

Declaration of Independence - Signers Series

Stephen Hopkins - Rhode Island

Stephen Hopkins, the second oldest signer of the Declaration of Independence, was born in Providence (now Scituate), Rhode Island, on March 7, 1707, the grandson of one of the colony's first Baptist ministers. Though his formal education was limited, his sharp intellect made him well educated. He began as a farmer and surveyor but soon entered politics after Scituate separated from Providence in 1731. Within a decade, he served as moderator of the first town meeting, town clerk, president of the town council, justice of the peace, justice and clerk of the Providence County Court of Common Pleas, legislator, and speaker of the house. Despite lacking legal training, he was chosen as Chief Justice of the Colony.

Around 1740, Hopkins and his brother Esek founded a mercantile firm that prospered for three decades. He might have grown wealthy, but he devoted much of his resources to civic causes and politics. Elected governor ten times, he represented Rhode Island at the Albany Congress of 1754, where seven colonies sought to counter French expansion and ally with the Iroquois Confederacy. Hopkins supported Benjamin Franklin's plan for colonial union, approved there, but later rejected by the colonies.

Hopkins promoted education and public life throughout Rhode Island. He established a subscription library in Providence, served as first chancellor of Rhode Island College (now Brown University), helped found the Providence Gazette and Country Journal, and joined the Philosophical Society of Newport. In 1774, he authored a law banning the importation of slaves—one of America's earliest antislavery acts—and freed his own slaves.

In the Continental Congress, he served on committees drafting the Articles of Confederation and creating the Continental Navy, appointing his brother Esek as its commander in chief. Despite suffering from "shaking palsy," he signed the Declaration of Independence in July 1776 with a wavering hand. Ill health soon forced his retirement, and he withdrew from public service in 1780.

Hopkins died on July 19, 1785. Despite having little formal schooling, his lasting achievements in politics, education, and reform, make Hopkins one of Rhode Island's most accomplished leaders.

