

Governors Island

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



National Monument
New York

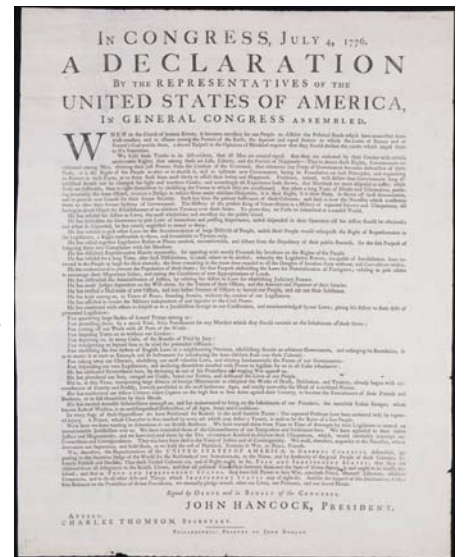
The Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave: A History of the Fourth of July



A photograph of fireworks, a traditional means of celebrating the Fourth of July going back to celebrations in 1777.

A History of Celebration

The Declaration of Independence, the document that formally severed the thirteen colonies from Great Britain, was approved by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776. This document, which spoke of the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was the foundational document for the fledgling United States. As such, the following year, citizens in the newly founded United States celebrated this momentous day in a manner that would be familiar even today. In Philadelphia, patriotic speeches, parades, music and fireworks served to celebrate the Declaration and the new nation it helped to create. After the American Revolution ended in 1783, celebrations such as these began to spring up throughout the country, as the celebration of the Fourth of July became an official holiday. Today, the Fourth of July, also called Independence Day, is an official federal holiday and all non-essential public offices are closed so that everyone can join together in celebrating the birth of the United States and its independence from Great Britain.



The first public publication of the Declaration of Independence, 1776.

The National Anthem and Its Place in History

The American Revolution may have won America's independence from Great Britain, but it was the War of 1812 that first tested the new United States. During this conflict, New York Harbor was defended with some of the most advanced fortifications of the age, deterring the British from attacking the city. Three of these forts, Fort Jay, South Battery, and Castle Williams are situated on Governors Island. Instead of attacking New York, the British forces sailed south to attack the new national capital in Washington, D.C. In Baltimore Harbor, the British Navy encountered a single, stubborn American fortification, Fort McHenry, a Vauban-style fort, nearly identical to Governors Island's Fort Jay. For nearly twenty-four continuous hours, the Royal Navy bombarded the position with shot, shell, and Congreve rockets. Watching from a nearby ship, Francis Scott Key, a civilian prisoner of war, penned the words that would become the national anthem, describing the red glare of the rockets and furious cannonade from the British. Fort McHenry outlasted the British assault, defending the city of Baltimore and showing the ultimate effectiveness of America's system of coastal defense. Many of these early sites of coastal defense remain vital military bases even today, like Fortress Monroe in Hampton, Virginia.



Francis Scott Key, author of "The Defense of Fort McHenry," better known as "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Saluting the Nation



The U.S. Army Presidential Salute Guns Battery firing a 21-gun salute.

On United States military installations throughout the world, noon on July 4th is marked with the "Salute to the Union", a fifty shot artillery salute. Each shot fired in the salute represents one of the fifty states. Throughout the nation's history, this has been the case, from the first salute to the Stars and Stripes in 1778 where thirteen guns were fired. This tradition continued, adding more shots as states entered the United States. The "Presidential Salute," more commonly known as the 21-gun salute, was instituted in 1841 and remains the official ceremony for the arrival and departure of the President of the United States from any military post. These salutes delight onlookers every year as the nation gathers to celebrate the Fourth of July.



The USS Constitution, the oldest ship in the United States Navy, fires a salute.