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.

Tea...
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.

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.