

Declaration of Independence - Signers Series

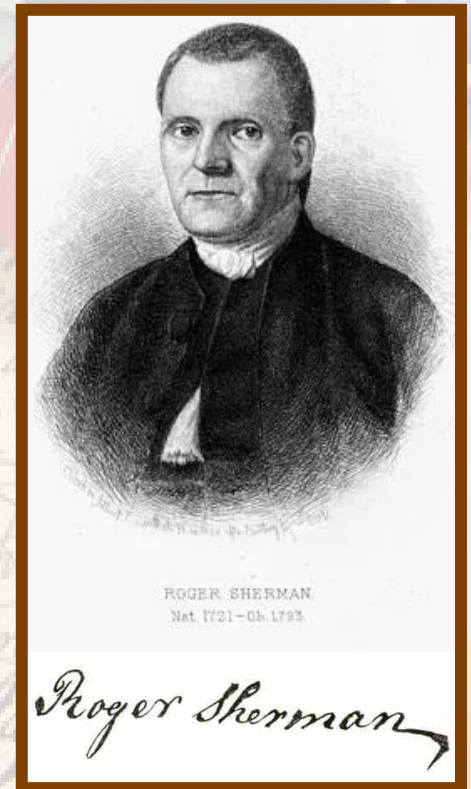
Roger Sherman - Connecticut

Roger Sherman, remembered in his later years as the “Old Puritan,” was born on April 19, 1721, in Newtown, Massachusetts, to William and Mehatabel Sherman. He grew up doing the work of a farmer and learning his father’s trade as a cordwainer, or shoemaker. His schooling was limited to the nearby one-room schoolhouse, but he had two great advantages: access to his father’s library and the guidance of a Harvard-educated minister who taught him mathematics and other subjects. From these modest beginnings, Sherman built himself into one of the most influential statesmen of his generation.

When Roger was nineteen, his father died, leaving him responsible for his mother and sisters. Two years later, he moved the family to New Milford, Connecticut, where his older brother William lived. Together, the brothers opened the town’s first store. Always eager to learn, Roger taught himself surveying and soon became surveyor for New Haven County, a position he held even after Litchfield County was created, serving until 1758. During the 1750s, he also published almanacs filled with astronomical calculations, religious festivals, weather predictions, commentary on colonial currencies, and practical maxims.

Sherman’s restless energy didn’t stop there. In 1754, though largely self-taught, he passed the bar exam and launched a public career that lasted nearly forty years. He began locally—as town clerk, justice of the peace, member of the Connecticut General Assembly, and county judge. In 1761, he moved to New Haven, opened a store near Yale College, and was soon appointed Yale’s treasurer. Four years later, Yale honored him with a Master of Arts degree, recognizing his unusual blend of intellect and practical skill.

Sherman’s responsibilities grew quickly. He was elected to the Connecticut State Senate in 1766 and reelected every year until 1785. He also served for years as a superior court judge, helped guide the Connecticut Council of Safety during the Revolution, and, beginning in 1784, became mayor of New Haven, a post he held until his death.



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On the national stage, Sherman's influence was even greater. In the Second Continental Congress, he worked alongside Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, and Livingston to draft the Declaration of Independence. He also served on the committee that produced the Articles of Confederation and on the Board of War and Ordnance - making him the only delegate to serve on all three. Colleagues marveled at his work ethic: his days stretched from seven in the morning until ten at night, and he was regarded as one of the most industrious men in Congress.

But Sherman's defining moment came at the Constitutional Convention of 1787. James Madison's Virginia Plan, favoring proportional representation, clashed with the New Jersey Plan, which demanded equal votes for every state. Large states wanted the Virginia Plan; small states insisted on the New Jersey Plan. The convention teetered on collapse until Sherman stepped forward with the idea that became known as the Connecticut Compromise. His plan created a House of Representatives, with seats apportioned by population, and a Senate, with equal votes for each state. That compromise saved the convention and gave the United States the framework of government it still uses today. In this and many other debates, Sherman's steady hand prevailed - earning him recognition as co-father of the Constitution alongside Madison.

Sherman didn't stop there. Under the pen name "A Countryman," he wrote five essays in the New Haven Gazette, helping to persuade Connecticut to ratify the Constitution, making it the fifth state to do so. He went on to serve in the first U.S. Congress from 1789 to 1791 before moving to the Senate. While serving there, he died on July 23, 1793.

It was quite a journey for a man with little formal education, never famed for his oratory, but admired for his plainspoken wisdom and his gift for building coalitions. As John Adams put it, Roger Sherman was "one of the most sensible men in the world."

