

MARYLAND VOICES

EDITORIALS

Samuel Chase: Maryland 'rabble rouser,' signer of the Declaration of Independence

As Independence Day approaches, we present the story of Samuel Chase, one of four Marylanders who signed the Declaration of Independence.

As the war between England and its American colonies dragged into its second year and the outrages and injustices from King George III intensified, Maryland became a point of vexation for the independence-minded patriots in other colonies, its leaders described variously as "obstinate" by John Adams of Massachusetts and "namby pamby" by John Henry Lee of Virginia. But if there was an exception to that rule, it was surely Samuel Chase, a rabble-rouser to equal any of those in Boston and Richmond. The Annapolis lawyer and longtime member of the General Assembly had been agitating for defiance against England since the Stamp Act days of the 1760s, and when the crucial moment arrived for Maryland to join its sister colonies in declaring independence, he was instrumental in bringing reluctant moderates to the cause through the most American of means: the power of the people.

Chase was born in Somerset County in 1741, the son of Thomas Chase, a physician by training who had become an Anglican priest, and Matilda Walker, the daughter of Eastern Shore planters and merchants. Walker died in childbirth, and Thomas Chase soon moved to St. Paul's Parish in Baltimore. Unlike his fellow Maryland revolutionary, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, Samuel Chase was neither wealthy nor blessed with an educational pedigree, receiving instead instruction from his father and eventually apprenticing himself to an attorney in Annapolis.

When he was admitted to the bar in 1763, Chase didn't get the blue blood clients, instead representing members of the emerging merchant class in business and debt disputes, among other matters. It didn't pay particularly well, but it proved useful for what would soon emerge as Chase's true vocation: politics. He quickly built a political machine in Annapolis among the sorts of people he represented in court, helping in 1764 to elect new members to the city's Common Council and winning a seat in the General Assembly for himself.

A year later, the British parliament passed the Stamp Act, a tax on American colonists to pay off debts from the Seven Years' War (known here as the French and Indian War) and to cover the costs of quartering British troops in North America. It required colonists to use only paper labeled with a special revenue stamp for a wide variety of uses, from newspapers to playing cards to legal documents. It marked the first time the British government imposed a tax on the colonies directly, not related to foreign trade, for the purpose of raising revenue, and it sparked widespread cries of taxation without representation. That wasn't just a question of colonists wanting to avoid paying taxes but a protest against the realization that the English government truly did not view them as equal citizens.

Protests spread throughout the colonies but were particularly fierce (and effective) in Massachusetts. Colonists there managed to stop the enforcement of the tax by the harassment, intimidation, burning in effigy and other assorted affronts to the official who was appointed to distribute the stamps. When word of that action made it to Maryland, Chase gathered a mob of his political supporters to pull the same sort of stunt in Annapolis, flogging and burning the effigy of Zachariah Hood, the stamp distributor there, and tearing down the building where the stamped paper was to be stored. Hood fled the colony, and the governor ordered the stamped paper held on a British naval ship to prevent it from being destroyed, an action that also had the effect of preventing the Stamp Act from being enforced here. Chase was on hand when the Frederick County court became the first to reopen in defiance of the act, and he quickly resumed a stamp-free law practice there.

His actions won him enemies among Annapolis loyalists, three of whom excoriated Chase in the Maryland Gazette in the summer of 1766 as "a busy, reckless incendiary, a ringleader of mobs, a foul-mouthed and inflaming son of discord and faction, a common disturber of the public tranquillity." But he knew how to punch back. The Gazette refused to publish his reply (perhaps due to some of its saltier elements, like observing of one of his antagonists, "It is with pain, I remind you of the unhappy circumstances of your children, reduced to beggary by your continued round of vice and folly, drunkenness and debauchery") but he distributed it as a pamphlet and gave no ground in defense of his actions.

"I admit ... that I was one of them, who committed to the flames in effigy, the stamp distributor for this province, and who openly disputed the parliamentary right to tax the colonies," he wrote, asserting that they were no "mobs" but the "people of this city" who stood up for their rights.

Several years later, when the Intolerable Acts — including the closure of Boston's port — again galvanized colonial protests, Chase rallied Marylanders to support a boycott of British goods. That effort and similar ones elsewhere led to the convening of the First Continental Congress, which was the first effort by the colonies to coordinate a unified response to the crown. Chase was elected one of Maryland's representatives to the Congress' meeting in Philadelphia in the fall of 1774, and there he became fast friends with John Adams, with whom he would engage in extensive correspondence over the coming years. Talk of independence was at that point still the province of radicals, and though Chase took a hard line on the question of a ban on exports to Britain, he did not yet join in it.



BALTIMORE SUN



DREAMSTIME

Samuel Chase, of Maryland, signed the Declaration of Independence just below John Hancock.

But his position would evolve rapidly. By early 1775, Chase wrote of the inevitability of armed rebellion and of his disgust for the British as "one of the most abandoned and wicked People under the Sun." After open hostilities broke out in the summer of that year, Chase orchestrated efforts to remove power from Maryland's loyalists and place revolutionaries in control, but the colony's position was still in favor of reconciliation with England. He and other delegates to the Continental Congress were given repeated and clear instructions not to support any move to declare independence.

Meanwhile, Chase proposed that a delegation travel to Canada in the spring of 1776 to try to get those colonies to join the Americans in rebellion. He would be accompanied by Benjamin Franklin and Charles Carroll — both of whose skills in French and diplomacy were expected to be useful, though the mission proved unsuccessful. Throughout, he carried on a lively correspondence with John Adams about troop deployments and strategy, and he made his views on the question of independence abundantly clear, writing to Adams in April, "Do not spend your precious Time on Debates about our Independency. In my Judgement You have no alternative between Independency and Slavery, and what American can hesitate in the Choice?"

The Conventions of the Province of Maryland, that's who. Hesitation was their middle name. In May, when Adams and other supporters of independence backed a resolution in the Continental Congress laying out many of the grievances that would make their way into the Declaration of Independence, Maryland's delegation walked out. The powers that be in Annapolis reconsidered the matter but stuck to their instructions: No vote for independence.

Characteristically, Chase took matters into his own hands, seeking to counter the elite views of the leaders in Annapolis with the popular will of the people. He returned to Maryland and, along with Carroll, helped organize local committees to call for independence. Local assemblies in at least four Maryland counties, Anne Arundel, Charles, Frederick and Talbot, passed their own declarations of independence, forcing the hands of the provincial convention. On June 28, the convention "Resolved unanimously, That the instructions given by the convention of December last (and renewed by the convention in May) to the deputies of this colony in congress, be recalled, and the restrictions therein contained removed; that the deputies of this colony attending in congress ... be authorized and empowered to concur ... in declaring the united colonies free and independent states ..."

The same day, Chase sent this to Adams on the day of the Maryland vote: "I am this Moment from the House to procure an Express to follow the Post with an Unanimous Vote of our Convention for Independence etc. etc. See the glorious Effects of County Instructions. Our people have fire if not smothered."

The news from Maryland arrived in Philadelphia on July 1. The vote for independence came the next day, 12-0, with New York abstaining. On July 4, the Congress adopted the formal declaration.

Chase missed it all. He had remained in Annapolis for health reasons, so he didn't actually get to witness the debate or the historic moment. But he was there on Aug. 2, in time to sign his name just below John Hancock, front and center of American independence.