MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

TIMOTHY MATLACK

Fiery Patriot, Steady Scribe

By Jamie Roberts

It's surprising that such a colorful and committed Patriot as Timothy Matlack is relatively unknown today. Perhaps his provocative nature offended the sensibilities of conservative 19th-century historians, theorizes Chris Coelho, in his biography, *Timothy Matlack: Scribe of the Declaration of Independence* (McFarland, 2013). Yet looking closer at his long career, it's clear that Matlack "believed in the United States of America and its destiny for greatness," as Coelho writes.

Born into the Quaker faith, Matlack was once considered a prime candidate for the ministry, but he was disowned from the Society of Friends for radical beliefs and behavior. Despite shame over his father's crippling debt, Matlack found himself in debtor's prison—twice. Full of contradictions, this failed merchant rose from obscurity to earn the responsibility of inscribing what's arguably the most famous document in American history.

Matlack became an influential political figure before and during the Revolution. His political life after the war was rocky, but his radical ideas about democracy helped solidify the foundations of a new government.

Finding His Way

Matlack was born May 28, 1736, in Haddonfield, N.J., to Martha Burr and Timothy Matlack, a Quaker merchant, brewer and beer bottler. He was 8 years old when his family moved to Philadelphia, renting a house next door to Benjamin Franklin. He attended school until he was 13, and in 1749, he started a seven-and-a-half-year apprenticeship to successful Quaker merchant John Reynell. Matlack aspired to a much more prosperous life than his father, who was constantly juggling creditors.

Matlack finished his apprenticeship in 1757 and married Ellen Yarnall, the daughter of a Quaker preacher, the next year. They had five children. After Ellen's death in 1791, Matlack married widow Elizabeth Claypoole Copper in 1797.

In 1760 Matlack, like his father, established a career as a merchant, opening a hardware shop he called the Case Knife. Even as his shop neared failure, he continued his favorite pastimes: the sports of horseracing and gamecock fighting. The gambling and cavorting with "lower classes" led to a schism with church leaders, and Matlack was disowned by the Quakers in July 1765.

His penchant for gambling also brought on heavy debts. In 1768 and again in 1769, he was thrown into debtors' prison. After his release, he started a new enterprise selling bottled beer—once again mirroring his father. In 1769 Matlack opened his own brewery near the Philadelphia State House.

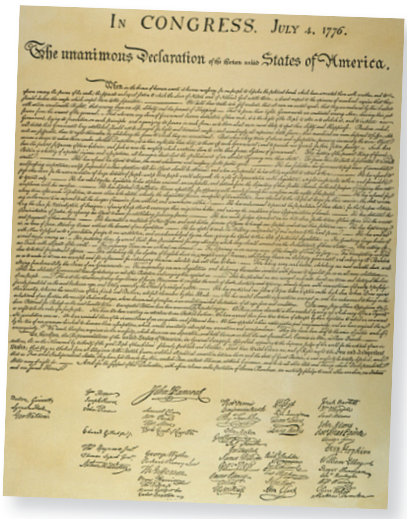
Holding Fast to His Beliefs

Brewing beer was only one of his many jobs. Matlack held a variety of political offices during the Revolutionary era, including storekeeper of military supplies, member of the state Council of Safety and clerk to Charles Thomson, secretary of the Second Continental Congress. He was also selected to be

colonel of the Fifth Rifle Battalion, one of the five battalions of the Philadelphia militia. Matlack's force saw action at the battles of Trenton and Princeton in 1776 and 1777, and the battalion continued to serve in the winter campaign until it dissolved at the end of January.

Matlack's penmanship was excellent, so he was tasked with copying legal documents such as land deeds, military commissions, and birth and marriage certificates. But he would soon find that a more famous document awaited him.

On July 9, 1776, New York was the last Colony to officially approve the text of the Declaration of Independence, and on July 19, Congress ordered the engrossed, or official and authoritative, copy.


IN CONGRESS. JULY 4. 1776.
The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.

Timothy Matlack's elegant, flowing penmanship full of looping flourishes was in a style called English round hand. Known today as Copperplate, the script has inspired several other typefaces, including American Scribe.

As author Coelho describes it: "Secretary Charles Thomson assigned Timothy Matlack the task of preparing a finely engrossed Declaration. Although completely occupied by the Convention, Council of Safety and his rifle battalion, Matlack made time for this important work. Perhaps in the evening hours, on his desk at home, he arranged a large sheet of parchment in front of him, along with his quill and ink stand, a copy of the printed Declaration and perhaps his own handwritten copy of the text (if he had one)."

Matlack scripted the document—the official one on display in the National Archives—on vellum, or fine parchment, using a feather-quill pen dipped in iron-gall ink. John Hancock and 55 others began signing Matlack's copy on August 2.

As talk of revolution swirled, Matlack emerged as a strong leader, an advocate of personal liberty and the security of property. He opposed slavery, believing strongly in the freedom and equality of all men—despite personally owning a slave named Hester whom he purchased after his first wife's death. Matlack's rhetoric "inflamed the people in town meetings and taverns," explains Coelho, who likens him to fellow radical Thomas Paine.

Battling for Power

Matlack and fellow leaders of the Pennsylvania Convention were instrumental in drafting the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776, which scholars described as the most democratic in America. After he helped shape the constitution, Matlack was elected secretary to Pennsylvania's Supreme Executive Council, making him one of the most powerful men in the new state during the war. He became an ardent defender of the constitution against such critics as James Wilson, leader of Pennsylvania Republicans, as well as Benjamin Rush and John Dickinson. Using the pseudonym Tiberius Gracchus, or "T.G.," he wrote a number of newspaper articles attacking his opponents.

In 1779, Secretary Matlack represented Pennsylvania at the trial for the court martial of Benedict Arnold, serving as a star prosecution witness.

His days as a political star were nearing their end, however. As the Republicans gained power, his political enemies worked behind the scenes to oust him. In 1782, he was removed as secretary to the Supreme Executive Council on charges of accounting discrepancies. He fought the charges, and the proceedings against him were eventually dropped. However, Matlack never regained his former political clout.

Designing a New Society

Matlack was one of the founders of the Society of Free Quakers in 1781. The society was primarily made up of Quakers who had either been disowned or had resigned from the established Quaker community for their support of or participation in the use of military force against Great Britain. Matlack was vocal in his criticism of the Society of Friends, denouncing the group for not joining the fight for abolition. According to the University of Pennsylvania online archives, after the death of a son during the Revolutionary War, Matlack even "caned two Quakers who criticized his sons for bearing arms against the British."

Matlack, along with Benjamin Franklin, Robert Morris and others, helped raise funds to construct the Free Quaker Meeting House in downtown Philadelphia. Among Matlack's many talents, he's also credited with designing the Meeting House and its masonry vaults.

Matlack lived in Lancaster, Pa., from 1799 until 1808, while the city was the state capital. He remained in politics, but was relegated to less-prestigious political posts such as a clerk of the Pennsylvania State Senate.

In 1779, Matlack was named a trustee of the new University of the State of Pennsylvania (now the University of Pennsylvania), where he served until 1785. In 1780, he was elected to the American Philosophical Society, serving as a secretary from 1781 to 1783. He delivered speeches urging the development of modern agricultural research and education in America. "The Star-bespangled Genius of America ..." he said in one address, "points to Agriculture as the stable Foundation of the rising mighty Empire." And in 1790, Matlack worked as a surveyor in Pennsylvania, tasked with surveying the northwestern portion of the state purchased from the American Indians.

After his death in Holmesburg, Pa., on April 14, 1826, Matlack was interred at Philadelphia's Free Quaker Burial Ground.

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