

In the Spotlight

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LIVING HISTORY



by Gene Pisasale

Living History: Thomas McKean, the 'Forgotten Founding Father'

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How many people do you know of who: 1) served as the governor of two states, 2) fought in a major war which changed the course of history, and 3) wrote the Constitution of his state? Chester County native Thomas McKean did all those things and much more. Born in New London Township on March 19, 1734, Thomas McKean was one of the most gifted politicians of his time. He participated in early debates over American independence from England, showing his dedication to "the cause" (as George Washington called it) by serving in the local militia during the Revolutionary War.

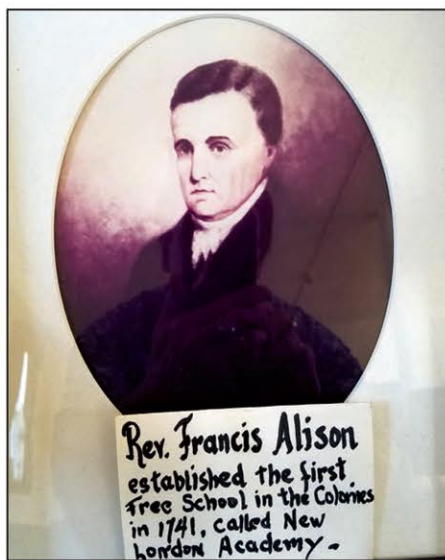
McKean was educated at Reverend Francis Alison's New London Academy in New London Township, Chester County, one of the earliest schools in the American colonies. Alison had other students who later became famous: George Read and James Smith. All three men, including McKean, were signers of the Declaration of Independence. Charles Thomson, the Secretary of the Continental Congress from 1774 to 1789 also was a student of Alison's. The New London Academy later moved from the township and became the Newark Academy in Delaware, which itself was the forerunner of the University of Delaware.

At age 16, McKean went to New Castle, Delaware to study law. He was admitted to the Bar of the Lower Counties (as Delaware was then known) in 1755; the next year he was admitted to the Bar of Pennsylvania. McKean had a superb legal mind and was an active participant in the Stamp Act Congress of 1765, where he and his friend, Delaware resident Caesar Rodney were vocal supporters of the "one state, one vote" policy which Congress later adopted in its proceedings. McKean had active ties to both Pennsylvania and Delaware. He and his first wife lived at 22 The Strand in New Castle. After she

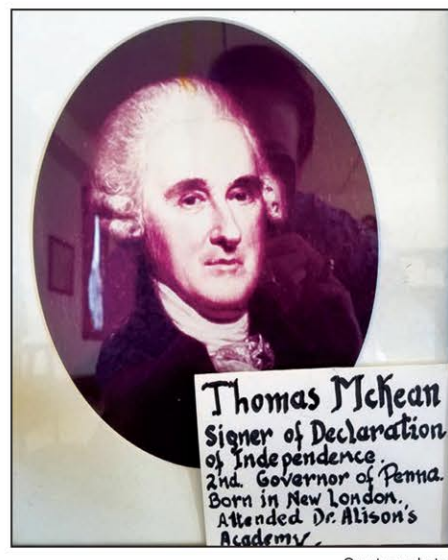
died, McKean re-married, and with his second wife he resided at the northeast corner of 3rd and Pine Streets in downtown Philadelphia. It was a short walk for him to the Pennsylvania State House, where he was a delegate to both the First and Second Continental Congress, and active in the struggle for liberty. He served in several important positions, including the Secret Committee (procuring supplies and material), the Claims Committee, the Treasury and the Qualifications Committee reviewing officer appointments to Washington's Continental Army.

McKean's claim to fame came when Delaware's delegates to the Second Continental Congress were about to vote regarding independence. When his colleague from the Academy, George Read, indicated he was against the motion, "cancelling" McKean's vote to approve, he knew he had to do something. The colonies desperately wanted to show unanimity in their deliberations. On July 1, 1776, McKean urgently requested that Caesar Rodney attend the meeting to break the tie and put Delaware in the "approved" camp. A messenger traveled ninety miles to Rodney's house outside Dover, imploring him to come to Philadelphia. Rodney rode all night through a rainstorm and arrived the next day, casting his vote in favor of independence.

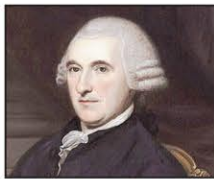
Shortly after his vote, McKean left to join the Fourth Battalion of the Pennsylvania Associators, forerunner of today's 111th unit of the Pennsylvania National Guard. The Associators supported Washington's army defending New York City. Because of his absence, McKean was not present when most delegates signed the Declaration in August 1776; he penned his name later. John Adams thought very highly of McKean, saying he was: "... one of the three men in the Continental Congress who appeared to me to see more clearly to the end of the business than any others in the body."



A portrait of Francis Alison courtesy of New London Township.



A portrait of Thomas McKean courtesy of New London Township.



McKean had an important influence on his adopted state of Delaware. As a member of their Legislature, he'd led the way for official separation from Pennsylvania. When he was selected to draft the new state's founding document, he rode from Philadelphia to Dover, spending the night in a tavern, where he single-handedly wrote the Delaware Constitution. It was adopted on September 20, 1776—the first state Constitution ratified after the Declaration of Independence.

After Delaware's President (Governor) John McKinly was captured by the British following the Battle of the Brandywine, McKean served briefly as Delaware's Governor. Decades before multi-tasking became the rage, McKean used his talents as the Chief Justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court while he was serving as Governor of Delaware. Although he did not attend the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, he was a delegate to Pennsylvania's ratifying convention, where he argued successfully



The Thomas McKean High School in New Castle County, Delaware is named for Thomas McKean, as is a street in downtown Philadelphia and a dormitory at the University of Delaware.

for approval. Due to his popularity in both states, McKean later served as the Governor of Pennsylvania from December 17, 1799 to December 20, 1808.

McKean is memorialized in many places. McKean County, Pennsylvania was created in his honor in 1804. Thomas McKean High School in New Castle County, Delaware is named for him, as is a street in downtown Philadelphia and a dormitory at the University of Delaware. If you want to see his roots, take a drive on Newark Road near New London. A simple blue and gold historical marker stands by the side of the road amidst the rolling hills of Chester County. While you cannot see the many contributions he made during the fledgling years of our republic, if you listen



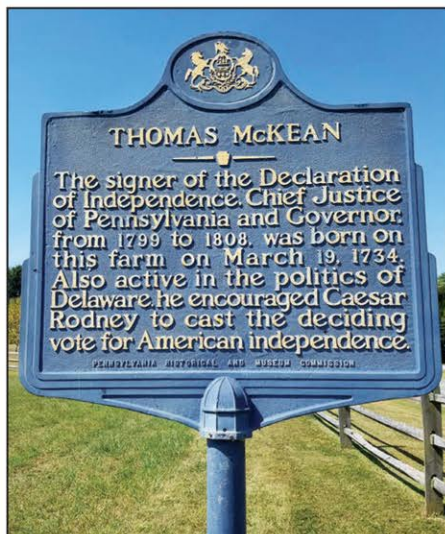
Thomas McKean's gravesite in the Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia.

to the wind blowing across the fields, you can almost hear his voice... requesting a critical tie-breaking vote early in our nation's history and bringing life to the principles he cherished.

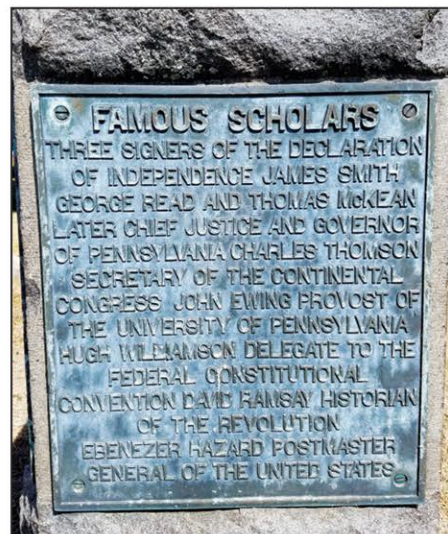
Gene Pisasale is an historian and author based in Kennett Square. He has written ten books and lectures on historical topics throughout the Philadelphia area. His latest book is "Forgotten Founding Fathers: Pennsylvania and Delaware in the American Revolution." His books are available on his website at www.GenePisasale.com and on www.Amazon.com. He can be reached via e-mail at Gene@GenePisasale.com.



The historical marker denoting the formation of the New London Academy.



A simple blue and gold historical marker stands by the side of the road amidst the rolling hills of Chester County.



The historical marker at the New London Township Building listing students of New London Academy.