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**HISTORY LESSON**

# The marathon drafting session: A great American tradition

**Tracey I. Batt / Special to NLJ.com**  
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New Jersey Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts director Tracey Batt

I have a very strange hobby. I collect history.

It started as an attempt to keep my life in some semblance of order. Appointments, reminders to pay bills and buy cat food. Family and friends' birthdays and anniversaries, along with reminders to send cards and gifts as appropriate. Then I added the Beatles' birthdays because, really, they're family too, right? Then I started adding more and more celebrity birthdays and historical events. These days, I spend several hours each week entering data from "this date in history" websites. There are now more than 26,000 entries in my PDA's calendar.

Why do I do this? I have no idea. But I do find that I see connections that I did not see before. Why on earth is that cable network showing "Anne of the Thousand Days"? Of course! It's Geneviève Bujold's birthday, and that's the movie for which she won a Best Actress Oscar as Anne Boleyn. Did you know that country singer Billy Ray Cyrus shares a birthday with Jeff Tweedy from Wilco, Rob Halford from Judas Priest, Geoff Downes from Asia, Gene Simmons from KISS, Elvis Costello, and Leonard Bernstein, as well as Sean Connery, Mad King Ludwig of Bavaria, and Ivan the Terrible? Did you know that like

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William Shakespeare, Ingrid Bergman died on her birthday?

One particular anniversary struck me recently, and I do not know why it did not do so prior to this year. On June 11, 1776, the Continental Congress formed a committee to draft a Declaration of Independence from Britain. Wait a minute. The one they adopted on the Fourth of July of that year? The Continental Congress formed a committee, drafted the Declaration of Independence, obtained all necessary approvals, and adopted it, all in the space of less than three and a half weeks?

Can you imagine how that would play out today? Have you ever tried to do anything by committee? Let's say South Jersey decides today to break away from North Jersey and form its own state. I don't think we could agree to form a committee to look into the possibility of forming a drafting committee in three and a half weeks. The committee would meet once a month, but not in the summer or December. The committee would circulate endless drafts, with committee members arguing over every comma. Each time the committee member in charge of making changes thought the document was "final," some

committee member would raise a whole new issue that would require three more drafting sessions for two sentences. The entire process would take so long that we would all be able to get to the signing ceremony by flying there on our jetpacks.

So how exactly did the drafting committee pull off this feat of declaratory dexterity, of manifesto manufacture, of secessionistic swiftness? They put the lawyers in charge, of course. The drafting committee was made up of five people, John Adams of Massachusetts, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, Robert Livingston of New York, and Roger Sherman of Connecticut. Adams, Jefferson, and Sherman were all attorneys, and Jefferson was tapped to be the principal author. Now it all makes sense. I can't help but picture these people sitting around a conference room table for 18 hours at a stretch, fueled by endless supplies of caffeine and nicotine, sending out a servant in a carriage to pick up moo shu mutton at 11:00 at night. There are dozens of crumpled pieces of parchment on the floor, each filled with Thomas Jefferson's neat script and covered with cross-outs, circled additions, and arrows. The table is littered with law books and sample documents from which to crib, as well as broken quills and empty ink pots. The dim room is suffused with smoke from candles and various tobacco delivery devices. Come to think of it, the room as I imagine it bears a striking resemblance to the Gryffindor Common Room during exams.

In my mind's eye, they are still arguing over every comma.

*"Do we want a comma after 'Liberty' in 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness'? We should make it consistent."*

*"Should it be 'to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another' or 'that have connected them with another'?"*

*"Maybe we should break up into two sentences that long sentence in the second paragraph, the one that starts with 'That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive...'"*

*"I believe there is only one 't' in 'British.'"*

*"Are you certain that you want to use 'consanguinity'? I do not even know what it means, and I went to Harvard."*

*"I am entirely willing to pledge my Life and my sacred Honor, but I must ask my wife before pledging my Fortune."*

So the next time you find yourself at the wrong end of an 18-hour stretch in a conference room for the third day in a row, strung out on caffeine, put it all in perspective: at least you can input your changes with a computer. And the Chinese food will find its own way right to your door at 11:00 at night.



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