

Redeeming the Fathers of America

Nathaniel Gorham (1738-1796)

In the sometimes-chaotic world of public affairs we live in, the banner of federalism is exalted over the citizenry. Our founding fathers were keenly aware of the potential forces of a tyrannical government, one no longer serving the best interests of the people, but of those yielding its power. Nathaniel Gorham was among those who supported a more cautious approach to government, that of anti-federalism. As a member of the Massachusetts Convention, he signed the U.S. Constitution.



Nathaniel Gorham was born in May 27, 1738 at Charlestown, Massachusetts into an old Bay Colony family of modest means. His father was Captain Nathaniel and mother, Mary Soley Gorham. Nathaniel was a descendant of John Howland, who sailed to America on the Mayflower in search of religious freedom, and was a founder of Plymouth Colony.¹ Gorham's education was minimal and as the eldest son of 15 years he began an apprenticeship on a packet boat owned by a New London, Connecticut merchant and operated by his father. He resigned this position in 1759 and returned to his hometown where he established his own business.

In 1763 Nathaniel married Rebecca Call, daughter of Caleb and Rebecca Stimson Call, who bore nine children into the Gorham home.

Not much is known of his business affairs in those early days. However, as a merchant and speculator, one involved in public security and interests, along with real estate he later became one of Massachusetts wealthiest citizens.

Nathaniel Gorham began his political career as a public scribe and notary,² which the colonies established as an impartial witness to legal transactions to reduce fraud. This public position soon won him election to the colonial legislature (1771-1775). During this time period he was unwaveringly devoted to the Whigs.

Mr. Gorham was among the 'radicals' that opposed the British Empire during the Stamp Act Crisis. He was appointed to the Massachusetts Assembly, the Provincial Congress, and served on the State War Board during the Revolution. He aided in the composition of the new state constitution of 1780, and served as a member of the Massachusetts House at various times in the 1780's. As one of his state's leading politicians, he was appointed to represent Massachusetts in the Continental Congress in 1782, 1783, and 1785-87.³

How would the colonies protect themselves from the tyranny of England? Furthermore, if they separated themselves from Her rule and authority how would this new union function? Would the colonist's merely trade one monarchy for another? These and more questions were on the minds of many a patriot who did not want to repeat the oppressive powers of tyranny practiced by Great Britain. As an Anti-Federalist, Gorham recognized the need to withdraw from the sovereignty of England. The fear of excessive power not only included the totality of government, but the potential within each individual branch of the new government. As a result, the voices of reason demanded a balance be struck with the forthcoming American Constitution, and the Bill of Rights was drafted.

As a merchant, Gorham needed raw iron materials to manufacture products for his business. However, according to the Iron Act of 1750, iron manufacture was prohibited in the colonies and all pig and bar iron was to be shipped to Great Britain for finishing. Many colonial merchants and manufacturers skirted these laws and as the future President of the U.S. Congress, Gorham's business was no exception to circumventing these British Laws. While most of the arms used during the American Revolution were of European manufacture, some of the numerous New England iron furnaces did supply shot, shells, and the occasional cannon.

When war broke out Nathaniel Gorham was elected a member of the Massachusetts board of war from 1778 until its dissolution in 1781. On September 6, 1778, Gorham served under Captain George Lewis' company. The board's responsibilities included oversight of the State's military strategy, logistics and recruitment. Gorham paid the price for the effective service in that office, as British troops ravaged much of his property during the occupation of Charlestown.⁴

In 1779 Gorham was chosen a delegate to the *Massachusetts* Constitutional Convention and that fall he was placed on a committee chaired by John Adams, and assigned the task of drafting the new Constitution. The *Memorial History of Boston Vol. III*, describes the Hon. Nathaniel Gorham as "*the most distinguished man who ever made Charlestown his home.*"

Sadly, the alarms that men like Gorham were sounding at our country's inception have come to roost in Washington today. We have seen judicial tyranny followed by a lawless Administrative Branch, and a power hungry, do-nothing Senate. This could only happen in a nation whose founding principles have been subsequently minimized over generations, and all but ignored by "we the people." The present condition of such willful ignorance has resulted in the minority taking control of our governing bodies at the state and federal levels. It is up to those who understand who our founding fathers were, what principles they bound themselves to, and their deep, abiding, and exemplary faith in God to stand, sound the alarm, and restore America to her former greatness.

Many recognized the potential profit and benefit of western expansion. Nathaniel Gorham had been very successful in real estate over the decades. When an opportunity arose to purchase 6,000,000 acres in what is now western New York, he and business partner Oliver Phelps did not hesitate. However, when the monetary values changed a year later, they missed a payment and were forced to sell a part of the lands in 1791 to satisfy the debt. In 1792, they missed another payment and were forced to sell the remaining land, this time at considerable profit.⁵

In 1798, frustrations were rising due to the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, in fear of being arrested under the above acts,

secretly drafted the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions. Congress was reviewing the Virginia plan, when days later, William Patterson of New Jersey submitted an alternative resolution and the two were compared. This back-and-forth debating went on for weeks, with one colony supporting Madison's version and another Jefferson's and so on. In the meantime, the Virginia Resolution was amended and resubmitted. Ultimately the decision was left in the hands of the states and would continue up to the passage of the Constitution. This in part is why George Mason, Elbridge Gerry, refused to sign the Constitution on September 17, 1787. The debate over potential overreach of power remained an issue of some concern well into the 1830's.

As to Nathaniel Gorham's faith, he was a Congregationalist. The sincerity of his faith was revealed in the following quote: *"Any person chosen governor, or lieutenant-governor, counsellor, senator, or representative, and accepting the trust, shall before he proceed to execute the duties of his place or office, take, make and subscribe the following declaration, viz. "I, _____, do declare, that I believe the Christian religion, and have a firm persuasion of its truth."*

The Hon. Nathaniel Gorham passed away on June 11, 1796 and is buried at the Phipps Street Cemetery at Charlestown, Massachusetts.

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