

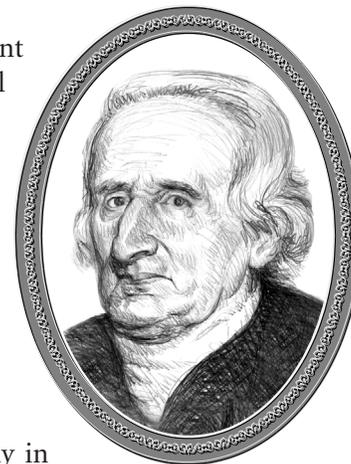
CHARLES CARROLL OF CARROLLTON (1737–1832)

Government was instituted for the general good, but officers entrusted with its powers, have most commonly perverted them to the selfish views of avarice and ambition.

—Charles Carroll, 1773



The boisterous patrons of the small Maryland tavern fell suddenly silent as the small, well-dressed man appeared in the entrance. Charles Carroll of Carrollton paused as the gazes of so many fell upon him. Suddenly, one man called out, “There is the First Citizen!” The crowd rose as one to its feet and burst into applause. Carroll politely doffed his hat and bowed slightly in return. Carroll had been using the pen name “First Citizen” in a series of newspaper essays defending the liberties of Marylanders against the colonial government. By this spring of 1773, the prosperous plantation owner had indeed become the first among equals in the eyes of his fellow Marylanders.



Background

Charles Carroll was born on September 19, 1737, to a Catholic family in Annapolis, Maryland. His grandfather had moved there from Great Britain to escape religious persecution. Charles’ father owned hundreds of slaves and prospered as a tobacco planter. He expected young Charles to take over the family business once he had proved himself “a worthy heir.” Charles was sent to London and Paris, where he received an extensive Catholic education. When he returned to Maryland in 1765, he helped his father manage a forty-thousand-acre estate on which two hundred eighty-five slaves toiled.

As a Catholic, Carroll knew that he was at a disadvantage in America. When his grandfather came to Maryland, the governing family, the Baltimores, practiced religious tolerance. However, Maryland became a royal colony in 1691 and, therefore, subject to English law. The Church of England became the official church, and Catholics felt the consequences. They could not practice law or vote. They were prohibited from serving in government. They were also forced to pay taxes to the Anglican Church. Despite these severe restrictions, Carroll remained in his homeland.

The Revolutionary

The year 1772 marked the beginning of Carroll’s twenty-eight-year role as revolutionary spokesman and civil servant. He became involved in politics when the governor of Maryland fixed government officials’ public service fees at a high rate. At the time, citizens had to pay officials directly for certain public services. The proceeds from these fees were used to pay the officials’ salaries. Daniel Dulany, a high-ranking Maryland official, defended the governor’s act in a series of articles published in the *Maryland Gazette*. Carroll quickly responded.

Writing under the name “First Citizen,” Carroll argued that the fees were taxes. He contended that only the Maryland Assembly, not the governor, had the right to levy taxes. “In a land of freedom,” Carroll argued, “this arbitrary [unpredictable] exertion of prerogative [power] will not, must not, be endured.” The identity of the First Citizen soon became known to all. Dulany responded with both argument and personal attack. He questioned Carroll’s right as a Catholic to become involved in public affairs. Carroll defended the right of Catholics to speak out on political issues.

Carroll believed that the restrictions placed on Catholics in Maryland were motivated by a desire for power on the part of the Protestant majority. Religious belief was merely an excuse to deny political influence to men like Carroll. “Designing and selfish men,” Carroll complained in the year following his First Citizen letters, “invented religious tests to exclude from posts of profit and trust their weaker or more conscientious fellow subjects, thus to secure to themselves all the emoluments [benefits] of Government.”

The battle on paper between a powerful government official and a Catholic landowner captivated the reading public. As First Citizen, Carroll earned a reputation for intelligence and character. Soon he was elected to serve on local committees that supported revolutionary ideals.

In October 1774, Carroll was again in the spotlight. The local merchant ship *Peggy Stewart* had arrived in Annapolis with a shipment of goods, including tea leaves. With Lexington and Concord only six months away, times were tense. The English monopoly on tea and oppressive British trade policies had driven most merchants to sign a nonimportation agreement in protest. When the colonists learned of the shipment, they were outraged. They threatened the lives of the owner and crew.

The vessel’s owner called upon the influential Carroll for advice. It was immediately clear to Carroll that an apology or exportation of the tea would not satisfy the crowd. He offered a drastic solution: burn the tea along with the entire ship. Doubtful but desperate, the owner agreed. Crisis was averted.

Diplomacy and the Declaration

As the colonies plunged deeper into conflict with the British, Carroll worked tirelessly for independence. The citizens of Maryland elected him to serve on the first Committee of Safety in Annapolis. He also served in the Provincial Congress in 1775. The following year, he was chosen to represent Maryland in the Continental Congress.

The Congress chose Carroll, along with Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Chase, to serve on a mission to gain Canada’s support for the Revolution. Carroll was picked because he spoke French and was Catholic, like many Canadians. Though the delegation returned home empty-handed, Carroll became recognized as an important player in the national political arena.

In the spring of 1776, Carroll returned home and learned that Congress would soon vote on a resolution to separate from Great Britain. He also found out that the Maryland delegates in Congress had been instructed by the colonial assembly to oppose independence.

Carroll immediately returned to Annapolis to argue the merits of independence. He reminded the delegates of England’s tyranny. After much debate, the Maryland legislature joined in support of separation. In July, Carroll returned to the Continental Congress. Though he missed the vote for independence on July 4, he “most willingly” signed the Declaration of Independence on August 2. Carroll was the only Catholic to put his name to that document.

It was reported that after Carroll signed his name, a spectator commented, “There go a few millions.” If Britain won the war, Carroll would certainly lose his family estate and perhaps even his life. Victory, however, could bring both political and religious liberty. Like all who supported the Revolution, Carroll was willing to sacrifice everything he had for independence and liberty.

In Service to State and Nation

During the American Revolution, Carroll immersed himself in public duties. In 1776, he was elected to the Maryland Convention, the body that governed the state during the war. The convention appointed Carroll to the committee responsible for creating a state constitution. Carroll succeeded in enshrining religious liberty in the Declaration of Rights attached to the document. The final version of the Declaration asserted that “all persons professing the Christian religion are equally entitled to protection in their religious liberty.” Catholics thereby became equal citizens under Maryland law, having earned the right to vote and hold office.

After independence, Carroll continued to serve in the Maryland legislature. Following the adoption of the new Constitution in 1789, Carroll also served as a United States senator. In 1792, however, Maryland disallowed simultaneous service in both the national and state legislatures. Carroll therefore resigned from the national legislature in order to continue serving his state. He retired from the Maryland Senate in 1800.

Retirement

Even in retirement, Carroll continued to make public appearances. On July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Carroll composed a short address to honor the occasion. “I do hereby recommend,” he announced, “to the present and future generations the principles of that important document as the best earthly inheritance their ancestors could bequeath to them.”

Carroll’s stature grew in his later years; he became famous among his countrymen as the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence. On November 14, 1832, at the age of ninety-five, Carroll died, quietly closing a chapter on the Founding generation.



Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What two topics did Carroll address in his First Citizen letters?
2. What did Carroll think was the reason that Catholics were denied rights in Maryland?
3. Why did Carroll become even more famous during the last few years of his life?

Critical Thinking Questions

4. What did Charles Carroll stand to lose by supporting the American Revolution? What did he stand to gain?
5. Imagine that you are Charles Carroll in 1832. Compose a one-paragraph newspaper article in which you reflect on the changes in Maryland between 1765 and 1832.