

Alexandria Times

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The first Independence Day

History tells us that the Declaration of Independence was signed by John Hancock on July 4, 1776. Do you ever wonder how long it took for the news about the signing to reach Alexandria? While proclamations and town criers relayed the news more quickly, Dunlap's Maryland Gazette published a declaration from the delegates of Maryland dated July 11, 1776, five days later.

Readers of the Virginia Gazette, published in the colonial capital of Williamsburg, waited until July 26 to read the legislative council order to publish the Declaration of Independence in their newspapers – or gazettes – as early as July 20, 1776. Information technology has advanced a lot in 248 years!

In a time when newspapers often printed news from other newspapers in cities far and

near, the Virginia Gazette provided news from the colonial capital. The first four newspapers published in Virginia were all called the Virginia Gazette.

While the first version of the newspaper may have been named after the London Gazette, later iterations with the same name may have kept the name due to the colonial legislature passing laws requiring the government and colonists to advertise in the Virginia Gazette. According to Colonial Williamsburg, the legislature published some of its regulations in the Gazette, making changing the newspaper's name – to the Times, for example – awkward and unwelcome.

The subscription price of the Virginia Gazette stayed at twelve shillings, sixpence over its colonial versions. This price was about what an unskilled laborer earned in a week. Due

IN COUNCIL, July 20, 1776.
 Ordered, **T**hat the printers publish in their respective Gazettes the DECLARATION of INDEPENDENCE made by the Honourable the Continental Congress, and that the sheriff of each county in this commonwealth proclaim the same at the door of his courthouse the first court day after he shall have received the same.
 ARCHIBALD BLAIR, Cl. Con.

An image of the Virginia Gazette dated July 26, 1776, with the legislative order.

PHOTO/VIRGINIA GAZETTE

to the cost, subscribers often shared their newspapers after reading their editions, and local taverns and coffee houses usually had current editions. Today, free Wi-Fi is an expected benefit of visiting taverns and coffee shops for similar reasons.

Printing the newspaper was a time and labor-intensive process. The small staff of the Virginia Gazette meant that previously printed reports from other cities, such as Annapolis and New York City, filled most editions.

Most of the Alexandrians who could read had to wait more than two weeks to see the words declaring the United States a free and independent country for themselves. This week, as we celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence, we hope readers take a moment to contemplate how differently news traveled in 1776.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.