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GWU History Expert Discusses Significance of Independence Day

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Office of University Communications

July 3, 2014

Dr. Tony Eastman Offers Insight on Fourth of July Background, Celebrations

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—Most Americans celebrate the Fourth of July by eating hamburgers and hot dogs, viewing fireworks, and participating in parades. The holiday offers a chance to visit with family and friends, take time away from work, and relax. That's exactly how the occasion should be celebrated, and it's what the country's Founding Fathers wanted, according to Gardner-Webb University Professor Emeritus of History Dr. Tony Eastman.

However, Eastman reminds Americans that a group of founding countrymen changed the world and risked their lives to write the Declaration of Independence and pursue freedom from Great Britain in 1776. The Continental Congress, a convention of the leaders of the 13 colonies, voted to approve the declaration on July 2. It was signed on July 4, the date now celebrated nationwide.

"The signers recognized that they were creating a very radical document for that day," Eastman offered. "The first two paragraphs are the radical part. Thomas Jefferson wrote that all men were created with three rights—life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The last sentence shows the seriousness of what they did. They pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor to each other. All of them held true to that pledge, and so July Fourth is a reverent day of remembrance. They knew if they were caught, they'd be arrested and likely executed. They escaped British capture and, because of their courage and sincere beliefs, the United States formed and in many ways has changed the world."

In the 238 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Americans have continued to pursue rights, democracy and self-government, Eastman asserted. "I would hate to think of a world without the United States," he said. "We've made our mistakes and will probably make more in the future, but overall the fact remains that the balance sheet is pretty solid. The core beliefs of the Founding Fathers on July Fourth are still with us."

John Adams—a key figure in the declaration's creation and later the nation's second president—suggested the Fourth of July be celebrated with fireworks, picnics and parades. "Many of us in history approach the day a little bit differently because we recognize it was a day of great change," Eastman shared. "But I think Adams is right, and it should be a celebration. July Fourth was the beginning of a new era for the whole world, not just the United States."

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University offers a comprehensive academic experience that introduces students to the diverse world of ideas and to the people who think them, preparing them for professional success and for productive citizenship.