

The Founding Fathers: Pennsylvania

En Español

George Clymer, Pennsylvania



Clymer was orphaned in 1740, only a year after his birth in Philadelphia. A wealthy uncle reared and informally educated him and advanced him from clerk to full-fledged partner in his mercantile firm, which on his death he bequeathed to his ward. Later Clymer merged operations with the Merediths, a prominent business family, and cemented the relationship by marrying his senior partner's daughter, Elizabeth, in 1765.

Motivated at least partly by the impact of British economic restrictions on his business, Clymer early adopted the Revolutionary cause and was one of the first to recommend independence. He attended patriotic meetings, served on the Pennsylvania council of safety, and in 1773 headed a committee that forced the resignation of Philadelphia tea consignees appointed by Britain under the Tea Act. Inevitably, in light of his economic background, he channeled his energies into financial matters. In 1775-76 he acted as one of the first two Continental treasurers, even personally underwriting the war by exchanging all his own specie for Continental currency.

In the Continental Congress (1776-77 and 1780-82) the quiet and unassuming Clymer rarely spoke in debate but made his mark in committee efforts, especially those pertaining to commerce, finance, and military affairs. During the War for Independence, he also served on a series of commissions that conducted important field investigations. In December 1776, when Congress fled from Philadelphia to Baltimore, he and George Walton and Robert Morris remained behind to carry on congressional business. Within a year, after their victory at the Battle of Brandywine, Pa. (September 11, 1777), British troops advancing on Philadelphia detoured for the purpose of vandalizing Clymer's home in Chester County about 25 miles outside the city. His wife and children hid nearby in the woods.

After a brief retirement following his last term in the Continental Congress, Clymer was reelected for the years 1784-88 to the Pennsylvania legislature, where he had also served part time in 1780-82 while still in Congress. As a state legislator, he advocated a bicameral legislature

and reform of the penal code and opposed capital punishment. At the Constitutional Convention, where he rarely missed a meeting, he spoke seldom but effectively and played a modest role in shaping the final document.

The next phase of Clymer's career consisted of service in the U.S. House of Representatives in the First Congress (1789-91), followed by appointment as collector of excise taxes on alcoholic beverages in Pennsylvania (1791-94). In 1795-96 he sat on a Presidential commission that negotiated a treaty with the Cherokee and Creek Indians in Georgia. During his retirement, Clymer advanced various community projects, including the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and served as the first president of the Philadelphia Bank. At the age of 73, in 1813, he died at Summerseat, an estate a few miles outside Philadelphia at Morrisville that he had purchased and moved to in 1806. His grave is in the Friends Meeting House Cemetery at Trenton, NJ.

Image: Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Thomas Fitzsimons, Pennsylvania

Fitzsimons (FitzSimons; Fitzsimmons) was born in Ireland in 1741. Coming to America about 1760, he pursued a mercantile career in Philadelphia. The next year, he married Catherine Meade, the daughter of a prominent local merchant, Robert Meade, and not long afterward went into business with one of his brothers-in-law. The firm of George Meade and Company soon became one of the leading commercial houses in the city and specialized in the West India trade.

When the Revolution erupted, Fitzsimons enthusiastically endorsed the Whig position. During the war, he commanded a company of militia (1776-77). He also sat on the Philadelphia committee of correspondence, council of safety, and navy board. His firm provided supplies and "fire" ships to the military forces and, toward the end of the war, donated £: 5,000 to the Continental Army.

In 1782-83 Fitzsimons entered politics as a delegate to the Continental Congress. In the latter year, he became a member of the Pennsylvania council of censors and served as a legislator (1786-89). His attendance at the Constitutional Convention was regular, but he did not make any outstanding contributions to the proceedings. He was, however, a strong nationalist.

After the convention, Fitzsimons continued to demonstrate his nationalistic proclivities as a three-term U.S. representative (1789-95). He allied himself closely with the program of Hamilton and the emerging Federalist Party. Once again demonstrating his commercial orientation, he advocated a protective tariff and retirement of the national debt.

Fitzsimons spent most of the remainder of his life in private business, though he retained an interest in public affairs. His views remained essentially Federalist. During the maritime difficulties in the late 1790s, he urged retaliation against British and French interference with American shipping. In the first decade of the 19th century, he vigorously opposed Jefferson's embargo of 1807-9. In 1810, again clashing with the Jeffersonians, he championed the recharter of the First United States Bank.

But Fitzsimons's prominence stemmed from his business leadership. In 1781 he had been one of the founders of the Bank of North America. He also helped organize and held a directorship in the Insurance Company of North America and several times acted as president of the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce. His financial affairs, like those somewhat earlier of his associate and fellow-signer Robert Morris, took a disastrous turn in 1805. He later regained some of his affluence, but his reputation suffered.

Despite these troubles, Fitzsimons never ceased his philanthropy. He was an outstanding supporter of Philadelphia's St. Augustine's Roman Catholic Church. He also strived to improve public education in the commonwealth and served as trustee of the University of Pennsylvania.

Fitzsimons died at Philadelphia in 1811 after seven decades of life. His tomb is there in the graveyard at St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, which is in present Independence National Historical Park.

Benjamin Franklin, Pennsylvania



Franklin was born in 1706 at Boston. He was the tenth son of a soap and candlemaker. He received some formal education but was principally self-taught. After serving an apprenticeship to his father between the ages of 10 and 12, he went to work for his half-brother James, a printer. In 1721 the latter founded the New England Courant, the fourth newspaper in the colonies. Benjamin secretly contributed 14 essays to it, his first published writings.

In 1723, because of dissension with his half-brother, Franklin moved to Philadelphia, where he obtained employment as a printer. He spent only a year there and then sailed to London for 2 more years. Back in Philadelphia, he rose rapidly in the printing industry. He published The Pennsylvania Gazette (1730-48), which had been founded by another man in 1728, but his most successful literary venture was the annual Poor Richard 's Almanac (1733-58). It won a popularity in the colonies second only to the Bible, and its fame eventually spread to Europe.

Meantime, in 1730 Franklin had taken a common-law wife, Deborah Read, who was to bear him a son and daughter, and he also apparently had children with another nameless woman out of wedlock. By 1748 he had achieved financial independence and gained recognition for his

philanthropy and the stimulus he provided to such civic causes as libraries, educational institutions, and hospitals. Energetic and tireless, he also found time to pursue his interest in science, as well as to enter politics.

Franklin served as clerk (1736-51) and member (1751-64) of the colonial legislature and as deputy postmaster of Philadelphia (1737-53) and deputy postmaster general of the colonies (1753-74). In addition, he represented Pennsylvania at the Albany Congress (1754), called to unite the colonies during the French and Indian War. The congress adopted his "Plan of Union," but the colonial assemblies rejected it because it encroached on their powers.

During the years 1757-62 and 1764-75, Franklin resided in England, originally in the capacity of agent for Pennsylvania and later for Georgia, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. During the latter period, which coincided with the growth of colonial unrest, he underwent a political metamorphosis. Until then a contented Englishman in outlook, primarily concerned with Pennsylvania provincial politics, he distrusted popular movements and saw little purpose to be served in carrying principle to extremes. Until the issue of parliamentary taxation undermined the old alliances, he led the Quaker party attack on the Anglican proprietary party and its Presbyterian frontier allies. His purpose throughout the years at London in fact had been displacement of the Penn family administration by royal authority-the conversion of the province from a proprietary to a royal colony.

It was during the Stamp Act crisis that Franklin evolved from leader of a shattered provincial party's faction to celebrated spokesman at London for American rights. Although as agent for Pennsylvania he opposed by every conceivable means the enactment of the bill in 1765, he did not at first realize the depth of colonial hostility. He regarded passage as unavoidable and preferred to submit to it while actually working for its repeal.

Franklin's nomination of a friend and political ally as stamp distributor for Pennsylvania, coupled with his apparent acceptance of the legislation, armed his proprietary opponents with explosive issues. Their energetic exploitation of them endangered his reputation at home until reliable information was published demonstrating his unabated opposition to the act. For a time, mob resentment threatened his family and new home in Philadelphia until his tradesmen supporters rallied. Subsequently, Franklin's defense of the American position in the House of Commons during the debates over the Stamp Act's repeal restored his prestige at home.

Franklin returned to Philadelphia in May 1775 and immediately became a distinguished member of the Continental Congress. Thirteen months later, he served on the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence. He subsequently contributed to the government in other important ways, including service as postmaster general, and took over the duties of president of the Pennsylvania constitutional convention.

But, within less than a year and a half after his return, the aged statesman set sail once again for Europe, beginning a career as diplomat that would occupy him for most of the rest of his life. In the years 1776-79, as one of three commissioners, he directed the negotiations that led to treaties of commerce and alliance with France, where the people adulated him, but he and the other commissioners squabbled constantly. While he was sole commissioner to France (1779-85), he and John Jay and John Adams negotiated the Treaty of Paris (1783), which ended the War for Independence.

Back in the United States, in 1785 Franklin became president of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania. At the Constitutional Convention, though he did not approve of many aspects of the finished document and was hampered by his age and ill-health, he missed few if any sessions, lent his prestige, soothed passions, and compromised disputes.

In his twilight years, working on his Autobiography, Franklin could look back on a fruitful life as the toast of two continents. Energetic nearly to the last, in 1787 he was elected as first president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery—a cause to which he had committed himself as early as the 1730s. His final public act was signing a memorial to Congress recommending dissolution of the slavery system. Shortly thereafter, in 1790 at the age of 84, Franklin passed away in Philadelphia and was laid to rest in Christ Church Burial Ground.

Image: Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Jared Ingersoll, Pennsylvania



The son of Jared Ingersoll, Sr., a British colonial official and later prominent Loyalist, Ingersoll was born at New Haven, CT, in 1749. He received an excellent education and graduated from Yale in 1766. He then oversaw the financial affairs of his father, who had relocated from New Haven to Philadelphia. Later, the youth joined him, took up the study of law, and won admittance to the Pennsylvania bar.

In the midst of the Revolutionary fervor, which neither father nor son shared, in 1773, on the advice of the elder Ingersoll, Jared, Jr., sailed to London and studied law at the Middle Temple. Completing his work in 1776, he made a 2-year tour of the Continent, during which time for some reason he shed his Loyalist sympathies.

Returning to Philadelphia and entering the legal profession, Ingersoll attended to the clients of one of the city's leading lawyers and a family friend, Joseph Reed, who was then occupied with the affairs of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania. In 1781 Ingersoll married Elizabeth Pettit (Petit). The year before, he had entered politics by winning election to the Continental Congress (1780-81).

Although Ingersoll missed no sessions at the Constitutional Convention, had long favored revision of the Articles of Confederation, and as a lawyer was used to debate, he seldom spoke during the proceedings.

Subsequently, Ingersoll held a variety of public positions: member of the Philadelphia common council (1789); attorney general of Pennsylvania (1790-99 and 1811-17); Philadelphia city solicitor (1798-1801); U.S. District Attorney for Pennsylvania (1800-01); and presiding judge of the Philadelphia District Court (1821-22). Meantime, in 1812, he had been the Federalist Vice-Presidential candidate, but failed to win election.

While pursuing his public activities, Ingersoll attained distinction in his legal practice. For many years, he handled the affairs of Stephen Girard, one of the nation's leading businessmen. In 1791 Ingersoll began to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court and took part in some memorable cases. Although in both *Chisholm v. Georgia* (1792) and *Hylton v. United States* (1796) he represented the losing side, his arguments helped to clarify difficult constitutional issues. He also represented fellow-signer William Blount, a senator, when he was threatened with impeachment in the late 1790s.

Ingersoll's long career ended in 1822, when he died less than a week after his 73d birthday. Survived by three children, he was buried in the cemetery of Philadelphia's First Presbyterian Church.

Image: Courtesy of National Archives, Records of Exposition, Anniversary, and Memorial Commissions (148-CP-130)

Thomas Mifflin, Pennsylvania



A member of the fourth generation of a Pennsylvania Quaker family who had emigrated from England, Mifflin was born at Philadelphia in 1744, the son of a rich merchant and local politician. He studied at a Quaker school and then at the College of Philadelphia (later part of the University of Pennsylvania), from which he won a diploma at the age of 16 and whose interests he advanced for the rest of his life.

Mifflin then worked for 4 years in a Philadelphia countinghouse. In 1764 he visited Europe, and the next year entered the mercantile business in Philadelphia with his brother. In 1767 he wed Sarah Morris. Although he prospered in business, politics enticed him.

In the Pennsylvania legislature (1772-76), Mifflin championed the colonial position against the crown. In 1774 he attended the Continental Congress (1774-76). Meanwhile, he had helped to raise troops and in May 1775 won appointment as a major in the Continental Army, which

caused him to be expelled from his Quaker faith. In the summer of 1775 he first became an aide-de-camp to Washington and then Quartermaster General of the Continental Army. Late in 1775 he became a colonel and in May 1776 a brigadier general. Preferring action to administration, after a time he began to perform his quartermaster duties perfunctorily. Nevertheless, he participated directly in the war effort. He took part in the Battles of Long Island, NY, Trenton, NJ, and Princeton, NJ. Furthermore, through his persuasive oratory, he apparently convinced many men not to leave the military service.

In 1777 Mifflin attained the rank of major general but, restive at criticism of his quartermaster activities, he resigned. About the same time, though he later became a friend of Washington, he became involved in the cabal that advanced Gen. Horatio Gates to replace him in command of the Continental Army. In 1777-78 Mifflin sat on the Congressional Board of War. In the latter year, he briefly reentered the military, but continuing attacks on his earlier conduct of the quartermastership soon led him to resign once more.

Mifflin returned immediately to politics. He sat in the state assembly (1778-79) and again in the Continental Congress (1782-84), from December 1783 to the following June as its president. In 1787 he was chosen to take part in the Constitutional Convention. He attended regularly, but made no speeches and did not play a substantial role.

Mifflin continued in the legislature (1785-88 and 1799-1800); succeeded Franklin as president of the Supreme Executive Council (1788-90); chaired the constitutional convention (1789-90); and held the governorship (1790-99), during which time he affiliated himself with the emerging Democratic-Republican Party.

Although wealthy most of his life, Mifflin was a lavish spender. Pressure from his creditors forced him to leave Philadelphia in 1799, and he died at Lancaster the next year, aged 56. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania paid his burial expenses at the local Trinity Lutheran Church.

Image: Courtesy of Independence National Historical Park

Gouverneur Morris, Pennsylvania



Gouverneur Morris was born at Morrisania estate, in Westchester (present Bronx) County, NY, in 1752. His family was wealthy and enjoyed a long record of public service. His elder half-brother, Lewis, signed the Declaration of Independence.

Gouverneur was educated by private tutors and at a Huguenot school in New Rochelle. In early life, he lost a leg in a carriage accident. He attended King's College (later Columbia College and University) in New York City, graduating in 1768 at the age

of 16. Three years later, after reading law in the city, he gained admission to the bar.

When the Revolution loomed on the horizon, Morris became interested in political affairs. Because of his conservatism, however, he at first feared the movement, which he believed would bring mob rule. Furthermore, some of his family and many of his friends were Loyalists. But, beginning in 1775, for some reason he sided with the Whigs. That same year, representing Westchester County, he took a seat in New York's Revolutionary provincial congress (1775-77). In 1776, when he also served in the militia, along with John Jay and Robert R. Livingston he drafted the first constitution of the state. Subsequently he joined its council of safety (1777).

In 1777-78 Morris sat in the legislature and in 1778-79 in the Continental Congress, where he numbered among the youngest and most brilliant members. During this period, he signed the Articles of Confederation and drafted instructions for Benjamin Franklin, in Paris, as well as those that provided a partial basis for the treaty ending the War for Independence. Morris was also a close friend of Washington and one of his strongest congressional supporters.

Defeated in his bid for reelection to Congress in 1779 because of the opposition of Gov. George Clinton's faction, Morris relocated to Philadelphia and resumed the practice of law. This temporarily removed him from the political scene, but in 1781 he resumed his public career when he became the principal assistant to Robert Morris, Superintendent of Finance for the United States, to whom he was unrelated. Gouverneur held this position for 4 years.

Morris emerged as one of the leading figures at the Constitutional Convention. His speeches, more frequent than those by anyone else, numbered 173. Although sometimes presented in a light vein, they were usually substantive. A strong advocate of nationalism and aristocratic rule, he served on many committees, including those on postponed matters and style, and stood in the thick of the decision-making process. Above all, it was apparently he who actually drafted the Constitution. Morris subsequently left public life for a time to devote his attention to business. Having purchased the family home from his half-brother, Lewis, he moved back to New York. Afterward, in 1789, Gouverneur joined in a business venture with Robert Morris, and traveled to France, where he witnessed the beginnings of the French Revolution.

Morris was to remain in Europe for about a decade. In 1790-91 he undertook a diplomatic mission to London to try to negotiate some of the outstanding problems between the United States and Great Britain. The mission failed, but in 1792 Washington appointed him as Minister to France, to replace Thomas Jefferson. Morris was recalled 2 years later but did not come home. Instead, he traveled extensively in Europe for more than 4 years, during which time he handled his complicated business affairs and contemplated the complex political situation.

Morris returned to the United States in 1799. The next year, he was elected to finish an unexpired term in the U.S. Senate. An ardent Federalist, he was defeated in his bid for reelection in 1802 and left office the following year.

Morris retired to a glittering life at Morrisania, where he had built a new residence. In 1809 he married Anne Cary (Carey) Randolph of Virginia, and they had one son. During his last years, he continued to speak out against the Democratic-Republicans and violently opposed the War of 1812. In the years 1810-13 he served as chairman of the Erie Canal Commission.

Morris died at Morrisania in 1816 at the age of 64 and was buried at St. Anne's Episcopal Churchyard, in the Bronx, New York City.

Image: Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Robert Morris, Pennsylvania



Robert Morris was born at or near Liverpool, England, in 1734. When he reached 13 years of age, he emigrated to Maryland to join his father, a tobacco exporter at Oxford, Md. After brief schooling at Philadelphia, the youth obtained employment with Thomas and Charles Willing's well-known shipping-banking firm. In 1754 he became a partner and for almost four decades was one of the company's directors as well as an influential Philadelphia citizen. Wedding Mary White at the age of 35, he fathered five sons and two daughters.

During the Stamp Act turmoil in 1765, Morris joined other merchants in protest, but not until the outbreak of hostilities a decade later did he fully commit himself to the Revolution. In 1775 the Continental Congress contracted with his firm to import arms and ammunition, and he was elected to the Pennsylvania council of safety (1775-76), the committee of correspondence, the provincial assembly (1775-76), the legislature (1776-78), and the Continental Congress (1775-78). In the last body, on July 1, 1776, he voted against independence, which he personally considered premature, but the next day he purposely absented himself to facilitate an affirmative ballot by his delegation.

Morris, a key congressman, specialized in financial affairs and military procurement. Although he and his firm profited handsomely, had it not been for his assiduous labors the Continental Army would probably have been forced to demobilize. He worked closely with General Washington, wheedled money and supplies from the states, borrowed money in the face of overwhelming difficulties, and on occasion even obtained personal loans to further the war cause.

Immediately following his congressional service, Morris sat for two more terms in the Pennsylvania legislature (1778-81). During this time, Thomas Paine and others attacked him for profiteering in Congress, which investigated his accounts and vindicated him. Nevertheless, his reputation suffered.

Morris embarked on the most dramatic phase of his career by accepting the office of Superintendent of Finance (1781-84) under the Articles of Confederation. Congress, recognizing the perilous state of the nation's finances and its impotence to provide remedies, granted him dictatorial powers and acquiesced to his condition that he be allowed to continue his private commercial enterprises. He slashed all governmental and military expenditures, personally purchased army and navy supplies, tightened accounting procedures, prodded the states to fulfill quotas of money and supplies, and when necessary strained his personal credit by issuing notes over his own signature or borrowing from friends.

To finance Washington's Yorktown campaign in 1781, in addition to the above techniques, Morris obtained a sizable loan from France. He used part of it, along with some of his own fortune, to organize the Bank of North America, chartered that December. The first government-incorporated bank in the United States, it aided war financing.

Although Morris was reelected to the Pennsylvania legislature for 1785-86, his private ventures consumed most of his time. In the latter year, he attended the Annapolis Convention, and the following year the Constitutional Convention, where he sympathized with the Federalists but was, for a man of his eminence, strangely silent. Although in attendance at practically every meeting, he spoke only twice in debates and did not serve on any committees. In 1789, declining Washington's offer of appointment as the first Secretary of the Treasury, he took instead a U.S. Senate seat (1789-95).

During the later years of his public life, Morris speculated wildly, often on overextended credit, in lands in the West and at the site of Washington, DC. To compound his difficulties, in 1794 he began constructing on Philadelphia's Chestnut Street a mansion designed by Maj. Pierre Charles L'Enfant. Not long thereafter, Morris attempted to escape creditors by retreating to The Hills, the country estate along the Schuylkill River on the edge of Philadelphia that he had acquired in 1770.

Arrested at the behest of creditors in 1798 and forced to abandon completion of the mansion, thereafter known in its unfinished state as "Morris' Folly," Morris was thrown into the Philadelphia debtor's prison, where he was nevertheless well treated. By the time he was released in 1801, under a federal bankruptcy law, however, his property and fortune had vanished, his health had deteriorated, and his spirit had been broken. He lingered on in poverty and obscurity, living in a simple Philadelphia home on an annuity obtained for his wife by fellow-signer Gouverneur Morris.

Robert Morris died in 1806 in his 73d year and was buried in the yard of Christ Church.

Image: Independence National Historical Park

James Wilson, Pennsylvania



Wilson was born in 1741 or 1742 at Carskerdo, near St. Andrews, Scotland, and educated at the universities of St. Andrews, Glasgow, and Edinburgh. He then emigrated to America, arriving in the midst of the Stamp Act agitations in 1765. Early the next year, he accepted a position as Latin tutor at the College of Philadelphia (later part of the University of Pennsylvania) but almost immediately abandoned it to study law under John Dickinson.

In 1768, the year after his admission to the Philadelphia bar, Wilson set up practice at Reading, Pa. Two years later, he moved westward to the Scotch-Irish settlement of Carlisle, and the following year he took a bride, Rachel Bird. He specialized in land law and built up a broad clientele. On borrowed capital, he also began to speculate in land. In some way he managed, too, to lecture on English literature at the College of Philadelphia, which had awarded him an honorary master of arts degree in 1766.

Wilson became involved in Revolutionary politics. In 1774 he took over chairmanship of the Carlisle committee of correspondence, attended the first provincial assembly, and completed preparation of *Considerations on the Nature and Extent of the Legislative Authority of the British Parliament*. This tract circulated widely in England and America and established him as a Whig leader.

The next year, Wilson was elected to both the provincial assembly and the Continental Congress, where he sat mainly on military and Indian affairs committees. In 1776, reflecting the wishes of his constituents, he joined the moderates in Congress voting for a 3-week delay in considering Richard Henry Lee's resolution of June 7 for independence. On the July 1 and 2 ballots on the issue, however, he voted in the affirmative and signed the Declaration of Independence on August 2.

Wilson's strenuous opposition to the republican Pennsylvania constitution of 1776, besides indicating a switch to conservatism on his part, led to his removal from Congress the following year. To avoid the clamor among his frontier constituents, he repaired to Annapolis during the winter of 1777-78 and then took up residence in Philadelphia.

Wilson affirmed his newly assumed political stance by closely identifying with the aristocratic and conservative republican groups, multiplying his business interests, and accelerating his land speculation. He also took a position as Advocate General for France in America (1779-83), dealing with commercial and maritime matters, and legally defended Loyalists and their sympathizers.

In the fall of 1779, during a period of inflation and food shortages, a mob which included many militiamen and was led by radical constitutionalists, set out to attack the republican leadership. Wilson was a prime target. He and some 35 of his colleagues barricaded themselves in his home at Third and Walnut Streets, thereafter known as "Fort Wilson." During a brief skirmish, several people on both sides were killed or wounded. The shock cooled sentiments and pardons were issued all around, though major political battles over the commonwealth constitution still lay ahead.

During 1781 Congress appointed Wilson as one of the directors of the Bank of North America, newly founded by his close associate and legal client Robert Morris. In 1782, by which time the conservatives had regained some of their power, the former was reelected to Congress, and he also served in the period 1785-87.

Wilson reached the apex of his career in the Constitutional Convention (1787), where his influence was probably second only to that of Madison. Rarely missing a session, he sat on the Committee of Detail and in many other ways applied his excellent knowledge of political theory to convention problems. Only Gouverneur Morris delivered more speeches.

That same year, overcoming powerful opposition, Wilson led the drive for ratification in Pennsylvania, the second state to endorse the instrument. The new commonwealth constitution, drafted in 1789-90 along the lines of the U.S. Constitution, was primarily Wilson's work and represented the climax of his 14-year fight against the constitution of 1776.

For his services in the formation of the federal government, though Wilson expected to be appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, in 1789 President Washington named him as an associate justice. He was chosen that same year as the first law professor at the College of Philadelphia. Two years later he began an official digest of the laws of Pennsylvania, a project he never completed, though he carried on for a while after funds ran out.

Wilson, who wrote only a few opinions, did not achieve the success on the Supreme Court that his capabilities and experience promised. Indeed, during those years he was the object of much criticism and barely escaped impeachment. For one thing, he tried to influence the enactment of legislation in Pennsylvania favorable to land speculators. Between 1792 and 1795 he also made huge but unwise land investments in western New York and Pennsylvania, as well as in Georgia. This did not stop him from conceiving a grandiose but ill-fated scheme, involving vast sums of European capital, for the recruitment of European colonists and their settlement in the West. Meantime, in 1793, as a widower with six children, he remarried to Hannah Gray; their one son died in infancy.

Four years later, to avoid arrest for debt, the distraught Wilson moved from Philadelphia to Burlington, NJ. The next year, apparently while on federal circuit court business, he arrived at Edenton, NC, in a state of acute mental stress and was taken into the home of James Iredell, a

fellow Supreme Court justice. He died there within a few months. Although first buried at Hayes Plantation near Edenton, his remains were later reinterred in the yard of Christ Church at Philadelphia.

Image: Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

[◀ Back to Main Founding Fathers Page](#)

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