

THE HISTORY OF FIREWORKS

"The day will be the most memorable in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival...It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade...bonfires and illuminations (fireworks) from one end of this continent to the other, from this day forward forevermore."

So wrote John Adams on July 3, 1776 to his wife after the Continental Congress decided to proclaim the American colonies independent of England. Fireworks were associated with Independence Day celebrations even before the signing of the Declaration.

The discovery of gun powder and the invention of the first fireworks (bamboo cases or rolled paper tubes filled with explosives) are traditionally credited to the Chinese, although India is also a likely source. The sound of these first firecrackers, which appeared about 1,000 years ago, was so loud that the Chinese believed the noise would scare away evil spirits. Then almost any event—a birth, death, wedding, coronation or New Year celebration—became a fit occasion for the noisemakers.

Fireworks made their way to Europe sometime in the 13th century, probably carried back from the East by Crusaders. Their popularity grew, and by the 15th century they were widely used for religious festivals and public entertainment.

The Italians were the first Europeans to manufacture fireworks and were the undisputed European masters of fireworks-making through the end of the 17th century. Their wares were used all over Europe to mark great occasions.

The earliest settlers brought their love of fireworks to the New World, where firings of black powder were used to celebrate holidays and impress the natives. Pranksters in the colony of Rhode Island caused enough problems that in 1731 a ban was established on the mischievous use of fireworks.

By the time of the American Revolution, fireworks had long played a part in celebrating important events. It was natural that not only John Adams, but also many of his countrymen, should think of fireworks when independence was declared. The very first celebration of Independence Day was in 1777, six years before Americans knew whether the new nation would even survive the war, and fireworks were a part of the revels.

Americans' spirit of celebration continued to grow and fireworks became more popular than ever. In the late 18th century, politicians used displays to attract

crowds to their speeches.

In 1892, a 400-year celebration of Columbus landing on our shores lit up the Brooklyn Bridge. Over one million people witnessed the event which was considered the greatest show ever seen in the Western Hemisphere.

More recent fireworks extravaganzas include the 1976 Bicentennial Celebration, the 1983 Brooklyn Bridge Centennial and the spectacular display that capped Inauguration Day celebrations in Washington, D.C. in January 1997.

One of the most memorable events was the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Statue of Liberty, unique because it brought together three of the most famous names in the fireworks industry: George Zambelli, Zambelli Internationale, Inc.; Felix Grucci, Jr., Fireworks by Grucci, Inc.; and Robert Souza, Pyro Spectaculars, Inc.

Known as fierce competitors in the industry, they had never before worked together as a "triad," yet for this event, held July 4, 1986, the three men worked closely for nearly a year designing and planning the largest and most magnificent display in the world in honor of Independence Day and Miss Liberty's 100th anniversary.

This show incorporated 22,000 aerial fireworks, launched from 30 barges and other vantage points. An additional 18,000 set pieces ground pictures, fountains and colorful low displays were seen, stretching from the East River, around the tip of Manhattan, up into the Hudson River and around the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island.

The production required an estimated 220 miles of wires, 777,000 pounds of mortar tubes, through which sky rockets and aerial bombs were launched, and a staff of at least 100 pyrotechnicians on site to produce the displays.

Fireworks can be seen throughout the year in communities large and small, in ballparks, stadiums and amusement parks. There's nothing like a fireworks display to add that spectacular finishing touch.

But more than anything else, when you think of fireworks, you think of the Fourth of July and the celebration of our nation's independence. Fireworks have been with Americans since our nation's very beginnings, and now more fireworks are ignited on the Fourth of July than for any other national celebration in the world.