

# THE SPIRIT OF '76 IN IOWA

by

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**I**n 1776 Iowa was wilderness, far distant from the people and events that caused the American Revolution. The Indians of the Mississippi Valley and the few Europeans and half-breeds living at St. Louis and even as far upstream as northern Iowa may have felt the impact of the restless Americans. Nevertheless, to write a full history of Iowa during the Revolution is impossible. Iowa's native people, for example, did not document their response to the great events to the east. The scant records surviving from eighteenth-century Iowa show ripples, not tremors from the Revolution.

What can be said about events in this part of the country during the Revolutionary period? The most recent scholarly treatment of this subject from a Caucasian perspective is found in the first volume of the projected multi-volume history of the neighboring state of Wisconsin. Historian Alice E. Smith discusses the period when the great powers of western Europe — France and England — vied for empire in North America. France lost the race and, after 1763, smarted from the transfer of Canada and the American backcountry to England. That same year England began a policy of discouraging the settlement of the West.

Nevertheless, people in the seaboard colonies and beyond learned about the lands even on the banks of the Mississippi. In 1766, Jonathan Carver, a Massachusetts veteran of the French and Indian War, came to Prairie du Chien where he found a Mesquakie Indian village of some 300 families. He saw "many horses of a good size and shape," which hinted of trade with Plains Indians. Carver camped across the Mississippi from Prairie du Chien on the banks of the Yellow River of present-day Iowa.

In 1773, Peter Pond, a Connecticut Yankee, also visited the present site of McGregor where he claimed, in his incomparable spelling, to have caught a catfish that measured "Sixteen Inches Betwene the Eise!" The following year he recorded scenes at the "Planes of the Dogs" where traders from as far away as New Orleans and Mackinac beguilingly separated large quantities of furs from the natives. At the Indian camp which stretched a mile and a half in length there was "Sport of All Sorts" until the trading was done and the people "Began to Draw of for thate Differant Departments and Prepare for Insewing winter." Carver made no mention of Frenchmen in the area, but Pond found them "Veray Numeres."

Even though the evidence of vis-

itors such as Carver and Pond shows little to connect the Iowa country with the 13 rebellious colonies, some have asserted Iowa was involved in the Revolutionary War. The boldest claim is an alleged episode concerning a man of French extraction, Jean Marie Cardinal. According to a recent version of the story prepared for Iowa school children by the Ashmore Audio Production Company, the British commander at Mackinac sent a troop of soldiers and Indians down the Mississippi to capture the city of St. Louis in the spring of 1780, and to take control of the Upper Mississippi lead mines on the way. "It was from these mines that the American rebels were getting lead for the bullets to fight the Revolution." The account strongly implies that Cardinal — trader, farmer, and frontiersman — also owned and operated a lead mine in the vicinity of present-day Dubuque. Realizing that the mines could not be defended from the hostile force, Cardinal hastened to St. Louis to warn the inhabitants that the red coats were coming. When the British soldiers and Indians attacked St. Louis on May 20, Cardinal "was in the thick of the fighting." He was captured, tried to escape, but the Indians shot and killed him — "Jean Marie Cardinal, the only Iowan known to have died in the fight for the independence of the thirteen colonies of the United States of America."

Parts of this interesting story are plausible and other parts difficult or impossible to verify. It is certain that a Jean or John Marie Cardinal was killed near St. Louis during an attack



*Patriotic images of the nineteenth century often mingled classical elements with actual historical figures. George Washington was, of course, a great favorite of lithographers.*

in May 1780. That a man of a similar name lived in the Prairie du Chien area at the proper time is also reasonably certain. However, that he lived in Iowa, mined lead near Dubuque, and that his product was a menace to the red coats during the Revolutionary War require more historical proof than is available. Even if these points are true, in order to verify Cardinal's Paul Revere-like mission it must be proven that the "Iowa" resident was the same man who was killed near St. Louis.

In evaluating the evidence, several points in conflict with the Cardinal story must be reconciled. The day-book of the garrison at St. Louis fails to note the arrival of Cardinal, for example. Frederic Billon in *Annals of St. Louis in its Early Days* (St. Louis, 1886) asserted that a John Marie Cardinal, formerly from "the little village of St. Phillippe, a few miles above Fort Charles," was killed by

Indians on "a piece of land he owned" near St. Louis May 26, 1780. This Cardinal, probably a farmer, maintained a residence in the City of St. Louis. Were *two* Cardinals killed near St. Louis?

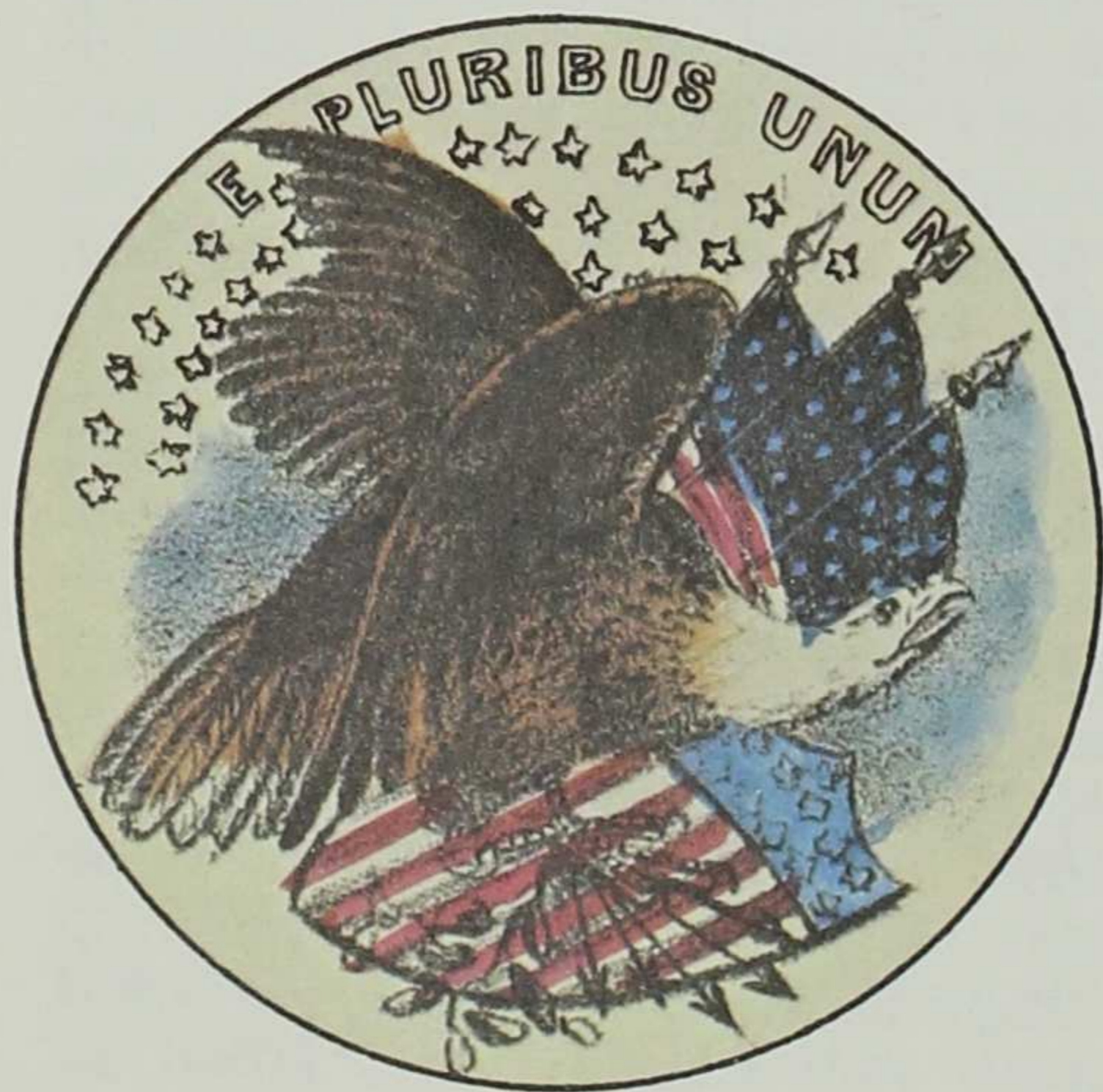
Those who will "re-enact" during the summer of 1976 the canoe voyage of Jean Marie Cardinal from Dubuque to St. Louis may not be paddling in the wake of a martyred Paul Revere of Iowa.

**W**hen and where was the first Independence Day observance held on Iowa soil? An article in the June 18, 1925 *Iowa Magazine* identified the time as July 4, 1838 and the place as Table Rock near what is now Elkader. Earlier reports in Dubuque newspapers clearly refute the claim that the "rolling phrases of the Declaration of Independence" were first heard in Iowa at Table Rock. A more likely place for the initial celebration would be Ft. Madison (a frontier post

established within 35 years of American independence) but this is conjecture, not historical fact.

During the pioneer period, which lasted several decades in Iowa, an Independence Day celebration was likely to be one of the first public events in a new settlement. In its first issue, the *Sioux City Eagle* of July 4, 1857 reported the first such celebration in that town. "This glorious . . . day of our independence was properly celebrated for the first time in Sioux City, by the gathering of our citizens in the grove above Perry Creek where seats had been prepared. The assemblage was addressed in a spirited and eloquent manner by Dr. S. F. Yeomans and W. Van O'Linda. True, there were no firings of cannon or strains of music, but every bosom swelled with patriotic emotions at the remembrance of the glorious and successful struggle for freedom made by the gallant and patriotic sons of '76."

In a year or two the people of Sioux City got their music, their firecrackers, and their cannon. But it is doubtful whether any northwest Iowa town ever claimed the participation of one of the heroes of '76 in an Independence Day celebration. In more eastern parts of the United States veterans of the Revolutionary War occupied the seats of honor at such occasions as long as they lived. At an appropriate time during his address, the orator of the day would turn to the patriot and mention his heroism in days of yore. "Strong hands would raise the old man aloft that all might see him and the old man's presence would kindle a more





One of the best-loved patriotic painters in American history was John Trumbull. His version of the surrender of British General Burgoyne at Saratoga, New York in 1777 was reproduced by the famed lithographer Nathaniel Currier in 1852. It undoubtedly graced the walls of many homes, reminding Americans of their Revolutionary heritage.

intense flame of patriotic fire in the hearts of the multitude than could be kindled by the most impassioned oratory."

In 1837, one of the heroes of '76, Charles Shepherd, moved to Iowa. He had fought at Trenton, New Jersey and had survived a harsh winter at Valley Forge with George Washington. When Shepherd came to Iowa he was receiving an \$8 a month pension from the federal government for his service during the Revolutionary War. He lived in a small cabin in Henry County beside the Old Territorial Road near the town of Rome. The January 1897 *Iowa Historical Record* asserted: "Mr. Shepherd is remembered as being a very small man, whom time had bowed until he

almost went double." This account explained that the Shepherd family was not held in high esteem by the settlers because of the "worthless character" of the old man's three sons (two of whom had families) "all of them depending upon his pension, to a great extent for a living." When emigrants and travellers learned of Shepherd's history, they stopped to see the old soldier, "that they might be able to tell, they had seen one who had served in the Revolution." They often made him "small presents of tobacco and whiskey, for he was not an exception to the rule that 'drinking is the soldier's pleasure.'" Under such treatment, "he never tired of fighting his battles over again." Shepherd died in 1845 at the

age of 84.

The Daughters of the American Revolution have found the graves of some 40 Revolutionary War soldiers buried in Iowa. The farthest west of these burial sites is the grave of Daniel Dow at College Springs. According to DAR research, Dow enlisted at his home town of Coventry, Connecticut at the age of seven and carried messages from one command to another. He died on the eve of the Civil War and very likely lived longer after the Revolution than any other veteran of that war in this state.

Details surrounding the military service of another future Iowan, John Lepper, dispel notions that the American Revolution was a simple war consisting of two carefully defined foes. The April 1904 *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* hints at various alternatives open to Lepper, originally of Johnstown, New York. Should he remain passive, flee behind the lines of the British army, unite with a force of Loyalists which was allied to a band of Indians, or should he join those who were testing the power and patience of the British government? He chose the latter alternative by enlisting for three terms of service in the patriot army. In later life, Lepper lived on a farm near De Witt, Clinton County, Iowa.

How much closer could one come to achieving Thomas Jefferson's dream of a free agricultural society? The Iowa soil was rich and deep; institutions in Iowa functioned smoothly according to patterns laid down by the founding fathers. Slavery, that unsolved problem which

Jefferson struggled with pathetically in an early draft of the Declaration of Independence, was not allowed in Iowa. Surely, Revolutionary War soldiers could find satisfaction in Iowa during the pioneer period.

In addition to patriots, the early population of Iowa included at least one red coat who fought against Washington's army. He was the father of Dr. William R. Ross, an early medical practitioner of southeast Iowa. After military service in America, the elder Ross went home to England, was discharged, returned to the United States, raised a family in Kentucky, and lived his last years at Burlington. If Ross ever visited Charles Shepherd, the whiskey-drinking patriot of Henry County, it would be interesting to know what they talked about.

The DAR has performed admirable service in researching the lives of Iowans who donned uniforms (other than British, Tory, or Hessian issue) and fought during the Revolutionary War. During the Bicentennial year, Iowans might also search for links to the Revolutionary Era through female lines. A daughter of Betsy Ross, for example, settled permanently at Fort Madison. Many communities in this state were peopled by women whose lives go back to the eighteenth century; some of these are at least as interesting as the men who bore arms against the mother country.

**A**s has been illustrated, some of the people who came to Iowa embodied the "Spirit of '76" in a literal sense. It would require the services of a skilled intellectual his-

torian and much effort to examine the fabric of life that connects Iowa with the fervor and rhetoric of the American Revolution. A brief exercise may illustrate that present-day Iowans may have better opportunities for feeling the impact of the Revolution than did Iowa residents 200 years ago. What, for example, is the source of the following quotations?

*All men are, by nature, free and equal, and have certain inalienable rights — among which are those of enjoying and defending life and liberty, acquiring, possessing and protecting property, and pursuing and obtaining safety and happiness.*

*No religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust . . .*

*No law shall be passed to restrain or abridge the liberty of speech, or of the press.*

Not one of these statements is directly from the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, or the Bill of Rights. All are from Article I of the present Constitution of the State of Iowa. All were written by Iowans, undoubtedly with the basic documents of the Revolutionary Era in mind or even on the writing table.

Iowans have had three major attempts at constitution making, the last of which came in 1857 and produced the passages quoted above. When Jonathan C. Hall of Burlington showed up at the Constitution Convention of 1857 in Iowa City he manifested the "Spirit of '76" as

clearly as any Iowan has. He refused to take an oath to support the Constitution under which Iowa had become a state in 1846. "I want to alter it, break it down, tear it to pieces . . ." said Hall. This placed Hall in the tradition of Thomas Jefferson and the Continental Congress back in 1776. But it would misrepresent a basic American tradition and also Jonathan Hall to stop the quotation there. Hall's full statement was: "I want to alter it, break it down, tear it to pieces, and build it up again." The lawmakers of 1776 and 1857 were anything but anarchists; they were constructive men who wanted to improve government, not abolish it.

Iowans must be reminded that they still have constitutional access to a modified right of revolution. "All political power is inherent in the people," reads Article I Section 2 of the Iowa Constitution. "Government is instituted for the protection, security, and benefit of the people, and they have the right, at all times, to alter or reform the same, whenever the public good may require it." This is an abbreviated and toned down version of Jefferson's statement:

*We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by*

#### Note on Sources

Earlier versions of this paper were delivered as speeches at five regional meetings sponsored by the Iowa State Historical Department during the fall of 1975. The author acknowledges with gratitude that the present version incorporates information and ideas brought to his attention by many Iowans, including several members of the staff of the Division of the State Historical Society. An annotated copy of the article is available upon request.

*their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government . . . .*

A subtle shading of meaning distinguishes Jefferson's key words "to alter or to abolish" from the Iowans' "alter or reform." Most Americans (including Jefferson) have tended to be uncomfortable about revolution and revolutionaries. The touched-up phrase "alter or reform" first appeared in the abortive Constitution of 1844; it was written into the 1846 document and repeated in the 1857 Constitution. Not all Americans have direct legal access to the principles of the Declaration of Independence, but Iowans can appeal to such principles



— many of which are paraphrased in their Constitution.

A reading of the section on suffrage in the 1857 Constitution illustrates the idea of the continuing revolution. "Every white male citizen of the United States, of the age of twenty-one years . . . shall be entitled to vote" reads the document, but a rash of amendments follows to explain the times and terms under which non-whites, non-males, and people below the age of 21 came to vote. Yet, an unamended version of the 1857 Constitution stands as a landmark of where Iowans have come from in the field of human rights. Jefferson's high-sounding phrases about the rights of man sharpened sensitivities about Blacks, touched off heated debate during Iowa's Constitution Conventions, and launched a continuing revolution that is still incomplete 200 years later.

The Bicentennial year is a time to recognize some of the ideas and procedures that have been at work in this state and nation. In this context, much has been written and spoken about the subject of religious liberties and the measures that have been taken to insure them. When the Americans wiped their governmental slate clean in 1776, people like Thomas Jefferson worked diligently to separate church and state. In his home state of Virginia, Jefferson adamantly asserted that the state should not collect money for any church and that the clergy should not control the public university. The break with England made it easier to accomplish this goal. Many gains of the Revolutionary Era were solidified



in the decades thereafter, but established principles must still be applied to particular circumstances.

For example, there is controversy in Iowa surrounding the activities of Maharishi International University at Fairfield. At the head of the venture is Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, a native of India who introduced Transcendental Meditation to the western world. Officials of the University insist that their teachings are secular in nature and in no way related to organized religion. Therefore, Transcendental Meditation is eligible for presentation in public classrooms and the organization must be treated before the law as any other secular college or business venture. Many Iowans, however, are equally certain that Transcendental Meditation is a form of Hindu religion, that it should not be advocated in public schools or furthered with tax dollars; the University is sectarian, they insist. The issues are far from resolution, but the controversy is contained and conducted within traditions of law

### CENTENNIAL BELLS

Hark! the pealing of that bell,  
As it echoes o'er the dell,  
Causing each human heart to swell.

Hail the patriotic day,  
Won by many a war and fray,  
Just an hundred years to-day.

Great Britain did you hear that bell,  
And its story hear it tell,  
That we would be free as well?

Great Britain did you hear it say  
That thy laws we'd not obey,  
Just one hundred years to-day?

Hark, the ringing of that bell,  
From Philadelphia it doth swell,  
Over mountain hill and dell.

List ye, while we hear it say,  
In its patriotic way,  
We'll celebrate this joyful day.

What means the ringing of that bell,  
Echoing over hill and dell;  
Ah! I hear somebody say,  
'Tis our grand Centennial Day!

*A bit of 1876 verse, based on the poetry of E.A. Poe.*

and precedent going back to the Revolutionary Era. There is peace in Fairfield, religious liberty in Iowa, and a procedure for separating matters of church and state.

The years have brought change in the manner in which Iowans have observed July 4 and interpreted the "Spirit of '76." Before the Civil War the embryonic frontier settlements sponsored celebrations as an annual affirmation of faith in a sacred union of sovereign states — the great experiment in American democracy. Impromptu toasts, local orators, singing,



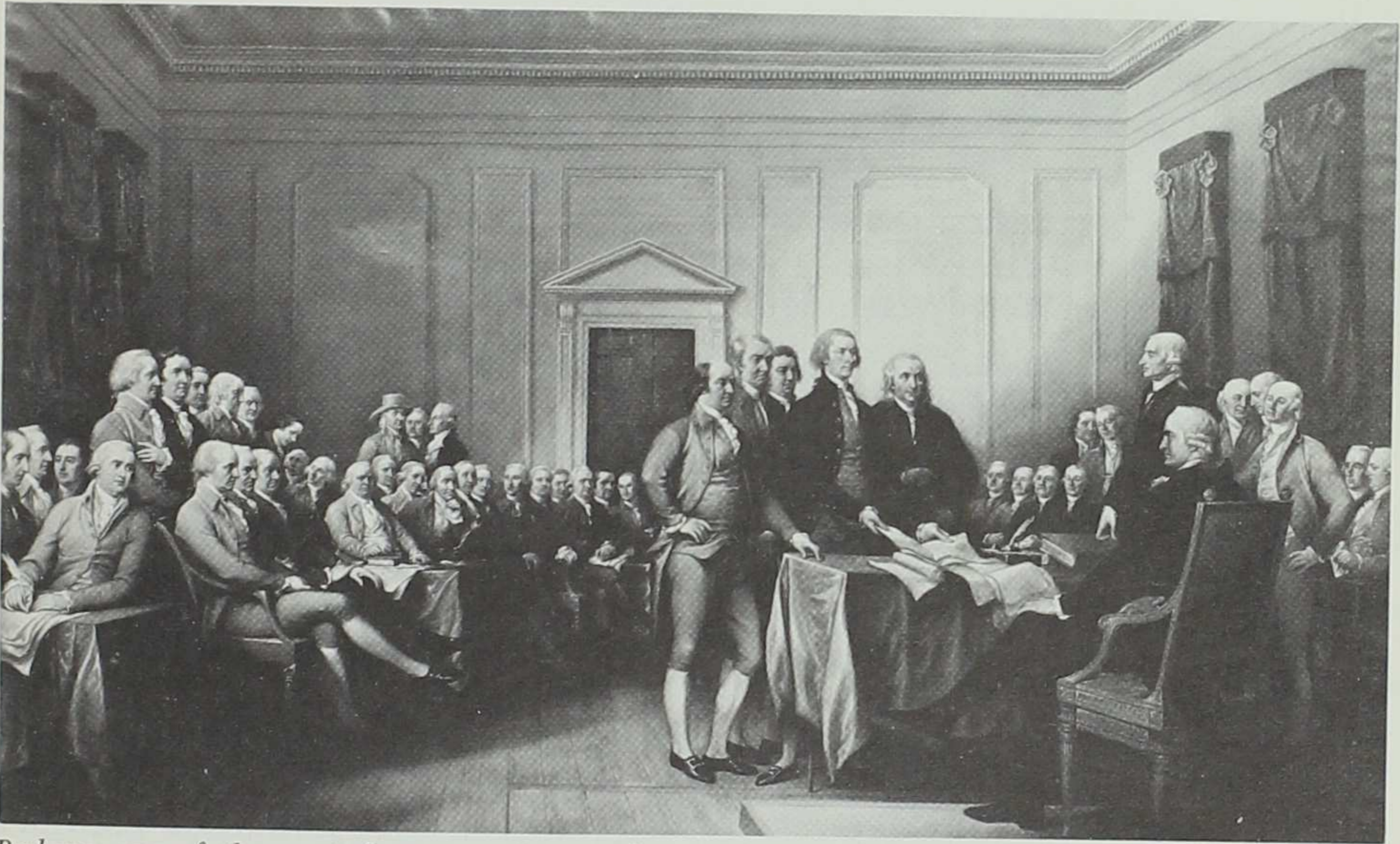
community parades, the presence of original settlers (and in some instances of veterans) added spontaneity and authenticity to these occasions. The sobering experience of the Civil War changed attitudes about the union and altered the exuberance of the old time Independence Day observances.

As early as the Centennial year, 1876, the trend was toward entertainment. A circus boasting "10,000 New and Novel Features!" entertained people at Atlantic on the national holiday in that year, according to the June 28 and July 4 issues of the *Atlantic Telegraph*. Among the attractions were seven golden chariots, a great menagerie of trained animals (including five elephants), "Elegant Costumes adorning Shapely Ladies, the Spirit of '76 — Washington, Lafayette, Goddess of Liberty..." Ironically, all of this and more came to the western Iowans on Independence Day under the auspices of Howe's Great London Circus. As Avoca and Walnut boys came to town "holding their girls firmly by hand," it was evident that showmen could pull people away from the small towns and cash in on the "Spirit of '76."

Those who traveled to Philadelphia for the great Centennial Exposition were stricken with awe as they viewed impressive industrial displays, particularly the giant Corliss steam engine. By the end of the nineteenth century neither the American union nor American industry seemed tenuous or experimental. With the new century the United States would take its place as a leader among nations.

Politicians who appealed to the "Spirit of '76" would have to adjust their rhetoric to new realities. Those who appealed to foreign-born voters or constituents whose family roots did not go back to the Revolution had an additional challenge. Gilbert N. Haugen, who represented northeast Iowa in the United States House of Representatives continuously from 1899 to 1933, handled both challenges effectively. Beginning with his "maiden effort" on the occasion of the 119th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Haugen formed the habit of starting an Independence Day speech with a rhetorical flourish about the particular anniversary at hand. He usually interjected some history from the infancy of the country drawn from a general source. Since his own parents came to the United States from Norway well after the Revolution, he found it easy to proceed to some thoughts about how late comers to the American republic contributed to the continuing revolution "without regard to nationality." On many a July 4 he referred to the spirit of the northerners who "broke the bands which bound millions of oppressed human beings" during the Civil War.

In his Fourth of July speeches Haugen expressed gratitude to God, government, and industrious citizens for agricultural bounty and other blessings, but such rhetoric was prelude to serious discussions of contemporary issues. On July 4, 1928, for example, he deplored the "ability of one class of people to take the benefit, and the inability of others to take the benefit of laws enacted."



Perhaps one of the most famous and most frequently reproduced examples of patriotic art, John Trumbull's *Signing of the Declaration of Independence*. One of the most recent appearances is on the back of the new two dollar bill. (courtesy Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut)

His prepared text ended with a lead-in to a discussion of the plight of Iowa farmers who did not share in the prosperity of the 1920s. Both as an orator and as a working politician Haugen operated within the tradition of the "Spirit of '76." He did not fear drastic change even to the extent of pegging prices of agricultural commodities or bolstering the nation's banks with the resources of the federal government during the Great Depression.

**A**mid the fireworks and festivities of 1976, Iowans may wish to test the buoyancy of the "Spirit of '76." The principles of the American Revolution are intertwined with the Iowa heritage. Basic rights for which the Revolutionary War was fought are

enshrined in the state constitution. The freedom to enjoy life, liberty, property, safety, and happiness is specifically guaranteed to citizens of Iowa. If these rights are threatened, Iowans need only to recall the words of Jonathan Hall about a constitution he believed to be outmoded: "I want to alter it, break it down, tear it to pieces, and build it up again." The "Spirit of '76" cries out to Iowans and Americans to prevent their government from becoming outdated, stodgy, or unresponsive to the people. Yet, to remember the Revolution is also to remember the yearnings for order, peace, and prosperity. The balance between creative change and ordered security is the great heritage of the "Spirit of '76" in Iowa. □