A Revolutionary Role

How One of the Founding Fathers Elevated Catholics in the New Republic

by Bill Miller, Senior Reporter

CARROLL GARDENS — Charles Carroll, born in 1737 to a wealthy family in Maryland, never lived in New York City. Yet, a street, a park, and a neighborhood are all named for him in Brooklyn.

troops, wanted to show appreciation for those who died or were taken prisoner trying to defend Long Island from a British invasion on Aug. 27, 1776.

"The memory of those soldiers really lived long in what is now Brooklyn," said Father Anthony Andreassi, a historian of the Church in the Americas. "And Carroll was the most prominent Marylander of the Revolution."

Carroll, however, was a planter and a lawyer, not a soldier, so he wasn't at the "Battle of Brooklyn."

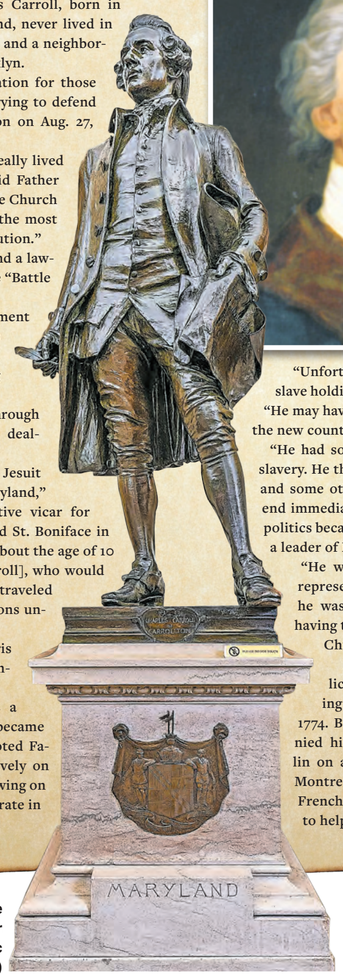
Still, despite anti-Catholic sentiment of the time, he was one of 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence — the only Roman Catholic among them.

Carroll achieved prominence through education and successful business dealings.

"As a small boy, he went to a small Jesuit school on the eastern shore of Maryland," said Father Andreassi, administrative vicar for Oratory parishes of Assumption and St. Boniface in Downtown Brooklyn. "And then at about the age of 10 or 12, he and his cousin, John [Carroll], who would become the first American bishop, traveled to France to continue their educations under the Jesuits in France.

"He ultimately studied law in Paris and London and became an accomplished lawyer."

Carroll also amassed wealth as a plantation owner and eventually became the richest man in the colonies, noted Father Andreassi, who writes extensively on Church history in the Americas, drawing on research he conducted for his doctorate in history at Georgetown University.



Charles Carroll, a plantation owner, eventually became the richest man in the colonies. He was influential in the cause for independence, which, by extension, helped ease anti-Catholic sentiments of his time. (Photos: Wikimedia Commons)

"Unfortunately, a lot of his wealth came from slave holdings," Father Andreassi said of Carroll. "He may have also been the largest slave holder in the new country.

"He had some ambivalent or mixed feelings on slavery. He thought it was a bad institution, but he and some others weren't convinced that it could end immediately." Although barred from colonial politics because of his religion, Carroll emerged as a leader of Maryland's independence movement.

"He was arguing against taxation without representation," Father Andreassi said. "And he was arguing against people in America having to pay taxes in support of the Anglican Church. He thought that was wrong."

Political restrictions against Catholics prevented Carroll from participating in the first Continental Congress in 1774. But in April of 1776, Carroll accompanied his cousin John and Benjamin Franklin on a secret yet unsuccessful mission to Montreal, Canada. There, they tried to enlist French speakers, who were mostly Catholic, to help fight England.

"They sent him there because he spoke French, he was Catholic, and he was very well educated," Father Andreassi said. "The cause failed, but they knew it was a bit of a long shot anyway."

Ultimately, Carroll's loyalty to the cause of independence became unquestioned. He was subsequently selected by Maryland to go to Philadelphia to sign the Declaration of Independence.

"He actually got there after it had already been voted on, but he did sign it in early August," Father Andreassi said.

Carroll represented Maryland in the U.S. Senate from 1789 to 1792. After that, he left politics to focus on his businesses. His forays into rail transportation yielded handsome profits, according to Father Andreassi.

He outlived the other signers of the declaration, becoming the sole survivor among them when he died at age 95 in 1832.

Father Andreassi said the legacy of Carroll and other Catholics helped bring the faith into mainstream America.

"The fact that we had him and a couple other prominent Catholics supporting the Revolution helped advance the reputation of Catholics in the New Republic," Father Andreassi said. "There's no doubt about that."

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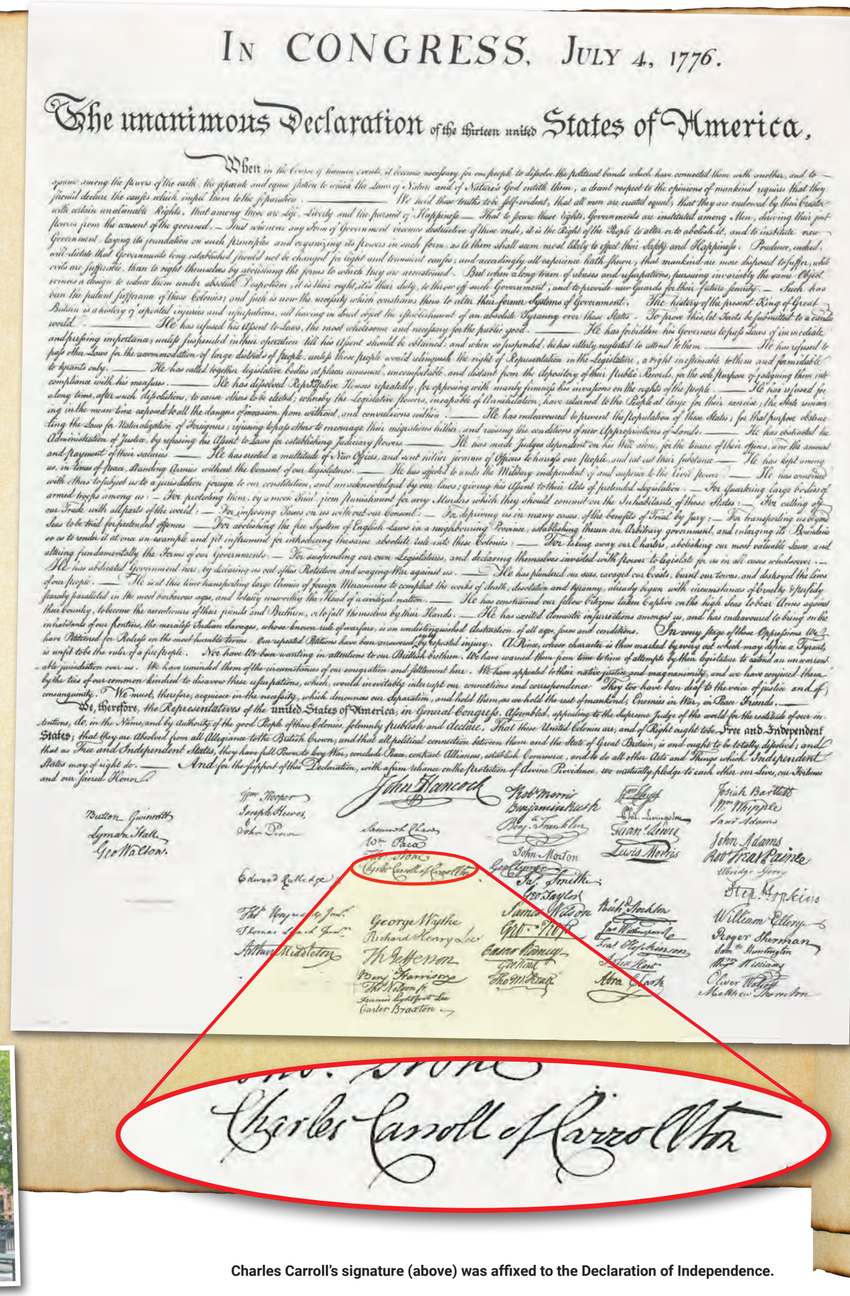
The Carroll Gardens neighborhood (top) in Brooklyn is named after Charles Carroll, as is Carroll Park (right) and Carroll Street.



Charles Carroll's signature (above) was affixed to the Declaration of Independence.