

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S IRISH

by Mike McCormack, NYS Historian

In this month when we celebrate America's independence, it would be good to recall the part played by the Irish in that watershed in history. The Father of our country had a great deal of respect for the Irish. It was a respect born of admiration for their dedication to the revolutionary cause. Early Irish settlers in America fled English tyranny in the old world and were determined it would not follow them to the new. Its no surprise therefore, that when separation from England was first proposed, the Irish were its most enthusiastic supporters. When the issue finally came to rebellion, that support became the backbone of Washington's army. 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.* When British forces left Boston to destroy the rebels at Lexington and Concord, their Major Pitcairn declared, *We will drive the Yankees and Irish to cover.* Not only were there 147 Irish among the minutemen that fateful Apr 19, but when the 'Shot Heard Round the World' was fired and the smoke cleared at Old North Bridge, among the dead were 22 Irish who had routed Pitcairn's redcoats and given their lives in America's initial bid for independence.

In July, 1775, when the Continental Congress was in need of finances, a plea was sent to the people of Ireland seeking support for the Irish in America. While Henry Grattan pleaded the cause in the Irish Parliament, funds collected in Dublin, Cork, and other cities were sent to America. Irish-born Oliver Pollack personally raised over \$300,000 to help finance the revolution, and ended up in debtor's prison for his efforts. War journalist George Clarke noted of him, *Pollack knew the British in Ireland and that was enough for him.*

The largest ethnic group to sign the Declaration of Independence were those with Irish roots, Charles Dunlop of Co Tyrone printed the first copies, and the first man to read it before Congress was Charles Thomson of Derry – Secretary of the Continental Congress. With the revolution underway, the Irish swelled the ranks of Washington's rebel force in record numbers. Dr. Davis Ramsey noted, *The common soldiers of the state were, for the most part, Irish.* British General Clinton wrote to his Secretary of War, *Immigrants from Ireland were to be looked on as our most serious antagonists*, and a letter from Ambrose Serle to the British Secretary of State went as far as to say, *Great numbers of Irish are in the rebel army*, and recommended that they be prohibited from leaving Ireland because they *add strength to the rebel army.* Even the Royal Gazette estimated that Washington's forces were about half Irish.

The tenacity of the Irish was a great asset to the patriot cause. Froude, the eminent British historian, noted, *Washington's Irish supporters were the foremost, the most irreconcilable, and the most determined to push the quarrel to the last extremity.* According to Major General Marquis de Chastellux, *On more than one occasion Congress owed their existence, and America possibly her preservation to the fidelity and firmness of the Irish.* General Henry Lee's memoirs noted that the Pennsylvania line, *might have justly been called the Line of Ireland.* What more gallant group could Washington have asked for than John Brady, revolutionary scout; or Major John Kelly who destroyed the bridge at Stony Point saving the American retreat from Trenton; or Capt. William O'Neill who held the British in check at Brandywine. Ranked among Washington's most trusted officers were Irish-born Generals Wayne, Sullivan, Irving, Shee, Lewis, Butler, and Commodore John Barry. Washington's personal Secretary was Major Charles McHenry and his Irish Aides de Camp included Joseph Reed, Joseph Carey, Stephen Moylan, and John Fitzgerald indicating just how deep that trust was. When General Montgomery was killed leading the attack on Quebec, Washington publicly mourned his trusted and valued Irish friend.

After the war, Lord Mountjoy stated in the British Parliament, *America was lost through the action of her Irish immigrants.* George Washington acknowledged America's debt to the Irish in a letter thanking them for the part they played in winning America's independence. He wrote to the Marquis de Lafayette that *the people of Ireland need that critical moment to shake off the badges of slavery they have so long worn.*

On the day of the British evacuation of New York, Washington sought out a man whose contribution was known to very few. Generally considered a collaborator, he was in fact Washington's highest intelligence agent, and had been living an extremely dangerous existence in the middle of the British as a tailor to their officers and gentry. He was a daring Irishman with the unusual name of Hercules Mulligan; Washington revealed his identity and service by publicly taking Mulligan to breakfast.

Washington and the founding fathers continuously demonstrated their trust in America's adopted Irish sons and daughters. The first President wrote of his pride in accepting membership in the Friendly Sons of St Patrick, and when Thomas Jefferson campaigned for President, he selected Thomas Addis Emmet - Irish rebel and brother of Ireland's martyred patriot, Robert Emmet - as one of his campaign managers.

Ireland gave America soldiers to win her freedom, and those soldiers left another legacy in true Irish fashion. Alan Lomax, renowned American collector of folk songs noted the presence of the Irish in Washington's continental army by the songs those 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.*