

The Duluth Lede

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OPINION

The Impossible Starts Where We Already Are

On America's 250th Independence Day: how a town meeting and a few letters between neighbors built a country — and why the same tools still sit in our hands.

By Bryan Russell · 2026-07-04

Tonight the sky over the harbor will fill with light, and it is worth remembering everything that light stands for. The Fourth marks a threshold — the moment the grip of tyranny began to loosen and a free people began to govern themselves. It is an ending and a beginning at once: an old order closing, a new one opening. But the freedom we celebrate tonight was itself the fruit of an earlier beginning, one that took root years before in a place far humbler than any battlefield — in town meetings, in letters carried between neighbors, in committees of ordinary people who decided the impossible was worth attempting anyway.

John Adams understood this better than anyone, and late in his life he said so plainly. Writing to the newspaperman Hezekiah Niles in 1818, he pushed back on the idea that the Revolution was the war:

The Revolution was effected before the War commenced. The Revolution was in the Minds and Hearts of the People.

He was not being sentimental. He meant it as a matter of fact: the real revolution was a change in how ordinary people understood their own rights and their obligations to one another, and it happened before a single shot was fired at Lexington. So if we want to honor the people who built this country, the fireworks are the easy part. The work is worth looking at.

It started at a town meeting

November 2, 1772. Boston. The immediate grievance sounds technical until you sit with it: the Crown had decided to start paying the salaries of the royal governor and

the colony's judges directly, out of London's pocket, rather than through the people's elected assembly. Stripped of the eighteenth-century language, it meant that the officials with power over colonists' lives would answer upward to a distant authority instead of to the community they governed. It severed the last local check on power. An unaccountable official is an unaccountable official in any century.

At the town meeting, Samuel Adams rose and moved that Boston create a standing "Committee of Correspondence" — twenty-one ordinary citizens charged with three tasks: to write down the rights of the colonists, to list the ways those rights were being violated, and to send that account to every other town in the province. The meeting agreed. James Otis was chosen chairman. It was not an army. It was a writing committee.

The letter that recruited the next town

Two days later, Adams sat down and wrote to his friend James Warren in Plymouth. The letter survives — it is held today by the Massachusetts Historical Society — and in his own hurried hand you can watch a country being organized one correspondent at a time. He explained what Boston had just done:

In order to ascertain the Sense of the People of the province a Committee is appointed, of which our Patriot Otis is Chairman, to open a free Communication with every town.

Then he did the thing that actually built a nation. He asked Warren to get his own town to do the same — to "second Boston" by forming its own committee of correspondence. He noted that letters were already arriving from Marblehead and Newburyport "fraught with manly Resentment" — courageous indignation, in the plainer language of our day. And he closed with a line that reads less like a scribbled note than a quiet promise:

Whenever the friends of the Country shall be assured of each others Sentiments, that Spirit which is necessary will not be wanting.

There is the whole method, in a single page: one town acts, tells the next town what it did, and asks it to act too. Do that enough times and you have a network — a web of ordinary people in ordinary places — that no distant authority can switch off, because there is no single switch to reach.

How a writing committee became a country

It worked. The Boston committee's report, printed and carried town to town, became known as the Boston Pamphlet. Dozens of Massachusetts towns answered it by

passing their own resolves and standing up their own committees. The next year Virginia built a committee to correspond with the other colonies, and one by one the rest followed. By 1774, when Britain moved to punish Massachusetts and bring it to heel, that homemade network of letters was already in place — and it was precisely the thing that made it possible to call the First Continental Congress into being. The grand assembly we remember in the history books grew directly out of the humble committees that almost nobody remembers. The committees, and the provincial congresses they gave rise to, quietly became a government that operated alongside and then in place of the royal one — built entirely from the bottom up.

Notice, too, what the colonists had been told for years. Adams described the complaint he kept hearing thrown in patriots' faces: that the country was perfectly content, that people were "well pleasd with the Measures of Administration," that making the governor and judges independent of the people was "a mighty harmless & even a desireable Manoeuvre." They were told, in other words, that ordinary people didn't care, that resistance was pointless, that the powerful had it all in hand. They organized anyway.

What we actually celebrate

When independence was finally voted — on July 2, 1776 — John Adams wrote home to his wife Abigail in a state of exhilaration, predicting that the day would be marked forever after:

It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more.

He got the date wrong by two days — the formal Declaration was adopted on the fourth, and that is the date we kept — but he got the fireworks exactly right. And notice what he was actually celebrating: not a battle won, but a decision ratified. The pomp and parade were for something ordinary people had already built, in their town halls and their letters, before the shooting started. The illuminations are the easy part. The committees were the work.

The tools are still in our hands

Here is why this is more than a history lesson. Every instrument those neighbors used is still sitting in front of us, unlocked and waiting. The town meeting is the city council and the county board. The committee of correspondence is the neighborhood group, the local paper, the email list, the room full of people who decide to keep a free

communication with one another. None of it requires anyone's permission from a distant capital.

And this is not a matter of one party or the other. The establishment of both is a long way from any town hall in Duluth, and the whole point of the founders' method was that it belonged to no faction — only to people willing to show up where decisions are actually made and refuse to believe the outcome is already fixed. The colonists were told their situation was hopeless and their consent was assumed. They answered by organizing locally, patiently, one town at a time, and they changed the world.

Two hundred and fifty years later, the lesson is not that we need another war. It is that the change we are so often told is impossible has a long history of starting exactly where we already are: in a room down the street, on a weeknight, with a few neighbors who decided the effort was worth it. The 250th isn't only a birthday. It is an instruction, left to us in writing by people who took the trouble to write it down.

As Samuel Adams put it, scribbling in haste by candlelight in the autumn of 1772: whenever neighbors become sure of one another's convictions, "that Spirit which is necessary will not be wanting."

Happy Independence Day, Duluth. Now comes the work.

SOURCES — PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

Samuel Adams to James Warren, 4 November 1772 (Massachusetts Historical Society). The Boston Committee of Correspondence, formed at the Boston town meeting of 2 November 1772, and its report, the Boston Pamphlet, November 1772. John Adams to Abigail Adams, 3 July 1776, and John Adams to Hezekiah Niles, 13 February 1818 — both in the Adams Papers (Founders Online, National Archives). Quotations retain the founders' original spelling.

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