

Irish Heroes: Founding American Independence and Identity

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The United States is a globally recognized leader, defined by its principles of democracy, liberty, independence, diversity, and charity. However, the way the U.S. achieved these pillars is frequently overlooked, particularly regarding one ethnic group. The contributions of men and women of Irish heritage to the founding of the United States of America are innumerable and often understated, so the best way to comprehend their true impact is to examine the stories of specific Irish people within greater movements that assisted in establishing the U.S.

Since colonial times, the Irish have had a profound presence in America. Many left Ireland due to economic hardship, religious conflict, and the lack of self-determination and immigrated to the American colonies in search of religious freedom and land ownership (“Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History”). As war erupted between the Patriots and the British, most Irish colonists sided with the Patriots as they understood the oppressiveness of the English government. During the American Revolution, the Irish spearheaded the intellectual and militaristic efforts leading to independence. One prominent figure was Thomas McKean, a man born to Irish parents in Pennsylvania. McKean became a Representative to the Delaware Assembly, served for seventeen years, and became Delaware’s representative to the Stamp-Act Congress in 1755 (Haltigan 131-132). McKean stood out as an outspoken individual dedicated to liberty, earning his membership in the Continental Congress. There, he helped draft the Articles of Confederation and strongly advocated for the Declaration of Independence, later signing the document (Haltigan 132-133). Despite his Irish background, McKean wholeheartedly dedicated himself to establishing the American independence that the U.S. stands upon to this day. Another Irishman who fought with the pen was Charles Carroll of Carrollton. Born in 1737 in Maryland, where his grandfather had emigrated to around 1689, Carroll received a Jesuit education and became well-versed in philosophy during his studies in France (Goodrich 857). Upon returning

to the colonies, Carroll wrote against the high colonial fees, becoming influential among Marylanders. Specifically, Carroll denounced excessive taxation of Catholics, and while he was scrutinized for being Catholic, he continued to publicly oppose anti-Catholic laws and the British, gaining him recognition as a revolutionary leader (“Charles Carroll of Carrollton”). In 1776, Carroll convinced the Maryland delegates to vote in favor of the Declaration of Independence and was appointed to the Continental Congress. Although he risked signing away his fortune, Carroll became the only Roman Catholic to sign the Declaration of Independence (Goodrich 359-362). Even though Carroll faced anti-Catholic discrimination, as many Irish did at the time, he persevered and fought for the freedom of all Americans and religious equality. His efforts assisted in establishing the country and making it both a refuge of religious freedom for all people and a center of diversity.

Aside from waging the ideological battle of the American Revolution, the Irish also constituted a large portion of the Continental Army, proving to be some of the bravest fighters. In fact, General Lee wrote that he believed half of the Patriot soldiers came from Ireland (O’Connor qtd. in Lee 452). This Irish battalion was composed of both men and women. During the revolution, “Molly Pitcher” became known as a woman who followed her husband into war and even fought. However, her tale was influenced by multiple women. One of these women was Margaret Corbin, an Irish-American who attended the attack upon Fort Mifflin. When her husband, a matross, was shot and killed, Corbin courageously filled her husband’s post and manned his cannon (Egle 52-53). Due to her heroism, Corbin was recognized as a soldier and became the first woman to receive a pension for military service in the U.S. (Teipe). Through her bravery, Corbin helped to gain U.S. independence and dissolve gender stereotypes, establishing two keystones of true American freedom: the principles of women’s rights and gender equality.

Another fighter, John Barry, was born in Wexford in 1745 and immigrated to Philadelphia young. Due to his naval experience, Barry was given command of several ships by the Continental Congress and captured multiple British ships, earning him the title “Father of U.S. Navy” (“John Barry”). While he was a native Irishman, Barry championed the fight for American independence. Just as Corbin and Barry valiantly fought, countless Irish fought bravely and helped bring the Revolutionary War to an end in 1783, establishing the United States as an independent country.

Although the U.S. was technically founded at this point, the Irish continued to influence the politics, culture, and principles of the country, founding the identity of the U.S. known today. Revisiting Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the sole Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence, Carroll joined the U.S. Senate, signed the U.S. Constitution, and funded the creation of a church basilica and Georgetown University (“Charles Carroll of Carrollton | Constitution Center”). Carroll significantly contributed to the foundations of the U.S.; he signed the still-existing governing document of the country and drastically expanded opportunities for Catholics. Despite the great anti-Catholic prejudice at the time, Carroll became the first Catholic senator, a highly influential government role, and founded a university that allowed Catholics to pursue higher education. His efforts greatly contributed to the expansion of Catholicism and opportunities for Catholics in the U.S. and helped make the country the haven of religious freedom it is today. In the 1840s and decades following, the Irish Potato Famine incited a massive wave of Irish immigration to the U.S., providing this fledgling country with the workforce needed to transform it into an economic powerhouse. Through this, the Irish became the face and voice of labor in the United States. When labor conditions were deficient, Mother Jones stepped in. Born in Cork, Ireland in 1836, Mary Harris Jones emigrated to Toronto as a

child, receiving her education there. She became a teacher and eventually lived in Chicago, but a fire rendered her homeless. Due to this, Jones became interested in the Knights of Labor, an expanding labor union. Over time, she became the leading figure of labor unions, championing mine workers' rights, earning her the name "Mother Jones" (Steel XXIII-XXV). For example, she wrote to John Mitchell, President of the United Mine Workers of America, "The miners themselves arranged a meeting for me... my audience they came from all over the mountains for ten miles" (Jones qtd. in Steel 15). Through her passionate speeches, Jones secured rights for workers and strengthened the democracy that is foundational to the U.S., affirming that the people have the power. Additionally, the Irish spread Catholicism in the U.S., constructing hundreds of churches that foster Irish and Catholic communities (Jones). The Irish also set the stage for the U.S. to be a philanthropic nation, forming early charities such as the Charitable Irish Society, established in 1737 to serve both native-Irish people and Americans in need (Shannon 96). The efforts of this Irish organization and many others have assisted Americans and weaved charity into the American identity.

It is evident that men and women of Irish heritage have made tremendous contributions to the establishment of the United States as a country and to the founding of its identity. To this day, the Irish continue to shape the country, its culture, and its people. Without the efforts of the brave Irish people mentioned and others alike, the United States would not be the same country it is today, and perhaps not even a country at all.

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