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# Caesar Rodney patriot

Delaware's  
hero for all times  
and all seasons

by

William P. Frank

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Illustrations by A. N. Wyeth

Delaware American Revolution Bicentennial Commission  
Wilmington, Delaware  
1975

# dedication

This booklet is dedicated to  
The Honorable Sherman W. Tribbitt,  
Governor of the State of Delaware,  
in recognition of his own dedication to bringing  
proper recognition of Caesar Rodney's services  
before and during the American Revolution.





**Thomas McKean, Caesar Rodney, and George Read,  
Delaware's signers of the Declaration of  
Independence.**

# foreword

Caesar Rodney rides through American history as the patron saint of his native state, Delaware's principal hero of the American Revolutionary War. In his brief 55-year life he held more public offices than any other Delawarean before or since. He was a soldier, a judge, a delegate to the American Continental Congress, speaker of the Delaware Assembly, a chief executive of Delaware, a justice of the state's Supreme Court, and held many other offices of public trust.

Unlike Thomas McKean, George Read, and John Dickinson, with whom he served in Congress, Rodney was not a scholar. McKean and Dickinson, because they were more learned, were better known beyond Delaware's boundaries than was Rodney.

But it is Rodney's name, not McKean's, Dickinson's nor Read's that is familiar to Americans today. The equestrian statue in Wilmington, Delaware, of Rodney riding to Philadelphia to cast Delaware's deciding vote for the Declaration of Independence in July, 1776, has been adopted by scores of writers, artists, playwrights, poets and businesses as the symbol of Delaware's participation in the American Revolution and the Declaration. Had he captured the imagination of a poet as prominent as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the story of Rodney's famous ride for independence probably would have become as renowned as Paul Revere's horseback alerting of the Massachusetts countryside in April, 1775. Unfortunately, familiar as the name of Caesar Rodney has been and still is in Delaware, the truth is that most Delawareans know little about the life, the accomplishments or personal problems of this hero.

This, then, is an effort to present, in perhaps too brief form, a biography of Rodney who, despite his devastating facial cancer and severe asthma, managed to carry on an energetic career that was ended soon after the United States won its war for independence from England.

The author is indebted to the encouragement of Governor Sherman W. Tribbitt, Delaware's Bicentennial Era Governor, who is one of the principal enthusiasts for perpetuating the name of Caesar Rodney and his role as the outstanding personality in Delaware's part in

the formation of the United States 200 years ago; and to such scholars of Delaware history as Dr. John A. Munroe of the University of Delaware and the late Dr. George H. Ryden, one-time Delaware state archivist and professor of history at the University of Delaware, for their research, which has been most helpful.

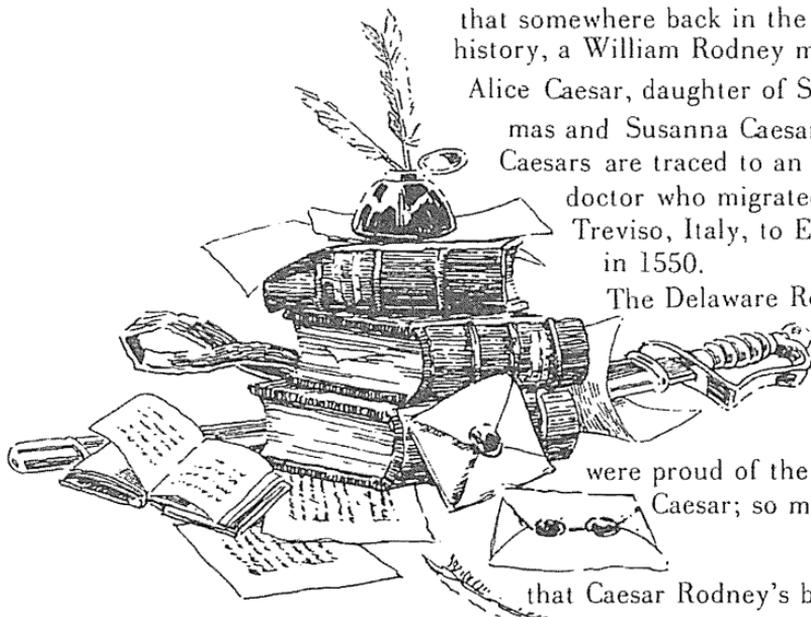
# rodney:

## multiple office holder

Caesar Rodney's lineage dates back through English and Italian families. The name, often spelled Rodeney, was solid, substantial English.

Caesar was derived from the fact that somewhere back in the family history, a William Rodney married Alice Caesar, daughter of Sir Thomas and Susanna Caesar. The Caesars are traced to an Italian doctor who migrated from Treviso, Italy, to England in 1550.

The Delaware Rodney



were proud of the name, Caesar; so much so

that Caesar Rodney's brother,

Thomas, had his son baptized with a grandiose gesture, Caesar Augustus Rodney.

The first Rodney to migrate to America was William, who sailed out of Bristol, England, in 1681 or 1682 and landed somewhere on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. He later went to Philadelphia, then to Sussex County, Delaware, and finally settled on St. Jones Neck, East Dover Hundred, in Kent County. William Rodney married twice and sired nine children. He died in 1708, having achieved a name for himself in the government of the three Delaware counties.

His youngest son, Caesar, born in 1707, inherited his father's estate. Caesar married Elizabeth Crawford, daughter of an Episcopal

clergyman. They had eight children — five sons and three daughters. The eldest was Caesar Rodney, the signer of the Declaration of Independence.

The year 1728 was not the best of times for people of Kent County. There had been floods early in the year and drought during the summer. Caesar, our hero, was born shortly before midnight, October 7, 1728, amid unusual circumstances. His father kept a diary, which indicates that the father acted as midwife.

The diary entry reads:

“October 7 — Hung some tobacco. Came in, got dinner and killed some squirrels. . . . About eleven o’clock at night, my wife awakened me for she was very bad. I got up and sent for ye midwife and women. But before any came, ye child was born and it was a SON. There was no soul with her but myself, being I believe just about midnight.”

Caesar was born on his father’s farm in East Dover Hundred, Kent County, near the Delaware River, an area that had always been known as St. Jones Neck.

Caesar’s father had never been ambitious but he did enjoy politics and the carefree life of a country gentleman, indulging in fishing, hunting, restrained carousing and occasionally visiting Philadelphia. There is evidence that, at one time, he had a store in Dover, but he was never successful as a merchant.

With thanks again to Papa Rodney as a letter writer, we have a glimpse of his concern about his son, Caesar. The young Caesar was sent to the Latin School in Philadelphia when a teenager; on July 16, 1743, the father wrote to his 14-year-old son:

“Dear child, be diligent at your Books and make what progress you possibly can in learning while you have an opportunity. I hope you’ll be careful in choosing your company. I would have you use all possible means to get in favour with the better sort of people, for there is not greater advantage to youth than good company. Nor no greater disadvantage than ill.”

Caesar’s father died in 1745 when the eldest son was 17 years old. Nicholas Ridgely of the well-known affluent Ridgely family of Dover, was named his guardian. Ridgely was clerk of the peace for the Kent County Court and prothonotary which meant, of course, that he had knowledge of the law and books.

Even though Caesar had plenty of duties on his hands running the plantation, he apparently developed a longing for public life. Hence, in 1755, at the age of 27, he became high sheriff of Kent County. This

experience was the start of a career that was to last for the remainder of his life; for the next 29 years, Caesar Rodney was never without some public appointment or office of trust. It wasn't that he had a yen to feed at the public trough; some of the posts he held paid very little. In his later years, he confessed that his funds were running low. In many instances, he personally bore the expense of offices and nowhere in all the annuals, niches, nooks or by-ways of Delaware history, is there ever a hint of scandal attached to the name of Caesar Rodney.

From high sheriff, Rodney proceeded to become register of wills in Kent County, deputy recorder of deeds, and recorder of deeds from 1766 to 1776. He also served from time to time, as clerk of the Orphans Court in Kent County, clerk of peace, and justice of the peace.

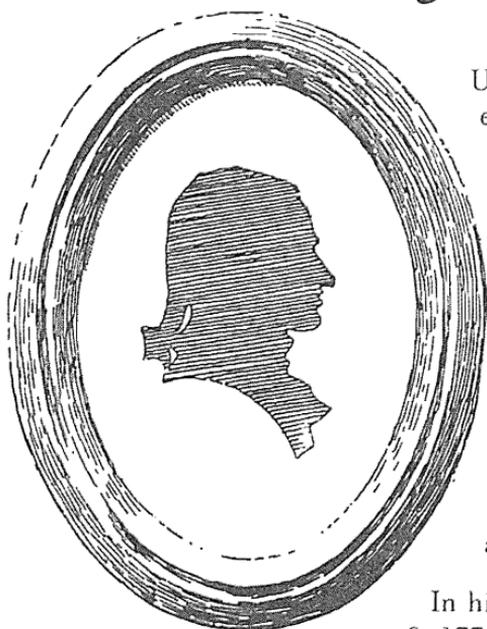
He was serving more than Kent County, however. In 1766, he was named to the Supreme Court of the colony, even though he was a member of the Delaware Assembly at the same time. In those days, no one seemed to worry if a man was part of the judicial and legislative branches of the government simultaneously. Rodney was continuously in the Assembly until 1776, at times holding the office of speaker. In 1769, as speaker, he tried unsuccessfully, to have a law passed prohibiting the importation of slaves into Delaware. He was speaker of the Delaware Assembly in June, 1776, when it declared the independence of the three counties from the British Crown. He was also speaker of the upper house of the Delaware General Assembly when he died in 1784.

As if these public offices weren't enough, Rodney was named a brigadier general and later major general in the Delaware militia during the Revolutionary War and also was judge of the state's admiralty court. He and his friend, Thomas McKean, were commissioned to codify Delaware's scrambled laws — the first such code. Before that, he had served his state and the infant nation when he was elected to the Stamp Congress of 1765, and later as a Delaware delegate of the First and Second Continental Congresses, the latter while continuing as speaker of the Delaware Assembly.

And if all this wasn't sufficient, Rodney became de facto chief executive of Delaware in the late summer of 1776 and was later elected president of the state for three years in 1778.

No man in the history of Delaware has ever held as many highly important jobs within the space of 29 years as Caesar Rodney.

# how did rodney look?



Unfortunately, there is no authentic portrait of Caesar Rodney painted during his lifetime.

He may have resisted the temptation to sit for an artist because of the facial cancer that plagued him from his late 30's until his death. But, thanks to John Adams, one of the leaders of the American Continental Congress from Massachusetts, we have at least a vague idea of Rodney's appearance.

In his personal diary on September 3, 1774, Adams discussed some of the men from the various states who had assembled in Philadelphia for the First Continental Congress. He wrote:

“Saturday . . . This forenoon, Mr. Caesar Rodney of the lower counties on Delaware River, and the Mr. Tilghmans from Maryland were introduced to us. Caesar Rodney is the oddest looking man in the world; he is tall, thin and slender as a reed, pale; his face is not bigger than a large apple, yet there is sense and fire, spirit, wit, and humor in his countenance.”

Judging from the many letters that have been preserved, Rodney must have also been a man of great patience and forbearance. His letters do not reveal him as a flaming militant. He respected the more conservative views of many of his fellow Delawareans, even though he often disagreed with them. He was certainly not a summer patriot, ready to resign or “pick up his marbles and go home” because political affairs

to resign or “pick up his marbles and go home” because political affairs

were not developing to his liking. He had a tremendous faith in the future of his state and his country, and he believed that, eventually, a new nation and a free state of Delaware would emerge from the conflict with England.

Rodney absorbed the indignities imposed upon him by his political foes and adversaries and determined to carry on what he considered to be his duties as an American and a Delawarean for the best interests of nation and state.

It is important to keep in mind that for many years before the Revolution and during the long years of the war itself, with all its disappointments and setbacks, Rodney was suffering from a terrible facial cancer. The first inkling of his health problem is found in a letter to his brother, Thomas, written in Philadelphia June 7, 1768. Caesar wrote:

“I got to Philadelphia on Saturday and on Monday applied to the doctors concerning the sore on my nose, who all upon examination pronounced it a cancer, and that it will be necessary I should go through a small course of physik, and then to extract it by a costick or by cutting it out, all of which (to me) is a dreadful undertaking and will require much time, that it is impossible for me now to determine when you may probably expect to see me in Kent County again.”

Three days later, his brother, Thomas, wrote to Caesar that he was not a little alarmed “at the dangerous consequences attending or that may attend the curing of the cancer on your nose, a matter worthy your serious consideration as your health and even your life may depend on the treatment.”

Thomas urged Caesar not to be worried about the medical expenses and also suggested that perhaps Caesar might consider going to England where more eminent doctors would be available. Caesar gave serious thought to a visit to England for a cancer cure. He also informed his brother that a number of high-ranking officials in Philadelphia had actually pressed upon him to make the voyage to England and, in a later letter, dated June 13, 1768, Caesar admitted:

“My case is truly dangerous, and what will be the event, God only knows.”

Ten days later, Caesar reported details of the cancer operation to brother Thomas:

“. . . The doctor has extracted the hard crusted matter which had risen so high and it has left a hole, I believe, quite

to the bone, and extends for length from the corner of my eye above half way down my nose. Such a sore must take considerable time to cure up, if ever it does. However, since it has been extracted, I am perfectly easy as to any pain."

The operation was performed by Dr. Thomas Bond, one of the leading physicians of Philadelphia.

For the remainder of his life, Rodney rarely referred to his malady in letters, or at least in letters that have survived the years. The tradition is that when he appeared in public, he wore a green scarf on his face. In the few plays produced with Rodney as one of the characters, he has been depicted either with a large green scarf around his face or an ugly patch on his left cheek.

The only two statues of Rodney in existence portray him as a rather tall, well-built man, with a very square-shaped face. One marble statue sculpted by Bryant Baker of New York City, a native of England but a naturalized citizen of the United States, is in the Rotunda of the Capitol in Washington, D. C. It was unveiled June 26, 1934. It depicts Rodney, standing proudly erect, hat in one hand and the Declaration of Independence in the other, with his sword reclining against his cloak.

The other, the more familiar bronze equestrian figure that graces Rodney Square, in Wilmington, was dedicated July 4, 1923. It is the work of James E. Kelly. The project, which cost around \$30,000, was financed through public subscription. The chairman of the statue commission was Gen. James Harrison Wilson of Wilmington, a general officer of the Union cavalry during the Civil War. He paid particular attention to the equestrian style. It shows Rodney riding to Philadelphia to vote for the Declaration of Independence. Although he did not go along that section of Wilmington's Market Street near Tenth in his famous ride, the statue was placed there because the square bounded by Market, King, Tenth and Eleventh, had been cleared and converted into a park, named in honor of Rodney.

A bronze bas relief on the base shows Rodney arriving at Independence Hall, but its dates are inaccurate. The accepted version now is that Rodney arrived in Philadelphia from Dover on July 2, 1776, not July 4.

# “molly, i love you”

The personal life of Caesar Rodney is almost a complete blank. Almost. For there is presumably in the possession of the Ridgely family of Dover, a letter written by Rodney to a Mary Vining in which he professed his love for her.

Rodney is not known to have kept a diary. What we know of his great love for American independence is harvested from his many letters to innumerable leaders of the nation and his state. His letters also reveal his periodic concern about the condition of his plantation on St. Jones Neck, near Dover, and his worries about personal business affairs. There are also occasional references to nephews and their happiness.

And, of course, there are references by Rodney to his cancer and the dubious prospects for a cure.  
But by far, the tenderest letter Rodney



wrote was to Mary Vining, his Molly, of Dover.

There's some question about the date — May 27, 1761 or 1764.

At the outset, Rodney expressed disappointment that Miss Vining had consented to go to Philadelphia with the Chews, a leading family in Dover. He reminded her that she had more or less promised to go with him to Philadelphia. Then, Rodney for the first and only time in all his letters, burst into a flow of words of a love-stricken young swain:

“. . . I am deprived of the greatest pleasure this world could possibly afford me. The company of that lady in whom all my happiness is placed. Molly, I love you from my soul. In this, believe me, I'm sincere and honest. But when I think of the many amiable qualifications you are possessed of — all my hopes are at an end.”

What his beloved Molly wrote in return, we shall never know. But we do know that she did not return his love. Mary Vining, daughter of Phoebe Wynkoop and John Vining, married the Rev. Charles Inglis, rector of Christ Church, Dover, in 1764. It was a brief marriage. She died within a year.

Inglis was later to become a noted Loyalist, opposing American independence, and eventually was consecrated the first Anglican bishop of Nova Scotia.

Rodney never forgot the Vinings. Years later, when he was a highly important man in the state government, he took a fatherly interest in Mary Vining, the beautiful niece of the Mary Vining he had loved. This second Mary Vining became his hostess in 1777, when he was living in Wilmington. The beautiful girl, by all reports, enchanted French and American officers, including the dashing General “Mad Anthony” Wayne of the Pennsylvania troops.

After the death of Rodney in 1784, her fortune declined and she died a lonely death in Wilmington in 1821. As for Rodney, of course, he never married. His name was never linked romantically with another after his one love had rejected him in favor of an Anglican rector.



# rodney the soldier

Caesar Rodney became a member of Delaware's militia as a young man of 28, but there is no record that he ever was engaged in a battle against the British. Nor is there any evidence he was involved in any kind of war.

Nonetheless, during the years of the Revolutionary War, as a brigadier general and later a major general, Rodney was no armchair officer. He grappled with the innumerable, almost impossible problems of clothing, feeding and paying the militia and Continental troops from Delaware. Many times, he personally led Delaware troops into the very strongholds of Tory or Loyalist dissenters who opposed national independence and plotted to prevent the state from continuing in the ranks of the United States of America.

The only time Rodney left the state as a commissioned military officer was in January, 1777, at the head of Delaware troops stationed at Trenton, New Jersey, directly responsible to General George Washington.

So little has been compiled of Rodney's career as a soldier that we have no idea today what his uniform was like nor how he fared as an officer in the field, suffering as he did from a facial cancer and asthma.

Rodney began his military career in 1756, at the outbreak of the French and Indian War, between the British and the colonies on one hand, and the French with their Indian allies on the other. Rodney joined Colonel John Vining's regiment of Kent County militia and was named a captain of one of its companies, known as the Dover Hundred Company. James Sykes was his lieutenant and Caleb Luff his ensign.

However, the militia company was never called into service. When the French and Indian War ended, the militia was dissolved, but Rodney wasn't out of uniform for long.

When the news of the Battle of Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts reached Delaware, militia companies were activated once more. Even though Rodney was in the Continental Congress in Philadelphia at the time, he was named colonel of the Upper Regiment of Kent County. Soon after, he sent instructions to his brother, Thomas, near Dover, concerning uniforms.

By fall, the military organization in Delaware had progressed to the point where a Council of Safety had been organized; Rodney was named brigadier general of the entire Kent County militia.

When Rodney heard of General Washington's military victories at Princeton and Trenton late in 1776 and early in 1777, he hastened to place himself at the service of the commander-in-chief. He was named commander of the post at Trenton. Then followed an embarrassing foul-up of mixed orders, countermanded instructions, and military red tape. A Delaware battalion was shunted back and forth between Morristown, New Jersey, where Washington was quartered, and Princeton.

It turned out that Rodney's chief function was to forward troops to Morristown as fast as they showed up at Trenton. Rodney was never happy with the situation, but a letter from Washington on February 18, 1777, salvaged his wounded feelings. The commander-in-chief wrote:

"The readiness with which you took to the field at the period most critical to our affairs, the industry you used in bringing out the militia of the Delaware State and the alertness observed by you in forwarding on the troops from Trenton, reflect the highest honour on your character and place your attachment to the cause in a most distinguished point of view."

The general gave Rodney permission to return home. Rodney quickly accepted.

Later, Rodney was named major general of the Delaware militia by the acting president of the state, Thomas McKean. Rodney continued in this office until he himself was elected president, or chief executive, of Delaware in 1778.



# the ride to philadelphia

It was an agonizing ride through the summer's heat, an angry thunderstorm and torrential rain, over dirt roads choked with mud across rickety bridges spanning swollen streams, over slippery cobblestone streets of towns and cities. There wasn't an hour to waste.

A lone rider, suffering from a serious facial cancer and afflicted with asthma was headed for Philadelphia, where he should have been days before. All that he had worked for, and would continue to work for, hung in delicate balance: The nation's independence.

As he pushed northward, he must have realized he was rushing to vote for a document that well might put a noose around his neck.

This was Caesar Rodney, soldier, politician, *de facto* chief executive of his state, and more important, a delegate to the Second Continental Congress.

Had Rodney not made that ride July 1-2, 1776, he might have gone down in Delaware history as just another leader for national and state independence. Historians might have doted upon him in the years to come, but he would not have captured the popular imagination.

In the last nine years of his life, from 1776 to 1784, Rodney was among the foremost of all Delawareans in the struggle for independence. But none of his tremendous achievements had the drama, the excitement, the heroic stamina reflected in that ride from near Dover to Independence Hall in Philadelphia.

It is too bad Rodney wasn't conceited enough to have written it all down for future generations. Unlike his brother, Thomas, Caesar was not a braggart. It never occurred to him to sit down and record the great event of July 1 and 2. He was a voluminous letter writer, but never a keeper of a diary. At least no Caesar Rodney diary has been found to this date.

What happened on July 1 and 2, 1776, that has virtually canonized him as the greatest of Delawareans during the Revolutionary era?

We brush aside as many myths as possible. We reconcile the many statements by his Revolutionary War contemporaries. We apply logic wherever possible and we come up with a story, told in simple, non-complicated style, based "upon all possible sources."

June 7, 1776. This was the day when Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, a delegate to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, introduced a resolution of only sixteen words:

"Resolved, that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be free and independent states."

At last, the Congress was to face its moment of truth. No more shilly-shallying. No more hedging.

Representing Delaware in the Congress at the time were Thomas McKean of New Castle; George Read, also of New Castle; and Caesar Rodney. In those days, the states, or colonies, voted according to a majority opinion of their respective delegates. How did Delaware stand on this issue of independence?

Even on June 7, before a final vote was taken on the Lee resolution, McKean and Rodney favored immediate independence. Read was opposed; he didn't think the time had come for such a drastic move. The Congress decided to postpone action on the Lee resolution until the states and their delegates could resolve any possible indecision. Meanwhile, Congress sent recommendations to the states to consider declaring themselves autonomous colonies, independent of royal charters or connections with England.

Rodney, at the time, was more than a delegate to Congress. He was also a brigadier general of the Delaware militia and speaker of the Delaware Assembly, the legislative branch of the colony's government.

Also at that time, Delaware still had, at least technically a royal governor, John Penn, grandson of the famous William Penn, who once owned Pennsylvania and the three lower counties on the Delaware.

Rodney returned to Delaware, following the introduction of the

Lee resolution, and summoned a meeting of the Delaware Assembly in the old State House in New Castle.

On June 15, 1776, the Delaware Assembly took its decisive step toward independence. With Rodney presiding, the Assembly, representing the three counties, authorized the three delegates in the Continental Congress to vote as they pleased on the question of national independence. Prior to that, the delegates had been directed to be cautious about angering King George III of England.

Also on June 15, the Delaware Assembly declared that, from that day on, the three counties were to be independent. All officers who had been appointed in the name of the king were to continue in office, but they were to be subject to the Delaware Assembly. This was Delaware's birthdate of freedom. A provisional revolutionary government was set up, with Rodney as acting chief executive of the new state until such time as a constitution could be drafted and adopted.

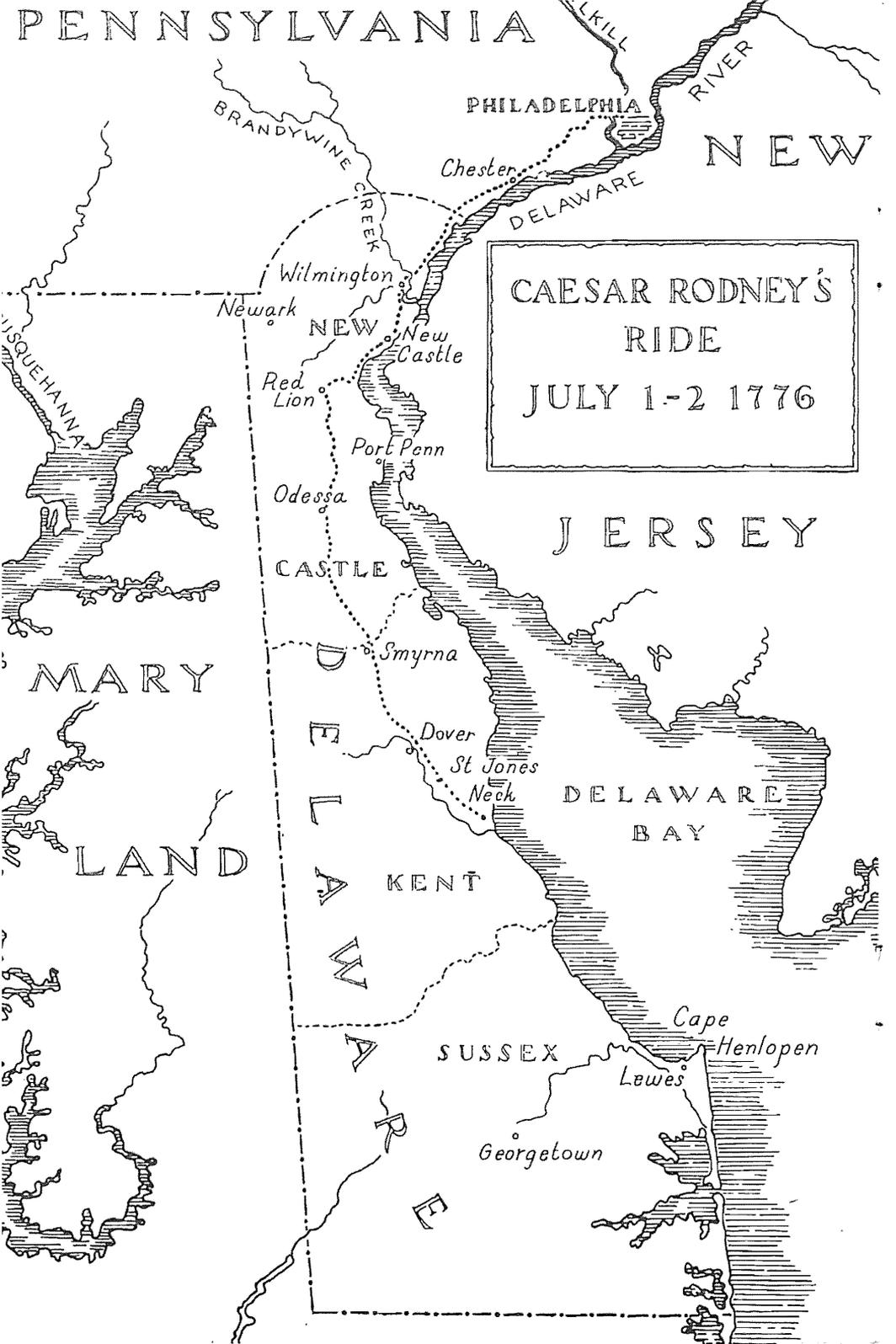
It is not far-fetched to call Rodney the first "governor" of free and independent Delaware since any claims of the royal governor, John Penn, were wiped out. However, it is also important to keep in mind that Rodney's powers as "governor" were highly restricted by the Assembly which, in traditional Delaware style, wasn't about to surrender any of its authority.

Within days of the June 15 Separation Day, Rodney learned of serious counter-revolutionary troubles in Sussex County, fomented by Tories or Loyalists who were opposed to national independence. It was so serious that reports of the threatened uprising were published in a London newspaper. There is evidence that Rodney returned to his home before June 30. Meanwhile, the move in Philadelphia for national independence was approaching a climax.

On July 1, Lee's resolution for independence was discussed by the Congress as a committee of the whole, a parliamentary device whereby such a resolution could be debated without official impact. Read and McKean were in the Congress, but Rodney was at home. It was important that Lee's resolution receive unanimous support but with Read against, McKean, in favor, and Rodney absent, Delaware could not take a stand. Rodney was needed in Philadelphia.

The decisive vote on the Lee resolution was scheduled for July 2. According to the best accounts, McKean sent a messenger to Dover, 80 miles away, more or less, urging Rodney to dash on up to Philadelphia. When the messenger left Philadelphia is not known; just when he arrived at the Rodney home near Dover we can only guess.

In later years, the highly-imaginative Thomas Rodney wrote that he (Thomas) had called out his Light Infantry Company, and put the question of national independence to a vote. Thomas reported that at least two-thirds of the soldiers voted for independence.



PENNSYLVANIA

PHILADELPHIA

NEW

DELAWARE

CAESAR RODNEY'S  
RIDE  
JULY 1-2 1776

JERSEY

MARY

LAND

DE  
LA  
W  
A  
R  
E

DELAWARE  
BAY

SUSSEX

Georgetown

Thomas further claimed he reported this to Caesar and, at the same time, added his own pro-independence arguments. With that, according to Thomas, Caesar "called for his carriage". Accompanied by some of the gentlemen of the Light Infantry Company, at least to the outskirts of Dover, Caesar was on his immortal ride for independence.

Did Caesar Rodney make the entire ride in a carriage? Or did he use a carriage part of the way? The rest astride a horse?

No matter how you look at it, it wasn't an easy trip. The weather was steaming hot and a thunderstorm broke over the state. There was no time to lose if Rodney was to get to Philadelphia by July 2 in time to vote "Yes" for the Lee resolution.

Roads were poor in those days. Bridges were not dependable. Ferries were hazardous. And the rider was 48 years old, suffering from facial cancer and asthma. He was to die eight years later.

Historians have always avoided trying to trace the route he took. But a study of road maps of those days, a review of the post riders' habits, coupled with the urgency of the trip and Rodney's knowledge of hostels where he could change horses, give us an idea of the route that is difficult to dispute.

Taking all these factors into consideration, the logical conclusion is that Rodney hastened from his farm on St. Jones Neck to Dover, along the King's Highway to Duck Creek Crossroads, now Smyrna.

From there he took the post road over Duck Creek to Cantwell's Bridge, now Odessa, perhaps crossing Appoquinimink Creek near the Corbit mansion. Thence through Blackbird, past the McDonough mansion, through St. Georges, where the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal was to be dug about 50 years later.

Since time was of the essence, Rodney undoubtedly avoided Middletown but kept on to Red Lion, a well-known stopping point for coaches and travelers; then over to Tybout's Courner and from there, by a small road which still exists, to the highway to New Castle.

It seems logical that he at least paused in New Castle, then the state's capital.

From New Castle, the road went straight to Wilmington and the old ferry over the Christina River where the present-day Third Street Bridge is located. The old ferry and the bridge over the Brandywine in the vicinity of the mills, were linked by another King's Road, of which there is no trace today.

Once over the Brandywine, Rodney was in Brandywine Village and his route probably followed today's North Market Street over Shellpot Creek and up Penny Hill. He continued northward, with the Delaware River on his right and the sweeping farms of the Talleys, the Grubbs, and allied families on his left. He passed old taverns, such as the Practical Farmer, near Grubb's Landing, and the Robinson mansion at Naaman's; proceeded into Marcus Hook, on through Upland, until he



reached Gray's Ferry outside Philadelphia.

From there, Rodney certainly followed the established post route to the State House, now known as Independence Hall.

There is no evidence that he stopped for sleep. He may have tarried briefly for some food and drink and certainly to change horses.

He arrived at Independence Hall in the afternoon of July 2. McKean was anxiously waiting for him. In later years, McKean recalled that Rodney was tired, dusty and covered with mud. He was booted and spurred. Together, they entered the hall and went quickly into the chamber where the debate on Lee's resolution was nearing a close. We don't actually know what Rodney said when he voted, but he is supposed to have declared:

"As I believe the voice of my constituents and of all sensible and honest men is in favor of independence, my own judgment concurs with them. I vote for independence."

Rodney's vote, with McKean's, put Delaware firmly on the side of independence.

If those weren't Rodney's exact words, we can be sure they accurately reflected his sentiments. Since Dame History writes such bad theatre, authors and playwrights are tempted to fill in the gaps, imagining what should have been said during great historic moments.

Two days later, Congress formally adopted the Declaration of Independence. On that same day, July 4, 1776, Rodney wrote a letter to his brother, Thomas — one of the few letters written by a signer of the Declaration on the day it was adopted.

But alas, he gave us only a few details of his grueling experience:

"...I arrived in Congress (tho detained by thunder and rain) time enough to give my voice in the matter of independence. It is determined by the Thirteen United Colonies without even one decenting (dissenting) colony."

It makes little difference that even Rodney was wrong about all 13 colonies voting for the Declaration on July 4, 1776. New York abstained for 10 days. The important thing is that Caesar Rodney wrote a letter on that great day in American history and gave us an inkling, small as it was, of his tremendous thrust for national freedom.

Child. July the 4<sup>th</sup> 1776.

Sir I have inclosed you a summons directed to  
Mr. Wright to ~~summon~~ summon the Members for our Com-  
ty to meet in Assembly at Newcastle on the 22<sup>d</sup> day  
of this Instant which I hope you will have  
put into his hands as soon as possible after it  
comes to yours. I arrived in Congress! this morn-  
ing by Thunder and Rain! time enough to give my  
voice in the matter of Independence — It is now  
determined by the Thirteen United Colonies, with-  
out even one dissenting Colony — We have now  
got through with the whole of the Declaration, and  
ordered it to be printed, so that you will soon have  
the pleasure of seeing it — Hand-bills of it will  
be printed, and sent to the Armies, Cities, Family  
Councils &c. To be published or rather proclaimed  
in form — Don't neglect to attend closely and  
carefully to my Request and give me oblig<sup>d</sup>

Yours &c.

Caesar Rodney

Caesar Rodney's letter to his brother Thomas, written  
the day that Congress adopted the Declaration of  
Independence.

Independence.



# the sarah rowland myth

It is ironic that two native Delawareans were responsible for the greatest damage to the image of Caesar Rodney. Without any foundation in fact, George Alfred Townsend and Katharine Pyle perpetrated a story that Rodney had been frittering away his time in Lewes with a Tory woman when he should have been in Philadelphia, debating and getting ready to vote for independence.

Townsend concocted this yarn in a lengthy poem he wrote and orated in Georgetown on July 5, 1880. Miss Pyle accepted it as factual. She interwove it in her story of Rodney in her otherwise delightful child's history, *Once Upon a Time in Delaware*, first published in 1911.

Townsend was born in Georgetown in 1841 and during the Civil War (1861-1865) became a noted correspondent for Philadelphia and

New York newspapers. After the war, he saw himself as a popular novelist; he never suffered any feelings of guilt about changing historic facts. Townsend also imagined himself as a poet laureate of Delaware and, so inspired, turned out scores of doggerel verses, with themes dipped from Delaware history.

And so, on July 5, 1880, he read a lengthy poem about Rodney's ride. In it, he portrayed Rodney as staying in Lewes enraptured by the wiles of one Sarah Rowland, a widow and member of a leading Tory family.

Townsend did tell of Rodney's concern over not having heard from Thomas McKean about what was going on in Philadelphia. But he also depicted Mistress Rowland as a kind of Sussex County Delilah, feeding Rodney dishes of terrapin and always filling his glass with the best Madeira in Lewes.

But at the crucial time, which Townsend estimates was July 3, Mistress Rowland's maid upset the plot to keep Delaware from joining other states in the Declaration of Independence by throwing a packet of McKean's letters into Rodney's lap, telling him Mistress Rowland had kept them from him on purpose.

After scanning the letters, Rodney, horrified and shocked, called for his horse. Ignoring the pleas of Mistress Rowland, he dashed off for Philadelphia. Enroute, Townsend noted, Rodney was greeted by another messenger from McKean, urging him on because time was running out.

As Townsend's story went, Rodney arrived in Philadelphia on July 4, just in the nick of time to vote for independence.

It was a dramatic story, involving the wiles of a charming woman, and all that.

But was it true?

Sussex Countians delighted in the yarn. Many believed it to be true, some even to this day. Miss Pyle took up the story and incorporated it in her chapter "Caesar Rodney Rode for Freedom" in *Once Upon a Time in Delaware*, published by the Colonial Dames of Delaware. In a footnote, it was stated:

"After much thought and trouble, the Colonial Dames have decided to choose the most detailed tradition as being possibly also the most accurate — the Sarah Rowland story."

But a Wilmington manufacturer, Samuel Bancroft, Jr., became interested in the authenticity of the story in 1911. Bancroft, who had

financed the publication of Townsend's poems, persisted in getting from Townsend the background of the Rodney poem.

Finally, somewhat begrudgingly, Townsend confessed in a letter postmarked May 14, 1911. He wrote that he had composed the poem from notes while staying in the Burton Hotel, Rehoboth Beach. Townsend also wrote:

"I would not have started Rodney at Lewes without having book authority for that point. I may have got my matter from Sanderson's *Lives of the Signers* but am not sure.

"I think Sarah Rowland was my creation to account for Rodney's absence from Congress such a [long] time. The Rodneys appear to think nobody should handle their ancient dead, except with scripture evidence."

Except for Townsend and Miss Pyle, no student or scholar of Delaware history ever took the Lewes-to-Philadelphia ride seriously. Townsend, in 1880, apparently was not familiar with Thomas Rodney's diary in which he tells of Caesar's starting out from his farm near Dover to vote for Lee's resolution for Independence in Philadelphia.

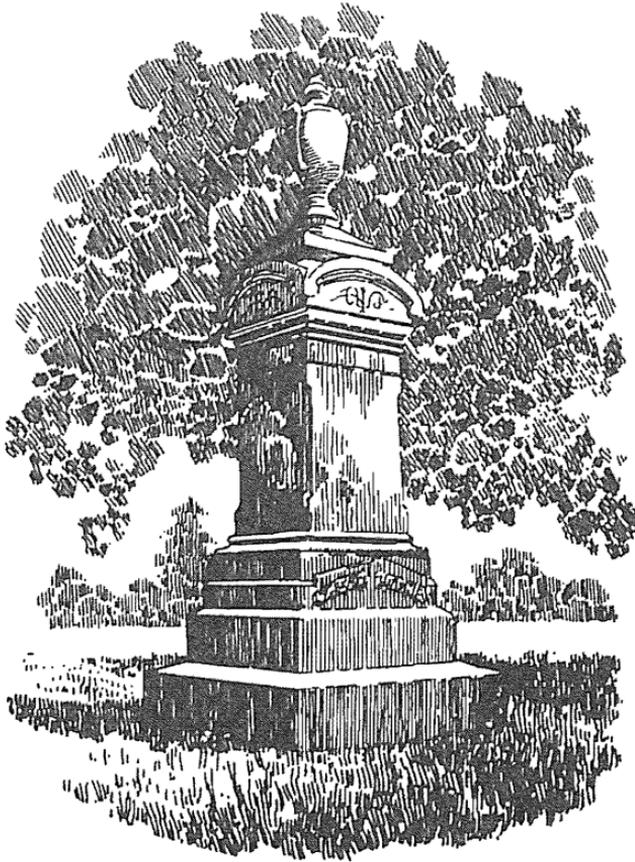
Also, in 1889, at the unveiling of the Caesar Rodney monument in the graveyard of Christ Episcopal Church, Dover, the principal speaker was Thomas F. Bayard, Sr., former U. S. Senator from Delaware, U. S. Secretary of State, and later ambassador to Great Britain. Bayard didn't dignify the Townsend story of Sarah Rowland with even the slightest reference. Instead, he told the story of Rodney's ride pretty much as we know it today, except that even Bayard was hazy as to whether Rodney arrived in Philadelphia July 2 or 4.

But the Rodney-Sarah Rowland myth cannot be dismissed entirely out of hand. Had Townsend been a better poet instead of a master of mediocre doggerel, the story might well have been more widely accepted. Even the generally-accepted "official" version of the Rodney ride is based on extremely thin shreds of historical evidence.

And, had Katharine Pyle's book, *Once Upon a Time in Delaware*, written for Delaware schoolchildren, not gone out of print and out of use in the schools, surviving only as a collector's item, the Rodney Sarah Rowland story might have persisted with greater credibility to this day.

Finally, had it not been for an autograph collector grubbing through the debris of Samuel Bancroft, Jr.'s letters in the 1940's, Townsend's letter confessing that he created the Sarah Rowland romance would never have survived to demolish the myth Townsend created.

# then came the end.



By 1782, Caesar Rodney had become weary in the service of his state and nation. He was only in his middle 50's. Ordinarily, there should have been a few more good years of life. But not for Rodney. The revolutionary War years had taken their toll — the years of frustration mingled with some success. The years of battling the opponents of independence and political liberty, the strain of trying to meet budgets; furnishing clothing and supplies to the troops; the constant traveling back and forth from Dover to New Castle, to Philadelphia, and elsewhere.

All this could wear down even a strong man. But what about a man suffering from a serious cancer? Rodney had been coping with this problem for a least 15 years. And now, in the beginning of the 1780's, this ailment was seriously sapping his vitality. He referred to his cancer



as "that horrid and most obstinate disorder." In the winter of 1782, Rodney, living chiefly in his home on St. Jones Neck, was being treated more frequently than ever by a doctor and there were times when he had to travel to Philadelphia for extended medical care.

In the meantime, the Delaware General Assembly decided to bestow further honors on Rodney. In the fall of 1783, he was elected speaker of the upper house of the Assembly, becoming in effect, lieutenant governor. Thus Rodney, whose many positions of state service included that of chief executive, was now vice-chief executive.

But by the early spring of 1784, Rodney had become too weak to travel. The upper house of the General Assembly voted to meet at his home. The last such session took place April 8, 1784.

One can imagine the scene: The very sick Rodney propped up in a couch or a small bed, his face swathed with bandages, his voice low, his words spoken hesitatingly. Very little business of any importance was transacted. It was really a courtesy call upon Rodney by his friends and colleagues.

Death came less than 3 months later. The funeral was held June 28, 1784. Rodney was buried on his home farm of Poplar Grove and, for more than 100 years, the grave was unmarked. This was corrected when a small slab was placed over the grave by the then Chief Justice Joseph P. Comegys. Later, in 1887, the Rodney Club was organized to spark a movement for moving the remains of Rodney to Christ Church in Dover.

The goal was reached in 1889, when the bones of Rodney were re-interred in the Christ Church graveyard and a monument placed there. Thomas F. Bayard, Sr., delivered a lengthy oration, the first real biographical dissertation about Rodney.

So far, the most extensive book on Caesar Rodney is *Letters To and From Caesar*, edited by the late Dr. George H. Ryden of the University of Delaware and one-time state archivist. The book was published by the Historical Society of Delaware in 1933. It contains most of the letters to and from Rodney in existence, the bulk of which were purchased for the Historical Society at a public sale in 1919. Since then, other letters have been added to the Historical Society's collection.

This book continues to this day to be the best source of information pertaining to Rodney. In many ways, it is the best and most meaningful memorial to Delaware's greatest citizen of all times.