

Often called “the Father of New York,” or more pointedly, given the extent of his control over politics in the Empire State, “the Pharaoh of New York,” George Clinton’s career spanned the Colonial, Revolutionary, Confederation and Federal eras, from battlefields to the halls of Congress to the vice presidency.

His list of accomplishments is long: He was a hero of the Revolutionary War who served with distinction in protecting New York state against British advances. With a total of seven three-year terms in office, Clinton ranks as the longest-serving governor in New York history.

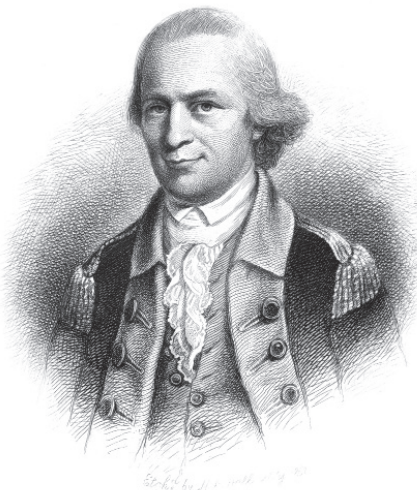
Though he supported strengthening the national government during the war to improve the efficiency of supplying troops in the field, Clinton became a staunch anti-Federalist and opposed ratification of the Constitution. His opposition to the Constitution helped ensure that it would later include the Bill of Rights.

He was the first of only two men to serve as vice president under two different presidents, and the first vice president to die in office.

Though Clinton’s life rivaled many of the better-known Patriots, he’s little-known today. In *George Clinton: Yeoman Politician of the New Republic* (Madison House, 1993) John P. Kaminski described Clinton as an enigma. “He and his counterparts from Massachusetts and Virginia—John Hancock and Patrick Henry—were the most popular governors in Revolutionary America; yet little is known about them because most of their papers have not survived.”

Many of Clinton’s papers were destroyed when British forces burned the then-state capital of Kingston, N.Y., in October 1777. Most of his remaining papers vanished in a 1911 fire in the New York State Library that destroyed more than 450,000 books and 270,000 manuscripts.

Without access to such personal documents, historians lack crucial material to gain insights into his thinking, which sometimes seems contradictory. For example, Clinton was an ardent Patriot and soldier who wanted more powers for the Confederation Congress, but then led the anti-Federalist movement against ratifying the Constitution, and avidly sought to become vice president in the new government.



GEORGE CLINTON

The Father of the Empire State

By Bill Hudgins

According to his U.S. Senate biography, historian Alan Taylor once wrote that “Clinton crafted a masterful, compelling public persona [that] ... masked and permitted an array of contradictions that would have ruined a lesser, more transparent politician.”

Clinton was, Taylor added, “The astutest politician in Revolutionary New York ... [he] understood the power of symbolism and the new popularity of a plain style especially when practiced by a man with the means and accomplishments to set himself above the common people.”

Early Influences

Clinton was born July 26, 1739, in what was then Ulster County (now Orange County), N.Y. His parents, Charles and Elizabeth Denniston Clinton, were Irish Presbyterians who had left Ireland to escape the Anglican Church’s oppression of dissenters.

Charles Clinton was a farmer, surveyor and land speculator who surveyed the New York frontier in 1748 for the Colony. He turned down the governor’s offer to become sheriff of New York City as a reward for his surveying,

so the governor promised to appoint young George as clerk of the Ulster County Court of Common Pleas when he was old enough. George Clinton took the job in 1759 and held it for the rest of his life, even while serving in other, higher positions.

Clinton also learned the surveyor’s craft and went on to indulge in land speculation. At the age of 18, he served in the French and Indian War on a privateer and then in a militia unit fighting in Canada. After the war, he decided to become a lawyer and went to New York City, where he read law under a well-known attorney, William Smith.

Clinton returned home to Ulster County in 1764 to farm and practice law. In 1765, he was named district attorney. His law practice thrived, and his surveying and land speculation paid off. But rather than flaunt his wealth, Clinton maintained a modest lifestyle, and was regarded as easygoing and gracious. This was in keeping with his background as a yeoman farmer, which eventually established him as a man of the people committed to protecting them against the excesses of the social and political aristocracies, according to Kaminski.

Clinton’s position as court clerk introduced him to New York politics, which even in Colonial times was torn by factions. In 1768, at age 29, Clinton was elected to the New

York General Assembly. He allied himself with the Livingston faction, named for a wealthy, prestigious Hudson Valley family. In 1770, Clinton married into the family when he wed Cornelia Tappan, a Livingston relative.

Battlefield Bravery

As relations soured between the Colonies and the mother country, the Livingstons and Clinton increasingly opposed the British Parliament's efforts to clamp down on the Colonies. Clinton soon emerged as a leader of the Livingston faction. In 1775, he was named a delegate to the Second Continental Congress, where he met and formed a lifelong friendship with George Washington.

But with his brother Colonel James Clinton already in the fight, Clinton felt he belonged on the battlefield. Washington recommended that he return to New York and offered him a commission as a brigadier general in the Continental Line. Named a brigadier general by the state's provisional congress, Clinton also commanded the Ulster-Orange County militia,

Suddenly enfranchised, and with their choices protected by secret ballot, the yeomen farmers and urban artisans who had kowtowed to powerful landowners such as the Livingstons looked for someone who would represent their interests. They decided to support Clinton, with whom they had more in common. Clinton took advantage of the opportunity to break from the Livingstons and, armed by a huge last-minute boost from soldiers, won in a stunning upset. His victory signaled the end of the Livingston faction's dominance of state politics and the rise of a new political star.

Before Clinton was sworn in as governor on July 30, 1777, he had promised his friend Washington that he'd return to the battlefield if his new duties allowed. He fulfilled this promise at a particularly crucial moment in the war: Clinton went back to the Highlands of the Hudson in October 1777 to try to block a British force from reinforcing General John Burgoyne in what became the crucial Battle of Saratoga.

Word reached the Americans that Burgoyne planned an invasion. Answering the call from Washington, Clinton

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according to John K. Lee in *George Clinton, Master Builder of the Empire State* (Syracuse University Press, 2010).

Clinton soon saw action. In July 1776, the British landed a huge invasion force on Staten Island, N.Y. Clinton was ordered to help defend the Hudson River against invaders seeking to cut off access to that vital waterway. He led militia regiments to man Fort Constitution and Fort Montgomery, both on the west side of the river near West Point. He later commanded militia regiments from Dutchess and Westchester counties, and Washington appointed him as overall commander of the defense of the lower Hudson. His defensive measures included stretching a massive chain across the Hudson and installing underwater obstacles to block British vessels from going upstream.

Though fighting continued in New York state, by 1777 the British had shifted their focus southward, leaving Clinton free to resume his civilian pursuits.

A New Political Star Rises

On April 20, 1777, New York adopted its first state constitution and scheduled elections for governor and lieutenant governor. The new constitution expanded eligibility to vote, enfranchising small farmers, artisans and tradesmen for the first time. The constitution also provided for a secret ballot instead of the voice vote used in Colonial elections, Kaminski writes.

mustered 2,800 militia to join General Horatio Gates' main force in opposition of the British.

Clinton and his men occupied Fort Montgomery, while his brother James commanded Fort Clinton. In the first week of October 1777, a flotilla of 40 ships with nearly 4,000 British troops landed just below Peekskill at Stony Point, then marched north to attack the forts. The commander divided his force and surrounded the strongholds. The Patriots refused an offer to surrender and were attacked. The defending Patriots, outnumbered 3 to 1, fought desperately until driven out of their forts at the points of the enemy bayonets. More than half of the Patriot forces were killed, wounded or captured. This time the British did not pull back; instead they marched on to Kingston, the state capital, which they burned.

But the Clinton brothers' defense had served its purpose—to delay the British enough that they would abandon their attempt to link up with Burgoyne, Kaminski writes. And the British did finally withdraw when they heard of Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga. With the threat neutralized, Clinton returned to his duties as governor.

Clinton would see military action again in 1780 when he led the militia to quell a frontier uprising by Loyalists and American Indians allied with the British. Clinton tried but failed to intercept a 700-man force near Schenectady, N.Y. The Loyalist-American Indian force struck again along the Mohawk River near Schoharie, N.Y. Clinton and his militia

joined General Robert Van Rensselaer in thwarting the raids, ending military action in New York state, according to Lee.

Governor Clinton

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As governor, Clinton worked to meet the state’s obligations to support the war effort despite a strong Loyalist sentiment and the British hold on New York City. But like Washington and others, he grew frustrated with the hapless Continental Congress and its inability to adequately supply the army or run the faltering nation. During the war, he supported calls for a stronger national government, telling Continental Congress President John Hanson in 1781 that “we shall not be able without a Change in our Circumstances, long to maintain our civil Government.”

But his support for a stronger national government waned after the war, when the Confederation Congress took a series of actions that Clinton felt threatened his state’s security and prosperity. Congress wanted to annex part of western New York as public lands, while Massachusetts asserted that it, and not New York, owned much of that territory. He also objected to plans to impose a national tariff on trade.

While opposing Congress’ efforts, Clinton decided to tend to business at home. Under his leadership, in 1784 the state assembly imposed a tariff to finance infrastructure and educational programs; instituted various incentives for agriculture and manufacturing; and began printing paper money that could be used in lieu of hard currency to pay debts—including wartime debts—and taxes. The measures worked: New York’s economy recovered faster from the post-war economic depression than those of most other states.

Having opposed a stronger Confederation government, Clinton also led the state’s anti-Federalist movement during the 1787–1788 debates over ratification of the Constitution. He is widely believed to be the pseudonymous “Cato” who authored many of *The Anti-Federalist Papers*.

His opposition to the Constitution led to a bitter fall-ing-out with his wartime friend Alexander Hamilton, who wrote many of *The Federalist Papers*. But, though Washington became estranged from Thomas Jefferson and other anti-Federalists, he and Clinton remained close friends. In fact, they were business partners in New York state. In 1783, Washington and Clinton spent three weeks traveling upstate New York looking for choice available land. They chose a 6,071-acre tract on the Mohawk River; Clinton paid for it and Washington repaid the loan over the next three years—at 7 percent interest. He also gave Clinton power of attorney to manage his share.

But Clinton’s anti-Federalism cost him politically at home. Though he had been unopposed for re-election as governor in 1786, he barely beat a Federalist opponent, Robert Yates, in 1789, and almost lost to Federalist John Jay in 1792.

Clinton aspired to the vice presidency in 1789 and entered the presidential election of 1792 as the Democratic-Republican candidate. At that time, the candidate with the highest electoral vote tally became president, while the runner-up became vice president, regardless of party affiliation. Washington was certain to be re-elected president, so Clinton hoped to beat the incumbent vice president, Federalist John Adams, but lost.

In 1795, Clinton refused to run again for governor, citing health issues and age. He also turned down requests to be Thomas Jefferson’s running mate in 1796.

But after several years in retirement, Clinton returned to the political scene in 1800 in a successful run for the New York State Assembly. Though still ailing, Clinton ran for governor of New York in 1801 to block his onetime political ally Aaron Burr. Clinton won in a landslide and served a full term, though his nephew De Witt Clinton handled most of the day-to-day work.

Feisty Final Years

Clinton and Burr collided again in 1804. Burr was then vice president under Thomas Jefferson, who wanted to dump Burr. Jefferson asked Clinton to be his running mate, and Clinton accepted.

Jefferson hoped to hand off the presidency to his protégé James Madison in 1808. He chose Clinton as his vice president, believing age and infirmity would prevent the New Yorker from seeking the presidency. Jefferson was wrong: Clinton hoped to be nominated, but the party chose Madison instead, with Clinton again nominated as vice president. Clinton resented the slight so much that he skipped Madison’s inauguration.

Though they were all Democratic-Republicans, Clinton had clashed with Jefferson over foreign policy and defense issues, and now opposed Madison on those same issues and other matters. For example, Madison supported rechartering the Bank of the United States, but Clinton opposed it, believing that this creation of Alexander Hamilton’s overstepped constitutional limits. And when the Senate tied over renewing the charter, Clinton as the Senate’s presiding officer got his revenge on Hamilton and Madison by breaking the tie with a vote against renewing the charter.

Clinton’s declining health interfered with his ability to preside effectively over the Senate, and it kept him from the chamber for extended periods, Kaminski writes. Clinton died on April 20, 1812. He lay in state in the U.S. Capitol and was buried in Congressional Cemetery. In 1908, his remains were moved to the Old Dutch Church in Kingston, N.Y., returning him to the state he had loved and served so long. 🏠