NATIONAL CONSTITUTION CENTER

Emily Sneff on When the Declaration of Independence Was News

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[0:00:00.2] Julie Silverbrook: From the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, this is We the People.

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[0:00:07.7] Julie Silverbrook: I'm Julie Silverbrook, Chief Content and Learning Officer. The National Constitution Center is a nonpartisan nonprofit chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people. As we mark America's 250th anniversary, many of us are returning to the Declaration of Independence as a foundational text, something fixed, familiar, and timeless. A great new book brings 1776 to life, before the outcome was certain, before the story was settled. It asks, what did independence feel like when it was still unfolding? In *When the Declaration of Independence Was News*, Emily Sneff reconstructs the moment when the Declaration was not yet a defining statement of national ideals, but breaking news that was printed, carried, read aloud, debated, and sometimes misunderstood and even ignored. Emily, welcome to We the People.

[0:00:57.0] Emily Sneff: Thanks, Julie. Great to be here.

[0:00:58.9] Julie Silverbrook: Your book begins with a simple but powerful set of questions. Who knew what, where, and when, and why that knowledge mattered? How does that lens change the way that we understand the Declaration of Independence?

[0:01:12.5] Emily Sneff: Well, I think that we as Americans, and really anyone in the 21st century, we associate the Declaration of Independence with a specific date of July 4th. And the reality of that date is that only people within a very small radius of the Pennsylvania State House knew about the Declaration of Independence on July 4th. News spread at a pace that's very different than what we experience today. We can get information from the other side of the world almost instantaneously. But in 1776, it took days, if not weeks or months, for the news of independence to spread. And that means that as the Declaration spread, it intersected with different news moments and different proceedings in the Revolutionary War, treaty negotiations, all sorts of personal situations that were changing over the course of the summer. So by kind of zooming in on the actual process of declaring independence, I was able to reconstruct a timeline that is more accurate of the lived experience of 1776 and also gets us outside of the Pennsylvania State House and the men who drafted, debated, and signed the Declaration to focus on the people who did that work of declaring independence. The printers, the post writers, the people who were reading the Declaration at public readings, and then the audiences consuming that information as well.

[0:02:47.3] Julie Silverbrook: Let's talk about a historical figure who I admittedly didn't know about until I was reading your book, Polly Palmer. Can you talk a little bit about how she encountered the Declaration and then how her story really shows how the Declaration was

circulating in real time?

[0:03:05.9] Emily Sneff: Yeah. Polly Palmer begins the book, and my reason for doing that is a lot of the discourse around the Founders in recent decades has been about whether they're on a pedestal, knocking them off of a pedestal. How can we relate to the Founders? How human were they? And I as a woman, I can't relate to the men who signed the Declaration of Independence or the men that were doing that political work. Sometimes, if I'm feeling particularly ornery, maybe I can relate to John Adams. But otherwise, it's hard to find that common experience. And when I came across Polly Palmer, who received the Declaration of Independence from John Adams, she was a 30-year-old single woman. And at the time, I was a 30-year-old single woman. And so I felt like, okay, this is someone I can relate to. Moreover, she was someone who had experienced a trauma in her life, which impacted her physically and mentally over the course of what ended up being a very short life. And although it's very different, I was living through the pandemic. I had recently lost my father. So I felt like there were ways that I could see myself in Polly Palmer's shoes. And so by beginning the book with her experience, not only is she an unexpected character in the story of independence, but her copy of the Declaration of Independence, the one that she received in 1776, was separated from the letter recording her experience. We don't know if it still survives. So this was also a way of reminding readers that only a small fraction of the copies of the Declaration that spread in 1776 survive to this day. And that doesn't mean that the copies that no longer survive have stories that are not worth telling. So, focusing on her was a great way of setting up a lot of the key aspects of the book, and also presenting someone who, to me, was a much more approachable person who experienced independence firsthand.

[0:05:22.4] Julie Silverbrook: I really do hope people go out and buy the book. And I found her story so interesting and was so glad that you recovered that. You write about earlier moments, like the May 15th resolution, where the colonies were urged to form new governments. And some people at the time actually interpreted that as a Declaration of Independence. How did those earlier resolutions shape expectations and confusion about what independence actually meant?

[0:05:53.2] Emily Sneff: The May 15th resolution, I think, has been sort of under-examined. And of course this year is also the 250th anniversary of that moment. What I tried to do with the book and also in my wider work giving presentations on the Declaration and curating museum exhibits, is to think about when does the ball start rolling toward independence? When is it a sort of phrase that you hear in the air, a Declaration of Independence or independency is coming? And May 15th is really a key date. The resolution that the Congress passes on that day calls for new representative governments in each of the colonies who haven't already started that process. But the preamble to that resolution was the first time that the Continental Congress directly blamed King George III for what the colonies were experiencing. And so it marks this pivot from a time when the Congress was sending out petitions to the King, addressed to His Majesty, from his most loyal subjects, to addressing other people about the King. And of course, the Declaration of Independence does that as well. That same day, May 15th, in Williamsburg, Virginia, the Virginia Convention passes the resolutions for new instructions to their delegates in Philadelphia calling for independence, as well as confederation and foreign treaties.

[0:07:27.1] Emily Sneff: And so as we look at these kind of moments that came before July 4th, you're right, in some cases, people perceived that May 15th resolution or the resolutions passed in Virginia as a Declaration of Independence. And we have to take that experience with so much respect for what people are living through. You don't know that a Declaration of Independence is gonna come on July 4th. You're living through the experience of it. So John Adams celebrates the May 15th resolution. He thinks that it is a Declaration of Independence. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, the Portuguese government treats the May 15th resolution as a Declaration of Independence. When I thought about this period of time when the Declaration of Independence was

news, it had to predate the actual declaration on July 4th because of this, you know, perception that the earlier resolutions that were blaming the King and being very assertive about the rights of colonists might actually be the Declaration of Independence.

[0:08:37.7] Julie Silverbrook: And the significance of that May 15th resolution is it actually kicks off this period of state constitution writing. And as part of our America 250 series, we're actually going to take a deep look at the early state constitution writing that happens after that resolution and predates the creation, of course, of the Federal Constitution of 1787. So I think the May 15th resolution is very significant and was glad to see it covered in your book and can see at the time where that would create some confusion. And that uncertainty actually extended into the Congress itself. What do the debates and postponements in Congress that occurred during this period reveal about how contested and uncertain the decision for independence really was in 1776? I just did a conversation with Jack Balkin a couple of weeks ago where he talked about how there are many moments where this could have gone in the other direction. So walk us through some of that uncertainty?

[0:09:39.6] Emily Sneff: Absolutely. And that was a big thing that I tried to recreate in the book. And also when I talk to people about the Declaration. Because 250 years later, we tend to take for granted that independence was always going to happen and it was always going to unfold the way that it did. But if you look at the actual timeline of the Continental Congress's decision-making on June 7th, Richard Henry Lee presents these resolutions called for by the Virginia Convention for independence, confederation, and foreign treaties. And those three things, I tend to call them the Continental Congress's to-do list. There was no set order to which those things had to happen. And there were people within the Continental Congress who have been remembered as being against independence, who were actually, in my view, against independence first out of that list. They were thinking about the need to have a confederation among the colonies, the need to pursue France as an ally to support independence. So these three things, documents are being worked on simultaneously to meet those ends. A declaration of independence, if the Congress decided to make that step forward, and then a model treaty and a plan of confederation, they are all being drafted simultaneously.

[0:11:05.9] Emily Sneff: There's a lot of overlap among those committees. But within that decision-making process, there's a three-week postponement where the Continental Congress decides to put off the debate about whether or not to declare independence to Monday, July 1st. And it's hard to get a sense of what exactly they thought could be accomplished during that time. If they were thinking about members of Congress who had returned to their home colonies, in some cases to work on those new constitutions, maybe they could come back to Philadelphia. Edward Rutledge keeps writing to John Jay, hoping that he'll come to Philadelphia. Maybe there was a sense that, at least for the middle colonies, who were believed to be the linchpin of this decision, that messages could be sent back to the provincial assemblies and somehow they'd be able to get a sense of what the people wanted. And we see in the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence that this decision the Continental Congress is making is rooted in the consent of the governed. So they were trying to get a sense of whether they had that consent, and so in that three-week period of time, they're actually not able to get very many decisions or very much intelligence back from the colonies. But there are key sort of moments of Maryland agreeing or Caesar Rodney riding through the night to break the tie in the Delaware delegation that ultimately bring us to July 2nd and the nearly unanimous vote for independence. New York still had to abstain from that vote because they did not believe that they had instructions permitting them to vote for independence. And then of course, they're worried about what will happen next. Are they gonna have to abstain from every vote moving forward. So there's a lot of tension. There's a lot of worry about what might come next and also consideration of the order in which things are going to happen.

[0:13:14.7] Julie Silverbrook: So let's talk about what actually happens. The Declaration is approved on July 4th, but it's not actually signed on July 4th. Can you walk people through what happens on July 4th and then a little bit more on the timing of when it's signed and that information becomes more widely available?

[0:13:32.3] Emily Sneff: Exactly. The Continental Congress's focus on July 4th is publishing rather than signing. So in the final paragraph of the Declaration, they say that they solemnly publish and declare. They're thinking about how to get the Declaration to the people, and so they resolve to have it printed. The drafting committee was supposed to superintend that process. We don't know how much they actually did or who was involved. But the Congress entrusts the task of printing the first copies of the Declaration to John Dunlap, who frequently printed resolutions for them. His printing office was a couple blocks away from the Pennsylvania State House at 2nd and Market Streets. And he worked through the night of July 4th into the day of July 5th with his team in his printing office to create broadsides or poster-sized sheets of the Declaration of Independence. Then John Hancock sent out those broadsides to each of the states and also to George Washington and the other leading officers of the Continental Army. Then immediately the Declaration was also printed in newspapers starting on Saturday, July 6th, and other printers in other locations created their own broadsides. So you have this immediate dissemination of the Declaration in all different forms.

[0:14:58.0] Emily Sneff: But it wasn't until later in July that the Continental Congress decided to create a parchment copy for the delegates to sign to pledge their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. That parchment copy was ready to be signed on August 2nd. And we know that the majority of the delegates signed at that time. Others signed as they either joined the Continental Congress or returned to Philadelphia. So the signing was actually a lengthy process. And the 56 names that we see at the bottom of the parchment, those men were never in the same room at the same time. And they represent a mix of delegates who voted for independence, but also delegates who were not involved in that decision at all. And there's some people, including Robert R. Livingston, one of the members of the drafting committee for the Declaration, who voted for independence, but then left Congress and didn't have the opportunity to sign the parchment. So by focusing on the printed copies that are spreading from Philadelphia, it actually takes attention away from that one particular parchment copy and highlights how the Congress wanted to get the word out to the people as quickly as possible. That parchment was for Congress's own records. That was gonna stay with them unless things went horribly wrong, and it ended up being the list of men you should hang for treason. But it's the printed copies, beginning with John Dunlap's, that are used for public readings and used by other printers to get the word out to the people.

[0:16:39.7] Julie Silverbrook: So I wanna talk a little bit about how there's actually, at this time, a number of different versions of the Declaration that are out in circulation, and they vary by printing, copying, translation, and that's shaping how people understand it. But before I do, I would be remiss if I didn't talk about Mary Katharine Goddard and the first printed version with the signatories included. And so just if we could do a quick aside, she's one of my favorite figures in early American history. And so if you wouldn't mind just talking a little bit about her, and then we'll pivot to the many versions of the Declaration circulating as news at this time.

[0:17:18.0] Emily Sneff: Absolutely. And she's a favorite of mine as well. Mary Katharine Goddard was a printer in Baltimore. She first prints the Declaration in her Baltimore newspaper in July 1776. And then in January 1777, the Continental Congress asks her to print the first broadsides that have the names of all the men who had signed the parchment copy by that time. Now, why are they asking a Baltimore printer? Because the Continental Congress had evacuated Philadelphia in fear of a British attack. And so she was the printer as well as the postmaster in Baltimore at the time that the Congress was meeting there. She creates these broadsides with 55 names on them because Thomas McKean of Delaware had not signed by that time. And she prints her own full name at the

bottom of these broadsides, which are meant to be sent out to each of the states to form the foundation of their state archives. So the book actually ends with Goddard's printing because to me, it marks the transition from when the Declaration was news to when it becomes archival treasure and something that is sort of in the museums, in the libraries and the archives, the way that we think of it today. Her broadsides are extremely rare, there's not too many that survived because they were not meant for the masses. They were meant for the archives.

[0:18:47.8] Julie Silverbrook: Let's pivot to the many different versions that are circulating in 1776 itself. How did these differences shape how people understood the document at the time?

[0:19:01.5] Emily Sneff: I often get asked questions about the Declaration of Independence, as if there is one copy. And in people's minds, it's the parchment, or really the engraving of the parchment created in 1823 because the parchment was so illegible and remains so. And so when I introduce people to the fact that there's all these local printings, it completely opens their eyes to a different experience of 1776. So within a few days of July 4th, the declaration was printed in newspapers in Philadelphia as broadsides. It was translated into German for the significant Pennsylvania German population at that time. It was read at public readings. These broadsides were used for that purpose. And the text spreads from there. So the Declaration was printed in every active newspaper in the United States. And then it was also printed as broadsides by different printers in different styles, sometimes on their own, perhaps to sell to people, in some cases by order of the state governments, to be used for official purposes. So there's this whole range of different looks to the Declaration within just a few weeks. Then the Declaration spreads through New York to British mail ships, across the Atlantic to London, and then it's printed throughout Europe.

[0:20:32.1] Emily Sneff: So we get even more translations. And it was a lot of fun to track down these copies of the Declaration because they have really gone under examined. And I am the beneficiary of increased digitization efforts, especially over the last 10 years. So I was able to locate at least excerpts, if not the full text of the Declaration translated into Dutch, German, French, Italian, Polish, all these different languages and all these different contexts through the fall of 1776. And you can always kind of find it based on John Hancock's name. That's my North Star when I'm looking at non-English printings of the Declaration, sometimes it's Jean or Giovanni, but you can always kind of see the Hancock. And that's the clue because that was the name that circulated with the text. We think of the Declaration as Thomas Jefferson's. But in 1776, the two names that people knew were John Hancock as President of the Continental Congress and Charles Thompson as Secretary.

[0:21:40.2] Julie Silverbrook: I want to bring this down to the level of lived experience. You also use New York in this timeframe as an example. Because you have continental forces living side by side with the British. So you have the celebration, the sort of famous taking down of the King George III statue in New York in response to this, with a more sort of measured response from the British. What does this moment reveal about how divided and in some ways contested the reactions are to independence on the ground at this time?

[0:22:19.5] Emily Sneff: New York is a really interesting case where if the timing had been different by a few days, you really wonder what might have happened. So the British Vice Admiral, Lord Richard Howe, shows up in New York, delayed. He had hoped to get there sooner to rendezvous with his brother, General William Howe, and he finds out about the Declaration of Independence. And he legitimately thinks that if he had gotten there sooner, he might have been able to prevent the Declaration from happening. So there's this real tension just within New York Harbor, where you have the British forces assembling at Staten Island, the American forces assembling in Manhattan and on Long Island. And I can just imagine this kind of stare down across

the water at each other, and the Declaration arrives in the middle of that, but also the British vice admiral and reinforcements arrive in the middle of that. So from day-to-day, the likelihood that independence will succeed is changing and shifting. On the day that the news of the Declaration arrives in Manhattan, George Washington and soldiers in the Continental Army are very excited. Within a couple of days, British ships move up the Hudson River, and the Continental Army completely fails to respond.

[0:23:50.8] Emily Sneff: So there's a lot of worry about can the Continental Army actually do this? Can they secure the independence that the Continental Congress has tried to at least assert on paper? So by focusing on New York and the reactions that we have on both sides from George Washington's men, but also from the British officers, and their reactions are just as you might imagine them to be. I was able to kind of recreate this scene, which we know ultimately results in the military campaigns that happened the following month. But there's a couple of weeks of just real tension and kind of back and forth and stalemates in communication. And like I said, there's a real question about what might have happened if the Declaration had arrived later or the British forces had arrived earlier. We'll never know for sure, but it's an interesting sort of hypothetical.

[0:24:55.2] Julie Silverbrook: It is. And it's interesting when you're looking back on history, to look at all of the moments that were somewhat contingent and how if the factors were just slightly different, history might have unfolded in a completely different way. So there are obviously communities who get the news of independence. It feels very real for them. It's impacting their lives. Right? It's moving forward military operations and then there's other places where the Declaration reaches, where it's competing with everyday realities. And this includes even politically involved families like the Adams family in Boston, where news of independence arrives at the same time that there's a significant smallpox outbreak. How did the experience of everyday life and grappling with just the realities of living in the 18th century, where there's a lot of disease. Right? How does that shape how people receive and prioritize the significance of the Declaration of Independence?

[0:25:55.5] Emily Sneff: As a political historian, or at least politically-minded historian, I did not expect to write as much about smallpox as I did. I spent a lot of time with the Adams family correspondence, recreating what Abigail Adams was going through. In July 1776, she had made the decision to inoculate herself and her children for smallpox during this brief window of time when it was legal to do so in Boston, because the rates of natural infection had gotten to such a point that local officials decided it would be better for everyone to go through inoculation at once in the city and then we'll be over it. We'll be able to move on. Of course, this is a city that is still recovering from the British occupation. So Abigail Adams makes this decision. She makes it on her own, but with the knowledge that her husband would support her choice. He was already inoculated for smallpox. And so when the Declaration arrives and she receives the news directly from her husband, but also from other letters and newspapers coming from Philadelphia, Abigail and her children were newly inoculated. They were just a couple of days into the process, and Abigail had made the choice not to tell John that they were going through inoculation.

[0:27:23.1] Emily Sneff: Unfortunately, other people told him for her. So she was hoping to keep him from worrying, knowing that he was working on independence as well as all of the other responsibilities of the Congress, and she knew that he would want to come home and be with his family. So when he finds out, he's heartbroken. When she finds out that he knows, she's heartbroken. But ultimately, the point of all of this is to say that when the Declaration arrived in Boston, most of the people who experienced it there were either in the process of inoculation or were already immune to smallpox, having gone through it naturally or been inoculated before. So there's this huge crowd that gathers to hear the Declaration read, just steps from the site of the Boston Massacre. And that is a crowd of people who are waiting and watching their skin to see

when they're gonna erupt in pustules. And having gone through a pandemic and seen how intertwined public health and politics are, this moment of intersection between inoculation and independence really struck me. I don't know if other people have really thought about that. When we look at the printings of the Declaration that were created in Boston, the public reading that happens there, and Abigail Adams' own letters describing the experience. But to me, that is the visceral reality of that particular city at that particular moment. Another interesting thing about how people thought about smallpox at this time is there was a fear that it might spread through paper. Martha Washington writes letters long after she goes through the inoculation process because she's worried about spreading the disease to other people. And so when we have printings of the Declaration that are created in Boston, I think they stayed in Boston, by and large.

[0:29:33.5] Julie Silverbrook: Oh, interesting.

[0:29:33.6] Emily Sneff: The newspapers and the broadsides created there because people were being very cautious about how paper might transmit the disease. And the copies of the Declaration that are formally called for by the Massachusetts government are not printed in Boston. They're printed in Salem. So this smallpox inoculation moment has a ripple effect on the print history of the Declaration, but also it really informs the experience of people like Abigail Adams, like Mercy Otis Warren, who were going through this inoculation process.

[0:30:13.6] Julie Silverbrook: So you follow the Declaration into encounters with Native American leaders to decide if they're gonna remain neutral, if they're gonna support the colonists, if they're gonna support the British. Right? They exist in sort of a different space in the colonies. And you also follow the Declaration into churches where clergies had to decide whether or not they keep praying for the King. What do these moments reveal about how disruptive and really transformative the declaring of independence was at the time?

[0:30:45.1] Emily Sneff: That's a great question. I always knew that I wanted to highlight the Native American reception moments that we know about. There were surely more, but there are two particular ones that are pretty well documented. One is the negotiations leading up to the Treaty of Watertown outside of Boston because of smallpox. And the other is a meeting with the Six Nations in German Flatts, New York, where wampum is transferred back and forth as recognition of the Declaration of Independence. In one of those cases, the Treaty of Watertown results in an alliance between the State of Massachusetts and the Wolastoqey and Mi'kmaq nations. The meeting of the Six Nations results in continued neutrality. And yet what we see in the actual Declaration of Independence is a slur against Native Americans and an assumption that they are going to engage in violence and side with the British against the colonists. So really getting back that experience of the Native leaders who were allies and neutrals in the conflict was very important. And it's something that I try to bring up whenever I talk about the Declaration to complete that picture of Native Nation sovereignty in 1776. Another sort of aspect of 1776 that we tend not to think about is there were a lot of people who worried that independence might be short-lived.

[0:32:30.5] Emily Sneff: And so they weren't necessarily willing to make large institutional changes based on the Continental Congress' decision. And that is an opinion that, with the benefit of hindsight, we can say, oh well, they were shortsighted. Obviously independence was going to survive. But in July and August of 1776, there's a lot of people who are looking at the Continental Army and not feeling very confident about their abilities or looking at this massive British force descending on New York and thinking, well, things will probably go back to normal soon. And one group of people feeling like that was the leaders of Anglican churches in the colonies turned united states. These are men who at their ordination had sworn an oath to King George III as not only the leader of the British Empire, but as the leader of the Church of England. And they were not willing to give up that oath so easily. So we see a lot of different reactions to the Declaration from these

clergymen who aren't really able to communicate back to London or with other ministers in other locations. So they're kind of on their own, making their own decisions. In some cases, they're being threatened by their own congregations to stop praying for the King or to make other changes based on the Declaration of Independence. So these two groups of people, the Native leaders who are immediately responding to the Declaration and thinking about the impact that it will have on their treaties and relationships moving forward, and these Anglican ministers who don't really know what the future of the Anglican church is, are two groups that we tend not to think about in 1776. But their experiences are really eye-opening.

[0:34:32.9] Julie Silverbrook: The story doesn't stop at the edges of the new United States, although I think for a lot of people, they weren't sure how long or if at all there would really be a new United States. As the Declaration travels abroad, it gets intercepted, it's altered, it's sometimes misrepresented by third parties. What does that reveal about how fragile and contested the message of independence was internationally at the time?

[0:35:01.3] Emily Sneff: The Declaration, as it leaves the Continental Congress's hands, as it leaves the Pennsylvania State House, it changes every printer that gets their hands on it, makes errors, makes choices in capitalization or punctuation or formatting. That's all part of the process. But when the Declaration gets to London, it is changed in a more significant and meaningful way. The text is excerpted by certain printers who skip over the list of grievances saying, oh, this is just the Continental Congress repeating the complaints that they've already made in the past. In some cases, the direct references to the King were censored. The times in the Declaration, where he's called a tyrant, are usually struck out. Of course, you can still understand what they meant to say, but there was that sort of act of self-censorship to try to avoid accusations of libel, even though these printers are just spreading the news. My favorite example is one London newspaper where the pronouns in the list of grievances were changed from "he" to "it." Now, the "it" could be the entire nation of Great Britain or Parliament. It's very unclear, but this was a strategic change that would have required a lot of work.

[0:36:31.4] Emily Sneff: If you take something that is written, "he has," "he has," "he has," and change it to "it has," it affects the entire rest of the sentence. So this was a choice by this particular printer to remove the King from the situation entirely. And it was a choice that would have required a lot of effort on their part. So we have all of these different approaches to the Declaration in the London press, and then those newspapers travel across the English Channel and are translated in European gazettes. And in some cases, the news of independence is sort of paraphrased or combined with other pieces of, in some cases news, in some cases, misinformation. So we really get this jumbling of the Continental Congress's initial meaning. And I wonder what someone like Thomas Jefferson would have thought about how the Declaration was treated by these international printers. We know that he was frustrated by the changes that the Continental Congress made. I can only imagine what he would have thought about seeing the censorship and the excision and manipulation that happens in Europe. And this is all fun. I love tracking typos. I love seeing differences in printings. But the bottom line here is that this is how the United States announced its existence. And so if European leaders and even the general public in Europe are reading these manipulated accounts of this decision to declare independence, that's gonna be their first impression of the independent United States. It's not exactly setting up the best scenario for foreign alliances.

[0:38:20.7] Julie Silverbrook: I want to talk a little bit about the consequences of some of this on foreign diplomacy, but to me, it was such a revealing moment of very early examples of dis- and misinformation happening around the world and how that really, the shaping of the document itself or the reshaping of the document itself was really shaping international perceptions of a new nation right that was being born. There's a great story in there about Silas Deane, who's the American diplomat in France, and he is desperately waiting for information about independence. And it takes

quite a bit of time for him to receive that official confirmation. Can you talk a little bit about the journey of Silas Deane's intended copy of the Declaration?

[0:39:15.1] Emily Sneff: Unfortunately for Silas Deane, the Continental Congress tried to send him one of the first printings of the Declaration of Independence. But they gave the captain of the ship carrying that copy instructions that if he encountered a British ship, he should throw the document overboard to prevent British interception. And of course, as soon as the ship leaves the Delaware River, it encounters a British vessel and the document goes overboard. And this is such an evocative moment for me because paper at this time was water-soluble. So you can just imagine the Declaration literally disintegrating in the Atlantic Ocean instead of reaching its intended destination. Ultimately, the Continental Congress does send another copy to Silas Deane, but not until August, and that copy doesn't reach him until November. So for months, poor Silas Deane is sitting in Paris as the news of independence spreads all around him, and he feels like he has been ghosted by the Continental Congress. And his letters back to Philadelphia are really striking. They're oftentimes really funny to read, too, because he's basically saying, do you not trust me? Do you not like me anymore? Do you still wanna be allies with France? You're really blowing this.

[0:40:39.8] Emily Sneff: You should be thinking more strategically. You should have sent copies of the Declaration on multiple ships to reach me. And all of that's justified because if the Declaration had arrived sooner to France, there might have been a faster alliance. We don't know. When Silas Deane eventually does receive a copy of the Declaration from Philadelphia, it's just a broadside on paper, and he writes and says, I finally got the Declaration, but do you really expect me to present this piece of paper in the gilded halls of Versailles? The courts of Europe need something a little bit more formal. So you wonder what might have happened if a copy on parchment had been sent to him or a copy with an official seal. We know that the Great Seal of the United States took more time to actually accomplish, but it was under discussion beginning on July 4th. So there's all these questions about how the Continental Congress might have made a better first impression. And Silas Deane is caught up in the middle of it. And so by the time he presents the news at Versailles, he writes to John Jay that the Declaration had already become an old story in Europe. So, again feeding on this idea of the Declaration as news. By the time he has a copy to present, it is no longer news. It's an old story. And then immediately afterward, Ben Franklin arrives, and the American diplomatic corps, as we think about it, really begins. So the Declaration is caught up in this moment, this kind of liminal stage of American diplomacy where Silas Deane is on his own and really hung out to dry because he's at such a distance from Philadelphia.

[0:42:29.8] Julie Silverbrook: So I wanna talk about the pivot from when the Declaration is news to something that is preserved and remembered. And we talked about this a little bit with the Goddard copy of the Declaration. But walk us through what really changed and also what we lose when we either forget or we're never informed about the fact that there was this earlier, much less certain moment for the Declaration?

[0:43:00.3] Emily Sneff: Yeah, the Goddard is the sort of pivot point for me. But I think the story of all these, you know, multiple different copies of the Declaration and translations and newspapers and public readings, it tends to be just kind of a blip in books about the Declaration. The focus tends to be much more on specific copies that are treated as having some authority. So the rough draft that Thomas Jefferson created, which is actually a much more complex document than just a rough draft or the parchment that was signed, that's in the rotunda of the National Archives, or the text as printed in the journals of the Continental Congress, these are all copies that have some sort of authority, and they're all kind of tied to the people at the center of the story. But I think that we have to think about those copies within the context of all of these other copies that are created to spread the news to people. And there's a lot of myths and sort of misunderstandings that are wrapped up in that focus on just a few copies of the Declaration. For example, there's a pretty prevalent story that

John Hancock signed his name big enough for the King to read without his glasses.

[0:44:20.3] Emily Sneff: Well, that's a misunderstanding on multiple points because the Continental Congress didn't send a copy to the King, and the parchment that they signed was not gonna end up in the King's hands unless something went really, really wrong. So if we focus too much on the Continental Congress, the men who signed the Declaration, and those kind of particular copies, we lose sight of a much bigger story with a much more diverse cast of characters and range of reactions to the Declaration. And as we approach the 250th anniversary, those copies that have specific authority or specific connections to the Continental Congress are only in a few collections. They're in the Library of Congress, they're in the National Archives. But these other copies, these broadsides and newspapers, they're everywhere. And so you can go to other museums, historical societies, libraries, archives, and see Declarations that had an impact on the local level. You can even go to the British National Archives; they have one of the best collections of copies of the Declaration because British officers sent them back to London. So I think expanding our understanding of what "the Declaration" is and thinking about this period of just tons and tons of copies of the Declaration being produced, then informs why we treat the Declaration as this privileged thing in the archives.

[0:45:59.4] Julie Silverbrook: We are obviously marking the 250th anniversary of the Declaration this year. And just as a closing thought from you, how do you think this notion that there was a very human contingent story of how independence and the Declaration were received, how might that shape the way that people are engaging with the declaration today, 250 years after the fact?

[0:46:26.4] Emily Sneff: That's a great question. My hope is that especially for people on the East Coast, where we have that sort of grounded connection to the events of 1776, people have the opportunity to go out to public readings of the Declaration or to visit sites that have a connection to how people actually received that information in 1776. There's a lot of public readings that are happening. In fact, America 250 Hawaii is organizing a public reading across the time zones. So there's a lot of opportunities for that kind of communal engagement with the Declaration. And I think that gets us back to some of that experience of 1776. You're not reading the Declaration alone in a textbook. You're hearing it read aloud to a group that is responding and offering huzzahs and other reactions. But the other way that I hope that this book, and just kind of thinking about the Declaration differently, impacts the 250th, is recognizing that it wasn't one day or one moment, but rather there's a long 250th. There's experiences that happened across the United States all through July and into August and then internationally as well. And so taking time to think about how the pace of news was different than it is today.

[0:47:58.1] Emily Sneff: When I lived in Boston, I was annoyed that they did their reading of the declaration on July 4th and not July 18th as would be accurate. You don't have to be that pedantic, but just reflecting on the fact that the Declaration was something that spread over the course of weeks and months. And so we don't need to just pay attention to it on one day on the 4th of July, but we can think about its impact on communities through time. And so the outcome of that is civic education initiatives, community-led programs to give back. There's so much that's happening for the 250th beyond the one day in history. And hopefully this book, which offers kind of a new way of thinking about the Declaration, helps with that.

[0:48:47.4] Julie Silverbrook: That's one of the things I most appreciated about the book. Because it really underscores that there isn't necessarily a singular founding moment, but rather sets of moments. And one thing that we're really focused on at the National Constitution Center is what we're calling the civic decade, which is really a little bit longer than a decade. It's the period between 1776, we're celebrating the 250th of a bunch of milestones that happened in 1776. But there's a ton of milestones between then and 1787. And you could pull that to 1791 and the

ratification of the Bill of Rights, these 250th anniversary milestones. It's those collective moments over the course of that, you know, 11 and a half years to an even longer time period where we're creating a new nation. And at 250 years, we hope that people will be on a journey with us to reflect during all of those critical moments. And we're so grateful, Emily, to you for writing this fantastic book that underscores that the Declaration, even its approval, it wasn't when it was signed, right? We should really be celebrating August 2, is what we should be celebrating, the signing. Because that's when those men were pledging their lives, fortunes, and sacred honors, when they signed what they thought was their death certificate by signing the Declaration of Independence. So there's so many moments of national import that are worthy of reflection. And your book really underscores that, even with respect to the Declaration itself. And I so appreciated that element of what you were trying to achieve and just enjoyed getting to know more about the Declaration's journey and when it was, in fact, news. And the Declaration is gonna be news again here 250 years later. And it will be interesting to see thematically some of the connections between what was happening 250 years ago, which you wrote about in your book, and how the Declaration is covered today. So, Emily, thank you so much for joining us.

[0:50:49.4] Emily Sneff: Thank you Julie, and it's always fun to be able to talk about the Declaration with the Constitution, folks. [laughter]

[music]

[0:50:58.2] Julie Silverbrook: This episode was produced and mixed by Bill Pollock with production support from Charles Sahm. Research was provided by Anna Salvatore, Trey Sullivan, and Tristan Worsham. Please recommend We the People to friends, colleagues, or anyone anywhere who's eager for a weekly dose of constitutional education and debate. The National Constitution Center will publish a book on May 12th, *The Promise of America: Reflections on Our Enduring Ideals*, a keepsake volume exploring the ideas at the heart of the American constitutional tradition. The volume will be published by Simon & Schuster. To learn more and pre-order, please visit constitutioncenter.org/promiseofamerica. And as always, remember that the National Constitution Center is a private, nonpartisan nonprofit, and we rely on your generosity, passion, and engagement for all of our programming, including this podcast. Please consider donating today at constitutioncenter.org/donate. On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Julie Silverbrook.