After the Fact | The Birthplace of America

Originally aired June 28, 2019

Total runtime: 00:17:37

TRANSCRIPT

[Road noise]

Dan LeDuc, host: We're in Center City Philadelphia, as busy a place as you'll find in America today, with gleaming glass and steel skyscrapers. It looked—and sounded—much different 243 years ago…

[Road noise fades to horses on street]

We're headed to Independence Hall, with a few other stops along the way. Of course, that building's name is another difference.

In the 1770s, it was the Pennsylvania State House. In 1776, revolution was brewing. Tea had been dumped in Boston Harbor. Blood had been shed at Lexington and Concord. And the men we today call the Founding Fathers—were gathering here to talk about a path forward for a group of fledgling colonies on the east coast of North America.

We know the end of the story, but as the Fourth of July approaches, we thought we'd go back to the beginning.

[Intro music]

We all learned our history lessons about the 13 original colonies. But did you know there were actually 18 British colonies in North America at the time of the American Revolution?

That 18 is our data point for this episode. And it underscores just how uncertain the future was in those early days. Some of those colonies that chose to stay with Britain were in what is today Canada. Can you imagine how modern maps would look if they had chosen differently?

Leading us through this tour is Jessica Roney. She's an associate professor of history at Temple University in Philadelphia and an expert in Colonial history. She suggested our first stop be a two-story brick building called Carpenters' Hall.

CARPENTERS' HALL

Dan LeDuc: We're in Philadelphia, the birthplace of our democracy. And it is well-known for Independence Hall and what happened there in 1776. We're in a different building, where things started before it was a nation, about two years before that. It's called Carpenters' Hall. What happened here? What is this place?

Jessica Roney, associate professor of history at Temple University: Well, Carpenters' Hall is about a block east of Independence Hall or the State House. And this is where the delegates of the First Continental Congress first came together. The colonists had organized boycotts before this, but this had been through committees of correspondence. They had written to each other and said, we don't like the Stamp Act, or we don't like the Townshend Duties, and let's organize. But they hadn't actually sent delegates to come together and actually meet face to face and discuss measures that they would take.

The First Continental Congress was sending delegates of 12 of the colonies to Philadelphia to meet in person and come up with a dramatic, unified response to the Coercive Acts and Intolerable Acts that Britain had passed against Massachusetts in the wake of the destruction of the tea. So they're coming together in this space.

This room has changed a lot. It's the original building, but the floor is quite different. The partitions of the walls that were here are gone. You have to use your imagination a little bit. But this would have been an incredibly grand space, a very dignified, beautiful space for these delegates to come and meet each other for the first time and begin trying to decide how much they trusted one another to involve themselves in a nonimportation union that might bring on the ire of the crown. And so this was an enormous first step.

It seems very cut and dried that the colonies came together, they declared independence. That's not what it was like to live through it. It took all these incremental steps. And the first one was sending delegates and having them meet in this space right here and start figuring out how to respond to what they saw as an assault on their charters, their rights, their liberties.

But they had never done this before. During the Seven Years' War, they tried to have a Congress in Albany. Only nine colonies sent delegates and they came up with an idea of how they might be able to work together to defend themselves from the French and Native American enemies in that war. And then they send the plan back to the legislatures, who are having none of it. They will absolutely not do this crazy plan of working together.

And the British are tearing their hair out. The colonists, even in self-defense, these colonists will not work together. They're useless. And that's part of why Britain doesn't take the independence movement too seriously. These colonies will not defend themselves in wartime. They won't work together in common self-defense. So they may talk a big game right now about working together and being a country, but they're never going to do it.

So 1774, Carpenters' Hall, this is where they're coming together and starting to lay the groundwork to make that not true, to make it possible for them to work together for the first time.

Dan LeDuc: We think of the Founding Fathers as this band of fellows who created this great thing and clearly must have known each other's skills and greatness and everything. And they didn't know each other.

Jessica Roney: You read their diaries, and they're sizing each other up. And I mean, really, literally, they'll be writing descriptions of how they look, how he sips his tea, this one slurps. He's a very good thinker, he's a snake—all these evaluations. They're really sizing each other up.

And they're unknown quantities. Some of them know each other through letters or commerce. Some of them went to college together. I mean, there are people who do know each other. But most of them are meeting for the first time. And so they are having to perform for one another and trust one another that they are going to have each other's backs and that they're going to be capable leaders in this moment. But, of course, when they start, a nonimportation association is a far cry from a government. So that level of trust starts at a lower level, and then it builds up over time.

Dan LeDuc: And as you say, we look at history backward. Writers have called this, what, the "Miracle at Philadelphia?"

Jessica Roney: Right.

Dan LeDuc: Nobody knew it was going to be a miracle at the beginning, did they?

Jessica Roney: No, no, they did not. And the miracle they wanted at first was to repair their relationship with Britain and get it to see the error of its ways. That's the only miracle they were here for, most of them. And it's only over time that it became clear to enough of them that they had to sever ties altogether. And then they had to win the war—that's a whole other thing—and create a government that would actually last and work.

I think if you told them that what they did was to found a country, and that 243 years later it was still operational, I think they would be incredibly impressed and maybe not surprised, but maybe a little, that it worked.

Dan LeDuc: So they met here for the first time. They're sizing each other up, because many of them literally had not met in person before. But another place where they could interact and get to know each other would have been City Tavern. And we're going to go there next.

CITY TAVERN

[Kitchen sounds]

Dan LeDuc: So now we're in City Tavern. And it is a tavern to this day even though it was around in 1776 for the Founding Fathers.

We were just talking a moment ago about how the Founding Fathers really didn't know each other very well until they started gathering in Philadelphia. How important was this place then for them getting to know each other?

Jessica Roney: Oh, it was essential. When they come to Philadelphia, they have to book lodgings. So, many of them are staying in houses together. Often delegates from the same colony would go to the same house, but sometimes they're intermingled. And so they're meeting one another through their boarding houses. Even if they're from the same colony, they may not know each other very well.

But then it's really the lunches, the midday meal. It may be later in the evening, but especially the midday meal where they are having an opportunity to actually talk to one another and get a sense of who they are. So coming to a place—to all the taverns, there are taverns all over the city—but City Tavern is the fancy establishment.

This is the place that they would have come to see and be seen. This is the place that would have had the most genteel accommodation and where they could have conversed over a meal, probably, but also alcohol, to talk about the issues of the day and strategize with one another about whatever it is that they were trying to accomplish.

Dan LeDuc: I mean, and that's the thing to remember. We may not like that phrase today, that it was a "political process," but that is indeed what it was. These were disparate forces, disparate interests, Virginia versus Massachusetts, that had to try and define common ground. Sometimes the best common ground can be had at the lunch table.

Jessica Roney: Well, and that's exactly right. It's funny, we talk about them as the Founding Fathers, like they were a group. But they were no more united than any other group of, take, 56 politicians and put them in a room. They had factions, they had friends, they had people that annoyed them. And they were trying to get things passed. And so that meant some horse trading sometimes. I'll support this if you help me with that. So they're operating like politicians, and the socializing was an important part of it.

They're meeting in places like City Tavern, but they're also being invited out to dinners that Philadelphians are hosting. So women are part of these gatherings, as well. They're also operating the social grease that allows everybody to meet and converse and have conversations that they might not be able to have in the public setting of the assembly room.

So it's here that they have space to kind of spitball and test out ideas, test out how will this guy react to this idea, how can we work around this problem? This is a space to get all of that…

Dan LeDuc: They were being invited out for dinners. When the delegates were out walking around Philadelphia, what were they seeing?

Jessica Roney: They were seeing a thriving seaport. They were seeing a place with a lot of mercantile exchange. Philadelphia's the port of departure for a lot of the grain that was going to the West Indies and to southern Europe. And so this was a major depot of export and of import. It's also an important place to come and get the latest fashions.

But one of the things that actually happened here at City Tavern, or could have happened here at City Tavern—it fortunately didn't—is that the First Continental Congress met in 1774 to pass the Nonimportation Agreements. These were saying we're not going to use certain British goods. In 1775, they appoint George Washington to be the general of the Army and he goes off.

And then in December, Martha Washington is coming up to join him. And she's going to pass through Philadelphia. And they know this is coming. She's moving slowly up the seaboard and they know she's coming to Philadelphia and they're so excited to welcome her. And they have this great idea that they're going to put on a ball for Martha Washington here at the City Tavern.

Jessica Roney: It's going to show off Philadelphia at its finest and impress Martha Washington and so on.

The common people of Philadelphia get wind of this. And they don't have any problem with Martha Washington, or honoring her, but they are infuriated. They are infuriated

that the Congress, which has passed these Nonimportation Agreements saying we're not going to have balls, we're not going to have horse races, we're not going to do these fancy things anymore, we're not going to wear silk, we're going to wear homespun, that suddenly they're throwing all that out the window.

They're going to have a ball, they're going to wear silk, they're going to put on this big thing for Martha Washington. And the people of Philadelphia say, we are not having it. If you have that ball, we are going to have a mob come and raze the tavern. We will burn it to the ground. And they end up not having the ball for Martha Washington because the people of Philadelphia were holding Congress to its own standards.

Dan LeDuc: So the power of the people in this country showed itself right there for the first time.

Jessica Roney: It's a remarkable incident of how Congress is having to be made accountable to itself and how the people of Philadelphia are helping remind it what it itself had said was the purpose of all of this.

Dan LeDuc: Well, they got to know each other here, but the real business was done in Independence Hall. So let's go there next.

Jessica Roney: Let's go.

PARK SEGMENT

Dan LeDuc: Well, now we're walking from City Tavern to Independence Hall. You know, they do a great job in Philadelphia. We've got cobblestone streets—

Jessica Roney: [laughs].

Dan LeDuc: —and lots of red brick, but what was the city like then?

Jessica Roney: Well, the city was the height of city planning at the time. The streets were paved, which was uncommon. There was also regular street lighting. There were patrols at night. So this is a very modern city by the standards of the 1770s. You wouldn't have found this level of paving and sort of organization in many places.

And we're just leaving 2nd Street, which is where City Tavern was. That was one of the major thoroughfares in the city. 2nd Street is a very posh address that a lot of merchants would have been on, especially that close to Market Street, called High Street at the time. And yeah—this is sort of the heart of it. This is where the fashionable people live and work.

[Birds chirping, leads into music]

INDEPENDENCE HALL

[Key, door opening, footsteps]

Jessica Roney: When you walk into the building, you come through the back door. Because that's how the park service has set it up. And you immediately notice these incredibly tall ceilings. And it gives a sense of coming into a hallowed space, a reverent space.

And then you turn right, and you come into the room, the assembly room.

Dan LeDuc: And here we are. And it's very quiet. And it's reverential now. It's almost churchlike in here. Not the way it was when they were here. It was a raucous room, right?

Jessica Roney: I think it would have been a lot more raucous back then. I mean, this had been the Pennsylvania legislature as well. This room is used to people fighting and calling each other names.

Dan LeDuc: Arguing.

Jessica Roney: This room has seen a lot. But for us coming and looking at it kind of in this static way—it is. It's kind of like coming into a reverential space.

Dan LeDuc: This time, 243 years ago—it was summertime. It was warm. And they were in this room. And what was the mood of the delegates that were in this room?

Jessica Roney: I mean, they were really fighting amongst themselves about what the best way forward was. They were very uncertain about the future. It was a dangerous proposition to take on the British Empire that had just defeated France in a major world war just the decade before, and that had the world's most powerful navy and army at its disposal.

And so the idea that these colonies that had never worked together successfully on anything would suddenly be able, not only to do that, but to defeat the British Army and the British Navy—that was a really tall order. And so there's a lot of—there were ideals and principles at stake, but then there were also pragmatists who are saying, can we do this? Is this possible?

They had no idea they would be a country. They did not have any kind of sense of a common history. And if they did, it was England's history. It was English. It was loyalty to the king. There was no sense that Massachusetts had anything to do with Virginia, had anything to do with Pennsylvania.

They're all trying to represent what's going to help their own colony the best. There is no sense that there is a country, that there is a single thing.

Dan LeDuc: And the debates go on for actually several weeks, right? We commemorate the Fourth of July every year. Things started several weeks before that.

Jessica Roney: So the First Continental Congress had called the Second—when they closed in October of 1774, they had said, there should be another meeting like this. And it should happen next spring. So the delegates assembled May 10th of 1775. They had no way of knowing that in April of 1775 there would be bloodshed at Lexington and Concord. So the timing worked out really well.

If they had been trying to organize a mass meeting in the wake of that event, it would have taken longer to do it. Because it was already in the works, they were able to meet in a very timely manner for the 18th century, which is to say, a month later. They were able to get the delegates here. And they knew American blood had been shed. And they're starting to think of it as American blood, rather than Massachusetts blood or English blood.

Jessica Roney: It's a climactic moment. But it's been building for a very, very long time. They didn't just pull it out of thin air. They really had to lay the groundwork. And a lot of different things had to break their way to be able to declare independence.

Dan LeDuc: And we celebrate the Fourth of July, but the vote was two days earlier.

Jessica Roney: So the Committee of Five that was going to write the Declaration had been appointed on June 11. So they were already really seriously thinking about it. But the actual vote doesn't happen until July 2. And John Adams is so excited. He writes home to Abigail, and he says, July 2 will be a date that will live on in history forever. The people will have parades. They'll have fireworks. It will be seared into every child's memory. July 2! Like, oh, John.

[Laughter] But what most Americans respond to in this room is that this is the room where they were. All of these names that you know, and many that you don't—but maybe you should—assembled and decided, against all odds, against all kind of even logic even, that they were going to take on the biggest empire in the world and declare independence. And that they did it.

If you were betting in 1776, it would have been a good bet to bet against them. And yet, it worked. And so to come into this space where they found a way to work together when they had never worked together before in any meaningful sense, not on this kind of level. And that they were able to put aside their differences in the face of these incredible odds and create the seed of what would become a nation.

And that's why being in this room, and seeing these empty chairs, and thinking about the men who would have sat in them at these tables, is incredibly awe-inspiring. It's humbling.

[Transition music]

Dan LeDuc: We hope you'll take a look at some pictures from the tour. They're on our website, pewtrusts.org/afterthefact.

And our thanks to Professor Jessica Roney for spending the day with us in Philadelphia.

I'm Dan LeDuc. Thanks for listening.

[(Female voice over closing music) "After the Fact" is produced by The Pew Charitable Trusts.]