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July 5, 1776

Abstract

Essay on a printed and manuscript copy of a Portuguese declaration on the American Revolution.

Keywords

Benjamin Franklin, Portugal, American Revolution

Disciplines

Library and Information Science | United States History

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Nothing can more effectually contribute to the Cultivation & Improvement of a Country, the Wisdom, Riches, & Strength, Virtue and Piety, the Welfare & Happiness of a People, than a proper Education of Youth, by forming their Manners, imbuing

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Tuesday
Jul 2016

July 5, 1776

POSTED BY MITCH FRAAS IN POSTS

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While the Continental Congress gathered in Philadelphia 240 years ago to decide the future of the 13 colonies, ministers and officials in Lisbon several thousand miles away also met to discuss what to do about the rebellious colonists. Long allied with the British, worried about the example of a rebellious overseas colony, and hoping to enlist greater British military aid against the Spanish, the Portuguese government decided on July 4, 1776 to ban all Portuguese trade to the 13 colonies. The following day, not knowing of the Declaration of Independence on the other side of the Atlantic, the edict was announced publicly and Portugal became one of the first foreign powers to take official action against the colonies [1].

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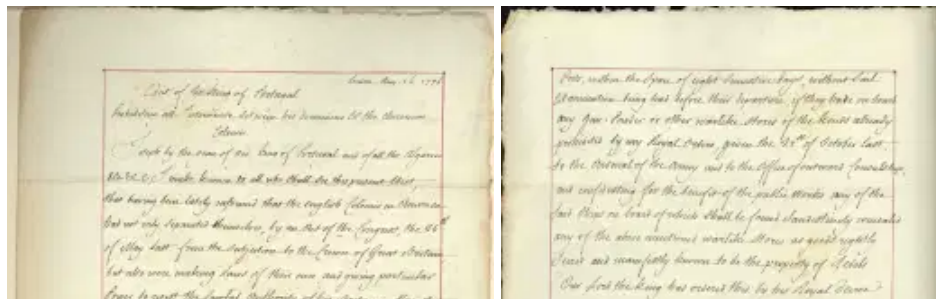
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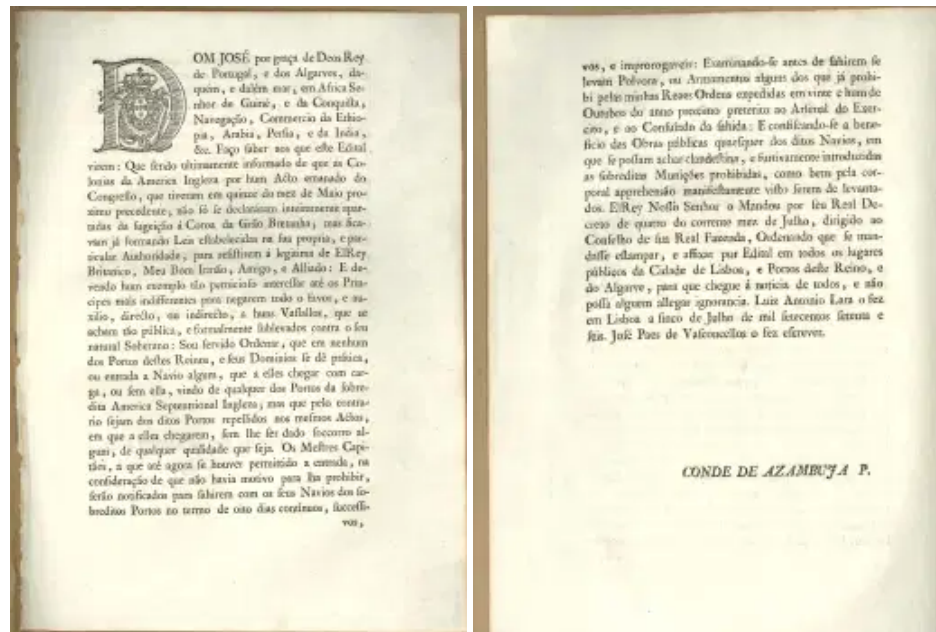
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Benjamin Franklin Papers, UPenn Ms. Coll. 900, Box XII, no.1

I had never heard of the Portuguese edict published on July 5th [[printed English translation](#)] until I saw a manuscript translation in the collection of Benjamin Franklin's papers here at Penn. Possibly originating from his time in France as ambassador, the manuscript translation bears the dateline "London Aug. 16 1776" presumably when this particular English translation appeared in London newspapers, though its exact origin and context is unclear[2]. I was excited then to acquire recently for the libraries one of the printed copies of the Portuguese decree published on July 5th.



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Dom José por graça de Deos rey de Portugal...as colonias da America Ingleza por hum acto emanado do congresso...não só se declaráram inteiramente apartadas da sujeição á Coroa da Grão Bretanha (Lisbon, 1776) f1r&v. UPenn copy.

This decree was ordered “to be printed and set up in all public places of Lisbon and the Ports of this Kingdom.” The printed edict survives in at least two different editions today (the JCB, for example holds [this variant](#)) providing evidence perhaps of the wide circulation and posting of Royal decrees [\[3\]](#).

Copies of the decree reached London by late July, and one British official sent the British ambassador in France a copy on the 26th [\[4\]](#). An English translation first appeared in the London press the next day. The decree seems to have first reached American audiences in the fall of 1776 when it was published in newspapers in Philadelphia and elsewhere. The Continental Congress took action by December when they ordered their commissioners in France to approach the Portuguese ambassador as well as offer American support to the Spanish by declaring war on Portugal [\[5\]](#). In the spring of 1777, Franklin and his colleagues then in Paris on their diplomatic mission, wrote formally to the Portuguese ambassador there to protest the edict and seek its revocation [\[6\]](#). Interestingly, they began their letter by noting that no official copy of the decree had been sent to the continental congress and that they had seen only newspaper copies, suggesting that the printed edicts like the one above didn’t circulate far outside Portuguese territories.

““The Congress of the United States of America have seen a paper purporting to be an Edict of his Portuguese Majesty, dated at the Palace of Ajuda, the 4th. of July, 1776...But as this Instrument has not been communicated to the Congress with any Circumstance of Authenticity...””

The history of Portuguese-American relations during the Revolution is told in full elsewhere but it Franklin was one of the key players in the diplomatic relationship between the two countries [\[7\]](#). If he did not already have the

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manuscript copy now at Penn in 1777, he likely did by 1783 when he was in the midst of negotiating a commercial treaty with Portugal [8]. The Portuguese Crown repealed the 1776 edict on February 15, 1783, officially opening ports to American shipping. Finally, after several tries, a version of Franklin's proposed treaty was signed by the two countries in 1786.

The spread of this short July 1776 decree, from printed sheets distributed in Lisbon, to newspaper printing in London and America, and then in manuscript to Franklin and others, provides a window on the movement of information and the material forms it took in the larger 18th century Atlantic world.

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[1] For the best recent discussion of Portuguese-American relations during the Revolution see Timothy Walker, "Atlantic Dimensions of the American Revolution: Imperial Priorities and the Portuguese Reaction to the North American Bid for Independence (1775-83)" *Journal of Early American History* 2.3 (2012), 247-285. See page 263 for a discussion of the July 4th/5th edict.

[2] Penn's collection of Franklin papers were acquired in bulk from the residue of William Temple Franklin's papers owned by the Fox family at their Champlost estate after the bulk had gone to the American Philosophical Society. They were organized in the early twentieth century and the original context for this document has been lost. The first translation of the edict I can locate occurs in the *London Gazette* on July 27, 1776 (issue no. 11686).

[3] Royal decrees and orders appear to have been printed by a variety of different printers in Portugal in a number of different states, take for example these two different printings of a 2 May 1768 decree at Penn: [Lea Folio DS135.P7 P712 1768](#) and [KCAJS Folio DS135.P7 P713 1768](#). The JCB copy of the July 1776 edict is printed on only one side of a sheet and has a different woodcut initial, it is listed in Valeria Gauz, *Portuguese and Brazilian books in the John Carter Brown Library 1537 to 1839*, (Providence, 2009), 776/4. The newly acquired Penn copy was clearly removed at some point from a sammelband. A third variant very similar to the Penn copy was recently sold at auction in Brazil: <http://www.dutraleiloes.com.br/2016/l132/images/lote562.jpg>

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[4] Weymouth to Stormont, 26 July 1776. p. 361 (no. 1341) in [B.F. Stevens, *Facsimiles of manuscripts in European archives relating to America, 1773-1783*. Vol. 13 \(London, 1892\).](#)

[5] See the Journals of the Continental Congress for 23 December 1776 ([pp. 1035-6](#)) and 30 December 1776 ([p. 1057](#)). For an early American newspaper printing of the decree according exactly to the English translation in the Franklin papers see the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* for 21 November 1776.

[6] "The American Commissioners to [the Conde de Sousa Coutinho], 26 April 1777," <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-23-02-0420>. [Original source: *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 23, October 27, 1776, through April 30, 1777, ed. William B. Willcox. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983, no pagination.]

[7] In addition to Walker's excellent "Atlantic Dimensions of the American Revolution: Imperial Priorities and the Portuguese Reaction to the North American Bid for Independence (1775-83)" see Dauril Alden's older "The Marquis of Pombal and the American Revolution" *The Americas* 17.4 (April 1961), pp. 369-376.

[8] For documents and discussion of Franklin's role in treaty negotiations see "From Benjamin Franklin to [the Conde de Sousa Coutinho], 7 June 1783," <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-40-02-0072> and "Portuguese Counterproposal for a Treaty of Amity and Commerce, [c. 7 June 1783]," <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-40-02-0073>. [Original source: *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 40, May 16 through September 15, 1783, ed. Ellen R. Cohn. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011, no pagination.]

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About Mitch Fraas

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