with the text. And that's certainly true when the text gets to London and it is excerpted and censored and printed in ways that if the Continental Congress had known, they would've been furious to see the Declaration manipulated in that way.

So it's a great question to think about compared to what we're used to with political leaders today, the sort of press secretaries, of course, the speed of communication, and the opportunity to quickly correct things in the modern day, which is a luxury that they just didn't have in 1776.

[00:16:22] Liz Covart: So Emily, when did the first news of the Declaration of Independence come out of Congress?

You mentioned John Dunlap, and that seems to be like the one message that Congress controlled, was when they ordered Dunlap to print the first copies of the Declaration of Independence. But was it the Dunlap broadside that told everyone the news about the Declaration of Independence? Or did Congressmen start talking about it in taverns and boarding houses in Philadelphia throughout the town after they made the vote on July 2nd, 1776?

[00:16:53] Emily Sneff: That's a great question. We know that on July 2, 1776, the news that the Continental Congress had voted to declare independence starts to spread immediately. And certainly it spreads around town by word of mouth in Philadelphia, in the coffee houses and the taverns, but it is also printed in one of the city's newspapers, *The Pennsylvania Evening Post*, which was a triweekly evening newspaper. And so the evening of Tuesday, July 2nd, there's a quick sentence that's added once most of the typesetting of the newspaper was completed.

And so that specific piece of news, the news of July 2nd begins to spread other printers, other newspapers copy that information. But it's of course quickly followed up by the Declaration

of Independence itself. So not every newspaper in the United States printed that information from July 2nd. Some of them, by the time they got that, they also have the Declaration in hand, and they focus their attention on sharing the full text of the Declaration, which is essentially the press release for the decision made on July 2nd.

Benjamin Towne also was the first newspaper printer to print the Declaration of Independence on Saturday, July 6th. So he was very fortunate with his Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday printing schedule in July 1776, to have early access to print the Declaration faster than other printers who had a set day of the week. John Dunlap printed his newspaper on Mondays.

In some other cities, printers created an extraordinary issue of their newspaper so that they could share the Declaration quicker. But for the most part, it was just whatever day of the week your newspaper was printed, that's the day that you printed the Declaration.

So Benjamin Towne begins this process of the Declaration being printed in the columns of local newspapers all over the United States on July 6th. John Dunlap does the same on July 8th. The news spreads to New York and Baltimore and it's printed there in the days after that, and then it just spreads and spreads and spreads from there.

So really, the first printing of the Declaration done by John Dunlap, the broadsides that he produced on the night of July 4th into the day of July 5th, those had some authority. Those had some oversight and direction from the Continental Congress.

But by July 6th, you have printers who are doing their own thing. And they're copying John Dunlap's text. They're using the title that he applies, the date that he applies to the text, but they're printing it in their own outlets. And eventually other printers are creating their own broadsides, sometimes of their own volition, sometimes of the direction of different state governments. So we end up with this multitude of different printings of the Declaration very quickly.

[00:19:46] Liz Covart: Was there any problem with the fact that there were multiple printings of the Declaration of Independence? I'm imagining how we would reproduce news today. So for example, the *New York Times* might tell you that they reprinted an article from the *Associated Press* or the *Washington Post*, and it's clearly stated in their journalism.

How did crediting sources and reprinting from other newspapers or broadsides work in the eighteenth century?

[00:20:12] Emily Sneff: So a lot of times in eighteenth-century newspapers, the heading of a particular news item is the key. So you can tell if something is under the London heading, then it probably originated in a London newspaper.

And so for a number of the newspaper printings of the Declaration produced in the United States, the Declaration is under the Philadelphia heading. In some cases though, printers decide to print the Declaration on the front page, which was unusual for news from Philadelphia, which would typically be on the interior pages because news was organized geographically in papers.

Or in some cases, printers set the Declaration on a completely separate sheet so that it could be sort of treated as a separate text from the rest of the news and the paper or even separated from the rest of the paper and treated like a broadside. And in those cases, there is no indication to Philadelphia.

Obviously, everyone knew the Continental Congress was meeting in Philadelphia. They knew that that's where this decision to declare independence was made. But you do lose the paper trail a bit. And so for me, as a historian who has access to either scans or digitized copies of all these different printings that were created, I can much more easily compare and find little tiny pieces of evidence that show how the text spread from one place to another.

Words that get switched around or a capitalization or punctuation changes that are then copied by other printers. And then I can see, oh, the text went from Philadelphia, to New York, then to New England. And in New England, they copied the things that happened to the text in New York. Or in London when the text is so changed by British printers, those changes are then copied by European printers, even in translations. So you can kind of piece the clues together.

But of course, in 1776, people read the copy of the Declaration that they had access to. They had no reason to question where it came from or whether the source was authentic or not. They trusted that it was the resolution of the Continental Congress.

[00:22:23] Liz Covart: I also took the point from *When the Declaration of Independence Was News* that we shouldn't assume that big stories like the Declaration of Independence would've headlined front pages of newspapers like they do today because when you look at an eighteenth-century newspaper, you typically see ads on the front and back of the newspaper. And the real news, the big news, that's what's located in the middle of the newspaper.

[00:22:47] Emily Sneff: We are so used to the importance of news being correlated with its position in the newspaper. For those of us who still read physical newspapers or who look at the front page of a newspaper on a website, we're used to, you know, the bigger the heading, the more important the story. And in 1776, that was just not the case.

The Declaration, in some cases is treated specially, but for a lot of printers, they set the first and last pages of their newspapers early in the week with longer essays or long running advertisements. And then they organized the rest of the news that they got from out of town from the furthest away to the closest. So we can't pass any judgment on printers who put the

Declaration in the interior of their newspapers or just treated it like any other piece of information from Philadelphia.

Though we can give attention to the printers who treated the Declaration specially. For example, Mary Katherine Goddard printed it on the front page of her Baltimore newspaper, and before the text, she added this little block of text with a bunch of type ornaments to draw reader's attention announcing that the thirteen colonies had become independent.

And I actually borrowed some of the type ornaments from that announcement within the text of the book, so you'll have to keep an eye out for those as you're reading. But she clearly took pride in the fact that the Declaration of Independence had happened, was excited about it, wanted her readers to know about it, and so she adds this extra little flourish to draw reader's attention to the front page. So it's not even just enough to put it on the first page. She added a little bit extra to make sure readers understood the importance of it.

[00:24:29] Liz Covart: Well, we've now talked about newspapers and broadsides and how people read about the Declaration of Independence in print, but was the print form how most people learned about the Declaration of Independence?

[00:24:40] Emily Sneff: It's a hard question to answer. I get a lot of questions about literacy in 1776 and access. How many people really would've been able to hold a copy of the Declaration of Independence in their hands and read it themselves? And that's a hard question to answer. We know that there are so many surviving copies of the Declaration that certainly people read it in their newspapers. They purchased broadsides, which they read.

But a lot of people also heard about the Declaration of Independence through public readings. Through organized gatherings of people in a centralized location where the Declaration was read aloud by someone, first of all, who had a voice that could carry, but second, who was in a position of civic authority; a sheriff or a military leader or someone in some states, even ministers, were enlisted for this job.

And the people who were in those crowds certainly included some people who had already read the Declaration to themselves in their newspapers or, or in private. And they're there to hear it read aloud, to be part of the group response to the Declaration. Then there would be other people who did not have the ability or the access to read the Declaration themselves. So they're learning the news from these public readings.

And then there's a third group of people, innumerable, who were within earshot, not necessarily an invited part of the public reading of the Declaration, the public celebration, but still able to hear the Declaration read aloud. And so that could include women as well as servants, enslaved people. In Philadelphia, the reading of the Declaration that happens outside of Independence Hall, at the other end of the block as the Walnut Street Jail. So there are prisoners within earshot of the Declaration.

So we really can't even come close to calculating how many people would've heard the Declaration, and that's part of the reason why the Continental Congress says that they want to publish and declare that the colonies are now independent states because publish has two meanings. Pauline Maier pointed this out in *American Scripture*. Published can both mean a printed publication, but also publishing by word of mouth, reading aloud.

So when you take those two methods together, the public and the private, we can guess that a lot of people receive the news of independence. But we can never calculate the exact number or really get a clear sense of who was able to read and have access to their own personal copy of the Declaration versus a shared copy versus a communal experience.

[00:27:27] Liz Covart: Now, something that we may not think about—but that Emily talks about in *When the Declaration of Independence Was News*—is that many people learned about the Declaration of Independence from their church ministers, their clergy, who the Continental Congress asked to read the Declaration out loud to their congregations and to talk about it.

Emily, Ben wonders what these religious leaders thought of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, and how they would've incorporated it into their church services?

[00:27:55] Emily Sneff: So of course, there's a wide variety of religious leaders in the colonies turned United States, and that means that they had a whole spectrum of reactions to the Declaration as well as obligations resulting from the Declaration.

We have examples of people like Ezra Stiles, a congregationalist minister who at this moment was going back and forth between Rhode Island and Massachusetts. He certainly was in favor of independence, and he comments on the other ministers he sees who are grieving the decision to declare independence. We have plenty of other examples of ministers who did not agree with the decision to declare independence.

And what I ended up focusing on in the book is the Anglican Ministers in the independent United States. So I would answer Ben's question by saying I never expected to have a chapter about Anglican ministers in my book about the Declaration. I also didn't expect to have a chapter about smallpox. But this is what you find out when you really dive deep into 1776 and the lived experience.

And this chapter about Anglican ministers was actually the last one that I wrote. It came out of a conference panel that I went to that was about loyalists, and someone was using the records of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) within their conference paper. And I thought, huh, I should take a look at them. And it was a treasure trove.

I already knew about Jacob Duche, who was the minister of Christ Church in Philadelphia. I knew about Jacob Bailey, who was a SPG minister in the part of Massachusetts that became Maine. And he vehemently opposed the Declaration of Independence. And in Massachusetts,

that is one of the states where the provincial governments instructed ministers to read the Declaration of Independence aloud to their congregations. And Jacob Bailey refused to do so. So we have those records. So I had those two examples. I didn't know there were so many more examples, and all over the place geographically.

And what's really interesting about the Anglican minister's reactions to the Declaration is they're all isolated. They can't really communicate with other ministers in other places, and they can't communicate with the SPG secretary back in London. So they have to make very quickly decisions about what to do after independence.

And they have basically three choices they could proceed as if nothing had changed. Which would mean continuing to have their churches open and to use the Book of Common Prayer as is, which included prayers for the king and the royal family. So that was one choice that some ministers had the luxury to make, at least for a short time.

Another choice, which a lot of ministers ended up pursuing, was to change the Book of Common Prayer. And so that meant either removing the prayers for the king and the royal family, or changing them to prayers for, for example, the Continental Congress or the state governments. And that was a challenge because it was against their oath of ordination to change the Book of Common Prayer. So these ministers felt like they might actually be betraying their oath by removing the prayers for the king and the royal family, but at least it kept their churches open and their congregations together.

And then the third choice, which ultimately a lot of pastors did make, was to close their churches altogether. Either because they didn't feel comfortable changing the Book of Common Prayer or going against their oath of ordination, which said that the king was the head of the Church of England—can't really say that anymore when the king is no longer the ruler of the independent United States. And in some cases, ministers were doing so because they were afraid of violence. Either from the larger communities around them or from their own congregations, we see veiled threats from congregations to their ministers, sort of forcing them to either close their churches or change their prayers.

So this chapter really emerged from this complex set of decisions that each of these ministers were making in their own circumstances. And in some cases, we end up with some really fantastic material culture resulting from these decisions. Pages in the Book of Common Prayer where the prayers are crossed out in ink or new prayers are pasted into place.

So it ended up being a really fascinating addition to the book, and I think it helps to show just the range of reactions to the Declaration, as well as the immediacy of the Declaration's impact on certain people's lives.

[00:32:33] Liz Covart: Well, thus far we have talked about how the Declaration of Independence circulated. It was read out loud in public settings and in church, printers published the Declaration's text so that people could hold it and read it.

But this is how English editions of the Declaration of Independence circulated, and something that Emily covers extensively in *When the Declaration of Independence Was News* is how the Declaration circulated in foreign languages.

Emily, let's take a moment to thank our episode sponsors, and then let's talk about the translation of the Declaration of Independence into foreign languages.

What Emily has been describing, a document that was made and remade the moment it left Philadelphia as it spread through print shops, pulpits, and treaty councils in ways that Congress never anticipated, this is exactly the kind of history that requires original sources to tell well. You just can't reconstruct 1776 from memory. You need the letters, the diaries, the annotated newspapers that people actually held in their hands. Which is why I want to take a moment to thank our episode sponsor the Massachusetts Historical Society, the first historical society founded in the United States in 1791.

Emily's book draws directly on the MHS's collections, and I think that's worth pausing on. The chapter on Abigail Adams and her children enduring smallpox inoculation in Boston is built on the Adams Family correspondence, which is held at the MHS. So is Polly Palmer's letter of August 4th, 1776, which he wrote just days after receiving one of the first printings of the Declaration. It's a letter that Emily featured as an illustration in her book.

The MHS also holds Isaac Bang's diary, which gives us a first-person account of the tensions in New York as the Howe brothers arrived to negotiate peace. They also hold Harbottle Dorr's annotated newspaper printing of the Declaration.

Now, these aren't just footnotes in Emily's work. They're part of its foundation. That's what historical societies like the MHS do. They hold the papers, the images, and the objects from the past that make history books like Emily's possible. Now, our partnership with the MHS helps us bring you more of this kind of work and keeps our content freely available.

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And a sincere thank you to Denise C., Miranda C., Jeremiah D., Carl D., Sanjiv D., Sue D., and Nathan D. for your generous support. It means more than you can know. Thank you so much for supporting this work.

[00:35:34] Dynamic Ad Break: Audio varies and may shift timestamps in the second half of this episode by 1-2 minutes. Thank you for supporting *Ben Franklin's World*.

[00:35:36] Liz Covart: Emily, would you tell us about the first foreign language translation of the Declaration of Independence, which saw the Declaration of Independence translated into German?

[00:35:44] Emily Sneff: The first translation of the Declaration is done in Philadelphia within days of July 4th, and that information is always surprising to people when I talk about the Declaration. Because they don't think about the early United States as being a multilingual place, but it absolutely was, and certainly in the greater Philadelphia area.

When I think back to my own ancestors, on both sides of my family, who where living in the greater Philadelphia area in 1776, they were German. So if they got the news of Independence, it probably was in German. So that means that the initial German translations are a particular point of pride and importance to me.

And yes, within a few days, these German printers in Philadelphia had not only translated and typeset the text but produced two versions. The Declaration was printed in the biweekly German newspaper in Philadelphia but also produced as a broadside. And if we think about broadsides as being things that were intended to be posted up in public spaces or used for public readings, then we get a clearer sense of how the German and American community operated in 1776. That they wanted the same level of access to the Declaration as their Anglophonic neighbors.

And these translations are really fascinating because we see additional German translations created in Europe about six weeks later that are totally different. They weren't working from the German translations created in Philadelphia. They were working from the English version of the text that had been printed in London, and in some cases from the French translation of the English text from London. So there's this sort of chain of translation that impacts the text.

But just to give one example of how the translations work, if we think about the word facts, "let facts be presented to a candid world" towards the end of the preamble of the Declaration. In the European newspapers, the word facts is translated as "vorfälle" or "begebenheiten", and both of those words imply events or incidents. But in Philadelphia, in the translations created days after July 4th, facts was translated as "facta." Which comes from the Latin legal understanding of the word.

So for the Philadelphia translators, they understood that the list of grievances about King George III was evidence. It was these lawyers on the Committee of Five, building up evidence supporting their case for independence from the king. Whereas the literal translations of the Declaration created in Europe, when those German translators were working with the text, they understood this long list of things the king had done as events or incidents that had happened.

So it, it's really interesting to see the distinctions between the different translations and to think about how the translators working here in Philadelphia, they had translated *Common Sense*, they had been translating the resolutions of the Continental Congress for months. They understood the language of independence in a way that the translators working in Europe, who were just printing word for word translations of news from around the world, they weren't really paying that much attention.

[00:39:06] Liz Covart: This really makes me wonder whether non-North Americans could ever truly understand the meaning and context of the Declaration of Independence. Because you offered a partial Dutch translation and some French translations in your book, and as I was reading those translations, I saw that they were literal word for word translations from English to Dutch and French that completely missed the nuance and idioms that played well in North America.

So the inclusion and translation of those meanings by the Pennsylvania Germans, I really think that is what makes this Pennsylvania-German translation very unique and interesting.

[00:39:43] Emily Sneff: Exactly, and I should say there's probably eleven or twelve languages in the book. I don't know any of them well enough to say I am an expert, but it's one of those things where you just start finding more and more European translations, at least excerpts of the Declaration in different languages.

And you can always spot John Hancock's name. It might sometimes be Jean Hancock or Giovanni Hancock or Johan Hancock, but you can kind of use that as the North Star to identify the Declaration in foreign language newspapers. And it's a lot of fun as an American to see the Declaration printed in different languages.

But yes, once you actually start looking at the meat of the translation, you realize a lot of the Declaration's rhetorical power was lost when it was translated. And it goes back to that question of why didn't the Continental Congress do more to make their case internationally? And we see a correction of sorts when Ben Franklin is in France, and he supervises the printing of the state constitutions and the Declaration of Independence.

And you can imagine that there was an intention there to have the language fully reflect the Americanness of the Declaration, of the state constitutions. That making sure the translations were thoughtful. And that not only the importance of the language that was being used to articulate natural rights, but also the precedents that were set from both the state constitutions and the Declaration.

So it's not in 1776 that we get those sort of nuanced translations. Those come later. And it impacts the way that we can think about the international independence movements that came after 1776. Yeah, they weren't getting the best version of the Declaration of Independence. They weren't getting the most compelling text the way that Thomas Jefferson intended it. They were getting a sort of bastardized, translated, manipulated version of the text.

And that probably impacted how people thought about the legitimacy of the independence of the United States, not to mention that the Declaration was being published alongside rumors and misinformation from the London press. So the view of independence from Europe was totally different than the view from someone who was in the crowd outside of Independence Hall, hearing the Declaration read aloud within days of July 4th.

[00:42:04] Liz Covart: Well, let's talk more about the French translations, because you mentioned at the start of our conversation that the Continental Congress didn't really think through how they would communicate the Declaration of Independence to France. And then when they did attempt to communicate it, they sent only one copy and it was lost at sea.

Now, Cynthia notes that she would've assumed that Congress would've been more thoughtful about translating the Declaration of Independence into French, to ensure that the United States' message was controlled before it dispatched copies to France and Saint-Domingue.

So would you tell us more about what happened with France and more about the work that Benjamin Franklin needed to do because Congress didn't think through a proper strategy for French translation?

[00:42:47] Emily Sneff: That's a great question. I would think that in July 1776 if the Continental Congress was going to be intentional about translating into any language, it could have been German because of the significant German population. And there's an ongoing conversation all through the early republic about printing resolutions and laws in German for people who operated their daily lives in German. So on the domestic side of things, that's the language to think about.

But internationally, the other language to think about translating into would be French. And it does seem counterintuitive that the Continental Congress had sent Silas Deane to France, and they had every intention of him forming an alliance between the colonies turned states and France, and yet they don't equip him with a French translation of the Declaration.

And in fact, in his instructions, when he is sent to France, he is told to find a translator that is trustworthy. Now that's challenging when you're in a foreign country and you don't really know the language yourself, and you're supposed to find someone who is both capable of doing translation and also trustworthy enough to not change the text when they do so.

So that question of why the Continental Congress wasn't more intentional in sending a French translation from Philadelphia to Paris continues to bother me. So in terms of the French translations that do exist, there are manuscript copies of the Declaration in French in the foreign archives in France. That Silas Deane was the first person keeping the records of a potential alliance between France and Spain, and so in that volume one of the alliance between France and the United States, there's a manuscript translation of the Declaration, which reflects when Silas Deane actually presented the Declaration to the Court of Versailles.

There's French translations in other archives as well. There's a French translation in an archive in France that is said to be from Canada. I wasn't able to get enough sort of evidence of that to figure out exactly when it was produced, if it was created in 1776 or later, but there's a sort of French connection there.

And then certainly in the Caribbean, we know that there were ongoing questions about Caribbean islands recognizing American ships that persist, you know, through 1776.

And it seems likely that people in Saint-Domingue, as well as other surrounding islands would have received the Declaration at some point, whether it was from a newspaper or from a copy sent directly from France or the other European powers, it's hard to tell.

We don't see a through line from a copy of the Declaration in Saint-Domingue in 1776 to 1804 when Haiti issues a Declaration of Independence of their own. And there's a lot to be said about how Haiti actually rejected the model of the Declaration of Independence. So it, it's not as if we can trace the arrival of the news of independence in Saint-Domingue all the way through as influencing the enslaved population of Saint-Domingue.

But certainly the Declaration did spread around the Caribbean. I have no doubt that copies of the Declaration made their way to the coast of Africa. We just don't have the evidence to support it. I've had people ask me about whether the Declaration reached Asia. That's harder to answer at this point. It seems likely that the Declaration in newspaper or manuscript or broadside form could have been on a ship going to India, but without specific documentation, it's hard to tell.

I think the most important thing is just if we treat the Declaration as news, then we can see it traveling much further, and being translated many, many more times than we have the physical evidence to actually corroborate.

[00:46:42] Liz Covart: Now, another type of translation that Americans made of their Declaration of Independence were verbal translations for Indigenous peoples.

Emily, would you tell us about the translations that the people of Massachusetts made for the Wolastoqey and Mi'kmaq peoples and that the people of New York made for the Haudenosaunee?

[00:47:00] Emily Sneff: So we think about the paper copies of the Declaration that survived, and we tend to focus on those when we tell the story of independence. But there were verbal translations that were made sort of on the spot of the Declaration.

And one of the earliest examples that we know of is in Watertown, Massachusetts, where there's this meeting between representatives of the colony turned state of Massachusetts and

the Wolastoqey and Mi'kmaq nations that are up in New Brunswick and Maine, that part of Canada and Northern United States.

They had come down to Massachusetts anticipating that they could meet with George Washington, not realizing that he had traveled to New York. So the Massachusetts leading political figures kind of step in, and they're in the middle of treaty meetings when the Declaration of Independence arrives. And because we have the minutes of the proceedings, we know that the Declaration was translated for these Wolastoqey and Mi'kmaq chiefs.

More than likely, it was translated into French, and then the men who knew French were able to translate it further for the men who didn't. Now, there's a lot of questions left within that story. We don't know for sure if the Declaration was translated in its entirety. If so, how was the phrase "merciless Indian Savages" treated.

At the very least, we know that the final paragraph of the Declaration of Independence was something that was communicated to these Indigenous and First Nations chiefs because the last paragraph of the Declaration is incorporated into the first paragraph of the treaty that they all sign.

So the one response that we actually have from one of the chiefs that was present is from Ambrose Bear, who was Wolastoqey, and he responds, "we like it well." Now that's his response that he gives to a bunch of other things that happen during the treaty proceedings. So it might just be the translator or the secretary kind of interpreting his words for him. But that act of verbally responding to the Declaration of Independence, that is the first formal acknowledgement of the independent United States by a foreign power.

So it's incredibly important and it's incredibly important that it comes out of the mouth of a Native American, a neighbor, and not someone on the other side of the Atlantic in one of the courts of Europe.

So that's one example of how the Declaration is communicated verbally. Another is to the Haudenosaunee. There's a meeting that Philip Schuyler organizes in German Flatts, New York. And he was concerned at this point that the Six Nations might be changing their neutral positions within the war.

So with the Mi'kmaq chiefs that come down to Massachusetts, they are absolutely in support of the independent United States. Some of the Mi'kmaq chiefs actually jump out of their chairs to go and join General George Washington in New York. They're so excited to fight alongside of him. But when it comes to the Six Nations, they were in more of a neutral position. And then of course you have other nations that are engaging in violence, that is what makes it into the Declaration, and is treated as "merciless savagery."

So these nations that were neutral, Philip Schuyler was hoping to at best convince them to support the independent United States but at least keep them neutral and dissuade them from

siding with the British. So he communicates the Declaration of Independence to them. And a Mohawk sachem named Abraham presents a wampum belt that represents the independent United States.

And so for me, as someone who thinks about communication and the history of communication, to have a wampum belt as recognition of the Declaration of Independence is really fascinating because of course the Declaration is ink on paper, right? It's black words on white, or maybe slightly less than white paper because it was rag-made paper, it was a little dingy. Wampum is another form of black and white communication, but it's beads.

And so the belt that is presented that acknowledges the Declaration of Independence has eight rows of white beads. So when we think of rows of text versus rows of beads, there's just a really interesting sort of visual there that has been overlooked because we tend to focus on the Dunlap broadsides, the printed copies that survive rather than these carefully orchestrated conversations and treaty negotiations, and the people who were involved, whose names may not actually be on a signed copy of the Declaration, but who are equally important within this story of independence and sovereignty.

[00:51:52] Liz Covart: Now, something that I've taken for granted about the Declaration of Independence, and perhaps you have too, is that the Second Continental Congress declared its independence from Great Britain. It wrote the Declaration of Independence, and I've always just assumed that Congress would naturally address a copy to both King George III and to Parliament, and that's how the English people learned about the United States' independence.

But Emily, when I read *When the Declaration of Independence Was News*, I found that Congress never sent an official copy of the Declaration of Independence to Parliament or King George III so that the people of England had to learn about the United States' independence in a different way.

[00:52:31] Emily Sneff: We do think about King George in the story of the Declaration of Independence. We imagine in a sort of schoolhouse rock illustration, the Declaration being presented to him and him reacting in some way. The reality is that the Continental Congress, for all of their communication errors and faults, they were much more interested in communicating the Declaration to allies and others, "to the candid world," than they were to communicating it to the king and his ministers.

So as far as we can tell from the documentary evidence, the Continental Congress did not send the Declaration directly to the king. He finds out via copies of the Declaration that were sent by royal governors or British officers back to the secretaries of state in London. And then it was probably Lord Germain, the Secretary of State for British North America, who had the unenviable job of sharing the Declaration with the king.

I think it's important to remember the way that communication happened at this particular moment. Because there's official ways of moving the Declaration around, copies that come

directly from the Continental Congress, but then there's also copies of the Declaration that move sort of through private networks or are intercepted and end up in the hands of someone for whom the printer never imagined that their copy of the Declaration would get to. And so as a number of copies of the Declaration, including Dunlap Broadsides build up in the secretaries of states offices in London, you can imagine them thinking like, "yeah, we get it, we know they declared independence."

But when we actually trace the way that the text spread, we can see that in London there were also questions of like, "well, why didn't the Continental Congress tell the king? Why didn't they send it to Parliament? Why didn't they make a more formal declaration of their separation from Great Britain?"

There are essays and commentaries that are questioning whether the Declaration of Independence fits within the laws of nations. That when you declare independence, what do you actually have to do? How do you have to communicate it to a broader public versus the individuals from whom you are declaring independence?

There's also a question in London of whether this text is a declaration of war, which the Continental Congress did not think it was because Lexington and Concord was fifteen months earlier. And if anything, they thought that things that had come out of the King's mouth and out of Parliament were declarations of war, more so than their Declaration of Independence.

So there's a lot of comments and questions around how the news of independence was communicated internationally. But none of that is coming from the Continental Congress. They sort of send the text out and it just travels. They don't send any envoys to Great Britain. They don't anticipate that the king is going to personally receive a copy of the Declaration of Independence.

I think that there's a question of some of the members of the Continental Congress believed that the United States were already effectively independent. And so their priority was telling the people rather than telling the king, because in their view, he had already cast them out and declared them as rebels.

So ultimately, Great Britain does not acknowledge the independence of the United States until the treaty that ends the war formally. So there's years in between the Declaration of Independence and when Great Britain is forced to actually acknowledge independence. But in 1776, I think there were a lot of lingering questions.

[00:56:19] Liz Covart: So do you think not sending a copy of the Declaration of Independence to the king was an oversight by Congress? You know, they did produce this brilliant document, but they were also trying to manage the War for Independence. So do you think it was a simple oversight that they didn't send and circulate a Declaration of

Independence to England, or do you think not sending official word for the Declaration to England was really more strategic, it was a strategic choice?

[00:56:43] Emily Sneff: That's a great question. I do think there was strategy in communicating or trying to communicate with France rather than communicating with London with the king, with his officers.

An added wrinkle here is that the king had sent commissioners for restoring peace to North America, the Howe brothers William Howe and Admiral Richard Howe, and they arrived shortly after the Declaration of Independence. They are in a really sticky situation of not being able to acknowledge the Declaration of Independence. They have to act as if nothing has changed.

So I think that the Continental Congress, it wasn't necessarily an oversight that they didn't send the Declaration to the king. It was more so that they were trying to focus on the war and on the king's commissioners, thinking that they might have the power to acknowledge independence, and ultimately, they don't.

So there's so many things that the Congress is trying to deal with at the moment of independence. Certainly some things slipped through. They weren't necessarily as strategic or as preemptive as they could have been. But ultimately, I think that their focus is elsewhere.

And really at the end of the day, they wanted the people living within the United States to know that they were independent and to be able to celebrate that, and especially the men who were fighting for independence. You know, I think if you gave the Continental Congress the choice of prioritizing, getting the Declaration to George Washington and the Continental Army that are about to face off against the British in New York, or getting the Declaration to Parliament, I think they would've gone with George Washington.

So with limited resources and time and focus, I think the Continental Congress did what they could. And ultimately the king finds out his officers, his ministers, everyone finds out, and they ultimately refuse to act as if anything has changed.

[00:58:43] Liz Covart: Today we view the Declaration of Independence as an iconic founding document, perhaps the founding document of the United States.

Emily, you make the case in *When the Declaration of Independence Was News*, that we may view the Declaration as this iconic document but in 1776, people viewed it differently. They viewed it as just another piece of congressional news. Why do you think it's important for us to understand the Declaration on its own terms in 1776, and how does this 1776 view of the document help us better understand it?

[00:59:19] Emily Sneff: Wow, that's a great question, and I think it's a question that I keep coming back to because in some of my work, I'm able to focus specifically on 1776, and then in other pieces of my work, especially for museums, I have to think about the Declaration's legacy and its impact beyond 1776. I like sticking to 1776 because there's a sort of cliffhanger of not knowing what's going to happen next.

I also, as I thought about the Declaration as news, it has become clear that for a lot of people, the Declaration was something that happened one day and then life continued. There were other priorities, there were other things that were happening. There's state constitutions that are being made. There's a war that's being fought. There's a smallpox outbreak in Boston. Like there's all these other priorities that people have.

And I think that's a very relatable thing that as we today lived through historic moments, we're thinking about the day-to-day much more so than the long sort of duration of a particular event. If you go back and watch an episode of local news from a year ago, you're not going to remember any of the things that are being reported.

And so when we think of the Declaration as news, it's part of a news cycle. It's something that people are absorbing, processing, and moving on. And in some cases we do have evidence of that. There's a soldier at Fort Ticonderoga who says that the Declaration made a little buzz but was soon forgotten about because they're waging a war. They've got to keep things going.

I also think it's important to remember that the people involved in the Declaration of Independence, that cast of characters, is much bigger than the men who signed the document. If we think of that as the Declaration, which many people do, and we just focus on the signers, a group of fifty-six men who were never in the same place at the same time, we lose sight of all of the other people involved in the process of declaring independence, in printing, in reading aloud, in absorbing that news, in tearing down the symbols of the king, and lighting bonfires in the streets, in fighting for independence. So focusing on 1776 allows those people's stories to really shine.

And at the end of the book, it leaves off in January, 1777 when things are not looking great for the independent United States, which is a helpful reminder. As you know, we're 250 years on. Ultimately, the nation has survived through many conflicts and many challenges. But at the time, the Declaration was something that, it was not known if independence was actually going to happen or if the Declaration was just words on a piece of paper.

[01:02:06] Liz Covart: Well, it's time for us to move into our next segment, and I'm calling an audible. We were going to have a "1776 in Context" segment, but I really think we need to go back to that "Time Warp" question about Benjamin Franklin. So Emily, welcome to the "Time Warp." This is our segment of the show where we ask you a hypothetical history question about what might have happened if something had occurred differently or if someone had acted differently.

Emily, in your opinion, what might have happened if Congress had thought to have a PR committee or a communications committee headed by someone like Benjamin Franklin who had made a lot of money over the years printing the news and communicating with people? How might the dissemination of the Declaration of Independence have been different with this committee and with Ben Franklin as its head?

[01:02:51] Emily Sneff: Well, I would hope it would've been more effective. I think Benjamin Franklin, obviously, he had so many things that he accomplished and so many precedents that he set and his impact on the printing business is deeply felt. You know, there's printers who printed the Declaration who came out of the sort of Ben Franklin tree of printers setting up shop all over the United States.

I think that to have someone actively thinking about how the Declaration was going to be communicated to the people would've been advantageous. That it's one thing to say within the text of the Declaration that "we solemnly publish and declare," and to instruct John Hancock to send the Declaration out in letters to George Washington and to each of the states.

But I think if there had been someone thinking more intentionally about how the Continental Congress was presenting the independent United States to the world, it could have really been a boon for getting allies on board, as well as building support for independence at home.

What we end up seeing is that each state makes its own decisions about how to declare independence, whether to have public readings in specific places at specific times, or how the Declarations should be printed. And obviously printers printed in their newspapers as well.

But there are other examples where the Continental Congress passes a resolution and specifically orders that it should be printed in every newspaper. And that doesn't happen with the Declaration. I think if you did have a PR office or a committee that was thinking more strategically about how the Continental Congress was communicating its resolutions, then that's a decision that probably would've been made.

The timing of things might have been given more thought. And it all goes back to the question of whether you declare independence first before you have alliances and confederation, or what order of events those things happen in. I think if they did focus more on the power of communication and how the first impression of the independent United States is going to impact whether people support independence or acknowledge the sovereignty of the United States, giving that a little bit more attention could have ultimately brought about alliances faster, brought about the cohesion of communities around independence faster.

So yeah, if I could go back and maybe help Ben Franklin out. I know he had gout. Maybe he wasn't quite up to the task of really contributing in a communication-oriented way to the Declaration. But I think the Continental Congress, with the benefit of hindsight, would've wanted things to go a little bit more smoothly and intentionally.

[01:05:37] Liz Covart: Yeah. And now we have to wonder why Franklin didn't think of this. He so carefully crafted propaganda and other messages, but he just didn't seem to think about how news of the Declaration of Independence would spread. And I know no one's perfect, and he wasn't perfect, this isn't casting blame on him. It's really just this question of why didn't he think of it? Perhaps you're right. Perhaps it was just the gout.

Emily, now that you finished your book, *When the Declaration of Independence Was News*, do you have a new research project that you're already working on? Perhaps that's an unfair question because your book, it just came out

[01:06:11] Emily Sneff: For years, I've been joking that everyone's going to forget about the Declaration on July 5th, 2026. That may be partially true, but I have been thinking about a new project, which comes out of my work at Historic Trappe. And would focus on Frederick Muhlenberg, who in the pantheon of forgotten Founding Fathers, has not yet received his due the way that people like Alexander Hamilton have.

Frederick Muhlenberg is a fascinating person. And when we think about the founding of the United States and the ongoing 250th, all of the anniversaries to come over the next decade plus, as you know Liz, he's there for a lot of them.

He's the first speaker of the US House of Representatives, but he also is intimately involved at the county and state level in the development of the independent United States and setting the precedents that became something that we take for granted.

So just like with the Declaration of Independence, where I started in the public facing, civic education side of things, and then turned to the more academic scholarship, that seems to be happening with Frederick Muhlenberg. Starting at Historic Trappe, thinking about his legacy and the houses that we have to interpret his story, and then transitioning to more of a history of his political career.

But I had no idea who he was until I started working for Historic Trappe. And so bringing that perspective of like, why don't we remember this person? And also how his German-ness, his place as a member of an immigrant community, factored into his political career is something that is really interesting to me. So stay tuned.

[01:07:48] Liz Covart: Now, speaking of 2026, as we mentioned at the start of our conversation, you've been involved in curating exhibits about the Declaration of Independence for the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia, and about everyday German American participation in the War for Independence at Historic Trappe. Would you tell us what these exhibits are about and how we can visit them?

[01:08:09] Emily Sneff: Absolutely. *The Declaration's Journey* at the Museum of the American Revolution opened in October 2025. So it kind of acted as the canary in the coal mine for 250th exhibitions, to see how people feel about the 250th. And so far the reaction

has been overwhelmingly positive, and people walk into the exhibit thinking that they know what they're going to see and they walk out having a new perspective on the impact of the Declaration.

And the exhibit will be up until January 2027. So if you come to Philadelphia for the 250th, the museum is just a couple blocks from Independence Hall and you'll get to see some really incredible objects. A printing press from Chile, all sorts of different copies of the Declaration, things like Elizabeth Candy Stanton's desk that really connect you to the people involved in the history of the Declaration. So definitely it's worth a visit.

At Historic Trappe. We're focusing on the experience of Pennsylvania Germans and thinking about not only the people who fought for independence, but the people who lived through independence. And we're also looking at the long 250th because next year, in 2027, we will mark when the war came to the Trappe area. From the battles in the fall of 1777 through the encampment at Valley Forge, which is only about twenty minutes from Trappe.

So we have houses that can interpret this story, including the Muhlenberg House, which was really a place of refuge for people that were evacuating from Philadelphia during the British occupation of the city. But we also talk about different types of people living through the war: people who were pacifists, people who were fused to sign oaths of allegiance, people of different religious communities given the tremendous religious pluralism in Pennsylvania, and then even the German soldiers who came here fighting alongside the British and then decided to stay and became fraktur artists and other, you know, artisans within Pennsylvania.

So tons of really interesting stories. And it's going to be an exciting exhibit where you can do something like read Henry Muhlenberg's handwritten journals describing what it was like to live through the war and then walk through his house and see it come off the page and really inhabit that space. Trappe is just outside of Philadelphia. Well worth a visit if you've never been before.

[01:10:29] Liz Covart: If we have more questions about the Declaration of Independence and how it circulated Emily, where is the best place for us to get ahold of you?

[01:10:36] Emily Sneff: Emilysneff.com is always a good spot to go for more information. Through the end of 2026, you can also go to declarationstories.org, which has the weekly Declaration Stories newsletter with different stories behind particular copies of the Declaration. As well as a daily newsletter of news from 1776, which pulls a particular bit of news from a Philadelphia newspaper, so you can get a sense of if you were Thomas Jefferson sitting in Philadelphia, what information would you have at a given moment. Those are the two best places to look, and you can also follow me at @declarationlady

[01:11:14] Liz Covart: Emily Sneff, thank you so much for rejoining us and for helping us see the Declaration of Independence as news and not just as an iconic American document.

[01:11:22] Emily Sneff: Thank you, Liz.

[01:11:24] Liz Covart: Emily Sneff has spent years finding and researching copies of the Declaration of Independence, all to follow how a single document was remade into hundreds of different versions, the moment it left Congress's desk. And what Emily found, and what I hope you found in this conversation, is that the Declaration of Independence is far more interesting when you treat it the way that people did in 1776, and that's as news.

Now two aspects of this conversation are staying with me. The first is Emily's point about what the word facts means. When Thomas Jefferson and the Committee of Five wrote, "let facts be submitted to a candid world," they were thinking like lawyers. And as lawyers, they prepared a list of grievances, twenty-seven of them, against King George III as evidence for the United States's claiming its independence from the British Empire.

Now, the Second Continental Congress meant facts as in the legal Latin definition of facta, but translators working in Europe tended to translate facts to mean events or incidents, things that had simply happened rather than as evidence that Congress had assembled to make its legal argument.

Now, this difference in meaning and translation tells us something profound about the Declaration of Independence. The people closest to the revolution understood its language in ways that the wider world simply could not.

Now, the second aspect of this conversation that's staying with me is Emily's account of John Dickinson's warning. Before the vote for Independence, Dickinson told Congress that declaring independence without foreign alliances or confederation in place would be like "sending a skiff made of paper out into the Atlantic Ocean." Dickinson was trying to delay the act of declaring independence. He didn't think the timing was right, but the image he evoked of a skiff made a paper, describes what actually happened.

Congress sent the Declaration of Independence out into the world with no communication strategy or plan. So the Declaration dissolved and reformed with every printer, translator, and minister who touched it and communicated it anew. Now, the miracle here is not that the Declaration survived the journey, it's that enough of its text survived in all its many remakings to matter.

So our conversation with Emily is a really good reminder that the Declaration of Independence wasn't born as an iconic document. It was made that way slowly, unevenly, and by far more people than the fifty-six men who signed the document.

Look for more information about Emily, her book, *When the Declaration of Independence Was News*, plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today on the show notes page, benfranklinsworld.com/439.



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

Now, I think this episode is one that you really should be sharing with your friends. After all, remember that the act of sharing is an act of caring. Friends tell friends about their favorite podcasts.

Production assistance for this podcast comes from Joseph Adelman, Karin Wulf, and Morgan McCullough. Breakmaster Cylinder composed our custom theme music. This podcast is part of the Airwave Media podcast network. To discover and listen to their other podcasts, visit airwavemedia.com.

Finally, I'm really curious, what part of this conversation surprised you most? Was it the German printers who understood the Declaration's legal language, or the Anglican ministers who crossed out the king in their common prayer books? Was it something else? I'd really love to know. So please send me your answers, liz@benfranklinsworld.com.

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