The two men in the otherwise empty chamber locked eyes for a moment in the late morning light. Two days earlier, the Continental Congress had approved a resolution supporting independence, and on July 4, 1776, had given their official approval to the Declaration of Independence. John Hancock, president of the Congress, had stayed behind. It was now his task to authenticate the Declaration so it could be sent to colonial legislatures.

Hancock held the gaze of Secretary of Congress Charles Thomson. The gravity of what they had just resolved weighed upon him. He knew that the other signers would not affix their names to the Declaration for another month or so, and even then, their names would be kept secret to protect them from charges of treason. Hancock would be the only known signer of the Declaration of Independence, that document which accused the English King of tyranny, and which would mark them as traitors to the crown. Hancock picked up the quill and boldly affixed his name in large, embellished script. With his name, he pledged—as the Declaration proudly affirmed—his life, his fortune, and his sacred honor to his fellow Patriots in the cause of American independence.

**Background**

John Hancock was born on January 23, 1737, in Braintree, Massachusetts. His father was a clergyman who died when Hancock was a boy. Hancock was then raised by his uncle, a wealthy Boston merchant, who sent him to Harvard College. At age seventeen, after an undistinguished academic career, Hancock graduated and became a clerk in his uncle’s shipping firm.

In 1764, Hancock’s uncle died, leaving his business and substantial fortune—perhaps the largest in all of New England—to the twenty-seven-year-old Hancock. He instantly became an influential figure at a time when tensions between America and Great Britain were beginning to increase. In 1765, the British Parliament passed the Stamp Act, which sparked violent protests in Boston. The following year, Hancock was elected to the Massachusetts legislature.

**The Sons of Liberty**

It was at this time that Samuel Adams befriended Hancock. A fellow Bostonian, Adams was already known for his opposition to the British attempt to tax the American colonies. He convinced the wealthy Hancock to assist him in organizing the Sons of Liberty, a group of Americans who took action to resist British tyranny. Hancock’s money largely funded the Patriot movement in Boston.

Adams and Hancock were in many ways an odd couple. A member of the elite class and a man of commerce, Hancock did not hesitate to conduct business with English merchants. He was always well groomed and attired in the finest clothes money could buy. Adams, on the other hand, was a failed businessman who cared little for fame or for
his personal appearance. A committed Puritan, he disliked displays of wealth and chided those who purchased “baubles” produced by English manufacturers. But the friendship between the pair became one of the most important personal relationships of the Revolutionary era.

**The Liberty Incident**

In 1768, British customs officials seized one of Hancock’s merchant vessels, the *Liberty*. They claimed that the ship’s captain had failed to pay import duties. The captain was following Hancock’s orders to challenge the legality of the British tax. The incident sparked violence when the Sons of Liberty organized a mob to protest the *Liberty’s* seizure.

The *Liberty* incident made Hancock a hero among American Patriots and a nuisance to British authorities. In the same year, he and Adams helped to generate protests against the newly enacted Townshend Duties. The British government sent several regiments of troops to Boston to try to squelch the increasing rabble-rousing of the Sons of Liberty.

**The Boston Massacre**

On the evening of March 5, 1770, a crowd of Bostonians gathered around a group of British soldiers and began to taunt them and throw snowballs. The soldiers fired on the citizens, killing five men. The event galvanized opposition among Bostonians to the British presence. Hancock and Adams convened a meeting of outraged citizens the next day. Hancock was chosen to head a committee to demand that Lieutenant-Governor Thomas Hutchinson remove the troops from the city.

The troops were not withdrawn, and the Sons of Liberty continued to organize opposition to British rule. In 1773, Parliament passed the Tea Act, which lowered the price of British tea, thereby undercutting American merchants and smugglers. In response, Hancock and Adams organized the Boston Tea Party. This was a nighttime raid in which some 150 members of the Sons of Liberty, disguised as Native Americans, boarded a docked merchant ship and threw 342 chests of British tea into Boston harbor.

**The Declaration of Independence**

By 1774 Hancock and Adams had been singled out by British authorities as the main troublemakers in Boston. In a last-ditch attempt to quell the uprising, the new royal governor of Massachusetts, General Thomas Gage, issued an amnesty to all who had been involved in illegal opposition to British law. However, he named Hancock and Adams as the only residents who could not obtain pardon. In April 1775, Massachusetts militiamen fired on British troops sent by Gage to arrest Hancock and Adams. The American War of Revolution had begun. Hancock was angry when Congress in 1775 passed him over for command of the Continental Army and chose George Washington instead.

That year, Hancock was chosen to attend the meeting of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. He was chosen president of the Congress and presided over the signing of the Declaration of Independence on August 2, 1776. He himself had signed it a month earlier on July 4, 1776. In 1780, Hancock resigned from Congress and returned home to Massachusetts.
Service to Massachusetts
Hancock served as governor of Massachusetts for nine terms between 1780 and 1793. He served on the committee that created the state constitution of 1780. As governor in 1787, he pardoned most of the participants in Shays's Rebellion, including Daniel Shays himself.

That same year, delegates from twelve of the states assembled in Philadelphia to revise the Articles of Confederation. Hancock had signed the Articles when he served in the Continental Congress. Fearful of centralized government power, he was at first critical of the Constitution. But Hancock eventually agreed to support ratification. He presided over the Massachusetts ratifying convention in 1788. Five years later, Hancock died in his hometown of Quincy, his name to be remembered by later generations of Americans for more than two centuries because he wrote it so boldly in 1776.

Reading Comprehension Questions
1. What was the Liberty incident? What effect did it have on Hancock's reputation?
2. In what ways was the partnership of Samuel Adams and John Hancock an unexpected one?
3. What role did Hancock play in the ratification of the federal Constitution of 1787?

Critical Thinking Questions
4. For a month in 1776, Hancock was the only known signer of the Declaration of Independence. What did this mean for Hancock personally, and what does this reveal about his character?
5. John Adams said that Hancock was one of “the essential characters” of the American Revolution. Others said that he was no more than a tool of Samuel Adams. Which opinion is more justified?
Oration on the Anniversary of the Boston Massacre (1774)

1. **Vocabulary**: Use context clues to determine the meaning or significance of each of these words and write their definitions:
   a. avowing
   b. enmity
   c. transactions
   d. pretensions
   e. laudably
   f. tenacious
   g. despise
   h. esteem
   i. animating

2. **Context**: Answer the following questions.
   a. Who wrote this document?
   b. When was this document written?
   c. Who was the audience of this document?
   d. Why was this document written?
Oration on the Anniversary of the Boston Massacre (1774)

Men, Brethren, Fathers, and Fellow-Countrymen:

Security to the persons and properties of the governed is . . . obviously the design and end of civil government. . . . It cannot be virtuous or honorable to support a government of which this is not the great and principal basis; and it is to the last degree vicious and infamous to attempt to support a government which manifestly tends to render the persons and properties of the governed insecure.

Some boast of being friends to government; I am a friend to righteous government, to a government founded upon the principles of reason and justice; but I glory in publicly avowing my eternal enmity to tyranny. Is the present system, which the British administration has adopted for the government of the Colonies, a righteous government—or is it tyranny? Here suffer me to ask (and would to heaven there could be an answer!) what tenderness, what regard, respect, or consideration has Great Britain shown, in their late transactions, for the security of the persons or properties of the inhabitants of the Colonies? Or rather what have they omitted doing to destroy that security? They have declared that they have ever had, and of right ought ever to have, full power to make laws of sufficient validity to bind the Colonies in all cases whatever. They have exercised this pretended right by imposing a tax upon us without our consent; and lest we should show some reluctance at parting with our property, her fleets and armies are sent to enforce their mad pretensions. . . .

Standing armies are sometimes (I would by no means say generally, much less universally) composed of persons who have rendered themselves unfit to live in civil society; who have no other motives of conduct than those which desire of the present gratification of their passions . . . who have given up their own liberty, and envy those who enjoy liberty . . . .

A well-disciplined militia is a safe, an honorable guard to a community like this, whose inhabitants are by nature brave, and are laudably tenacious of that freedom in which they were born. From a well-regulated militia we have nothing to fear; their interest is the same with that of the State. When a country is invaded, the militia are ready to appear in its defense; they march into the field with that fortitude which a consciousness of the justice of their cause inspires. . . . No; they fight for their houses, their lands, for their wives, their children; for all who claim the tenderest names, and are held dearest in their hearts. . . .

Suffer not yourselves to be betrayed, by the soft arts of luxury and effeminacy, into the pit digged for your destruction. Despise the glare of wealth. That people who pay greater respect to a wealthy villain than to an honest, upright man in poverty, almost deserve to be enslaved; they plainly show that wealth, however it may be acquired, is, in their esteem, to be preferred to virtue. . . .

I have the most animating confidence that the present noble struggle for liberty will terminate gloriously for America.

**Directions:** After reading Hancock’s speech, imagine how each individual or group on the left side of the chart would react to his words. Write a two or three sentence response on the right that reflects that reaction. Write your response using first-person.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDIVIDUAL/GROUP</th>
<th>REACTION TO HANCOCK’S SPEECH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family members of American Boston Massacre victims</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts Royal Governor General Thomas Gage</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Boston Colonial Militiamen</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Citizens of Boston loyal to Britain</td>
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<tr>
<td>British Soldiers in Boston</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women of Boston</td>
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<tr>
<td>Citizens of other American Colonies</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Liberty was the central political principle of the American Revolution. As Patrick Henry, one of its staunchest supporters, famously intoned, “Give me liberty or give me death.” Henry was not alone in his rhetorical fervor. Indeed, no ideal was proclaimed more often in the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world than liberty.

The idea of liberty defended by the American Founders came from several sources. The most venerable was English common law. Beginning in the late medieval period, writers in the common law tradition developed an understanding of liberty which held that English subjects were free because they lived under a system of laws which even the Crown was bound to respect. Leading English jurists argued that these legal limits on royal power protected the subject’s liberty by limiting the arbitrary use of political power.

Under English common law, liberty also consisted in the subject enjoying certain fundamental rights to life, liberty and property. William Blackstone (1723–1780), the leading common lawyer of the eighteenth century, argued that these rights allowed an English subject to be the “entire master of his own conduct, except in those points wherein the public good requires some direction or restraint . . .” For Blackstone, these English rights further protected the subjects’ liberty by making them secure in their persons from arbitrary search and seizure, and by ensuring that their property could not be taken from them without due process of law.

In order to preserve these fundamental rights, the English common law allowed the subject the right to consent to the laws that bound him by electing representatives to Parliament whose consent the monarch had to obtain before acting.

Common lawyers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not view these rights and the liberty they protected as the gift or grant of the monarch; rather, they believed that they were an Englishmen’s “birthright,” something that inhere in each subject and that therefore could not be taken away by royal prerogative.

This common law understanding of liberty was central to the seventeenth-century struggles against the Stuart monarchy. Prominent jurists and Parliamentarians such as Edward Coke (1552–1634) took the lead in the attempt to limit what they saw as the illegal and arbitrary nature of the Stuarts’ rule. This struggle culminated in the Glorious Revolution of 1689 and the triumph of Parliamentary authority over the Crown. For champions of English liberty, the result of this century-long struggle was the achievement of political liberty. They further argued that, as a result of this struggle, Britain in the eighteenth century had the freest constitution in the world. According to the French writer Montesquieu (1689–1755), Britain was “the only nation in the world, where political and civil liberty” was “the direct end of the constitution.”

This seventeenth century struggle between royal power and the subject’s liberties made a great impression on the American Founders. They absorbed its lessons about the nature and importance of liberty through their reading of English history as well as through their instruction in English law.

A second and equally influential understanding of liberty was also forged in the constitutional battles of the seventeenth century: the idea that liberty was a natural right pertaining to all. The foremost exponent of this understanding of liberty in the English-speaking world was John Locke (1632–1704). Locke’s political ideas were part of a wider European political and legal movement which argued that there were certain rights that all men were entitled to irrespective of social class or creed.

Like the common lawyers, Locke saw liberty as centrally about the enjoyment of certain rights. However, he universalized the older English understanding of liberty, arguing that it applied to all persons, and not just to English subjects. Locke also expanded the contemporary understanding of liberty by arguing that it included other rights—in particular a right to religious toleration (or liberty of conscience), as well as a right to resist governments that violated liberty. In addition, Locke argued that the traditional English common
law right to property was also a natural right, and was an important part of the subject’s liberty.

Locke began his political theory by arguing that liberty was the natural state of mankind. According to Locke, all men are “naturally” in a “State of perfect Freedom to order” their “Actions, and dispose of their Possessions, and Persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the Law of Nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the Will of any other Man.”

However, Locke did not argue that this natural liberty was a license to do whatever we want. “Freedom is not,” he argued, “A Liberty for every Man to do what he lists (For who could be free, when every other Man’s humour might domineer over him?).” Rather, Locke held that since all men are “equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his Life, health, Liberty, or Possessions.” According to Locke, each of us has “an uncontroulable Liberty to dispose of our persons and possession,” but we do not have the right to interfere with the equal liberty of others to do the same.

In Locke’s political theory, men enter into society and form governments to better preserve this natural liberty. When they do so, they create a political system where the natural law limits on liberty in the state of nature are translated into a legal regime of rights. In such a system, Locke argued, each person retains his “Liberty to dispose, and order, as he lists, his Person, Actions, Possession, and his whole Property, within the Allowance of those Laws under which he is; and therein not to be subject to the arbitrary Will of another, but freely follow his own.”

For Locke, as for the common lawyers, the rule of law was necessary for liberty. In Locke’s view, “the end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge Freedom.” According to Locke, “Where there is no Law, there is no Freedom. For Liberty is to be free from restraint and violence from others which cannot be, where there is no law.”

Building on both the English common law and on Locke’s ideas, the eighteenth-century English writer Cato argued “that liberty is the unalienable right of mankind.” It is “the power which every Man has over his own Actions, and his Right to enjoy the Fruit of his Labour, Art, and Industry, as far as by it he hurts not the Society, or any members of it, by taking from any Member or by hindering him from enjoying what he himself enjoys.” Cato was the pseudonym for two British writers, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. Their co-authored Cato’s Letters (1720–1723) were widely read in the American colonies.

On the eve of the American Revolution, then, the received understanding of liberty in the Anglo-American world was a powerful amalgam of both the English common law and the liberal ideas of writers like Locke and Cato. On this view, liberty meant being able to act freely, secure in your basic rights, unhindered by the coercive actions of others, and subject only to the limitation of such laws as you have consented to. Central to this idea of liberty was the right to hold property and to have it secure from arbitrary seizure. In addition, under the influence of Locke, liberty was increasingly being seen on both sides of the Atlantic as a universal right, one not limited to English subjects. Equally influential was Locke’s argument that if a government violated its citizens’ liberty the people could resist the government’s edicts and create a new political authority. However, despite the gains that had been made since the seventeenth century, many Englishmen in the eighteenth century still worried that liberty was fragile and would always be endangered by the ambitions of powerful men.

Since the first settlements were established in the early seventeenth century, the American colonists shared in this English understanding of liberty. In particular, they believed that they had taken their English rights with them when they crossed the Atlantic. It was on the basis of these rights that they made a case for their freedom as colonists under the Crown. In addition, in the eighteenth century, the colonists were increasingly influenced by the Lockean idea that liberty was a natural right. As a result, when they were confronted with the policies of the British Crown and Parliament in the 1760s and 1770s to tax and legislate for them without their consent, the colonists viewed them as an attack on their liberty.

In response, the colonists argued that these British taxes and regulations were illegal because they violated fundamental rights. They were particularly resistant to the claims of the British Parliament, as expressed in the Declaratory Act of 1766, to legislate for the colonies “in all cases whatsoever.” By 1774, following the Boston Tea Party organized by Samuel Adams and John Hancock, and the subsequent
Coercive Acts, many leading colonists such as Thomas Paine and James Otis argued that they had a natural right to govern themselves, and that such a right was the only protection for their liberty. In addition to several essays in defense of rights, including Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania, John Dickinson wrote the first patriotic song, “The Liberty Song.”

This colonial thinking about liberty and rights culminated in the Declaration of Independence issued by the Continental Congress in 1776, which proclaimed that, because their liberty was endangered, the colonists had a natural right to resist the English King and Parliament.

Having made a revolution in the name of liberty, the American challenge was to create a form of government that preserved liberty better than the vaunted British constitution had done. In doing so, the founders turned to the ancient ideal of republican self-government, arguing that it alone could preserve the people’s liberty. They further argued that the modern understanding of liberty as the possession of rights needed to be a central part of any proper republican government. Beginning in 1776, in the midst of the Revolutionary War, all of the former colonies began to construct republican governments which rested on the people’s consent and which included bills of rights to protect the people’s liberty.

Since there was widespread consensus among the Founders that liberty required the protection of rights and the rule of law, much of the political debate in the crucial decades following the American Revolution revolved around the question of which institutional arrangements best supported liberty. Was liberty best protected by strong state governments jealously guarding the people’s liberties from excessive federal authority, as leading Anti-Federalists like George Mason contended; or, was an extended federal republic best able to preserve the freedom of all, as leading Federalists like James Madison and Alexander Hamilton argued?

The era of the American Revolution also gave birth to a further series of important debates about liberty. Was slavery, as some Americans in the eighteenth century were beginning to recognize, an unjust infringement upon the liberty of African Americans? Were women, long deprived of basic legal rights, also entitled to have equal liberty with their male fellow citizens? By making a Revolution in its name, the Founders ensured that debates about the nature and extent of liberty would remain at the center of the American experiment in self-government.

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Suggestions for Further Reading