



"Ohman's authentic Restoration of the Declaration of Independence"



The Story of the Restoration

by

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THE BOY liked it the first time he read it. Many of its words were violent; its tone was defiant. Such qualities, in themselves, would appeal to a boy, particularly to a boy of spirit and independent nature. Perhaps, at that first reading, he was not fully conscious of the deeper meanings of the document—its call to the human spirit that has reached the innerselves of just and honest men the world around. All he knew was that it seemed to lift him up and inspire his imagination.

Maybe the surprising thing is that he should have been allowed to read it at all. In little towns in Bohemia, four decades ago, school teachers were not encouraged to stir up democratic ideas among their students. So perhaps our gratitude for a unique accomplishment of today should reach back to a liberal-minded teacher in the little town of Kostelec-above-Black Forest, Czechoslovakia.

As the boy grew older his appreciation of the message of the American Declaration of Independence grew. Through long days when he was being taught the family art of lithography by his skilled grandfather, the stories of the lives of Jefferson, Franklin, Adams, and other signers were his inspiration. In his imagination he pictured America as a land of promise, where every boy could achieve his ambition, however humble his station.

With mounting appreciation of the meaning of the American Declaration of Independence, there grew within the boy a consuming curiosity about the document itself. He felt that if its reprinted words were so inspiring, the opportunity to feast his eyes upon the original writing should be an experience beyond imagining. To see the actual signatures of those fearless men would be an indescribable joy.

We shall omit the story of the passage of the years, while the boy grew to manhood and established himself in his profession in his adopted land. It is a typical American story, the tale of an immigrant, eyes and heart alight from the reflected glow of Liberty's torch, the oft-repeated saga of self-made Americans, who work and win in the Land of Freedom. Finally the boy, no longer a boy, appears again—Theodore William Ohman, of Memphis, Tenn.—proud of his new status, an American Citizen.

Nor has he forgotten his early desire during the years of struggle for success. He has stood, reverently, before the shrine in The Library of Congress where the original Declaration of Independence is preserved. His thrill at its sight was fully as deep as he had so long anticipated.

INDEPENDENCE HALL Philadelphia

"I wish to express to you my appreciation for the splendid restoration of the Declaration of Independence.

"The work has been done with great care and has been inspired by real patriotic devotion. We are proud to give this restoration a place of honor in Independence Hall."

But it was tempered by his shock at discovering that this immortal document had been permanently damaged. In 1823, long before its enshrinement, many of the signatures had been almost obliterated. The edges of the parchment had been trimmed almost into the finely-drawn script of the text; creases and cracks from age and careless handling endangered the survival of the document. Now, though, it is forever safe. It rests within a protective covering of specially made glass, which bars the passage of destructive light rays and guards it from handling.

But from this visit grew a resolution. Ohman resolved that some day he would faithfully reproduce, in lithography, a true restoration of the priceless Declaration of Independence. This would show the precise penmanship of the engrossed script, and the exact signatures of the Signers, as they were in 1776—and also the actual colors of the original parchment, as it is today, cracked and smudged by age and handling. Thus there would be made available to the American people, for the first time in history, an authentic restoration of the Nation's most sacred document that would carry all of the historic dignity of the original.

Actually, this was far from a simple procedure. It involved years of research, the accumulation of valuable materials, an utter disregard for time and expense, a precision in platemaking and printing, and a feeling for the responsibility that was implied by the very urge to restore this immortal document in its exact likeness.

Ohman's studies revealed that the first facsimile of the Declaration of Independence was made in 1823. At that time, President James Monroe directed John Quincy Adams, his Secretary of State, to have a true facsimile of the original engraved on a copper plate for posterity. W. I. Stone, the finest engraver of the time, was appointed to do the work. It is believed that he made a wet transfer directly from the original document onto his copper plate to serve as a perfect guide for his engraving. Then, upon the removal of the parchment from the plate, the signatures of practically all of the signers and some of the script were discovered to have peeled off the parchment onto the copper plate. Thus ever since 1823 the original document has been permanently damaged.

After the engraving was completed, Stone was authorized to print from the copper plate, on genuine parchment, a limited edition of 200 copies. These were distributed by Congress to the main branches of the Government, and to descendants of the Signers.

It was several years ago, when searching through an old antique shop in the East, that Ohman came upon a reproduction of the Declaration of Independence, so unusual that he immediately purchased it. Later, during his research in the Library of Congress, he discovered that the Library's two copies, thought to be the only parchment prints of the original 200

THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES
Washington

"I wish to express the gratitude of The National Archives for your reproduction of the Declaration of Independence. It has been given the place of honor in the Exhibition Hall and beside it I have taken the liberty of placing your letter of presentation."

remaining in existence, actually were done on paper, resembling parchment. The one he had purchased in the antique shop was one of the original parchment prints. From this, the text of the script and the precise signatures of the Founding Fathers were obtained for reproduction. Now that this work has been done, it is the intention of Theodore W. Ohman to present his parchment copy to the Library of Congress.

Pursuing his research, Ohman found that the last authorized photograph of the original Declaration of Independence was made in 1903, before it was placed in its scientifically-built shrine in the Library of Congress for permanent preservation. The photographer who took the picture had died. After a long search and much negotiation, Ohman finally located and purchased the negative from which he reproduced the appearance of the cracked and smudged original parchment.

Then came the delicate, painstaking and difficult task of combining the original writing with the exact present appearance of the parchment, in all its rich, aged tones and color. This required the re-arranging of every word and every letter of every word over the cracks in the parchment, exactly as it would be if the signatures and script were unimpaired. All the artistry and skill of a lifetime of experience were required, because he wanted to be sure, to be very sure, that his restoration of America's most fundamental document was authentic in every detail.

And here it is, in all its beauty and dignity—in the exact size and color as it appears today in its permanent shrine in the Nation's capitol, but with the script and signatures restored. As you look upon it, and read its boldly eloquent words, you will realize that this document embodies the essence of your most precious heritage as an American. It is the pattern of faith in Freedom and Democracy, the blueprint for Civil and Religious Liberty, by which you shape your life. It is glorious to know that in defense of those eternal ideals Americans will always face death as courageously as did those fearless men who risked their property, their lives, their sacred honor, to proclaim its principles to the world in 1776.

When Theodore W. Ohman studied the American Declaration of Independence as a Bohemian schoolboy, he hoped that some day every school child in his country would know and revere this eloquent statement of the rights of free men. Later, he saw his native land win the right of independent self-government as the Czechoslovakian Republic and, then, become prostrate and crushed by the might of vile dictatorship. He well knows that all the hope of the World is centered here in America and, today, with renewed confidence, he looks forward to the establishment of a World Peace which shall guarantee, for all, those principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence. Thus, his greatest desire now is to have every American become fully acquainted with that stirring document—to honor the principles it states as deeply as he did years ago.

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
Washington

"Your restoration of the Declaration of Independence is a very great accomplishment, and we are most happy to have this copy in this Division where many will admire it."