

The burning question: Is 1776 historically accurate?

This has to be the most often asked question about this movie. Except for maybe, "Where can I buy a copy?" Hahaha, I'm kidding. Anyway, this page will attempt to answer the proposed question. It will be a long answer, but stick with me and we might learn something about history along the way...

Of course, as always, further questions concerning accuracies are welcome, and I will do research if I don't already know the answer.

Some of the items below are things I have noticed others commenting on, and in keeping with the goal of this being a Q&A format, I have reformed them into questions. For example, the comment "Adams and Abigail didn't actually write to each other asking for saltpetre and pins" is converted into the question "Did Adams and Abigail write to each other asking for saltpetre and pins?"

This is a work in progress. I have plans to keep it as a Q&A format - the trickiest part for me will be to keep it clean - that is, not cluttered and choked with text, text and more text. Even I might find that less than fun to slog through and that is counterproductive to my goal of this site: to get people *interested* in 1776 and history. Some material from the "1776 Tidbits" page has been rearranged and moved over here, and there will be new material, so stay "tuned."

I have noticed around other sites that there is some... no... a lot of confusion concerning the historical accuracy of this movie. No, the signers didn't sing about eggs and the Lees of Virginia (although odds are at least one of them *could* sing and Jefferson was quite accomplished with the violin) but there are other things about this movie that seem odd and inaccurate, but are in fact true. I thought I would first start out with some things that have shorter answers to them.

Q: Did Adams and Abigail write to each other asking for saltpetre and pins?

A: Yes. If you want proof, look it up in their letters, which have been reprinted in a couple of volumes and are available online.

Q: Was the Declaration of Independence signed on July 4th?

A: Not by all of the congressional members, no. There are varying accounts, but it is agreed upon that the signers attached their names over a period of time. The account most commonly given states most of the members signed it on August 2nd. One account gives the final name appearing on it sometime in January 1777.

Q: Did Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration of Independence include the part Edward Rutledge calls attention to, beginning "He has waged cruel war...?"

A: Yes. It was about the slave trade, not necessarily about slavery itself. On a related note, there is a lot of debate as to if Jefferson intended to free his slaves. Often people point to the fact that Jefferson racked up some serious debts after about 1789 and was deeply in debt by the end of his life, and thus couldn't afford to free his slaves. If you're really interested, there are a number of books/biographies I can recommend.

Q: Was Samuel Chase (Maryland) really called "Bacon Face?"

A: According to Edwards and Stone's historical note in the back of the script book, yes. Behind his back, of course. I haven't done any more research on this one (yet). Note: The scene where Adams calls Chase "Bacon Face" was cut in the VHS version, but is restored on the DVD.

Now come the questions with lengthier answers...

Q: Did the New York delegation abstain from voting for independence?

A: The New York delegation did abstain on many motions, including the "final" one on independence. Historically, there were actually two votes: one on the resolution on independence as proposed by R. H. Lee (taking place on July 2) and then the vote approving the Declaration of Independence (on July 4). New York abstained from both, but the New York legislature did approve it after the fact.

Q: How long did it take Thomas Jefferson to write the Declaration of Independence?

A: It took Jefferson between one week and three weeks. He had three weeks to write it, but he was also

writing the Virginia State Constitution at the same time. It has been assumed that a surprisingly small amount of time went into writing it. Many of the ideas expressed Jefferson borrowed from others (such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness) and many are revisions of the declaration committee (such as we hold these truths to be self-evident. That was Franklin). Jefferson *might* have worked on it on and off for the three weeks he was given, and that he spent the equivalent of a week's worth of work, his time and energy being devoted to other things such as the VA State Constitution, and he still had congress to attend every day (except Sunday). He was probably on other committees as well, besides the declaration committee. By the way, the visit from his wife didn't actually happen. She was probably ill at the time (she died very young), and he certainly wanted to go visit her in VA. It is possible that he did go.

Q: Was Stephen Hopkins (Rhode Island) really drunk?

A: According to Edwards and Stone's historical note in the back of the 1776 script book, Hopkins was really called "Old Grape and Guts" because of his fondness for distilled refreshment. However, I wouldn't really call him drunk though. People consumed a lot of distilled drinks back then because there just wasn't anything else to drink. Tea was out (haha). Water was not clean, milk was only had if you knew a cow nearby (no refrigerators). They did have "hot chocolate" but it wasn't as sweet as the stuff we know today (if I remember correctly). I don't know about juice. There was coffee, but no soda, so... drink up! [Addition Summer 2006]: You could drink "switchel," a drink made of vinegar (yes, vinegar), sugar, molasses, ginger, and - surprise - water. I have personally tasted this and I liked it! I was giving out samples to people, however, and most people thought it was O.K. but not something they'd want every day. One kid though, about twelve or thirteen, liked it so much he copied down the recipe! It was meant to be a refreshing summer drink (which it still is), especially for people who were working hard (like farming in the fields) all day. There's so much more out there about drinks of the 18th century, but I will leave it here.

Q: Was Caesar Rodney (Delaware) really dying?

A: According to Edwards and Stone's historical note in the back of the 1776 script book, Rodney did suffer from skin cancer, did walk around with a green scarf on his face, and was roused from his bed to ride to Philadelphia to vote, as seen in the movie. He was dying, and by becoming involved with independence he did lose the possibility of treatment in England.

[Addition 07-13-2007]: In light of an e-mail received recently, I revisited this matter and did some digging. As the aforementioned correspondent wrote, Rodney did have cancer (on his nose, according to www.ushistory.org/declaration/signers/index.htm) but was not on his deathbed in 1776. He was actually campaigning for President of Delaware and had to be sent for (not by McKean himself but a messenger sent by him) and he rode alone back to congress. It is certainly true Rodney lived for the better part of eight years after voting for independence. He died on June 29, 1784.

Q: Were John Witherspoon and the New Jersey delegates late because Ben Franklin's son got arrested?

A: O.K., a seemingly simple question proves to be tricky to answer. First, in the reality of the movie: Technically no. Franklin's illegitimate son, William Franklin, was governor of New Jersey and he was arrested in June 1776 and exiled to Connecticut. I can imagine with the Royal Governor out of the way, the new New Jersey government could send a delegation to support independence. They were not really late; a delegation would have been appointed by the Royal government, but, as seen in the movie, they never showed up. With the new government in place, Witherspoon and the others were sent (Witherspoon does say in the movie that the New Jersey legislature recalled the old delegation and has sent a new one, which is accurate). They were sent as replacements for the old delegation that didn't show up (it was not uncommon at the time, I'm afraid, for someone to be appointed to congress by their colony but they never show up in congress for some reason or another). Second, the historical reality: William Franklin was arrested and exiled in June 1776. I haven't done enough research to tell if there was no New Jersey delegation in Congress pre-June 1776, but John Witherspoon and the others had arrived in time to vote on independence on July 2nd. But I don't think it's too much of a stretch that the movie is accurate regarding a new delegation being sent by the new New Jersey government.

SOURCE: <http://johnadams1776.tripod.com/1776accuracy.html>