

John Trumbull

EYEWITNESS TO THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

MARGOT MORRELL

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Battle of Bunker Hill

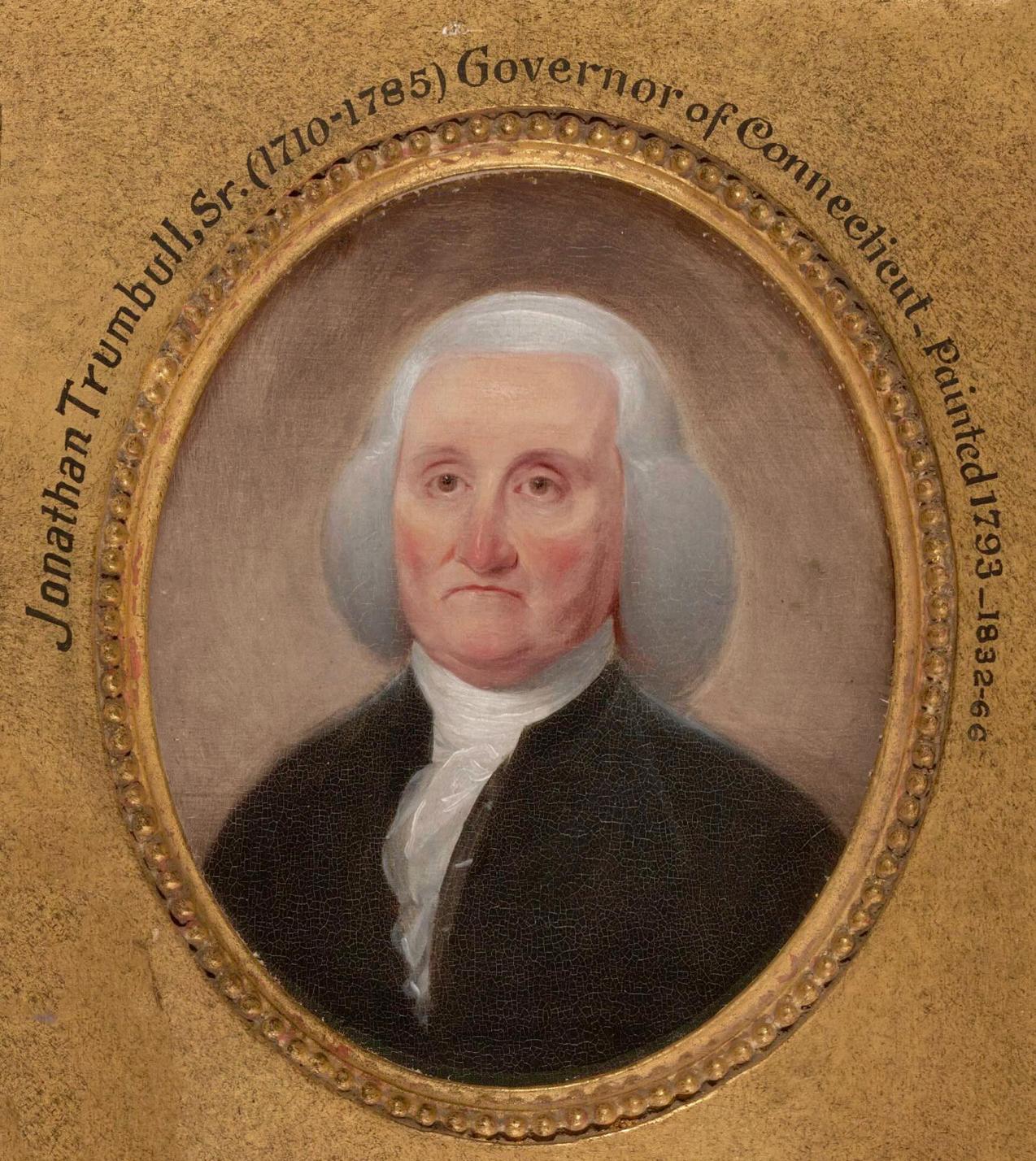


George Washington



Declaration of Independence

John Trumbull dedicated his life to memorializing the birth of the United States. He witnessed the first shots fired at the battle of Bunker Hill. His "fast friend" George Washington summoned memories of facing the powerful British army at Princeton for a 1792 portrait. When Trumbull painted the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were his advisers.



Trumbull's father, Connecticut Governor Jonathan Trumbull was the only colonial governor sympathetic to the patriots' cause.

A trusted confidant of General Washington's, Governor Trumbull, and his sons, used their family business, to supply uniforms, blankets, food - everything the continental army needed to keep going.

In the estimation of John Trumbull, the governor's youngest son, "After General Washington, perhaps no individual contributed more to the success of the Revolution than Governor Trumbull."

In 1776, when Congress ordered thirteen ships for the fledgling U.S. Navy, the ships were named *Congress*, *Randolph*, *Hancock*, *Washington*, *Trumbull*, *Raleigh*, *Effingham*, *Montgomery*, *Warren*, *Boston*, *Virginia*, *Providence*, and *Delaware*.

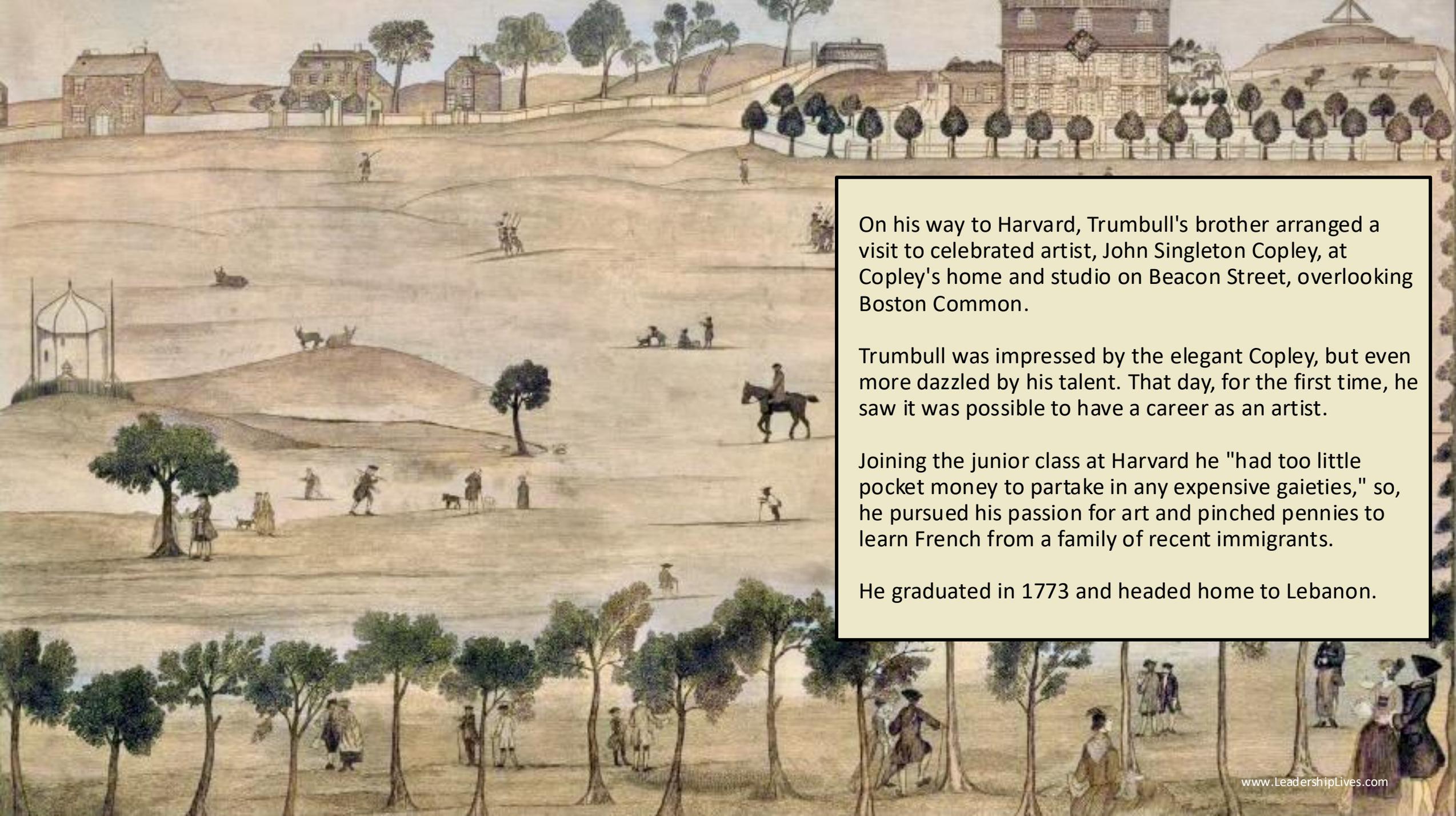
John Trumbull's 1777 self-portrait captured a bright, cheerful young man but his life got off to a rocky start.

Troubled by convulsions as an infant, he was blinded in one eye by a childhood accident. The youngest of six by five years, he was too frail to participate in games, so he poured himself into schoolwork and art. His earliest drawings were scrawled on his parents' floors.

Thanks to an excellent school in his hometown, Lebanon, Connecticut, Trumbull was ready for Harvard at 12 but his parents held him back until he was 15.



John Trumbull, Self—portrait, 1777
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA..



On his way to Harvard, Trumbull's brother arranged a visit to celebrated artist, John Singleton Copley, at Copley's home and studio on Beacon Street, overlooking Boston Common.

Trumbull was impressed by the elegant Copley, but even more dazzled by his talent. That day, for the first time, he saw it was possible to have a career as an artist.

Joining the junior class at Harvard he "had too little pocket money to partake in any expensive gaieties," so, he pursued his passion for art and pinched pennies to learn French from a family of recent immigrants.

He graduated in 1773 and headed home to Lebanon.



For the next two years, Trumbull worked in the family business, filled in when the local schoolmaster had a stroke, and painted.

Many years later, he wrote, "In the summer and autumn of 1774, the angry discussions between Great Britain and her colonies began to assume a very serious tone. As the low growling of distant thunder announces the approach of the natural tempest..."

Inspired by patriots that surrounded his father, Trumbull formed a small militia, and "learned to use a musket and to march... Military exercises and studies became the favorite occupation of the day."

Two weeks after the battles at Lexington and Concord, Trumbull headed to Boston to join the "brave, enthusiastic... country lads."



The Battle of Bunker Hill
Winthrop Chandler

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Trumbull was up before 5 a.m. on June 17, 1775, and gasped when he saw HMS *Lively* fire at Bunker Hill. During the night, patriots had been fortifying the high ground that overlooked the British warships crowding Boston Harbor.

After hours of fighting, the "obstinate" patriots ran out of ammunition. From 4 miles away, on the south side of the Harbor, Trumbull watched through a telescope as British soldiers torched Charlestown.

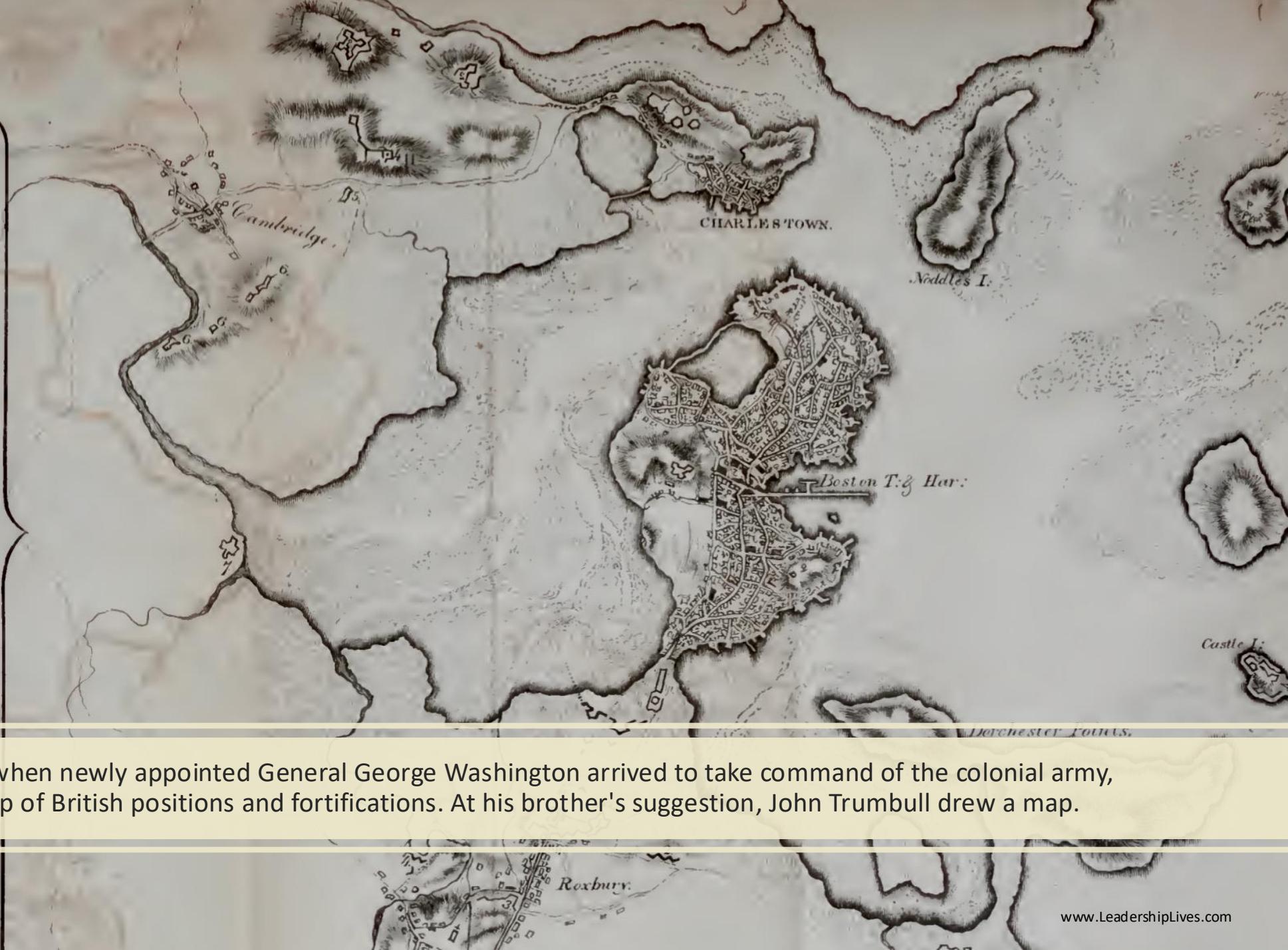
Explanations.

In Cambridge:

- N^o 1. Bunker's Hill.*
- 2. New Works on Plow'd Hill.*
- 3. Winter Hill.*
- 4. Prospect Hill.*
- 5. Col^l. Patterson's Works.*
- 6. Line of Redoubts, towards the River & Bay.*
- 7. Redoubt at Sewall's Point.*

In Roxbury.

- N^o 1. Advanc'd Lines on the Neck.*
- 2. Small Work to defend the Marsh.*
- 3. Small Works in the Street.*
- 4. Battery to defend the Marsh.*
- 5. Fort on Meetinghouse Hill.*
- 6. Redoubt*
- N^o 5.*
- 7. Lines at Dunster Neck.*



A few weeks later, when newly appointed General George Washington arrived to take command of the colonial army, he needed a map of British positions and fortifications. At his brother's suggestion, John Trumbull drew a map.



Impressed by the young man's effort, Washington hired Trumbull as an aide. A few weeks later, using the excuse that Trumbull felt out of place in the General's "elegant" surroundings, Washington sent Trumbull into the field. His mission was to act as a listening post – in other words, as a spy. Trumbull served the General as a valued asset for the rest of Washington's life. When the British evacuated Boston, Trumbull accepted a post with Washington's arch-rival, General Horatio Gates, who coveted Washington's role as commander-in-chief.

Over the next three years, Trumbull resigned his commission, studied painting, and sailed for Europe under the vague pretense of managing "a considerable speculation."



Trumbull arrived in Paris in June 1780 and learned the British had seized Charleston, South Carolina rendering the funds he had worthless. That was the end of his "considerable speculation."

During his brief stay in Paris, he spent time with Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and "the eminent engraver," Robert Strange.

Armed with a letter of introduction to Franklin's childhood friend, acclaimed artist Benjamin West, Trumbull set off for London to become a painter.

He noted in his 1841 autobiography that within hours of his arrival in London, he was under surveillance.

Five months later, he was under arrest.

Charing Cross, London
ca. 1830





Short of funds, Trumbull had one asset to exploit. He knew what George Washington looked like. And Europeans were very interested.

Trumbull had already painted two portraits of Washington. He had copied a portrait commissioned by Martha Washington and had painted a half-length portrait from memory.

In London, Trumbull whipped off a full-length portrait of Washington that was rapidly turned into a highly profitable engraving.

When Trumbull left England, he wrote to his father that he had covered all his expenses and was reasonably well off.

George Washington and William Lee by John Trumbull, 1780
Metropolitan Museum of Art
Bequest of Charles Allen Munn

That November, news reached London of Benedict Arnold's treasonous attempt to turn over West Point to the British. Arnold escaped but his British partner in the plot, the universally popular Major John André, had been captured and hanged.

Within hours, as retaliation, John Trumbull was arrested and incarcerated for spying. The charge was "high treason."



Shocked by Trumbull's arrest, Benjamin West rushed to Buckingham Palace to consult George III.

The king listened sympathetically and said, "I fully believe all that you have now said and assure you that my confidence in you is not at all diminished by this unpleasant occurrence. I am sorry for the young man, but he is in the hands of the law... I cannot interpose."

Then, after a pause, the king added, "But, West, go to Mr. Trumbull immediately, and pledge to him my royal promise, that, in the worst possible event of the law, his life shall be safe."





Charles J. Fox by Anton Hickel, 1794



Edmund Burke by James Northcote, ca. 1780

Whig politicians, sympathetic to the patriots' cause, rallied to Trumbull's aid – most notably, Charles J. Fox and Edmund Burke. With their help and connections, Trumbull was freed in June 1781, on the condition he leave England within thirty days.

He sailed for Amsterdam three days later. In the Dutch capital, letters from his father were waiting for him at John De Neufville & Son, financiers of the Revolution.

Arriving home after a grueling voyage, Trumbull collapsed from exhaustion. When he recovered, he returned to helping his family supply the army and spent a winter near Washington's camp on the Hudson.

In 1783, when news reached America of the signing of preliminary peace agreements in Paris, Trumbull decided it was time "to choose an occupation for life."

He "quit all other pursuits" and, once again, embarked "for London and the arts."

Benjamin West, 1783: John Jay, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Henry Laurens, and William Temple Franklin negotiating the peace treaty with the British. West abandoned the project when the British delegation refused to sit for their portraits.
Winterthur Museum

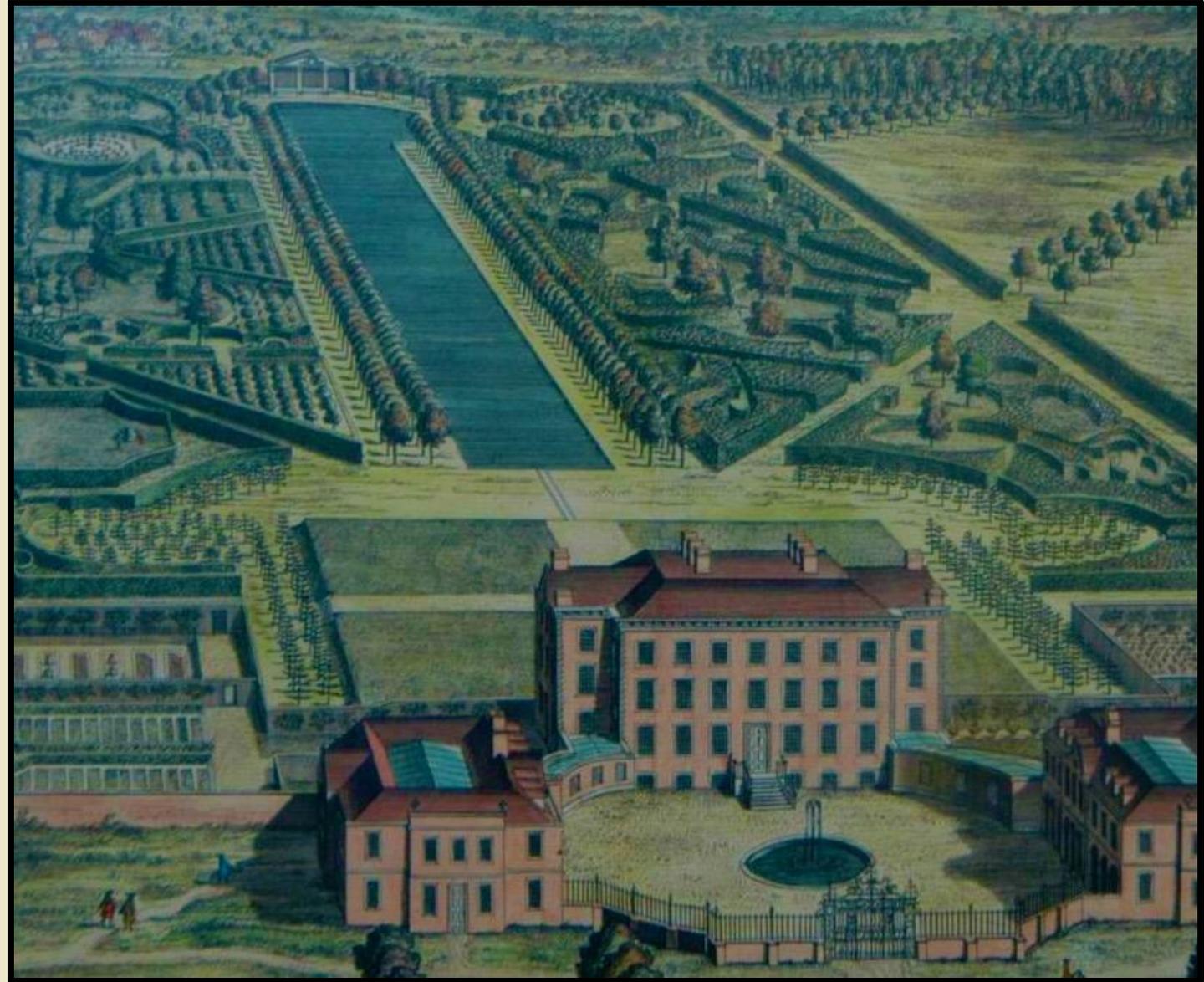


In the fall of 1785, while staying at Chevening in Kent, Trumbull made his first attempt to compose a military scene based on an incident from the American Revolution - the death of British General Simon Frazer.

Frazer's death led to General Burgoyne's surrender of the entire northern British army at Saratoga. When Burgoyne attempted to retreat from the battlefield, every path was blocked.

Burgoyne's surrender was the turning point in the American Revolution when the French, discerning British weakness, decided to send their military forces to support the patriots.

Chevening, Kent





As Trumbull began thinking about the Revolution's pivotal moments, he zeroed in on the death of General Joseph Warren at the battle of Bunker Hill.

The widowed father of four small children, Dr. Warren was widely known, and highly regarded, for his compassionate care of injured troops.

Along with Sam Adams, Warren was considered a prime enemy by the British. He was murdered, by a shot to the head, in the final moments of the battle.

The battle was an expensive victory for the British. Besides losing many officers and soldiers, accounts of the conflict incited fury throughout the colonies.

The Battle of Bunker's Hill, June 17, 1775
John Trumbull, 1786
Yale University Art Gallery

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Benjamin West watched Trumbull's progress on the Bunker Hill painting "with great interest, and strongly encouraged me to persevere in the work of the history of the American revolution..."

West explained the benefits of engravings – over time small payments from many buyers might exceed the price of a painting and the wider audience for engravings publicized an artist's work.

West explained in detail and, "with the kindness of a father, all the intricacies of such an enterprise—the choice of engravers, printers, publisher, etc., etc."

Following West's advice, in September 1786, Trumbull went to Paris to meet with engravers.



In Paris, Trumbull stayed with Thomas Jefferson and made his first sketch of the presentation of the Declaration of Independence to Congress. Jefferson and John Adams, who was in London as minister to the Court of St. James, urged Trumbull to include all the delegates to the Convention – even those who refused to sign the final document.



"In the autumn of 1787, I again visited Paris, where I painted the portrait of Mr. Jefferson in the original small *Declaration of Independence*... and the French officers in the *Surrender of Lord Cornwallis*, at Yorktown in Virginia. I regard these as the best of my small portraits painted from the life, in Mr. Jefferson's house."

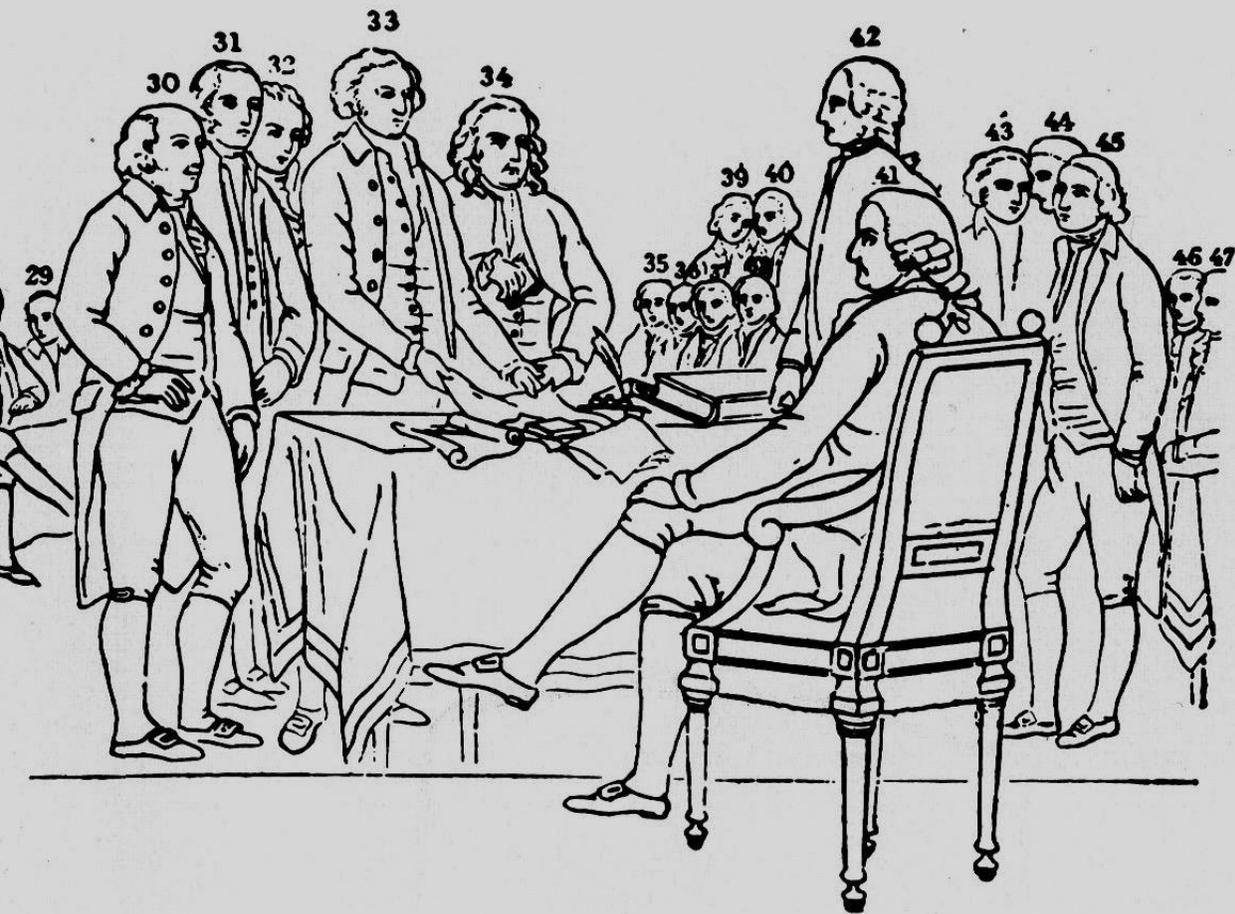


That summer, John Adams had resigned his post at the Court of St. James. Preparing to return to America, "he had the powder combed out of his hair. Its color and natural curl were beautiful, and I took that opportunity to paint his portrait in the small *Declaration of Independence*."

In his *Autobiography* Trumbull noted, he "arranged carefully the composition for the *Declaration of Independence*, and prepared it for receiving the portraits, as I might meet with the distinguished men, who were present at that illustrious scene."

From 1787 to 1807, Trumbull travelled from New Hampshire to South Carolina – attempting to gather portraits of all fifty-six delegates to the Second Continental Congress. If the delegate had died, he painted a son whenever possible. He finally settled for portraits of forty-eight.

The Declaration of Independence - Detail
John Trumbull, 1786 – 1820
Trumbull Gallery, Yale



- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| 25. George Clymer, Pennsylvania | 37. John Witherspoon, New Jersey |
| 26. William Hooper, North Carolina | 38. Samuel Huntington, Connecticut |
| 27. Joseph Hewes, North Carolina | 39. William Williams, Connecticut |
| 28. James Willson, Pennsylvania | 40. Oliver Wolcott, Connecticut |
| 29. Francis Hopkinson, New Jersey | 41. John Hancock, Massachusetts |
| 30. John Adams, Massachusetts | *42. Charles Thomson, Secretary,
Pennsylvania |
| 31. Roger Sherman, Connecticut | 43. George Read, Delaware |
| *32. Robert R. Livingston, New York | *44. John Dickinson, Pennsylvania |
| 33. Thomas Jefferson, Virginia | 45. Edward Rutledge, South Carolina |
| 34. Benjamin Franklin, Pennsylvania | 46. Thomas McKean, Delaware |
| 35. Richard Stockton, New Jersey | 47. Philip Livingston, New York |
| 36. Francis Lewis, New York | |

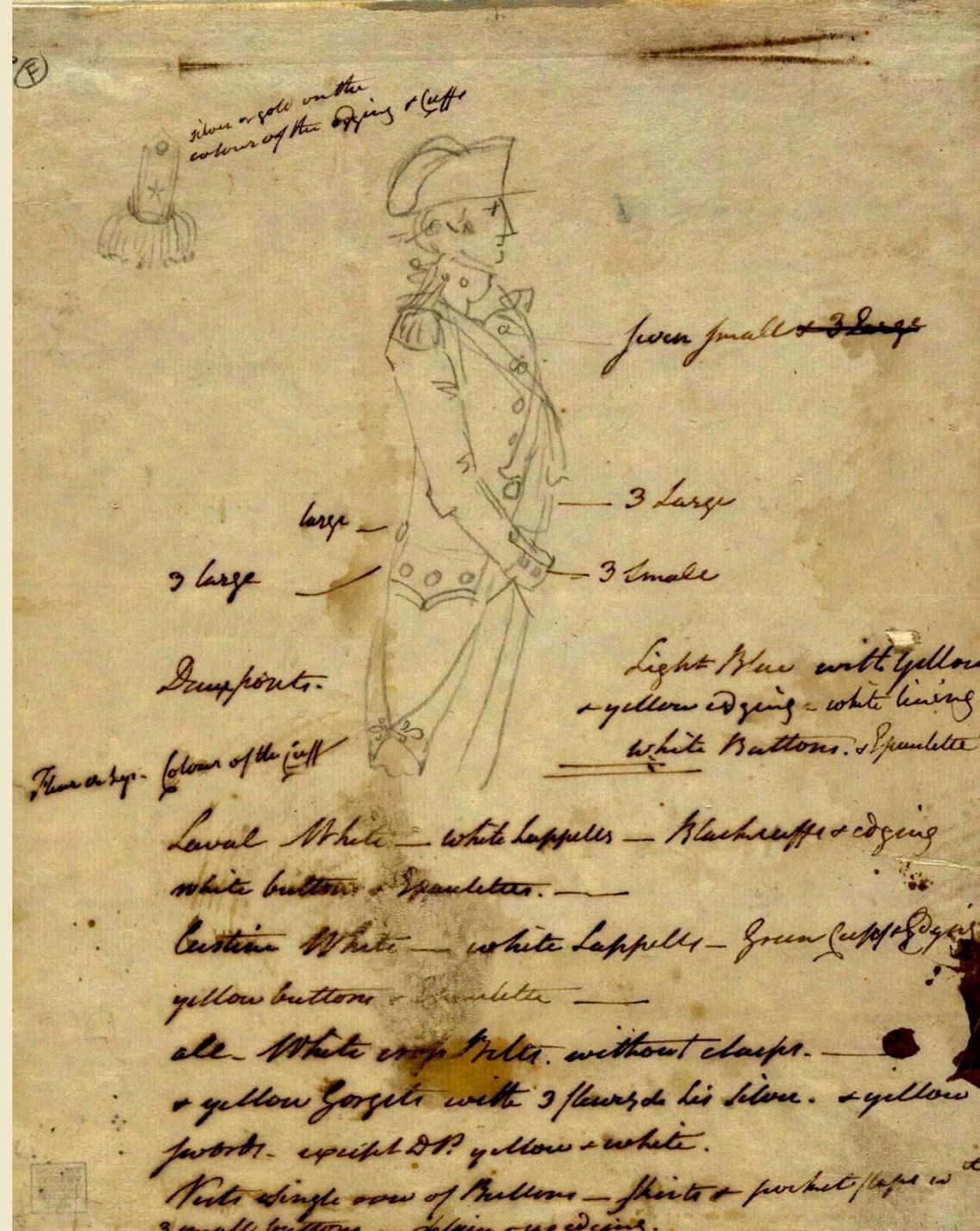
For his event paintings, *Declaration of Independence*, *Battle of Bunker Hill*, *Burgoyne's Surrender at Saratoga*, *Surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown* and *The Resignation of General Washington*, Trumbull created "keys" to identify each person depicted.

Links to the paintings and keys are on the title page of this photo-essay.

That summer, "I also made various studies for the *Surrender of Lord Cornwallis*, and in this found great difficulty the scene was altogether one of utter formality — the ground was level — military etiquette was to be scrupulously observed, and yet the portraits of the principal officers of three proud nations [America, Britain, and France] must be preserved, without interrupting the general regularity of the scene. I drew it over and over again, and at last, having resolved upon the present arrangement. I prepared the small picture to receive the portraits."

Trumbull's study of details – epaulettes, colors, buttons – of the French officer's uniform demonstrates his commitment to accuracy in his event paintings.

Study for the figure of Count Deuxponts of the French Infantry from the *Surrender of Lord Cornwallis*
John Trumbull, Trumbull Gallery, Yale







In 1791, Trumbull went to Saratoga to sketch a study for the *Surrender of Burgoyne* and began collecting portraits.



In 1777, General Horatio Gates dashed to Saratoga to take credit for the patriots' stunning victory, but the real hero was Colonel Daniel Morgan who Trumbull placed prominently in the forefront, dressed in white.

After his inauguration, President Washington was often asked to sit for portraits. His standard response was that he would when John Trumbull was available.

Trumbull wrote, "In 1792 I was again in Philadelphia, and there painted the portrait of General Washington... the best certainly of those which I painted, and the best, in my estimation, which exists, in his heroic military character."

Trumbull chose to depict Washington in his most "sublime moment" – the evening before the battle at Princeton as he faced "the vast superiority of his approaching enemy."

Washington left a small detachment of soldiers burning campfires in sight of the British while the bulk of his army melted into the woods. By morning, all the Americans had vanished.

Later that day, in a startling upset, Washington's scruffy forces defeated Lord Cornwallis' regulars.





Washington and Trumbull discussed "the scene, its dangers, its almost desperation. He looked the scene again, and I happily transferred to the canvas, the lofty expression of his animated countenance, the high resolve to conquer or to perish."

At Washington's suggestion, Trumbull kept the painting until, with his former brothers-in-arms, he presented the portrait to Yale.

Over the years, Trumbull divided his time between art and international relations. Sometimes drifting perilously close to the "fatal lee-shore of debt."

He served as secretary to John Jay who negotiated lingering disputes with Britain over debts, trade and the border between the United States and Canada.

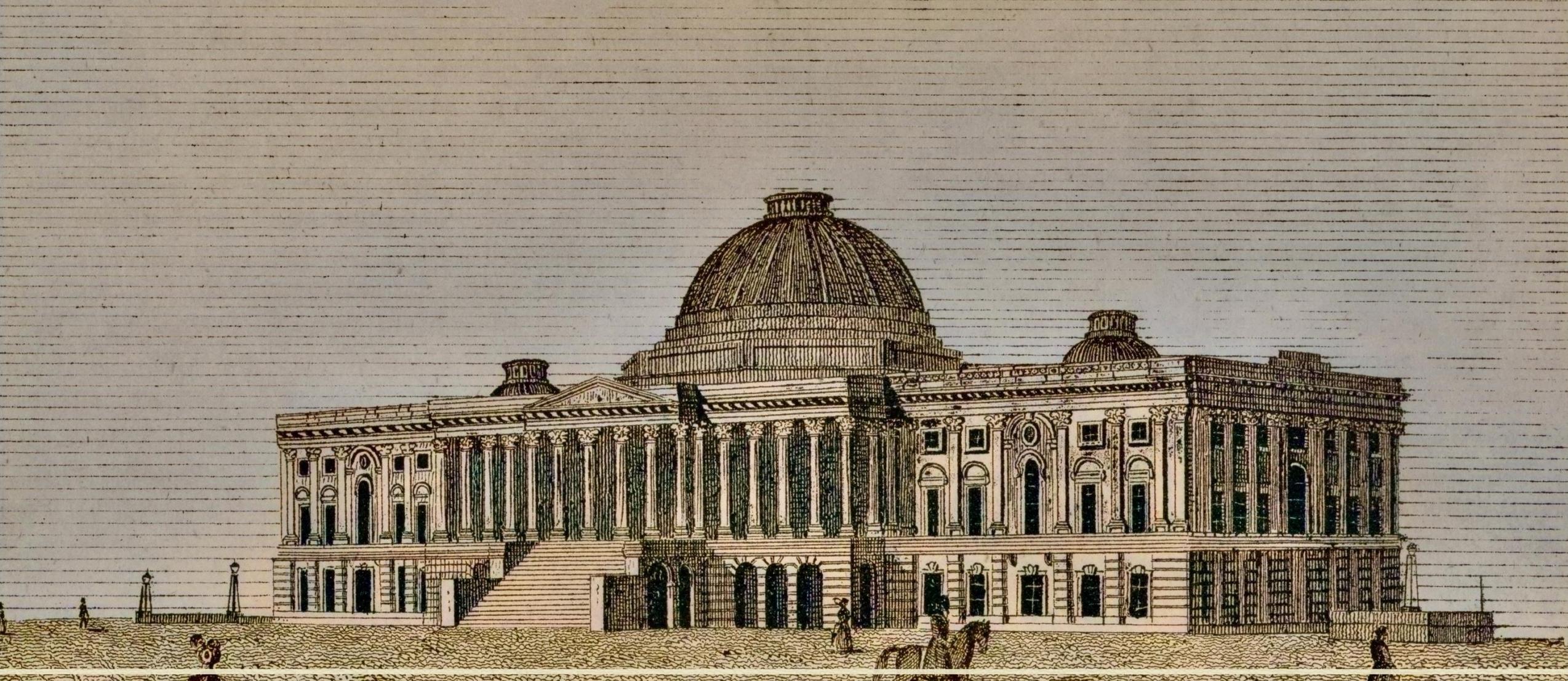
John Jay asked Trumbull to memorize the 8500-word treaty to share with James Monroe, ambassador to France. In Paris, Trumbull raced to Monroe's office to share the text. Monroe had no interest in hearing it.

In 1808, Trumbull was trapped in Europe by the outbreak of the War of 1812.





In early 1817, Trumbull signed a contract for four paintings for the Rotunda of the United States Capitol. A component of the original design, construction on the Rotunda was delayed, in part, by the British attempt to burn the Capitol in 1814. Work finally began in 1818.



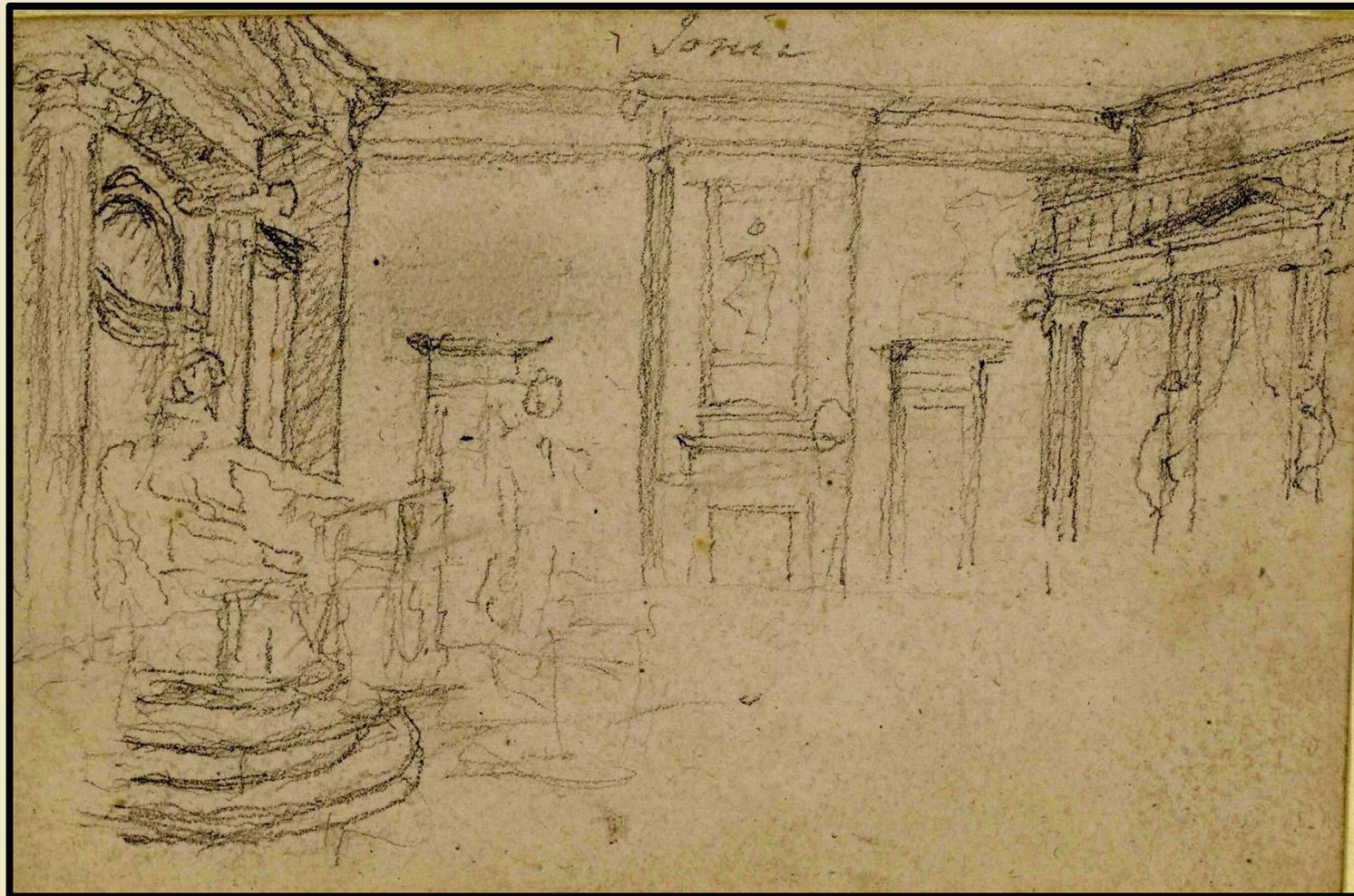
Trumbull met with President Madison to choose the subjects and size of the paintings. Trumbull suggested the paintings be six feet high by nine feet long – half life size. Madison overruled him and proposed the figures in the "vast space" be "the size of life."



South Front of the
White House,
January 1817.

Turning their attention to the subject matter, Madison suggested Bunker Hill. Trumbull demurred saying, there were two victories "paramount to all others. We had... made prisoners of two entire armies, a circumstance almost without a parallel... the surrender of General Burgoyne at Saratoga, and that of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown." To Trumbull those events were "indispensable." Madison agreed. They quickly settled on the third - the Declaration of Independence.

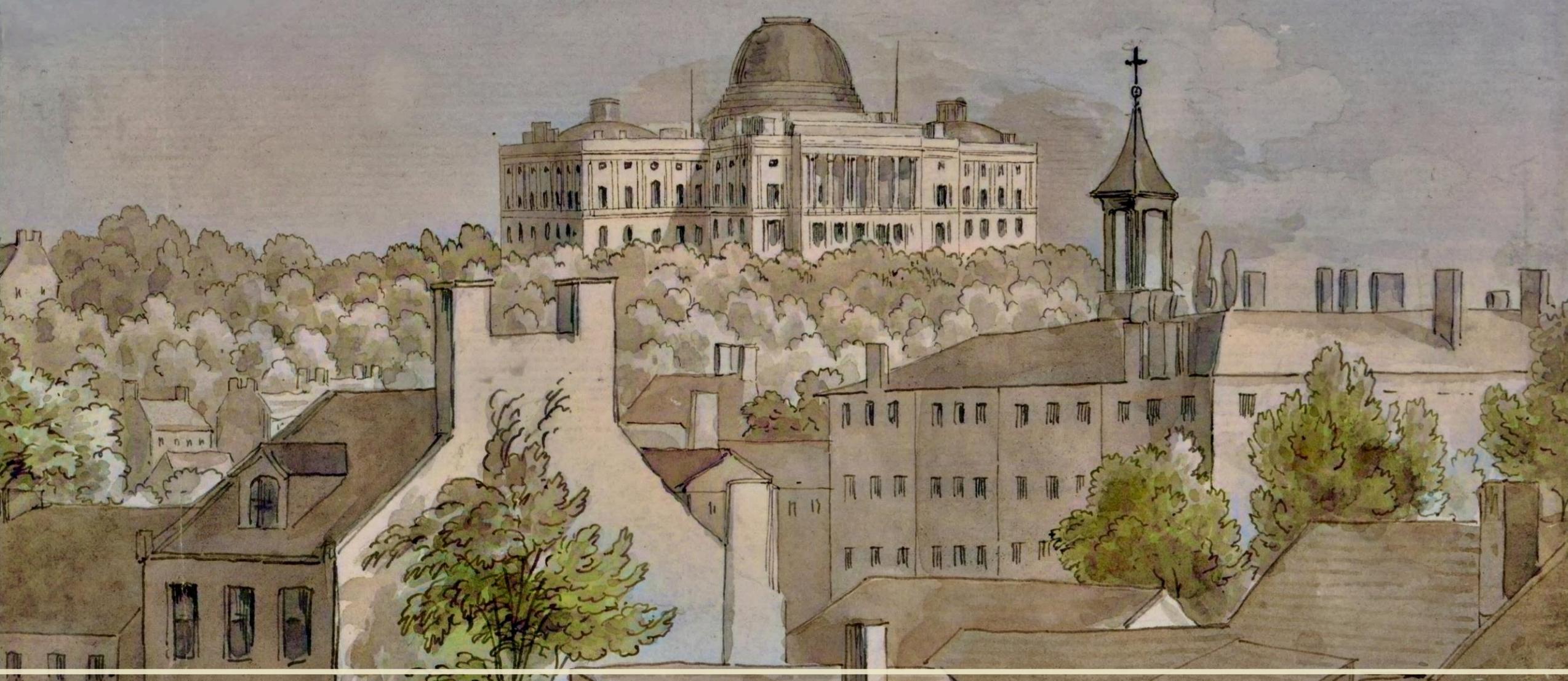
Then President Madison asked, "What would you have for the fourth?" Trumbull said, "I have thought of one of the highest moral lessons ever given to the world... the resignation of Washington. Madison briefly considered this and said, 'I believe you are right; it was a glorious action.'"



John Trumbull, 1783
Sketch for the Interior of the
Maryland State House
where Washington resigned
his commission.(Edited)
Yale University Art Gallery

Trumbull wrote about Washington's decision to resign his commission, "What a dazzling temptation was here to earthly ambition! Beloved by the military, venerated by the people, who was there to oppose the victorious chief, if he had chosen to retain that power which he had so long held with universal approbation? The Caesars, the Cromwells, the Napoleons, yielded to the charm of earthly ambition, and betrayed their country; but Washington aspired to loftier, imperishable glory, —to that glory which virtue alone can give, and which no power, no effort, no time, can ever take away or diminish."



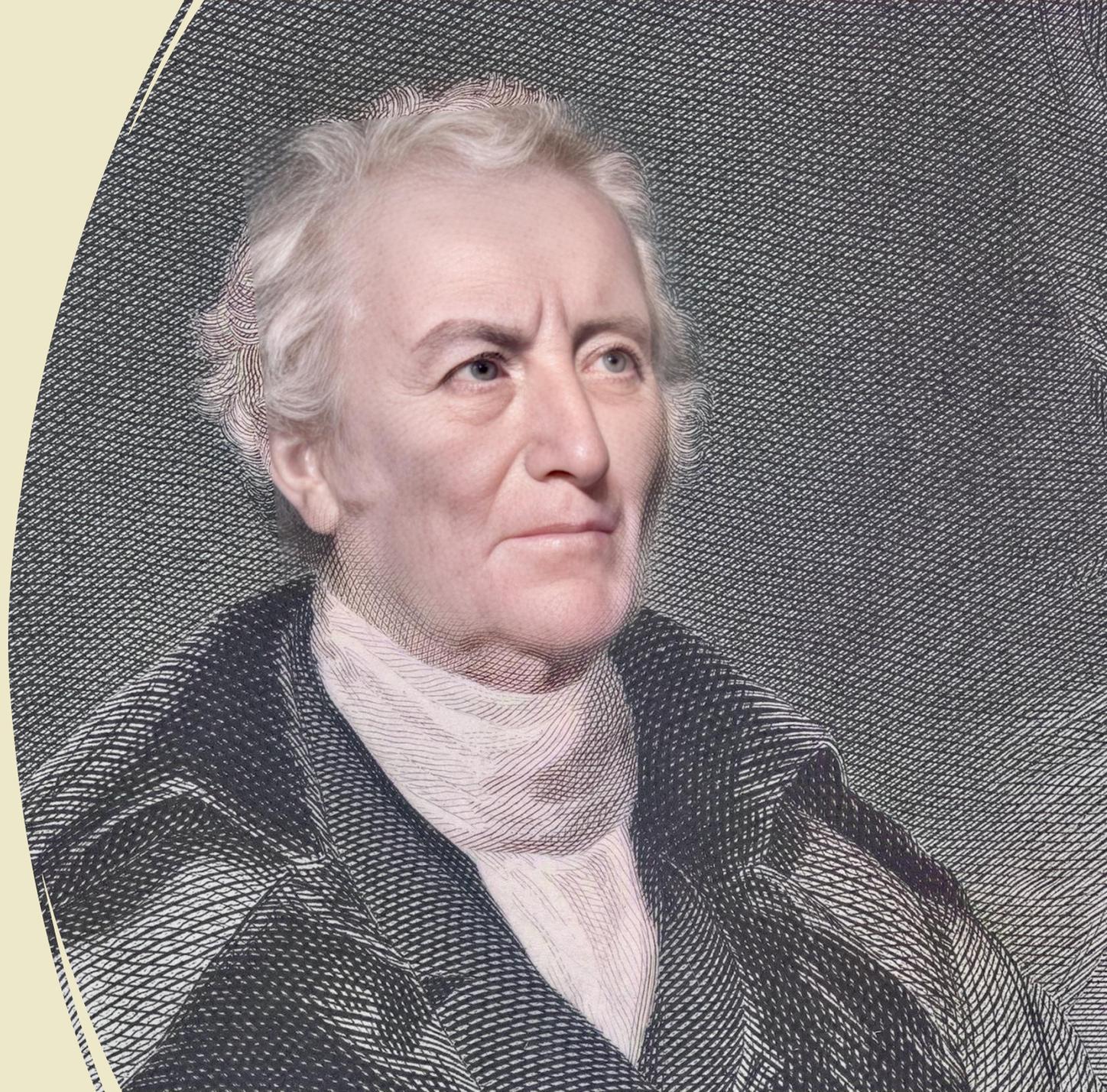


Thirty-seven years after John Trumbull began meditating "seriously" on painting the crucial events of the American Revolution, four of his "great works" were hanging in the newly completed Rotunda of the United States Capitol.

Once again, short of funds, in 1831, Trumbull donated the bulk of his artwork to establish the first university art museum, Trumbull Gallery at Yale, in exchange for an annuity of \$1000 per year.

Then he turned his attention to writing his autobiography. When his manuscript was complete, he hosted evening readings, with champagne and grapes, for family and friends. A niece reported, "They are very pleasant little meetings." His book was published in 1841.

The frail schoolboy lived to be 87. He died in New York City in 1843.



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IMAGE CREDITS

John Trumbull, self-portrait, 1777. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The Battle of Bunker's Hill. John Trumbull, Trumbull Collection, Yale.

George Washington. John Trumbull. Trumbull Collection, Yale.

Declaration of Independence. John Trumbull. Trumbull Collection - Yale.

Governor Jonathan Trumbull, Sr. John Trumbull, Trumbull Collection - Yale.

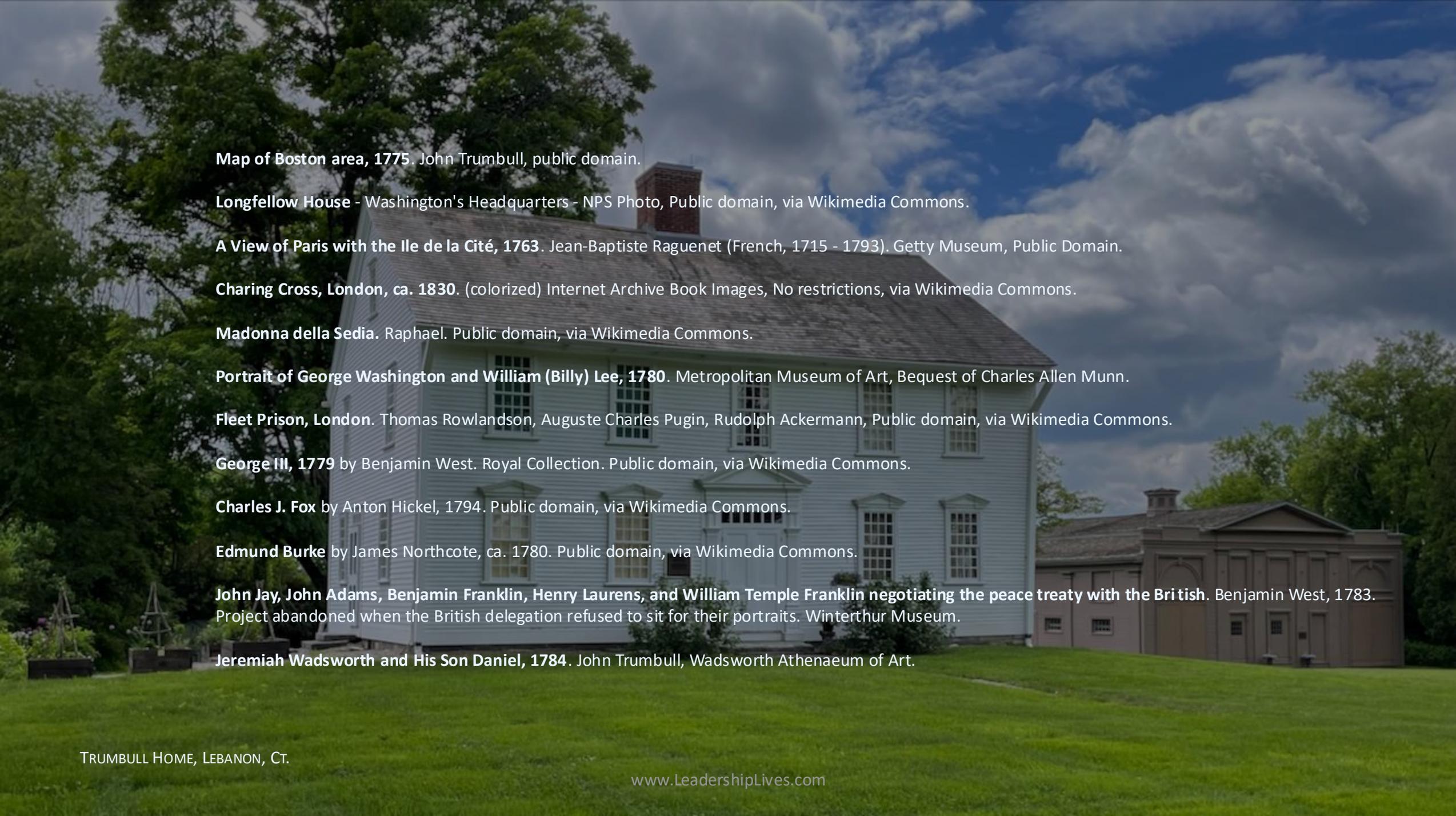
Boston Common, 1768 (colorized) by Christian Remick. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Heroes of '76 Marching to the Fight, 1876, Library of Congress via Wikimedia, public domain.

The Battle of Bunker Hill. Winthrop Chandler (1747-1790), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Map of Boston area, 1775. John Trumbull, public domain.

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A View of Paris with the Ile de la Cité, 1763. Jean-Baptiste Ragueneau (French, 1715 - 1793). Getty Museum, Public Domain.

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Portrait of George Washington and William (Billy) Lee, 1780. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Charles Allen Munn.

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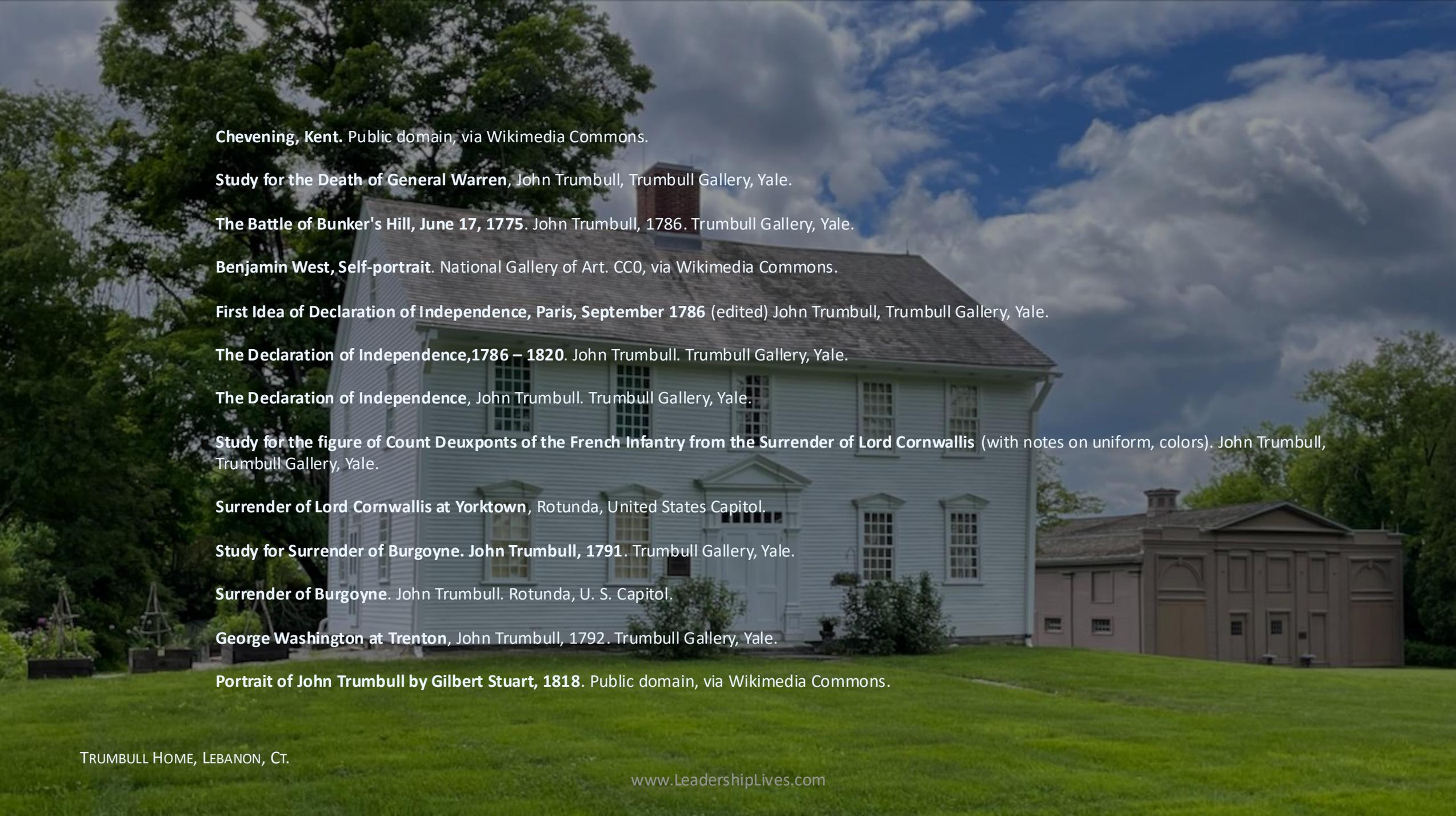
George III, 1779 by Benjamin West. Royal Collection. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

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Edmund Burke by James Northcote, ca. 1780. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

John Jay, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Henry Laurens, and William Temple Franklin negotiating the peace treaty with the British. Benjamin West, 1783. Project abandoned when the British delegation refused to sit for their portraits. Winterthur Museum.

Jeremiah Wadsworth and His Son Daniel, 1784. John Trumbull, Wadsworth Athenaeum of Art.

A large, two-story white wooden house with a grey roof and a central chimney, set on a green lawn under a blue sky with white clouds. To the right, a smaller, grey stone building with a pedimented entrance is visible.

Chevening, Kent. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Study for the Death of General Warren, John Trumbull, Trumbull Gallery, Yale.

The Battle of Bunker's Hill, June 17, 1775. John Trumbull, 1786. Trumbull Gallery, Yale.

Benjamin West, Self-portrait. National Gallery of Art. CC0, via Wikimedia Commons.

First Idea of Declaration of Independence, Paris, September 1786 (edited) John Trumbull, Trumbull Gallery, Yale.

The Declaration of Independence, 1786 – 1820. John Trumbull. Trumbull Gallery, Yale.

The Declaration of Independence, John Trumbull. Trumbull Gallery, Yale.

Study for the figure of Count Deuxponts of the French Infantry from the Surrender of Lord Cornwallis (with notes on uniform, colors). John Trumbull, Trumbull Gallery, Yale.

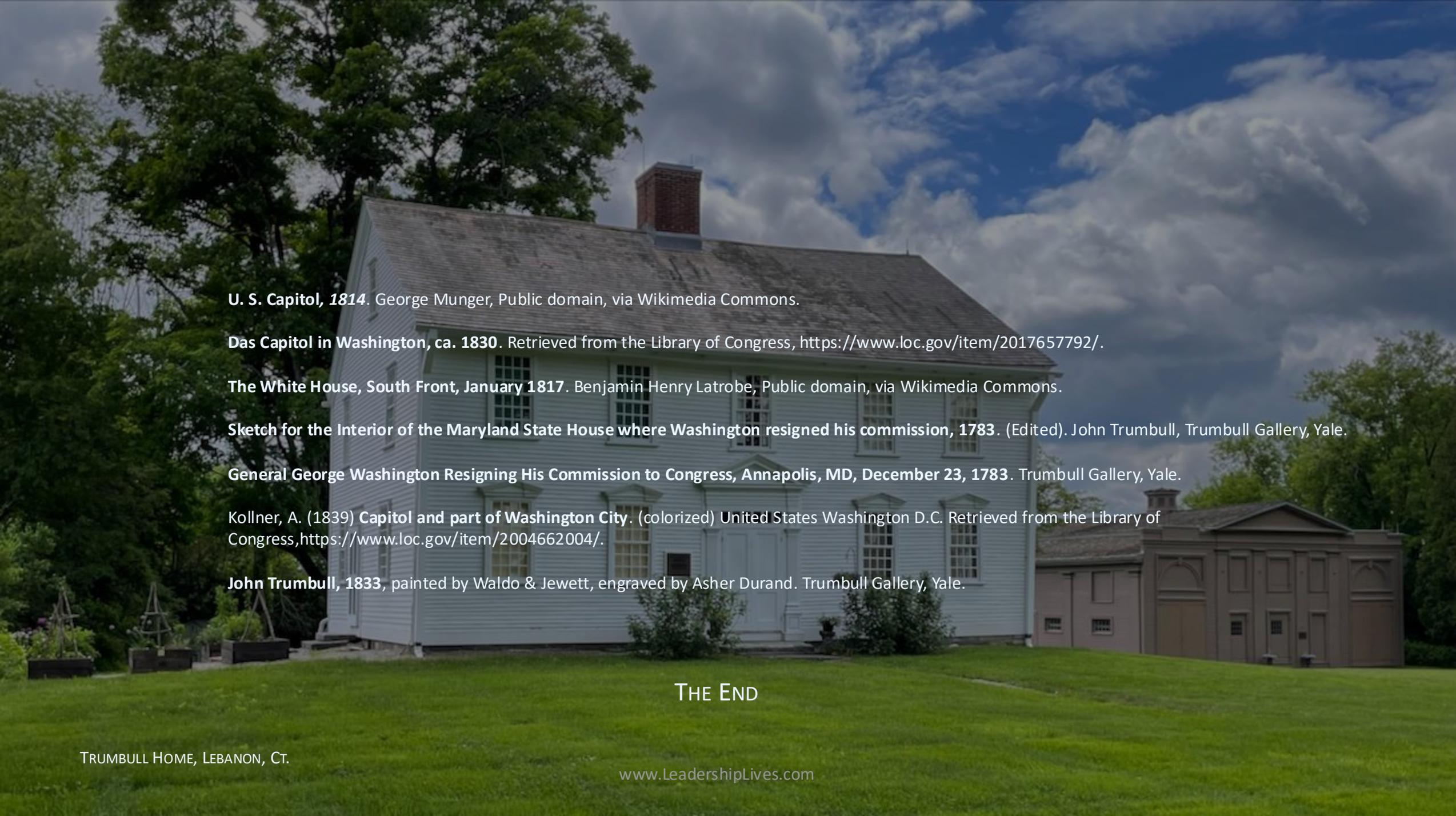
Surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, Rotunda, United States Capitol.

Study for Surrender of Burgoyne. John Trumbull, 1791. Trumbull Gallery, Yale.

Surrender of Burgoyne. John Trumbull. Rotunda, U. S. Capitol.

George Washington at Trenton, John Trumbull, 1792. Trumbull Gallery, Yale.

Portrait of John Trumbull by Gilbert Stuart, 1818. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



U. S. Capitol, 1814. George Munger, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Das Capitol in Washington, ca. 1830. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017657792/>.

The White House, South Front, January 1817. Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Sketch for the Interior of the Maryland State House where Washington resigned his commission, 1783. (Edited). John Trumbull, Trumbull Gallery, Yale.

General George Washington Resigning His Commission to Congress, Annapolis, MD, December 23, 1783. Trumbull Gallery, Yale.

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John Trumbull, 1833, painted by Waldo & Jewett, engraved by Asher Durand. Trumbull Gallery, Yale.

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