

## THE FOURTH OF JULY

by Mike McCormack  
National Historian

The Fourth of July is America's birthday, but it doesn't mark the day she won her independence, it marks the day that it was declared. And the Irish were there. They not only made up half of Washington's Army, but those who were unable to suffer the hardship of soldiering, contributed as well. They were the settlers, merchants, and community leaders who dreamt the dream, organized its creation, and supported its success.

When increased Crown exploitation drove the colonists to protest, among the loudest were the Irish who had no great love for the Brits to begin with. They'd been here since 1652, when Cromwell sent 400 Irish children to be sold as slaves; they continued to come, some as indentured servants, and some with a price on their heads for fighting the English theft of their land. Catholics and Presbyterians came fleeing persecution by the Church of England, and the economic oppression fostered on them in order to benefit their British competitors. The destruction of the Irish wool trade ruined 40,000 families, while destruction of the Irish linen trade reduced the population of Ulster by half a million. They came with spinning wheels and looms to build an industry that would be of great importance to the nation awaiting birth.

They came in such large numbers that one Massachusetts Court, fearing the "*malignant spirit that has from time to time been manifested by the Irish against the English*," prohibited the Irish from its jurisdiction, and fined anyone who should buy an Irishman and bring him in. But they came anyway. Some altered their names, some settled in outlying areas like the ancestor of John Hancock who came from Co Down, and Daniel Patrick and Robert Feake - first white settlers in Greenwich Conn. They settled in New Hampshire, and founded the town of Concord; in Vermont, where their sons would lend strength to the Green Mountain Boys led by Irish American John Stark and Limerick-born Matt Lyons; in Maine, home of the O'Briens who would capture the first British ships in the war that was yet to come; and in every other colony.

They came anxious to be rid of British colonialism, and men like Matthew Lyons, Patrick Henry, and other Irish Americans used their eloquence to urge separation from England. When confrontations occurred, the Irish were often involved. Among those killed in the Boston Massacre in 1770 was Irish-born Patrick Carr, the Boston Tea Party was planned at an inn owned by man named Duggan, and the tea was dumped at Griffin's Wharf. While young able-bodied Irishmen rushed to arms in support of Washington, Irish businessmen, and merchants participated in the deliberations of Congress, and raised money to feed and clothe the army. Irish-born Oliver Pollack personally raised more than \$300,000.

Then, on July 1, 1776 after a full year of tension, the leaders met. Some wanted to settle grievances, and resume amicable relations with the Crown; others, including the Irish, opposed them. A resolution was presented which read, "*Be it resolved, that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.*" After much heated debate, the vote was indecisive.

They met again on July 2, and finally the ayes carried the question. John Adams wrote to his wife that July 2 was the most memorable day in the history of America, and would be celebrated forever. However, approval of the final draft was not made until the fourth. Philadelphia State House was packed, despite the sweltering heat, as Secretary Charles Thomson of Derry read the document that Adams, Jefferson, Franklin, and Livingston had composed, and that he (Thomson) had drafted. It was an explanation of why their action was justified. After more shouting, and modifying copy, Secretary Thomson recorded the changes, and America's Declaration of Independence was complete.

The formal copy would not be ready for signatures until August, but the people first heard that document read in an Irish accent, as Secretary Thomson was the first to read it to an anxiously awaiting public. Philadelphia printers like Charles Dunlap of Co. Tyrone rolled out copies that were snatched up before the ink was dry. And that's the event marked by the 4th of July, not the winning, but the declaring of America's independence. There would be many years of struggle and sacrifice before the last battle was fought, but America, supported by her adopted Irish sons, had made her stand. That last battle, by the way, saw Irish-born Commodore John Barry defeat the British ship Sybil. He had been carrying a cargo of gold with which Congress would establish the new Bank of North America with the help of Irish-born Thomas Fitzsimmons.

Yes the Irish were there, and while the able Irish fought for America on land and sea, Irish merchant's purses were always open to the country's cause. The Marquis de Chastelleux wrote, "*on more than one imminent occasion Congress itself, and the very existence of America, owed its preservation to the fidelity and firmness of the Irish.*"

It was best said by George Washington Parke Custis, grandson of our first President in 1828. He 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, 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 let truth and justice, guiding the pen of history, inscribe on the tablets of American remembrance, 'Eternal Gratitude to the Irish.'*" Remember that as you hang out the stars and stripes on our Fourth of July. Many Irish fought and died so that you would have the right to

do so, so do it with pride.