

Historical Insights

by Daria Sockey

Charles Carroll and the American Revolution (by Milton Lomask)

When studying notable American Catholics, it's easy to become confused by all the Carrolls. This book names three Charles Carrolls—each of whom had to identify himself by the name of his home. In addition we meet cousin John Carroll, who later became the first American Catholic bishop. But now back to Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the subject of our book. It's easy to see the interplay of faith and freedom in Carroll's story. He was the grandson of a man who came to the New World in 1688 in search of a home where English-speaking Catholics could practice their faith freely. Tragically, religious freedom did not last in the Maryland colony. All too soon Catholics became second class citizens, unable to vote or worship publicly, and barred from many professions. Vast wealth gave the Carrolls influence despite this handicap. Yet all this wealth could not overcome bigotry enshrined in law.

Against this background, Charles Carroll's decision to enter into argument with Daniel Dulany was like a small rolling stone that precipitated an avalanche. Circumstances made it unlikely that Carroll could have defeated anti-catholic law and sentiment by crusading against it, however eloquently. Instead, he took up a battle on common ground with all freedom-loving Marylanders. When he won that argument so brilliantly, his supporters were forced to confront the injustice of Maryland's religious laws. Just imagine the discussions among Maryland's patriots: *Charles Carroll can defend me in court any day of the week, papist though he be! Aye, if this is how a papist defends our liberty, I say, let's give him a vote! In fact, I'd vote for him myself!*

Following the First Citizen vs. Antilon correspondence, anti-Catholic laws were increasingly ignored, enabling Carroll to represent his colony at the Continental Congress. And how could our new nation do anything other than guarantee freedom of religion when a member of a religious minority had been part of its very founding? Truly, when Charles Carroll took up the pen of First Citizen, he struck a powerful blow for religious freedom without even realizing it.

While speaking of freedom, a few words are needed about the elephant in the room—Charles Carroll was a slave owner. While examining this moral blind spot that lasted for so long in the western world and still exists in other places today, it is only fair to note that Carroll was opposed to slavery in principle, publicly stating that it was a great evil, and promoting legislation (unsuccessfully) for its gradual abolition in Maryland. He also gave consideration to an idea popular with many abolitionists of his day: establishing a colony for freed slaves in Africa. Although Carroll's opinions and actions did not—from our present understanding—go far

enough, they certainly demonstrate that he was wrestling with the issue and not comfortable with the status quo.

A parting thought on the elderly Charles Carroll's personality change. He evolved from the earnest, taciturn, overly serious young patriot who chided his wife for her levity, to the "best laugh in America." It's interesting to speculate about that change. Perhaps his beloved Molly was praying for him in heaven and obtained for him the grace of joy. Maybe, as he approached the end of life, he could see his many possessions, and even the great American republic he strove for, as small things in relation to eternity. If so, Charles Carroll had at last learned to take himself lightly. Which, as GK Chesterton points out, is the reason that angels are able to fly.