

# Destiny of the Signers of The Declaration of Independence



**W**hen the 56 Signers of The Declaration of Independence attached their signatures to that document, each knew they were committing treason against the British Crown. If caught and captured, they risked death.

But death would not be swift. It would be by hanging to the point of unconsciousness, then being revived, disemboweled, their body parts boiled in oil and their ashes scattered into the wind. Our Founding Fathers valued freedom, for themselves and their posterity, to the extent that they found this fate worth the risk. The story below tells what happened to the men who signed the Declaration of Independence...

# What Happened to the Signers?

**F**ive signers were captured by the British and brutally tortured as traitors. Nine fought in the War for Independence and died from wounds or from hardships they suffered. Two lost their sons in the Continental Army. Another two had sons captured. At least a dozen of the fifty-six had their homes pillaged and burned.

## What kind of men were they?

Twenty-five were lawyers or jurists. Eleven were merchants. Nine were farmers or large plantation owners. One was a teacher, one a musician, and one a printer.

These were men of means and education, yet they signed the Declaration of Independence, knowing full well that the penalty could be death if they were captured.

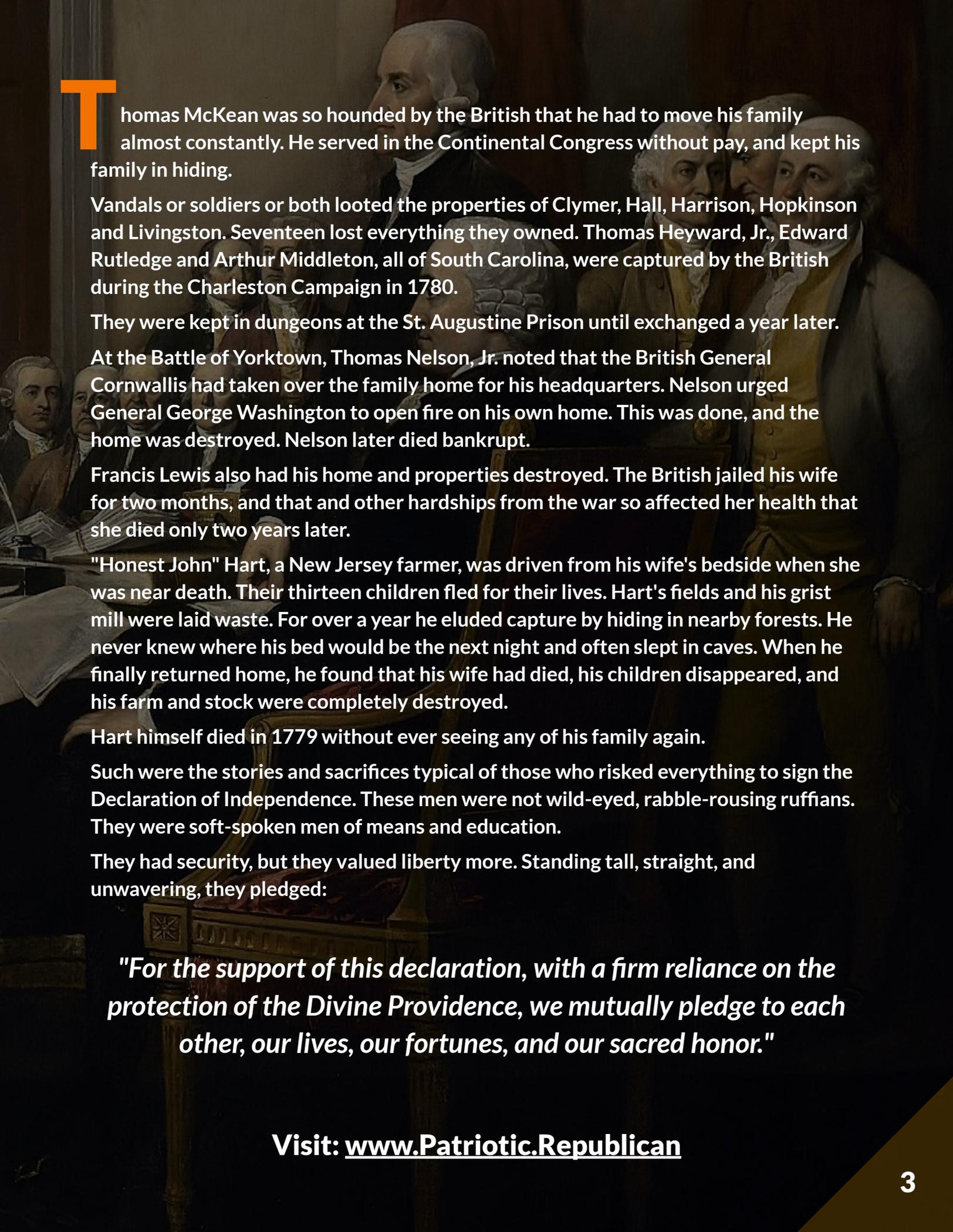
In the face of the advancing British Army, the Continental Congress fled from Philadelphia to Baltimore on December 12, 1776. It was an especially anxious time for John Hancock, the President, as his wife had just given birth to a baby girl. Due to the complications stemming from the trip to Baltimore, the child lived only a few months.

William Ellery's signing at the risk of his fortune proved only too realistic. In December 1776, during three days of British occupation of Newport, Rhode Island, Ellery's house was burned, and all his property destroyed.

Richard Stockton, a New Jersey State Supreme Court Justice, had rushed back to his estate near Princeton after signing the Declaration of Independence to find that his wife and children were living like refugees with friends.

They had been betrayed by a Tory sympathizer who also revealed Stockton's own whereabouts. British troops pulled him from his bed one night, beat him and threw him in jail where he almost starved to death. When he was finally released, he went home to find his estate had been looted, his possessions burned, and his horses stolen. Judge Stockton had been so badly treated in prison that his health was ruined and he died before the war's end. His surviving family had to live the remainder of their lives off charity.

Carter Braxton was a wealthy planter and trader. One by one his ships were captured by the British navy. He loaned a large sum of money to the American cause; it was never paid back. He was forced to sell his plantations and mortgage his other properties to pay his debts.



**T**homas McKean was so hounded by the British that he had to move his family almost constantly. He served in the Continental Congress without pay, and kept his family in hiding.

Vandals or soldiers or both looted the properties of Clymer, Hall, Harrison, Hopkinson and Livingston. Seventeen lost everything they owned. Thomas Heyward, Jr., Edward Rutledge and Arthur Middleton, all of South Carolina, were captured by the British during the Charleston Campaign in 1780.

They were kept in dungeons at the St. Augustine Prison until exchanged a year later.

At the Battle of Yorktown, Thomas Nelson, Jr. noted that the British General Cornwallis had taken over the family home for his headquarters. Nelson urged General George Washington to open fire on his own home. This was done, and the home was destroyed. Nelson later died bankrupt.

Francis Lewis also had his home and properties destroyed. The British jailed his wife for two months, and that and other hardships from the war so affected her health that she died only two years later.

"Honest John" Hart, a New Jersey farmer, was driven from his wife's bedside when she was near death. Their thirteen children fled for their lives. Hart's fields and his grist mill were laid waste. For over a year he eluded capture by hiding in nearby forests. He never knew where his bed would be the next night and often slept in caves. When he finally returned home, he found that his wife had died, his children disappeared, and his farm and stock were completely destroyed.

Hart himself died in 1779 without ever seeing any of his family again.

Such were the stories and sacrifices typical of those who risked everything to sign the Declaration of Independence. These men were not wild-eyed, rabble-rousing ruffians. They were soft-spoken men of means and education.

They had security, but they valued liberty more. Standing tall, straight, and unwavering, they pledged:

*"For the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of the Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other, our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."*

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