

Declaration of Independence - Signers Series

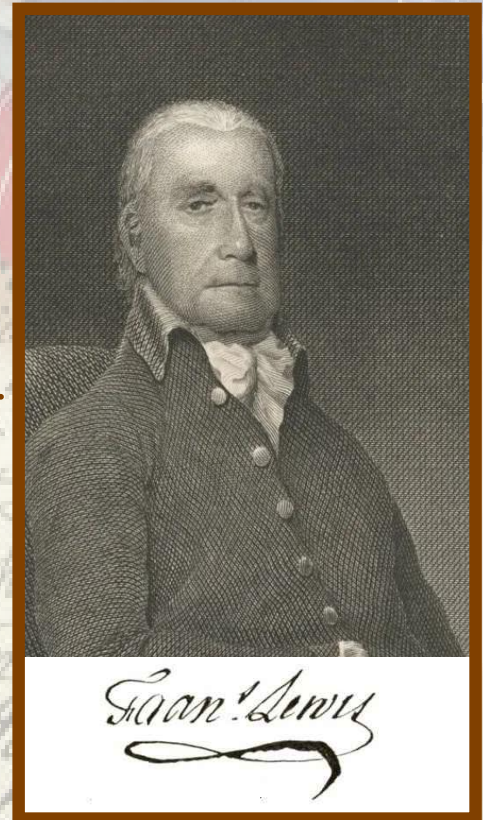
Francis Lewis - New York

Francis Lewis was born on March 31, 1713 in Llandaff, Wales, the only child of an Episcopalian minister, and a clergyman's daughter. He became an orphan at age 5, and was raised by a maiden aunt who saw to his education in Scotland where he learned the Gaelic language. He then had the good fortune to be sent to the prestigious Westminster School in London.

Upon graduation, he worked as an apprentice in a mercantile business, until he was 21 when he inherited properties left by his father. He sold the land, converted it to merchandise, and sailed for New York in 1734 or 1735. He left a portion of the goods with his business partner, and headed to Philadelphia with the rest. On returning to New York, he engaged in foreign trade, making several trans-Atlantic trips both to northern Europe and to Africa, and surviving two shipwrecks off the Irish coast.

At the time of the French and Indian War, he was providing uniforms as a clothing contractor to the British forces at Fort Oswego, when, in August 1756, the French under General Montcalm and his Indian allies overran the fort, killing the commander. Lewis was one of thirty captives who was given to the Indians. Fortunately, he found their language similar to his native Welsh or Gaelic, and was readily able to converse with them. A chief took kindly to him, and returned him to the French in Montreal with the request that he be returned to his family. But the French had other ideas, and instead sent him to France as a prisoner, where he would remain until the British victory in 1763.

The British government granted him 5,000 acres of land in New York as compensation for the loss of seven years of his life. He re-established himself in business, and made quite a large fortune, later ranked as the fifth most wealthy of the signers.



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Becoming active in public life, the issue of taxation without representation turned his loyalties away from the Crown, soon becoming one of New York's leading radicals. He attended the Stamp Act Congress in 1765 and was a founding member of the Sons of Liberty. He was later a member of the Committee of 50 that exercised control of New York City from late 1774, and was a member of the provincial convention that set up the colony's new government.

Lewis was elected to both the First & Second Continental Congresses, signed the Olive Branch Petition pledging American loyalty and seeking to resolve the colonies' disputes with England, and was very effective in committee work. Although unable to cast a positive vote for the Declaration, since the New York Congress did not approve independence until July 12th, he signed the document on August 2nd.

Shortly thereafter, Lewis' estate in Whitestone was taken by the British, his library and papers destroyed, the house thoroughly pillaged, and his wife, Elizabeth captured. She was thrown into prison without a bed or change of clothing and with but meager food. General Washington did arrange a prisoner exchange, but her weeks in captivity ruined her health.

She passed in 1779 not long after Lewis was one of 16 signers who also signed the Articles of Confederation. Later that year, he was elected Chairman of the Continental Board of Admiralty that oversaw naval operations and management of the Continental Navy, a position he held into 1780. Thereafter, he retired from public life in 1781 and rebuilt his mercantile business with his son. For the next 21 years, he enjoyed the society of his children and grandchildren until he passed on December 31, 1802

