The Founding Fathers: New York

En Español

Alexander Hamilton, New York

Hamilton was born in 1757 on the island of Nevis, in the Leeward group, British West Indies. He was the illegitimate son of a common-law marriage between a poor itinerant Scottish merchant of aristocratic descent and an English-French Huguenot mother who was a planter's daughter. In 1766, after the father had moved his family elsewhere in the Leewards to St. Croix in the Danish (now United States) Virgin Islands, he returned to St. Kitts while his wife and two sons remained on St. Croix.

The mother, who opened a small store to make ends meet, and a Presbyterian clergyman provided Hamilton with a basic education, and he learned to speak fluent French. About the time of his mother's death in 1768, he became an apprentice clerk at Christiansted in a mercantile establishment, whose proprietor became one of his benefactors. Recognizing his ambition and superior intelligence, they raised a fund for his education.

In 1772, bearing letters of introduction, Hamilton traveled to New York City. Patrons he met there arranged for him to attend Barber's Academy at Elizabethtown (present Elizabeth), NJ. During this time, he met and stayed for a while at the home of William Livingston, who would one day be a fellow signer of the Constitution. Late the next year, 1773, Hamilton entered King's College (later Columbia College and University) in New York City, but the Revolution interrupted his studies.

Although not yet 20 years of age, in 1774-75 Hamilton wrote several widely read pro-Whig pamphlets. Right after the war broke out, he accepted an artillery captaincy and fought in the principal campaigns of 1776-77. In the latter year, winning the rank of lieutenant colonel, he joined the staff of General Washington as secretary and aide-de-camp and soon became his close confidant as well.

In 1780 Hamilton wed New Yorker Elizabeth Schuyler, whose family was rich and politically powerful; they were to have eight children. In 1781, after some disagreements with Washington, he took a command position under Lafayette in the Yorktown, VA, campaign (1781). He resigned his commission that November.

Hamilton then read law at Albany and quickly entered practice, but public service soon attracted him. He was elected to the Continental Congress in 1782-83. In the latter year, he established a law office in New York City. Because of his interest in strengthening the central government, he represented his state at the Annapolis Convention in 1786, where he urged the calling of the Constitutional Convention.

In 1787 Hamilton served in the legislature, which appointed him as a delegate to the convention. He played a surprisingly small part in the debates, apparently because he was frequently absent on legal business, his extreme nationalism put him at odds with most of the delegates, and he was frustrated by the conservative views of his two fellow delegates from New York. He did, however, sit on the Committee of Style, and he was the only one of the three delegates from his state who signed the finished document. Hamilton's part in New York's ratification the next year was substantial, though he felt the Constitution was deficient in many respects. Against determined opposition, he waged a strenuous and successful campaign, including collaboration with John Jay and James Madison in writing The Federalist Papers. In 1787 Hamilton was again elected to the Continental Congress.

When the new government got under way in 1789, Hamilton won the position of Secretary of the Treasury. He began at once to place the nation's disorganized finances on a sound footing. In a series of reports (1790-91), he presented a program not only to stabilize national finances but also to shape the future of the country as a powerful, industrial nation. He proposed establishment of a national bank, funding of the national debt, assumption of state war debts, and the encouragement of manufacturing.

Hamilton's policies soon brought him into conflict with Jefferson and Madison. Their disputes with him over his pro-business economic program, sympathies for Great Britain, disdain for the common man, and opposition to the principles and excesses of the French revolution contributed to the formation of the first U.S. party system. It pitted Hamilton and the Federalists against Jefferson and Madison and the Democratic-Republicans.

During most of the Washington administration, Hamilton's views usually prevailed with the President, especially after 1793 when Jefferson left the government. In 1795 family and financial needs forced Hamilton to resign from the Treasury Department and resume his law practice in New York City. Except for a stint as inspector-general of the Army (1798-1800) during the undeclared war with France, he never again held public office.

While gaining stature in the law, Hamilton continued to exert a powerful impact on New York and national politics. Always an opponent of fellow-Federalist John Adams, he sought to prevent his election to the presidency in 1796. When that failed, he continued to use his influence secretly within Adams' cabinet. The bitterness between the two men became public knowledge in 1800 when Hamilton denounced Adams in a letter that was published through the efforts of the Democratic-Republicans.

In 1802 Hamilton and his family moved into The Grange, a country home he had built in a rural part of Manhattan not far north of New York City. But the expenses involved and investments in northern land speculations seriously strained his finances.

Meanwhile, when Jefferson and Aaron Burr tied in Presidential electoral votes in 1800, Hamilton threw valuable support to Jefferson. In 1804, when Burr sought the governorship of New York, Hamilton again managed to defeat him. That same year, Burr, taking offense at remarks he believed to have originated with Hamilton, challenged him to a duel, which took place at present Weehawken, NJ, on July 11. Mortally wounded, Hamilton died the next day. He was in his late forties at death. He was buried in Trinity Churchyard in New York City.

Image: Courtesy of The National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

John Lansing, Jr., New York

On January 30, 1754, John Lansing was born in Albany, NY, to Gerrit Jacob and Jannetje Lansing. At age 21 Lansing had completed his study of the law and was admitted to practice. In 1781 he married Cornelia Ray. They had 10 children, 5 of whom died in infancy. Lansing was quite wealthy; he owned a large estate at Lansingburg and had a lucrative law practice.

From 1776 to 1777 Lansing acted as military secretary to Gen. Philip Schuyler. From the military world Lansing turned to the political and served six terms in the New York Assembly--1780-84, 1786, and 1788. During the last two terms he was speaker of the assembly. In the 2-year gap between his first four terms in the assembly and the fifth, Lansing sat in the Confederation Congress. He rounded out his public service by serving as Albany's mayor between 1786 and 1790.

Lansing went to Philadelphia as part of the New York delegation to the Constitutional Convention. As the convention progressed, Lansing became disillusioned because he believed it was exceeding its instructions. Lansing believed the delegates had gathered together simply to amend the Articles of Confederation and was dismayed at the movement to write an entirely new constitution. After 6 weeks, John Lansing and fellow New York delegate Robert Yates left the convention and explained their departure in a joint letter to New York Governor George

Clinton. They stated that they opposed any system that would consolidate the United States into one government, and they had understood that the convention would not consider any such consolidation. Furthermore, warned Lansing and Yates, the kind of government recommended by the convention could not "afford that security to equal and permanent liberty which we wished to make an invariable object of our pursuit." In 1788, as a member of the New York ratifying convention, Lansing again vigorously opposed the Constitution.

Under the new federal government Lansing pursued a long judicial career. In 1790 he began an 11-year term on the supreme court of New York; from 1798 until 1801 he served as its chief justice. Between 1801 and 1814 Lansing was chancellor of the state. Retirement from that post did not slow him down; in 1817 he accepted an appointment as a regent of the University of the State of New York.

Lansing's death was the most mysterious of all the delegates to the Constitutional Convention. While on a visit to New York City in 1829, he left his hotel to post some letters. No trace of him was ever found, and it was supposed that he had been murdered.

Image: Courtesy of Schaffer Library, Union College, Schenectady, NY

Robert Yates, New York

The son of Joseph and Maria Yates, Robert Yates was born in Schenectady, NY, on January 27, 1738. He received a classical education in New York City and later studied law with William Livingston. Yates was admitted to the New York bar in 1760 and thereafter resided in Albany.

Between 1771 and 1775 Yates sat on the Albany board of aldermen. During the pre-Revolution years Yates counted himself among the Radical Whigs, whose vigilance against corruption and emphasis on the protection of liberty in England appealed to many in the colonies. Once the Revolution broke out, Yates served on the Albany committee of safety and represented his county in four provincial congresses and in the convention of 1775-77. At the convention he sat on various committees, including the one that drafted the first constitution for New York State.

On May 8, 1777, Yates was appointed to New York's supreme court and presided as its chief justice from 1790 through 1798. While on the bench he attracted criticism for his fair treatment of Loyalists. Other duties included serving on commissions that were called to settle boundary disputes with Massachusetts and Vermont.

In the 1780s Robert Yates stood as a recognized leader of the Antifederalists. He opposed any concessions to the federal congress, such as the right to collect impost duties, that might diminish the sovereignty of the states. When he travelled to Philadelphia in May 1787 for the federal convention, he expected that the delegates would simply discuss revising the existing

Articles. Yates was on the committee that debated the question of representation in the legislature, and it soon became apparent that the convention intended much more than modification of the current plan of union. On July 5, the day the committee presented its report, Yates and John Lansing (to whom Yates was related by marriage) left the proceedings. In a joint letter to Gov. George Clinton of New York, they spelled out the reasons for their early departure. They warned against the dangers of centralizing power and urged opposition to adopting the Constitution. Yates continued to attack the Constitution in a series of letters signed "Brutus" and "Sydney" and voted against ratification at the Poughkeepsie convention.

In 1789 Yates ran for governor of New York but lost the election. Three years after his retirement from the state supreme court, on September 9, 1801, he died, leaving his wife, Jannetje Van Ness Yates, and four of his six children. Though he had enjoyed a comfortable income at the start of his career, his capital had dwindled away until very little was left. In 1821 his notes from the Constitutional Convention were published under the title Secret Proceedings and Debates of the Convention Assembled . . . for the Purpose of Forming the Constitution of the United States.

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