

THE CLASS OF 1776

Seven young men graduated from Penn one month before the American colonies declared their independence.

In 1776, seven young men graduated from the College of Philadelphia, later the University of Pennsylvania, during an unprecedented time for the school founded by Benjamin Franklin. Several class members made their marks on American history, in sometimes unexpected ways. A few all but disappeared from history.

Members of the Class of 1776 earned Bachelor of Arts degrees at the College of Philadelphia amid escalating tensions between the American colonies and Great Britain. The future graduates began their studies close to when colonial rebels in Boston dumped shipments of tea into the harbor to protest mounting British taxes. By autumn 1774, the First Continental Congress convened to draft a list of colonial grievances for King George III and a plan to boycott British trade. This pivotal meeting took place at Carpenters' Hall near Third and Chestnut Streets, just a few blocks away from the college campus. The following year saw several clashes between the Revolutionary and British armies both north and south of Philadelphia, including the Battle of Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts and the Battle of Great Bridge in Virginia.

The College of Philadelphia Board of Trustees responded by closing the June 10, 1776, commencement ceremony to the public, allowing only the graduating students, trustees, and faculty to attend. "The Commencement is ordered to be a private one, on account of the present unsettled



State of public affairs, and the Candidates to be excused from the delivering [of] the public Exercises usual on such occasions," the board's May 23 meeting minutes reported with customary brevity. Unlike nearly every previous year—including in 1775 when the commencement was attended by members of the Continental Congress and featured a religious service, several lectures, and musical performances—the 1776 ceremony was a quiet affair.

Despite the war, 1776's class of seven graduates was in line with the College of Philadelphia's historically small number of graduates in the 18th century. The Class of 1760 had eight graduates, while the classes of 1770 and 1771 each had 14 and the Class of 1772 only two. "Bear in mind, at this time period, the idea of having a college degree wasn't something that

people sought," says J. M. Duffin, Penn's assistant university archivist. "It was an honor and a status symbol, but it wasn't like today, where it's something that you need for professional development."

Unsurprisingly, the Class of 1776 came from privileged families and used their education to launch careers in the church, medicine, law, and politics.

Two 1776 graduates hailed from the Philadelphia area. Rev. James Abercrombie (1758–1841) was born in Philadelphia, the son of a Scottish sea captain, also named James Abercrombie, who went down with his ship on a voyage in the North Sea when his son was two years old. Abercrombie grew up on Second Street between Spruce and Locust Streets in a house still known today as the Captain James Abercrombie House.

After graduation, Abercrombie abandoned his desire to study for the ministry due to an eye ailment. He became a merchant and city councilman but, after a doctor cured his eye injury, resumed his theological studies and was ordained. He served as assistant minister at St. Peter's Church in Philadelphia from 1794 to 1832 and often officiated at other churches in the area. Abercrombie also cofounded Philadelphia Academy in 1800, later becoming the private school's sole director.

The outspoken Abercrombie frequently used sermons to voice his opinions and didn't shy away from targeting high-profile public figures. While preaching at Christ Church in Philadelphia, Abercrombie notably made a thinly veiled dig at President George Washington, who was in the congregation that day. In an oft-reported story, the minister chastised well-known people who skipped communion and left church after the sermon, citing the "unhappy tendency of those in elevated stations who invariably turned their backs upon the celebration of the Lord's Supper." Abercrombie didn't call out anyone directly, but the president knew the minister was talking about him. Washington subsequently simply stopped attending church on Sundays when communion was offered, according to the book, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* by David L. Holmes.

Also born in Philadelphia was Thomas Duncan Smith (1760–1789), the second-eldest son of William Smith, the College of Philadelphia's first provost. Smith followed in the academic footsteps of his older brother, 1775 graduate William Moore Smith. After his graduation in 1776, Thomas Duncan Smith studied medicine and set up his practice in Huntingdon, a town in central Pennsylvania founded by his father in 1767, according to a biography of the provost, *Life and Correspondence of the Rev. William Smith, D.D.* The younger Smith also served as a justice of the peace once the town became the capital of Huntingdon County. But he died young, at the age of 29, after suffering a severe fever. He is buried in Huntingdon.

John Clopton (1756–1816) left Virginia for Philadelphia to further his studies, but his heart remained in the Richmond area where he was born and died. Clopton first attended William and Mary College and then earned a degree at the College of Philadelphia before studying law. He served in the Revolutionary Army as a lieutenant and captain and was wounded at the Battle of Brandywine in 1777 under General Washington. Clopton refused all other promotions "because of his attachment to his company, which was composed of his relatives, friends,

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and humble dependents of his family, all belonging to the Parish of St. Peter's, who were furnished with supplies and clothed by his father during the whole war," according to the Penn Archives.

After the war ended, Clopton entered politics. He served as a member of the Virginia state house of delegates from 1789 to 1791. Clopton was elected as a Democratic Republican to the House of Representatives, serving multiple two-year terms from 1795 until his death in 1816.

Another graduate, John Leeds Bozman (1757–1823), was the son of a colonel, born in Oxford, Maryland. After earning a degree at the College of Philadelphia, Bozman traveled to London in 1784 to study law at the Middle Temple. Several years later, he returned to Maryland, was admitted to the bar, and began practicing law, according to the 1887 publication *A Memoir of John Leeds Bozman, The First Historian of Maryland*. He served as deputy attorney general of Maryland from 1787 to 1808. Bozman was also the first person from Maryland to chronicle

the state's history. His books include *A Sketch of the History of Maryland During the Three First Years After Its Settlement* (1811) and *The History of Maryland: From Its First Settlement in 1633 to Its Restoration in 1660* (1837).

Penn's remaining three 1776 graduates are a bit of a mystery due to the lack of documentation about their origins.

Ralph Wiltshire might have come from Barbados, based on clues pieced together by Duffin. A Ralph Wilshire was born in Barbados in 1757, the son of a doctor with the same name who died in 1770. A Ralph Wiltshire, presumably the son, married in Barbados in 1778. "I can't be absolutely certain this is the same person, but it is not impossible since there were students from the Caribbean who attended the college and academy," Duffin says.

Research-based presumptions are all that can be applied to graduate William Cocke, as well. Cocke is believed to be from Maryland and may have been the same man who became a Circuit Court judge in Tennessee and served as a US senator from Tennessee between 1796 and 1805, according to the Penn Archives.

Even less is known about the seventh graduate, William Thomas. "It's primarily because we don't know where he's from. The only record we have of him is his name at graduation and his name in the tuition account books," Duffin says. "Unfortunately, it's a fairly common Welsh name. So it could be anyone."

Nothing is known about how the members of the Class of 1776 interacted, their activities outside of classes, or if any kept in touch with each other. What is known is that the College of Philadelphia shut down at the end of the year when the Pennsylvania militia moved into the city. As the board of trustees' December 1776 meeting minutes reported: "No Meeting, the Schools broke up, on Account of the public Alarms." By the beginning of 1777, troops were camped out on school property.

No further graduation ceremonies were held until 1780.

—Samantha Drake CGS'06