Author didn't err in Declaration of Independence

By Theodore M. Bernstein

No Jeffersonian slip. In a recent column we mentioned that the Declaration of Independence speaks of the unalienable rights with which all men are endowed by their Creator. Since the word these days is inalienable, we asked, "Did Jefferson make a mistake?", then went on to suggest that Jefferson might have written the in-form but

and chiefly Samuel Adams, successfully argued for changing the word to unalienable.

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Judge Ditter quotes Donald W. Whitehead as having said in a speech that the distinction between the two words is significant: inalienable means that which cannot be taken away without the consent of the possessor but which may be surrendered by him, whereas unalienable, now archaic, meant that which could neither be taken nor given away. "Thus," writes the judge, "the Founding Fathers took pains to note that the rights of citizenship cannot be denied to any person nor can the burden of their responsible exercise be evaded."

Since that earlier column of ours appeared we have seen a facsimile of one of the earliest drafts of the Declaration and it is quite clear that Jefferson wrote in his own hand the word inalienable.

Nonplus word. Increasingly we hear the word plus used as a pseudo-conjunction in instances such as this: "It costs you less; plus you get longer wear." James G. Van Oot of Wilmington, Del., wants to know whether that use of the

word has achieved recognition. The answer is that plus used in that way is considered colloquial—that is, permissible in conversational or informal language but not in careful writing or speech. The adverb moreover and the phrase in addition are available substitutes.

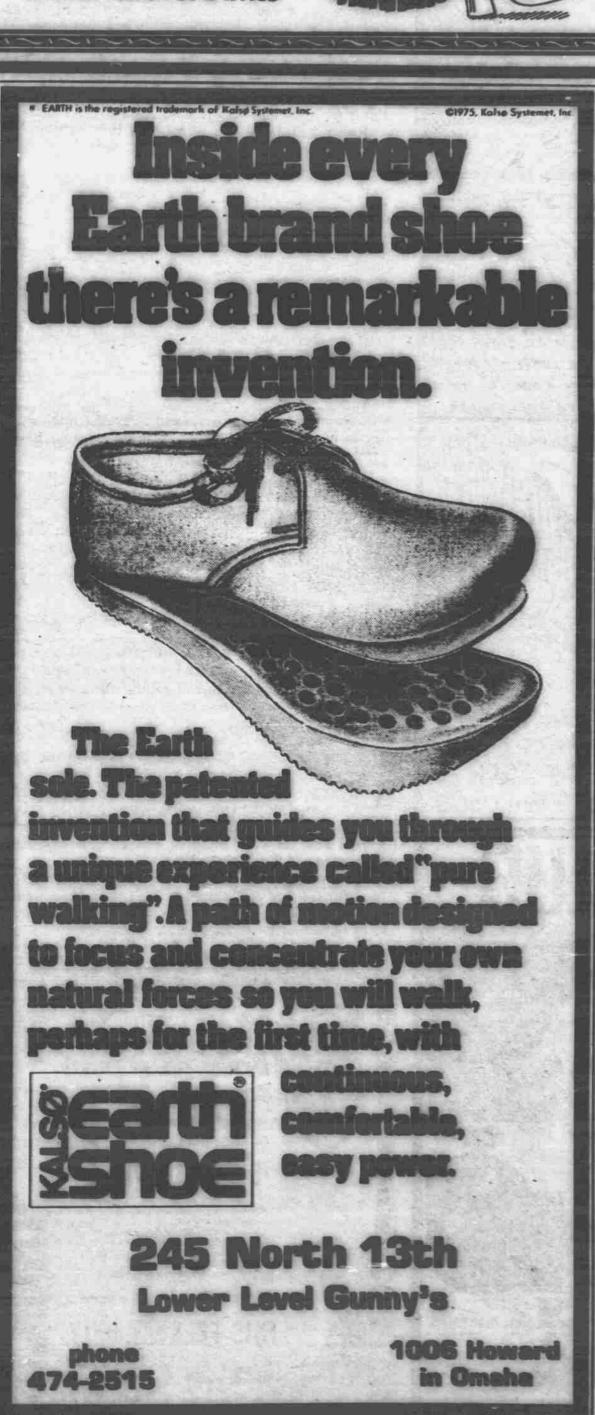
Phew: Considering that quite conveys the meanings of completely or very or to a considerable extent, the phrase quite a few is faintly puzzling—sufficiently puzzling so that Mary Wiermanski of Mt. Clemens. Mich., asks how we feel about it. We feel content about it. The phrase is a colloquialism of American origin, but it is widely used and widely accepted. The puzzling part of it is that the phrase includes two words of almost opposite meanings. Quite suggests very or considerably, while few means not many or a small number. You would expect, therefore, that quite a few would mean a very small number, but actually it means a good many. It is thus a form of litotes, or understatement.

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bernstein on words

a scribe slipped up. Now Stuart Ostrow, producer of the show "1776"; Marie R. McGuire of Philadelphia, and Judge J. William Ditter Jr. of the U.S. District Court, Philadelphia, have written us to say that Jefferson did indeed write inalienable but that the drafting committee,

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