

THE AMERICAN TRADITION OF  
*Service*

*We are a nation born out of service to others.*

The American Revolution created not just a new form of government, but a new idea of citizenship rooted in service, responsibility, and the belief that ordinary people can and should shape the world around them.

Our selfless commitment to service is at the heart of American ideals of **liberty, democracy, and civic duty.**

# Origins

**The early social fabric of America was woven from threads of service by inhabitants of diverse cultures.**

Indigenous peoples had long established traditions of service with their own communities and customs.

For European settlers, inspiration to serve came from many sources:

- The challenges of settling a distant land
- Their religious faith
- Philosophical writings
- Science & Enlightenment ideals
- Early governance and state constitutions

Enslaved and free Africans also brought their own traditions of service, carried with them from their homelands and necessitated by their circumstances in America.

## The Colonies Unite!

The American colonies joined forces to oppose abuses of the British crown and parliament and found ways to advance their own interests while at the same time **working to serve the greater good of the whole.**

# The Challenge

Throughout human history there has always been tension between serving the greater good and choosing self interest.

**Could any democratic government survive if individuals and states focused primarily on selfish interests regardless of the consequences for the nation as a whole?**

The new United States was able to navigate constantly conflicting visions, and stark disagreements to find balances of power and cooperation in communities, states and a new form of government.



# For the Public Good

The new American government immediately put the **ethic of service** into practice.

The actions of the First Congress and President George Washington's administration—including the passage of the Bill of Rights—were a clear manifestation of their dedication to the common good.

*Throughout human history there has always been tension between serving the greater good and choosing self interest.*

The founding generation of new Americans continued to champion and embody this service ideal.

## Among them were:

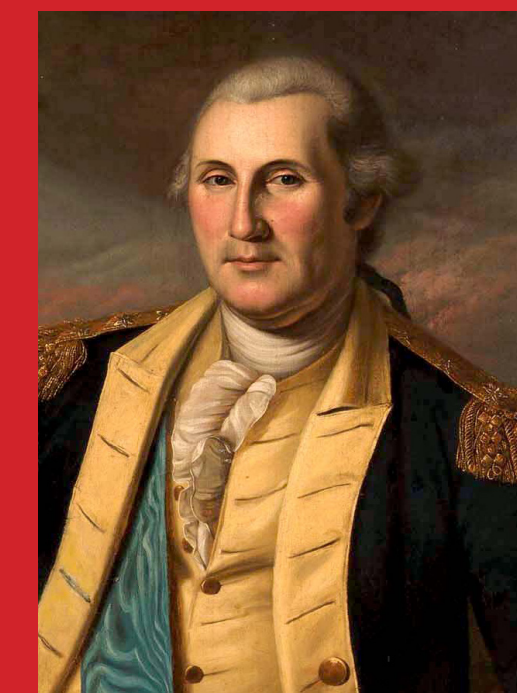
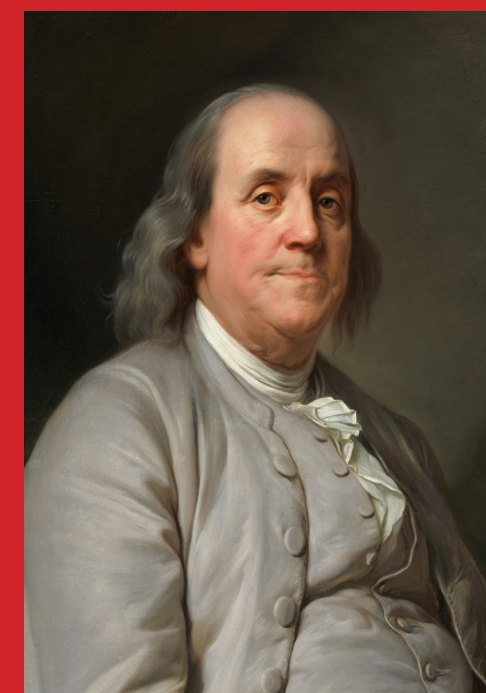
**Abigail Adams**, wife of John Adams, opposed slavery and advocated for women's rights, urging the Continental Congress to "Remember the Ladies".

**Benjamin Franklin** served through research, inventions, diplomacy, and was the founder of the first formally recognized volunteer fire company.

**Benjamin Rush**, a physician and the first professor of Chemistry in America, advocated for vaccines and used his scientific knowledge as a form of public service.

**Elizabeth Freeman ("Mumbet")**, in 1781, with the help of Theodore Sedgwick, she drew on founding ideals of liberty and equality to claim her own freedom and expand rights for others.

**George Washington** is remembered for leading the Continental Army, returning his commission to civil government, presiding over the Constitutional Convention, and voluntarily retiring the Presidency.

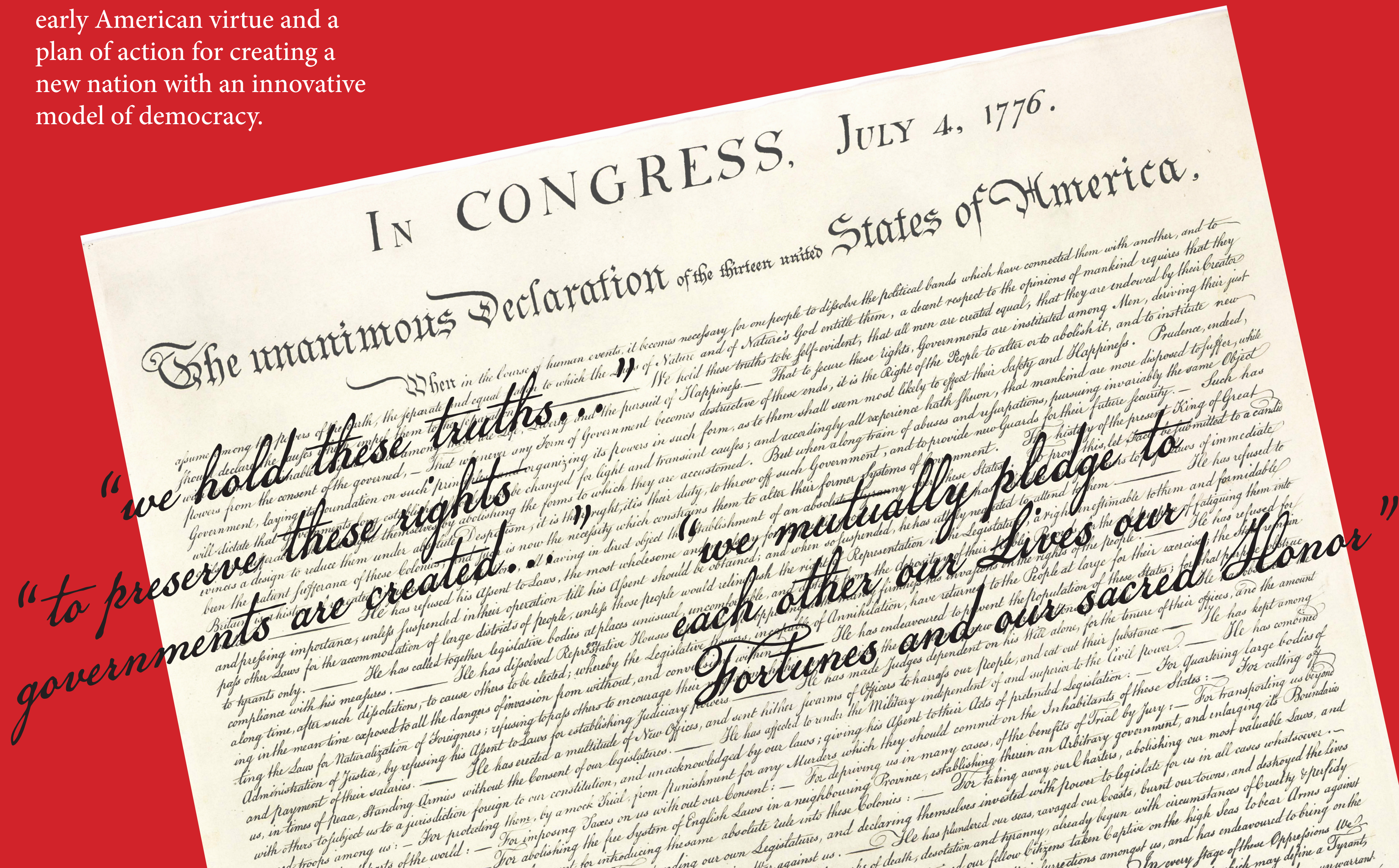


# The Declaration of Independence

A commitment to put **service over self** is powerfully inscribed in the closing lines of the Declaration of Independence.

Service can be seen as both an early American virtue and a plan of action for creating a new nation with an innovative model of democracy.

“...we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”

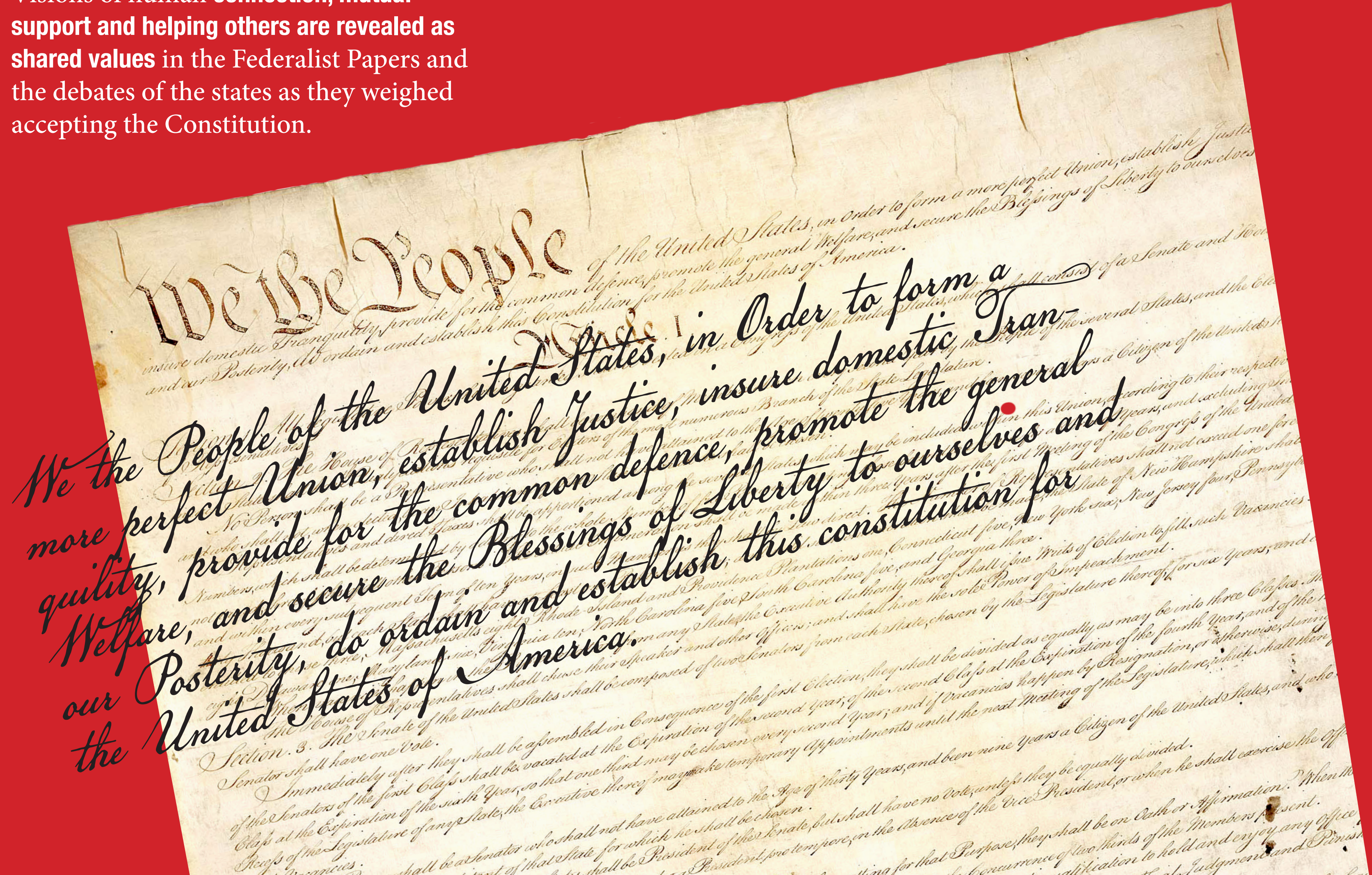


# The Constitution of the United States

The spirit of service is at the heart of the US Constitution.

The document opens with the reasons and motives for creating the Constitution itself.

Visions of human **connection, mutual support and helping others** are revealed as **shared values** in the Federalist Papers and the debates of the states as they weighed accepting the Constitution.



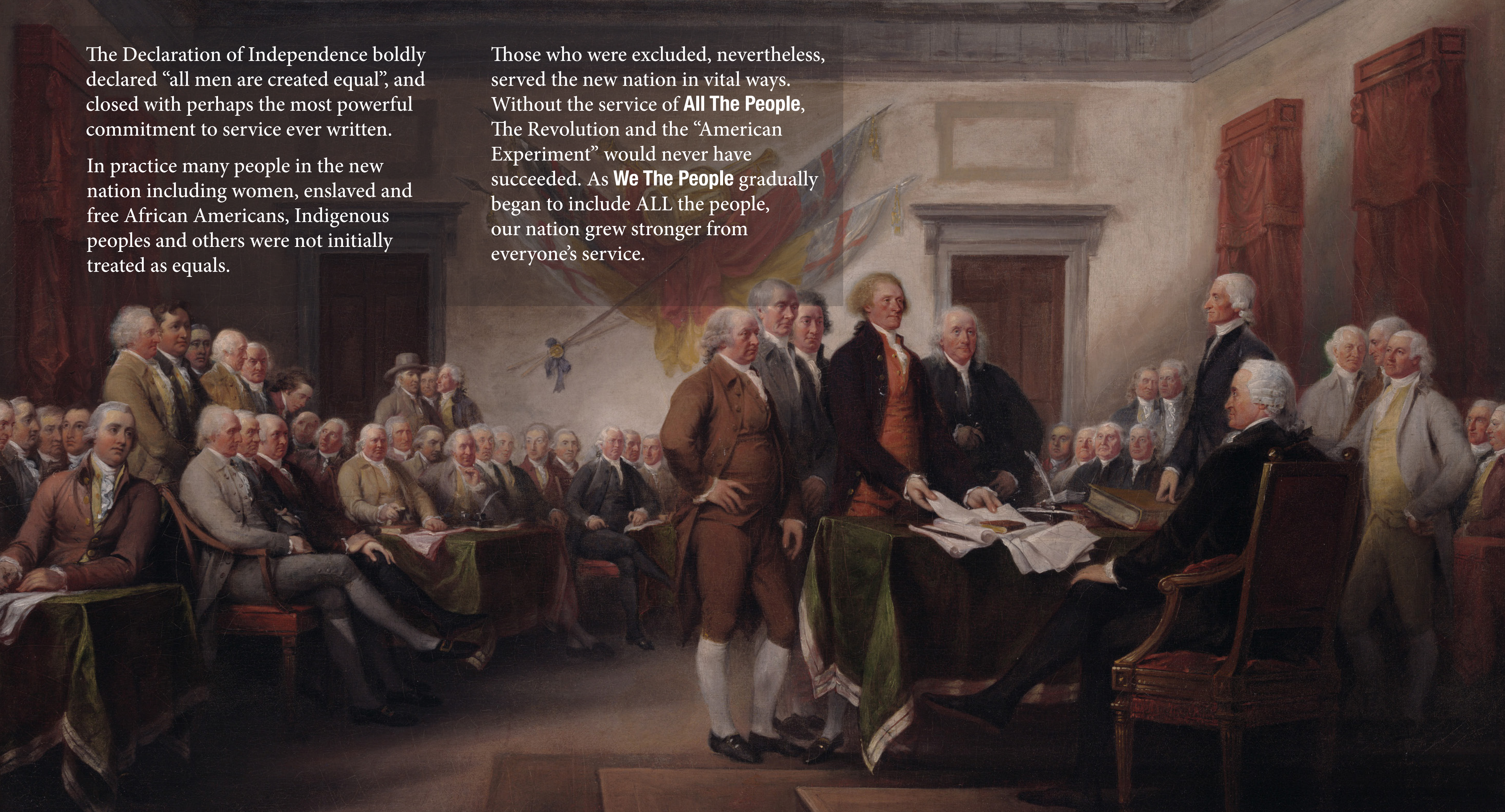
**We the People** of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

**We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this constitution for the United States of America.**

The Declaration of Independence boldly declared “all men are created equal”, and closed with perhaps the most powerful commitment to service ever written.

In practice many people in the new nation including women, enslaved and free African Americans, Indigenous peoples and others were not initially treated as equals.

Those who were excluded, nevertheless, served the new nation in vital ways. Without the service of **All The People**, The Revolution and the “American Experiment” would never have succeeded. As **We The People** gradually began to include ALL the people, our nation grew stronger from everyone’s service.



*Declaration of Independence, (detail) John Trumbull, oil on canvas 1817*

# AMERICAN SERVICE FOR THE FUTURE

**Our nation's past and future is the story of service in support of democracy.**

*"We the People"  
isn't just rhetoric—  
it is an invitation  
for every citizen to  
take part in building  
and sustaining a  
just society.*

The founders' inclusion of the **process to amend** provided an essential tool for future generations to challenge the limits of the founding documents, ensuring the continuous, and often difficult, expansion of the American narrative toward including ALL PEOPLE.

The "American Experiment"—rapidly became a revolutionary model for self governance across the world. The lasting legacy of the American idea is the enduring core value of **service to others that drives the American people** and the nation itself.

# SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS CARRY THE TRADITION OF SERVICE INTO THE FUTURE.

American values of service remain strong today and visions for the future inspire more Americans to expand their service to the nation while honoring our traditions.

The history of service organizations like Rotary, Peace Corps, Boys & Girls Clubs and CARE embody our modern and future passions for expanding the nation's potential while supporting our traditional ideals of liberty, democracy, and civic duty.

Harriet Tubman put the nation's founding ideals into practice by leading others to freedom at great personal risk. Photo courtesy of Library of Congress



Volunteer firemen practicing during an air raid drill in Lititz, Pennsylvania, 1942.



Suffragist Margaret Foley distributing the Woman's Journal and Suffrage News.



1920 - With the flu spreading rapidly through the National Capital, the Red Cross Ambulance Corps is stretched to its limit. New recruits are needed behind the wheel to help battle the crisis.



Austria 1947, Little Lubka Madenova was the lucky recipient of a CARE food package from the American Silent Guest Committee. It was a heaven-sent gift for the child whose mother is desperately ill and whose father was killed during the war.  
Used with permission/CARE



*"Every CARE package is a personal contribution to the world peace our nation seeks. It expresses America's concern and friendship in a language all peoples understand."*

*-President John F. Kennedy, 1962*

A volunteer for the Meals on Wheels program prepares to make deliveries, 1972. Photo courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration



Bernie Wong, founder of Chinese American Service League (CASL), engages with students in Chicago's Chinatown, reflecting her commitment to empowering immigrant families through education and community services.  
Photo courtesy of Peace Corps Media Library



Ethel Washington and Louise Beleno, senior aide, packing surgical kits as part of work of volunteer nurses aide class, 1943.



Teri Lutz, Peace Corps volunteer from Colorado, teaches English at the girls high school in Jalalabad, Afghanistan.  
Photo courtesy of Peace Corps Media Library



1962, President John F. Kennedy greets Peace Corps volunteers on the White House South front lawn.



Tribal Civilian Community Corp (TCCC) and Texas Youth Conservation Corps help local residents clean up after storms and flooding.



Peace Corps Volunteer teaches an English class at Kisumu Technical School in Kenya, 1979.



Boys & Girls Club Photo courtesy of Mark Skalny



# THE AMERICAN SPIRIT OF SERVICE IS ACTIVE AND INSPIRING

Habitat for Humanity, AmeriCorps NCC and Starbucks corporate volunteers build a bunkhouse for volunteers assisting in recovery efforts, Gulfport, Mississippi, 2006. Photo courtesy of George Armstrong/FEMA



NASA Astronaut Cady Coleman and 4-H member Eva planting lettuce at a USDA event in Washington, DC. Photo courtesy of USDA



HOOPA Tribal Civilian Community Corps (TCCC) and AmeriCorps Members from Minnesota and St. Louis meet in Hoboken, N.J. to receive their assignments for outreach to find Hurricane Sandy survivors who need assistance.



Volunteers at the Greenville Noon Rotary Splash for Trash waterway cleanup event



Installing a trash guard to reduce marine debris, in Ellenton, FL. with the Tampa Bay Estuary Program.



# ALL AMERICANS CAN PARTICIPATE IN SERVICE TO OTHERS.

33% of seniors regularly volunteer in their communities.



Children take part in a hands-on cooking and nutrition class in Kerrville, Texas with World Central Kitchen as part of the broader flood-relief efforts in 2025. Photo courtesy of World Central Kitchen



Over **75.7 million** Americans *formally* volunteer each year and **137.5 million** *informally* contribute to their communities.

*-The Census Bureau and AmeriCorps*

Rescue officers ceasing the fire during the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, New York City. Photo courtesy of Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress



Volunteers assist with debris cleanup in Cameron, LA following Hurricane Rita



Joshua Tree National Park search and rescue team training



# THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO CARRY SERVICE INTO THE FUTURE.

The City of Greenville, NC celebrating Arbor Day as a Tree City USA Community



Peace Corps Volunteer cultivates a field with women from her village in Botswana



Volunteers of America, bell ringer, New York

