

Redeeming the Founders of America

Josiah Bartlett 1729-1795

As we venture into a study of the lives of the men and women whose names are written in the history books of this nation, we must ask ourselves several questions. Who were they? Did their family line come from royalty, merchants, educators, politics, or religion? Why did they leave the security of their homeland? What was so different about these individuals that they should be recognized among so many others? In



consideration of the great cost of the voyage, what motivated them to risk it all? Lastly, did that same impetus drive them to succeed in the colonies?

As a student of history, one would expect such a writing to begin with great men like George Washington or Thomas Jefferson, but that is not where I found myself. As I spent countless hours rifling through biographies of so many qualified individuals, it only made the starting point more challenging, but then I came upon this individual. In my quest to discover what or even whether there was anything that might set him apart I soon discovered a man of character.

Josiah Bartlett was born November 21, 1729, the youngest of five sons to Stephen and Hannah Webster Bartlett.¹ Josiah's mother Hannah, was the great-granddaughter of John Webster, a man of significant properties. His father excelled as a shoemaker and settled the family in Beverly, Massachusetts. Later they moved to Amesbury where they raised their family on a farm called "The Lions Mouth."

Josiah received a common education, but there was nothing common about this young man. He had a passion for learning, reading a variety of subjects including some Latin and

Greek, under the Rev. Webster of Salisbury. At age 16 he began studying medicine began the study of medicine under Amesbury's Dr. James Ordway. Upon completion of his studies in medicine young Bartlett joined the office of Dr. Ordway, for another five years. During this period, Josiah Bartlett was observed to have applied himself with "indefatigable zeal."²

In 1750, Josiah traveled to Kingston, Rockingham County, New Hampshire where he began his medical practice and moved in with the family of Rev. Joseph Secombe, who owned a vast library. Josiah took advantage of the opportunity to expand his knowledge through interacting with Rev. Secombe and reading from his collection of books.

One might think that Josiah was too young to begin a medical career at about age 21, yet he quickly rose to prominence due to his knowledge and ability. During this period, he was the only physician in the community of Kingston, where hundreds of families relied on his skills.

In 1752, Josiah came down with a severe fever that took many a life in the colonies during that period. A manifestation associated with this disease were called "febrile symptoms," which is another word for seizures. His doctor ordered a 'warm and stimulating regimen,' but as Bartlett got worse the doctor said he would die. Josiah asked two young men who watched over him to pour him a quart of cider and give it to him in small doses. At first, they refused afraid that it would kill him, but Bartlett prevailed. Throughout the night they gave him half-teacups full of cool cider. The cider caused him to sweat, the fever broke by morning, and saved the young doctor's life.³

After settling in Kingston, Josiah Bartlett married Mary Barton of Newton, Massachusetts on January 15, 1754. The couple went on to have twelve children, three of their sons and seven grandsons followed Josiah into the medical profession. Mary was a woman of character and a great source of advice and comfort to her husband.⁴

Throughout Josiah's life he depended on his own judgment, rather than accepting conventional wisdom. He was quoted as saying, "*Just be wrong. Just stand there in your wrongness and be wrong, get used to it.*"

Later in the year 1754, Kingston was again visited with this malignant disease. At the time, Doctor Bartlett was the physician of the town. He treated it as an inflammatory disease, but this failed. Not being satisfied with the characteristic of the disease he administered a

liquid form of Peruvian bark (quinine) to a child with great success. This experience changed the good doctor's life forever. From that day on he abandoned the arbitrary system for the more just principles of nature and experience. As a result, he became a skillful and distinguished Practitioner. But this would only be the beginning for Josiah Bartlett.

When a man or woman rises to the occasion and is part of a breakthrough, it does not take long for others to notice. Dr. Bartlett was heralded as a man of distinction and brought him before the public as a "*gentleman in whom confidence might be reposed, and whose duties, whatever they might be, would be discharged with promptness and fidelity.*"³

In 1765, Doctor Bartlett was elected to the legislature of the province of New Hampshire. He fought against the tyrannical goals of the royal governor "*whose object, next to the display of his own authority, was to subjection of the people to British administration.*"

John Wentworth, the royal governor assigned the Dr. Bartlett with the honor of serving in the office of Justice of the Peace and a colonel in the militia in 1767. He did so to bait the good doctor into supporting the British government's influence on the people of the province of New Hampshire. Dr. Bartlett accepted the position offered by the governor, knowing how greedy and manipulative Wentworth was, but Josiah held fast to his convictions. In June 1768, Josiah joined the patriot party, which steadfastly opposed Governor Wentworth.¹

During this period there was heightened opposition to the British government throughout the colonies. Concurrently, a Committee to the Correspondence was appointed to the New Hampshire House of Representatives and convened an assembly. When the royal governor discovered their actions, he quickly dissolved the assembly. Despite his objections, the assembly re-convened shortly thereafter.

Some of Mr. Bartlett's opposition was related to "royal adjudication." For example, New York officials spotted New Hampshire surveyors on the east side of the Champlain River. Governor Wentworth sent them there as part of a 1741 letter declaring that land part of New Hampshire. This was not an uncommon practice for power hungry governors. In 1764, Wentworth wrote that a resolution would be settled by a royal verdict, one he thought would go in his favor. New York countered by filing an appeal with the Board of Trade, and the

dispute went on until 1770, when the New York Supreme Court invalidated Wentworth's grants.

Dr. Bartlett retained his seat in the House of Representatives and his opposition became a thorn in the side of the royal governor. As a result, Governor Wentworth deprived him of his commission as Justice of the Peace and dismissed him from his command in the militia to discourage Bartlett.³

In 1774, attorney John Pickering and Josiah Bartlett were chosen as delegates from New Hampshire. Pickering's was financially struggling after his house had been burned, and could not serve. But Bartlett joined the Assembly's Committee of Correspondence and began working closely with revolutionary leaders from the other colonies. On September, 1775, Dr. Bartlett was elected to the Continental Congress, where he proceeded to take his seat. The demand required by the members of the Congress caused a great deal of anxiety and occasionally strained their health. Even so, these Assemblymen knew the importance of their service to the people of New Hampshire and continued to devote themselves to the task.⁴

History describes how the British government had come under increasingly hard times. The King decided the best resource to alleviate their financial problems was to tax the settlers in the provinces of New England. Clearly, this is one of the reasons Dr. Josiah Bartlett and countless others who settled in the colonies did so, to gain freedom from the anarchy of the British Empire.

Dr. Bartlett among others, was deeply committed to protecting the colonies from excessive taxation and maltreatment of its citizens, but were also aware of the threat of war against Britain. This resulted in several of the colonies initiating the collection of revenues for the eminent battle for freedom, while some hoped to negotiate a compromise with Britain.

Dr. Bartlett was chosen to serve as a delegate in the second election to the Continental Congress in early 1776. This time of service saw the British evacuate Philadelphia while leaving it ravaged for their stay in the province. Upon seeing first-hand the devastation, Bartlett was more determined that Congress should meet in the college hall from that day forward.

The Continental Congress passed the Articles of Confederation on November 15, 1777.

With the new elections in August of 1778, Dr. Bartlett continued to serve as a delegate to the New Hampshire province, but much of the session he suffered considerable health concerns and was forced to move back to his home. While he recuperated, he remained focused on his civic duties with the same measure of zeal and devotion.

In early 1779, the people of New Hampshire suffered financially as the colony's goods had become depreciated and provisions were becoming scarce, causing an increase in price on precious commodities. Even their military suffered extensive hardships as they fought for liberty against the British, resulting in great difficulty in keeping up moral.

It was during the second part of 1779 that Dr. Josiah Bartlett was appointed Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas. All 13 States ratified the Articles of Confederation on February 2, 1781, and enacted by the U.S. Continental Congress on March 1, 1781. In 1782, he became an associate justice to the Supreme Court, and in 1788 he was advanced to the head of the bench. In the latter part of this year, the present Constitution was presented to several states for their consideration. Dr. Bartlett was seated as a member of the New Hampshire Convention and was an observer at its ratification. He also served as chairman of the Committee of Safety. In 1789, he was elected a senator to Congress, but his health caused him to decline the office. In 1793, he was elected as the State's first governor and served with the same degree of zeal until his health again caused him to resign.

The close of career occurred in January of 1794 when he composed a letter to the "Gentlemen of the Legislature." In this letter Dr. Bartlett recognized the gracious people of New Hampshire for their repeated "*marks of trust and confidence*" in him.¹

With this and more to be discovered regarding Dr. Josiah Bartlett's life and service we can easily understand why he should be considered a person of distinction. His service and commitment to the colonies was proven time and time again.

I came across a statement made by Dr. Josiah Bartlett that struck me with an awareness of this man's faith. As part of his last will and testament he was quoted as saying, "*Firstly I commit my Soul into the hands of God, it's great and benevolent author.*" He was also quoted during a Proclamation for a Day of Prayer and Fasting, March 17, 1792 as saying, "...[t]hat the knowledge of the Gospel of Jesus Christ may be made known to all nations, pure and undefiled

religion universally prevail, and the earth be fill with the glory of the Lord. ⁵

Further evidence of the foundation of colonial Christian faith was found in this statement presented by the New Hampshire Medical Society, which set forth to establish Dartmouth College for the purpose of educating the Indian population in reading, writing, and all parts of learning which shall appear necessary and expedient for civilization and Christianizing children.

Although I disagree with references to the American Indians as savages or pagans, the intent of Dartmouth was clear, to propagate and spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ across the colonies, for all men, for the betterment of society.

The founding father's devotion to personal freedom as well as their commitment of self-sacrifice was the lifeblood of the colonies. Men such as Dr. Josiah Bartlett, gave more than sweat, they gave their lives to the point of suffering poor health, and expending their personal wealth to the point of bankruptcy. However, they were not thinking of an earthly prize or possession, nor that of their posterity alone, they had a vision for what could be for generations to come.

This has been Redeeming the Fathers of America

References:

- 1) Rev. Charles A. Goodrich *Lives of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence*. New York: William Reed & Co., 1829.
- 2) Biography of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence, by Robert Waln Jr. Vol III, 1823
- 3) Biographical Sketches of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence – B.J. Lossing 1866
- 4) Sanderson's Biography to the Signers of the Declaration of Independence, 1876
- 5) Lives and Signers of the Declaration of Independence, *B.J. Lossing, 1848*