

## **What Happened to the 56 Men Who Signed the Declaration of Independence?**

Five were captured by the British, tried as traitors, and tortured before they died. Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned. Two lost their sons serving in the Revolutionary Army; another had two sons captured. Nine fought and died from wounds or hardships of the Revolutionary War.

They signed and they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. What kind of men were they?

Twenty-four were lawyers and jurists. Eleven were merchants, nine were farmers and large plantation owners, men of means, well educated. But they signed the Declaration of Independence knowing full well that the penalty would be death if they were captured.

Carter Braxton of Virginia, a wealthy planter and trader, saw his ships swept from the seas by the British Navy. He sold his home and properties to pay his debts, and died in poverty.

Thomas M'Kean was so hounded by the British that he was forced to move his family almost constantly. He served in the Congress without pay, and his family was kept in hiding. His possessions were taken from him, and poverty was his reward.

Vandals or British soldiers looted the properties of Lyman Hall, George Clymer, George Walton, Button Gwinnett, Thomas Heyward, Jr., Edward Rutledge, and Arthur Middleton. At the battle of Yorktown, Thomas Nelson, Jr, noted that the British General Cornwallis had taken over the Nelson home for his headquarters. He quietly urged General George Washington to open fire. The home was destroyed, and Nelson died bankrupt. Francis Lewis had his home and properties destroyed. The enemy jailed his wife, and she died within a few months.

John Hart was driven from his wife's bedside as she was dying. Their 13 children fled for their lives. His fields and his gristmill were laid to waste. For more than a year he lived in forests and caves, returning home to find his wife dead and his children vanished. A few weeks later he died from exhaustion and a broken heart. Morris and Livingston suffered similar fates.

Such were the sacrifices of leaders of the American Revolution. These were not wild-eyed, rabble-raising ruffians. They were soft-spoken men of means and education. They had security, but they valued liberty more. Unwaveringly, they pledged: "For the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other, our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."