

The Founding Fathers: Massachusetts

En Español

Elbridge Gerry, Massachusetts



Gerry was born in 1744 at Marblehead, MA, the third of 12 children. His mother was the daughter of a Boston merchant; his father, a wealthy and politically active merchant-shipper who had once been a sea captain. Upon graduating from Harvard in 1762, Gerry joined his father and two brothers in the family business, exporting dried codfish to Barbados and Spain. He entered the colonial legislature (1772-74), where he came under the influence of Samuel Adams, and took part in the Marblehead and Massachusetts committees of correspondence. When Parliament closed Boston harbor in June 1774, Marblehead became a major port of entry for supplies donated by patriots throughout the colonies to relieve Bostonians, and Gerry helped transport the goods.

Between 1774 and 1776 Gerry attended the first and second provincial congresses. He served with Samuel Adams and John Hancock on the council of safety and, as chairman of the committee of supply (a job for which his merchant background ideally suited him) wherein he raised troops and dealt with military logistics. On the night of April 18, 1775

Gerry attended a meeting of the council of safety at an inn in Menotomy (Arlington), between Cambridge and Lexington, and barely escaped the British troops marching on Lexington and Concord.

In 1776 Gerry entered the Continental Congress, where his congressional specialities were military and financial matters. In Congress and throughout his career his actions often appeared contradictory. He earned the nickname "soldiers' friend" for his advocacy of better pay and equipment, yet he vacillated on the issue of pensions. Despite his disapproval of standing armies, he recommended long-term enlistments.

Until 1779 Gerry sat on and sometimes presided over the congressional board that regulated Continental finances. After a quarrel over the price schedule for suppliers, Gerry, himself a supplier, walked out of Congress. Although nominally a member, he did not reappear for 3

years. During the interim, he engaged in trade and privateering and served in the lower house of the Massachusetts legislature.

As a representative in Congress in the years 1783-85, Gerry numbered among those who had possessed talent as Revolutionary agitators and wartime leaders but who could not effectually cope with the painstaking task of stabilizing the national government. He was experienced and conscientious but created many enemies with his lack of humor, suspicion of the motives of others, and obsessive fear of political and military tyranny. In 1786, the year after leaving Congress, he retired from business, married Ann Thompson, and took a seat in the state legislature.

Gerry was one of the most vocal delegates at the Constitutional Convention of 1787. He presided as chairman of the committee that produced the Great Compromise but disliked the compromise itself. He antagonized nearly everyone by his inconsistency and, according to a colleague, "objected to everything he did not propose." At first an advocate of a strong central government, Gerry ultimately rejected and refused to sign the Constitution because it lacked a bill of rights and because he deemed it a threat to republicanism. He led the drive against ratification in Massachusetts and denounced the document as "full of vices." Among the vices, he listed inadequate representation of the people, dangerously ambiguous legislative powers, the blending of the executive and the legislative, and the danger of an oppressive judiciary. Gerry did see some merit in the Constitution, though, and believed that its flaws could be remedied through amendments. In 1789, after he announced his intention to support the Constitution, he was elected to the First Congress where, to the chagrin of the Antifederalists, he championed Federalist policies.

Gerry left Congress for the last time in 1793 and retired for 4 years. During this period he came to mistrust the aims of the Federalists, particularly their attempts to nurture an alliance with Britain, and sided with the pro-French Democratic-Republicans. In 1797 President John Adams appointed him as the only non-Federalist member of a three-man commission charged with negotiating a reconciliation with France, which was on the brink of war with the United States. During the ensuing XYZ affair (1797-98), Gerry tarnished his reputation. Talleyrand, the French foreign minister, led him to believe that his presence in France would prevent war, and Gerry lingered on long after the departure of John Marshall and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, the two other commissioners. Finally, the embarrassed Adams recalled him, and Gerry met severe censure from the Federalists upon his return.

In 1800-1803 Gerry, never very popular among the Massachusetts electorate because of his aristocratic haughtiness, met defeat in four bids for the Massachusetts governorship but finally triumphed in 1810. Near the end of his two terms, scarred by partisan controversy, the

Democratic-Republicans passed a redistricting measure to ensure their domination of the state senate. In response, the Federalists heaped ridicule on Gerry and coined the pun "gerrymander" to describe the salamander-like shape of one of the redistricted areas.

Despite his advanced age, frail health, and the threat of poverty brought on by neglect of personal affairs, Gerry served as James Madison's Vice President in 1813. In the fall of 1814, the 70-year old politician collapsed on his way to the Senate and died. He left his wife, who was to live until 1849, the last surviving widow of a signer of the Declaration of Independence, as well as three sons and four daughters. Gerry is buried in Congressional Cemetery at Washington, DC.

Image: Courtesy of The National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Nathaniel Gorham, Massachusetts

Gorham, an eldest child, was born in 1738 at Charlestown, MA, into an old Bay Colony family of modest means. His father operated a packet boat. The youth's education was minimal. When he was about 15 years of age, he was apprenticed to a New London, CT, merchant. He quit in 1759, returned to his hometown and established a business which quickly succeeded. In 1763 he wed Rebecca Call, who was to bear nine children.

Gorham began his political career as a public notary but soon won election to the colonial legislature (1771-75). During the Revolution, he unswervingly backed the Whigs. He was a delegate to the provincial congress (1774-75), member of the Massachusetts Board of War (1778-81), delegate to the constitutional convention (1779-80), and representative in both the upper (1780) and lower (1781-87) houses of the legislature, including speaker of the latter in 1781, 1782, and 1785. In the last year, though he apparently lacked formal legal training, he began a judicial career as judge of the Middlesex County court of common pleas (1785-96). During this same period, he sat on the Governor's Council (1788-89).

During the war, British troops had ravaged much of Gorham's property, though by privateering and speculation he managed to recoup most of his fortune. Despite these pressing business concerns and his state political and judicial activities, he also served the nation. He was a member of the Continental Congress (1782-83 and 1785-87), and held the office of president from June 1786 until January 1787.

The next year, at age 49, Gorham attended the Constitutional Convention. A moderate nationalist, he attended all the sessions and played an influential role.. He spoke often, acted as chairman of the Committee of the Whole, and sat on the Committee of Detail. As a delegate to the Massachusetts ratifying convention, he stood behind the Constitution.

Some unhappy years followed. Gorham did not serve in the new government he had helped to create. In 1788 he and Oliver Phelps of Windsor, CT, and possibly others, contracted to purchase from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts 6 million acres of unimproved land in western New York. The price was \$1 million in devalued Massachusetts scrip. Gorham and Phelps quickly succeeded in clearing Indian title to 2,600,000 acres in the eastern section of the grant and sold much of it to settlers. Problems soon arose, however. Massachusetts scrip rose dramatically in value, enormously swelling the purchase price of the vast tract. By 1790 the two men were unable to meet their payments. The result was a financial crisis that led to Gorham's insolvency--and a fall from the heights of Boston society and political esteem.

Gorham died in 1796 at the age of 58 and is buried at the Phipps Street Cemetery in Charlestown, MA.

Rufus King, Massachusetts



King was born at Scarboro (Scarborough), MA (present Maine), in 1755. He was the eldest son of a prosperous farmer-merchant. At age 12, after receiving an elementary education at local schools, he matriculated at Dummer Academy in South Byfield, MA, and in 1777 graduated from Harvard. He served briefly as a general's aide during the War for Independence. Choosing a legal career, he read for the law at Newburyport, MA, and entered practice there in 1780.

King's knowledge, bearing, and oratorical gifts soon launched him on a political career. From 1783 to 1785 he was a member of the Massachusetts legislature, after which that body sent him to the Continental Congress (1784-86). There, he gained a reputation as a brilliant speaker and an early opponent of slavery. Toward the end of his tour, in 1786, he married Mary Alsop, daughter of a rich New York City merchant. He performed his final duties for Massachusetts by representing her at the Constitutional Convention and by serving in the commonwealth's ratifying convention.

At age 32, King was not only one of the most youthful of the delegates at Philadelphia, but was also one of the most important. He numbered among the most capable orators. Furthermore, he attended every session. Although he came to the convention unconvinced that major changes should be made in the Articles of Confederation, his views underwent a startling transformation during the debates. With Madison, he became a leading figure in the nationalist caucus. He served with distinction on the Committee on Postponed Matters and the Committee of Style. He also took notes on the proceedings, which have been valuable to historians.

About 1788 King abandoned his law practice, moved from the Bay State to Gotham, and entered the New York political forum. He was elected to the legislature (1789-90), and in the former year was picked as one of the state's first U.S. senators. As political divisions grew in the new government, King expressed ardent sympathies for the Federalists. In Congress, he supported Hamilton's fiscal program and stood among the leading proponents of the unpopular Jay's Treaty (1794).

Meantime, in 1791, King had become one of the directors of the First Bank of the United States. Reelected to the U.S. Senate in 1795, he served only a year before he was appointed as Minister to Great Britain (1796-1803).

King's years in this post were difficult ones in Anglo-American relations. The wars of the French Revolution endangered U.S. commerce in the maritime clashes between the French and the British. The latter in particular violated American rights on the high seas, especially by the impressment of sailors. Although King was unable to bring about a change in this policy, he smoothed relations between the two nations.

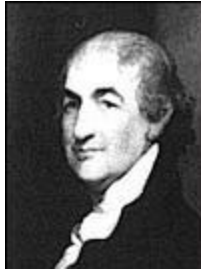
In 1803 King sailed back to the United States and to a career in politics. In 1804 and 1808 fellow-signer Charles Cotesworth Pinckney and he were the Federalist candidates for President and Vice President, respectively, but were decisively defeated. Otherwise, King largely contented himself with agricultural pursuits at King Manor, a Long Island estate he had purchased in 1805. During the War of 1812, he was again elected to the U.S. Senate (1813-25) and ranked as a leading critic of the war. Only after the British attacked Washington in 1814 did he come to believe that the United States was fighting a defensive action and to lend his support to the war effort.

In 1816 the Federalists chose King as their candidate for the presidency, but James Monroe beat him handily. Still in the Senate, that same year King led the opposition to the establishment of the Second Bank of the United States. Four years later, believing that the issue of slavery could not be compromised but must be settled once and for all by the immediate establishment of a system of compensated emancipation and colonization, he denounced the Missouri Compromise.

In 1825, suffering from ill health, King retired from the Senate. President John Quincy Adams, however, persuaded him to accept another assignment as Minister to Great Britain. He arrived in England that same year, but soon fell ill and was forced to return home the following year. Within a year, at the age of 72, in 1827, he died. Surviving him were several offspring, some of whom also gained distinction. He was laid to rest near King Manor in the cemetery of Grace Episcopal Church, Jamaica, Long Island, NY.

Image: Courtesy of The National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Caleb Strong, Massachusetts



Strong was born to Caleb and Phebe Strong on January 9, 1745 in Northampton, MA. He received his college education at Harvard, from which he graduated with highest honors in 1764. Like so many of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention, Strong chose to study law and was admitted to the bar in 1772. He enjoyed a prosperous country practice.

From 1774 through the duration of the Revolution, Strong was a member of Northampton's committee of safety. In 1776 he was elected to the Massachusetts General Court and also held the post of county attorney for Hampshire County for 24 years. He was offered a position on the state supreme court in 1783 but declined it.

At the Constitutional Convention, Strong counted himself among the delegates who favored a strong central government. He successfully moved that the House of Representatives should originate all money bills and sat on the drafting committee. Though he preferred a system that accorded the same rank and mode of election to both houses of Congress, he voted in favor of equal representation in the Senate and proportional in the House. Strong was called home on account of illness in his family and so missed the opportunity to sign the Constitution. However, during the Massachusetts ratifying convention, he took a leading role among the Federalists and campaigned strongly for ratification.

Massachusetts chose Strong as one of its first U.S. senators in 1789. During the 4 years he served in that house, he sat on numerous committees and participated in framing the Judiciary Act. Caleb Strong wholeheartedly supported the Washington administration. In 1793 he urged the government to send a mission to England and backed the resulting Jay's Treaty when it met heated opposition.

Caleb Strong, the Federalist candidate, defeated Elbridge Gerry to become Governor of Massachusetts in 1800. Despite the growing strength of the Democratic party in the state, Strong won reelection annually until 1807. In 1812 he regained the governorship, once again over Gerry, and retained his post until he retired in 1816. During the War of 1812 Strong withstood pressure from the Secretary of War to order part of the Massachusetts militia into federal service. Strong opposed the war and approved the report of the Hartford Convention, a gathering of New England Federalists resentful of Jeffersonian policies.

Strong died on November 7, 1819, 2 years after the death of his wife, Sarah. He was buried in the Bridge Street Cemetery in Northampton. Four of his nine children survived him.

Image: National Archives, Records of Exposition, Anniversary, and Memorial Commissions (148-CP-156)

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