

Richard Morris

New York City and County

Born: August 15, 1730

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 are the third son of Lewis Morris Jr. (1698–1762) and his first wife, Katrintje (Catherine) Staats Morris (1697–1731); you were born August 15, 1730.

You spent your formative years at Morrisania before going off to study at Yale College, graduating in 1748. Afterward, you studied law and were admitted to the bar in 1752. Your law practice was quickly successful, and you established a reputation as an up-and-coming solicitor. In 1762, upon the death of your father, who had been a judge on the Court of Vice-Admiralty of New York, the royal governor, Robert Monckton, appointed you to the court, whose cases concerned mainly ship seizures and the laws of capture and prize but also breaches of parliamentary statutes relating to trade and revenues. Your judgeship became a matter of some delicacy when Britain began extracting revenues from its trade with the colonies. By 1775 New Yorkers were being forced to take sides. You chose the patriot side and resigned from the court, refusing Governor Tryon's request that you remain in office and, in consequence, suffering the governor's wrath when your Westchester estate, Mount Fordham, was ordered seized. Your family divided over independence: your eldest brother, Lewis, third lord of the Morrisania Manor, signed the Declaration of Independence, and your much-younger half-brother, Gouverneur Morris, drafted the Constitution of the United States this past summer; on the other hand, your stepmother, Sarah Gouverneur Morris, remained a loyalist living at Morrisania, and your elder brother, Staats Long, became an officer in the British army.

In 1778 you were appointed a senator by the assembly. You resigned in 1779 to assume the position of chief justice of New York, replacing John Jay who had been appointed minister to Spain by the Continental Congress. In that capacity you were part of a council charged with governing the southern parts of the state during the legislature's adjournments.

More recently, you have been elected a delegate to the New York State Ratifying Convention representing New York City and County. There you will join your brother Lewis, representing Westchester County. You and he are Federalists and will give hearty support to Chancellor Robert Livingston (party leader) and Alexander Hamilton (party lieutenant), as they, and others of your party, endeavor to ensure that New York votes to ratify the Constitution.