

AMERICA'S BIRTH

By Mike McCormack, AOH Historian

When the thirteen colonies declared independence, who were their most ardent supporters? Common sense tells that the Irish, who fled British oppression in their homeland, were not about let it rule their new home. In 1700's America, the Irish were at least 25% of the population. They were Protestants whom British tariffs made economically insecure; they were Catholics who remnants of the Penal Laws kept from full equality. America, though still a British colony, was thousands of miles from the detested British presence and the Irish settled in to make it their new home. However, a British bias against Catholics resulted in them taking menial jobs in eastern cities or sending many to the frontiers of Pennsylvania and other western regions where a man's worth was not reckoned in terms of religion.

When rebellion was called for by colonial leaders, they were mostly Protestant merchants who objected to Crown taxes. Yet, when the call came to break the ties with England, it was supported by hordes of Irish who refused to let America become another Ireland! Yet, since the winners write the histories, the students of America's schools today know the White Anglo Saxon Protestants (WASP) to whom we owe our independence, but were never taught the contributions of the Irish in making their effort possible. Americans today believe that the Founding Fathers actually recruited an army of New England Yankee middle-class farmers of Anglo-Saxon descent and led them to victory.

That's total BS (bad stories)! To put one's life on the line against the greatest army in Europe just to avoid a tax increase took a lot more nerve than the average farmer had. Yet, the Irish settlers and their descendants knew how the British could mistreat a colony and they knew what they had to lose so they joined the struggle to beat the force that had driven them and their fathers out of their homeland. The disproportionate role that the Irish played in America's fight for liberty was an echo of the independence struggle they'd fought in Ireland. American Historian Charles Beard in **'The Rise of American Civilization'** wrote: *native Irish, who came by the hundreds, if not by the thousands, bearing the scars of age-old conflict with England, flocked to the American army when the standard of revolt was raised. General Washington even told the Irish, your cause is like unto mine and he confirmed, When our friendless standard was first unfurled for resistance, who were the strangers who first mustered around our staff? And when it reeled in fight, who more bravely sustained it than Erin's generous sons?* There were 147 Irish names among the thousand Minutemen at Lexington and Concord and when the 'shot heard round the world' was fired and the smoke cleared at Old North Bridge, among the dead were 22 Irish names who had routed Pitcairn's redcoats and given their lives in America's initial bid for independence.

Therefore, noting how the Irish served with distinction not only in the ranks, but in the Officer Corps with more than 16 generals, shouldn't America's school books be revised to include the true story of America's birth? They could begin with Dublin-born General Richard Montgomery, killed in the attack on Quebec to become America's first top military martyr and list him alongside Irish-born Patrick Carr, killed in the Boston Massacre to become one of America's first civilian martyrs. To that list they can add General John Sullivan, son of Irish immigrants, who led one of the two assault columns in Washington's victory at Trenton after crossing the Delaware with the help of Paddy Colgin of Cavan. Another of Washington's Generals, General John Haslet from Derry, was killed leading the successful attack on Princeton, the following day. The list should also mention General Daniel Morgan, son of Irish immigrants and hero of the battle of Saratoga, NY that convinced the French to support America's cause. And what of Timothy Murphy who fired the shot that turned that battle around? Add to that list General Anthony Wayne, whose Irish grandfather fought at the battle of the Boyne; General Henry Knox, son of Derry immigrants; General John Stark, son of Ulster Irish immigrants and many others who led the Irish volunteers who rushed to Washington's banner.

There was a larger percentage of Irish (40%+) than any other ethnic group in Washington's forces, as evidenced in several sources. Joseph Galloway, a PA delegate to the First Continental Congress argued against rebellion, quit the Congress and sided with the Loyalists. After the revolution he fled to England and was called as a witness in a Parliamentary enquiry into General Howe's Campaign during which he revealed that *the majority of the men who fought against England in America were of Irish extraction.* That was later confirmed by Lord Mountjoy who told Parliament that, *America was lost through the action of her Irish immigrants.*

According to The Army Lineage Book, Vol II, the first company to answer Washington's call was the

Pennsylvania Rifle Battalion which was heavily Irish and led by Col William Thompson of Co. Meath and Lt Col Edward Hand of Offaly. General 'Light Horse' Harry Lee called them the *Line of Ireland*. They were commissioned as the First Continental Regiment and Thompson was made the first Brigadier General in the Continental Army making him the father of the U.S. Army just as Commodore John Barry of Wexford became the Father of the U.S. Navy.

A large number of Irish from South Carolina served under the famous 'Swamp Fox' Francis Marion whose band turned the tide in South Carolina, when American's southern fortunes were at their lowest. Examples of significant Irish contributions to America's independence are almost without end. Quite simply, the Irish were the very heart and soul of America's resistance from beginning to end. And in the end, the greatest dream of the Founding Fathers, including Washington, came true because of what those forgotten members of America's Revolution accomplished both on and off the battlefield. The Irish made far more than just battlefield contributions. Eight signers of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, were Irish-American including three Irish-born. Irish merchants also provided invaluable economic support. The revolution's largest single contributor was Tyrone-born merchant Oliver Pollock who funded the revolutionaries at his own expense contributing an amount worth roughly one billion dollars in today's money. It was he who invented the dollar sign just like Congress Secretary Derry-born Charles Thomson designed the Great Seal of the United States. Allan Lomax, renowned collector of folk songs also noted the presence of the Irish in Washington's army by the songs the soldiers sang. He wrote, *If soldier's folk songs were the only evidence, it would seem that the armies that fought in the early American wars were composed entirely of Irishmen.*

A high-ranking French volunteer, the Marquis de Chastellux, noted that: *Congress owed its existence and America possibly her preservation to the firmness and fidelity of the Irish.* No one was more thankful than Washington for the Irish who literally saved the revolution by their commitment, faith, and sacrifice year after year. A collection was even taken up in the Irish Parliament prompting the Father of our country to call Ireland, *thou friend of my country in my country's most friendless days.*

George Washington Park Custis, Washington's grandson wrote of the Irish: *Washington loved them, for they were the companions of his toil, his perils and his glories in the deliverance of his country.* At a St Patrick's Day dinner, years after the revolution, Custis said: *Ireland's generous sons, alike in the day of our gloom and of our glory, shared in our misfortunes and joined in our successes; With undaunted courage (they) breasted the storm which once threatened to overwhelm us; and with aspirations deep and fervent for our cause, whether in the shock of liberty's battles or in the feeble expiring accents of famine and misery, cried from their hearts God Save America. Then honored be the service of the sons of Erin in the war of Independence. Let the shamrock be entwined with the laurels of the Revolution, and truth and justice, guiding the pen of history, inscribe on the tablets of American remembrance 'Eternal Gratitude to Irishmen.'* Why has that remembrance been forgotten and shouldn't it be in our school books?

In 2007, The Washington D.C. Friends of St. Patrick allowed me I was given the honor of placing a shamrock on his grave at Arlington, but that's another story!