

# Bound by Virtue: How Irish Men and Women Forged American Liberty

By Keira Driscoll

Irish immigrants have made a deep and influential impact on the culture, policies, and values the United States was founded on, dating back to the American Revolution. In the 18th century, Native Irish Catholics and Ulster-Scots immigrated to the United States, sharing the overarching belief that the British government was oppressing their freedoms. Ulster-Scots were Presbyterian Protestants whose families originally had been moved from Scotland to Northern Ireland by the British government. By the 1700s, Britain had fully stripped them of their freedoms by imposing high taxes on their linen trade and restricting their religious practices. On the other hand, the Native Irish Catholics fled Ireland due to the Penal Laws, passed by the British government during the 16th and 17th centuries in order to suppress religious practices, land ownership, and the ability to hold public offices. These Irish groups settled mainly in the frontier backcountry of Pennsylvania, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. Their lifestyle and adaptation to wildlife on the frontiers forced immigrants to become fierce, independent, and allowed them to build up the resilience they would need to defend the thirteen colonies in the American Revolution. Having opposed the British since their own conflicts back in Ireland, Irish colonists were dedicated to fighting against British tyranny in America. When the Crown began taxing and enforcing acts in the colonies, they were committed to champion for their new lives. Driven by the desire to end British oppression, Irish heritage men and women put immense effort and sacrifice into the American Revolution, proving their substantial contribution to the founding of the United States while displaying friendship, unity, and Christian charity throughout their initiatives.

The dedication of Irish heritage men was illustrated through their impact as a part of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, where they held true to their belief in

brotherhood, togetherness, and service. Still holding anger towards the British government, Irish men volunteered in droves to be a part of the Continental Army. Their presence did not go unnoticed, as illustrated in the *Examination of Joseph Galloway, Before the House of Commons, 1779*. During the examination, Loyalist Joseph Galloway was called to testify before the British House of Commons to explain why the British were not able to suppress the rebelling colonies. When he was asked about the makeup of Washington's troops, Galloway stated “were scarcely one fourth natives; that about one half were Irish, and the other fourth were English and Scotch”(Great Britain). Backed by the account of a Loyalist, it is made clear how important Irish immigrants were to creating a strong enough population of soldiers against the world renowned British forces. They were the backbone of American troops, earning names like the “Line of Ireland” in units such as the Pennsylvania Line. Scarred by facing injustice in the past, Irish colonists united with one another and other groups in order to create a symbol of the Revolution, serving for the freedom of all in the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness.

Beyond the battlefield, the exceptional leadership of individual Irish men further proved their devotion to American freedom. Commodore John Barry is a perfect example of these values. Coming from County Wexford, Ireland, he worked his way up the ranks and was appointed by the Continental Congress to command early naval operations. He went on to capture more ships than any other captain in the Continental Navy, eventually earning the name “Father of the American Navy”. He snuck past the British in order to deliver supplies to Washington's troops at Valley Forge, commanded the “Raleigh” while fighting two British warships at once to buy time, and even fired the final naval shots of the war in 1783 in order to protect American gold. Throughout every part of his career, he fought bravely and never

surrendered, even with his own life on the line, to protect Continental troops and defend freedom for the American people. With these selfless acts, Barry demonstrated his commitment to the brotherhood of the revolution, proving the unwavering loyalty and influence Irish leadership had on the victory of the revolution and founding of the United States.

While Irish men fought on the front lines, the contributions of Irish women were equally important, sustaining unity on the homefront and keeping peace domestically. With their husbands away for months at a time, colonial communities relied on women completely to stay afloat. Women assumed every role that the men in their lives left behind, becoming farmers, business owners, teachers and community leaders while balancing their typical jobs of cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children. Without any preparation or knowledge of when or if life would ever return to normal, Irish women took on these roles with passion, bravery, and resilience. Their spirit was deeply rooted in Christian charity, with stories often describing how women pooled their resources together, shared their supplies with others, and opened their homes to care for anyone that fell victim to the ongoing conflict. The importance of community was specifically described in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, mentioning the “industry and patriotism of the fair daughters of liberty” who spun wool creating clothing for soldiers. These women did this in order to boycott taxed British goods. With acts of kindness and service, Irish women upheld the colonial communities for years during the American Revolution, and were an incredibly important part of achieving independence.

Leadership and bravery was displayed through Irish women as well, a prime example being Margaret Corbin. Born to an Irish immigrant father, Margaret supported the war by providing medical care to troops with her husband, John. However, during the Battle of Fort

Washington in 1776, her dedication to the fight was horrifically tested. Her husband was killed instantly while operating a cannon right in front of Margaret. Instead of breaking down, giving up, or fleeing, Margaret stepped into her husband's place and continued to operate it until her wounds became too severe to continue. Her strength and determination displayed her passion for American freedom and willingness to fight for the people even in the darkest and most dangerous of times. In a 1779 primary source resolution, the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania awarded her a lifelong military pension for her sacrifice. The fortitude of Irish women as a whole proves their duty to Christian charity and displays their ability to put their lives on the line in order to protect and provide for their communities.

Ultimately, the founding of the United States relied on the sacrifices and bravery of Irish men and women that cannot be overlooked. With a desire built on previous oppression by the British, they worked tirelessly to protect their lives here in America and expand liberty to all citizens. Whether it was through brotherhood on the battlefield, or acts of service back at home, Irish immigrants never forgot the importance of friendship, unity, and Christian charity. They not only fought for a new nation, but they created it, enforcing values of togetherness and service that are infused in American society today.

## Citations

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