

Charles Thomson Leaves His Mark

How an orphaned Irish immigrant became a key player in our nation's birth

— By Jeff Walter —

As America was being conceived and birthed, Charles Thomson was in the thick of it all. He not only helped instigate the Revolution, but also helped deliver and foster the new nation. As secretary of the Continental Congress throughout its 15-year existence, he chronicled America's formative history. And he helped create an enduring American symbol.

John Adams dubbed him the "Samuel Adams of Philadelphia," a nod to his own second cousin. And when the Continental Congress sent the Declaration of Independence for its first printing, it bore only two signatures: John Hancock and Charles Thomson.

Teacher, Merchant, Friend of Indians

Thomson was born November 29, 1729, in County Derry, Ireland. When he was 10 his mother died, and his father set sail for the Colonies with Thomson and his brothers. His father fell ill at sea and died within sight of land. Upon arrival, the penniless orphans were separated. Charles was taken into the care of a blacksmith in New Castle, Del., and educated in New London, Pa.

In 1750 he became an instructor of Greek and Latin at the Philadelphia Academy, forerunner of the University of Pennsylvania. He also established himself as a merchant of integrity, which led to the Delaware American Indians' selecting him to represent them in negotiations leading to the Treaty of Easton. This 1757 agreement between

the British colonial governors in Pennsylvania and New Jersey and 13 American Indian nations declared that the Delaware would not ally themselves with the French against Great Britain. In exchange, large areas of land were returned to the tribes.



Thomson, who blamed Pennsylvania proprietors' policies toward the natives for the French and Indian War (1754–1763), took a keen interest in American Indian issues and learned the Delaware (or Lenape) language. The Delaware tribe even adopted him into their nation, giving him an American Indian name meaning "man of truth" or "man who tells the truth."

Political Activism

As dissatisfaction toward British policies grew in the Colonies, Thomson aligned himself with the Whig party and its push for a Continental Congress. He also became a leader of the Sons of Liberty, a secret organization that opposed the actions of the crown. Other members included Samuel Adams, Paul Revere, John Hancock,

Benjamin Rush, Oliver Wolcott and Benedict Arnold.

After the British Parliament passed the wildly unpopular Stamp Act, Thomson helped force the resignation of John Hughes, official stamp collector for Pennsylvania and a close friend of Benjamin Franklin.

In the Prime of His Power

The First Continental Congress convened September 5, 1774, in Philadelphia. Loyalist members of the Pennsylvania

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Assembly prevented Thomson and other radicals from becoming delegates. But after the Massachusetts delegates—including John and Samuel Adams—arrived, Thomson was elected secretary, a position he would not relinquish until 1789.

The final adoption and signing of the Declaration changed the nature of Thomson’s position, as the secretary’s office became an official U.S. department. In his study, “Charles Thomson, ‘Prime Minister’ of the United States” in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 101, No. 3 (The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, July 1977), Fred S. Rolater, a history professor at Middle Tennessee State University, makes a case that Thomson’s power and effectiveness would make later presidents envious.

His duties were wide-ranging and ever-expanding, beginning with keeping the journals of Congress, which entailed recording the resolutions that were adopted for inclusion in the minutes. Because some materials were omitted from the published journals, Thomson also kept secret journals for domestic and foreign affairs.

At various times over his tenure, his responsibilities also included: certifying the authenticity of congressional actions; serving as Congress’ directing administrator and the liaison for the body’s wartime communications with General George Washington; supervising the transfer of essential documents and materials when Congress moved from Philadelphia to Baltimore and back; conducting important investigations; and notifying U.S. states and federal departments of laws and resolutions passed by Congress.

In addition, he was immersed in foreign affairs, including sending congressional resolutions to the British king and Parliament; authorizing privateers to attack and capture enemy vessels at sea; and even serving for 18 months as unofficial secretary of foreign affairs.

The British saw Thomson as a crucial cog in the American war machine, and twice tried unsuccessfully to place a spy in his office. Their second attempt, in 1781, resulted in their agent being hanged.

On June 13, 1782, Thomson and lawyer William Barton, an expert in heraldry, were tasked with designing the Great Seal of the United States—a national emblem or coat of arms. This process had been initiated in 1776, but since then three committees had submitted ideas that had been rejected. Thomson, while not an artist, synthesized the best aspects of the various designs into a cohesive whole. On June 20, the Continental Congress officially adopted the new design.

The Great Seal

The Great Seal of the United States is distinguished on one side by an eagle with wings outstretched, clutching 13 arrows in the left talon and an olive branch in the right, reflecting the original 13 states and the nation’s desire for peace while being prepared for war. The flip side features a pyramid topped by the Eye of Providence. Both sides have been featured on the \$1 bill since 1935.

In 1782, Charles Thomson described to Congress the symbolism of the Great Seal, which shares the colors of the American flag: “White signifies purity and innocence; Red, hardiness and valor; and Blue ... signifies vigilance, perseverance and justice.”



Character and Controversy

The well-educated Thomson had a reputation for honesty that earned him the trust and respect of superiors, peers and subordinates. But, while he was often a unifier, he could also be headstrong, full of Scots-Irish fire, unafraid to take a controversial stance and skilled at making enemies.

In a 1785 letter to Thomas Jefferson in support of the Virginian’s deepening anti-slavery stance, Thomson painfully acknowledged the problems such a position would bring in the South, but concluded: “This is a cancer we must get rid of. It is a blot on our character that must be wiped out.”

Among Thomson’s detractors was delegate James Searle, who once started a cane fight with him on the floor of Congress, claiming Thomson’s official minutes had misquoted him.

After the Constitutional Convention created a new form of government when the Constitution was ratified in 1788, Thomson’s days in office were soon to be over. George Washington became America’s first president on April 30, 1789, and Thomson resigned as secretary on July 23, bringing to an end the Continental Congress.

He spent the remainder of his life at Harriton House in Pennsylvania, translating the Septuagint Bible from Greek into English.

According to Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to John Adams, Thomson in his old age could not recognize members of his household. He died August 16, 1824, at the age of 94. 🐼

