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Presidents and Our Founding Documents

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Presidents and Our Founding Documents

How many future presidents signed the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution?*

Of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, only two would become president: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. (They and one other, Elbridge Gerry, would serve as vice president.) Of the 39 signers of the Constitution of the United States, only two would become president: George Washington and James Madison.

You may be surprised that only four Founding Fathers went on to become president after their good work in the Pennsylvania State House. But remember, it took time for people to accept the new Constitution; the ratification process dragged on from 1787 (when Delaware ratified) to 1790 (when Rhode Island did). It took time before enough states ratified the Constitution so there could be a presidential election. The clock was ticking, and the sad fact is, those who had signed the Declaration more than a decade earlier suffered greatly during the War for Independence. Many had either died, lost their fortunes, or retired from public life after the war.



Moreover, George Washington, by unanimous consent, was a two-term president. Thus other Founding Brothers with ambitions for high office had to wait eight years for The Indispensable Man to retire. Then Adams, Jefferson, and Madison -- in that order -- filled the top post for the next twenty years. The last Founders to be elected president were James Monroe (in 1816 and 1820) and John Quincy Adams (1824), neither of whom were signatories to the two great charters of the American experiment.

What was lacking in quantity was made up in quality. The Second Continental Congress that produced the Declaration of Independence saw both Adams and Jefferson serve on the committee that drafted and edited the document. As for the Constitutional Convention, Washington was its unanimously chosen president; and Madison was called the "Father of the Constitution."

Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison -- not a bad line of presidents, that.

(Question fFrom Russell C. of Lee's Summit, Missouri)

* Full question: With the Fourth of July almost upon us, I would like to know how many future presidents signed the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution.