

A Note from  
CHS President Gary T. Johnson

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**July 4, 2006**  
**Address by Gary T. Johnson at the**  
**47th Annual Independence Day Celebration**  
***What Do You Treasure?***

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*These remarks followed the reading of the Declaration of Independence.*

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I would like us to pause on the very last words we heard in the reading of the Declaration of Independence. Did you hear them? "Sacred honor."

What are we to make of those words today...we who live in an age when, it sometimes is said, that we hold nothing sacred?

The dictionary tells us that one meaning of "sacred" is "highly valued and important."

And the veterans in the crowd know about honor, and maybe that's everything we need to know about honor.

But historians like to dig, and I have found that there is a school of thought among scholars that ties the meaning of "honor" in the Declaration of Independence to the outmoded, aristocratic customs of Virginia and the other colonies, a mind-set that gave us customs such as dueling.

With all respect to the work of researchers, I don't believe that we can or should corral the Founders' conception of honor in that way. Consider the phrase as a whole: "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other **our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.**"

"Our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor." In other words, the Founders were willing to risk everything they treasured.

These are living words, and they live today. What do you hold sacred? What do you treasure? In what **cause** would you pledge what your treasure?

Behind me, is one of the greatest history museums in our country, and in it, are some 22 million treasures — documents and physical objects. When we open our doors on September 30, our Chief Historian, Russell Lewis, and our staff will offer you a new view of our treasures, a challenging view. Some of our treasures are no surprise — of course, the bed where Lincoln

died is one of them. But others are ordinary objects that are treasured by individuals or communities, such as a steamer trunk that carried one immigrant family's material possessions — their treasures — from the old world to the new. Some are objects from our own time that are cherished by some of this city's communities.

What did they treasure, all the people who came here in the past? What do we treasure today? What will people treasure in the future?

What makes something a treasure is not the object itself, of course, but the story that goes with it. And some stories are treasures, even when there are no objects connected with them. These are stories told from parent to child. Stories such as slavery and freedom. Stories of struggle and the Great Migration to Chicago. Stories of promise here in this city, but also of hardship and discrimination.

Here, in our museum, our treasures are pledged for the cause of history. History is a **cause** because we take nothing for granted. History is a call to action. History can change the human heart.

In what cause would you be willing to pledge **your** treasures? Join us this fall, and we can explore these very big questions together in our new museum. And I can guarantee that when the doors open, there will be some surprises.