—Slug:.....COMM-0867.arts.col.America_250_talk

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—For section.....Voices/Forum

—Format.....Opinions - Interview

—Dateline.....Brattleboro

—Article Number:.....43638

Notes from editor (not for publication):

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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The Declaration's unfinished work

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At a Brattleboro forum, historians weigh the founding document as both a break from empire and a continuing challenge to the nation it helped summon into being

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TEXT BODY:

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ON A BRIGHT, COOL early May evening, more than 1,000 people gathered both under a tent at Brattleboro's Retreat Farm and peripherally in lawn chairs to hear a panel of four high-powered historians and filmmakers, moderated by scholar Jill Lepore, on the nature and value of the Declaration of Independence.

Part of Lepore's four-part Retreat Farm series commemorating the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States of American, the May 7 event started with a 45-minute set of music by the Rear Defrosters as queues grew at various food and drink trucks in the Farm's historic courtyard.

Upbeat was the atmosphere and palpable the anticipation of hearing Lepore, whose long list of honors had just grown with the winning of the 2026 Pulitzer Prize for History, and filmmaker Ken Burns, who couldn't make it after all.

Retreat Farm President and Founder Buzz Schmidt introduced the conversation among the group, which he said included "some of the most notable historians of American history."

Jane Lindholm and Dan Smith, representing respective co-partnering presenters Vermont Public and Vermont Community Foundation, joined Schmidt on stage for opening remarks.

Smith, his organization's president and CEO, shared that going to Town Meeting as a youngster in the small Vermont town of Middlesex and supporting small-community well-being throughout his whole career "makes me reflect that sometimes the solutions to our biggest problems come from our smallest places. And there are some lessons in the ways that we Vermonters show up for each other that a lot of people could stand to learn."

Referencing these times that challenge democracy, he added, "The road through this is going to be a bumpy one." But in Vermont "we know that the bumpiest roads lead to the most beautiful places. So I hope the lessons we learned from history and the speakers tonight offer us direction as we travel those roads together."

Schmidt then introduced Lepore — recipient of the 2026 Pulitzer Prize for history, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, a faculty member at Harvard University, and author of numerous books — as one of the country's most-widely-read historians.

Lepore, in turn, introduced the panel, the three historians on which all appear as commentators in Burns' The American Revolution series:

• **Christopher Brown**, professor of history at Columbia University, specializes in the history of Britain and the British Empire across the age of revolution. He is known through his scholarship and publications for his work on slavery, abolition, and the Atlantic world.

• **Jane Kamensky,** president and CEO of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and a leading historian of early America and the United States, worked for decades as a professor and higher education leader, most recently at Harvard University.

• **Maya Jasanoff,** professor at Harvard University and author of three prize-winning books, whose teaching and research extend from the history of the British Empire to global history.

• **David Schmidt** co-directed and produced Ken Burns's acclaimed series *The American Revolution*. He has worked with Burns for nearly 20 years and was filling in for his colleague, who had originally been scheduled to participate on the panel.

What follows are excerpts from the talk, a full recording of which will soon be aired on Brattleboro Community Television.

* * *

Jill Lepore: It's really a treat to be here in this beautiful, beautiful place to talk about this beautiful, perplexing, complicated, mysterious, deeply important document: what it meant in the 18th century, what it meant in the 19th and 20th centuries, what it means to us today.

Jane, I want to begin with you. What did the Declaration do?

Jane Kamensky: The Declaration separated the United States from the British Empire, or declared the reasons for that separation. It laid out the causes: This is what we're going to do;

this is who we are; this is all the reasons why; this is what's going to cost us.

J.L.: Chris, maybe you could tell us a little bit about what the Declaration did not do.

Christopher Brown: Such an interesting question. You know, as much as anything, it's a statement about grievances. It's a forward-looking document to a degree, and it certainly becomes a forward-looking document in what it has meant to our nation and in the way it's been used around the world. But it's speaking very much to its present as well.

So famously, it does not declare for the abolition of slavery. It doesn't say anything explicit about women's equality. It doesn't even suggest who's included in the "we" of "we hold these truths." I've always thought that the "we" is, in itself, a bit of an argument because it's including a whole bunch of people who are not sure they want to be in the Revolution.

It's also summoning into existence a nation that did not exist. So in saying that there's a "we," it's also a declaration of a kind of a unity, which is still in formation. I think the list of things it doesn't do is actually longer than the things that it does do.

It's so plastic and so elliptical. It's been left to subsequent generations to fill in the blanks.

J.L.: Maya, can you talk a little bit more about that elliptical nature of the document and its contested nature at the time?

Maya Jasanoff: Chris has nicely called attention to the rhetorical feat that the "we" is doing, and it's coming on the heels of an even-more-successful feat, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, which helped galvanize public opinion around the idea that something that seemed actually incredibly radical was something normal and commonsense.

And that radical thing? Getting rid of the system of governance that everybody had lived under for well over 100 years.

At the time of the Declaration in 1776, we're looking at the 13 colonies in which a quite large number of people, leaving aside the enslaved [and] Native Americans, are not at all convinced that this is the way they want to go — that they want independence, that they want war.

Literally thousands of Loyalists [to the British crown] have come in from the countryside to stay in New York City under the protection of British troops at the very time that Jefferson is writing these words.

And some months after the Declaration of Independence is inked and signed, a bevy of Loyalists get together in New York City to gather at Fraunces Tavern downtown; they put their names to a document which has been called the "Declaration of Dependence": a plea to the British to protect them, to put a stop to this war, and end, as they say, "the most unnatural, unprovoked rebellion" that's erupted on these shores.

And what do they want? They want peace. They want security. That's important to bear in mind. But they also understand themselves to be part of a political community in which reform might be a better option than outright revolution.

J.L.: David, I'm so impressed with how masterfully *The American Revolution* series embraced all of this complexity. And could you tell us a bit about how you conceived the storytelling task of setting the declaring of independence within the context of the Revolution, while also moving outward to the British empire, understanding Loyalism at home — the array of different peoples and their views of this moment — and the Declaration as an expression of the American mind? As a storyteller, how did you conceive of that work for the series?

David Schmidt: Much of what I know about the American Revolution and definitely about the Declaration comes from these [panelists] and their colleagues. But I think part of the storytelling challenge is to go in thinking you don't know anything. I mean, we've covered the Declaration of

Independence in other films, but we've got to come at it anew, as though we don't know anything.

[The Declaration is] read in Boston, and it's heard among the soldiers at Ticonderoga, one of whom is Lemuel Haynes, who'll write a work later titled *Liberty Further Extended*. He's a white and Black Vermonter who recognized instantly that these words, "we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal," ought to apply to him.

And he was not alone. A lot of people picked up on that quickly.

But when [in time] that's heard in England, a London gentleman's magazine writer said "All men are created equal? Are you kidding? Every ploughman knows they're not created equal, right?"

There's nothing less evident than that the United States has a right to exist, but there's something about a state saying "all men are created equal" that's going to be important for people around the world forever.

J.L.: I'm glad you brought in Lemuel Haynes. Our 250th as a country is this year, but next year is the Republic of Vermont's 250th anniversary.

Vermont did not enter the Union as a state until 1791. It was its own country — which may come back to us — and its constitution states:

"Whereas […] that all men are born equally free and independent, and have certain natural, inherent and unalienable rights, amongst which are the enjoying and defending life and liberty; acquiring, possessing, and protecting property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety. Therefore, no male person born in this country or brought from overseas ought to be holden by law to serve any person as a servant, slave or apprentice, after he arrives at the age of twenty-one Years, nor female, in like manner, after she arrives to the age of eighteen years."

C.B.: I've [often] asked students which was the first place in North America to abolish slavery, and none of them ever guessed Vermont. Then I quickly turn around and say, "There were almost no Black people in Vermont at the time."

It's abolishing something that doesn't exist. But that actually matters, because it's an announcement of what the Republic of Vermont will be and what it will not have. And so it's as much a warning to slaveholders in other parts of North America, saying, "You can come here, but you can't bring them here and do that."

It's not entirely unprecedented, but it's deeply, deeply rooted in not only the language of the Declaration, but in a view that the future is a future without slavery. And for many of the New England states, where slavery does exist and is somewhat more legally and socially established, they are also looking at a slave-free future, even though they have a slave-holding past.

J.L.: Henry Louis Gates has said that in 1776, the poetic language of the Declaration of Independence planted our national family tree. Maya, where did that idea come from? Is that persuasive to you? Is there a different way you think about what this does as an ancestral document in some sense?

M.J.: Yeah, so one of the reasons why it was so unfathomable for so many people to imagine breaking away from the monarchy is that the monarch was the father figure for the Anglo-political community, also the head of the church.

And Anglicanism had certainly, since the time of the King James Bible, been welded to the idea of patriarchy and family. Really early printings of the King James Bible have all these diagrams, family trees of patriarchs from the Bible, and coming into the early United States, you start to see Bibles printed here that have these registers.

So there's already this idea that your political community, your family, and your faith are bound together.

In the early Republic we see the idea that inheritance is going to work a certain way, that men are going to have certain

kinds of privileges, that there's a great type of emphasis on — although some founders are against this — primogeniture ["the right, by law or custom, of the firstborn legitimate child to inherit all or most of their parent's estate, as well as succeed their parent as the ruler of a state," as defined by Wikipedia].

I would say that the Declaration of Independence successfully establishes a separation in the political communities of the United States from Britain. It breaks away from the father king as head of the political community, but it does not get rid of an Anglo-Protestant emphasis on certain ways of understanding lineage that will continue to shape this country, both in its reverence for a certain kind of male, white political leader, and in its subordination of non-white figures and women.

J.K.: So [the words] *patriarchy*, *patria*, and *patriotism* all have the same Roman root, right? Fatherhood. I think what the Declaration allows as an alternative to this conventional sense of lineage is the idea that you can make a nation by choosing, and you can join that nation by choosing.

We want the nation that people will join. We want the family tree that people can elect into.

Many at the time of the Declaration's writing are saying "I want some of that" in the mode of Lemuel Haynes and others. Jefferson, of the founders, is among the most pro-immigration.

M.J.: There're a lot of people who don't get to opt in, though. Yes, [the United States is] absolutely open to immigration, but it's only much later, of course, that we have birthright citizenship established. And we have a persistent exclusion of women as members of the political community. So, yes, you can join, but there are all kinds of exclusions.

J.L.: David, I'll turn to you here. Just to think about how you navigate both situating the Declaration in [its] time and [recognizing] that the document is something that people signed on to at a moment in time, but are still contesting—

D.S.: Well, the Declaration — it's not a legal document, right? It's just something they put out there. It's not a statute or

law. It's not something that's on the books, but it is something that everybody's going to refer to.

They're creating something people can, will, and do use to try to pull a lever, to pull themselves into the polity. So, yeah, I think that Maya has a good point, that they're not welcoming to a lot of people, but still a lot of people are saying, "look, this is your founding document."

James Fortin is a great example. Age 9 when the Declaration was first read publicly in Philadelphia, he was there. He's a free-born Black boy at the time, born two blocks away from Independence Hall. He serves in the Pennsylvania Navy when he's 14 and has an awful year and a half of service. After the war, he becomes one of the wealthiest men in Philadelphia and a sponsor of the abolitionist movement.

And he fights in the early 19th century against what I think a lot of white liberals might've thought was a humanitarian effort to send former slaves or the descendants of former slaves back to the Atlantic coast of Africa to recolonize it.

Fortin said, "No, I'm born here. I'm from here. This land means something to me." And he quoted the Declaration, saying "We hold these truths to be self-evident that God created all men equally."

He changed Jefferson a little bit, adding that that idea should apply to the "Indian and the European, the Savage and the Saint, the Peruvian and the Laplander, the white man and the African."

C.B.: I think part of what gives the anti-slavery movement power in the 19th century is that they're working both along secular and sacred lines in terms of arguments they're pushing.

The problem that arises is what does equality mean, right? It's the plowman's point in some ways. Yes, we're all born equal, but that doesn't mean that we are equal. But once the dam is broken in terms of the arrival of anti-slavery movements, it's very hard to put that genie back in the bottle. It's also very hard

for that politically to become effective and powerful because of all the interests that are aligned against it.

J.K.: So we've gotten too far without talking about Lincoln who, I think, is as responsible as anybody else for turning the Declaration from a rights-claiming document into a creed.

Lincoln says he's never had a thought that didn't stem from the Declaration. And I think he's not saying that primarily in a rights-claiming way, but he's claiming it as a document of union to a much greater degree than it was able to be or was even meant to be in 1776.

Lincoln, coming on the heels of generations of poor people's activism, Black people's activism, women's activism to claim the Declaration, says, "This is the electric cord. This is the thing that binds all of us," and finds the key phrase in the Declaration, unrealized in 1776 and still unrealized now: "one people."

So the Declaration is what makes us one people. I'm interested in this idea of whether the Declaration can actually help us to discover union again.

M.J.: Isn't it amazing that what [originates as a] secessionist document then becomes the foundation of a new idea of union?

D.S.: There're a lot of lessons to learn from the American Revolution, but it started with meetings, right? And people in their communities working together — it might be in churches, and it might be in New England Town Meetings, and it might be in the Raleigh Tavern among the rich Williamsburg guys, but there's community that we're losing [and that is the difference] I think, between 1976 and 2026.

I'm grateful that we had an opportunity to present something for people to talk about here [with The American Revolution series] in their libraries and elsewhere, but it takes work, and I think everybody needs to own that.

C.B.: I was 8 in 1976 and I grew up in Washington, D.C., so the Bicentennial was a big deal. It was everywhere. I

remember all the bunting, the festivals, and festivities around it. And it really was a moment of emerging political consciousness.

At the same time, one of my first political memories is watching Nixon leave the White House. My father pulled me in front of the television and said, "You need to watch this. This really matters."

From a child's eye, there was so much in public television, like things that were geared towards kids to do basic kinds of civics lessons. And I remember the feeling: "Wow, this is an amazing country."

Mind you, this was also on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement and its successes when I was feeling [like] "this is a country where I'm going to have a full set of rights and opportunities." I remember this being a period of great hope.

I'm heartened by this crowd, and I've been heartened everywhere by [the reception and engagement on the] promotional tour for *The American Revolution*. There's been a lot of interest and excitement, I think, in learning about it and thinking about it.

But I've also detected a sense of not so much hope, but of a yearning to find something that can bring us back together, that can bring us back to some base understandings of who we can be as a people and where we might go. I feel a yearning for that.

J.L.: Thank you. I assume you also watched *Schoolhouse Rock*, another bicentennial project, which was basically my entire understanding of American history until graduate school.

With one exception — and I always forget this was a bicentennial project — *Roots*, which was broadcast beginning in January 1977.

C.B.: It was meant to be a history of America.

J.K.: *Yearning* is a word we use a lot at Monticello. It's a very difficult moment to be a first-person interpreter of a full and complete history. I talk to our guides. We had a meeting recently, and I asked them how it was difficult.

"Are people yelling at you?" No, was the response, "people are crying. People are crying when they mention the Declaration of Independence."

And I said, "You are feeding hungry people. There is a yearning and a hunger."

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LEPORE THEN TURNED to the audience for questions. Among many responses, David Schmidt said: "You know, I'm not the end or the beginning of anything. And neither are you. We're part of something. And maybe it's scary. It can be. And that's what humanity is."

Brown noted that "the revolutionary generation was full of hope, had a really strong idea of the nation that they thought they would make. If they acquired independence, they had a vision for the kind of country that they hoped to establish, part of which involved, as we know, moving westward and taking Native land.

"But I think one of the great contrasts with our era, and even from 1976, is a collective pessimism, which is something I think we all, in our different ways, would do well to try to challenge, to push back.

"What happens next is up to us. We are no less in control of our destiny than the Revolutionary generation was. I'm hopeful our kids will have an idea about [taking] this legacy, this heritage, and doing something new, something better with it.

"I think that the United States, when it's been at its best, has been a forward-looking nation. And I think that's something that we need to try to be."

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For those who what to read more on Lepore's current thinking on the Declaration, check out her recent piece in The New Yorker.

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Editor's note: Stories presented as interviews in this format are edited for clarity, readability, and space. Words not

spoken by interview subjects appear in brackets, as do editorial clarifications.

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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ANNIE LANDENBERGER is an arts writer and columnist for *The Commons*. She also is one half of the musical duo Bard Owl, with partner T. Breeze Verdant.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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