

General James Clinton

Ulster County

Born: August 9, 1736

You operate in the shadow of your more illustrious younger brother, George, governor of the state. You are James Clinton, born August 9, 1736, to Colonel Charles Clinton and Elizabeth Denniston Clinton.

Your family is descended from English nobility going all the way back to William the Conqueror, whose cousin Renebald was made the Lord of Clinton in Oxfordshire and took the Clinton surname. You, however, are more Irish than English, because your great-grandfather William, having fought for the defeated and deposed King Charles I, was thereafter a refugee, moving to the Continent, to Scotland, and finally to Ireland where he died. Your father, a refugee in his own right, emigrated from Ireland in 1729. He was a Presbyterian suffering religious persecution by English Anglicans and Irish Catholics. He settled in Ulster County, New York, and became a farmer, surveyor, and land speculator. Accomplished in many fields, he was also a longtime member of the colonial assembly.

Your own accomplishments have been mainly military. You served in the French and Indian War (1757–63) as an ensign rising to the rank of captain. Along with your father, a colonel in the militia, and your brother George, 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. The British commander of the expedition was Lieutenant Colonel John Bradstreet. You remained in the militia until the end of the war, stationed at various frontier posts and commanding a troop of 200 called the "Guards of the Frontier."

In 1765 you married Mary DeWitt and together had seven children. One of your sons, DeWitt Clinton (1769–1828), will later become the governor of New York.

The war with Britain began in April 1775 (Lexington and Concord). In May, the Continental Congress decided to defend the Hudson River with a series of forts built along the Hudson Highlands. You, a longtime local, were tasked with reconnoitering the area and identifying appropriate locations.

As a colonel in the Third New York Regiment, you took part in General Richard Montgomery's ill-fated assault on Quebec, on the last day of December 1775, before enlistments expired, but in a blinding snowstorm. Montgomery was killed, Benedict Arnold was wounded, and Daniel Morgan was taken prisoner. You were lucky to escape with your life and liberty.

In March 1776 you were placed in command of the Second New York Regiment, and in August you were promoted to brigadier general of the Continental Army. You fought in the Saratoga campaign of October 1777. You and your brother bore responsibility for preventing British General Henry Clinton from sailing up the Hudson and relieving General John Burgoyne in the Albany area. You relied on your forts, Clinton and Montgomery, and on a great chain stretched across the waterway. The forts fell and the chain was removed, but Burgoyne was not reinforced. Defeated at Saratoga the next day, October 7, Burgoyne surrendered his army October 17—a signal victory that proved to be the turning point of the war.

You spent 1778 in the Northern Department guarding Albany and the surrounding country from Indian and Tory attacks. These same foes you encountered in Pennsylvania and defeated at the Battle of Newtown on August 29, 1779. You were part of General John Sullivan's force and the Sullivan Expedition. You returned to the Northern Department in 1780 but later joined Washington at Yorktown in 1781.

After the war you resigned your commission. In 1783 you became a charter member of the New York Society of the Cincinnati, a fraternal organization of former war officers.

Your political career has been relatively skimpy: one term in the state assembly (1787). But this past spring you were elected to the state senate and to the state ratifying convention meeting in Poughkeepsie to accept or reject the Constitution. You go as a committed Antifederalist, eager to support your brother, 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.