

Saving and Sharing Maine's Scots-Irish Heritage



MAINE ULSTER SCOTS PROJECT

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The Maine Ulster Scots Project (MUSP) has been created to promote awareness of Maine's Scots-Irish heritage and to gather and archive the histories of Maine's Ulster-Scots families, up to and including the time of the American Revolution. This history has been greatly overlooked and under-reported in many Maine history reference books.

*They came here to make their own way, on their own terms.
They were not universally welcomed.*

The following article is provided to us by Alister J. McReynolds who has made two trips to Maine to study the connections between the province of Ulster and the people of Maine, New England and Nova Scotia. The Maine Ulster Scots Project was pleased to host Mr. McReynolds during his trips here and were fortunate to have his expert guiding services this past August during a trip to Northern Ireland.

John T. Mann, Chair Maine Ulster Scots Project

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Alister McReynolds at the Research Library, Londonderry, New Hampshire

Matthew Thornton

In this article (which was written as the final instalment of a three-part series on signers of the Declaration of Independence, who were born in Ulster), Alister McReynolds portrays Matthew Thornton, who was arguably the most distinguished of the trio.

Matthew Thornton was born in Northern Ireland in 1714. When he was three years of age his father James decided to emigrate to (America). The Thornton family settled first outside Bruns-

wick Maine on a plot of land overlooking Maquoit Bay on Rossmore Road. In 1976 the Brunswick Knights of Columbus placed a granite marker on the site of the former Thornton homestead. Often accounts of Thornton's life state that the family settled at 'Wiscasset Maine', but this is not correct. In and around 1720 Brunswick was the outpost of the "Eastern territory" and was on the frontline that stood between the aspirations and momentum of three major cultures, each of which was seeking its own territory.



This triangle of struggle consisted of:-

The English in Boston and Falmouth to the West
The Native American peoples to the North and in the interior
The French of Acadia, Nova Scotia and the St. Lawrence to the East.

In a way this juxtaposition was prophetic - for Matthew Thornton's private and public life was to interface, at different times, with the struggles of all three contenders.

The first such encounter was to occur five years later; on July 11th 1722 when a band of Native Americans attacked the town. James Thornton, his wife Elizabeth and their young son Matthew fled from their burning home and escaped by canoe. Narrowly escaping death they made their way initially to Casco Bay Maine. From there they moved to the Scots Irish settlement of Worcester Massachusetts (see article by this writer on The Scots Irish in New England – Special edition June 2007). In Worcester Matthew Thornton received a classical education at the Worcester Academy. The family subsequently left Worcester as a result of the bad treatment meted out to the Scots Irish of the town by the Congregationalist Puritan burghers. Matthew Thornton completed his studies in Medicine in Leicester and then in 1740 opened up his medical practice in Londonderry New Hampshire. This proved to be a position which was financially lucrative and Thornton became a wealthy citizen. Londonderry was relatively small at this time but by 1775 it had grown to become the second largest town in New Hampshire in both population and taxable wealth.

In 1745, five years after he had hung out his Doctor's slate in Londonderry, Matthew Thornton was still a bachelor and decided to volunteer his services as a military surgeon on the 'Fort Louisburg' expedition to Cape Breton. This was a major British campaign against the French and ended with the taking of the aforementioned French fort at the mouth of the St Lawrence waterway. During this campaign Matthew Thornton's skill as a surgeon was particularly noted. In spite of the magnitude of the operation, consequent from the fighting only 6 lives were lost on the British side. After this 'tour of duty' Matthew Thornton returned home to Londonderry New Hampshire where he remained in the local militia and eventually in 1775 received a commission as a Colonel from Governor Wentworth. Realistically however at 61 he was too old for active service. We have descriptions of Dr Matthew Thornton in 1750's which portray him as tall, clear-eyed and handsome and added to this possessing a charm and storytelling capability that kept his friends enthralled for hours on end.

Matthew Thornton was 46 years of age when he married Hannah Jack in 1760 and the couple were to have five children. From the outset Thornton took an active part in the overthrow of the British governance in New Hampshire and was prominent in his opposition to the Stamp Act. In 1768 Matthew Thornton and the other members of his family were granted the township which still bears his name – Thornton.

In 1775 Matthew Thornton was elected President of the Convention and over the next decade held a series of positions as Chairman of committees and President of the Constitutional Convention. Subsequently he became President of the fifth Congress which adopted the first Constitution of the Colonies on January 5th 1776. He also chaired the 5 man committee which drafted the document.

Although not elected until November 4th 1776 and thus after the passage of the Declaration of Independence, Matthew Thornton was allowed to sign the engrossed copy of the document. He had attested and it had been fully accepted that retrospectively he was fully in accordance with the voting on the issue. Thornton arrived in Philadelphia just one day before he signed the Declaration and commenced his two year stint in Congress. Some 18 months prior to his arrival in Philadelphia Matthew Thornton had written a letter to Congress advocating complete independence from Great Britain. This was a view that was not universally supported at the time. However by November 1776 it was the almost unanimous viewpoint of the activists in the Colonies.

After the adoption of the January 1776 Constitution, the first in the Colonies, Thornton was elected as the first speaker of the House. Subsequently he became a member of the Council although Meshech Weare was named as Head of this Body.

From 1776 until 1782 Matthew Thornton served as Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas – the superior court of New Hampshire. In 1779 he returned to Exeter New Hampshire and in 1780 settled his family there on a farm which he purchased when it was confiscated from the prominent Tory – Edward Goldstone Lutwyche. As part of this land in Merrimack County he owned a ferry on the Merrimack River which is known to this day as Thornton's ferry. He gave up his medical practice at this time.

In his 70's from 1784 – 1787 Matthew Thornton was a member of the New Hampshire State Senate and coupled this with an adjunct role from 1785 – 1786 as a State Councillor. Double tragedy struck him within a twelve month period when in 1786 his wife died and his son passed away the following year. Thornton himself had increasing infirmities and shortly after this he retired from public life. Nonetheless he continued to write articles on matters of the day throughout his eighties. In his last days he composed but didn't publish a metaphysical work on the origin of sin.

Matthew Thornton died on June 24th 1803 aged 89 whilst on a visit to the home of his daughter in Newburyport Massachusetts.

In 1887 the legislature of New Hampshire voted \$1000 for a monument to be placed over Matthew Thornton's grave in Merrimack New Hampshire. Other monuments and memorials were to follow including that which gave his name to the 'Matthew Thornton High School' in Londonderry New Hampshire. He will be especially remembered here in Ulster for the fact that during the period of transition of the American Legislature from the British to the Provincial authorities, Matthew Thornton, an Ulsterman by birth, was viewed by many as the leader of the Government.

Alister J. McReynolds



and convenience of the
the Military Officers under
Mr Thornton Ch.

