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An Address

by

**JAMES A. WAKEFIELD**

before

**The Pennsylvania Society  
Sons of the American Revolution**



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## CAESAR RODNEY AND HIS RIDE

EVERY Pennsylvanian loves the grand old State. Her soil, her history, and her name are sacred. To most of the world she is known as the "Keystone State." There are four reasons given for the adoption of this name:—

(1) If you look at a map of the thirteen original states you will notice that they form an irregular arch. Pennsylvania is located at the center of this great arch and may be called for that reason the Keystone of the Arch of States.

(2) In the early days, Pennsylvania was the most important State in foreign trade. Hundreds of vessels spread their white sails to the breezes of the Delaware River, and Philadelphia was the greatest center of trade in the new world. Some contend that it was given the title of "Keystone State" because of this commercial prominence.

(3) When the new Capitol building was erected at Washington all the stones were not needed and some of them were used to make a bridge over Rock Creek, a small stream flowing between Washington and Georgetown. Thirteen stones of the arch were visible and on the faces of these stones were carved the abbreviations of the names of the states. PA. was cut on the central or keystone, and it is possible that this stone was chosen for Pennsylvania in honor of the position and importance of the State and in honor of the part Pennsylvania took in the adoption of the great Declaration of Independence.

(4) July 1, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was reported to the Continental Congress. The patriots knew that our country could not be free and independent unless the Declaration was adopted. The final vote was delayed three days to give



Franklin and Samuel Adams a chance to bring Pennsylvania into line for the measure, and to give Caesar Rodney time to ride from his home in Delaware to cast his vote and his State's vote for freedom. On July 4, Delaware was ready to vote, for Caesar Rodney was there, and the roll was called. All the States voted "Aye" until Pennsylvania, the last State, was reached. She was entitled to seven delegates. Two doubtful ones were persuaded to remain away. Five were present. Franklin and Wilson voted "Aye"; Humphreys and Willing voted "Nay." Here was a tie. John Morton was outside listening to a crowd of friends who were begging him to vote "Nay." The President, John Hancock, began to talk and did not stop until he saw Morton enter the hall. Then Morton's name was called and he voted "Aye." Thus for four days the noble men of that Congress had been building the great arch of human liberty and Caesar Rodney's ride and John Morton's vote made Pennsylvania "The Keystone of the Arch of Liberty."

The greatest ride of Revolutionary times was the ride of Caesar Rodney. Paul Revere rode to save army supplies at Lexington and Concord, but Caesar Rodney rode to save the Declaration of Independence. In 1776 the Colonies were in great excitement. The Continental Congress was sitting in old Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Thomas Jefferson had written the great Charter of our Freedom, and July 1st it was presented to Congress by Benjamin Harrison of Virginia. Would these brave men dare to defy King George and his armies? Yes, if the Colonies stood united for freedom. No, if the Colonies were divided. As has been stated, four of the seven Pennsylvania delegates were opposed, but two of these four were persuaded to stay away by Franklin and Adams, and thus they had the State's ready to vote. In Delaware, Thomas McKean was for independence, George Read was opposed at this time, and Caesar Rodney was eighty miles away down in Sussex County; and Caesar Rodney was needed to carry Delaware for the Declaration of Independence.

The subject of this paper, some authorities say, was born in Dover, Delaware, 1730, but the Encyclopedic Dictionary of American History gives it as 1728. He died in 1781. He was Sheriff of Kent County in 1758, then Justice and Judge, and before 1762 he



sat in the Delaware Assembly. In 1765 he was sent as delegate from Delaware to the Stamp Act Congress at New York. In 1768, while a member of the State Assembly, he offered resolutions "totally prohibiting the importation of slaves into the province of Delaware," and pleaded so earnestly for its adoption that it lacked only two votes of passing. He had twice petitioned the King for freedom of his people. He was Speaker of the Delaware Assembly from 1769 to 1774 and of the Delaware popular convention in 1774. He was a member of the Continental Congress from 1774 to 1776, was a member of the Committee to draft a statement of Rights and Grievances, and signed the Declaration of Independence under the dramatic circumstances hereafter to be told. He served under General Washington in the Delaware campaign from 1776 to 1777, and was President of Delaware from 1778 to 1782. He was a Brigadier General of Militia and a noble Patriot.

On the 5th of September, 1774, the delegates of eleven Colonies met at Philadelphia, in the City Tavern on Second Street, above Walnut, to select a place to hold the first Continental Congress. The State House (Independence Hall) was either occupied or likely to be by the Pennsylvania Assembly. The Carpenters Company offered the use of their hall and it was accepted. To this first Congress John and Samuel Adams came from Massachusetts to stand for freedom; George Washington, tall, modest, resolute, the hero of the Braddock Campaign in 1755, walked by the side of Patrick Henry, whose eloquent speech against the Stamp Act in May, 1765, rang round the world. Thomas Millin, Samuel Rhoads, Charles Humphreys, George Ross, Joseph Galloway, John Dickinson, John Morton and Edward Biddle were Pennsylvania's delegates. Caesar Rodney was there. A rumor had just reached the city that a British fleet had cannonaded and destroyed Boston. Reverend Jacob Duché, of Christ Church, opened the deliberations by reading the 35th Psalm. With a voice tense with emotion he read that Song of the Sweet Singer of Israel: "Plead my cause, O Lord, with them that strive with me, fight against them that fight against me. Take hold of my shield and buckler and stand up for mine help." The whole Assembly was profoundly moved. It seemed as if heaven had ordained that psalm to be read that morning.



This Congress grew out of a general meeting held in Carpenters Hall, July 15, 1774. At this meeting was passed a declaration of rights and an invitation to all the Colonies to send delegates to Philadelphia for the purpose of acting as a unit against English oppression.

This Congress adopted fourteen measures, in all of which Caesar Rodney participated. British goods were not to be imported into the Colonies, in order to lessen the profits of the English merchants and to show that the Colonists resented taxing the people without their consent, nor were troops to be quartered in time of peace or men tried without a jury. Teas, wines, coffee, pepper, molasses and syrups were not to be imported or used in the Colonies. The slave trade between America and Africa was to be wholly stopped. More sheep were to be raised, to be killed sparingly, and none were to be exported. It passed also the famous Declaration of Rights: (1) the right to life, liberty and property; (2) the right to tax themselves; (3) the right to assemble peacefully to petition against grievances; (4) the rights of Englishmen and of their charters.

When the Congress closed, the Assembly of Pennsylvania gave them a banquet where this sentiment was given: "May the sword of the parent never be stained by the blood of her children"; to which Caesar Rodney observed, "This is not a toast but a prayer."

In such a school as this was he prepared.

When the critical moment came he was eighty miles from Congress and his presence was needed to make his country free and independent. Thomas McKean asked Benjamin Harrison to plead for time and sent a horseman South on July 1st to find him and tell him to hasten to Philadelphia. The messenger found him ill at Byfield, one of his farms near Dover. He had suffered for four years with a cancer that had attacked his face to such an extent that he was compelled to wear a veil to conceal the fearful ravages of the disease. In spite of the terrific heat, the urging of relatives, the commands of a nurse and physician who warned him that the ride might mean his death, soon as he heard the news he called out, "Saddle the black," sprang upon his faithful horse,



faced the North and galloped away. His determination and eagerness soon left the messenger behind.

When the sun rose over Philadelphia, July 4, 1776, and the anxious delegates gathered in Independence Hall, Caesar Rodney was still many miles to the South. His horse was jaded, his cancer-scarred face showed signs of physical pain and mental anxiety. He urged his horse along and lo! in the distance he sees the curling smoke of a hundred chimneys. He is nearing the city. Is he too late? Has the vote been taken? Through the streets rang the sound of rushing hoof beats and into the yard before the Hall, dashed a foaming dusty steed. The rider sprang to the ground, threw the rein to a groom and hastened to the door, where he was met by McKean, who embraced him. Booted and spurred, tired and dusty, amidst a silence in which the heart throbs of Liberty were heard, Caesar Rodney entered Congress. Delaware was called. McKean voted "Aye," Read "Nay"; and then the famous rider arose and said: "As I believe the voice of my constituents and of all fair, sensible and honest men is in favor of independence, and as my own judgment concurs with them, I vote for independence." The story of "Ring grandpa, ring," though a myth, stirs every man in whose veins there courses one drop of Revolutionary blood.

The historians and romanticists have missed the true and dramatic story of Caesar Rodney's ride and the lesson it teaches. 'Tis said, if you would awaken a flame of martial spirit in the sons of France, appeal to them as descendants of those whose eagles flew in triumph over Wagram and Austerlitz and Lodi Bridge, and bore upon their outstretched wings the glorious destinies of their favored child of fortune, their thunderbolt of war. If you would arouse Caledonia to battle, appeal to her sons as descendants of

"Scots wha hae wi Wallace bled

Scots wham Bruce has often led,"

and at once from Loch Lomond, from Ben Nevis and from the Grampian Hills her kilted warriors will troop to death as to a feast, stimulated by the recollection of the glorious deeds of those from whose loins they sprang. And hereafter, if eloquence shall



want a theme to awaken her sublimest efforts, or poetry shall seek some shrine at which to offer her most harmonious numbers, orator and bard need not go back to the romantic period of Agincourt and Crecy, when Henry V led his armies to victory and Douglass poured out the vials of his wrath across Northumbrian plains, but tell of the deeds of our glorious ancestors who fought at Valley Forge and Yorktown; of those who sleep in consecrated graves tonight in Trenton Woods and Germantown Groves; of those heroes whose battle cry for freedom was hushed in death, a cry scarcely stilled ere the acclamations of angels awoke them to sublimer greeting; of that rider who rode with death to save a nation, and whom the poet Beamish sings:

Teachers, tell us of Rodney, Rodney of Delaware!  
Some of you start and stammer. Others stand mute and stare.  
Put up your sums and fables. Listen that you may hear  
The gallop of Caesar Rodney with death always riding near.

Heat, like a thick, black blanket, closely on Byfield lay,  
It harried the flesh and spirit of him who waited for day.  
His fevered eyes watched the candle that blinked like a far-off star,  
They looked from a face upon which all the grace was hid by a  
cruel scar.

Out of the heat and blackness, clamors a-trooping came,  
Barking of dogs and thunder of knocks on a door's stout frame.  
Sternly a nurse hissed, "Silence!" and then came a stranger's call:  
"McKean bids you ride. I will be at your side. Come quickly or  
freedom will fall."

"He'll die on the way," shrilled a servant, but Rodney was out of  
his bed.

"Boots, horses and spurs," he commanded, "and the veiling to cover  
my head."

"Horses are posted to meet you," the voice in the doorway said.  
"It is well. I am ready." The weak voice was steady. "I will  
vote or you'll bear me there dead."

It's seventy miles to the State House in the city of William Penn,  
Seventy miles of torture to forward the freedom of men.

For some in the Congress were Tories and others too timid to dare,  
So Rodney must ride, that his vote might decide, the ballot of  
Delaware.

Neck by neck through old Dover they galloped, and Rodney bent  
low to his task.



It was gray in the east when he tarried to cover his face with the mask.

A woman screamed loud at the vision, but Rodney was riding again, Though, beneath him, the back of his horse was a rack to torture the bravest of men.

Great weariness came upon Rodney. He galloped as one in a dream;

But lightning-like pains broke his trances as rocks break a mountain stream.

Somewhere, in the misty morning, his comrade faltered and fell, Thence rode at his side, with a long silent stride, a shape that Rodney knew well.

The tropical heat-haze closed round him, the veiled and the wraith at his side,

At inns and by-lanes he changed horses, then, on with the furious ride.

Weakness at last made him falter, he fed and then slumbered awhile,

But the will was so strong that the rest was not long, for the goal still lay many a mile.

And then he came into the city, the half-Tory town of Penn,  
Down Passyunk Road he galloped, past wondering women and men.  
His veil streamed, a pennon of freedom, and his limbs hung like bags of sand;

But the horse he bestrode knew the turns of the road and needed no guiding hand.

So to the State House came Rodney, merely the shell of a man,  
There McKean met and bore him as gently as only a sturdy friend can.

Steadied him in the chamber, and gloried to hear him declare:

"For the right to be free, and to end Tyranny, we vote, Aye for our Delaware."

You know the rest of the story, you teachers, who teach by rote,  
How prudent South Carolina announced the change of its vote;  
How Pennsylvania also veered round in Freedom's gale;  
How the Thirteen broke from their necks the yoke, and a nation came through travail.

Paint us a noble portrait, Story or Sargent or Chase,

One of the missing signer, show us an eager face.

Glorified through its veiling, and we will uplift it where

He ended his ride with death by his side, brave Rodney of Delaware.



















