

NEWS

EASTON

Historic reading of Declaration of Independence shrouded in mystery 250 years later

Easton tradition says it was Robert Levers, a Northampton County magistrate who became a leader in the new local government, but the historical record isn't as clear.

Steve Novak lehighvalleylive.com

We know this: The Declaration of Independence was publicly read aloud for the first time on July 8, 1776. We know that it happened in Philadelphia, Trenton and here in Easton's Centre Square.

One thing we don't know: Who read it? We think we know. Easton tradition says it was Robert Levers, a Northampton County magistrate who became a leader in the new local government of the revolution. But thanks to the vagaries of history, we can't say for sure.

This may be surprising for a city that uses the historical moment as a core piece of its cultural identity. After all, Easton foregoes Independence Day on July 4 to celebrate Heritage Day, the commemoration of the Declaration's reading. This year, it's July 11 when the city will have its big celebration of the nation's 250th anniversary.

Christopher Black understands something about Levers; he has played the minor founder for more than a decade at Heritage Day and other events. He is the artistic director of the Bachmann Players, a local troupe of actors who research the colonial figures they then portray at events from Coca-Cola Park to historical reenactments and plays.

He believes Levers likely did read the Declaration on the square in Easton that day, mostly because he can't imagine the man — whose life could be described as a constant hustle to be in the right place at the right time — would have allowed anyone else to do it. But Black doesn't find his inspiration in Levers.

"Levers read it," Black said. "That's great. He read it. OK. He didn't write it. And I don't know if his life — whether or not it reflected what is written there. But I want to respect the Easton tradition of it being him" doing the reading.

We know Levers was well-positioned for the task. In the 2000 book "Sweet Land of Liberty: The Ordeal of the American Revolution in Northampton County, Pennsylvania," researcher Robert S. Fox devoted a chapter to Levers's life. After arriving in Philadelphia from London as a young man in his twenties, Levers took on many jobs but never could escape the shadow of insolvency. His connections in land speculation in the new Northampton County helped get him appointed as a local magistrate.

But Levers was a reluctant radical. Fox's book surmises he "simply hovered in the doorway" during a treasonous meeting in 1774, then skipped his court duties for some months as he considered his options. Levers embraced the cause "as political winds shifted." He was elected to a local arm of the revolutionary government in 1775 and became its chair in May 1776, as the county



A 1960 mural in the Northampton County Courthouse in Easton depicts Robert Levers reading of the Declaration of Independence. Steve Novak, lehighvalleylive.com contributor

decided to help overthrow Pennsylvania's moderate colonial authorities. (The preceding chairman, Lewis Gordon, had a change of heart and skipped the meeting — he would later be known as a loyalist.)

So, Levers, then in his early 50s, was chairing an influential committee when the Declaration was ratified, printed and distributed. July 8 was a special election for delegates to Pennsylvania's Constitutional Convention, so an appreciative crowd was likely present. A newspaper account, submitted after the fact and possibly embellished, described a scene with fifes, drums, "three loud huzzas" and a cheer: "May God long preserve and unite the Free and Independent States of America."

We know there are gaps in the record. Tim Betz, curator of exhibitions and programming at the Northampton County Genealogical Society at the Sigal Museum, has researched the period and punctures some of its myths in the museum's exhibit on the history of local media on display through July 12.

He said there is an "astounding vacuum" of detail around the Declaration's local reading, especially given Levers's own proclivity, as Betz described it, for bragging or martyring himself in his writings.

"He [Levers] never — certainly not in any of the documents I've seen or any of the archives I've looked at his writing — he never alludes to the moment, at all. ... Not

as an observer, not as a speaker," Betz said. "In fact, in any 18th century documents of anyone writing in Easton, Levers included," there are no references to the moment the Declaration was read.

That newspaper account is, apparently, the only description, perhaps because revolution had already been simmering for years. Levers wouldn't be popularly associated with the moment until as late as the mid-20th century, Betz said.

Culturally, we tend to fill the vacuum with romanticized images. A 1960 mural in the modern courthouse illustrates this literally with a granite-jawed Robert Levers proclaiming news of the new nation to a cheering audience represented by militia, gentry, a farmhand, a frontiersman and a family.

We know the reality was more nuanced. Both Black and Betz described a local populace that was roughly equal parts patriots, loyalists and pacifists — often for business or religious reasons, as well as personal. After declaring the self-evident truths in the Declaration, Levers later used his authority to confiscate property of anyone who didn't sign a loyalty oath, and much later exercised initiative to legally keep would-be freed slaves in servitude.

This is not shared to destroy myth, but to enhance understanding. Revolution is messy because history is made by humans. There are gaps in our knowledge; that's OK. The people reading and cheering in the

square on July 8, 1776, were still committing treason against one of the largest empires on the globe.

"That we know for sure!" Betz said. "We know that for them in that moment, [victory] wasn't assured. It wasn't the likely outcome, even. And I think saying we don't know — comfortably saying we don't know everything about this moment is good. ... We can think about the people that it happened to in the 18th century and what their lives were and what they went through and what they might have thought — because they were humans like us."

Black, the Bachmann Players director, doesn't find his inspiration in Levers, though he plays the part. Instead, he draws it from the writers, from Jefferson, Adams, Franklin and the words they put to paper — he tries to make it more about the ideas than the person. We might wonder if Levers did the same in the moment.

When he reads the Declaration aloud now, Black usually gets one of two reactions. With the smaller, quieter groups, he is more likely to see contemplation, as people hear the words and relate them to their own lives and government. The larger crowds, often provide the cheers, the huzzas, something joyful and unifying, like we imagine it to have been.

Either way, the ideas are the same, no different now than they were then. And those hearing them — really hearing them — still know something about America.

PENNSYLVANIA

Fourth of July traffic enforcement targets speeding, DUI violations

State police will implement enforcement programs through Sunday, with troopers focusing on aggressive driving behaviors and impaired motorists across the Lehigh Valley and statewide.

Kurt Bresswein lehighvalleylive.com

Pennsylvania State Police announced increased efforts to enforce safe-driving laws in July, beginning this week for the 2026 Independence Day holiday period.

State police Troop M in Bethlehem will implement heightened traffic enforcement as of 12:01 a.m. Friday through midnight Sunday, targeting aggressive and impaired drivers.

The enforcement initiative involves two primary programs.

The Pennsylvania Aggressive Driving Enforcement Education Program will focus on drivers who operate vehicles in dangerous ways, including speeding, seat belt vio-

lations and child-seat violations.

Troopers with the Selective Traffic Enforcement Against Drunk Drivers program, along with Drug Recognition Experts, will concentrate on apprehending motorists driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Statewide, during last year's Independence Day enforcement period, state police investigated 803 crashes and made 458 driving under the influence arrests. Troopers also investigated nine fatal crashes and issued 5,790 speeding citations across Pennsylvania.

Authorities are warning motorists not to park on Interstate 78, including ramps, shoulders or the center median, during the annual Dorney Park fireworks celebration. Violators will be cited for a parking violation and could have their vehicles towed.

State police are reminding residents that while consumer-grade fireworks are legal, restrictions apply. Fireworks cannot be ignited without property owner permission, discharged from or aimed at vehicles or buildings, directed at people, or used within 150 feet of buildings or vehicles. They also cannot be discharged by anyone under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Troopers are also reminding drivers that



Pennsylvania State Police Troop M in Bethlehem will increase enforcement efforts for the 2026 Independence Day holiday weekend through 11:59 p.m. today, with troopers focusing on aggressive driving behaviors and impaired motorists across the Lehigh Valley and statewide.

the Paul Miller Law prohibits use of handheld devices while driving, even when temporarily stopped in traffic or at red lights. Drivers can still use phones for emergencies and hands-free technology for calls, GPS and music. Violations carry a \$50 fine plus court costs and fees.

Additionally, fleeing or attempting to elude police is a felony offense that carries a maximum sentence of seven years in prison, a \$15,000 fine and restitution for damages or injuries resulting from the pursuit.

Following the Fourth of July enforce-

ment period, state police Troop M also announced a sobriety checkpoint in Bucks County between Friday, July 24, and Sunday, July 26, to identify impaired drivers.

Troopers with state police at Dublin will systematically stop vehicles at specific locations to observe drivers for signs of alcohol or drug impairment.

According to state police officials, the initiative aims to reduce the number of impaired drivers on roadways and decrease fatal and serious crashes involving drugs or alcohol.

NEWS

HARRISBURG

State lawmakers want to lower electric bills. Will budget impact be too big to swallow?

As lawmakers and Gov. Shapiro hash out budget, a tax cut to lower electric bills and a cap on utility profits are on the table.

Charlotte Keith *Spotlight PA*

Responding to public anger over soaring energy costs, Pennsylvania lawmakers in both parties have voted in support of a massive tax cut that would lower electric bills for customers across the state — although they have said little publicly about how to pay for the \$1.7 billion hole the measure would create in the budget.

Legislators in both parties are touting it as the largest tax cut in Pennsylvania history, although it's not clear whether it will actually become law.

The proposed change would eliminate a 5.9% state tax on the sale of electricity. It would take effect immediately and apply to all customers, including businesses and nonprofits. Utilities would be required to pass the savings on to customers or face fines.

The state House, where Democrats have a narrow majority, passed the measure unanimously last week as part of a bill that would dramatically change the way utility profits are regulated. House Republicans criticized the changes to utility regulation, but voted in favor of the legislation after it was amended to include the tax cut.

"There is no other way for the legislature to lower people's electric bill immediately," said state Rep. Carl Walker Metzgar, R-Somerset, who introduced the tax cut amendment.

"Everything else is pie in the sky."

The state Senate has not taken up the regulatory changes, but approved the tax cut in expedited fashion last week as the centerpiece of a broader package that would also repeal a sales tax exemption for data centers and expand a tax credit that funds private school scholarships.

A spokesperson said Democratic Gov. Josh Shapiro supports the cap on utility profits, but did not address his position on the tax cut. The profit cap follows the approach the governor outlined in a letter sent to utility leaders in May, warning them to stop seeking "unacceptably high" rate increases, or face his public opposition.

Shapiro and legislative leaders are currently in the thick of negotiations over the state budget. Republican leaders in the state Senate said in a statement Tuesday that they expected a deal "in the days following July 4th."

Asked how the state could afford such a large tax cut, state Rep. Jordan Harris, D-Philadelphia, the chair of the House Appropriations Committee, told Spotlight PA: "Everything is on the table right now, and anything that's gonna help people is gonna be on the table until we're done."

FAIR RETURNS

The bill began life in the state House as a way to curb utility profits.

The average electric bill in Pennsylvania has risen by more than 60% over the past five years, according to data compiled by Heatmap News and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Several factors have contributed to the increase. The rapid growth of data centers has contributed to a surge in demand, prompting a spike in wholesale prices, which are passed on to residential customers. There have also been delays in bringing new generation online.

The tax cut could offer fast relief for residents squeezed by rising bills, as concerns over affordability are top of mind for voters ahead of the November election. But it would also cost the commonwealth an estimated \$1.7 billion in revenue in the next fiscal year, without an obvious way to make up the shortfall.

Even without the tax cut, spending is set to outpace available revenues, making it likely that lawmakers will need to dip into the rainy day fund to balance this year's budget.

Republican leaders have argued that Pennsylvania needs to cut spending, while Shapiro's proposed budget would boost state spending by roughly 5%.

The state Senate passed a similar tax cut to lower electric bills in 2024, but it did not ultimately become law.

In a local radio interview, state Senate Majority Leader Joe Pittman, R-Indiana, acknowledged that the tax cut "would have an impact" on the state's deficit, but added that "there's a shared understanding that affordability is a major issue."

While most Senate Democrats voted in favor of the tax cut, some criticized it as a political stunt.

"What taxes will go up to cover it? What services will be cut?" state Sen. Lindsey Williams, D-Allegheny, one of six Democrats to vote against the tax package, asked during



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Dan Gleiter, dgleiter@pennlive.com file photo

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the floor debate on the bill.
"No one is answering those questions and no one will."

PROFIT FORMULA

Consumer advocates have long argued that excessive utility profits also play a role in driving up residents' bills. In their view, the profits that the state Public Utility Commission allows utility companies to earn are too high, given that their status as monopolies makes them a relatively safe investment.

By law, utilities are entitled to recover "reasonably incurred" expenses, as well as the opportunity to earn a fair return on their investment. The Public Utility Commission considers rate requests in complex and technical legal proceedings that can last months.

"They don't need to be making as much profit as they are making now," said state Rep. Elizabeth Fiedler (D., Philadelphia), chair of the House Energy Committee, who introduced the original legislation.

Fiedler said there is a "shared frustration" among lawmakers in both chambers and both parties about utility costs.

Fiedler's proposal would cap the profits that investor-owned utilities can earn based on a formula tied to the yield on U.S. Treasury bonds. Alternatively, a utility company could hold a "sealed bid competitive auction process" to determine the rate of return required to attract investment.

In a typical rate case, a utility's experts and consumer advocates use the same financial models to come to very different conclusions about the profits that utilities need to earn in order to attract continued investment, said Patrick Cicero, an attorney at the Pennsylvania Utility Law Project.

The bill is an attempt to be "more granular and precise" in setting profits, said Cicero, who previously served as the state's official consumer advocate.
"Why approximate when we don't have to?"
Changes to the profits that utilities earn could add up to millions of dollars in savings for customers, supporters say.
A reduction of 2 percentage points in the profits of PPL, which serves more than 1 million customers across central and eastern Pennsylvania, could save a typical residential customer almost \$60 on their electric bill by 2030, according to a report by Synapse Energy Economics, a consulting firm.

CREDIT CONCERNS
Opponents say the profit cap is an untested policy that would harm utilities financially and drive investment from the state.
"Trying to undo a century's worth of process on the fly is not sound energy policy," said Andrew Tubbs, president and CEO of the Energy Association of Pennsylvania, which represents electric and natural gas utilities.
The bill "wouldn't just change how rates are set, it would take Pennsylvania and make us really outside of the mainstream."
No state regulates utility profits this way, although similar legislation has been proposed in New York. New Jersey is considering tying profits to performance, including affordability and reliability.
The returns available to investors allow private water utilities to attract the money they need to make infrastructure improvements, Jenn Kocher, vice president of communications for the National Association of Water Companies, said in a statement.
Capping those profits "directly threatens the safety and reliability of water and wastewater in Pennsylvania," said Kocher, who was previously a spokesperson for the state Senate's Republican caucus.
In the state House, Republican lawmakers were largely critical of the bill — before voting in support of it once the tax cut was added.
The Public Utility Commission is neutral on the legislation to cap profits, according to a spokesperson.
Two of the agency's five commissioners, however, wrote to state Senate President Pro Tempore Kim Ward (R., Westmoreland) to express their opposition, arguing that the proposed changes "will not make a positive contribution and may make matters worse."
Additionally, they argued, legal challenges would be inevitable, and the costs of that litigation would be passed on to ratepayers.
Another commissioner, Vice Chair Kimberly Barrow, took a different view, saying at a recent legislative hearing that she was "very pleased" to see the bill advance in the House.

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Spotlight PA's Stephen Caruso contributed to this report.