

Thomas Mifflin

An Address delivered by Dr. H. M. J. Klein, at the Unveiling of a Bronze Memorial Tablet at Trinity Lutheran Churchyard, on the Occasion of the Sesqui-Centennial Observance of the Signing of the Federal Constitution, September 29, 1937

It was altogether a remarkable group of men that formed the Federal Constitutional Convention one hundred and fifty years ago. The eight delegates from Pennsylvania were among the most eminent and influential members of that distinguished body of statesmen. Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Mifflin, Robert Morris, George Clymer, Thomas Fitzsimons, Jared Ingersoll, James Wilson, Gouverneur Morris—these eight delegates of Pennsylvania signed the great document on September 17, 1787.

We have come here today at the invitation of the Pennsylvania Constitution Commemoration Committee to honor one of these eight immortals who helped to construct the pattern of our national life.

Thomas Mifflin had a remarkably interesting career and deserves to be more widely known and recognized. Some years ago one of the historians called General Mifflin "one of the neglected Pennsylvanians." We trust that the events of this day may prove that Pennsylvania is not unmindful or unappreciative of the work and worth of its distinguished sons. Hereafter the sentiments expressed by Lloyd Mifflin in his sonnet on his namesake and kinsman, Major General Thomas Mifflin, will be only partially true:

"Intrepid orator and statesman bold,
At whose impetuous and impassioned words
Men dropped the plowshares and took up their swords
To fight for freedom, in the days of old—
Forgotten art thou in this lust for gold,
Although thy strong and stirring life records
Deeds that were noble. But this age rewards
With calm neglect thy labors manifold.
Champion of Liberty and of the Right,
Brother in perilous arms to Washington,
Thou zealous Ruler of a glorious State—
Is there no way thy service to requite?
Sleep, Patriot, Sleep! nor wish to know thy fate—
Th' ingratitude of Freedom for her son!"

The Quaker ancestors of Thomas Mifflin came to Pennsylvania before William Penn arrived here. The ancestral home is now a part of Fairmount Park. Born in Philadelphia in 1744, Thomas Mifflin attended Quaker schools, and at the age of sixteen graduated from the College of Philadelphia, now the University of Pennsylvania. He spent four years in the counting house of William Coleman, concerning whom Benjamin Franklin said: "He had the coolest, clearest head, the best heart and the exactest morals of almost any man I ever met with." At the age of twenty, Thomas Mifflin visited England and France, returned to America, married a Philadelphia girl, and entered the mercantile business with his brother. The real interests however of this young

Quaker merchant were civic, political and military. The stirring events of Revolutionary days had much to do with stimulating this inclination. From the age of twenty-six when he was elected to the assembly, to the age of fifty-six when as a member of the Assembly meeting here in Lancaster his life came to an untimely end, this Quaker soldier-statesman spent his life and energy in public service.

Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Mifflin were Philadelphia's two representatives in the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1772. Two years later Mifflin was in the first Continental Congress. When the news of the battle of Lexington reached Philadelphia, he spoke at a town meeting, then enlisted and drilled troops, and led one of the earliest formed regiments to General Washington's headquarters in Boston. He became the first member of Washington's personal staff. When the Continental Army was thoroughly organized, Colonel Mifflin became quartermaster general. A year later Congress commissioned him a brigadier general, and assigned to him the command of two Pennsylvania regiments.

After the battle of Long Island, General Mifflin and his troops faced the enemy for a time, so that the main Continental Army could withdraw under cover. He preferred service in the military field, but Congress placed him once more at the head of the Quartermaster's Department—a frightful responsibility in the days of 1776 and 1777, when soldiers were hungry and footsore, and war materials were scarce. No wonder there was complaint and discontent, for even a quartermaster could not furnish food, clothing and ordnance in the darkest days of the Revolution. In the fall of 1776, General Mifflin travelled into the frontier counties of the State to rouse the people to the necessity of supporting the American cause with soldiers and supplies, for Philadelphia was threatened with British invasion. He spoke in school houses and taverns and at cross roads, appealing to the people of Pennsylvania to support the patriotic cause.

The darkest days of the American Revolution followed—the days when Continental Congress left Philadelphia, met for a brief session in Lancaster, then went to York for nine months. There was confusion, criticism, discontent everywhere. The soldiers were half starving and freezing at Valley Forge. A great part of the criticism fell on the head of the quartermaster general, who became so weary of Congressional interference and unjust criticism that he resigned both as quartermaster and major general.

George Washington was equally the subject of criticism. He was accused of being too slow in his tactics, and when the victory of General Gates at Saratoga was announced, the Conway Cabal followed, in which a number of prominent military men were involved. Many of them felt that General Gates ought to replace General Washington. To what extent Thomas Mifflin was favorable to this movement is not so clear. But whatever his temporary attitude may have been, he remained the life-long friend of Washington, and said of him: "He was the best friend I ever had in my life."

While the British occupied Philadelphia General Mifflin removed his family to his farm at Angelica, near Reading, and he was chosen to represent Berks County in the General Assembly. Political honors now came to him thick and fast. From 1782 to 1784 he was in Congress, and was chosen president of that body. While presiding over Congress at Annapolis, in 1783, George Wash-

ington resigned his commission as head of the Army, and Thomas Mifflin replied to the farewell address with a gracious response. This scene is commemorated in a picture in the rotunda of the Capitol at Washington. In 1785, General Mifflin was a member of the General Assembly from Philadelphia and was unanimously selected as speaker of the House. In 1787 he was a member of the Federal Constitutional Convention.

In the Notes taken in the Convention by Major William Pierce, of Georgia, the following comment occurs: "General Mifflin is well known for the activity of his mind, and the brilliancy of his parts. He is well informed and a graceful speaker. The General is about 40 years of age, and a very handsome man." In this same year, Mifflin was a member of the Board of Trustees of the newly established Franklin College in Lancaster.

After signing the Federal Constitution on September 17, 1787, Thomas Mifflin devoted the remainder of his life to Pennsylvania. He was president of the Supreme Executive Council from 1788 to 1790, succeeding Benjamin Franklin to that office. He was president of the Convention which adopted the State Constitution of 1790, and was elected the first governor of the Commonwealth under that instrument. He was governor of Pennsylvania for three terms of three years each, which was the limit under the Constitution of 1790. During these nine years, from 1790 to 1799, he worthily upheld the dignity of his high position. Many improvements were made in the State. The first turnpike was built from Philadelphia to Lancaster. Governor Mifflin was greatly interested in the building of roads and in inland navigation. During the Insurrection in the western counties in 1794, he personally led the troops to Bedford, Pennsylvania, where they were joined by the militia of New Jersey, Maryland and Virginia, to form a national army—President Washington's first test of the strength of the new nation.

Due to a disastrous contagious fever—probably cholera—in Philadelphia, plans were laid to remove the National Capitol to Washington, and the State Capitol to Lancaster. Before Governor Mifflin's term of office expired, the State House was in Lancaster and remained here for thirteen years—a period over which Thomas McKean and Simon Snyder presided as governors. After General Mifflin's term of office as governor expired, he was elected a member of the Assembly from Philadelphia. During a session of the Assembly here at Lancaster, Dr. Logan arose and informed the members that during the night of January 19, 1800, the patriotic General Thomas Mifflin had expired at fifteen minutes past three o'clock. He was buried here in this little yard between the pavement and the front wall of Trinity Lutheran Church. By the instruction of Governor Thomas McKean, a marble slab was placed here 137 years ago bearing this inscription:

"In perpetuation of the memory of Thomas Mifflin, Major General of the Revolutionary Army of the United States, and late Governor of the State of Pennsylvania. A distinguished Patriot and Zealous Friend of Liberty. Died January 19, 1800."

What could be more fitting than that this group of citizens should gather here in this Sesqui-Centennial year of the signing of the Federal Constitution, and in a simple ceremony, assure this generation and other generations to come that Freedom is not ungrateful for her sons and that men whose deeds were noble shall not be forgotten in our lust for gold.