Moments That Made Us

Two hundred and fifty years ago, delegates from the thirteen self-proclaimed United States of America signed the Declaration of Independence and changed the world. The signers gambled their lives on the future of a new nation, uncertain of what would follow as the ink dried.

The new free and independent states proclaimed their right to break from an unjust ruler and formed a government based on the consent of the governed, not a king. Their statement that all men are created equal introduced a new idea of freedom and argued that governments exist to protect natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The founders pledged to each other their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor, beginning a national experiment that each generation has carried forward, writing our story one moment at a time. The ink is still drying.

Moments That Made Us explores these founding principles and shares multiple perspectives from some of the United States' most significant moments. They showcase how the nation has advanced the founders' ideals and create opportunities to contemplate the ongoing story of what it means to be American.

They show us that our path was never inevitable. We shaped it at every turn.

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Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness

The United States began with a bold idea: the natural right to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. The notion that these rights were inherent to individuals, rather than granted by a monarch, was politically radical. So, too, was the thought that the government's purpose was to protect these rights, not just the desires of the Crown or of Parliament.

To the founders, these natural rights extended beyond individuals. Rather, happiness implied a shared obligation of every person to live well, act with integrity, and contribute to the well-being of their community. These revolutionary ideals became the justification for American independence and the north star guiding what the new nation would become.

1607: English Colonization

[Image Description: Illustration of colonial Jamestown depicting men building a tall log fence around a tent settlement with a British flag near the coast. Three ships are docked near the coast as supplies are unloaded to the settlement. End image description.]

Tobacco Made the American Economy

Tobacco was already popular in Europe, but its success with English growers in the colony of Jamestown, Virginia, set the struggling colony on a path to prosperity. The cash crop sustained it as the first permanent English settlement in North America.

Robert Cotton, a tobacco pipe maker, came to Jamestown in 1608. He imprinted a distinctive cross shape on these pipes as a way to sign his work. The look blended Indigenous and English pipe design at a time when tobacco was driving trade across the Atlantic for goods and people.

[Image Description: Two light reddish-brown clay tobacco pipes with some dark brown staining over a white background. The top pipe is broken off on the left side. Image caption reads “Tobacco pipe fragments about 1608-1624. Robert Cotton. Clay. Loan, preservation Jamestown Rediscovery. Foundation at Historic Jamestowne. IL.2025.4.1-2. End image description.]

“Tobacco, which passes there as current Silver, and by the oft turning and winding it, some grow rich but many poore…” – John Smith, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England & The Summer Isles,* 1622

1956: Interstate Highways

[Image Description: Bird’s eye view of a sprawling, interconnecting highway system in Colorado. End image description.]

Highways Put the American Dream Within Driving Distance.

By the 1950s, Americans were already in love with the open road. But as highways knitted the country together after the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956, a nation on the move was soon going farther and faster than ever before.

But first they had to stop for gas.

[Image description: A bright red gasoline pump with a black hose and glass cylinder surrounded by red bars at the top. Image caption reads “Gasoline Pump. 1930s-1970s. Steel, glass, and porcelain. History Colorado. 79.165.5. End image description.]

This pump began filling up cars in Golden, Colorado, in the 1930s. With the tank topped off, automobile owners found a new kind of freedom in a country increasingly built for travel by car. From the layout of our cities to roads through our national parks, modern America and automobiles were made for each other.

“Travel my way, take the highway.” – “(Get Your Kicks On) Route 66, recorded by Nat King Cole, 1946.

A Car for Everyone

[Image Description: Black and white photo of a man sitting in a parked Ford Model T outside the executive offices of the White House, 1921. Image caption reads “Drives ancient “Lizzie” to White House to show Henry Ford..., Harris & Ewing, 1938. Courtesy Library of Congress.” End image description.]

Henry Ford’s motor company changes Americans’ relationship to gasoline forever when the Ford Model T debuted in 1908. Before the “tin Lizzie’ hit the market for everyday Americans, cars had been luxury vehicles. With innovative assembly line production, Ford mass produced vehicles and lowered their price, enabling millions of Americans to purchase their first cars. As more and more Americans hit the road, the nation’s appetite for oil, from which gasoline is made, grew nearly insatiable.

“Failure is only the opportunity more intelligently to begin again.” -Henry Ford in his autobiography, 1922.

Driving a New Way of Life

[Image Description: A man wearing a dark shirt, jeans, and work boots and holding a coiled green hose over his shoulder leans against a red classic car. Text in image footer reads “I’m no millionaire but it’s mine!” Image caption reads “’I’m no millionaire but it’s mine!’ Plymouth advertisement, 1957. Public domain.” End image description.]

Suburban streets after World War II gleamed with chrome and optimism. Veterans used G.I. Bill benefits to buy homes outside dense city limits – and bought cars to get themselves to work. Highways stretched outward, linking neighborhoods and cities increasingly designed for drivers. Parking garages rose, traffic thickened, and car culture roared to life.

With Mustangs and Thunderbirds on the move, America's love affair with the open road hit full speed.

"And she'll have fun fun, fun / 'Til her daddy takes the T-Bird away" – Brian Wilson and Mike Love, "Fun, Fun, Fun" by the Beach Boys, 1964.

The Mother Road

[Image Description: Four classic cars parked in a semicircle at the top of a mural painted on the road celebrating the 100th anniversary of Route 66 in Flagstaff. Image caption reads "Rolling into history: Classic cars line up to honor 100 years of Route 66, where every mile tells a story." End image description.]

Long before interstates sped travelers past small towns, Route 66 carried America straight through Arizona. Opened in 1926, the "Mother Road" connected Chicago to California and turned desert crossroads into gateways. Towns like Winslow, Holbrook, Seligman, and Kingman grew around gas stations, diners, motels, and trading posts that welcomed Dust Bowl migrants, military families, vacationers, and dreamers heading west. Route 66 didn't just move people. It moved culture.

"Route 66 is the main street of America." —John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, 1939

"The form of government, which communicates ease, comfort, security, or in one word happiness to the greatest number of persons, and in the greatest degree, is the best." John Adams, Thoughts on Government, 1776

Consent of the Governed

The Declaration of Independence made a radical claim that power comes from the consent of the governed. King George III, like all monarchs, claimed to rule by divine right, or the will of god, but American Patriots insisted that political authority came from the people. They asserted that government must be accountable to the governed, or be replaced.

The founders argued that the Revolution was not simply a rebellion, it was necessary because the British Crown and Parliament did not protect their rights. The new United States would be a nation in which the government derived its power and legitimacy from the people.

1773: Boston Tea Party

[Image Description: Hand-colored lithograph of men throwing tea off the sides of ships into the Boston Harbor as a gleeful crowd looks on. Image caption reads “Destruction of Tea at Boston Harbor. N. Courier, 1846. Courtesy Library of Congress”. End image description.]

Coffee was the drink of American patriots who rejected England andits obsession with tea.

Copper coffee pots appeared in many more American homes after the Boston Tea Party, when the Sons of Liberty dumped 92,000 pounds of British tea into the Boston Harbor on December 16, 1773.

[Image Description: A copper coffee pot with a long, curved neck and a thick wooden handle. Image caption reads “Coffee pot, 18th century, copper and wood. Loan, Winterthur Museum. IL.2025.34.1” End image description.]

Patriotic plots stirred in Boston’s coffee houses, where revolutionaries like Samuel Adams and Paul Revere strategized for independence. A silversmith by profession, Revere’s spoons also stirred their coffee.

[Image Description: A silver tablespoon with an ornately decorated handle. Image caption reads “Tablespoon, 18th century, Paul Revere Jr., silver. Loan, Winterthur Museum. IL.2025.34.2”. End image description.]

“Tea must be universally renounced.” —John Adams, letter to Abigail Adams, 1774

1846: War with Mexico

[Image Description: Led by General Scott, U.S. troops on horseback wearing blue uniforms enter Mexico City. Image caption reads “Genl. Scott's entrance into Mexico, Plate 45,” Carl Nebel, 1851. Courtesy New York Public Library. End image description.]

The Mexican-American War reshaped land and lives forever.

US troops spilled across the Mexican border in 1846. President James K. Polk had promised to expand the United States in pursuit of the nation’s Manifest Destiny. He used military force to claim disputed lands along the Rio Grande River.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican-American War on February 2, 1848. By the time the ink was dry, Mexico had given up more than half its territory while the US nearly doubled in size. A printer in Mexico City published this Spanish language version of the treaty so residents of the surrendered lands could make sense of the war’s consequences.

[Image Description: The first page of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo printed in Spanish on aged, yellow paper in black text with an ornate printed border. Image caption reads “Tratado de Paz Amistad, Límites Y Arreglo Definitivo Entre la República Mexicana y los Estados Unidos de América, 1848, Ignacio Complido, printer. History Colorado 2024.137.1”. End image description.]

“those who shall remain in the said territories after the expiration of that year…shall be considered to have elected to become citizens of the United States.” —Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Article VIII, 1848

“A government of our own is our natural right.” **Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, 1776**

All Men are Created Equal

Perhaps the most famous line of the Declaration of Independence reads, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are **created equal**.” The founders understood equality as a collective right, that no person was inherently superior to another, not even a king.

The world remained divided by race, gender, and class, even as Americans broke free from monarchy. But the promise of equality was powerful. Those excluded from the meaning of these words in 1776 still recognized that by the founders’ logic, equality should mean that all people deserve access to the ideals promised by the Declaration of Independence.

1870: Fifteenth Amendment

[Image Description: Pencil drawing of Civil War soldiers in uniform. End image description.]

Constitutional amendments defined the Civil War’s meaning.

The Fifteenth Amendment gave Black men the right to vote. It was the last of three additions to the US Constitution securing the rights so many had fought for in the Civil War.

Not two months after its ratification, Thomas Mundy Peterson made history as the first Black man to vote under the amendment’s protections. He cast his ballot in a local election in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, on March 31, 1870. His fellow citizens later gave him a medal, celebrating the moment the nation moved one step closer to fulfilling the promise of equality in the Declaration of Independence.

[Image Description: A tin and lead coin inscribed with text that reads “Presented by citizens of Perth Amboy, N.J. to Thomas Peterson, the first colored voter in the U.S. under the provisions of the 15th Amendment at an election held in that city. March 31st 1870.” Image caption reads “Thomas Mundy Peterson medal, 1884, Citizens of Perth Amboy, New Jersey. Tin and lead alloy cast from same stamp as gold medal. Loan, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. IL.2025.29.1”. End image description.]

“And so we meet to decorate, By token on the Freedman’s coat, The man who was in any State, The first to cast a Freedman’s vote.” —William Paterson, presenting Peterson with the medal from the citizens of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, 1884

1990: Americans with Disabilities Act

[Image Description: Black and white photograph of a group of people in wheelchairs. End image description.]

Disability rights activists made change by demanding accessibility.

Activists demanded equal rights for people with disabilities throughout the 1970s. In San Francisco, hundreds occupied a federal building for weeks in 1977, calling for better enforcement of existing anti-discrimination laws. The next year in Denver, a group known as "The Gang of 19" stopped traffic downtown, laying in front of public buses not accessible to all.

Their campaign would continue on for decades until disability rights advocates celebrated the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. For these protestors, equality came in bursts as some companies began offering more accessible services. Frontier Airlines introduced this low-vision-friendly braille emergency procedure pamphlet in 1977.

[Image description: A braille pamphlet with a printed title that says "Frontier Horizon Flight Information". Image caption reads "Frontier Horizon Fight Information, 1983, Frontier Horizon Airlines. Braille paper. History Colorado, MSS.970.14." End image description.]

"These kinds of issues—civil and human rights—are not issues that people with disabilities can compromise any further." —Ed Roberts, Congressional testimony, 1977

"The decree is gone forth, and it cannot be recalled, that a more equal Liberty, than has prevail'd in other Parts of the Earth, must be established in America." – John Adams to Patrick Henry, 1776.

Free and Independent States

The Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in the summer of 1776 to consider independence from Great Britain. But whose independence did the delegates have in mind? Were Americans one people held together by common bonds, or a collection of **free and independent states?**

Representatives of all thirteen colonies approved the Declaration of Independence on behalf of "the good people of these Colonies." But the document only began to address the balance of power between the states and their commitment to a shared goal. It would take the Articles of Confederation in 1777, and ultimately the Constitution in 1787, to strike a more considered balance, with debates continuing as more states joined the Union

1850: Fugitive Slave Act

[Image Description: Oil painting of African Americans escaping slavery in the snow on the Underground Railroad. Image caption reads "The Underground Railroad, Charles T. Webber, oil on canvas, 1893. IanDangall Computing / Alamy". End image description.]

Black Americans were fugitives in a free land.

Black men, women, and children resisted enslavement, often fleeing north despite the dangers of capture and the pain of family separation. The 1850 Fugitive Slave Act made escape even riskier, allowing slave catchers to work in free states, overruling local laws guaranteeing freedom for Black men and women. Suddenly, even free Black people living in northern states weren't safe from slave catchers.

[Image description: Two flyers promising rewards for the capture of runaway slaves. The caption for the first poster, which also includes a drawing of a runaway slave, reads "$100 Reward! February 12, 1861, Broadside. Loan, Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. IL.2025.19.2". The caption for the second flyer reads "$150 Reward for Nace Dorsey, a runaway slave. July 15, 1860, Broadside. Loan, Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. IL.2025.19.1". End image description.]

These runaway slave advertisements reveal both the determination of those seeking freedom and the persistence of masters trying to keep them in bondage in the decade before the Civil War.

"It was the beginning of a reign of terror to the colored population." —Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1861

1920: Women's Vote

[Image Description: Suffragettes wearing sashes and holding flags stand in a line in front of a wrought-iron gate. Image caption reads "Woman Suffrage." Harris and Ewing, 1917, Courtesy Library of Congress". End image description.]

Western women led the movement for the Nineteenth Amendment.

Women had campaigned for the vote since before Americans declared independence. But it was in the new states out west – Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Idaho- where women first won the franchise.

Colorado's voters marked their ballots for equal suffrage in 1893. It was the first time women won the right to vote through a statewide referendum. Women like Ellis Meredith led the effort in Colorado, and then focused on winning the vote for women nationwide. Thanks to generations of hard work, states ratified the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. It guaranteed many American women – but not yet all – the right to vote.

[Image description: A yellowed and wrinkled paper ballot with three columns of text. Each column has a drawing at the top of it; from left to right, a house, an American flag, and a rooster. Image caption reads "Ballot, Pitkin County, Colorado, 1893. History Colorado 2020.9.1". End image description.]

[Image description: A membership certificate with an ornate printed border for the National American women Suffrage Association. Image caption reads "Ellis Meredith's National American Woman Suffrage Association life membership certificate, 1915-1920. History Colorado. MSS.427.130. End image description.]

"The vote is an indefinable something that makes you part of the plan of the world. It means the same to women that it does to men." – Ellis Meredith, *Atlantic Monthly,* 1908.

"The powers delegated by the proposed Constitution to the federal government are few and defined. Those which are to remain in the State governments are numerous and indefinite." – James Madison, "Federalist No. 45," 1788

We mutually pledge to each other

Delegates to the Continental Congress in 1776 concluded the Declaration of Independence with a powerful promise: "We mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred honor." With these words they acknowledged their commitment to a shared purpose and responsibility, for which they risked everything.

The signers of the Declaration understood that fighting for independence would mean war, and possibly death. By pledging everything to one another in the face of these risks, they turned their own struggles, and that of each colony, into a common cause for freedom.

1776: American Revolution

[Image description: Head and shoulders view of George Washington and another soldier hoisting an American flag as they cross the Delaware River. Image caption reads "Washington Crossing the Delaware, Emanuel Leutze, 1851. The Metropolitan Museum of Art". End image description.]

George Washington knew it would take more than determined soldiers to win the Revolution.

[Image description: A pair of metal and leather spurs displayed on metal racks over a white background. Image caption reads "General George Washington's spurs, 1775. Silver, steel, and leather. Loan, The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. IL.2025.21" End image description.]

General George Washington took these spurs off his boots and gave them to Lieutenant Thomas Lamb at Valley Forge in January 1778. The Continental Army was running perilously low on supplies and equipment, and Lamb had volunteered for the dangerous mission of delivering Washington's plea for support to patriots in Boston. There was one problem: Lamb did not have his own set of spurs.

The dream of a new nation hung by a thread that winter at Valley Forge. Facing Britain's overwhelming military might, Washington's leadership united the struggling American army. Nearly four years later, in October 1781, he would lead them to victory at Yorktown and a new nation to independence.

"...as the Sword was the last Resort for the preservation of our Liberties, so it ought to be the first thing laid aside, when those Liberties are firmly established." —George Washington to the Executive Committee of the Continental Congress, 1777

1944: D-Day

[Image description: Black and white photo of allied troops disembarking from a war ship onto the beaches of Normandy on D-Day. Image caption reads "Robert F. Sargent. Courtesy National Archives." End image description.]

A massive Allied invasion turned the tides against fascism.

Five years into world War II, Axis powers ruled most of Europe. Only Great Britain held out against Nazi Germany's onslaught. There, Allied forces planned an invasion in the summer of 1944.

[Image Description: A round black helmet covered with dark brown netting that is torn in the upper right portion of the helmet. Image caption reads "US Army M1 combat helmet, 1940s. Steel, plastic, and khaki netting. History Colorado. H.6369.1". End image description.]

Captain David Hall wore this helmet as one of many American soldiers stationed in England in the build up to the invasion. A Black soldier serving in a segregated unit, Captain Hall was responsible for top secret operations in support of the 1st Army's beach landing on D-Day. The unprecedented June 6 assault on the French coast at Normandy broke through Hitler's defenses, beginning the Allied march to victory.

"We all knew what we were there for. We were ready." – Captain David Hall, 1st US Army, recalled in an oral history, 1998.

"We must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately." - **Benjamin Franklin, at the signing of The Declaration Of Independence, 1776**