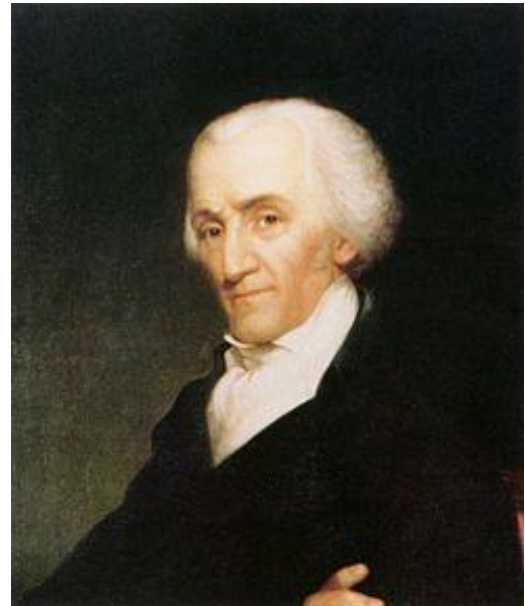


Redeeming the Founders of America

Elbridge Gerry, Massachusetts (1702-1814)

The subject's father, Thomas Gerry was born at Newton-Abbot, Devonshire, England on March 14, 1702. Thomas emigrated to the colonies in 1730, as the captain of a merchant ship. The record of his history is scant, making it difficult to say why he left England. We do know that after arriving in Marblehead, Massachusetts, he resigned his commission at sea and became a merchant.



In December 1734, Thomas wed Elizabeth Greenleaf, the only daughter of successful Boston merchant, Enoch Greenleaf. Their union improved Thomas' success in business and being well respected among the people of Marblehead, he was elected as a board member and a justice of the peace. He continued to serve the community until he passed away in 1774. He was survived by his wife and five children, the youngest is the subject of this writing.¹

Elbridge Thomas Gerry was born at Marblehead, Massachusetts on July 17, 1744, when the town was known for its flourishing fishing and merchant trade. At the time, Marblehead was approaching the merchant success and population of the colony's capital. Generally, these fisherman-merchants were considered a discerning lot with sound judgment. Elbridge's parents acquired a suitable wealth from the business, enough to provide him with basic academic training. Little else is known of his early life.

In 1759 Elbridge enrolled at Harvard and graduated 1762 along with Jeremy Belknap, Chief Justice Francis Dana, and Andrew Eliot. Gerry's first inclination was to pursue medicine, but this changed when he returned to help his father and brother operated the family's

merchant business. Something was stirring in young Elbridge's life was beginning to shape his future, and it started when he was assigned his master's speech. Gerry rose to the occasion taking on the issue of colonial resistance to oppressive British taxation, specifically the Sugar Act and Stamp Act. These two acts had a broad and severe impact across the colonies, restricting many from providing for their families.³

The years of hard work in his father's business improved Gerry's financial station, but his heart was elsewhere. Elbridge began to seek more challenging interests. As with many of the founders, Gerry's education and business interactions caught the eye of those in government. He was elected to represent the Massachusetts Provincial Court in 1772. It was here that Gerry was exposed to the eloquent speech and mastery of John Adams. They quickly engaged in a friendship, one that would last a lifetime.

At the time, the royal governor was trying to control the judiciary that was rising in power and influence across the colonies by modifying its compensation. Even a rumor of such intent was enough to inflame the resistance. Meetings of concerned citizens occurred and provided reason and purpose to the cause of freedom, as well as opportunity for future leaders of the movement to gain support. In my personal studies I find it interesting how the actions of mother England and her loyalist governors created the opposite effect they intended, resulting in stirring the fires of the revolution.

As a judge of the superior court, Gerry believed that the judiciary must not be independent of the people they were sworn to serve, this was foundational to a representative form of government. He saw the throne's actions as an attempt to rob his constituents of their constitutional liberties in order to maintain control over their lives. John Adams attended a meeting at Boston the night of October 28, 1772, which echoed the concerns of Elbridge. Many at that meeting wished to petition the governor with specific violations and grievances. Adams encouraged Gerry to have a similar meeting in his district of Salem.⁴

Mr. Gerry represented the Marblehead General Court from 1773-1814, and the boldness to which he addressed issues of concern garnered him the attention of many citizens

across the colony. In 1774, Elbridge Gerry was among the youngest representatives and his presence on important committees gave him opportunity to address vital concerns. Below is a list of some of those committees:⁵

- 1) From April 1775, Committee of Supplies, as the chairman he was responsible for collecting ammunition and supplies for the militia, along with Colonel Lee, Mr. Gill, Mr. Cheever, and Colonel Lincoln. He also communicated with generals in the field and Congresses in Connecticut and Massachusetts.
- 2) Committee to take up Depositions prior to Troop Transactions.
- 3) Committee of Correspondence, was assigned to explain itself to the Committee of Safety.
- 4) The Treasury; as chairman of the Treasury Committee Gerry investigated General Benedict Arnold and made no quick friend of him.
- 5) A committee to arrange a treaty with Great Britain.

As an ardent supporter of military provisions, Elbridge Gerry offered a proposal at the 1775 Congress to establish an armed naval fleet. He further suggested that two ships outfitted with cannon be used to patrol the coastal waters. Samuel Adams regarded this as one of the most hazardous and necessary measures in the history of the new world.⁵

In 1778 Elbridge Gerry was appointed to Congress along with Lewis Morris and Joseph Jones and requested that they consult with George Washington about the impending conflict. In June 1782 Gerry was sworn in as a delegate to the Massachusetts General Court and witness by Governor John Hancock.⁷

Elbridge Gerry has been described by some as being strong, bold, self-willed, cantankerous, self-serving, and a proponent of compromise-except when it suited him. Such appeared to be the case on September 17, 1787 when he was faced with signing the Constitution, he refused to sign it. Governor Randolph and Colonel George Mason, joined Elbridge Gerry in his protest, and refused to sign the Constitution. Their refusal stemmed from the document omitting the following:⁶

- 1) The government did not have the power to regulate commerce

2) The government did not have oversight of all maritime vessels

3) It did not establish a fair and balanced approach to taxation.

If the Constitution would have addressed these three issues, they would have signed it.

Despite their efforts the Constitution did pass, and these three men went on to support it. Congress knew the document was flawed and that it would require amendments, but time did not allow a delay. In my estimation this revealed the founder's wisdom and foresight. As to the three, what appeared to be a rejection was merely a cry to establish safeguards through which would be addressed in our nation's Bill of Rights. It is noteworthy that the Assembly did not impugn their characters, even though their decision did result in the loss of respect by some.³

The founders were aware of their human nature, its inherent weaknesses, and strengths and how these Congressional debates were taking a physical and emotional toll upon their bodies. At times tensions ran high, but they always seemed to return to a place of focusing on the priorities before them. When the process became grueling, they recognized the need for stepping back and asking for help from a higher power, and often resorted to prayer.

These were well educated, and at times brilliant men of character and conviction, fighting for something dynamically different from anything in the world's history. They understood well the power and influence of the monarchy and debated long and hard to avoid copying any aspect of such a model. This required extended hours of deliberation to achieve the monumental task, which tested every man's mettle. Regardless of their religious persuasion, they were seeking a common goal, independence. How they achieved this end should be a lesson for us all.

In 1789, Elbridge Gerry was he was elected to Congress and served four years, but his decision not to sign the Constitution effected his career for a time. To correct the sentiment against him, Gerry delivered a speech where he defended the Constitution as the supreme law of the land, and encouraged all to support it. In 1793, Gerry resigned his seat in Congress and returned to private life.

In 1798, President Adams appointed Elbridge Gerry, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, and future Chief Justice, John Marshall as a political envoy to France. Their assignment, to negotiate long-standing disputes over reparations. The three were no match for Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand, who was a skilled, but deceitful negotiator. Talleyrand insisted they pay him to gain an advantageous settlement with France. Pinckney and Marshall were so repulsed by Talleyrand's manner and tactics, refused to parley further, and returned to America. Gerry remained on, thinking his 'friend' would acquiesce and he would return to America a hero. Talleyrand played him for a fool and Gerry left France in disgrace. The negotiations came to be known as the XYZ Affair, and haunted Elbridge Gerry for his remaining years.

Despite Elbridge Gerry losing favor due to the XYZ Affair, he continued to run for public office and after four failed attempts for governor, he was successfully elected as Massachusetts' eighth governor in 1810. One of the first battles that Gerry faced was the Federalist Party's opposition to the foreign policies of President James Madison. In 1811, then Governor Gerry initiated a redistricting plan to give the Democratic-Republicans an advantage in the state's senate races. This is where we get the term "Gerrymandering." Politicians on both sides of the isle have to this day used this tool to rig elections.

The day Elbridge Gerry succumb to this tactic, was a sad day in our history and one that deepened distrust for him. However, Madison rewarded Gerry by selecting him as his second term vice president candidate in 1813. Madison and Gerry were elected, but the honor would end all too soon, for in the fall of 1814, 70-year-old Elbridge Gerry died on the way to the Senate.

Such was the life of founder, Elbridge Gerry, Esquire. He was one of a few founders that had the distinct privilege of signing the Articles of Corporation, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution of the United States.

As to a man's religion, Elbridge Gerry was an Episcopalian. He was quoted as saying;

“And for our unparalleled ingratitude to that Adorable Being Who has seated us in a land irradiated by the cheering beams of the Gospel of Jesus Christ ... let us fall prostrate before offended Deity, confess sincerely and penitently our manifold sins and our unworthiness of the least of His Divine favors, fervently implore His pardon through the merits of our mediator.”

Elbridge Gerry

As to his character or integrity, I will offer some observations. First, we must acknowledge that our founders worked tirelessly in the fight to gain our independence, committing their “lives, fortunes, and sacred honor” to the cause. Second, even if they aligned themselves with a sect or denomination of Christianity, they were not perfect, no man is. Third, there is a constant battle within the heart of every human. The Apostle Paul addresses the battle we face as believers in Christ in Romans 7:15, he wrote; “For I do not understand what I am doing; for I am not practicing what I want to do, but I do the very thing I hate.” Believers must deal with the sins of the flesh, daily. I write this to acknowledge that our founders were raised on Christian principles. And evidence points to them starting off well, but sadly, some late in their lives made decisions that cost them dearly, ethically, morally, and financially. Despite those decisions, I am sincerely thankful for their relentless depth of devotion in bringing America to its place as a “shining light on a hill.”

This has been Redeeming the Fathers of America

Resources:

- 1) Life of Elbridge Gerry Volume I, James T. Austin, 1828
- 2) Familysearch.org
- 3) Rev. Charles A. Goodrich *Lives of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence*. New York: William Reed & Co., 1856.
- 4) United States Manual of Biography and History, James V. Marshall 1856
American Archives Series 5, Volume 1, 1776
- 5) American Archives Series 4, Volume 4, 1776
- 6) Ratification of the Constitution by the States: Pennsylvania, Volume 2, 1776-1787
- 7) Journals of the Continental Congress 1783-1789, Vol XXIV
- 8) Life and Letters of Harrison Otis Gray, Vol I, 1765-1848