

GOUVERNEUR MORRIS (1752–1816)

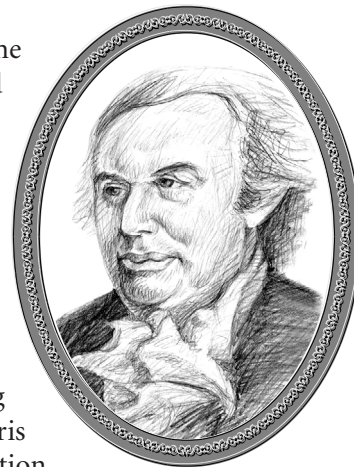
Slavery is the curse of heaven on the States where it prevails.

—Gouverneur Morris, 1787



Gouverneur Morris politely excused himself from the company of the beautiful young lady. The woman was a wealthy widow who had welcomed Morris to dinner in her Philadelphia home after he had completed another long day of work at the Constitutional Convention. Morris had important work to do on this September evening of 1787. To him had fallen the task of writing the final version of the Constitution. He and his fellow delegates had labored throughout the hot summer on the document, and now he had a mere few days to put their thoughts into final form.

Morris gripped his cane and bid farewell to his hostess. He walked down the streets of Philadelphia, using the cane to keep his wooden leg from slipping out beneath him on the cobblestone streets. As Morris walked, he pondered the phraseology of the Preamble to the Constitution. Should the opening words of the document list all the states individually as the creators of this new government? This was the suggestion of the convention's Committee of Style. No, Morris thought. He decided that he would begin the Constitution with the phrase, "We the People of the United States." Morris smiled to himself as he reached the boarding house where he was rooming. These words, he knew, would change everything.



Background

Gouverneur Morris was born on January 31, 1752, at his family's estate of Morrisiana in New York. He was given his mother's maiden name as his first name. (How Americans pronounced this French name is unclear, though it was likely "Gov-er-neer.") Morris entered King's College (now Columbia University) of New York at age twelve. During a visit home, Morris's right arm was badly burned when a pot of scalding water overturned on him. The arm was badly crippled for the rest of his life.

In 1771, at the age of nineteen, Morris was admitted to the New York bar. He took an interest in politics but hesitated to join the Patriot cause. An aristocrat, he worried that a revolution would lead to the breaking down of the social order. "The mob begin to think and to reason," Morris said of his fellow Americans in 1774. "Poor reptiles!" But he eventually decided to align himself with the Revolutionary movement, hoping that he could steer it away from radical paths.

Revolution and Loss

In 1775, Morris was elected to New York's Provincial Congress, an assembly organized by the Patriots. Morris became a leading advocate of American independence, and he helped write New York's new constitution of 1777. The next year, Morris was sent to the Continental Congress. He served on a military committee and visited Valley Forge during the famous winter of 1777–1778. The sight of the suffering soldiers shocked Morris: "The skeleton of an army presents itself to our eyes in a naked, starving condition, out of health, out of spirits." Morris soon became the soldiers' champion in Congress.

Morris signed the Articles of Confederation in 1778. The following year he moved to Philadelphia and resumed his law practice. Shortly thereafter, Morris lost his left leg after a carriage accident in the city. His left ankle was caught in the turning spokes of a moving carriage's wheel. Doctors amputated the leg just below the knee. The rumor was that Morris was fleeing a jealous husband at the time. Morris never denied that this was the case. In fact, he seemed to enjoy the story—true or not—since it added to his reputation as a great lover.

Morris had to use a wooden leg for the rest of his life. Neither this handicap nor his mangled right arm seemed to lessen his attractiveness to women, both married and unmarried. “Gouverneur Morris kept us in a continual smile,” recalled one young woman.

In 1781, Morris became the Assistant United States Superintendent of Finance. Lacking funds, he struggled to supply George Washington's army during the Yorktown campaign of 1781. Aggravated by Congress' failure to support the troops, Morris began to hint to some that the Continental Army itself might employ force if Congress did not act. In March 1783, the officers assembled at a barn in Newburgh, New York. Talk of treason was in the air, as many officers whispered about marching on Philadelphia. Fortunately for the republic, Washington himself quelled the conspiracy by appearing at the gathering.

Writing the Constitution

In 1787, Morris was chosen as part of Pennsylvania's delegation to the Constitutional Convention. He was eager to replace the Articles of Confederation with a system that concentrated more power in the national government. Under the Articles, he said, “the fate of America was suspended by a hair.”

At the convention, Morris became a leader of the nationalist bloc. He advocated a lifetime term for the president, a Senate appointed by the president, and a federal property qualification for voting. Though he lost on these and other issues, Morris spoke 173 times during the convention, more than any other delegate. He was also the only delegate to make a lengthy speech against the institution of slavery.

Morris was appointed to the Committee of Style as the debates ended. The other four members of the committee gave Morris the task of editing the final language of the Constitution. Morris worked on the document for four days to fashion a concise and clear finished product. He also glossed the Constitution's wording to enhance the power of the new federal government. Most significantly, Morris began the Preamble with the phrase, “We the people,” to signal that the new government was not the creature of the states but the work of the entire nation.

Paris, Retirement, and Death

Morris took no part in the ratification debates. He turned down an offer from Alexander Hamilton to co-author a defense of the Constitution, a series of essays that became *The Federalist Papers*. After the adoption of the Constitution, Morris succeeded Thomas Jefferson as ambassador to France. Morris showed personal courage by remaining at his post during the bloody Reign of Terror. He was the only foreign diplomat to do so.

Morris returned to the United States in 1799. In 1809, he married a member of the prominent Randolph family of Virginia. In 1812, distressed by the United States' war against Great Britain, Morris called for the secession of New York and New England

from the Union. He wrote an *Address to the People of the State of New York* in which he argued for the legality of secession under the Constitution.

Morris lived long enough to see his plans for secession discredited. Four years after the failed secessionist proposal, Morris died at Morrisiana at the age of sixty-four.



Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What two physical disabilities afflicted Morris?
2. What role did Morris play in the Newburgh Conspiracy of 1783?
3. What role did Morris play at the Constitutional Convention?

Critical Thinking Questions

4. What were Morris's shortcomings as a human being? What were his strengths?
5. Did Morris's justification of secession at the end of his life contradict his support of a strong central government at the Constitutional Convention?