

July 4th History: Catholic Patriots Were Unsung Heroes in American Revolution



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Did you know that many Catholic patriots not only took part in the America Revolution but distinguished themselves in fighting for independence, even gaining the admiration of George Washington?

Heroes like John Barry, Stephen Moylan, Mary Waters and Thomas Fitzsimons should be better known.

Commodore John Barry

Commodore John Barry stood tall in both physical height and accomplishments. At 6 feet 4 inches, he towered over most of the soldiers and sailors, whose average height then was 5 feet 8 inches. And figuratively, towering over his opponents during the Revolutionary War, he would earn the title “Father of the American Navy.”

As a young man, this sea captain had immigrated from Ireland and found his new lifelong home in Philadelphia, a city known for brotherly love and religious freedom. On April 7, 1776, in Delaware Bay, weeks before that fateful July 4, he engaged a British war vessel and brought it back to Philadelphia — the first warship captured by a commissioned Continental naval officer.

The fledging Navy had just begun in October 1775 when the Continental Congress bought two warships. Barry, then 30 years old, was assigned to the first ship; on Dec. 7 he was officially named the first captain, or commander, commissioned by the Continental Congress’ Marine Committee. President Washington would appoint Barry to head the Navy, as he trusted in Barry’s “patriotism, valor, fidelity and abilities.”

Barry joined Washington in the Battles of Trenton and Princeton and went on to capture more than 20 British ships — nine during September 1782 alone — often after fierce battles. On a return trip from a mission to France, Barry captured two more warships — despite being severely wounded — showing he was both an exceptional captain and fearless in battle.

Barry also was entrusted with getting the Marquis de Lafayette safely to France. Then, on March 10, 1783, as Barry was protecting a ship bringing financial aid to the Continental Congress, this valiant captain’s frigate engaged in a fierce fight with a British frigate. This last naval battle of the American Revolution was Barry’s victory. A month later, peace was declared.

Soon-to-be Commodore Barry was an “ardent Catholic,” according to Matthew Bunson and Margaret Bunson in their *Encyclopedia of U.S. Catholic History*. “Barry was a firm believer in Divine Providence and regularly opened his ship day with a Bible reading to his crew,” wrote John Barry Kelly in article about the captain. (No mention is made if the writer was descended from the captain.) Captain Barry had no children from his first marriage. After his first wife died, he remarried. Although he had no children, he and his second wife raised his two nephews, sons of his late sister. Both wives were Protestants who converted to Catholicism. “The Barrys were regular parishioners at several Philadelphia Catholic churches: Old St. Joseph’s, Old St. Mary’s and, eventually, St. Augustine’s,” noted writer Barry. The naval hero and his wives are buried in St. Mary’s Church cemetery.

Irish-Born Philadelphians

Other Irish-born Philadelphians joined the American Revolution and earned reputations as illustrious patriots, too. One was Stephen Moylan, a successful city merchant. At the start of the Revolutionary War, he volunteered for Washington’s Army. Rising quickly in the ranks, in 1775, he acted as Washington’s first secretary; then, in June 1776, he was appointed commissary general of the Continental Army. Fighting in the Battle of Princeton, he formed a horse regiment upon Washington’s request. He suffered along with his fellow soldiers at Valley Forge and fought in other battles through the victory at Yorktown. Moylan not only became quartermaster general of the Continental Army, but he was named a brigadier general. At the same time, as a member of the Continental Army, his brother John was appointed the clothier general. Their brother Francis did not join the fray — he remained in Ireland and served the Church as the bishop of Cork.

Another Irish-American Philadelphian was nurse Mary Waters. A tireless worker in the Revolutionary Army’s hospitals, she received praise and accolades from one of the prominent physicians of the day with whom she worked — Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of the Founding Fathers and a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

From the same city and also Irish-born, merchant Thomas FitzSimons served in the Continental Congress of 1774. The Bunsons note that FitzSimons had “the distinction of being the first Catholic chosen for public office in Pennsylvania.” In the Continental Army, he commanded a company, raised money for the war and gathered needed supplies. After the war was won, he became one of only two Catholics to become a framer of the Constitution. (The other was Daniel Carroll of Maryland.) FitzSimons was then elected to the first House of Representatives.

They Came From Carrollton

Then there were the Carrolls. The celebrated Charles Carroll of Carrollton, who served on the Board of War during the American Revolutionary War, is the most prominent. Out of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, Charles Carroll was the only Catholic. But other relatives played a strong role in the American Revolution too.

Charles Carroll's first cousins were Daniel Carroll, another delegate to the Constitutional Convention, and his brother Father John Carroll. Daniel began working for American independence first, and later, Washington himself asked Daniel to "develop the nation's capital," the Bunsons explain.

During the Revolutionary War, Father Carroll ministered to Catholic colonists as well as the French and European Catholics who joined the cause. Among them were Casimir Pulaski and Brig. Gen. Tadeusz Kościuszko. An ardent patriot, Father Carroll accompanied his cousin Charles and Benjamin Franklin on a trip to try to secure Canada's alliance or neutrality amid the struggle for independence.



After the war was won, the Holy See created a diocese in what became the new United States. Father Carroll was appointed the country's first bishop and untiringly helped the Church in America grow. Noted for helping all people, he earned the respect of Protestants. And in 1792, he was the first to consecrate the country to our Blessed Mother under the title "Immaculate Conception." "Of those things that give me most consolation at the present moment," he said, "one is that I have always been attached to the practice of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary; that I have established it among the people under my care, and placed my diocese under her protection."

A Presidential Letter

No doubt Catholics made their mark as our nation began. No less than the head of the country honored them. In March 1790, President Washington recognized their contribution in a personal letter addressed to Catholics in which he wrote:

"As mankind become more liberal they will be more apt to allow that all those who conduct themselves as worthy members of the community are equally entitled to the protection of civil government. I hope ever to see America among the foremost nations in examples of justice and liberality. And I presume that your fellow-citizens will not forget the patriotic part which you took in the accomplishment of their Revolution, and the establishment of their government; or the important assistance which they received from a nation in which the Roman Catholic faith is professed."