

The Story behind the Proclamation of Peace

The War that almost didn't end

The American Revolution's final act—the ratification of peace with Great Britain—involved missing congressmen, climatic change, unconstitutional maneuverings, a last minute “save” and a rush to Paris to meet what proved to be an impossible deadline. Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, starred in the drama and Benjamin Franklin played a part, not only as a diplomat, but also as a scientist.

This little-known piece of American history began on December 13, 1783 when the United States Congress convened in Annapolis, Md. to approve the Treaty of Paris, the peace accord with Great Britain. The treaty stipulated that both nations were to exchange ratifications in Paris by March 3, 1784. Congress, however, didn't have the votes to ratify the treaty.

The treaty, itself, was not the problem. In the treaty, George III acknowledged the United States to be “free, sovereign and independent.” Great Britain, in addition, guaranteed timely troop withdrawals from all occupied American territory as well as agreed to boundaries that doubled the size of the republic. The Americans also regained access to the cod and haddock fisheries in the British-controlled North Atlantic, a mainstay of New England’s economy before the Revolution. They had even countered British demands for compensation to loyalists with a vague promise to “earnestly recommend to the states” appropriate remedial actions.

The dilemma was more basic. The Congress meeting in Maryland’s Statehouse did not have enough delegates to approve the peace. The Articles of Confederation required nine states or a two-thirds majority of the 13-state union to ratify a treaty. Each state with two or more delegates had a vote. However, just seven states--Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina--had sent full delegations to Annapolis. Only one representative from New Hampshire and South Carolina was present. Not one of the 20 congressmen in the assembly was from New York, New Jersey, Connecticut or Georgia.

All the delegates could do was wait for their missing colleagues. Roll calls through December and into January brought no relief. The deadline grew closer with each day. State negligence in sending and supporting delegates in Congress jeopardized the peace that American arms had seemingly achieved.

The weather also threatened peace prospects. North America was entering the “Long Winter of 1783-1784,” a time of bitter cold, ice storms and blizzards that Jefferson, manager of the Congress’ ratification effort, described as “severe beyond all memory.” Great storms raged along the Eastern seaboard. By the end of January the three-month snow accumulation for Morristown, New Jersey, 25 miles from New York City, was 83.5 inches. Ice closed down Philadelphia’s harbor December 26 and Baltimore’s January 2. Roads became almost impassable. The temperature plunged to -20F in Hartford, Connecticut.

The weather isolated the snowbound Maryland capital from much of the nation. A letter North Carolina Governor sent December 8 to his state’s delegation, for instance, arrived on February 24. Not one of the absent states responded to a December 23rd Congressional appeal that “the safety, honor, and good faith of the United States” required their immediate representation in Congress. Neither the New Jersey nor Connecticut governor acknowledged a letter Thomas Mifflin, president of Congress, sent informing them that the United States could not meet the Paris deadline without the votes of their states.

Tension increased among the powerless legislators. Many congressmen, including Jefferson, feared that Britain would use a missed deadline to demand renegotiation of terms or even begin the war again. The American security situation was not good. The American Army had virtually

disbanded. The British still occupied forts on the frontier. Rumors reached Annapolis that war between Russia and Turkey was imminent. The United States would be defenseless if such a conflict involved France, America's ally.

Jefferson confessed his "extreme anxiety" over Congress' situation. Yet he vigorously argued against a late December attempt to approve the treaty with just seven votes. He said that such a secret ratification would be a "dishonorable prostitution of our seal." Britain, he argued, would certainly discover the deception and feel "surprised and cheated" and have grounds to challenge the ratification. His successful opposition to the measure angered its proponents and divided the body.

On January 3, in the aftermath of yet another heavy snow storm, Jefferson relented. He agreed to ratification by seven states and the document's dispatch to Paris. However, Jefferson stipulated that the arrival of the treaty be kept secret from the British. His plan called for Benjamin Franklin, the American Ambassador to France, first to ask the British for an extension of the deadline. If the British agreed to an extension, Congress would have time to secure the additional two state votes and to send an unquestionably valid ratification to Paris. If the British refused, Franklin was to present the seven-state ratification; inform them that the treaty had arrived when Congress was not in session; note that only seven states had assembled but all had approved the treaty; and declare, that because of the deadline, Congress was officially offering the seven-state ratification in exchange for theirs.

Jefferson's "middle ground" compromise united the assembly. A vote was set for January 14. Express riders left Annapolis for the state capitols to inform the respective governors of the pending irregular, if not "unconstitutional" seven-state ratification. Charles Thomson, secretary of the Congress, used the interval to send off a letter to Franklin urging an extension. His cryptic unsigned note, prepared for a ship about to brave the Chesapeake Bay ice for Europe, blamed the ratification holdup on severe weather and heavy snowfalls that made travel difficult, but made no mention of the yet to-be-adopted seven-state ratification proposal. President Mifflin, meanwhile, made a last attempt to secure a nine-vote treaty ratifying quorum. He sent Col. Josiah Harmar, his aide, to New Jersey to plea for delegates. He also ordered Harmar to stop in Philadelphia to urge Richard Beresford, a delegate from South Carolina, to leave his sick bed for the vote.

On January 13, the eve of the proposed vote, Connecticut delegates James Wadsworth and Roger Sherman and New Jersey's John Beatty arrived in Annapolis. Connecticut now had full voting rights. Congress was only one state away from the treaty quorum. The next morning South Carolina's Richard Beresford arrived to complete his state's delegation, eliminating the need for the compromise legislation. The Congress unanimously ratified the treaty with nine votes from Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Virginia. (New Hampshire and New Jersey, each represented by only one delegate, also supported the resolution. New York and Georgia had no delegate in Congress.)

Jefferson wrote the ratification legislation and also used it as the basis for the Proclamation. Like the ratification document itself, Jefferson's Peace Proclamation reprints the peace accord and includes Congress' promise to observe all its articles "as far as should be in our powers." It then reminds Americans that each treaty stipulation was approved "under the authority of the federal bond by which their existence as an independent people is bound up together." The Proclamation calls on "all civic and military officials, of whatever rank, degree or powers and all other good citizens of these United States" to carry into effect "every clause and sentence" of the treaty "sincerely, strictly and completely." Congress adopted the Proclamation unanimously.

To demonstrate "good faith" in reference to several unpopular provisions in the peace treaty, Congress also passed a resolution directed to state legislatures that "earnestly recommended" compliance with treaty commitments regarding restitution of estates, rights, and properties of "real

British subjects...and of persons (loyalists) resident in districts under British control "who have not borne arms against the United States. It also asked the states to permit "persons of any other description" (loyalists) to travel "unmolested" within their borders for 12 months to secure legal redress for confiscated estates and urged the revision of anti-loyalist laws and acts to make them "consistent not only with justice and equity, but with that spirit of conciliation, which, on the return of the blessings of peace, should universally prevail." In recommending restitution of loyalist properties, Congress repeated the treaty stipulation that the claimants would have to refund those who purchased the seized land.

Thomson prepared diplomatic pouches which included the Ratification, the Peace Proclamation and the Resolution to the States. Military couriers--Cols. Harmar and David S. Franks--quickly left Annapolis for New York City with separate packets. Harmar, arrived in the newly liberated port on the evening of the 19th and promptly boarded the French Packet "Le Courier de L'Amerique" which, on order of the French ambassador, had delayed its departure for the courier. Franks arrived a few days later and secured passage on a London-bound ship. Great cakes of harbor ice, fierce snow storms and for 10 days in February, a solid ice barrier between Long Island and Staten Island ("the Narrows") kept the ships from the open sea until February 21, too late to meet the deadline.

Harmar, first to Europe, made landfall March 25, after a rough 33-day voyage, in L'Orient, the French naval base in Brittany. He left immediately for Paris, riding night and day. On the evening of March 29, 73 days after he left Annapolis, Harmar delivered the ratification documents to Franklin at the ambassador's residence in Passy, outside Paris. Franklin had received Thomson's letter several days after the deadline. Congress' suspicions of Britain's readiness to renounce the treaty were wrong. Great Britain readily accepted the explanation that inclement weather had delayed the treaty. Europe, like America, Franklin wrote home, was experiencing a winter "unlike any even the oldest men could remember." *

George III informed that the American ratification had arrived in Paris, signed the British ratification on April 9, 1784. Both nations exchanged ratifications in Paris on May 12, 1784. Franklin sent Congress the British ratification, signed by George III. As Franklin wrote Thomson, "The great and hazardous enterprise we have engaged in, is, God Be praised, happily completed."

*Before leaving France for home, Franklin submitted a paper connecting the severe winter in North America and Northern Europe with volcano eruptions in Iceland. His observation submitted to a British scientific society is considered the first scientific association of volcanic eruptions with climate change. Gases from the eruptions of Iceland's Laki volcano, between June 1783 and February 1784, destroyed Iceland's crops, wiped out three-quarters of its livestock and killed 9,000 to 10,000 people almost a quarter of the island's people. Sulfuric acid fell to the ground as a dry fog or blue toxic gas in much of Northern Europe. Many volcanologists believe that the gases, trapped in the upper atmosphere, temporarily changed Northern Hemisphere's climate, triggering or increasing the severity of the "Long Winter of 1783-1784." Others suggest different reasons for the harsh weather in America. Computer simulations based on meteorological data, unavailable in Franklin's time, might soon resolve the issue.

Treaty of Paris, Article 1

"His Britannic Majesty acknowledges the said United States ...to be free, sovereign and independent states and he treats them as such, and for himself, his heirs and successors, relinquishes all claims to the government, propriety, and territorial rights of the same and every part thereof."