

PETER FORCE PRINTING OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

The "Force Declaration" was originally found in Volume I of Peter Force's 1837-1853 series of books, "American Archives."

In 1820, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams had commissioned William J. Stone of Washington to engrave an exact copy of the original Declaration of Independence onto a copperplate. Interest in reproductions of the Declaration had increased as the nation grew. It took three years to complete. Stone used a new Wet-Ink transfer process to create a copperplate from which facsimile copies could then be made. By wetting the original document, some of the original ink was transferred to the copperplate, which was then used for printing. On June 4, 1823, the "National Intelligencer" reported that: "The 'City Gazette' informs us that Mr. Wm. J. Stone, a respectable and enterprising engraver of this City has, after a labor of three years, completed a facsimile of the Original of the Declaration of Independence, now in the archives of the government, that it is executed with the greatest exactness and fidelity; and that the Department of State has become the purchaser of the plate. We are very glad to hear this, for the original of that paper which ought to be immortal and imperishable, by being so much handled by copyists and curious visitors, might receive serious injury. The facility of multiplying copies of it now possessed by the Department of State will render further exposure of the original unnecessary." This would seem to indicate that there was some fear of the deterioration of the Declaration even prior to Stone's work. The 201 official parchment copies struck from the Stone plate carry the identification "Engraved by W. J. Stone for the Department of State, by order" in the upper left corner followed by "of J. Q. Adams, Sec. of State July 4th 1824." in the upper right corner. Stone kept one copy for himself (this copy now resides in the Smithsonian) and delivered 200 copies to the Department of State. On May 26, 1824, the Senate and House of Representatives, in Congress assembled, issued the following resolution: "Resolved, That the two hundred copies of the Declaration of Independence, now in the Department of State, be distributed in the manner following: two copies to each of the surviving signers of the Declaration of Independence; two copies to the President of the United States; two copies to the Vice President of the United States; two copies to the late President, Mr. Madison; two copies to the Marquis de Lafayette; twenty copies for the two houses of Congress; twelve copies for the different departments of the government; two copies for the President's House; two copies for the Supreme Court room; one copy to each of the governors of the states; and one to each branch of the legislatures of the states; one copy to each of the governors of the territories of the United States; and one copy to the legislative council of each territory; and the remaining copies to the different universities and colleges of the United States, as the President of the United States may direct. Resolved, That the President of the United States be requested to cause the distribution of the said copies of the Declaration of Independence to be made, agreeably to the foregoing resolution." Of the original 201 copies, only 31 examples are currently known to exist, 19 of which are permanently housed in museums.

In 1833, historian and printer Peter Force, under contract with the Department of State authorized by Act of Congress, planned to compile a vast work in at least 20 volumes, to be known as the "American Archives, a Documentary History of the English Colonies in North

America." It would include legislative records, documents, and historic private correspondence. Six volumes were published from 1837-1846 and three more between 1846-1853. The nine volumes covered the years 1774-1776. Inserted in Volume 1 was a copy of the Declaration of Independence. The "Wet Ink" copperplate created by William J. Stone had been removed from storage and, from it, Force printed copies on rice paper. In the lower left of each copy, Force printed: "W.J. STONE SC. WASHN." These documents were then folded and inserted into Volume 1 of the "American Archives" collection. Congress authorized up to 1500 copies of the series to be printed, but subscriptions fell far short of that number. The actual number of copies printed is unknown, with estimates ranging from about 500 copies to upwards of 1,000 copies. Only a few hundred of Force's printing of the Declaration of Independence are known to exist today. On April 29, 1846, the U.S. Senate "Resolved, That the Committee on the Library be instructed to inquire into the expediency of distributing copies of the American Archives, now belonging to the government, among the historical societies, incorporated public libraries, colleges, and universities in the United States." There were still sets of the "American Archives" remaining so on February 21, 1849, the House issued "a Joint resolution authorizing the distribution of the 'American Archives,' under the direction of the Joint Committee on the Library, to literary institutions in the several States and Territories." In 1853, possibly because of the low demand for the nine volumes of "American Archives" already in print, Secretary of State William L. Marcy refused to approve Force's plans to continue his series.

Acknowledgement: The above description comes from Heritage Auctions.