



Ulster-Scots and the Declaration of Independence



Ulster-Scots Agency
Tha Boord o Ulstèr-Scotch

The influence of Ulster-Scots Presbyterians was heavily stamped on the American Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776 and in the unfolding events which led to the establishment of the United States as a nation. The historic Declaration contained sentiments closely identified with the aspirations of the Presbyterian immigrant stock from the north of Ireland who settled in the American colonies during the 18th century.

A significant assertion was: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator, with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness".

The 56 men from the 13 colonies who signed the Declaration were almost entirely of British family origin. Thirty eight were firmly established as being of English extraction, eight Irish (at least five of whom had direct Ulster family connections), five Welsh, four pure Scottish and one Swedish.

One account from Ulster writer the Rev W. F. Marshall records the far-seeing contribution of the Scots-Irish (Ulster-Scots) in the struggle for American independence, with General George Washington reportedly stating: "If defeated everywhere else I will make my last stand for liberty among the Scotch-Irish of my native Virginia".

British Prime Minister at the time Horace Walpole was less flattering, with a jibe to King George III and the British Cabinet: "Cousin America has run off with a Presbyterian parson . . .!" Walpole may have been specifically referring to Scotsman the Rev John Witherspoon, the only clergyman to sign the Declaration, but he will have been highly conscious of the role of the Ulster-Scots in the revolutionary struggle.

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Captain Johann Heinrichs, of the Hessian Jaeger Corps in British service in the colonies, said in 1778: "Call it not an American rebellion; it is nothing more or less than an Irish Scotch (Scotch-Irish) Presbyterian rebellion".

Indeed, Colonel A. K. McClure, the Philadelphia writer, commented: "It was the Scotch-Irish people of the colonies that made the Declaration of Independence of 1776. Without them it would not have been thought of except as a fancy. The actions of the Continental Congress voiced the teachings of the Scotch-Irish people of the land. They did not falter, they did not dissemble, they did not temporise. It was not the Quaker, nor the Puritan, not the Cavalier or the German, it was the Scotch-Irish of the land whose voice was first heard in Virginia".

A forerunner to the American Declaration of Independence was the Mecklenburg Declaration, signed at Charlotte in North Carolina on May 20, 1775 by 27 leading citizens in the region, 18 of whom were of Ulster-Scots Presbyterian origin.

This Carolina backcountry document fearlessly staked the claim for American independence, with the signatories declaring themselves a free and independent people. Similar patriotic sentiments were expressed at the time by Scots-Irish settlers at Abingdon, Virginia, at Pine Creek in western Pennsylvania and at Hanna's Town in south-western Pennsylvania

THOMAS MCKEAN, leading Delaware signatory of the Declaration, was the son of William McKean, an Ulster emigrant from North Antrim who came to Pennsylvania via Londonderry as a child and later married Letitia Finney, whose family had also emigrated from Ulster.



The lawyer Thomas McKean led the movement in Delaware for American independence and served as commander of a patriot militia group known as the Pennsylvania "Associators". He was President of the Continental Congress for a short period in 1781 and was later Governor and served on the Supreme Council of Pennsylvania.

GEORGE TAYLOR, a signatory for Pennsylvania, emigrated from Co Antrim as a 20-year-old in the 1720s and he settled in the Scots-Irish dominated Chester county.

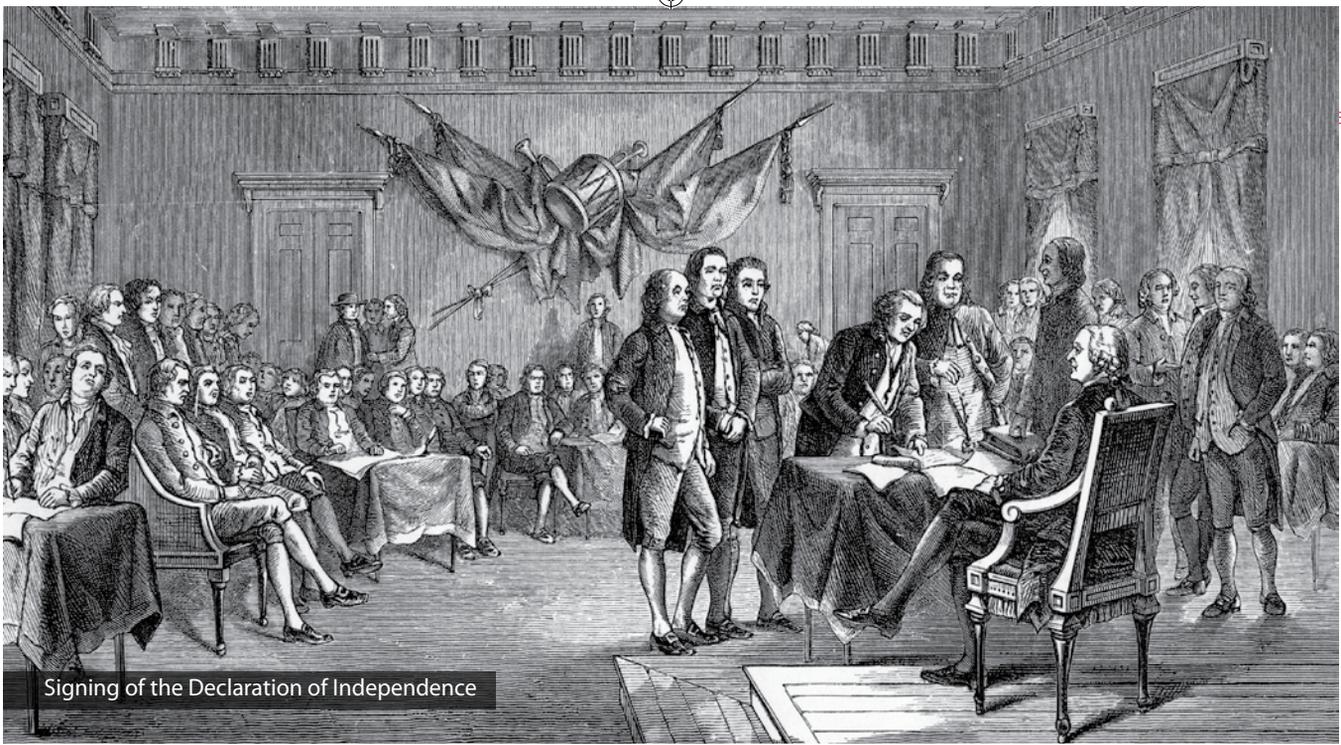


Taylor, involved in the iron producing business, would have been classified as a moderate radical who represented the small farmer Scots-Irish settlers of south-east Pennsylvania. He was a delegate to the second American Continental Congress and served on the Supreme Council of Pennsylvania.

JAMES SMITH, another Declaration signatory from Pennsylvania, emigrated from the north of Ireland as a 10-year-old at about 1719 and, like George Taylor, he also settled with his Presbyterian family in Chester county.



Smith emerged as a leading lawyer and in 1774 he submitted a paper on the constitutional power of Great Britain over the colonies in America, in which he urged an end to the import of British goods and promoted the idea of a congress of the 13 colonies,



Signing of the Declaration of Independence

to promote colonial grievances and ambitions.

He raised a militia group in York, Pennsylvania and joined the American Continental Congress in July 1775, a year before the Declaration was ratified.

MATTHEW THORNTON, signatory from New Hampshire, landed on American soil as a four-year-old in the passage of five ships carrying 120 Presbyterian families from the Bann Valley (Coleraine -Ballymoney-Aghadowey-Macosquin).



Thornton graduated as a doctor and practiced at Londonderry, New Hampshire, a Scots-Irish township, which became heavily involved in the struggle for American independence. His patriot sympathies won him political recognition and it was from his position in the Continental Congress that he readily lined up to sign the Declaration.

Londonderry in New Hampshire is reputed to have sent more soldiers to aid George Washington's armies

in the Revolutionary War than any other backcountry colonial town.

EDWARD RUTLEDGE, whose father Dr John Rutledge left Co Tyrone in the north of Ireland in 1735, was and a signatory of the Declaration from South Carolina.



With his brother John, Edward Rutledge was elected to the Continental Congress in July, 1774 and their commitment to the American patriot cause won the respect of Pennsylvania statesmen Benjamin Franklin and President-to-be from Massachusetts John Adams.

Edward Rutledge later became a United States Senator and was South Carolina governor for two years from 1798.

Other Declaration signers - **JOHN HANCOCK**, **WILLIAM WHIPPLE**, **ROBERT PAINE** and **THOMAS NELSON** - are also believed to have some Ulster links,

while **THOMAS LYNCH Jun.** and **GEORGE READ** had family ties to the south of Ireland.

CHARLES THOMSON, born near Maghera, Co Londonderry in 1729, emigrated with his family 10 years later. He was secretary to the Continental Congress for 15 years from 1774 to 1789.



Thomson, a Presbyterian elder, was a statesman very close to the thinking of General George Washington and his signature was one of only two on the original Declaration of Independence. The other was John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress.

Thomson designed the first Great Seal of America and it was he who was delegated to convey to George Washington at his Mount Vernon, Virginia home in 1789 the request of Congress that Washington should become first President of the United States.

JOHN DUNLAP, the American pioneer printer who printed the first copies of the Declaration of Independence, was born in Strabane, Co Tyrone. Dunlap's printed copies were circulated soon after the signing throughout the various American colonies and the first newspaper outside America to publish the first text was the Belfast News Letter in its edition of August 23-27, 1776.



Dunlap was printer to the American Continental Congress during the Revolutionary War and in 1777 he founded the Philadelphia Packet newspaper, which became a daily publication from 1783.

As a soldier, Dunlap served in the first troop of Philadelphia Cavalry, which acted as bodyguard to General George Washington at the battles of Trenton and Princeton.

Patriot merchant and militia man **COLONEL JOHN NIXON** gave the first public reading of the Declaration in Philadelphia Square on July 8, 1776. Nixon was the grandson of Ulster immigrants.

Ulster Presbyterian minister and teacher the **REV FRANCIS ALLISON** played a key role in shaping opinion on American independence and his pupils included three members of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia - Thomas McKean, Charles Thomson and Dublin-born George Read.



Allison, born at Leck near Letterkenny, Co Donegal, emigrated to America in 1735 after graduating from Glasgow University. He ran an academy at Philadelphia and was recognised by Benjamin Franklin as a man of "great ingenuity and learning". During the Revolutionary War years, Francis Allison preached to the Continental Congress.

Historical research for this leaflet was carried out by **BILLY KENNEDY**, author of the Scots-Irish Chronicles (10 volumes), 1995 – 2009.



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