



On the Path to Liberty

Caesar Rodney braved storms and 80 miles of bad road to vote for independence

By Bill Hudgins

Most Americans have at least a vague idea of who Paul Revere was, but outside of his home state of Delaware, far fewer know the name Caesar Rodney or why he is memorable.

Like Revere, Rodney also made a long, desperate dash at a critical moment in the course of the Revolution. Revere's ride to warn Lexington and Concord that Redcoats were on the way prevented the capture of vital arms and several key Patriot leaders, and it rallied the militia to oppose the British.

Rodney's ride from Dover, Del., to Philadelphia was crucial in securing a unanimous vote for independence among the Continental Congress. Unlike the robust Revere, Rodney was in bad health, yet he traveled at least part of the way in a carriage over 80 miles of muddy, rutted roads cut by more than a dozen streams.

For that alone he is worth remembering. But Rodney also was a well-respected, highly capable and effective public servant before and during the War for Independence. His tireless efforts helped further the cause of freedom from Great Britain and bring the "First State" successfully through those tumultuous times.

Early Days

Rodney was born in Dover, Del., on October 7, 1728, the eldest of eight children of Caesar and Elizabeth Rodney. Few details about his early life are known, other than the fact that he attended a Latin school in Philadelphia in 1743. When his father died in 1745, the young Caesar inherited his family's farm and slaves. He never married.

By the time he was 40, Rodney had developed skin cancer on his face, which led to several attempted primitive cures. In a letter written in 1768, he mentions having unsuccessful surgery

that left him disfigured. Rodney also suffered from asthma for much of his life and other health issues as he grew older.

At the First Continental Congress, John Adams described Rodney as "the oddest looking man in the world. He is tall, thin and slender as a Reed, pale; his Face is not bigger than a large Apple, yet there is Sense and Fire, Spirit, Wit, and Humour in his Countenance."



Like many landed gentlemen, Rodney became involved in politics and public service. In *A Gentleman as Well as a Whig: Caesar Rodney and the American Revolution* (University of Delaware Press, 2000), Jane Harrington Scott writes that Rodney was respected for his honor, discretion, devotion to duty, courage, kindness and thoughtful demeanor.

Rodney generally got along well with people of different viewpoints, and could put political allegiances aside when it came to maintaining friendships. Unlike his highly partisan and headstrong brother Thomas, Rodney carefully

thought through the implications of his actions and words, and he sought long-term solutions rather than short-term gains. In 1755, Kent County voters elected him sheriff, and he held that powerful post for many years. He also served as a justice of the peace, a judge in the Colonial courts, and a captain, brigadier general and major general in the Kent County Militia.

Rodney was elected to a one-year term in the Colonial assembly in 1758, and was re-elected every year thereafter (except 1771) until the Colonial government was abolished in 1776. The assembly appointed him speaker in 1769, 1773, 1774, 1775 and 1776.

Rodney's political star began rising in earnest in 1765 when he, Thomas McKean and George Read were chosen to represent Delaware at the Stamp Act Congress. When Parliament agreed to repeal the act, the three men were tapped to write a letter of thanks to King George III.

Rodney's political star began rising in earnest in 1765 when he, Thomas McKean and George Read were chosen to represent Delaware at the Stamp Act Congress. When Parliament agreed to repeal the act, the three men were tapped to write a letter of thanks to King George III.



From this point on, these three men figured prominently in Delaware politics and government. Like Rodney, Read and McKean each held important posts in the Colonial and later state governments. In 1774, they were selected to represent Delaware at the First Continental Congress, and in 1775, they were picked again as delegates to the Second Continental Congress.

Though their views would diverge over the years, Rodney maintained cordial working relationships with them even when they disagreed.

An Essential Vote

Like the colonists themselves, the Second Continental Congress was divided over the issue of independence. Even as fighting erupted in April 1775 and relations with Great Britain decayed, many hoped for reconciliation.

Congress took up the question of independence on June 7, 1776, when delegate Richard Henry Lee of Virginia proposed, “That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States ... and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.”

Congress debated Lee’s resolution for two days, then tabled it until July 1 so the delegates could seek new instructions from

home. At the time, Thomas Jefferson noted that Delaware, Pennsylvania, New York and Maryland did not appear ready to endorse independence.

During this interval, Rodney left Dover to deal with near-insurrection in Sussex County, where Loyalists and Patriots had clashed violently. Read had written Rodney indicating that Congress would probably deal with other matters before taking up independence again. As a result, Rodney planned to return to Philadelphia sometime after July 1, Scott writes.

According to Scott, Rodney left Sussex sometime between June 25 and June 30, and planned to rest at Dover before continuing on to Philadelphia. He had not been home long before a rider delivered an urgent message from McKean: Congress had resumed debate and voted on Lee’s resolution on July 1. There would be a second, decisive vote on July 2, and Rodney had to come at once.

Under the rules of the Continental Congress, each Colony had only one vote, which was determined either by a vote within each delegation or by instructions from home.

On July 1, nine Colonies had voted in favor of independence, while Pennsylvania and South Carolina opposed it. New York abstained because its delegation had not been instructed to vote for independence. And Delaware did not cast a vote because McKean favored independence, while Read did not. Rodney would break the tie.

Delaware’s Beginnings

Tiny but proud, Delaware passed through several hands on its way to becoming a state.

The Dutch were the first Europeans to try to settle Delaware with a trading post that was wiped out by American Indians. Sweden planted the first permanent European settlement, New Sweden, in 1638 near Wilmington.

The area remained under Swedish control until 1655, when a Dutch fleet under Peter Stuyvesant sailed from New Amsterdam and seized the small colony. Great Britain took control of New Amsterdam in 1664; the Dutch lost the

war that followed and surrendered their American holdings.

In 1681, King Charles II granted William Penn the Colony of Pennsylvania, whose three “Lower Counties”—Sussex, Kent and New Castle—comprised Delaware. The king’s action touched off a lengthy dispute between Pennsylvania and Maryland over Delaware’s precise borders. Eventually, the disputants hired two English surveyors—Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon—to outline those borders.

As part of Pennsylvania, Delaware was a proprietary colony under the control of the Penn family, not a royal colony. This gave the Penns considerable latitude in directing the affairs of the Colony—including largely exempting themselves from many taxes.

In one of those ironies of history, in the years before the Revolution, Benjamin Franklin headed a party that unsuccessfully tried to persuade the Crown to revoke the proprietary charter and make Pennsylvania a royal colony.

When the Continental Congress urged the 13 Colonies to abolish the royal governments and establish their own independent governments, Delaware took the opportunity to break away from Pennsylvania and become its own state.

Delaware is known as the “First State” because it was the first of the 13 original states to ratify the U.S. Constitution. The unanimous decision to ratify took place at a state convention held in Dover on December 7, 1787.

Though a majority vote could carry the motion, the pro-independence delegates felt that anything less than unanimity would betray weakness and lack of resolve. Hoping that some minds might change, Congress agreed to hold a second vote on July 2.

McKean's message arrived in Dover around midnight on July 1. Contemporary reports say it was raining heavily, but, despite the weather, fatigue and his ill health, Rodney called for his carriage and left immediately. (According to an account Thomas Rodney gave years later, it was he who persuaded his brother to go.)

It's about 80 miles from Dover to Philadelphia, and the roads were bad at any time. Besides stopping to change horses, the trip involved crossing 15 streams "by ford, bridge or ferry," according to a letter from Rodney to Thomas. Rodney added that he "traveled all night, arriving (tho detained by Thunder and Rain) in time enough to give my Voice in the matter of Independence."

By the time Rodney, still wearing riding boots and spurs, arrived on July 2 the situation had changed.

South Carolina had dropped its opposition and would vote in favor.

Pennsylvania's two outspoken opponents to independence, John Dickinson and Robert Morris, did not attend the session, which allowed Pennsylvania also to vote in favor. New York abstained because it was still under orders to seek reconciliation; new orders arrived a few days later that allowed New York finally to support the measure.

Delaware voted last. As before, Read was opposed to the resolution, while McKean supported it. Rodney broke the tie, telling Congress, "As I believe the voice of my constituents and of all sensible and honest men is in favor of Independence and my own judgment concurs with them, I vote for Independence."

From Legislation to War

In the months after the historic vote for independence, Delaware's conservatives and Loyalists mounted a reaction to Rodney's vote. He was not chosen as a member to the state constitutional convention, and neither he nor McKean were elected to the new state legislature that replaced the Colonial assembly. Read, however, was elected.

So instead of legislating, Rodney went to war. He served on the Committee of Observation and Inspection charged with enforcing the boycott of British goods. He was also a member of the Council of Safety that endeavored to raise troops and supplies.

As brigadier general of the Kent County Militia, he spent time serving in a largely administrative billet with General George Washington's army near Trenton, N.J., in early 1777. Later that same year, he was promoted to major general and tasked with organizing the removal of vital supplies to safer locations as British forces moved on Philadelphia.

By 1778, the Loyalist reaction in Delaware had waned, and Rodney returned to Congress. The legislature also named him president of the new state, a post he held until 1781.

Though re-elected to Congress in 1782 and 1783, Rodney did not serve. His health had significantly declined as the cancer worsened, prompting him to write a friend that "The Doctor must conquer the Cancer, or the Cancer will conquer me."

Rodney died on June 26, 1784, at Poplar Grove, his farm near Dover, and was buried at Byfield, another farm he owned nearby.

Rodney had started his political career as a conservative, a member of what was called the "court party" that generally supported the Crown. Over time, as British abuses mounted, he had moved left. Loyalists, of course, branded him a radical, though he was never on a par with firebrands like Samuel Adams.

In a letter to an acquaintance quoted by Scott, Rodney describes his political outlook and philosophy as follows:

"When the contest between Great Britain and America first commenced, I stepped forth among others in order to obtain a redress of Greivances (sic). This and no other was my aim until absolutely refused. The Question then was Independence or the Bayonet, I was at no loss in determining which to chuse (sic). Independence then and hope it will ere long be established, but Sir I always kept in View the good order well Being and Happiness of the people, more especially those over who I had lately the honor to preside, and Trust That none who know me believe otherwise."

Though his daring journey secured his place in American history, his patient stewardship of local and national government was equally important for the early nation. 🇺🇸



A statue of Rodney on horseback is the centerpiece of Rodney Square in Wilmington, Del.