

Eastern Illinois University

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2011

Art of Representation: Portraits of the Founding Fathers

Ellen Corrigan



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The Art of Representation

Portraits of the Founding Fathers

Who were the Founding Fathers of the United States? The roster typically includes the "Signers" of the Declaration of Independence and the "Framers" of the Constitution (including, notably, the first four U.S. presidents), but the designation may also extend to other significant figures who participated in winning American independence or establishing the nation. Benjamin Franklin was all of the above. The major contributions of the five Franklin contemporaries pictured in these portraits are summarized below.



Samuel Adams (1722-1803)

Portrait by John Singleton Copley, dated circa 1772

One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, Samuel Adams is perhaps best known today as the namesake of a popular American beer brand. In his time, however, he was famed as a rabblerous patriot and, as his obituary in Boston's *The Independent Chronicle* called him, "the Father of the American Revolution." Among the first to call for colonial independence from Britain, Adams was a member of the Sons of Liberty and one of the instigators of the Boston Tea Party in 1773.

Adams's former protégé John Hancock commissioned this painting from Copley. The portrait is unusual in its dramatization of a distinct historical moment and the subject's impassioned stance: At the apex of his political career in the wake of the Boston Massacre of 1770, Adams challenges Governor Thomas Hutchinson by demanding the expulsion of British troops from the town. Copley depicted Adams, pointing to the Massachusetts Charter and gripping a petition prepared by his fellow citizens, much as his then less well-known second cousin John Adams described him: "zealous, ardent, and keen in the cause."



John Jay (1745-1829)

Portrait by Gilbert Stuart, dated 1784-1794

Though Jay was neither a Signer nor a Framers, the erstwhile New York lawyer served as a President of the Second Continental Congress (the convention of delegates that functioned as the *de facto* governing body of the thirteen colonies until an independent Constitutional government was established), Secretary of Foreign Affairs (later Secretary of State), and the first Chief Justice of the United States. As an ambassador, he was a principal negotiator in the 1783 Treaty of Paris formally ending the Revolutionary War and the 1794 "Jay Treaty" improving relations and facilitating a period of peaceful trade between the U.S. and Britain. He also authored five of the 85 *The Federalist* essays, which continue to be consulted as a source for Constitutional interpretation. Contemporaries and historians characterize Jay as a prudent man with a keen sense of justice and uprightness of purpose.

In his first important American commission, Stuart situated Jay in a setting alluding to the "Grand Manner" used in British portraiture to convey the nobility of the subject. The voluminous red-and-black judicial robes, however, emphasize Jay's role as Chief Justice. Working directly upon the canvas, Stuart first painted Jay's head from life, using Jay's nephew to complete the body in later sittings. The success of this portrait led to additional commissions, including his more famous Washington portraits.



Alexander Hamilton (1755 or 1757-1804)

Portrait by John Trumbull, dated 1806

"Mine is an odd destiny." Although Hamilton wrote these words in reference to his frustration following the Federalists' defeat by the Jeffersonians, they also serve as a succinct description of his life's course. Born illegitimate and raised in poverty in the Caribbean, the self-admittedly ambitious Hamilton rose to become one of the most influential figures in America before his death in an infamous duel with Aaron Burr.

Hamilton pseudonymously wrote the majority of *The Federalist* papers, a series of essays arguing for ratification of the Constitution. He later formed the Federalist Party to support his fiscal policies and vision of a strong national government. As first Secretary of the Treasury under George Washington's administration, Hamilton restored public credit with his debt assumption plan, established a national bank, and paved the way for the United States to become a modern, industrialized nation. His influence was so great that Washington was said to be the figurehead to Hamilton's helmman.

Also known for his iconic depiction of the Declaration of Independence, the artist Trumbull was a Federalist who had acted as secretary to John Jay during the negotiation of the 1794 treaty. Trumbull had previously painted Hamilton from life, but used Giuseppe Ceracchi's neoclassical marble bust as a model for posthumous portraits. Trumbull's portrait was, in turn, used as the source of Hamilton's image on the \$10 bill.



Robert Morris (1734-1806)

Portrait by Robert Edge Pine, dated circa 1785

A Pennsylvania merchant, Morris's contribution of private funding and supplies to the revolutionary war effort, as well as his economic reforms during his stint as Superintendent of Finance (an executive office analogous to the subsequent Secretary of the Treasury position), earned him the sobriquet "Financier of the American Revolution." In addition, Hamilton derived his national economic plan from the system proposed by Morris in "On Public Credit." Morris's biography also has a seamer side: He was involved in slave trading and privateering, and later in life unwise land speculations led him into bankruptcy and debtors' prison. Despite his relative obscurity, Morris holds a significant place in U.S. history as one of two men to sign all three key founding documents—the Declaration of Independence, Articles of Confederation, and Constitution.



Benjamin Rush (1745-1813)

Portrait by Charles Willson Peale, dated 1783

Rush was an eminent physician and humanitarian who, as a Pennsylvanian delegate to the Continental Congress, was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Among his legacies are suggesting the title for Thomas Paine's pro-independence pamphlet *Common Sense* and facilitating the reconciliation between his friends John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

Rush found that he did not have the temperament for politics, making foes of no less than George Washington and Alexander Hamilton. In a letter to John Adams, Rush wrote that his wife compared him to Martin Luther, "ardent in all my pursuits, fearless of the consequences of attacking old prejudices, and often hasty in my manner of speaking of my enemies," but identified himself with the biblical Jeremiah, "a man of strife and a man of contention." More importantly, he found political life incompatible with his pursuit of science, and returned his attention to medical practice. Although his treatments in some areas of medicine were primitive, he is renowned for pioneering the field of American psychiatry.

In this portrait by Peale, Rush is portrayed as a philosopher-scientist, dressed in a scholar's gown and seated in a pose of retirement in his library with labeled volumes from a variety of disciplines, including the philosophical works of Benjamin Franklin, whom he greatly admired.