

ORIGINAL COLONY

★ 1 OF 13 ★

NEW HAMPSHIRE

GRANITE COLONY

A small but fiercely independent colony that valued liberty, local self-government, and moral courage in all things.

SIGNERS FROM NEW HAMPSHIRE

Josiah Bartlett
William Whipple
Matthew Thornton

NEW
YORK

NEW
HAMPSHIRE

CIRCA 1776

(PART OF
MAINE)

ATLANTIC
OCEAN

MASSACHUSETTS



"Live free or die; Death is not the worst of evils."
— John Stark

JULY 4,
1776

★ THIRTEEN COLONIES. FIFTY-SIX SIGNERS. ONE DECLARATION. ★

NEW HAMPSHIRE

COLONY ESTABLISHED: 1623

DELEGATES TO THE SECOND CONTINENTAL CONGRESS: 3

SIGNERS OF THE DECLARATION: 3

THE COLONY

New Hampshire was not founded for God. That distinction belongs to the Puritans who settled Massachusetts Bay, the Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth, and the dissidents who followed Roger Williams to Rhode Island. New Hampshire was founded for fish.

Captain John Mason received his land grant from the Council for New England in 1622 and sent settlers to the mouth of the Piscataqua River in 1623, a year before the Dutch settled Manhattan, seven years before the Massachusetts Bay Colony was formally established. They came to trade timber, catch fish, and build ships along one of the finest deep-water harbors on the Atlantic coast. The spiritual earnestness that defined Massachusetts was never New Hampshire's primary character. The colony that grew up around Portsmouth was more practical than pious, more commercial than covenantal, and that difference shaped everything about how it entered the Revolution.

This is not to say faith was absent. The Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who settled the inland town of Londonderry brought a covenantal seriousness from Ulster that put them in closer theological company with their Massachusetts neighbors than with Portsmouth's merchant class. Congregationalist churches existed throughout the colony. But unlike Massachusetts, New Hampshire never established a single official church. The colony's religious landscape was pluralist by default, shaped more by the variety of its settlers

than by any governing theological vision. Congregationalists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Quakers all found space there. The colony's motto would eventually become "Live Free or Die," and that spirit of independent self-determination ran through its religious life as certainly as its political life.

The economy that sustained New Hampshire was built on timber, shipbuilding, fishing, and trade. The great white pines of its northern forests were the finest ship masts in the known world, and the British Crown claimed them for the Royal Navy, marking them with the King's Broad Arrow and forbidding their private use. It was an economic grievance as immediate and personal as any tax. When London told a New Hampshire man he could not sell the trees on his own land, it did not require philosophical argument to produce resentment.

THE ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE

New Hampshire's road to independence was shorter and less complicated than most. The colony had been governing itself with unusual autonomy for decades. When royal Governor John Wentworth fled Portsmouth in August 1775, he was the last royal governor to leave his post, and his departure barely changed the colony's daily operations. The infrastructure of self-government was already in place. New Hampshire did not have to build a new political order from scratch. It simply formalized what it was already doing.

The colony had been moving toward open resistance for months before Lexington and Concord made it official. On December 14, 1774, four months before Paul Revere's famous midnight ride, Revere made a less celebrated but equally important journey: fifty-five miles from Boston to Portsmouth to warn local patriots that British troops were coming to reinforce Fort William and Mary at the harbor. The next day, nearly four hundred New Hampshire men stormed the fort, seized its cannon and gunpowder, and lowered the British flag. These were among the first shots of the Revolution, fired five months before Lexington, and the gunpowder seized that day is believed to have supplied American forces at the Battle of Bunker Hill.

On January 5, 1776, New Hampshire became the first colony to establish its own constitutional government. A full six months before the Declaration of Independence made that act official for all thirteen. The document was careful to note that New Hampshire “never sought to throw off dependence on Great Britain,” but the practical effect was identical to independence: New Hampshire was governing itself, under its own authority, by its own consent.

When the Continental Congress finally voted on Richard Henry Lee’s resolution on July 2, 1776, New Hampshire’s three delegates needed no extraordinary courage to raise their hands. Their colony had already been living the declaration for half a year.

THE DELEGATION

New Hampshire sent three men to the Continental Congress in 1776: Josiah Bartlett, William Whipple, and Matthew Thornton. They were not a delegation of famous men. None of them would become president or chief justice or secretary of state. But together they represent something the larger delegations sometimes obscure: three ordinary men of uncommon conviction who carried the weight of a colony on their shoulders and did not flinch.

Bartlett was a physician who voted first, the first vote cast for independence among all fifty-six, by the custom that called on New Hampshire before Virginia, before Pennsylvania, before anyone. Whipple was a sea captain who had trafficked in enslaved people and freed the man he had enslaved before riding south to sign. Thornton was an Irish immigrant who arrived as a boy, built a medical practice in the frontier wilderness, and signed the Declaration four months late, not present on August 2, but unwilling to let the opportunity pass.

All three survived the war. All three served their state and country for years afterward. None of them died broke. New Hampshire paid a cost for its signers that was lighter than most, but it paid it early, before the other colonies had found their resolve, when the outcome was most uncertain, and the risk was highest.



Portrait taken from
Ole Erikson's
Portraits & Autographs of the Signers of the
Declaration of Independence
Published 1876

JOSIAH BARTLETT

State Represented: New Hampshire

Signer Order: 2nd to sign (first to vote for independence)

VITAL RECORDS

Birthdate	November 21, 1729 (O.S.)
Place of Birth	Amesbury, Massachusetts
Date of Death	May 19, 1795
Burial Location	Kingston, New Hampshire
Parents	Stephen Bartlett (shoemaker) and Hannah (Webster) Bartlett
Siblings	Six older siblings; Josiah was the youngest child
Spouse	Mary Bartlett (cousin)
Children	Twelve children; eight survived to adulthood
Religious Affiliation	Congregationalist
Church Attended	Kingston Congregational Church (Kingston, NH)
State Represented	New Hampshire

INTERESTING FACTS

- Bartlett was the **first delegate to vote “aye”** for independence on July 2, 1776, it was said he “made the rafters shake with the loudness of his approval.”
- He was the **second to sign** the Declaration of Independence.
- Bartlett called the Declaration “the greatest state paper ever conceived by the mind of man.”
- His home was **burned down by loyalist neighbors** in retaliation for his patriot activity; he rebuilt it immediately and did not waver.
- As a physician, he was unconventional for his era; he treated certain fevers with cooling liquids instead of bloodletting, and his patients fared better for it.
- He served as the **first president of the New Hampshire Medical Society**, which he helped charter in 1791 while serving as governor.
- Bartlett was also the **first to vote for and first to sign** the Articles of Confederation, making him one of the most consequential signers in terms of actual founding documents.
- A bronze statue honoring him stands in Amesbury, Massachusetts, dedicated on July 4, 1888, with a poem composed for the occasion by John Greenleaf Whittier.

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Josiah Bartlett was born on November 21, 1729, in Amesbury, Massachusetts, the youngest of seven children born to Stephen Bartlett, a shoemaker, and Hannah Webster Bartlett. His formal schooling was modest, a common school education supplemented by tutoring in Greek and Latin from a relative, Reverend Dr. John Webster. At age sixteen, he began a medical apprenticeship under Dr. James Ordway, teaching himself through borrowed books on medicine, history, and mathematics. By the time he was twenty-one, he had moved to Kingston, New Hampshire, and opened his own medical practice.

Bartlett built a strong reputation as an independent-minded physician who trusted observation over tradition. His use of Peruvian bark (quinine) to treat diphtheria outbreaks, at a time when most physicians still relied on bloodletting, demonstrated a mind shaped by evidence and principle rather than convention. His practice thrived, and Kingston trusted him. That trust translated naturally into civic leadership. By 1765, he was serving in New Hampshire's Colonial Legislature, and by 1770, he held the rank of militia colonel.

As tensions between the colonies and the Crown escalated through the early 1770s, Bartlett's loyalties were unmistakable. He joined the Committee of Correspondence and threw his support behind the resistance movement. The Crown's loyalists answered by burning his home to the ground. He rebuilt immediately. In 1774, the Colonial Governor stripped him of his commissions as justice of the peace, militia colonel, and assemblyman. By that point, those titles meant little; the old order was already collapsing.

In 1775, Bartlett was elected as a New Hampshire delegate to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. As the northernmost colony on the roll call, New Hampshire was always asked first, and so it was Bartlett who gave the first "aye" for independence on July 2, 1776. Two days later, he voted to adopt the Declaration itself. A month later, he was the second man to sign it. He went on to cast the first vote for the Articles of Confederation and was the first to sign that document as well. Few men in the founding generation carry that record.

DURING THE WAR

Bartlett's service during the Revolution was not military in the traditional sense; his weapons were votes, correspondence, and medicine. He served on multiple congressional committees covering civil government, secrecy, safety, marine affairs, and munitions. When New Hampshire soldiers fought under General John Stark at the Battle of Bennington in 1777, Bartlett was sent by the state's Committee of Safety to advise Stark and tend to the wounded. He then used his political relationships to advocate successfully for Stark's recommission in the Continental Army, a behind-the-scenes effort that preserved one of the war's most effective commanders.

He returned to Congress in late 1777, cast the first vote for the Articles of Confederation, and signed that document in July 1778. Throughout this period, his wife, Mary, managed their farm, their orchards, and twelve children largely on her own. Their surviving letters give a rare window into what the founding actually cost, not just the famous signatures, but the daily weight carried at home while the men were in Philadelphia.

AFTER THE WAR

Bartlett returned to New Hampshire and continued building the state's institutions. He served as Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas from 1779 to 1782, then as Associate and later Chief Justice of the New Hampshire Supreme Court from 1782 to 1790. He was a supporter of the new Constitution and presided over New Hampshire's ratification convention.

In 1790, he was elected the state's chief executive, a title that became "Governor" in 1792 under a revised state constitution. He served until 1794, when failing health forced him to retire. His farewell message to the Legislature was characteristically plain: he expressed gratitude for the trust placed in him and offered his best wishes for the state's future peace and prosperity. He died in Kingston on May 19, 1795, at sixty-five years old. He had spent nearly his entire adult life in public service, as a physician, legislator, judge, and governor.

He also founded the New Hampshire Medical Society in 1791, drafting its charter while serving as governor, and was elected its

first president. Even in his final years, he was building institutions rather than coasting on reputation.

LEADERSHIP & FAITH REFLECTION

Josiah Bartlett was a Congregationalist in practice and a man shaped by the New England conviction that ordered society, moral courage, and providential purpose were inseparable. He did not leave a large body of theological writing, but his life was a sermon in itself, rebuild after the fire, serve when called, tell the truth when it costs something.

What stands out about Bartlett is not one dramatic moment but a pattern of steady resolve. He was the first to say “yes” when the question of independence was called. He rebuilt when his home was burned. He did not flee responsibility when his party was the minority or when the personal cost was high. That is the mark of a man who understood that character is not formed in comfort.

For students today, Bartlett offers a simple but demanding model: show up, do the work, rebuild when necessary, and hold your convictions without apology. He was not the most famous man in Philadelphia in 1776. But he was the first to stand. That kind of quiet, principled courage is rarer than talent and more durable than fame. His story is a reminder that the heroes of history were ordinary people who made extraordinary choices, and that the same opportunity sits before every generation.

Sources: Wikipedia, Constitution Center, National Park Service, New Hampshire Medical Society, U.S. House of Representatives History, Tara Ross Historical Archive, Descendants of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence (dsdi1776.com)