

Redeeming the Fathers of America Series

Gunning Bedford Jr. 1747-1812

The subject of this writing was a servant of the people, statesman, signer of the United States Constitution, and a jurist is one of Delaware's most distinguished and colorful patriots.

Gunning Bedford Jr. was born April 13, 1747 at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the fifth of eleven children. If their number made it challenging to remember their names, this was compounded by the fact of nine others Bedford's in the family line who were given the same name. This included his grandfather, father, son, three first cousins, two second cousins, and a third cousin, who became governor of Delaware, all bearing the same first name, Gunning. To distinguish this man from the rest, he was the only to be given the designation of "Junior."



Gunning Bedford Jr. came from a prominent family that could trace its roots to 1621 Jamestown. His grandfather may have settled in Cecil County, Maryland. The father of Gunning Jr. was a captain in the French and Indian Wars, and an architect in Philadelphia where he served as an alderman until his death in 1802. Gunning Junior left the family home at the tender age of twenty to study law at Nassau Hall at the College of New Jersey, which later became Princeton University. Among his classmates were Hugh Henry Breckenridge, who became a justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, and another founding father - James Madison.¹

While a student at the College of New Jersey, Gunning Jr. married Jane "Jenny" Ballareau Parker, a classically educated native of France. Her natural grace and beauty allowed her to easily catch the eye of Bedford. Together they had five children. Jenny Parker Bedford

was the daughter of James Parker, a printer who learned his trade from his business partner, Benjamin Franklin. Among her accomplishments, Jenny was known to assist her father in editing his newspaper, "The New York Weekly Post Boy."²

In 1771, Gunning Bedford Jr. graduated with honors from the College of New Jersey, where his wife Jenny attended the commencement with their baby, to listen to her husband deliver the valedictorian speech. Reportedly, the good Dr. John Witherspoon took care of the baby while Jenny attended the commencement exercises. Afterward, Gunning Jr. returned to Philadelphia along with classmate, James Madison. Bedford studied law under noted attorney, Joseph Reed. After reading law with Attorney Reed, Mr. Bedford won admittance to the bar and set up a practice.

In 1775 General George Washington appointed Bedford to the position of Muster Master General but little other information is available. The following reading is from the Papers on the Life of Gunning Bedford, Junior; "What part Bedford took in the Revolutionary War is uncertain. Miss Montgomery describes Gunning as "an officer of the Revolution." His daughter, Henrietta in her will, says: "During the Revolutionary War General Washington, desiring my father to go from Trenton to New York on some important secret embassy at night, and fearing he was not sufficiently armed with pistols in his holsters, presented him with a pair of pocket pistols with a view to his protection and greater security."³ So, there is sufficient evidence that Gunning Jr. served in the Revolutionary Army.

Gunning Jr. moved to Dover where he was admitted to the bar in Sussex County on August 4, 1779. He only resided there for a year before relocating to Wilmington. Little time past before Mr. Bedford was recognized for his scholarship and oratorical abilities. In 1783 he was elected to the Continental Congress as a representative from Delaware where he served for three years. On April 26, 1784, he was appointed Attorney General of the State of Delaware, a position which he continued to serve in the following five years.

On June 17, 1787, Gunning Bedford Jr. was elected to a commission shared by George Read, Jacob Broom, John Dickinson, and Richard Bassett to meet with other State's commissioners to establish an interstate system of commercial regulations. Their first meeting was held in Annapolis, Maryland on Tuesday, September 4, 1787. These men were held in such high regard among their peers, acknowledged for their distinction by re-electing them as delegates one year later to frame our Constitution of the United States.

Gunning Bedford Jr. was the quintessential champion of the rights of the small states. His experience in local politics, along with his service in the Continental Congress, taught him much about the political and economic vulnerabilities of states like Delaware. Unlike some other small-state representatives who looked to the creation of a strong central government to protect their interests against more powerful neighbors, Bedford sought to limit the powers of the new government. Bedford often debated with Alexander Hamilton, the delegate from New York over this issue. But when the conflict over representation threatened to wreck the Constitutional Convention, he laid regional interests aside and, for the good of the country, sought to compromise.

Almost four months of working under behind closed doors in some of the most undesirable conditions resulted in the Constitution of the United States. Once Mr. Bedford's duties at the convention were finished, he traveled back to Delaware where he fought for ratification of the Constitution by the State of Delaware. In 1788, Gunning Jr. was elected a member of the State Council from New Castle County. In 1789, Washington chose Gunning Bedford Jr. as the first judge of the United States District Court for the District of Delaware.

In 1793, Judge Bedford bought an estate of some two hundred and fifty acres in Brandywine Hundred, according to the deed. A parcel of this same property later became the Lombardy Cemetery.

In closing I would like to draw your attention to the issue of equal representation, no matter if a state be large or small. James Madison's Journal of the Federal Confederation addresses the following five (5) points, which are presented by either Madison or William Patterson. In them I find a striking parallel to the current political

environment of our nation, one where the Constitution as the Rule of Law is in question.

Here are those points;

- 1. The minority could negative the will of the majority of the people.*
- 2. They could extort measures, by making them a condition of their assent to other necessary measures.*
- 3. They could obtrude measures on the majority, by virtue of the peculiar powers which would be vested in the Senate.*
- 4. The evil, instead of being cured by time, would increase with every new State that should be admitted, as they must all be admitted on the principle of equality.*
- 5. The perpetuity it would give to the preponderance of the Northern against the Southern scale, was a serious consideration.*

Gunning Bedford, Junior, He continued to hold office as district judge of the United States Court until his death on March 30, 1812. He was interned at the First Presbyterian Churchyard in Wilmington, with his remains later being moved to the Masonic Home in Christiana, DE. He was one of the ablest patriots that the little State of Delaware produced during the Revolutionary period.⁴

This has been Redeeming the Fathers of America

References:

- 1) Papers of the New Haven Colony Historical Society
- 2) The History of Printing in America with Biography of Printers and Account of Newspapers, Vol I and Vol II, 1810
- 3) Papers of Delaware Historical Society
- 4) Manuscript Letter in Congressional Library

Additional Resources:

- 5) Library of Congress Journals of the Continental Congress Vol XXIV, 1774-1789 and Vol XXVII, 1784
- 6) Journals of Congress Containing the Proceedings Vol III, from Jan 1777 to Jan 1778