

# A Historical Oddity

By Aubrey G. Davies

A few days ago J. Carleton Brown, local historian of St. Stephen, drew my attention to an odd bit of history which was brought to light in Guy Murchie's thoughtful Saint Croix, a book of historical sketches of the early days in the Valley.

The last name signed to the Declaration of Independence is that of Matthew Thornton. But the exact identity of Matthew Thornton is still a mystery. The name appears early in the history of the St. Croix Valley. A Matthew Thornton is known to have lived in St. Andrews in 1784, and the rumor circulated that his past contained a peculiar episode not entirely consistent with his established life as an active Empire Loyalist.

Over sixty years ago James Vroom, the historian, decided to track this curious animal to its lair. He discovered that the strands

of the story were held by three generations of Thorntons, each bearing the name Matthew.

The first was a doctor from Londonderry and was well known by his title. Though he held a Royal Commission, he joined the revolutionists in 1775 and soon became a prominent revolutionary figure. At first glance the mystery seems solved, except for a nagging doubt in our minds. Why, if he were the logical suspect, was there ever a mystery at all?

The Doctor had a nephew, also Matthew, a dark figure who lived out his painful saga in relative obscurity. After serving his term as captain in the revolutionary army, he went on business to Bennington, Vermont, where he was captured by the British and forced to serve as driver of an ammunition wagon. He was seen, and on his return home, he was tried for treason. Though acquitted before the law, he was convicted by his community, and, faced with threats and abuse, he decided to try his luck in the land to the north. He and his dog spent a desolate winter on St. Andrew's Island, but in the spring, he was granted land and became a member of the Loyalist Penobscot Association. He lived

a respected though lonely life.

His son was the third Matthew Thornton, and through a trick played upon this Matthew by his future son-in-law, Joseph Donald of Dufferin, our last evidence comes to light. These are the words of Joseph Donald as they appeared in a statement obtained from him by James Vroom.

"A friend had sent me (Joseph Donald) a group of portraits of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Showing this to Mr. Thornton without letting him know what it was, I asked him whether he knew any of the faces. He pointed to one and said, 'Why, that's Father Thornton' - and showed it to his wife, who also recognized the likeness. Then I told him the pictures were those of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and the one he had pointed out bore his father's name, and he said, 'Yes, he was a signer'."

You may take your choice, but those who live in the Valley feel that the second Matthew Thornton was the real signer of the great revolutionary document, for he, even more than they, lived out his strange life as a man of two countries.