

Center *for the Study of the* American Constitution

NO. 6: GOUVERNEUR MORRIS (1752-1816)

A child of privilege, Gouverneur Morris was born on the Hudson River Valley manor of Morrisania in New York. Morris was a 1768 graduate of King's College (Columbia), and he was admitted to the New York bar in 1771. Morris was a Westchester member in the New York provincial congresses, 1775-77, and along with John Jay and Robert R. Livingston was an author of the new state constitution in 1777. Morris successfully advocated for a provision guaranteeing freedom of religion, but he was unsuccessful in obtaining the elimination of slavery.

Morris was a member of the first Committee of Safety, New York's executive authority before the new state constitution came into force. While serving as a delegate to Congress, 1778-79, Morris signed the Articles of Confederation, chaired several committees, and wrote important public papers. When the state legislature refused to re-appoint him in 1779, Morris moved to Pennsylvania where he allied with the state Republican Party, which strongly opposed the radically democratic state constitution.

In May 1780, Morris's left leg was shattered in a carriage accident. The accident ultimately led to the leg's amputation below the knee. Colleagues and critics alike hoped that the loss of a leg would slow down Morris's escapades and curtail his indiscretions, but the injury had seemingly little impact.

Morris served as the assistant superintendent of finance to Robert Morris under the Articles of Confederation, 1781-85. (The Morrises were not related.) In the Constitutional Convention, Morris delivered more speeches than any other delegate, and he was a member of the Committee of Style, where he shaped the final language of the Constitution. According to James Madison, who reminisced almost fifty years later, "The *finish* given to the style and arrangement of the Constitution fairly belongs to the pen of Mr. Morris. . . . A better choice could not have been made, as the performance of the task proved." Morris also wrote both the Constitution's preamble and the letter from George Washington as Convention president to the president of Congress. The latter document accompanied the Constitution to Congress and in newspaper, broadside, and pamphlet printings of the Constitution.

After profitable business ventures with Robert Morris, Gouverneur Morris purchased the family estate of Morrisania from his brother and returned to New York. In 1788 he went to France as the other Morris's business agent. President Washington appointed Morris as a special envoy to England, 1790-91, and as U.S. minister to France, 1792-94. Coupled with the reign of terror in revolutionary France, Morris's conservative political temperament made his tenure abroad difficult. France eventually asked for his recall in response to the U.S. expulsion of Citizen Genet, the French ambassador to the United States.

Morris returned to the United States in 1798 and soon after filled a vacancy in the U.S. Senate, 1800-1803. Beginning in March 1810, Morris served as chairman of the commission to establish the Erie Canal. He opposed the War of 1812 and supported the Hartford Convention in 1814. Morris died in November 1816.

QUOTATIONS

Gouverneur Morris to John Jay, York, Pa., 29 April 1778

I am a busy Man tho as heretofore a pleasurable one.

Gouverneur Morris to Robert R. Livingston, Philadelphia, 17 August 1778

You tell me that I must be with you at the opening of the Session [of the New York legislature] but you do not let me know when the Session is. Let me paint my Situation [in Congress]. I am on a Committee to arrange the Treasury & Finances. I am of the medical Committee and have to prepare the Arrangements of that Department. I have the same Thing to go thro with Relation to the Commissary's, Quarter Master's & Clothier General's Departments. I am to prepare a Manifesto on the Cruelties of the British. I have drawn and expect to draw almost if not all the Publications of Congress of any Importance. These are leading Things but the every Day Minutia are infinite. From Sunday Morning to Saturday Night I have no Exercise unless to walk from where I now sit about fifty Yards to Congress and to return. My Constitution sinks under this and the Heat of this pestiferous Climate. Duer talks daily of going hence. We have nobody else here so that if I quit the State will be unrepresented. Can I come to you? If there be a Practicability of it with any Kind of Consistency I will take half a dozen Shirts and ride Post to meet you. Oh that a Heart so disposed as mine is to social Delights should be worn and torn to Pieces with public Anxieties.

Gouverneur Morris to Robert Morris, Philadelphia, 20 October 1778

As to Personalities I am fully of Opinion with you that I speak too often and too long of which the Bearer of this Letter will give you I doubt not many Instances. To my Sorrow I add that I am by no Means improved in my public Speaking. ... That I am not a punctual Correspondent must be attributed to Distractions arising from an Attention to Business of so many different Kinds that your poor Friend hath but little in him of the gay Lothario.

John Adams: Diary, 22 June 1779

In the Evening I fell into Chat with the Chevalier [Luzerne]. He asked me, about Gouverneur Morris. I said it was his Christian Name—that he was not Governor. The Chevalier said He had heard of him as an able Man. I said he was a young Man, chosen into Congress since I left it. That I had sat some Years with his Elder Brother in Congress. That Gouverneur was a Man of Wit, and made pretty Verses—but of a Character très legere.* That the Cause of America had not been sustained by such Characters as that of Gouverneur Morris or his Colleague Mr. Jay.

*superficial; lightweight

John Jay to N.Y. Governor George Clinton, Philadelphia, 27 August 1779

Several circumstances which have come to my knowledge, lead me to suspect that pains have been taken to injure Morris in the opinion of his constituents. Justice to him as well as regard to truth obliges me to say that he deserves well of New York and America in general. It has been the uniform policy of some from the beginning of the contest, to depreciate every man of worth and abilities who refused to draw in their harness.

John Jay to Robert R. Livingston and Gouverneur Morris, Philadelphia, 29 September 1779

I exceedingly regret his [Morris's] not being sent to Europe where his abilities would have done Honor as well as Service to his Country—but it seems that Period is not yet arrived, & Congress must for some time longer remain his Field. . . . if Morris governs his Imagination will conciliate Friends.

Lewis Morris, Jr., to Nathanael Greene, Esopus, N.Y., 1 October 1779

This morning the legislature proceeded to the choice of delegates [to Congress]; Mr. Jay, Mr. Scott, Mr. Duane, Mr. Floyd and a Mr. LeHommodieu are the persons chosen. The last is a refugee from Long Island, a man of sense but not out of the common track. Mr. [Gouverneur] Morris was dropt from a vulgar prejudice which prevailed in the assembly that he ridiculed the Christian religion and was a man of very bad morals. Thus from this idle notion they have lost the services of the ablest politician in the state.

John Laurens to Alexander Hamilton, Philadelphia, 18 December 1779

. . . the world in general allows greater credit for his abilities than his integrity.

William Bingham to John Jay, Philadelphia, 1 July 1780

An unlucky accident lately happened to Gouverneur Morris. In attempting to drive a pair of wild horses in a phaeton, he was thrown out and in the fall his left leg caught in the wheel and was greatly shattered. He was under the necessity of having it amputated below the knee and is now in a fair way of recovery.

John Jay to Robert Morris, St. Ildefonso, 16 September 1780

Gouverneur's Leg has been a Tax on my Heart. I am almost tempted to wish he had lost something else.

Robert Morris to Gouverneur Morris, Office of Finance, 6 July 1781

The cheerful manner in which you agreed to render me the assistance I solicited, soon after my appointment to the Superintendency of the Finances of the United States, gave me great pleasure on my own Account, and a still more solid satisfaction on Account of my Country; depending solely on my self, I trembled at the Arduous task I had reluctantly undertaken; aided by your Talents and Abilities I feel better Courage and dare to indulge the fond hope, that Uniting our utmost exertions in the Service of our Country, we may be able to extricate it from the present embarrassments, and dispel those only Clouds, that seem to hang destruction over it. The Honorable Congress by their act of this date have fixed a Salary for the Assistant I may appoint agreeable to the Powers annexed to my office by a former Act of Congress. My entire Conviction of the great and essential Services your Genius, Talents and Capacity enable you to render to your Country, and of that aid, ease and Confidence you can and will Administer to my own exertions and Feelings, never left me one moment to hesitate about the choice I shou'd make. I only lament that the provision allowed by Congress is not more adequate to your deserts, but as I know you are incapable of Mercenary Views and considerations, this circumstance shall be overlooked for the present in expectation that the Utility of our measures may draw a proper attention from those that employ us and at any rate we will have the Consolation to pursue the interests of the United States to the best of our Judgment and abilities whether we meet with suitable rewards or not. Therefore it is with the utmost satisfaction that I do hereby appoint you, an Assistant to the Superintendent of the Finances of the United States of North America, and I do assure you nothing will make me more happy than to acquire and divide with you the thanks of our Country and applause of the World.

Mary Morris to Sally Jay, Philadelphia, 12 July 1781

Mr. Gov. Morris's friends here and, indeed, all who know him, were exceedingly shocked at his irreparable misfortune—the loss of his leg . . . I never knew an individual more sympathized with.

Robert Morris to John Jay, Philadelphia, 19 October 1781

Gouverneur is with me and a most useful and able adjunct he is. I hope our joint labors will in the end have the desired effect. We have mended the appearance of things very much, and are regaining public credit and confidence by degrees.

John Jay to George Clinton, Madrid, 16 November 1781

It gave me much pleasure to hear that G. Morris would probably be in your delegation [to Congress] this fall. Independent of my regard for him, it appears to me of great importance to the State that every valuable man in it should be preserved, and that it is particularly our interest to cultivate, cherish, and support all such of our citizens, especially young and rising ones, as are, or promise to be, able and honest servants of the public.

Nathanael Greene to Charles Pettit, 21 December 1782

[On the rumor that Superintendent of Finance Robert Morris had been killed in a duel, it was thought that Gouverneur Morris might fill the Superintendent's vacancy.] Gouverneur Morris is in the order of promotion; but the confidence of the people is wanting. His abilities are great; but I fear he has more of genius than judgment.

Robert Morris to John Jay, Philadelphia, 3 January 1783

Your friend Gouverneur writes you political letters, but as he tells you nothing of himself, it is just that I tell you how industrious, how useful he is; his talents and abilities, you know; they are all faithfully and disinterestedly applied to the service of his country. I could do nothing without him, and our quiet labours do but just keep the wheels in motion.

Charles Thomson to Hannah Thomson, Princeton, 30 June 1783

At Trenton I shaved, washed & breakfasted & waited till eight in hopes of seeing Govr. Morris. . . . Govr. was gone a fishing and though I sent him a note to inform him of my arrival, I suppose he thought it too great a sacrifice to forego the pleasure of fishing.

Robert Morris to John Jay, Philadelphia, 4 November 1783

I do not know whether Gouverneur writes to you by this opportunity; you must cherish his friendship, it is worth possessing. He has more virtue than he shows, and more consistency than anybody believes. He values you exceedingly, and hereafter you will be very useful to each other.

Samuel Osgood to Elbridge Gerry, Philadelphia, 3 April 1784

I have had an Opportunity of conversing freely with the D—— M———r [Dutch Minister Pieter Johan Van Berckel]. He has observed a very good Line of Conduct in my Opinion since he has been here—& I apprehend he will fall in, fully with the independent Americans. He is much opposed to intriguing. He has a good Opinion of R——— M——— but says he has very bad Councillors about him. I found he meant G——— M————. He has the same Sentiments of him that I have.

Francisco de Miranda: Travels in the United States, 1783-1784

Mr. Gouverneur Morris, the lively intellect of the town, and it seems to me he has more ostentation, audacity, and tinsel than real value.

Arthur Lee to John Adams, Annapolis, 11 May 1784

Our Treasury is as low & the prospect of raising it by taxes, as unpromising as possible. Either the present Superintendent must continue in with powers calculated solely to convert every thing to the emolument of himself & his Creatures; or if a reform is made, he & his immoral Assistant have malignity enough to ruin where they can no longer plunder. However there is now a plan before Congress for reforming the department, by putting it into Commission & prohibiting the Commissioners from being engaged in trade or commerce; which I hope will take place.

Luigi Castiglioni: Sketches of American Statesmen, 1787

All those who have the good fortune to know him marvel at his talents and can only profit from his conversation and his pleasant company. As courteous and refined as a European, free as an American, he combines the talents of French bon ton and republican frankness, and is welcomed with pleasure in Philadelphia society.

William Pierce: Sketches of Members of the Constitutional Convention, 1787

Mr. Gouverneur Morris is one of those Geniuses in whom every species of talents combine to render him conspicuous and flourishing in public debate;—He winds through all the mazes of rhetoric, and throws around him such a glare that he charms, captivates, and leads away the senses of all who hear him. With an infinite stretch of fancy he brings to view things when he is engaged in deep argumentation, that render all the labor of reasoning easy and pleasing. But with all these powers he is fickle and inconstant,—never pursuing one train of thinking,—nor ever regular. He has gone through a very extensive course of reading, and is acquainted with all the sciences. No Man has more wit,—nor can any one engage the attention more than Mr. Morris. He was bred to the Law, but I am told he disliked the profession, and turned merchant. He is engaged in some great mercantile matters with his namesake Mr. Robt. Morris. This Gentleman is about 38 years old, he has been unfortunate in losing one of his Legs, and getting all the flesh taken off his right arm by scald, when a youth.

Otto's Biographies, Fall 1788

Citizen of the state of New York, but always connected with Robert Morris and having represented Pennsylvania several times. Celebrated lawyer, one of the best organized minds on the continent, but without manners, and, if one believes his enemies, without principles; extremely interesting in conversation having studied finances with special care. He works constantly with Robert Morris. He is feared more than admired, but few regard him with esteem.

George Washington to Thomas Jefferson, Mount Vernon, 27 November 1788

You will find [him] full of affability, good nature, vivacity and talents. As you will also find in him a deportment calculated to do credit to the national character, I cannot hesitate to believe that you will be desirous of having opportunities of being useful to him.

George Washington: Diary, 8 October 1789

Mr. Madison . . . thought with Colonel Hamilton, and as Mr. Jay also does, that Mr. Morris is a man of superior talents—but with the latter that his imagination sometimes runs ahead of his judgment—that his Manners before he is known—and where known are oftentimes disgusting—and from that, and immoral & loose expressions had created opinions of himself that were not favorable to him and which he did not merit.

George Washington to Gouverneur Morris, Philadelphia, 28 January 1792

[On the opposition to Morris's appointment as minister plenipotentiary to France.] Whilst your abilities, knowledge in the affairs of this country and disposition to serve it were adduced and asserted on one hand, the levity and imprudence of your conversation, and in many instances of your conduct were as severely arraigned on the other. It was urged that your mode of expression was imperious, contemptuous and disgusting to those who might happen to differ from your opinion; and among a people who studied civility and politeness more than any other nation it must be displeasing.—That in France you were considered as a favorer of Aristocracy, and unfriendly to its revolution (I suppose they meant constitution) that under this impression you would not be an acceptable public character and of consequence would not be able, however willing to promote the interest of this country.—That in England you gave evident proofs of indiscretion by communicating the purport of your mission in the first instance to the minister of France, at that court, who availing himself in the moment of the occasion gave it the appearance of a movement through his court.—This and other circumstances of a similar nature, added to a closer intercourse with the opposition members, occasioned distrust and gave displeasure to the ministry, which was the cause it is said of that reserve which you experienced in negotiating the business which had been entrusted to you.—But not to go further into the detail of this matter, I will place the ideas of your political adversaries in the light which their arguments have brought them to my view, viz. that tho' your imagination is brilliant the promptitude with which it is displayed allows too little time for deliberation or correction, and is the primary cause of those sallies which too often offend, and of that indiscreet treatment of characters, which but too frequently results from the enmity produced by it, and which might be avoided if they were under the guidance of more caution and prudence, and that it is indispensably necessary more reserve and caution should be observed by our representatives abroad than they conceive you are possessed of.—In this statement you have the Pros and Cons. By reciting them I give you a proof of my friendship, if I give you none of my policy or judgment. I do it on the presumption that a mind conscious of its own rectitude bids defiance to and may despise the shafts that are not barbed with accusations against the honor or integrity of it, and because I have the fullest confidence (supposing the allegations to be true in whole or part) that you would find no difficulty, being apprised of them, and considering yourself as the Representative of this country to effect a change and thereby silence in the most unequivocal and satisfactory manner your political opponents.—Of my good opinion and of my friendship and regard you may be perfectly assured.

George Mason to James Monroe, Gunston Hall, Va., 30 January 1792

I see by a late Paper, that Gr. Morris is appointed our Minister, to the Court of France; so that, I suppose, the Opposition in the Senate has been outvoted.

I don't think a more injudicious Appointment cou'd have been made. In the present Situation of France, to appoint a Man of his known monarchical Principles has rather the Appearance of Insult, than of Compliment, or Congratulation. And altho' Mr. Morris's Political Creed may not be known generally in France, it must be well known to Mr. de la Fayette, the most influential Character in the Nation. What a Man seems to value himself upon, and glory in, can't long remain a Secret, in a public Character. "Coercion by G-d" is his favourite Maxim in government. And in his place, as a Member of the federal Convention in Philadelphia, I heard him express the following sentiment. "We must have a Monarch sooner or later" (tho' I think his word was a *Despot*) "and the sooner we take him, while we are able to make a Bargain with him, the better."

William Short to Thomas Jefferson, Paris, 29 February 1792

I will not say any thing to you of the amazement which this nomination has occasioned here to the public and particularly to the friends of the revolution of all classes, as the manner in which I am affected by it renders it improper. My friends condole with me as far as it regards me personally. The preference given to Mr. Morris strikes them as well as

others differently perhaps from what it should, but it leaves with all an impression with respect to me too humiliating and too painful not to render my existence a burden to me. In their eyes it is a kind of dishonor which I am unable to support the idea of. They judge of the subject not according to the ideas entertained in America of Mr. Morris's talents and worth in every respect (which however should be their guide) but according to the opinions they have formed of what they have seen here. They have seen me for two years past charged with the confidence of my country. They have known my zeal and see that my conduct was such as to prevent my being disagreeable to any of the parties prevailing here. They have seen Mr. Morris during that time busied in his own concerns, contriving all the ways of making money by his industry, by land jobbing and by plans of finance for liquidating the American debt, which have fallen through and they have seen him constantly attending on the ministers, and so busy with them as to have acquired the reputation (though I do not pretend to say deservedly, having always defended him from the inculpation) of an *intrigant*. They have seen him the constant supporter of what they consider a diabolical system of government, and what they suppose also must give much displeasure in America. They have seen him so constantly the enemy of the principles of the present revolution as to be constantly cited and to be considered as the servant of the opposite party. They have seen him forming a plan, without mission, for the King's acceptance of the constitution, which they considered as artificially designed for effecting a counter revolution &c. &c. They have considered him therefore as one of the last men that the American government would name here at present, and they now see me displaced to give way to him. ... It is not for me to judge Mr. Morris's merits, much less of mine, but when I know that Mr. Morris was in commerce—of course that the interests of his house could often be in competition with those of the public—and particularly that his opinions are that it is more advantageous for the U.S. that their articles should be under a monopoly and furnished by individual contractors, as in the case of tobacco, which you must have often heard him express, I never could have supposed that any consideration whatever, could have counterbalanced such a situation, and such opinions which must ever follow such a situation.

Gouverneur Morris to George Washington, London, 6 April 1792

I now promise you that Circumspection of Conduct which has hitherto I acknowledge formed no Part of my Character. And I make the Promise that my Sense of Integrity may enforce what my Sense of Propriety dictates.

Thomas Jefferson: The Anas, 1792

The fact is, that Gouverneur Morris, a high flying monarchy-man, shutting his eyes & his faith to every fact against his wishes, & believing everything he desires to be true, has kept the President's [i.e., Washington's] mind constantly poisoned with his forebodings [respecting the French Revolution].

John Quincy Adams: Diary, 22 February 1796

Conversation with Mr. Morris. Do not at all concur in his opinions. Think him more decidedly English the more I see of him.

Alexander Hamilton to Rufus King, New York, 2 October 1798

Why does not Gouverneur Morris come home? His talents are wanted. Men like him do not superabound.

Robert Troup to Rufus King, New York, 19 April 1799

Mr. Gouverneur Morris is at Morrisania. . . . He is in excellent health and is very happy to see his friends, to whom he is all hospitality. His wines are of superior quality and given with great liberality. His attachments to his own country and government have increased by what he has seen in Europe. . . . He seems determined to remain a farmer, and not again to embark in public life.

Manasseh Cutler: Journal, 8 January 1802

Mr. Gouverneur Morris delivered in the Senate a truly Ciceronian phillipic on the repeal of the Judiciary [Act of 1801].

Manasseh Cutler to Joseph Torrey, Washington, D.C., 1 February 1802

You will find there has been much able speaking on both sides [of] the question [in Congress]. Mr. G. Morris has shown with distinguished luster. His eloquence has never been surpassed, it is said, in either House of Congress.

Gouverneur Morris to John Dickinson, 13 April 1803

In adopting a republican form of government, I not only took it as a man does his wife, for better, for worse, but, what few men do with their wives, I took it knowing all its bad qualities.

Mercy Otis Warren's *History of the American Revolution*, 1805

A character eccentric from youth to declining age; a man of pleasure, pride, and extravagance, fond of the trappings of monarchy, and implicated by a considerable portion of the citizens of America, as deficient in principle, was not a suitable person for a resident minister in France at so important a crisis. . . . These circumstances required a man of character, rather than a dexterous agent of political mischief, whose abilities and address were well adapted either for private or court intrigue.

Gouverneur Morris to Jared Sparks, c. December 1809

I have no notes or memorandums of what passed during the war. I led then the most laborious life, which can be imagined. This you will readily suppose to have been the case, when I was engaged with my departed friend, Robert Morris, in the office of finance. But what you will not so readily suppose is, that I was still more harassed while a member of Congress. Not to mention the attendance from eleven to four in the House, which was common to all, and the appointment to special committees, of which I had a full share, I was at the same time chairman, and of course did the business, of three standing committees, viz. on the commissary's, quartermaster's, and medical departments. You must not imagine, that the members of these committees took any charge or burden of the affairs. Necessity, preserving the democratical forms, assumed the monarchical substance of business. The chairman received and answered all letters and other applications, took every step which he deemed essential, prepared reports, gave orders, and the like, and merely took the members of a committee into a chamber, and for the form's sake made the needful communications, and received their approbation, which was given of course. I was moreover obliged to labor occasionally in my profession, as my wages were insufficient for my support. I would not trouble you with this abstract of my situation, if it did not appear necessary to show you why I kept no notes of my services, and why I am perhaps the most ignorant man alive of what concerns them.

Gouverneur Morris to Timothy Pickering, 1 November 1814

Propositions to counterbalance the issue of paper money, and the consequent violations of contracts, must have met with all the opposition I could make. But, my dear sir, what can a history of the Constitution avail towards interpreting its provisions? This must be done by comparing the plain import of the words with the general tenor and object of the instrument. That instrument was written by the fingers which write this letter. Having rejected redundant and equivocal terms, I believed it to be as clear as our language would permit; excepting, nevertheless, a part of what relates to the judiciary. On that subject, conflicting opinions had been maintained with so much professional astuteness that it became necessary to select phrases which, expressing my own notions, would not alarm others nor shock their self-love; and, to the best of my recollection, this was the only part which passed without cavil.

James Madison to Jared Sparks, Montpelier, 8 April 1831

[Sparks had asked Madison whether it was true that Gouverneur Morris had written the final form of the Constitution in the Convention of 1787.] The *finish* given to the style and arrangement of the Constitution fairly belongs to the pen of Mr. Morris; the task having, probably, been handed over to him by the chairman of the Committee [of Style] [i.e., William Samuel Johnson], himself a highly respectable member, and with the ready concurrence of the others. A better choice could not have been made, as the performance of the task proved. It is true, that the state of the materials, consisting of a reported draft in detail, and subsequent resolutions accurately penned, and falling easily into their proper places, was a good preparation for the symmetry and phraseology of the instrument, but there was sufficient room for the talents and taste stamped by the author on the face of it. The alterations made by the Committee are not recollected. They were not such, as to impair the merit of the composition. Those, verbal and others made in the Convention, may be gathered from the Journal, and will be found also to leave that merit altogether unimpaired.

James Madison to Jared Sparks, Montpelier, 8 April 1831

It is but due to Mr. Morris to remark that, to the brilliancy of his genius, he added what is too rare, a candid surrender of his opinion when the lights of discussion satisfied him that they had been too hastily formed, and a readiness to aid in making the best of measures in which he had been overruled.

James Kent to Elizabeth Hamilton, New York, 10 December 1832

The appearance of Mr. Morris was very commanding. His noble head, his majestic mien, the dignity of his deportment were all impressive.

