

Elise Gresham

June 2, 2005

My Responsibility as a Descendant of the Signers

The Declaration of Independence was an act of defiance, a call for self-governance, and a leap of faith that ordinary people could determine their own future. In 1776, there was no guarantee that this experiment in democracy would survive. The men who signed their names to that document were risking their lives for a set of principles. Honoring this history is about recognizing that the fight for freedom doesn't end with them: It continues with each new generation.

For me, that responsibility is personal. My ancestors, Richard Henry Lee and Robert Morris, were instrumental in securing American independence. Lee was one of the first to formally call for a complete break from Britain, knowing the danger of such a stance. Morris, the "Financier of the Revolution," helped make independence possible by securing the funds to keep Washington's army alive. Their sacrifices were not made for their own glory; they were made for the future—for me to enjoy the freedoms I have today, including the opportunity to reflect on their legacy. That knowledge fuels my commitment to carrying their legacy forward through action.

One way I do this is through civic engagement. The Declaration states that the government exists through the will of the people, which only holds true if the people participate. As the election of 2024 approached, I wanted to take an active role in this process—not just as a first-time voter but as someone who could help others engage as well. At Bard College, where I'm a first-year student, I learned about Election @ Bard, a student-led initiative dedicated to increasing voter access and participation on campus. I spoke with members and got involved, eager to understand the challenges students face when trying to vote.

I learned that for over twenty-five years, Bard fought to establish an on-campus polling site due to its isolated location, finally securing one in 2022. I met a panel of alumni who had fought for these rights—some from as far back as the 1990s. The fact that it took a quarter of a century for students to gain basic voting accessibility reinforced how fragile and hard-won these rights can be. Although I joined the club late and didn't have a major role in the initiative during the election, witnessing their efforts inspired me to stay involved and ensure that voting remains accessible, not just at Bard but any community where barriers exist. This experience deepened my understanding of democracy as something that requires constant vigilance.

Ensuring that democratic values remain strong is not just about direct civil engagement, but also about fostering discussions that keep these conversations alive. In my First-Year Seminar Class, we examine foundational political texts such as Rousseau's *The Social Contract* and Hobbes' *Leviathan*, alongside other declarations that echo, expand upon, or even contradict the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. Reading the *Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen* from the French Revolution, for instance, forces us to confront how France sought to universalize human rights, yet struggled with questions of exclusion and hierarchy, much like early America.

These discussions reveal a difficult but necessary truth: The Declaration of Independence was groundbreaking, but it was also incomplete. Its promise of equality, in practice, limited to a select group, excluded women, Indigenous peoples, and the enslaved. However, its language has been reclaimed again by those it originally ignored—abolitionists, suffragists, civil rights leaders—who understood that its principles had the potential to be more inclusive than its signers may have intended. Studying these texts in conversation with each other forces me to ask not just how democracy was conceived, but how it must evolve. Richard Henry Lee and Robert Morris

didn't sign the Declaration as an endpoint, but as the beginning of an unfinished project, one that demands continuous work. Their legacy isn't about reverence; it's about responsibility. As their descendant, I take that responsibility seriously.