

Charles Thomson
by Diana Severance

July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was approved by the Continental Congress, signed by President John Hancock and Secretary Charles Thomson, and sent to a Philadelphia printer, where about 200 broadsides were printed. These were sent to colonial assemblies and governments in Europe. Not until August 2, 1776, was the Declaration engrossed and signed by the delegates, though not by Secretary Thomson. This signed copy is in the National Archives. Unfortunately, the original copy signed by Hancock and Thomson no longer exists, though copies of the broadside remain. Though many know John Hancock as the first signer of the Declaration with his florid signature, few are familiar with the person of Charles Thomson, Secretary of the Congress, though his roles in the early days of the country are quite significant.

Charles Thomson was born in Londonderry, Ireland in 1729. After his mother died in 1739, his father immigrated to America with Charles and two or three of his brothers. Charles' father died at sea, shortly before reaching America, and many of his possessions were stolen after his death. Penniless, Charles and his brothers landed at New Castle, Delaware and were sent to live with different families. Ten-year old Charles was apprenticed to a blacksmith. Not wanting to be a blacksmith, he ran away. A woman found Charles wandering the streets and asked him what he wanted to be. When he said he wanted to be a scholar, she arranged for his schooling in the classics at New London Academy, established by the Rev. Francis Alison in 1741. (Three signers of the Declaration of Independence received their education with Rev. Allen – Thomas McKean, James Smith, and George Read.) Thomson lived with the Presbyterian clergyman and excelled in his studies. After completing his schooling with Rev. Allen, Thomson set up his own school, which he ran for several years. In 1750, at the age of twenty-one, he became a tutor in

Latin at the Philadelphia Academy, forerunner of the University of Philadelphia, and was inducted into the American Philosophical Society.

Thomson became involved in politics during the French and Indian War, opposing the Penn family's Indian policy and becoming secretary for the Delaware Indians in the Treaty of Easton, in which the Delaware, Iroquois and eleven other tribes agreed not to side with the French, in return for large amounts of land being returned to them. In 1759, Thomson wrote *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Alienation of the Delaware and Shawanese Indians from the British Interest*. The Delaware adopted him into their tribe and gave him the Indian name meaning "One who speaks the truth." Thomson's honesty and integrity were character traits for which he was noted throughout his life.

In 1760, Thomson resigned from the Philadelphia Academy and opened a general merchandise store on Market Street. After the French and Indian War, the Pennsylvania Assembly petitioned to become a royal colony from a proprietary colony controlled by the Penn family. Benjamin Franklin was sent to England as the Assembly's agent. Thomson and Franklin had become acquainted through Thomson's work at the Philadelphia Academy, and the two corresponded while Franklin was in England. When the Stamp Act was passed, Thomson strongly opposed it and wrote Franklin,

Arbitrary courts are set over us, and trials by juries taken away: The Press is so restricted that we cannot complain: An army of mercenaries threatened to be billeted on us: The sources of our trade are stopped; and, to complete our ruin, the little property we had acquired, taken from us, without even allowing us the merit of giving it. I really dread the consequence. The parliament insist on a power over all the liberties and privileges claimed by the colonies, and hence require a blind obedience and acquiescence in whatever they do: Should the behavior of the colonies happen not to square with these sovereign notions, (as I fear it will not), what remains but by violence to compel them to obedience. Violence will beget resentment, and provoke to acts never dreamt of: But I will not anticipate evil; I pray God will avert it.¹

¹ John J. Zimmerman, "Charles Thomson", 'The Sam Adams of Philadelphia,' *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, December 1958, Vol. 45, no. 3, 468.

When Franklin wrote articles for the British press presenting American arguments against growing British hostility, Franklin printed Thomson's letter. Thomson increasingly became an opponent of Britain's colonial policy. He was part of a deputation of seven delegates sent by a large group of citizens to the British stamp agent to encourage his resignation. Thomson's opposition to the Stamp Act was supported by small shopkeepers, mechanics and artisans, and Thomson became a leader in Philadelphia of opponents to the Townsend Acts. He frequently conveyed Franklin's letters to the merchants opposing Parliament's taxation, as Franklin used Thomson's letters in conveying to Parliament the principles behind colonial opposition.

As the leader of the radicals in Pennsylvania, Thomson frequently opposed Joseph Galloway, leader of the conservatives and speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly. When delegates were chosen for the First Continental Congress, Galloway prevented Thomson from being chosen a delegate. However, when the Congress met, John Adams of Massachusetts skillfully nominated Charles Thomson to be Secretary of the Congress, saying, "Charles Thomson is the Sam Adams of Philadelphia, the life of the cause of liberty."

Thomson had wed Hannah Harrison on Thursday, September 1, 1774 (Hannah was sister of Benjamin Harrison V, who later was a signer of the Declaration of Independence and became Governor of Virginia). Monday, September 5, he came to Philadelphia with his new bride. When he got out of the carriage, he received a message from Peyton Randolph, the President of Congress, to come immediately to Congress. When he arrived, he was told he had been chosen Secretary and to begin taking minutes! Thomson remained Secretary for almost fifteen years - throughout the Continental Congresses, the Congress of the early United States under the Articles of Confederation, and the adoption of the Constitution. During all that time, there were

fourteen presidents of Congress and three hundred and forty-two delegates, but only one Secretary. Thomson's influence and importance in the founding of the country was immense.

The original Declaration of Independence was hand-written by Charles Thomson before being signed by John Hancock and Charles Thomason and sent to the printer. The same day the Declaration was adopted, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson were appointed to design a seal for the new United States. Their work was never approved, and two other committees worked on possible designs unsuccessfully. Finally, the Continental Congress charged Thomson with designing a seal, and within six days he submitted a design to Congress which was approved. The Great Seal Thomson designed consisted of

the national coat of arms surrounded by two concentric rings. The arms have an American bald eagle with raised wings as their chief feature. The eagle holds a branch of olive in its right talon and a bundle of thirteen arrows in its left. A ribbon held in its beak displays the motto *E Pluribus Unum* – 'From Many, One'. Above the eagle's head is the crest, consisting of thirteen stars against a blue sky, surrounded by rays of light and an encircling cloud. The national flag is suggested by the shield on the eagle's breast with its six stripes on a white field and a blue chief.²

Today the Great Seal is kept in the U.S. Department of State, and the Secretary of State is the Seal's official custodian.

As Secretary of Congress, Thomson not only kept the records of Congressional proceedings, but he was responsible for much of the correspondence, ranging from petitions to the King to translating letters from French officials. Throughout the Revolutionary War, it was Thomson who issued letters of marque and reprisal to American privateers (granted on request of individual states in accordance with congressional rules), making Thomson effectively the supervisor of the American navy.

² Cyril M. White, "Charles Thomson: The Irish-Born Secretary of the Continental Congress 1774-1789," *An Irish Quarterly Review*, Spring/Summer, 1979, Vol. 68, No. 269/270, 41.

Among the many matters Thomson dealt with as Secretary was the approval of Robert Aitken's printing of the Bible in English. The King had controlled the license to print the English Bible, and the colonies were not allowed such privilege. The blockade and war had limited the import of Bibles, leading to a shortage in the colonies. January 1, 1781, Philadelphia printer Robert Aitken sent Congress a memorial seeking Congress' approval for printing a Bible in English. The matter was referred to a committee, which from time to time inspected Aitken's work. In September 1782, two chaplains from Congress inspected the work and supported it, and on September 12, 1782, Aitken's work was approved by the committee. When this first English Bible printed in America was issued, it included at the forefront the Congressional resolution of approval:

Whereupon,
RESOLVED,

THAT the United States in Congress assembled highly approve the pious and laudable undertaking of Mr. Aitken, as subservient to the interest of religion, as well as an instance of the progress of arts in this country, and being satisfied from the above report of his care and accuracy in the execution of the work, they recommend this edition of the Bible to the inhabitants of the United States, and hereby authorize him to publish this Recommendation in the manner he shall think proper.

CHA. THOMSON, Sec'ry.

Thomson was virtually the administrator of Congress. In addition to notifying the states of Congressional laws, Thomson also collected and preserved all the constitutions and laws of the states. This, along with Thomson's congressional records, in essence was the beginning of the National Archives. He maintained communications with foreign nations and directed consular recognition. He sent the earliest resolutions of Congress to the King and Parliament. He developed a private code to use in maintaining communications with the United States' emissaries abroad. During Congress's several recesses, Thomson continued to manage the

government. Twice the British tried to place a spy in Thomson's office, though both attempts failed, with the last agent hanged for the offense.

When the Northwest Territory was organized, it was Thomson who first supervised the administration of the territory and kept records of the proceedings of its territorial government. Earlier, Thomson had directed the Indian affairs of the young country. With his numerous and varied administrative responsibilities, it is understandable that one historian has called Thomson the virtual Prime Minister of the United States. When Washington became President, Thomson was able to rely on his own vast governmental experience to advise Washington on the organization of his cabinet.

Thomson also was in charge of the first elections under the Constitution of both the Federal Congress and the first Presidency of the United States of America. He directed that the States send to him the election results of their choice for Senators, Representatives, and electors. After the ratification of the Constitution, the old Confederation Congress drifted away. For seven months there were never enough States represented to carry out business. Thomson continued to run the government until April 6th 1789, when sufficient Congressmen and Senators elected George Washington. When Washington was elected, Congress chose Charles Thomson to personally notify Washington of his official election. So, Thomson went to Mt. Vernon to formally notify Washington and accompany him back to New York, where he was inaugurated. Thomson shortly after resigned and retired to Harriton House, his home twelve miles outside of Philadelphia.

In 1884, Theodore F. Dwight, Chief of the Bureau of Rolls and Library of the U.S. Department of State, described the debt the country owes to Charles Thomson:

To Charles Thomson we owe the preservation of all the records of the Continental Congress – not only the *Journals*, but all those fragments now so precious, e.g. the original

motions, the reports of Committees, the small odds and ends which are the small bones of history... for example, the original of Lee's motion (on Independence). The *Journals of Congress* are with very few exceptions, entirely in the handwriting of Thomson. He seems to have been present at ever session of Congress.³

The fidelity, industry, and integrity with which Thomson served is indeed remarkable. One historian noted that

Never before in history had the origin of a nation been so fully recorded from the moment it occurred, much less by such an immense mass of documentary evidence on every aspect of its creation from the most critical decisions of policy to the most significant details of accounting. Also, it needs to be stated that never before had *one* man the unique opportunity of recording such an event. This is Charles Thomson's historically unique role and contribution to the establishment and the development of the United States of America.⁴

After leaving Congress, Thomson devoted himself to the study of a work he had acquired some years before. Passing by an auction house in Philadelphia one day, a crier advertised "an unknown outlandish book for sale."⁵ Thomson bid and acquired the volume for a trifle. He discovered the work was a portion of the Greek Septuagint and desired to have the entire copy. Two years later, passing by the same store, he found the remainder of the book for sale and eagerly bought it. The volume Thomson purchased, *Vetus Testamentum Graecum ex versione Septuaginta interpretum. Juxta Exemplar Vaticanum Romae editum*, was the Septuagint based upon the Codex Vaticanus and was printed in Cambridge by John Field in 1665.

Thomson realized that the Scriptures quoted in the New Testament were often from the Greek Septuagint, the Hebrew Scriptures translated into Greek about the third century B.C. Thomson wrote a friend that the quotations "Show that the prediction of the prophets are fulfilled in J[esus] C[hrist] or to confirm and enforce the doctrines they delivered."⁶ Thomson also

³ White, "Charles Thomson," 44.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ As quoted in Albert J. Edmunds. "Charles Thomson's New Testament: A Description of three MSS.in the Library of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 15, no. 3 (1891), 328.

⁶ Edmunds, "Charles Thomson: New Testament", 329.

recognized that the Septuagint represented an older version of the Hebrew Scriptures than any Hebrew manuscripts used in the English translations. Since he could not find any translation of the Septuagint into English, he decided to complete one himself.

Exactly when Thomson began his translation work is not known, but apparently a draft was completed during the American Revolution, for a friend noted in a letter to his wife that when he visited Thomson after his retirement from government, he was working on a revision of his translation. He carefully worked on this revision for twenty years. We know that he made at least four drafts of the translation, with notations and corrections.

In a January 6, 1801, letter to Rev. Samuel Miller, Thomson wrote,

Attached to no system nor peculiar tenets of any sect or party, I have sought for truth with the utmost integrity, and endeavored to give a just and true representation of the sense and meaning of the Sacred Scriptures; and in doing this, I have further endeavored to convey into the translation, as far as I could, the spirit and manner of the authors, and thereby give it the quality of an original.⁷

Thomson kept a notebook, now in the Library of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, with notes and historical background on various Greek words and phrases. In that notebook he wrote out his principles of translation:

To translate well is: 1, to convey a just representation of the purpose of an author; 2, to convey into the translation the author's spirit and manner; 3, To give it the quality of an original by making it appear natural, a natural copy without applying words improperly, or in a meaning not warranted by use, or combining them in a way which renders the sense obscure, and the construction ungrammatical or harsh.⁸

The very first page of Thomson's notebook has the heading "Aion" after which he has numerous notes on the meaning of the word. He came to define *aion* as "an age, or the time of God's dealing with man in a particular way, whether of a longer or shorter duration."⁹ Thomson

⁷ *The Septuagint Bible: The Oldest Version of the Old Testament*, translation of Charles Thomson, edited, revised and enlarged by C.A. Muses. Indian Hills, CO.: Falcon Wings Press, 1954, xi.

⁸ *Septuagint Bible: The Oldest Version of the Old Testament*, ed. Muses, xii.

⁹ Edmunds, "Charles Thomson's New Testament," 328.

noted that correctly translating the word as “age” would have avoided much confusion, such as in Matthew 12:32, where in the King James Bible it was translated, “And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the *world* to come.” Thomson translated verse, “Even though one speak against the son of man, it may be forgiven him; but whoever shall speak against the holy Spirit is not to be forgiven, either in the present age, or in that to come.”

Though Thomson often followed the King James translation, he did seek to use the more common language of his day.¹⁰ Though he does translate *euangelon* as “gospel” thirteen times, fifty-seven times he translates the word “glad tidings” and five times as “good news.” He never translated *euangelezo* as “preach”, but as “proclaim” thirty-four times and twelve times as “publish.” Though he frequently translated *basileia* as “kingdom,” especially when speaking of a geographical kingdom, one-third of the time he translates it as “reign. So, Matthew 6:10 reads, “thy reign come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Thomson usually translated *metanoia* as “reform” rather than “repent”, “reformation” rather than “repentance.” So, John the Baptist proclaims, “Reform, for the reign of the heavens is at hand.” (It’s interesting to consider, in light of Erasmus’ translation of the word as “repent” in contrast with the Latin Vulgate, “do penance.”) Thomson preferred the word “trial” to “temptation.” In two places he used the word “hell” (Mat. 16:18; Luke 10:15), but he consistently translated *hades* as “mansion of the dead.” In a note at Matthew 16:18 he explained “*Hades*, the place, mansion or habitation of departed spirits.” He usually translated *dikaio* as “acquit” rather than “justify.” Thomson translated *ekklesia* as “church” in Matthew 16:18, but elsewhere used the word “congregation.”

¹⁰ Comments on Thomson’s Greek usage and translation is largely taken from Kendrick Grobel, “Charles Tomson, First American N.T. Translator: An Appraisal,” *Journal of Bible and Religion*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (August 1943), 145-151.

Thomson is excellent in his rendering of legal expressions, such as his rendering in Acts 15:6 about the Jerusalem council, “The apostles and elders were convened to deliberate.” His accounts of Paul’s appearances before Felix and Festus in Acts 24-25 also shows good use of legal terminology, reflecting Thomson’s long experience keeping the legal records of Congress. Galatians 5:1 is slightly mistranslated, but does reflect the “Sam Adams of Philadelphia” - “stand up for the liberty with which Christ hath made us free!”

Thomson regularly corresponded with Thomas Jefferson, discussing many matters, including science and horticulture, as well as his translation work. When Jefferson saw news that Thomson’s work was nearing publication, on January 11, 1808, he wrote Thomson,

My dear and antient Friend,

-I see by the newspapers your translation of the Septuagint is now to be printed, and I write this to pray to be admitted as a subscriber. I wish it may not be too late for you to reconsider the size in which it is to be published. Folios and quartos are now laid aside because of their inconvenience. Everything is now printed in 8vo, 12mo or petit format. The English booksellers print their first editions indeed in 4to, because they can assess a larger price on account of the novelty; but the bulk of readers generally wait for the 2d edition, which is for the most part in 8vo. This is what I have long practised myself. Johnson, of Philadelphia, set the example of printing handsome edition of the Bible in 4v., 8vo. I wish yours were in the same form.¹¹

Thomson followed Jefferson’s advice, and in 1808 his Bible translation was published in four octavo volumes, including his translation of the Septuagint and the Greek New Testament (it’s unknown which text Thomson used for his New Testament translation). Thomson wrote Jefferson, “I am thankful to that kind Providence which directed my attention to this work. It has kept my mind employed, so that I can say I have not during the last nine years found one hour hang heavy on me.”¹²

¹¹ “To Charles Thomson, January 11, 1808,” *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, Federal Edition. New York and London: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904-1905.

¹² “To Thomas Jefferson from Charles Thomson, 24 February 1808, in Papers of Thomas Jefferson, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-7482>.

Thomson's Bible translation was published as *The Holy Bible, containing the Old and New Covenant, commonly called the Old and New Testament: translated from the Greek*. The work was printed by Jane Aitken, daughter of Philadelphia printer Robert Aitken, who was the first to print an English Bible in America. Thomson's work was a first in several ways. It was the first English translation of the Septuagint, indeed the first translation of the Septuagint in any European language. It was also the first Bible printed by a woman in America.

The work was well received in America and especially praised in England. In 1824, William Orme, a Scottish Congregational minister and biographer of Richard Baxter wrote that "This transatlantic work is creditable to America, and to the learned author. It is the only English version of the Septuagint, and is therefore worthy of attention, as well as for the fidelity with which it is executed. The New Testament contains many improved readings."¹³ Yet, in spite of Thomson's best advertising, sales were small, and it was not profitable. Thomson and Ebenezer Hazard (a businessman and publisher), had partnered to assume the cost of publication. Hazard stored the unsold copies in his garret. After Hazard's death, they were sold for wastepaper to Dr. Earles, a bookseller at the corner Fourth and Chestnut, so most of the volumes were destroyed. Thomson's translation was later reprinted, however, and was consulted by the revision committee for the American Standard version.¹⁴ Rendell Harris of Cambridge was known to sometimes quote Thomson's translation in his lectures.

After his translation was published, Thomson continued his Bible studies. In 1815 he published a harmony of the gospels, using his translation, titled *A Synopsis of the Four Evangelists: or, a regular history of the conception, birth, doctrine, miracles, death,*

¹³ Grobel, "Charles Thomson: First American N.T. Translator", 151.

¹⁴ C.A. Muses in his introduction to his edition of Thomson's Bible noted especially the places the Revision Committee followed the LXX reading: Genesis 4:8; 12:6; 30:11; 49:6; Josh. 9:4; Judges 8"13; I Samuel 14:18; II Samuel 21:19; I Kings 13:12; 22:38; Psalm 22:16.

resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, in the words of the evangelists. Thomson recognized that the gospels were not regular histories but “memoirs of remarkable things said and done by Jesus Christ, on certain occasions.”¹⁵ Thomson included every verse from the Gospels in his *Synopsis*, not omitting or adding anything, “except, merely, for the purpose of connect or explanation of peculiar phrases or technical terms,” and then enclosing those in brackets. His *Synopsis* included critical and explanatory notes at the end, showing that the gospels “mutually elucidate, support, and confirm one another’s narration” without contradiction.

In his last years, Thomson’s memory failed so that he could not even recognize members of his own family. He was cared for by a nephew and a maiden sister who lived with him. After a long and fruitful life, Thomson died on August 16, 1824, at the age of 95.

¹⁵ Charles Thomson, *A Synopsis of the Four Evangelists*. Philadelphia: Wm. McCulloch, 1815, Preface.

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