

Sweet Briar's Hidden Treasure: Rare Declaration of Independence Print Captivates Historians

A rare Sweet Briar-owned Declaration of Independence print is recognized as one of only two known test prints from the historic 1823 Stone engraving.

SWEET BRIAR, VA, UNITED STATES, July 4, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Sweet Briar College recently learned it possesses what is likely one of two exceedingly rare copies of the Declaration of Independence.

Sweet Briar has the late Rosemary Frey Rogers, a member of the Class of 1934, to thank for acquiring this copy of the Declaration of Independence. After receiving an invitation to her 50th Reunion in March 1984, Mrs. Rogers wrote to then-president Nenah Fry: "A thought has occurred to me that perhaps the 50th Reunion would be the time to give to [Sweet Briar College for their museum](#) or library a rare copy of the Declaration of Independence, engraved by W. J. Stone by order of J. Q. Adams, Secretary of State, July 4, 1823." After discussing the opportunity with her colleagues, President Fry responded to Mrs. Rogers, "I can tell you that there is no question that we wish to accept your offer."

Mrs. Rogers declared that "the Declaration of Independence and I will arrive at Sweet Briar College in the early afternoon of Friday, May 25." When she presented President Fry with the copy, she also provided a written narrative. In it, she shared that she had received an old family trunk many years earlier, but hadn't paid attention to its contents until just a few years prior. At the bottom of the trunk, carefully rolled up, was her copy of the Declaration of Independence.

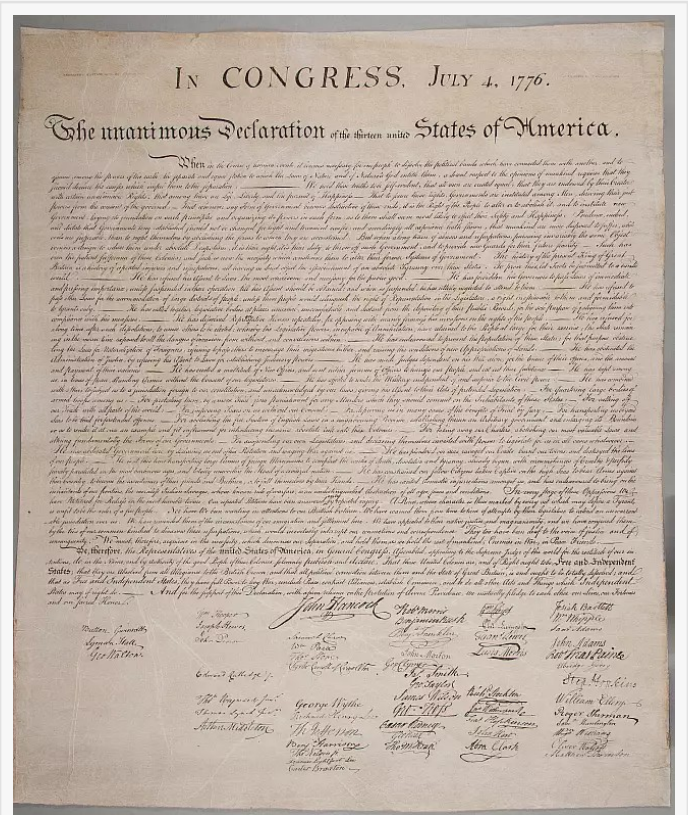
At the time, Mrs. Rogers believed her print to be one of the 201 copies produced by W. J. Stone



Rosemary Frey Rogers '34 presents then-President Nenah Fry with her copy of the Declaration of Independence in 1984.

on vellum, of which only eight others had been found in 1984. Other copies had been examined, tested, and authenticated by George Martin Cunha, director emeritus of the New England Document Conservation Center in Andover, Mass. Mrs. Rogers contacted Mr. Cunha, who also examined, tested, and authenticated the copy that was to become Sweet Briar's.

Mrs. Rogers shared that friends had suggested she sell the copy and enjoy the profits. In her narrative given to President Fry, she said, "To me, it is far more important to give to my college, Sweet Briar, something of value which otherwise the College may never have received in appreciation for what Sweet Briar College gave me and the four wonderful, rewarding, and happy years I spent there." In addition to recognizing her 50th Reunion, Mrs. Rogers gave the Declaration to Sweet Briar in memory of her father, Clarence N. Frey, and her uncle, Walter J. Frey, both of Cincinnati, Ohio.



Sweet Briar's print of the Declaration of Independence after restoration. Credit: Richmond Conservators of Works on Paper

However, thanks to the work of Richmond Conservators of Works on Paper, Sally Mott Freeman '76, her husband John, and Missy McNatt '76, additional information has surfaced that indicates that the copy is not one of the 201 vellum copies.

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Rosemary Frey Rogers '34

test the engraving plate before the vellum copies were made. Six of these proofs were produced, and besides the Sweet Briar copy, only one other survives, held by the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, Pa.

Sally and John funded the conservation work of the Sweet Briar copy. In preparation for her own 50th Reunion, Sally mentioned the copy during a class Zoom, which Missy had also joined. Missy had worked at the National Archives until 2025 and reviewed the conservation report from Wendy Cowan and Mary Studt, the conservation experts who worked on the document. Missy reached out to some of her contacts there, and, with their expertise and assistance, the group of researchers determined that Sweet Briar's copy of the Declaration of Independence is likely one of the paper proofs that William Stone used to

While other paper copies of the Declaration exist, they result from Stone's modified copper plate. The 1823 printing included a line at the top left that reads, "Engraved by W. J. Stone for the Dept. of State by order," and on the right, "of J. Q. Adams Secy of State July 4 1823." After the 1823 printing, the imprint line was burnished from the top of the copperplate, and a new imprint was added at the bottom left, below the first column of signatures, that reads, "W.J. STONE SC. WASHN." Sweet Briar's copy still has the 1823 inscription at the top and lacks the later inscription at the bottom left.

The Virginia Museum of History & Culture (VMHC) debuted its display of Sweet Briar's copy of the Declaration of Independence at an event for museum members and friends of the College on

June 7. On that date in 1776, Richard Henry Lee, on behalf of the Virginia delegation to the Second Continental Congress, stood among his peers and, for the first time, introduced a formal resolution for American independence, leading to the Committee of Five drafting the Declaration of Independence, which was adopted on July 4, 1776.

"There are two things at work here that make this a uniquely Sweet Briar story: the connections and sisterhood of our alumnae network and the outcome of those connections that will allow for unparalleled academic experiences," said President Mary Pope M. Hutson '83 at the museum event. "This is a special place that embodies a dedication to the history of the Commonwealth, and a commitment to the stewardship of Sweet Briar's history, Virginia history, and our nation's history—campus, Commonwealth, and country."

It is particularly significant that the conservation work and display of the College's copy of the Declaration coincide with its 125th anniversary year. Sweet Briar has been educating women leaders in the liberal arts since its founding in 1901. The College has recognized this anniversary with events, speakers, and celebrations. Recordings of past events and details about upcoming events are available at sbc.edu/125. The collection of blueprints and drawings by the College's architect, Ralph Adams Cram, is on display in Pannell Gallery through Oct. 24, 2026.

Sweet Briar has just extended the loan of its print of the Declaration of Independence to the VMHC through Aug. 2, 2026, where it is on display in the Royall Gallery at the entrance to the



President Hutson at the June 7 Virginia Museum of History & Culture event.

museum's marquee 250th anniversary exhibition, "We The People: The World in Our Commonwealth." It will then return to Sweet Briar and be on display for events for the local community this coming fall, providing students and community members in Amherst and surrounding counties the opportunity to learn about America's 250th anniversary and the importance of civic engagement. Sweet Briar students and faculty will have the opportunity to showcase the Declaration in classes and research, supporting the College's commitment to educating the next generation of women leaders.

At Sweet Briar College, history is more than something students study—it is something they experience firsthand. From rare historical artifacts and [museum collections](#) to undergraduate research, internships, and faculty mentorship, students have unparalleled opportunities to engage with history in meaningful ways. Whether your passion is history, political science, [museum studies](#), the humanities, or preserving our nation's heritage, Sweet Briar provides an immersive learning environment where curiosity becomes discovery. Explore your future at sbc.edu/admissions or contact admissions@sbcc.edu to learn how you can become part of a college with a remarkable past and an even brighter future.

For media inquiries, please contact the Director of Communications, Marketing, and Events, Clélie Steckel, at cdsteckel@sbcc.edu or 434-381-6299.

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