

**THE SUSTAINERS: CITIZENS OF
THE UNITED STATES**

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THE UNITED STATES**

by
William T. Mayton



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Prologue

“Seventeen Hundred Levelers with Firearms”

By his letter of June 24, 1826, Thomas Jefferson declined the invitation to attend the fiftieth-anniversary celebration of the document — the Declaration of Independence — he had written. He was in bad health and ten days later, on the day of that anniversary, July 4, he died. His letter included this statement, “the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.” With those words, Jefferson recalled and repeated the last statement of an old Leveler, Col. Richard Rumbold, who delivered it from the gallows on which he was hanged by the English Crown for treason. For Rumbold, the terms of the metaphor — saddled, booted, and spurred — were a natural form of expression; he had been a cavalryman. As to the spirit of the message, as a Leveler he lived and died for that. I mention these things because the Levelers in a roundabout way led to this book.

The Levelers were a force during England’s Civil War in the late 1640s, marked as they were by the sea green ribbons they wore and by the prose and passion of their cause. They held a notion of rights, of identified spaces of liberty held by an individual and as held secured from taking, by the king or any arm of the state. They carried a statement of their cause, the “Agreement of the People.” But that movement failed. It led to a military protectorate followed by a restoration of the English Crown in the person of Charles II.

In the United States, the Levelers have had an appeal, on thoughts that our own Constitution is considerably owed to their “Agreement of the People” and that the leveling of our own society, as gained by our (successful) revolution, started with them. I was taken by those thoughts and spent

two years going through English sources. But then I turned back to us, to find that my preceding two years, at least in terms of usefully publishable work, were fruitless. In terms of what the Levelers might have brought to the table, for us that table had already been set. By the mid-seventeenth century, the foundation of our own and successful revolt, our leveling, was already in place.

So what was it, the groundwork we began in North America? It was a basis not yet understood in Great Britain and there would not be for another two hundred years. For us, though, the work started at Plymouth when the Pilgrims landed in 1620, the Mayflower Compact being evidence of the fact. At Jamestown, the work took a decade to form, but it did and was in place in 1618. Then in 1776 that movement, as had spread to the rest of colonies, became the Revolution.

At the start of the Revolutionary War, a British loyalist in New York spoke of a disturbance there by “seventeen hundred Levelers with fire-arms.” But those armed people had come together under a different name. They were, as they said, “citizens” and fought for that order.

The word they used, the citizen, was new. We conceived it, the citizen, in 1776 and in that year used it for the first time in a public document, the Declaration of Independence. Then and now the citizen is an embedded fact. The British statesman who in time understood that fact, of the citizen, was Edmund Burke. During our resistance to Great Britain, Burke was sympathetic to our cause and famously expressed that sentiment in Parliament. What he then spoke of was our regard for “liberty” and “rights” — England should respect these claims rather than trying to crush them. But in the 1770s, Burke did not yet have the word for us. The word we had invented, the citizen, he not know. Fifteen years or so later the French Revolution came on, to which Burke was not at all sympathetic, and now he had the word, citizen, to show his hostility. In *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790), he wrote, “In all societies, consisting of various descriptions of citizens, some description must be uppermost.” The problem in the French Revolution, where *citoyen* was the salutation, was that the word was unhinged. Now it was used, Burke said, to “change and pervert the natural order of things . . . setting up in the air what the solidity of the structure requires to be on the ground.” Burke saw the absence of the citizen and understood the consequences, guillotine and all.

The word we conceived in 1776, the citizen, is a noun that is both general and particular. A particularity, which *The Sustainers* is about, is the route to being a citizen.