



GOUVERNEUR MORRIS

The Constitution's Wordsmith

By Lena Anthony

Like many of his fellow Founding Fathers, Gouverneur Morris did more for his country than serve as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention. A talented orator, Morris spoke 173 times during the convention's nearly four-month term—more than any of the other 54 delegates. Nicknamed the “Penman of the Constitution,” Morris is widely credited with putting the document in its final form, as well as writing the preamble.

The gifted writer unbelievably “wrote it in a weekend,” said Jack Barlow, a Morris historian and a professor of politics at Juniata College in Huntingdon, Pa. “The outlines of the preamble were clear, but Morris gave it an elegance of expression that hadn’t been produced by the convention itself.”

Before his turn as a Pennsylvania delegate to the convention, Morris helped draft the first New York State Constitution, signed the Articles of Confederation and served under Robert Morris, superintendent of finance.

After the Constitution was signed, Morris continued as a public servant. He was a vocal proponent of rights for slaves and American Indians, and he served as a U.S. minister to France, U.S. senator from New York and chairman of the Erie Canal Commission. The New York State Legislature also tasked him with creating New York’s grid street plan.

Despite his many accomplishments, you won’t find many monuments to Morris, though there is a small town

named after him in upstate New York. But Morris likely would have been fine with no formal tributes.

“Morris never tried to do the things that would have made his name prominent, and he didn’t really care if it happened,” Barlow said. “He believed people needed to take responsibility for themselves, establish their own heroes and not spend time idolizing figures from the past.”

From Privilege to Politics

Morris was born in 1752 in New York City to Lewis Morris, a wealthy landowner and judge, and his second wife, Sarah Gouverneur. (Morris’ elder half-brother was Lewis Morris, who signed the Declaration of Independence and was a New York delegate to Continental Congress.) His privileged upbringing brought him many advantages, including a good education at prominent schools. At the age of 12, he enrolled in King’s College, now Columbia University, and earned both a bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

“As far as I know, he was the only Founding Father with a master’s degree,” Barlow said. “He never seemed to have any trouble acquiring knowledge or information. It came very naturally to him.”

He took a year off from school due to a serious accident with a boiling teakettle that burned his right arm.

“So severe was the burn that his nerves had probably been damaged,” wrote Richard Brookhiser in *Gentleman Revolutionary: Gouverneur Morris—The Rake Who Wrote the Constitution* (Free Press, 2003). “Years later, William Pierce, a fellow delegate to the Constitutional Convention, would describe Morris’ arm as having ‘all the flesh taken off.’” A later accident, involving a carriage, would cost him his left leg, leaving him with a peg in its place.

Morris never allowed his disabilities to define or debilitate him. The peg leg made his tall stature even more commanding—he served as George Washington’s body double for the French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon.

“Morris took the accidents in stride,” Barlow said. “The fact is he lived in a time when life expectancies were short. These kinds of accidents could befall people at any point and have much more serious consequences than they did for him.”

After graduating from King’s College, he followed in his father’s and grandfather’s footsteps and became a lawyer in 1771. He was not the only Founder to have that occupation—35 of the 55 delegates to the Constitutional Convention had legal training.



His aristocratic background influenced his views on public service. “He had very firm opinions about how people of a certain class ought to be leaders in society,” Barlow said. “He saw it as his duty.”

In 1775, he entered public office, representing Westchester County in the New York Provincial Congress.

A Nuanced View

His privileged upbringing influenced the way he looked at the world and thought about his role in it, but it wasn't the only lens through which he viewed it.

“It's important to recognize that in the 18th century, economic liberalism and liberty was an aristocratic attitude, and Morris saw himself as part

of that,” Barlow said. “But he was also the first son of his father's second marriage, which means he actually did not inherit any property. He became a lawyer, made money and bought property. He was an aristocrat, but he was also a self-made man.”

He was also close to many Loyalists. In dealing with his Loyalist mother and other members of his circle of influence, Morris was nothing short of gracious. He displayed the same humanity in his work as a delegate, as illustrated in the following example from Brookhiser:

“In June 1775, the British pulled their last troops in New York City—100 men of the Royal Irish Regiment—out of the fort ... The Provincial Congress had agreed to let the soldiers go peacefully,

but a party of Liberty Boys stopped them at Broad Street and seized five wagons of weapons. Morris, who happened to be passing by, tried to prevent the seizure. ‘To be opposed by Mr. Morris staggered me,’ wrote one Patriot. Staggered or not, the Patriots kept the arms, though the Provincial Congress, at Morris's urging, eventually returned them to the enemy.”

“He was a reluctant politician. ... Having said that, he was also a gregarious, amusing man, and he liked to hear himself talk. He was a very funny guy, but he also made it hard for people to take him seriously.” —JACK BARLOW

His diplomacy toward the other side caused some of his colleagues to question his allegiance. But if there was ever any doubt about which side Morris was on, by 1776 it was clear: He volunteered for military service, applying for the position of colonel in a new regiment in New York. He didn't get the job.

“The position went to a militiaman who was a shoemaker in private life, and Morris refused to serve as lieutenant colonel under him,” Brookhiser wrote.

Morris would never fight for the Continental Army, but he became acutely aware of its conditions after visiting the winter encampment at Valley Forge as part of a Continental Congress committee. Over several visits to Valley Forge during late 1777 and the early part of 1778, Morris got to know Washington and “came to admire him very much,” Barlow said.

Personal Pursuits

Throughout his lifetime, Morris didn't necessarily shrink from public office, but he was never eager to serve.

“He was a reluctant politician,” Barlow said. “On the whole he probably would have preferred to run his law practice or other business ventures. Yet,

he was also a gregarious, amusing man, and he liked to hear himself talk. He was a very funny guy, but he also made it hard for people to take him seriously.”

He was also considered a ladies’ man. According to Barlow, Morris admired intelligent, strong women, and he was accused of several affairs. (He was also somewhat of a poet; he shared many of his best ones with the married and unmarried women with whom he fraternized.)

To his credit, he also was happy to help certain female friends find publishers for their books, as well as loan them money. “I think one of the reasons he was as successful as he was with women was because he had respect for the things they did,” Barlow said.

Before appointing him as U.S. minister to France in 1792, Washington implored Morris to practice restraint.

“Political leaders worried about his lack of self-control,” Barlow said. “He

certainly wasn’t the only Founder to have affairs, but what made it so alarming was that he was always a little too self-indulgent.”

His pleasure-seeking, undisciplined personality is perhaps why Morris was out of public office as much as he was in it. He wasn’t re-elected to the Senate, but it didn’t seem to bother him as such a loss would his peers.

“He was a very content guy,” Barlow said. “He would fail at something, shrug it off and go do something else. He wasn’t interested in doing more. Washington was reluctant about being in politics, too, but he was able to talk himself into running for president. Morris couldn’t do that. He was what he was and we could vote for him or not; either was fine with him.”

Morris was 57 when he married Anne Cary (Nancy) Randolph, a banished daughter of a prominent Virginia family who was at the center of a

scandal involving adultery and a dead newborn. She was never found guilty of any wrongdoing, but her reputation was nonetheless tarnished. In April 1809, she moved to his estate, Morrisania, as a housekeeper. By December they were married, at which point, Barlow said, it appears the affairs with married women stopped. Four years later, his son, Gouverneur Morris II, was born.

Three years after that, Morris died at the age of 64, after unsuccessfully attempting to clear an obstruction of his urinary tract with whalebone. He is buried in the family crypt at St. Ann’s Church in the South Bronx, and his estate is now the site of public housing.

Brookhiser said Morris’ legacy goes beyond his contributions to the new nation: “The Founding Fathers can show us how to live as citizens. Morris can show us how to enjoy life’s blessings and bear its hurts with humanity and good spirits.” 🌿

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