

Sussex's secret link to birth of US

Valentine Low

For more than half a century an ancient, folded piece of parchment has sat in a strong room in an archive in Sussex. No one thought much of it, and no historians paid it any great attention.

Now it has been hailed as a document that goes to the very birth of the United States of America — and yet which no one on the other side of the Atlantic even knew existed.

The manuscript is a parchment copy of the Declaration of Independence, and is not only stupendously rare, but also sheds new light on the political struggles that surrounded the early days of independent America.

The original 1776 copy of the Declaration is in a glass case in the National Archives in Washington and was thought to have been the only version on parchment.

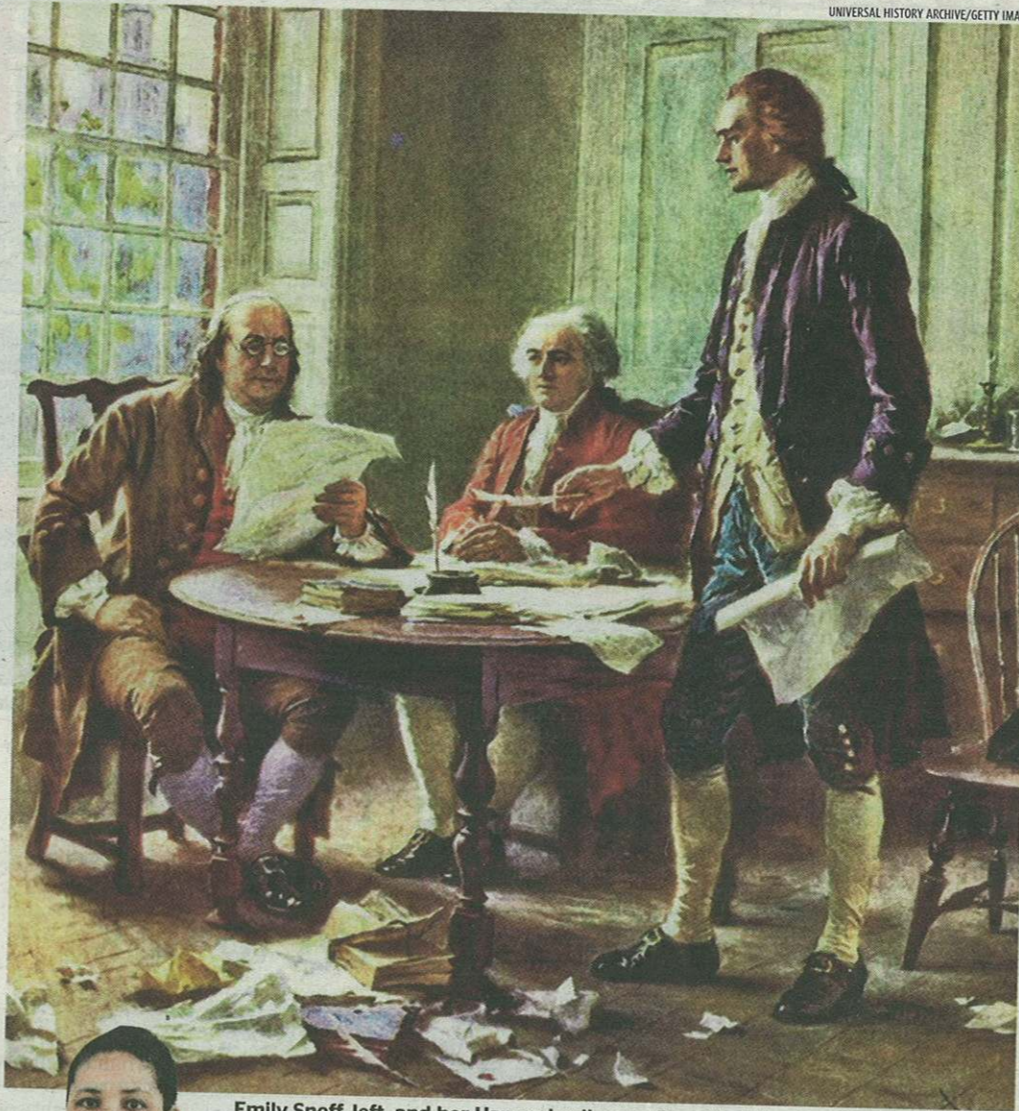
The Sussex version was discovered by two academics at Harvard University who have been trying to create a database of every known edition of the Declaration of Independence.

Believed to have been created in the mid-1780s, it has been in the West Sussex County Archives in Chichester since 1956. Danielle Allen, a professor of government at Harvard, said: "The world of historians had no idea a second ceremonial parchment manuscript existed. We have for generations thought there was one, in the National Archives. To find a second is unbelievable."

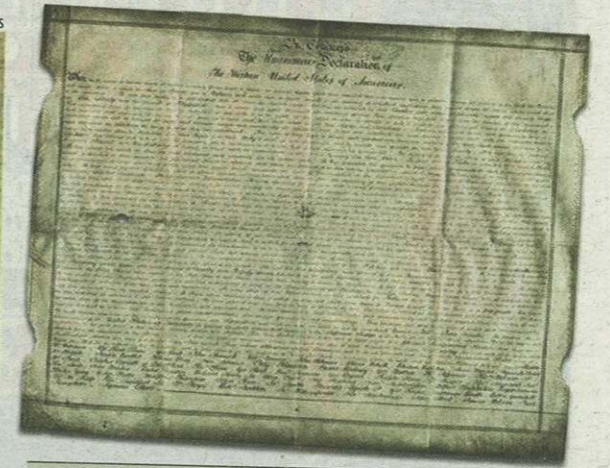
It was tracked down by a researcher, Emily Sneff, in the Chichester archive's online catalogue. "We never expected to find a document like this in West Sussex," she said. "This was unlike any other copy we had seen. It is very large, 24 inches by 30 inches — the same size as the signed parchment in our National Archives."

Unlike that version, however, it is oriented horizontally rather than vertically. Professor Allen said: "Emily found the catalogue entry and secured the photo and sent it to me, and I emailed her back, 'Holy history, Batman!' and we were off and running. It has been a true Sherlock Holmes experience. I've never known anything like it. I feel like I can retire, to tell you the truth."

They both went to Chichester to see the document. Professor Allen said: "The declaration in the National



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Historic declaration of 13 states

● The original version of the Declaration, ratified by Congress on July 4, 1776, has long been lost. The signed copy in the National Archives in Washington was ordered on 19 July and signed primarily on 2 August. It

contains the sentence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness."



Emily Sneff, left, and her Harvard colleague Danielle Allen found the Declaration in Chichester. Signatories to the original included Franklin, Adams and Jefferson

Archives is encased and will not be opened for at least 100 years. To have a parchment of nearly equivalent significance be available for close examination, it's a dream come true."

There is still a mystery over how it came to be in Sussex. The Harvard team thought it may have come through the 3rd Duke of Richmond, who supported the colonists and was known as the Radical Duke. He lived at Goodwood House in Sussex and according to Professor Allen had "many points of intersection" with Thomas Paine, a US founding father who had lived in Lewes.

However, an engraving of the parchment was made in Boston in

1836, which casts doubt on that theory because the duke died in 1806.

For Professor Allen, one of the most fascinating aspects of the parchment is the list of signatories at the bottom. In the original they are sorted by state. In the Sussex Declaration they appear to be random, which could relate to the debate that raged in America in the 1780s over whether the authority of the Declaration rested on a unitary national people or a federation of states.

The grouping of signatories, she said, points to the document being commissioned by someone — possibly James Wilson, a Pennsylvania lawyer — who backed the people's position and thus "shifts our understanding in how the nationalist position emerged".

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