

Declaration of Independence - Signers Series

ROBERT TREAT PAINE - Massachusetts

When most people think of the Massachusetts signers of the Declaration of Independence, their thoughts usually turn to John Adams, John Hancock and Samuel Adams, but the fourth signer, Robert Treat Paine, left his indelible mark on our founding.

Paine, born March 31, 1731, was the son of Rev. Thomas Paine, minister turned merchant, and Eunice Treat Paine. His early education was at Boston Latin School, the first public school on this side of the Atlantic. After finishing at the top of his class, it was assumed that he would study theology at Harvard, from which he graduated at 18. He taught school for a short time, and then because of frail health worked at sea as a marine merchant, making trips to North Carolina and Europe. In 1754, as Captain of the Seaflower, he led a whaling expedition to Greenland, leaving behind, arguably, the earliest illustrated log of a whaling adventure by an American.

Not finding mercantile to be financially rewarding, he took up the study of law, and served as chaplain to a militia regiment at Lake George during the French and Indian War.

A celebrant of the repeal of the Stamp Act, he did not believe that the separation from England was inevitable. While in the First Continental Congress, he was on the committee to procure gunpowder for the Continental Army, and he also signed the Olive Branch Petition, the final effort to ease relations with England, but King George III rejected it. Thus, separation was the only choice.

Although known by fellow signer Benjamin Rush as the "Objection Maker" to many proposals, he readily voted for and signed the Declaration of Independence. In 1777, he became the first Attorney General in Massachusetts, serving until 1790. As Attorney General, he prosecuted the criminal case of Commonwealth v. Jennings, which was pivotal in outright abolishing slavery in Massachusetts, the first state to do so.

In 1790, he accepted Gov. John Hancock's appointment as an associate justice on the state supreme court, a position he held for fourteen years until he retired in 1804. After ten peaceful retirement years, he passed in May 1814. WHS - 2025

