

Zephaniah Platt

Dutchess County

Born: May 27, 1735, Huntington, L.I.

That's quite a mouthful: Zephaniah! And not the first, or the last, Zephaniah are you. Your father bore the name (1705–1778) as does a son and as will a grandson. You were born May 27, 1735, in Huntingdon, Long Island. Your earliest American ancestor was Richard Platt (1603–1684), who settled in Connecticut, having come from Ware, Hertfordshire, England. You yourself have fathered fourteen children by two wives, Mary Hannah Davis and Mary Van Wyck.

You studied law, were admitted to the bar, and set up a legal practice in Poughkeepsie, New York, where you and the family had moved. With the coming of the war and the termination of British rule, you served in the Provincial Congress (1775–77) and on its committee of safety; and you were a member of the convention that ratified the new state constitution (1777). Under that constitution, you served successive terms in the state senate (1777–83). On the national level, you served one term in the Continental Congress (1785–86).

However, your chief claim to fame is the city you founded and that carries your name (not Zephaniah)—Plattsburgh, New York, on the western shore of Lake Champlain, near the Canadian border. The state legislature, in 1781, wanting to raise troops and keep the French away, offered unclaimed lands in the north as bounties to officers and soldiers in the army. You were neither, but many of your other thirty-two cofounders were one or the other, including several of your brothers; and in 1785, with your brother Charles arriving first, Plattsburgh was established. By then you were the most prominent member of the family, having served continuously as a Dutchess County judge (beginning in 1781) and having twice served on the governor's council of appointment (1778, 1781). Thus, it was after you that the new town was named.

This past spring, your Dutchess constituents honored you with election to the state ratifying convention, convened here in Poughkeepsie to accept or reject the Constitution. You attend as a confirmed Antifederalist, eager to support Governor George Clinton, the Antifederalist party leader, and Melancton Smith, the party lieutenant, as they, and others of your party, endeavor to defeat the Constitution or secure amendments thereto.