

August 2016 #16-33

Summary:

In what could be called his last testament, Charles Carroll bequeathed to a young nation his deep regard for the principles of freedom for which the Founders each pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor 240 years ago.

Word Count 670

“...[W]hen John Hancock asked Carroll to sign—and Carroll responded, ‘Most willingly’—a bystander commented, ‘There go a few millions.’”

“The Best Earthly Inheritance” Our Founders Bequeathed

By Kathryn Hickok

Every July much is said about the blessings of liberty, the meaning of the American Experiment, and the price of freedom. But this year we also mark the 240th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and, on August 10, of the arrival of the news of this world-altering decision in London.

Benjamin Franklin is [said to have advised](#) his fellow patriots of the potential consequences of challenging the British Empire and its king: “We must all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately.” While each of the 56 British subjects who affixed their names to the Declaration risked life, fortune, and sacred honor, none may have risked as much as the delegate from Maryland, Charles Carroll of Carrollton.

At the time of the signing, Charles Carroll was the wealthiest man in the American colonies. The risk he took in siding with the cause of independence was acknowledged to be substantial, both in material terms and in his social standing as one of the most prominent citizens of Maryland. In his book, [Charles Carroll of Carrollton: Faithful Revolutionary](#), biographer Scott McDermott recounts that when John Hancock asked Carroll to sign—and Carroll responded, “Most willingly”—a bystander commented, “There go a few millions.”

And just to make sure that everyone, including King George III, knew which of Maryland’s many Charles Carrolls was the signer, he proudly added the words “[of Carrollton](#)” (his Frederick County estate). Thus, history remembers him as “[Charles Carroll of Carrollton](#).”

Carroll is unique among the signers for more than just his wealth. He was, in fact, ineligible to vote or to hold public office when he was chosen by the Maryland Convention as a delegate to Congress to approve the Declaration on its behalf. [Maryland’s early Toleration Act](#) granting religious freedom had been overturned in 1692, so Catholics could not vote, hold public office, worship in public, or freely educate their children in their faith.

Carroll’s participation in the War of Independence was motivated by his firm belief in natural law and rights, government by consent of the citizens, and freedom of religion. The Catholic minority in the British American colonies recognized in the cause of liberty the path to equality under law.



Carroll strongly supported and collaborated with George Washington during the war, influenced the crafting of the Maryland and the U.S. Constitutions, and served as the first senator from the new state of Maryland. His public life was long, and he was a giant figure through the early decades of the 19th century. Looked up to as an elder statesman and symbol of national unity, at his death in 1832, the *Baltimore American* called him “the last of the Romans”—a reference to the classical prototype of the generation who built the new but maturing Republic.

Charles Carroll’s brief testament to the America he would leave behind was written on a parchment copy of the Declaration, dated July 4, 1826. He wrote in the style of a man educated in the 18th century, but behind the formality is a stark humility and a simple message intended for today:

“Grateful to Almighty God for the blessing which, through Jesus Christ our Lord, he has conferred upon my beloved country, in her emancipation, and upon myself, in permitting me, under circumstances of mercy,...to survive the fiftieth year of American Independence, and certifying by my present signature my approbation of the Declaration of Independence adopted by Congress..., and of which I am now the last surviving signer, ***I do hereby recommend to the present and future generations the principles of that important document as the best earthly inheritance their ancestors could bequeath to them, and pray that the civil and religious liberties they have secured to my country may be perpetuated to the remotest posterity and extended to the whole family of man.***”

As we celebrate many historic anniversaries of our freedom this year, and the legacy of each of America’s founders, let us also “[remember Carroll’s sacred trust](#)...and all [who slumber] with the just.”

Kathryn Hickok is Publications Director and Director of the Children’s Scholarship Fund-Portland program at Cascade Policy Institute, Oregon’s free market public policy research organization.

“Carroll’s participation in the War of Independence was motivated by his firm belief in natural law and rights, government by consent of the citizens, and freedom of religion.”

Attention editors
and producers:

Cascade Commentaries are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications, with credit given to author(s) and Cascade. Contact Cascade to arrange print or broadcast interviews on this commentary topic.

Please contact:

Cascade Policy Institute
4850 SW Scholls Ferry Rd.
Suite 103
Portland, Oregon 97225

Phone: (503) 242-0900
Fax: (503) 242-3822

www.cascadepolicy.org
info@cascadepolicy.org

Cascade Policy Institute is a tax-exempt educational organization as defined under IRS code 501 (c)(3). Nothing appearing in this Cascade Commentary is to be construed as necessarily representing the views of Cascade or its donors. The views expressed herein are the author’s own.