

Col. Timothy Matlack

A Revolutionary Patriot In Lancaster

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Col. Timothy Matlack, although a resident of Philadelphia, lived for a time in Lancaster. It was during the most trying period in the history of our country, and the activities of this remarkable man, which were far above the ordinary, were such that he deserves a place in the annals of this Society.

In order to understand the part he played in the struggle for freedom and in the organization of the new government, it will be of interest to know, just who he was and something of what he did, before coming to Lancaster.

No one knew more of the history being made in Pennsylvania during the Revolution than did Timothy Matlack, who served on many committees and as a delegate to many conventions. He knew much of the inside history and the transactions of the Continental Congress during the early years of the war in which he did active service as a colonel. His commanding figure was often seen on the streets of Philadelphia and Lancaster.

Timothy Matlack was born at Haddonfield, N. J., March 28, 1736 (sometimes given as 1730), of Quaker parentage, being the son of Timothy Matlack and Martha Burr Haines, widow of Josiah Haines. His grandparents were William and Mary Hancock Matlack. The young Timothy was educated at the Friends' Schools of Haddonfield and Philadelphia, his father having removed to the Quaker City in 1745.

On October 5, 1758, he was married at the Arch Street Meeting to Ellen, daughter of Mordecai and Ann Yarnall. Mordecai Yarnall was a minister of the Society of Friends.

Quaker life did not appeal to Timothy Matlack, being of a combative disposition, brimful of animal spirits and vigor, undauntedly courageous, quick

to resent insult or injury, self-reliant and fond of all sports, especially horse-racing. The peace-loving Friends disapproved of his manner of living and he was disowned by the Society in 1765.

His military career began when he became a member of a company known as the "Quaker Blues," where he learned enough of military matters to warrant his selection by the "blue-blooded Associators" for the colonelcy of the rifle battalion. From the time of the battle of Lexington, April 19, 1775, he entered into the contest for liberty with his whole soul.

Part of the year 1775 was spent with his battalion, doing duty in New Jersey, but on July 24, 1776, he took his seat in the Council of Safety of Pennsylvania and was active in its deliberations. In December, 1776, and January, 1777, he was again engaged in military duty, and served throughout the campaign that culminated in the Battle of Princeton.

From an entry in the minutes of the Continental Congress, May 15, 1775, we find the following:

"Agreed that the Secretary be allowed to employ Timothy Matlack as a clerk, he having first taken an oath or affirmation to keep secret the transactions (or secrets) of the Congress that may be entrusted to him or may come to his knowledge."

It is said that he was the first to read the Declaration of Independence from the State House step. He was clerk of Congress at the time. Christopher Marshall in his diary said it was read by John Nixon.

Later he was appointed by Congress storekeeper of military supplies, an important office.

"On May 10, 1776, Congress recommended changes be made in the Constitutions of the Colonies to conform with the new order of things.

"As the Assembly was unwilling to move in the matter a number of the patriots decided to proceed without them. Meetings were held and delegates elected to attend a conference June 18, 1776. The Convention followed July 17, to frame a new constitution. Timothy Matlack was a member of both the Conference and the Convention, and was also one of the committee to prepare the draft." (Pa. Archives, Third Series, Vol. X, p. 761.)

Christopher Marshall records in his diary, July 23, the names of the men selected by the Convention, which included Timothy Matlack, David Rittenhouse, Thomas Wharton, Jr., Samuel Morris, and among others our own John Hubley, to act as a Committee or Council of Safety.

The new constitution was finished in September, 1776, and at a mass meeting held soon after, Timothy Matlack was strong in its defense, while it was opposed by Colonel McKean and John Dickinson.

The name of Timothy Matlack appears first on the list of signers at the Constitutional Convention of which Benjamin Franklin was president.

Upon the organization of the Council of Safety in August, 1776, which succeeded the Committee of Safety, Thomas Wharton, Jr., of Philadelphia, was elected president. The Council of Safety was, in turn, superseded by the Supreme Executive Council which, upon organization the following year, elected Thomas Wharton, Jr., as president of this body also, being then proclaimed "by the Stile and Title of His Excellency, Thomas Wharton, Junior, Esquire, President of the Supreme Executive Council of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Captain General and Commander in Chief in and over the same."

His brief administration lasted only from March 5, 1777, to the time of his death which occurred in Lancaster, May 23, 1778. He is buried in Trinity Lutheran Church, with a tablet to his memory placed on the outside of the west church wall. (Pa. Archives, Fourth Series, Vol. III, p. 651.)

The Proclamation dissolving the Council of Safety by the Supreme Executive Council of the Commonwealth was issued by President Wharton in Lancaster, December 6, 1777. The last Proclamation signed by Timothy Matlack as secretary was issued by the president, John Dickinson, March 17, 1783, at Philadelphia. He had held the office from March 6, 1777, when he was selected by the Supreme Executive Council, just two days after its first meeting, to act as secretary, a position he filled with ability.

Colonel Matlack must have come to live in Lancaster about the time of the formation of the Supreme Executive Council in 1777, and according to Dr. A. M. Stackhouse, he remained here until his appointment as Prothonotary of the District Court, when he removed to Philadelphia. This appointment was made March 14, 1817, and held by him for about five years. ("Martin's Bench and Bar," 1883, p. 80.)

Colonel Matlack seems to have divided his time between Philadelphia and Lancaster for some years, but wherever he was he was always among the leaders.

In 1783, the Committee of Safety of Pennsylvania, in recognition of his loyal services, presented him with a solid silver urn, which bore the following inscription—"as a token of their appreciation of his patriotic devotion to the cause of the Colonies in their struggle for Freedom and the many and valuable services rendered by him during the entire period until the acknowledgment of their Independence by Great Britain in the Treaty of Peace." This urn is very beautiful in shape, standing on three ball feet and with two lion heads with rings in mouth for handles. It had been handed down in the family for many years, but is now (since 1930) in the possession of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, at 1300 Locust Street, Philadelphia. The Society has also the oil portrait by Sully, probably a copy of the Peale portrait.

The activities of Colonel Matlack were not limited by his office of Secretary of the Supreme Executive Council, and in 1777 he was made Keeper of the Great Seal. The issuance of marriage and tavern licenses was also part of his duties, and he was appointed Keeper of the Register of names of all persons attainted of high treason. Most of these duties were discharged while a resident of Lancaster. Again in 1779 we see him by the side of General Joseph Reed riding into the mob at Third and Market Streets, Philadelphia, in an effort to quell the riot at the Wilson house. Again he wrote numerous articles for the newspapers on topics of the day, in one of which he criticised Benedict Arnold for his extravagance while in command in Philadelphia, and he was later, selected to conduct the prosecution against him at the court-martial. In 1779, he was a member of the Board of Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania. On the 21st of January, 1780, he was made a member of the American Philosophical Society, and in the same year he was one of the subscribers to the Bank of Pennsylvania, and soon after this he became a member of the first Board of Directors of the Bank of North America. In 1780, he was elected by the Assembly to the Continental Congress. In 1781 and 1782, he was one of the secretaries of the American Philosophical Society.

In 1782, the political party to which he belonged was defeated and this brought about many changes in the Assembly and the Supreme Executive Council. Colonel Matlack was accused of a number of misdemeanors and accordingly was requested to resign his secretaryship. The charges against him were finally declared to be unjust and his reputation did not suffer, as he was afterward employed by the state in offices of honor and responsibility. In 1790, he was appointed one of the Commissioners to explore the waterways of the state, and in 1793 he was Clerk of the Senate. He was made Master of the Rolls in 1800, and served as Prothonotary of Philadelphia and as alderman for some years, which closed his public career.

While living at Lancaster far from the turmoil of Philadelphia, his little farm was his delight and he contributed to the Philadelphia Agricultural Society papers on the Cultivation of the Vine; on Peach Trees; on the Making of Cider and an account of a new "Pumice" Press, with remarks on cider making. This was accompanied by a model which he made with his own hands.

He was much interested in the works of nature and scientific matters, and read before the American Philosophical Society many papers he had written; one on "The Growth of Trees from the Bud Downward," another on a "Large Tusk Found in the Back Country," and another giving "An Account of an Open Stove." As a speaker and writer he was a master of expression.

In 1782, Colonel Matlack was selected by the American Philosophical Society to deliver an oration, an honor shown only, up to this time, to Provost Smith and Drs. Rush and Rittenhouse. He chose as his subject "Agriculture."

Col. Timothy Matlack was appointed to deliver the annual oration for the American Philosophical Society held at Philadelphia for promoting useful

knowledge which he did on March 16, 1780. After some preliminary remarks he said: "When a few Days ago you appointed me to the Duty of this Evening, entirely unprepared for the discharge of it, I had not even thought of a subject on which to speak; but sitting down to consider of it, the Seals of the State lay before me. On the Face a Plow, a sheaf of wheat and a Ship; On the Reverse, Liberty, represented by a Female Form, with a modest, but animated and determined Countenance, in her right Hand a drawn Dagger,—her left foot vigorously and firmly pressing to the Ground the horrid Head of Tyranny represented by a huge, grim, furious Lion, exciting a last convulsive Effort to rise and devour her: The Motto, 'Both can't survive.' How just a Picture of the Contest between these United States and prostrate Britain, still haughty, desperate and furious in her Fall. How tempting a Theme for Declamation."

With the State Seal as his theme, he proceeded along agricultural lines with an oration which held his audience for a full hour and ten minutes, and closes with "while Agriculture is honored, and the Republican Virtues of Industry and Economy are duly respected—while the Owners of our widely extensive Fields cultivate them with their own Hands—while our Citizens of all Ranks remain armed and trained for Defence—and while Learning is cherished and encouraged among us—Force can never conquer, nor Fraud enslave us. But standing upon those mighty Pillars whose Great Foundations GOD himself has laid, a whole happy People with one Voice shall triumph forever in 'VIRTUE, LIBERTY, INDEPENDENCE'." (The Motto of the great Seal of the State.)

Timothy Matlack's patriotic ardor continued to the end of his days, and we find him with Charles Biddle, the Rev. Wm. Smith and others in 1799, when there was trouble with France, organizing a Company of Associators. They announced themselves ready for active service, and again, in 1812, when past three score and ten years, he once more offered his services.

Christopher Marshall, while a resident of Lancaster, relates in his diary that on the night of October 20, 1777, he was awakened about nine o'clock by Timothy Matlack, who was on his way "into town" where there was great rejoicing over Burgoyne's defeat. Christopher Marshall lived on the north side of East Orange Street, just above Lime Street, and Timothy Matlack occupied a house on the opposite side of the street at the southwest corner of Orange and Jefferson Streets.

In November, 1799, there was another big celebration in Lancaster. It was the occasion of the election of Governor Thomas McKean. A feast was spread in front of Mr. Boyd's house, where a table had been erected 300 feet long. Seventeen toasts were drunk, a corps of militia firing after each toast. A volunteer toast was offered by Timothy Matlack. After the dinner a large parade was held. Lancaster was at this time the capital of the state, and the rejoicing was great, the beginning of festivities having been announced by a morning gun. Four hundred and twelve citizens, including many members of the Assembly, were seated at the table. The feasting began at one

o'clock and continued until nine o'clock in the evening. A band of musicians entertained, and there was singing in both German and English.

On Thursday, December 12, Thomas McKean, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, arrived in the borough of Lancaster from Philadelphia, escorted by two volunteer detachments of cavalry. They were met at Witmer's bridge by officers of the militia, the "Republican Blues" and citizens of Lancaster. Timothy Matlack was one of the escort.

The Inauguration of Governor Thomas McKean took place on Tuesday, December 17 at 12 o'clock noon in the Representatives' chamber in the old Court House in Penn Square.

At four in the afternoon a sumptuous dinner was served at the house of Leonard Eichholtz, to Governor McKean, and the retiring governor, Thomas Mifflin, with a number of members of the House of Representatives, the Senate and citizens of Lancaster. Timothy Matlack was again present, and gave a volunteer toast.

The banquet was followed by an elaborate parade through the streets and this concluded the festivities. (Intelligencer and Weekly Advertiser, December 18, 1799.)

At the celebration of July 4, 1801, we find a company of militia, called "The Republican Blues," receiving a handsome standard, a gift from the ladies of the borough. It so happened that Mrs. Timothy Matlack and Mrs. James Trimble were chosen to present it. Mrs. Matlack made the presentation speech and was criticized by the newspaper because of the emblem used. She was accused of publicly insulting religion, but the design in reality was meant for tyranny. Colonel Matlack bravely came to her defense with a reply in the next issue of the paper.

Mrs. Trimble was Clarissa Sidney Claypoole, wife of James Trimble, Deputy Secretary of the Commonwealth from March 6, 1777, until January 15, 1836. She was the mother of Mrs. Daniel Reigart of Lancaster, and sister of John Claypoole, third husband of Betsy Griscom Ross, who made the first American flag. Mrs. Trimble and the second Mrs. Matlack were both members of the prominent Claypoole family of Philadelphia.

On May 12, 1804, Timothy Matlack was again present at a celebration in Lancaster, when the people of the borough celebrated the Louisiana Purchase. About forty gentlemen assembled at Major John Bausman's tavern on East King Street. Col. Timothy Matlack was chosen president and Christopher Mayer vice-president. Seventeen toasts were drunk and the festivity ended with a volunteer toast by the president, Colonel Matlack, as follows: "May some great occasion, interesting as the present, soon call us together again; and may we then spend another day in harmony, friendship and festivity, as we have spent this day!"

On December 4, 1804, Timothy Matlack was chosen to act as secretary to the Electors who met in Lancaster. They met in the Senate Chamber in

the old Court House and proceeded to elect a president and vice-president of the United States. The committee of three appointed to draw and prepare the forms required on the occasion were Peter Frailey, Casper Shaffner, Jr., and James Boyd, with Timothy Matlack as secretary. It was the first presidential election held after an amendment had been added to the Constitution changing the method of election. As a result Jefferson and Clinton were elected by the Republican Party.

Timothy Matlack was twice married. His first wife, Ellen, or Nelly Yarnall Matlack, died July 16, 1797. At that time they were living on Front Street, near Arch Street, in Philadelphia. According to Hiltzheimer's diary, he married again, August 17, 1797, at Christ Church (Episcopal), Philadelphia, the second wife being Elizabeth Claypoole, widow of Capt. Norris Copper, who survived him. She was the sister of David C. Claypoole, who was one of the proprietors of the Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser, the first daily newspaper set up in Philadelphia, afterwards Poulson's Daily Advertiser. He was an ensign and later lieutenant in the Pennsylvania Militia during the Revolution, in the army of General Washington, where he remained until sometime after 1777, when his company was discharged and, in a communication, he states: "I retired to Lancaster, where I assisted in the publication of a News Paper, which I flatter myself, contributed essentially to the forwarding of the great and good cause in which we were all so heartily engaged." (Genealogy of the Claypoole Family, p. 84.)

By the first marriage he had five children, William, Mordecai, Sibyl, Catharine, and Martha, who became the wife of Guy Bryan, at whose home, near Holmesburg, Colonel Matlack ended his days. He died April 14, 1829, in his ninety-ninth year, and was buried by the side of his first wife in the Free Quaker Graveyard. On November 20, 1905, it was necessary to remove his remains and other members of the family to Fatlands on the Schuylkill River, opposite Valley Forge.

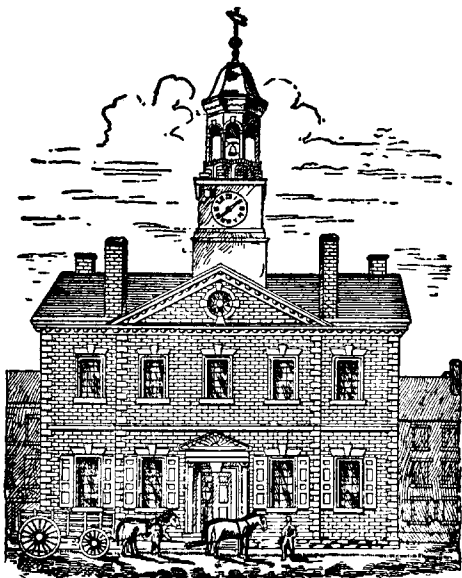
While at the home of his daughter, Martha, he was visited by the venerable artist, Charles Willson Peale, for the purpose of painting his portrait, which now hangs in the National Museum, Independence Hall, Philadelphia. He was also honored by Lafayette, who called to see him when on his way from Bristol to Philadelphia.

Timothy Matlack, first Secretary of the Commonwealth, was indeed a remarkable man and we of Lancaster may well feel proud of his sojourn and activities in our midst.

There are at the present time living in Lancaster thirty descendants of Colonel Timothy Matlack, headed by Mrs. Hope Bryan Shreve, a great-great-great-granddaughter.

References:

Col. Timothy Matlack, Patriot and Soldier, by Dr. A. M. Stackhouse.
The Claypoole Family, by Rebecca Irwin Graff.
The Pennsylvania Archives.
The Lancaster Newspapers.



LANCASTER COURT HOUSE

In Timothy Matlack's Day.