

Lewis Morris

Westchester County

Born: April 8, 1726

The Morris family is one of New York's oldest, tracing back to the mid-seventeenth century when your great-grandfather Richard Morris, arriving from Barbados, bought land in the Bronx area of Westchester County. Richard was formerly a soldier in Oliver Cromwell's army; he emigrated from England in the 1660s, after the Stuart monarchy was restored under King Charles II. Richard died in 1672, leaving the land, now an estate grandly named Morrisania, to an infant son christened Lewis. This Lewis, your grandfather, died in 1746, whereupon the estate passed to his son, also Lewis. You, Lewis III, inherited from your father in 1762. You are the third lord of Morrisania Manor.

You were born April 8, 1726, to Lewis Morris II and Katrintje (Catherine) Staats Morris. You are of Dutch ancestry on your mother's side. You have two full siblings, Staats Long and Richard, and four half-siblings from your father's second wife, Sarah, including Gouverneur (twenty-six years your junior), who last year drafted the Constitution of the United States. You and your wife, Mary, have ten children of your own, and your eldest son is named—guess what!

You were educated by private tutors until going off to Yale College, from which you graduated in 1746. Estate management was your primary occupation, but eventually politics intruded, with a seat on the Admiralty Court (1760) and in the New York General Assembly (1769). Despite your great wealth and aristocratic heritage, you early on concluded that the colonies would need to separate from Great Britain. And the policies and practices of the mother country, to say nothing of the violence, settled the matter—you were a patriot and would join the movement for independence.

To that end, you organized your election to the Provincial Convention, successor to the colonial assembly, which in turn elected you to the Second Continental Congress (1775). There you concerned yourself with military and Indian affairs, responsibilities that kept you away from Philadelphia for extended periods, including when the Declaration of Independence was presented to Congress on July 4, 1776. But back were you, on August 2, in time to affix your signature to that historic document. Warned against signing by your half-brother Gouverneur, you replied, "Damn the consequences. Give me the pen!"

You returned home to New York in 1777 (replaced in Congress by Gouverneur) and were appointed county judge and elected to the state senate. You also were a major general in the state militia during the war years. Little action did you see, but three of your sons had distinguished military careers. After the war, the restoration of Morrisania, ransacked by the British, became your overriding passion. You studied and applied all the recent developments in crop rotation, soil improvement, and seed mutation. Likewise, you advocated for better public education and took a seat on the first board of regents of the University of the State of New York (1784). The Society of the Cincinnati, a fraternal organization of former officers of the Continental Army, made you an honorary member (1784).

Your first stint in the state senate ran from 1777 to 1781. This career you resumed in 1784, and you are still a senator today, even as you are a member of the New York State Ratifying Convention. Indeed, over half of the convention members currently have seats in either the senate or the assembly.

Since your half-brother wrote the Constitution, it stands to reason that you support its ratification and are a Federalist. You thus will give hearty support to Chancellor Robert Livingston (party leader) and Alexander Hamilton (party lieutenant), as they, and others of your party, endeavor to secure New York's vote for ratification.