

THE SOURCES OF THE SUSSEX DECLARATION: A RECONSIDERATION

by

JOHN BIDWELL

IN April 2017 several newspapers carried stories about the discovery of a manuscript Declaration of Independence. Conjectures about the political significance of the manuscript began to circulate in print and then proliferated on the web where the original announcements are still accessible. The discovery was sufficiently newsworthy that Prime Minister Theresa May and President Donald Trump took time to look at it while Trump was making his UK state visit in 2019. Unfortunately, they and their advisors were misinformed. Basic assumptions about the date and origins of the manuscript are in error and have prompted unfounded claims about its historical importance. I hope to correct those errors here and set the record straight by reviewing the bibliographical arguments that made that manuscript a media sensation.

My main concern is with an article by Danielle Allen and Emily Sneff in the *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* (PBSA). It serves as the definitive announcement of the discovery and a means of explaining the authors' research methods. They describe and date the manuscript (see figure 1) in the article and suggest a route by which it came to its present location in the West Sussex Record Office (WSRO), Chichester, England. In brief this is how they present their findings: sometime between 1783 and 1790 a clerk made a copy of the Declaration of Independence, the manuscript that had been engrossed on parchment for the Continental Congress in 1776. The clerk had trouble reading the original, committed errors of transcription, and even smudged the title, but was ambitious enough to write it out on a large sheet of parchment. Measuring 24 by 30½ inches, it was intended for display and was probably commissioned by the Pennsylvania lawyer James Wilson (1742–1798), one of the Founding Fathers who had signed the engrossed Declaration. Wilson played a prominent part in drafting the Constitution, which he also signed, and relied on this copy to argue for a strong national government founded on the will of the people rather than a loose confederation of semi-independent states. His concept of nationhood is evident in the way the clerk transcribed the fifty-six signatures in the engrossed Declaration, not grouped by states as in the original but intermingled in a seemingly