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The Declaration continues to instill a sense of awe. But the physical document itself has suffered greatly during 200 years of travels and travails. Not until installation in the National Archives during the 1950s were all three of this nation's Founding Documents assembled in one place for display and safekeeping.

The original Founding Documents are on permanent display for public viewing under low light in the ***Charters of Freedom Rotunda*** *of DC's National Archives Building. Housed in special encasements filled with inert gas to prevent deterioration, the cases are lowered into a vault each night for safekeeping.*

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TIMOTHY MATLACK:

Engrosser of the
Declaration of Independence, 1776

The Declaration of Independence was drafted for the most part by Thomas Jefferson. But the scribe who put quill to parchment to produce the historic document was a man named Timothy Matlack. A former shop owner and brewer who had spent time in debtors' prison, Matlack was by then a 40-year-old clerk at the Pennsylvania State House where the Continental Congress was meeting.

On July 4, 1776, delegates in Philadelphia approved the Declaration and ordered that it be "fairly engrossed on parchment…and be signed by every member of Congress." That day its text also had its first public reading outside the State House (now known as Independence Hall). According to one eyewitness, the speaker was none other than Timothy Matlack. Therefore, he may have voiced the Declaration before even starting to letter it.

The scribe selected the best available skin large enough to accommodate the document's wording, signatures, margins and interlinear spacing. After receiving final instructions on July 19, Matlack penned a visually distinctive title with large letters and flourishes:

"The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America."

Under this title, the lines of text that Matlack wrote in English Roundhand script took up nearly the entire width of the parchment (now 29.5"w x 24"h).

The scribe finished his work by August 2, when presiding officer John Hancock was the first to sign the Declaration—his large signature a deliberate choice, possibly to highlight his position and the significance of his action. (If caught by the British, Hancock and the other signers could have been hung for treason.)

Matlack was also the penman for George Washington's commission as commanding general of the Continental Army. Despite the scribe's Quaker background, he then joined Washington in going to war. Like the future president, Matlack crossed the icy Delaware River in December 1776—serving as colonel of a rifle battalion at the Battles of Trenton and Princeton. His son Mordecai died in military service during the Revolutionary War.

Matlack's wartime activities got him disowned by the Society of Friends. Along with fellow outcasts, he became one of the founders of the Society of Free Quakers in 1781. He also designed the Free Quaker Meeting House, which remains standing today in Philadelphia.

Timothy Matlack pursued a long and colorful political career. He was a delegate to the Second Continental Congress in 1780—and also to the 1787 convention that made Pennsylvania the second state to ratify the U.S. Constitution. He spoke out strongly against slavery. His notoriety led to portraits painted by both Charles Willson Peale and the artist's son Rembrandt Peale.

By the time he died in 1829 at age 93, there had been seven presidents of the nation that Matlack's pen declared independent from Great Britain in 1776.

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Watch Brody Neuenschwander letter parts of the Founding Documents:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayJoTSO0wwU

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JACOB SHALLUS:

Engrosser of the
Constitution of the United States, 1787

Written in 1787, ratified in 1788, and the law of the land since 1789, the United States Constitution is the world's longest surviving written charter of government. Its first three words—"We the People"—affirm that the government of the United States would exist to serve its citizens.

The scribe who engrossed the Constitution lettered those three words taller than the others. Yet for 150 years his identity was a mystery. In advance of the Constitution's sesquicentennial celebration in 1937, research finally identified Jacob Shallus as the scribe of the historic document.

His place in history was cemented during a very busy weekend in September 1787. As the Constitution was nearing its final draft, the 37-year-old son of a German immigrant was serving as assistant clerk of the Pennsylvania General Assembly. The Constitutional Convention was taking place one floor below the Assembly session in what is now Independence Hall in Philadelphia.

The Assembly kept Jacob Shallus busy right through Saturday. Then that evening delegates to the Constitutional Convention voted unanimously to accept the latest draft of the Constitution. As George Washington wrote in his diary, the convention "adjourned till Monday that the Constitution which it was proposed to offer to the People might be engrossed."

It turns out that an accomplished penman was in the building. Jacob Shallus agreed to accept a payment of $30 to engross the document using goose quills and ink made of oak galls and iron bits. He transcribed some 4,400 words on four large sheets of parchment, each measuring about 24"w x 29'h. A biographer estimates that, leaving a minimum amount of time for sleep and a few meals, Shallus would have lettered at a rate of at least 160 words per hour.

He made the Monday morning deadline but still had a few tasks to do. On Monday, September 17, 1787, delegates made one alteration to the text of the final draft of the Constitution, substituting "thirty Thousand" for "forty Thousand" in the clause that dictates the maximum ratio of representatives to population in the House of Representatives. On the last page Shallus lettered an errata that included that change, and also acknowledged a few mistakes he had made in haste.

Finally, Shallus engrossed a new closing paragraph proposed by Benjamin Franklin that recognized that there had been some dissent within the Convention. The wording recognized the signers of the Constitution as witnesses to "the Unanimous Consent of the States present"—rather than implying that they endorsed every principle within the document.

George Washington was first to sign, followed by each state delegation descending from north to south.

Then the scribe engrossed on an additional half sheet of parchment instructions for the state legislatures to call ratifying conventions and suggested procedures for implementing the Constitution after ratification by nine state conventions.

The Pennsylvania Assembly was having a difficult time getting delegates to appear so the vote to approve a state convention to ratify the Constitution could proceed. They sent its clerk Jacob Shallus into the Philadelphia streets along with its sergeant-at-arms to search for Anti-Federalist assemblymen who wanted less power in the federal government and a Bill of Rights to protect individual liberties. A quorum was reached, and the body authorized the convention. In December 1787, Pennsylvania became the second state to ratify the Constitution.

It took roughly six months for the Constitution to be ratified by the required nine states. Delaware was the first and New Hampshire became the ninth, officially establishing the Constitution as the framework for the United States government.

Jacob Shallus was chosen to letter this foundational document not simply because of his ability with pen and ink and his proximity to the convention. He was also a true patriot. In early 1776 he had volunteered for George Washington's American Continental Army, serving as quartermaster in a punishing campaign in Canada. Later in the Revolutionary War, he was a partner in a privateering operation to capture British vessels and cargo.

But his highest achievement was the one that went unheralded for a century and a half. The Constitution that he engrossed was the culmination of three hot summer months of equally heated debate that forged a completely new system of government and established a more unified nation.

WILLIAM LAMBERT:

Engrosser of the U.S. Constitution's
Bill of Rights, 1789

A passionate advocate for a Bill of Rights to the Constitution that would protect individual liberties, James Madison spent the summer of 1789 reconciling the many proposals into 17 amendments.

The First Congress passed 12 of these on September 25, 1789. But before they could be sent to the states for ratification, the draft document required the services of two engrossers: William Lambert, clerk for the House of Representatives; and Benjamin Bankson, clerk for the Senate.

Over three days the scribes engrossed 14 parchments, each about 28"w x 30"h.

President Washington sent 13 to the states for ratification, and one remained in New York City for signing on September 28.

In two years the required three-fourths of the states had ratified 10 amendments. These are the Bill of Rights, guaranteeing fundamental rights to the individual like freedom of speech, religion and the press, and protections against government overreach.

Two amendments were rejected by states. One gave the formula for determining the size of the House based on the 1789 population; the other concerned when Congress can change its pay (not remedied until 1992 when the 27th Amendment passed.)

Whether it was Lambert or Bankson who engrossed the "file copy" of the Bill of Rights remained a mystery until 1965. As the 175th anniversary of ratification neared, the FBI confirmed by handwriting analyses that the writing on the National Archives' parchment belonged to William Lambert.

Lambert left his post at the House to clerk for the State Department in the 1790s. There he became acquainted with Thomas Jefferson while the future president served as Secretary of State under George Washington. Lambert shared with Jefferson a passion for astronomy, keeping him informed of his latest scientific calculations—including the longitude of Monticello.

Lambert was an outspoken advocate for the building of a national astronomical observatory in Washington, but it took until 1825 for President John Quincy Adams to sign the bill for its creation. Another of Lambert's causes, to establish an American prime meridian passing through the nation's capital, never came to pass—although Meridian Hill Park off 16th Street NW in DC reflects the effort.