

Declaration of Independence - Signers Series

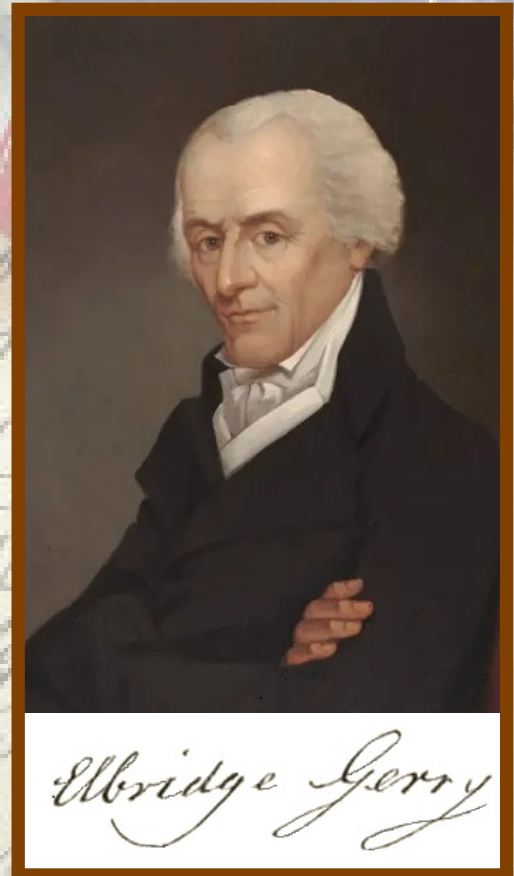
Elbridge Gerry - Massachusetts

Elbridge Gerry was born in Marblehead, Massachusetts on July 17, 1744, son of a successful merchant Thomas Gerry, graduating from Harvard in 1762. While earning his Master's in 1765, his dissertation argued that the colonies should resist the recently passed Stamp Act. During this time, he was working in his father's counting house. The Gerrys owned a number of ships and shipped dried codfish to the Barbados and to Spanish Ports. The mercantile business led to his becoming significantly wealthy, particularly, after the British closed the nearby port of Boston in 1774.

His first venture in politics was in 1770, when he served on a local committee to ban the sale and consumption of tea. It was then on to the General Court in Massachusetts, and then the Provincial Congress where he was appointed to the Executive Committee of Safety. After a Safety meeting near Lexington on April 18, 1775, Gerry and two others escaped in their nightshirts and hid in stubble of a nearby cornfield as the redcoats searched the tavern where they had been staying.

During 1775, Gerry helped to raise troops and supplies for the Provincial Army. In the Provincial Congress, he submitted a proposal to encourage the outfitting of armed ships (privateers) and to provide for the adjudication of prizes. John Adams claimed this law was one of the most important measures of the Revolution. The results — several British ships being captured with needed cargoes and supplies.

In 1776, he was elected to the Second Continental Congress, and his efforts to persuade delegates from the middle colonies, New York to Maryland, to support independence earned this high praise from John Adams: "If every man here was a Gerry, the Liberties of America would be safe against the Gates of Earth and Hell." Of course, he voted for independence but was away for the general signing on August 2nd. *WHS - 2025*



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The following year, he voted for and signed the Articles of Confederation, one of only sixteen members of Congress to sign both that and the Declaration. He became known as the soldiers' friend as he advocated for better pay and equipment.

Later, during the Constitutional Convention in 1787, although for a strong central government, he refused to sign the Constitution because it lacked a bill of rights, and he deemed it a threat to republicanism. Having changed his mind by 1789, with the Bill of Rights in the works, he was elected to the First Congress for the first of two terms.

Gerry failed to become the governor of Massachusetts in his first four attempts, but did succeed 1810-1812. Near the end of his second term, the Democratic-Republicans passed a redistricting measure to ensure their dominance of the state senate. The Federalists ridiculed Gerry, and the Boston Globe printed a cartoon calling a salamander-shaped district a "gerrymander." Hence, the term gerrymander, that still gets used today, was coined some 113 years ago.

The following year, he became Vice President under James Madison. He would serve less than two years before suddenly dying on November 23, 1813 at age 70 in his carriage while on his way to preside over the Senate. Buried in the Congressional Cemetery, he is the only Vice President buried in Washington, D.C. His wife, who passed in 1849, was the last surviving widow of a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

