

# Governor George Clinton

*Ulster County*

**Party Leader & Convention President**

**Born:** July 26, 1739

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You are George Clinton, New York's inaugural and, to date, only governor, first elected in 1777. As the leader of the Antifederalists at the state ratifying convention, your single purpose is to ensure New York's rejection of the Constitution drafted in Philadelphia the previous summer.

You were born July 26, 1739, to Colonel Charles Clinton and Elizabeth Denniston Clinton. Your father, a Presbyterian, emigrated from Ireland a mere ten years earlier to escape religious persecution by English Anglicans and Irish Catholics. He settled in Ulster County, New York, and became a farmer, surveyor, and land speculator. He was also a member of the colonial assembly and an adviser to the royal governor, a distant relative coincidentally named George Clinton.

Your education consisted of tutoring by a Scottish clergyman, which, in the event, was interrupted by the outbreak of the French and Indian War. You volunteered for service, first on the privateer *Defiance*, operating in the Caribbean, and then in the provincial militia where you rose to the rank of lieutenant. Along with your father, a colonel in the militia, and under the command of British Lieutenant Colonel John Bradstreet, you marched on Quebec and participated in the siege and seizure of Fort Frontenac (1758), the fall of which cut off French lines of supply and communication with Montreal.

After the war you read law under noted attorney William Smith, setting up a legal practice in 1764. The next year you were appointed district attorney, and three years later, in 1768, you were elected to the Provincial Assembly representing Ulster County. New York politics was patronage based, dividing between the Livingstons and the De Lanceys. You sided with the Livingston faction, in part because of your marriage to a Livingston relative, Cornelia Tappan. When relations with Britain fractured in the 1770s, the De Lanceys opposed resistance and became loyalists; the Livingstons supported resistance, including the street violence of the Sons of Liberty, and became patriots. You even defended one of their number imprisoned for seditious libel.

With your patriot bona fides thus established, you were elected to the Second Continental Congress in 1775 and elected again in 1776. You were not on hand, however, for the signing of the Declaration of Independence because of duties back home. For you were, in addition to your role as a congressman, a brigadier general in the New York militia, charged with defending the Hudson River against British attack. To that end you had constructed two forts (one named after you, Fort Clinton, the other Fort Montgomery) and a heavy chain strung across the waterway. The purpose was to prevent the army in Manhattan (as of fall 1776), under General William Howe, from sailing north up the Hudson and connecting with the army moving overland south from Canada, under General John Burgoyne. You shared command with your older brother, James Clinton; and as the British forces at the time (summer 1777) were then under the command of General Henry Clinton, the battle of October 6, 1777, was called the Battle of the Clintons. The forts fell, the chain was removed, but Burgoyne was not reinforced. Defeated at Saratoga the next day, he surrendered his army on October 17—an American victory that proved to be the turning point in the war. For your efforts, you earned a commission in the Continental Army as brigadier general.

While still in the army and indeed commanding troops in the field, you were elected governor of the state—a surprise win over Philip Schuyler, manor lord of Albany County, that marked the end of patronal politics in the state. You remained in the army until it disbanded in 1783, whereupon you became a charter member of the New York Society of the Cincinnati, a confraternity of former war officers.

During the war you were a nationalist, anxious to strengthen the powers of Congress, especially its power to raise revenues. You supported the 1781 impost, for instance, which insular and truculent Rhode Island succeeded in defeating. After the war, however, you switched positions, becoming a states' rights advocate. You opposed a 1783 impost requested by Congress to pay

its debts (including to soldiers) and finance its operations. Such a national tax, you feared, would undermine the state impost, paid mainly by Connecticut and New Jersey merchants, which kept taxes low for New Yorkers. Low taxes and the redistribution of confiscated loyalist lands were the foundation of your political popularity and the reason for your repeated reelection as governor.

But this new Constitution would give the national legislature unlimited taxing power, along with a host of other centralizing powers that Antifederalists vehemently oppose. You are their leader, and, elected to the New York State Ratifying Convention representing Ulster County, you command a huge majority of like-minded delegates. You additionally are the convention president, elected by unanimous vote. (Another though will preside as chair, because the convention—for the duration of the game—will meet as a committee of the whole.) **Special role:** If the Constitution is rated Federalist in character, Clinton is directed to threaten to send a circular letter to other governors demanding a second convention.