

Introductory Remarks to the Washington County Superior Court's 250th Anniversary Celebration

Hon. Daniel P. Richardson

Good Afternoon! Thank you for joining us on this special day celebrating the 250th Anniversary of this country. I am very grateful to you joining us, and I am very excited for the Great Dave Keller to start his performance followed by an amazing set of speakers, Washington County Probate Judge Jeffrey Kilgore and Vermont Historian, Paul Gillies.

Before we begin it is my prerogative and honor to set the stage. We are here because the United States of America is turning 250 years old. While the official date was Saturday, July 4th, today's date is more in line with when Vermonters living on Rattlesnake Hill would have received the news here at the frontier and soon renamed their spot across from Ft. Ticonderoga, Mount Independence.

America, like all big, bold, and popular concepts, has suffered through a number of interpretations over the years. Some favorable, some . . . more wanting. For those of us old enough to remember the bicentennial, we can recall liberty bell bottoms, patriotic leisure suits, and School-House rock, the latter of which remains the best way to sing the preamble to the Constitution.

But through it all, America continues and survives. That is because America is not simply a physical place or a clan tied by blood, but an idea and a system of beliefs that unite people through history like an invisible chain. Today's celebration marks one of the most important links in that chain, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the official statement of our independence and the birth of the United States.

But the chain begins and continues beyond this 1776 date. I would argue that two of the most important and earliest links in this chain begin in 1619 and 1620. The former date has become more well known in recent years as the start of importation of slaves from Africa into the United States. Slavery, its aftermath, and how we have addressed it, is a key part of the American story. It represents some of the lowest points in what it means to be an American, but it is also responsible for some of our most powerful and strongest examples of American values at their finest.

The date 1620 is of course the date that the Pilgrims landed just south of us in Massachusetts Bay. The arrival of the Pilgrims is, in many ways, the sowing of America. Let us remember the Pilgrims were religious refugees persecuted as part of the growing rift between the Church of England and Puritanism that would soon lead to the English Civil War between Royalists and Parliamentarians. When the Pilgrims arrived, the first thing that they did was form the Mayflower Compact. An agreement between the parties about the organization of government. The consent of the people to select representatives and how they would do the business of governance. Pilgrim society brought many of the virtues that we believe as Americans:

representative democracy; civic discussion; religious tolerance; and a skepticism of inherited privilege. Were the pilgrims perfect exemplars of these values? No. Many Quakers would attest to the limits of their religious tolerance. Native people of Massachusetts can still speak of the mistreatment that followed once the honeymoon of those early Thanksgivings ended. Yet, we can look back to these men and women and see the early links that bring us to 1776.

In July of 1776, the 13 colonies and the raw wilderness of Vermont stood in sharp contrast to the people of these earlier dates. No long struggling simply to survive, the colonies had flourished and thrived. The colonies had welcomed diverse groups of immigrants, refugees and settlers to its shores, and for some the promise of a new start of success, not determined by birth order or social rank, had proven true. For many in Europe and other countries, these colonies were, as John Winthrop wrote, a Shining City on a Hill. But we would be remiss not to remember that for Winthrop and others, a Shining City on a Hill was not a good thing. It was a city in danger—open to piracy and threats. People built cities in valleys to protect them. America's position was in the open. This made it an example to many but a target for others.

With the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The leaders of the colonies took a united step forward and an immense philosophical leap. As one can imagine a British aristocrat responding to this movement: "One simply does not leave the United Kingdom!" Yet, this vaulting ahead was calculated. Lawyers on the committee, like John Adams, who had a command of the common law and its philosophical underpinnings, knew how to aim this step so that we landed on solid footing. Adams, Franklin, Livingston, Jefferson, and Sherman, the committee of five who drafted the document represented diverse interests and brought an entire age of enlightenment to bear on crafting what had not been done before. Whether the world knew it or not, on the close of the day in 1776, we were living in a different era, where the promotion of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, rather than privilege, hierarchy, and divine right drove the organization and purpose of government and people's lives.

In July of 1863 through the blood of many, including more Vermonters per capita than nearly any other state, on the fields in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, the United States forcibly extended this promise—that all men are created equal—to those still suffering under enslavement. In 1864 President Abraham Lincoln made this connection explicit. Through the Gettysburg Address and the Emancipation Proclamation, he forged the link that connects the dates 1619, 1620, and 1776 into one chain.

Our story is not a story of perpetual success or perpetual happiness. It is one of struggle and effort, a concerted project to bend the arc of history toward justice. But it is also one of Faith, Hope, and Charity, values that the Pilgrims would have recognized. It is a multitude of stories. It is a tapestry. Sometimes there is tragedy, in some places there are curses and sins, but in other panels there is kindness and the finest of human character let loose to reach its full potential.

In the summer of 1900, John Adams great-grandson, the American historian, Henry Adams walked the halls of the Great Exposition in Chicago. Adams who had written the definitive

history of America's transformation from a fledgling nation to the great power of North America, who had accompanied his father to England during the Civil War to negotiate support for the North, stood before the massive electrical dynamos and inventions of a new, American age. The resulting essay, *The Virgin and the Dynamo* grappled with and ultimately recognized that America had brought forth a new force into a shifting the world. Gone was the dominance of religion and royalty (the Virgin) that had animated western history from early Greece through the age of enlightenment. In its place was the Dynamo, technology, progress, and its raw power. For Adams, this is a staggering shift, and one that is fundamentally American. With his essay Adams forges the last link that I will discuss today.

The echoes of 1776 continue to play out in our lives today. As we struggle with a world grown more complicated, a politics drawn partisan, and a sense that technology may not have our best interests or betterment at heart, we stand in the shoes of the men and women who stood before us in 1776. In their day, they were called upon to cast aside not merely a governor or a single set of laws but an entire order. They were charged with bringing forward a new nation conceived in the value of liberty, equality, and the promotion of individual pursuits. Their fruit, which we continue to enjoy is the product of this process, of carefully crafted links, a chain that unites and ties us, its inheritors, to the values and struggles of our founding. As frightening as we may find tomorrow, we must take comfort in this American experiment, this on-going test of government by the people and for the people. Today is an opportunity to not only reflect on these ideals but to re-commit ourselves to their finest points and to accept the responsibility that it represents.

Thank You.