

Discussion questions for *American Treasures*

Did *American Treasures* teach you new details of American history? For example, did you know that July 2 — not July 4 — was the actual date the delegates voted on the question of independence?

What incident or fact surprised you most in *American Treasures*?

Who is your favorite character in the book, and why?

Which historical figures introduced in *American Treasures* were new or unfamiliar to you?

What are your thoughts about the delegates' work in Pennsylvania? Was the creation of the Declaration — process, writing, debating, and duration — easier or more complex than you envisioned?

American Treasures is written in a “braided narrative” format, a creative approach that switches between different time periods to tie together a theme, in this case, the founding and safeguarding of the nation’s founding documents. What do you think of this format? Does it add to the “color” of the narrative and the information presented?

Imagine an event from the book in the context of present day. How would it differ? How would people across the colonies — and around the world — respond to “signing day,” Friday, August 2, 1776, when delegates gathered in Pennsylvania to sign the Declaration of Independence. How do you imagine the coverage — by the standards of today’s press and social media? How quickly would the news spread? What challenges exist today that the delegates did not face in 1776?

As the book illustrates, signing the Declaration was an act of enormous courage and astounding risk. Had you considered this prior to reading the details in *American Treasures*? Again, imagining this action in the present day, might the delegates' lives be more endangered?

The book describes the amazing efforts to protect and preserve America's founding documents. However, what if these priceless documents had been destroyed? What might have been done to preserve — or bring back — national morale?

In describing the potential for an unsuccessful outcome of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Puleo wonders "if mere pettiness, stubbornness, hubris, regionalism, or factionalism led to the end of the brief American experiment?" How would you compare these emotions and headwinds to today's political climate?

Despite the enormity of the task, the process of creating a new constitution was accomplished in just 13 months. What, in your view, contributed to this amazing feat?

How much did you know about the War of 1812 prior to reading *American Treasures*? The book offers a vivid description of the devastating attack on Washington, in which British troops set fire to much of the city. Were you familiar with this attack? Were you surprised to learn of Dolley Madison's heroic efforts to save her husband's priceless documents? How might you have reacted in her situation?

Which actors would you choose play Dolley and James Madison in the feature film version of *American Treasures*?

A significant segment of the book details the dramatic efforts to secure priceless documents in a secret location in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor. What are the notable differences — and similarities — between the efforts of Archibald

MacLeish in 1941, those of Dolley Madison and Stephen Pleasonton during the War of 1812, and the 21st-century renovation of the National Archives?

Have you been to the National Archives Building to see the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution? If not, does *American Treasures* inspire you to pay a visit?

Were you surprised that Lincoln's delivery of the Gettysburg Address lasted less than three minutes? Have you visited the Lincoln Memorial, where the address is inscribed?

If you hadn't been involved with this book discussion, would you have chosen to read *American Treasures* on your own? Do you typically read non-fiction or history?

After reading *American Treasures*, do you want to read other books about related topics (American history, World War II, War of 1812) or anything else written by Steve Puleo?