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# Freedom

A HISTORY *of* US

JOY HAKIM



SOCIAL STUDIES SCHOOL SERVICE

# DEDICATION

Someone asked me if *A History of US* (the series I wrote for young readers) was the best thing I've ever done. I answered with a strong "no." The best thing I ever did was to have children. This book is for them, and for the grandchildren, too.

Ellen and Todd  
Jeff and Haya  
Danny and Liz  
And Natalie, Sam, Casey, Eli, and Miriam

It's also for Sam, who helped create the books (and the kids, too).

And for Peter and Philip Kunhardt and their friends, who turned it all into an exciting television adventure.

And for Barbara Dorff, a Texas teacher of the year, a friend, and an inspiration. She's the author of teaching materials that coordinate with this book.

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# ORDINARY PEOPLE

*An Introduction by Joy Hakim ~*

**W**e are of the humble opinion that we have the right to enjoy the privileges of free men. But that we do not will appear in many instances, and we beg leave to mention one out of many, and that is of the education of our children which now receive no benefit from the free schools in the town of Boston, which we think is a great grievance, as by woeful experience we now feel the want of a common education. We, therefore, must fear for our rising offspring to see them in ignorance in a land of gospel light when there is provision made for them as well as others and yet can't enjoy them, and for no other reason can be given this they are black. We therefore pray your Honors that you would in your wisdom some provision might be made for the free education of our dear children. And in duty bound shall ever pray.

That's a petition to the state legislature of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Bay. It was written in 1787. Consider the hopes and aspirations that must have been in the minds of its authors. We hear a lot about our founding daddies, but, again and again, it was people without fancy pedigrees or privileges, those often dubbed

"ordinary," who stood up, shouted out, ignored abuse, and, wanting to expand their freedoms, expanded ours, too. Among the astonishments of the American freedom drama—our experiment in republican government, which has lasted more than 200 years—is that it was conceived and played out in town meetings and state assemblies from Maine to Georgia as well as in Philadelphia's stately chambers. Why, suddenly, did men and women think they could rule themselves? What made them believe they could do without kings and emperors?

Grouchy, acerbic Isaac Newton had a lot to do with it. Newton (who was an old man when young Ben Franklin first arrived in London) had taken the vast universe, which seemed beyond human comprehension, and demystified it. He found that the earth and skies are governed by verifiable laws and regulated by nature's checks and balances. If the universe submits to reason and law, men and women certainly should be able to do so, said the eighteenth-century thinkers. Reason and law? It takes free minds to make the most of them. That



Howard Chandler Christy's twentieth-century view of the *Scene at the Signing of the Constitution of the United States in 1787*.

got poet John Milton (who hated kings) thinking about free speech, and some philosophers (especially John Locke, who agreed with Milton) thinking about political freedom. From them and others came the Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason. And that's when we were lucky enough to be born.

**I**n our long row of Atlantic-washed colonies, we were far enough from the traditional seats of power to try new ideas. Besides, the European monarchs, not

recognizing our potential, neglected us. They let us run our own affairs. We learned by doing it. Then we broke the mold of history and established a nation where citizens are expected to choose their own rulers and govern themselves. It had never been done before in any sizable country. (At our birth, we were, territorially, the largest nation in the western world.)

To add to our good luck (our timing, our isolation, the richness of our land), we had George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, James

Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and some other independent thinkers to get us started. They met in Philadelphia and, over the course of several years, were courageous enough to stand up to the world's greatest power, Great Britain, and savvy enough to start us off with a written constitution—and a remarkable one at that.

Moralists all, they placed God—who had always been invoked to explain the divine right of kings—in a personal, spiritual sphere, separate from the mundane world of legislatures and taxes. John Adams, talking about the making of the new nation, had this to say:

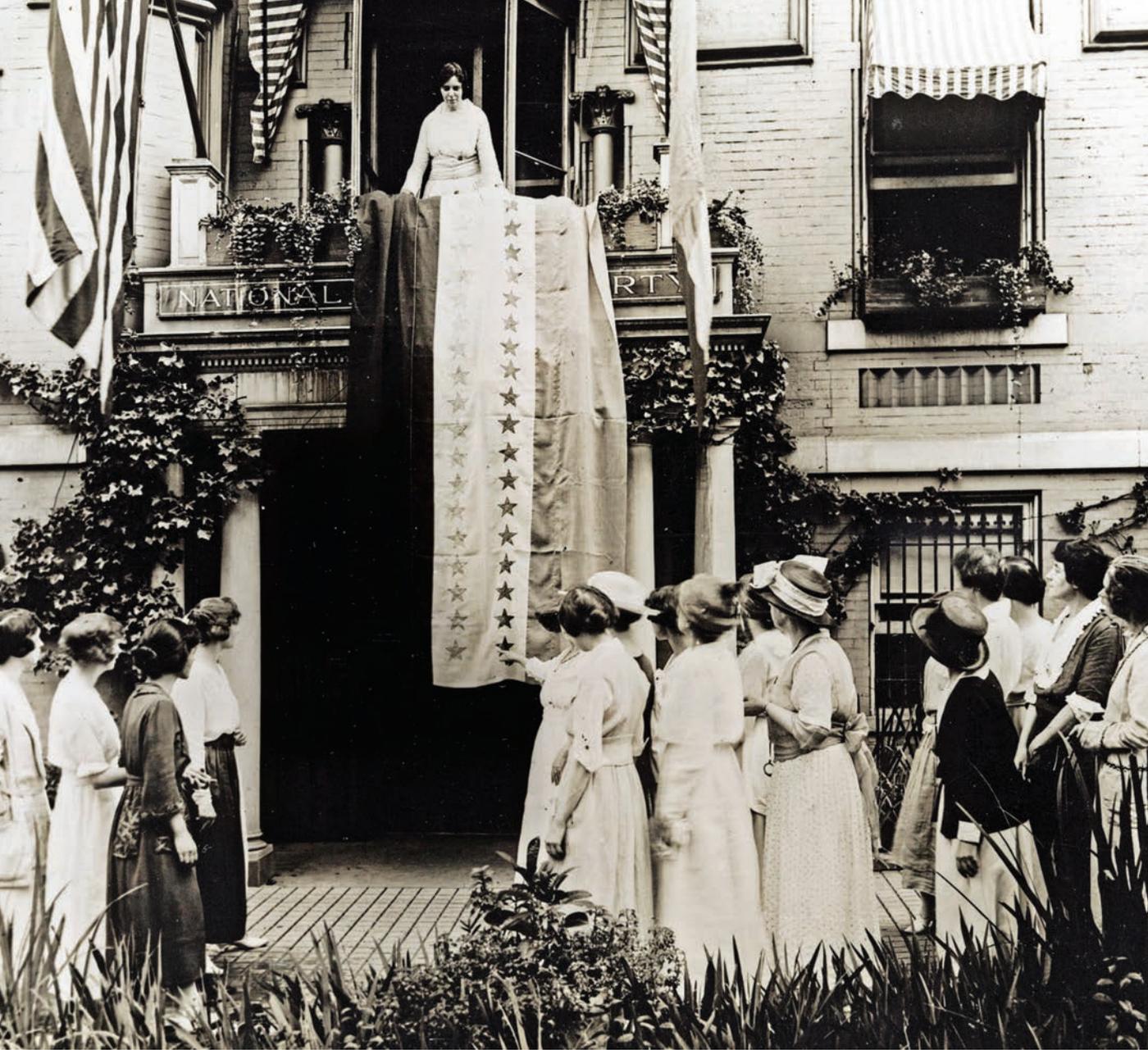
*It will never be pretended that any persons employed in that service had any interviews with the gods, or were in any degree under the inspiration of Heaven.... Thirteen governments thus founded on the natural authority of the people alone, without a pretense of miracle or mystery ... are a great point gained in favor of the rights of mankind.*

Religious wars had racked Europe for centuries. The founders wanted none of that. Why should any government presume to direct anyone's innermost beliefs? "Freedom of conscience" was how they described what we call freedom of religion. "The legitimate powers of government extend only to such acts as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks

my leg," wrote Jefferson in *Notes on Virginia*. Still, a government without a state religion seemed risky. It had never been done before. This was an original American idea. Would the population fall into immorality?

George Washington was skeptical in 1786 when Thomas Jefferson introduced his bill for a statute for religious freedom to the Virginia legislature. In colonial Virginia, all state officials were required to be members of the Church of England. If the statute passed, anyone, even Baptists, could hold state office. Supporting the idea, the Presbytery of Hanover declared, "Religion is altogether personal; and the right of exercising it is inalienable; and it is not, cannot, and ought not to be, resigned to the will of the society at large; and much less the legislature." As it turned out, when the statute passed (after much controversy), Virginians were able to do without a state religion; they were no more sinful than before. So, when the Constitution was written, it was easy to make the separation between church and state: Article VI of the Constitution stipulates: *No religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States*. James Madison, writing the First Amendment, made that separation a constitutional guarantee: *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof*.

Washington became an enthusiast of religious freedom. Writing to the Hebrew



Finally! In 1920 the National Woman's Party celebrates the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution and the enfranchisement of half the population.

congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, in 1790, he said:

*The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy, a policy worthy of imitation.... it is*

*now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that*

*they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens.*

James Madison seemed to think coerced religion was as hard on the church as on individuals. In an 1822 letter to a friend, he said: “Religion and government will both exist in greater purity; the less they are mixed together.”

There’s a whole lot more to this freedom story, but the thing to keep in mind is that we started a way of governing that speaks to the whole world. Our political process, open to all, will let a farmer’s son, Harry S. Truman—too poor to go to college follow a wealthy patrician, Franklin Delano Roosevelt—Groton, Harvard, and Columbia Law—into the nation’s top job. It’s a position that anyone, of either sex or any ethnic background, can now reach for.

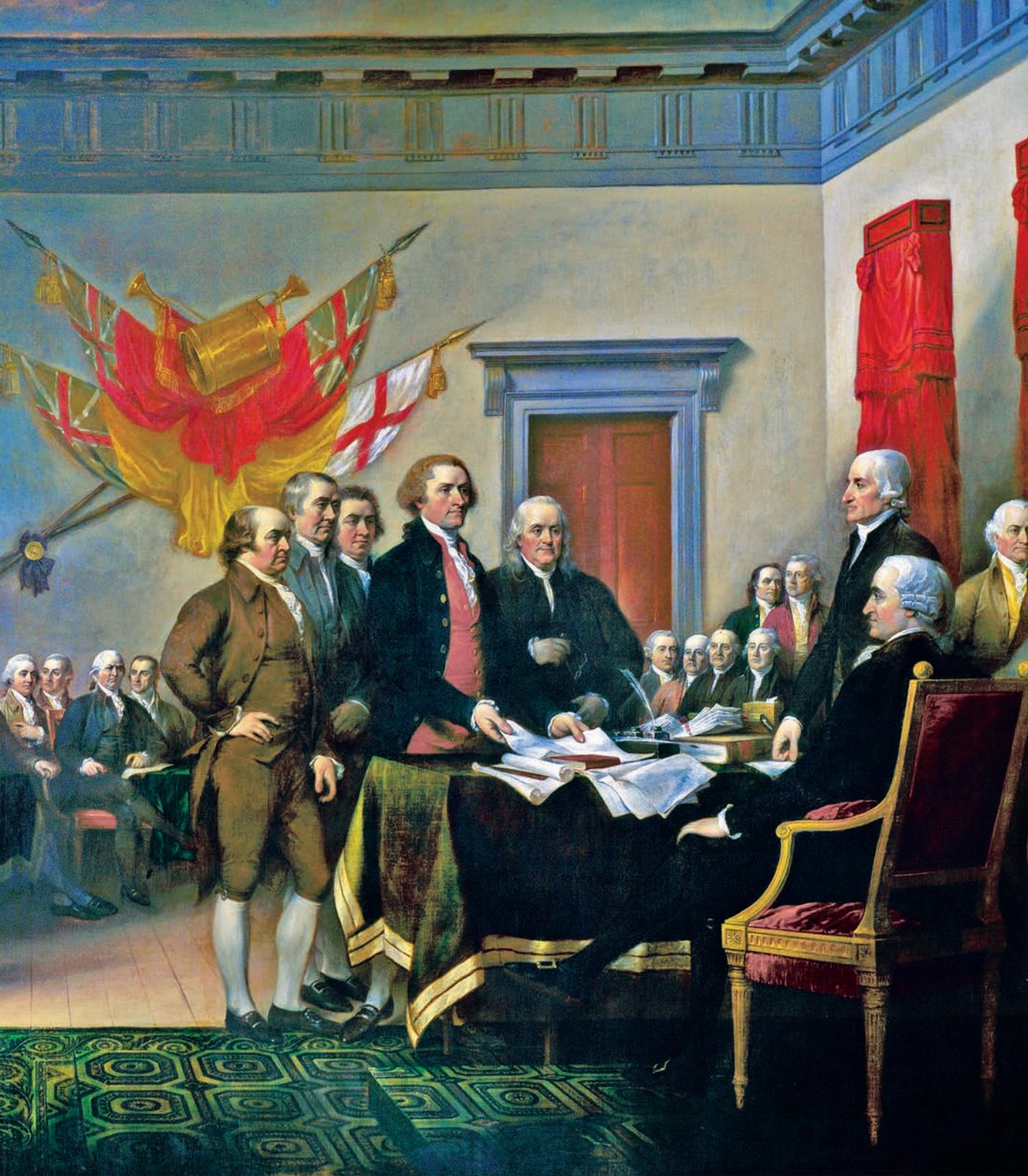
Our founding rebels wore knee breeches and spoke in civilized phrases, but they were tough and uncompromising when it came to their beliefs. They demonstrated that you can fight for freedom and change—and be decent about it. Elsewhere, revolutionaries had no problem acting like thugs, which seems the customary way. Our cherished radicals—people like Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, Cesar Chavez, and Martin Luther King, Jr.—use reason, discourse, and peaceful demonstration to right wrongs and broaden rights, do us proud, and establish an American model. They will constantly invoke our founding documents

as the basis for their claims.

“There is a natural aristocracy among men,” wrote Thomas Jefferson in a letter to John Adams. Abraham Lincoln is proof of it. Lincoln transforms a horrific war into an epiphany—a time of insight and enhanced meaning—and makes us look anew at the founding phrase *All men are created equal*.

One hundred and sixty some years after African-Americans petition the legislature in Boston to get decent schooling for their children, the Reverend Oliver Brown goes to court for the same reason: he wants his daughter to have an education equal to that of the white children in his community. That he has to do it is a shameful part of our history; that it takes so long for the Supreme Court to sanction equal opportunity is dismaying; that many American children still don’t get a fair shake in their schools is unconscionable. Our system is far from perfect, but it gives us tools to strive for perfection.

So here we are in the twenty-first century, and still a work in progress. *Liberty and justice for all* is both our legacy and our destination. It’s not the wishful thinking of textbook writers or governmental dissemblers. It’s not corny; it’s not maudlin. It is a special, unique, marvelous American gift to humanity. It’s a fairness doctrine. In George Washington’s words, it is “worthy of imitation.” So come aboard and consider how you can help spread the word: freedom works. It is worth the energy and courage it takes to keep it growing. ✨



Connecticut artist John Trumbull made the first sketch for his painting *The Declaration of Independence* while at Thomas Jefferson's house in Paris in 1786. The men standing on the left (from left to right)—John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, Jefferson, and Ben Franklin—are presenting the Declaration to John Hancock (sitting, right).

# INDEPENDENCE



In Europe, July 4, 1776, seemed just an ordinary day. But if England's King George III had put an ear to the ground, he would have felt the earth tremble. Because something happened on that July day that was going to change the Americas, and Europe, and, eventually, the whole world. It took place in England's American colonies, but it was several weeks before a ship brought the news to England's King George. And even then he didn't understand it.

It is the people who have settled a narrow band of land along North America's Atlantic coast who will cause the changes that are coming. Most of these newcomers are from England, or from Africa. They have accomplished much in the 150 years since the first of them climbed from their small wooden ships at Jamestown and Plymouth. They have cleared land and planted crops and built towns. They have created colonies where life is freer than it is in the Old World.

But not for the Africans. For them there is no freedom at all. Most of them are enslaved. Slavery exists in much of the world in this eighteenth century. Many people say, "There has always been slavery, and there always will be. Let's not worry about it." These people don't realize it, but their ideas will change.

That July day in 1776 will help break chains from the past. Two hundred years

into the future, people will be shocked at the *very* idea of slavery. Yet right now almost everyone seems to think that people are made differently from one another—that some are ordinary and some extraordinary; some are elegant and noble, others simple and dull. Most people living in the eighteenth century believe that birth determines where you fit on the ladder of humans. And that some people are better than others. Oh, a few don't accept that idea—but they are the kind who lead frustrated lives. Yet it is that very idea of aristocrat and peasant that will be blasted away on July 4, 1776.

Do you see why the earth will shake? In some European towns, laws actually prevent men and women of the upper classes from being friends with the lower classes. Much of the world is like that. Poor people don't have a chance. These English colonies are like that, too—but only partly. Many people have come here to escape European ways. In America the son of a Boston candlemaker will become one of the wealthiest and most famous men in the land.

That is what the momentous day in 1776 is about. It is about opportunity for all, and equality, and fairness. Americans will fight a revolution to make those things possible. But the most important part of the revolution will be "in the minds and hearts



Hector St. John  
de Crèvecoeur

of the people.” The revolution will change everything—well, almost everything. It won’t solve the awful problem of slavery.

But it will unleash the idea that will end slavery, and that will

bring women’s rights, and children’s rights, and all kinds of other rights. The idea is so daring that nothing like it has been heard in governments before. This is it: ordinary people are as worthwhile and valuable and competent as anyone, even as worthwhile as kings and queens. Imagine it! No one is better than anyone else. That idea will transform the whole world.

## AN AMERICAN FARMER

Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur was a small man with red hair, freckles, and a cheerful face. He was French, and still a teenager when he headed for Canada to fight the English colonists. The French and Indian War was under way (it was part of a bigger war between the French and the British); Crèvecoeur was a mapmaker

whose skills were needed. But when he saw the American colonies for himself, and the freedom they offered, Crèvecoeur changed his ideas. He decided to move. In 1759, he settled on a farm in what is now New York State. And then he gave himself an English name: Hector St. John.

Hector St. John Crèvecoeur fell in love with America. He knew that in Europe the aristocrats—wealthy, privileged people—owned most of the land. In America most people were yeoman Farmers—they owned and worked small farms. Crèvecoeur thought farming an ideal life and the English colonies an ideal place, though he also said that some Americans were destroying the land, and others were always “bawling about liberty without knowing what it is.” He soon married and had a family. And he wrote about



Edward Hicks (1780–1849) painted *The Residence of David Twining* in 1846, but he meant it to evoke an earlier time: the idyllic memory of an eighteenth-century childhood with his foster parents in Pennsylvania, Quaker farmer David Twining (in hat) and his wife, Elizabeth, with Edward, aged seven (lower right).