

Declaration of Independence - Signers Series

Matthew Thornton - New Hampshire

Matthew Thornton, born in Ireland in 1714, emigrated with his parents to what is now Wiscasset, Maine when he was a toddler, and thence to Worcester, Massachusetts, after fleeing an Indian attack. He had a classical education at Worcester Academy, later studying medicine and becoming a successful physician in Londonderry, New Hampshire. In 1745, he served as a surgeon for the New Hampshire militia during King George's War against the French at the Battle of Louisburg, in Nova Scotia.

On his return, he was appointed a Colonel of the Militia and a Justice of the Peace by Royal Governor Wentworth. He was later elected to the colonial legislature where his popularity with the people was a cause of jealousy to the governor. When Wentworth abdicated and fled New Hampshire in 1775, Thornton was named Speaker of the House, where he urged the citizens to take up arms, citing British cruelty that caused civilian suffering. In late 1776, he was appointed a delegate to the Continental Congress, and became one of the last signers of the Declaration of Independence after wanting the "same privilege as the others ... to be hanged for his patriotism."

After leaving the Congress, he resumed his position as a Superior Court judge, retiring in 1782. He continued his medical practice, later became a farmer until he was struck with whooping cough in his 82nd year, from which he never fully recovered. While visiting his daughter in Newburyport, Massachusetts in June 1803, he passed away at age 89.

His original gravestone bore the inscription: "An Honest Man."

