

# Redeeming the Founders of America

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## William Ellery, Rhode Island 1727-1820

Our subject's father, William Ellery Sr. was born at Bristol, Rhode Island on October 31, 1701. Little is known of his English heritage or why his family emigrated to America in the mid to late 17<sup>th</sup> century. William Sr. attended Harvard College and graduated in 1722. That same year he married Elizabeth Almy, daughter of Job and Ann (Lawton) Almy. The couple had seven children, among them a son who signed the Declaration of Independence. William Sr. became a wealthy merchant in Newport, served his community as a clerk, judge, Assistant Governor and Rhode Island's 31<sup>st</sup> Deputy Governor.<sup>1</sup>



William Ellery Jr., the subject of this writing, was born at Newport, on December 22, 1727. His father tutored him during his early years and at age 16 enrolled William in Harvard, where he studied law, English literature, and Latin and Greek languages, something he had maintained great affection for until his death. William graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from Harvard in 1747, along with his older brother, Benjamin. William decided to remain at Cambridge, which afforded him access to study literary volumes.<sup>2</sup>

Cambridge offered William other attractions, first it was where he became acquainted with his future wife Ann Remington, and family friend Judge Edmund Trowbridge<sup>3</sup>, who would become a valued friend to Ellery. As to lasting friendships, Ellery maintained his relationship with his former Harvard roommate Andrew Oliver, who wrote a publication on Comets.

William relocated to his home town of Newport, which had become a prosperous commercial and tourist center. It was here that Ellery returned to his father's merchant business, and on October 11, 1750, married Ann Remington, daughter of Hon. Jonathan Remington, one of the Massachusetts Supreme Court Justices. Newport made a suitable home for his family for the rest of his days until the onset of the revolution. His wife Ann was an excellent woman, one that took great care to make sure Ellery always felt at peace in his house. One night while they sat at home, Ann wrote in her diary how pleased she was that her husband spent the night with her. Upon noticing her inscription, he made haste to visit his

usual pub, saluted them with a parting cup of drink, and said he was returning to his home. His friends were in shock and disbelief, but William was true to his word, he spent many a pleasurable evening at home with his dear Ann up to the start of the revolution.<sup>4</sup>

Tragically, his wife Ann passed away in 1764. Three years later (June 28, 1767) he married Abigail Carey, daughter of Col. Nathaniel and Elizabeth Wanton Carey.

A patriotic soul at heart, William Ellery offered pro-bono legal counsel on cases involving individual rights, Rhode Island appointed him as a delegate to the Continental Congress in May of 1776, and two months later he signed the Declaration of Independence. Ellery continued to serve in Congress from 1776 to 1781 and again from 1783 to 1785.<sup>5</sup> While in Congress, he served on Maritime and Admiralty Committees. Unlike many of his colleagues in political service, Ellery decided to destroy many of his private documents related to this time period, leaving but a few letters, books, and diaries.

Like many who fought to establish freedom of the colonies, William returned home in 1785 only to discover his house and business had been burned to the ground. Forced to start over at 60 would be difficult for any, despite the setbacks Ellery pushed forward aided by considerable knowledge and courage.

In 1786, Congress appointed Ellery as Commissioner of the Continental Loan Office for Rhode Island, and later was appointed the Customs Collector for Newport District.

On his return to Newport, he commenced the study of the law, and after the usual preparatory course, he entered upon the practice, which for twenty years he pursued with great zeal. During this period, no other particulars have been recorded of him, than that he succeeded in acquiring a competent fortune, and receiving the esteem and confidence of his fellow citizens.

At an early period of the controversy between Great Britain and the colonies, Rhode Island strongly enlisted herself in the patriotic cause. She was not backward in expressing her disapprobation of the arbitrary measures of the parent country. Indeed, it is doubtful whether Rhode Island is not equally entitled, with Virginia and Massachusetts, to the honor which they claim, of being earliest in the measures leading to the revolution. Among the great scenes which led the way to actual resistance, two occurred in Narraganset bay. The first of these was an attack by the people of Rhode Island, upon the armed revenue sloop, Liberty, in the harbor of Newport, June 17th, 1769. The second was the memorable affair of the Gaspee, June 9th, 1772, and in which it may be said, was shed the first blood in the revolution. This latter

occurrence excited an unusual alarm among the royal party in the provinces, and gave occasion to Governor.<sup>6</sup>

Governor Thomas Hutchinson addressed the following letter to British Commodore Gambier: "Our last ships carried you the news of the burning of the Gaspee schooner, at Providence. I hope, if there should be another like attempt, some concerned in it may be taken prisoners, and carried directly to England. A few punished at *execution dock*, would be the only effectual preventive of any further attempts."

By other acts did the people of Rhode Island, at an early period, evince their opposition to the royal government. On the arrival in the year 1774 of the royal proclamation prohibiting the importation of fire arms from England, they dismantled the fort at Newport, and took possession of forty pieces of cannon. Again, on the occurrence of the battle of Lexington, they simultaneously roused to the defense of their fellow citizens, in the province of Massachusetts. Within three days after that memorable event, a large number of her militia were in the neighborhood of Boston, ready to cooperate in measures either of hostility or defense. In that same year she sent twelve hundred regular troops into the service, and afterwards furnished three state regiments to serve during the war.

No sooner was the formation of a continental congress suggested, than Rhode Island took measures to be represented in that body, and elected as delegates two of her most distinguished citizens, Governor Stephen Hopkins and Samuel Ward.

During these movements in Rhode Island, Mr. Ellery, the subject of this notice, was by no means an idle spectator. The particular history of the part which he took in these transactions is, indeed, not recorded; but the tradition is, that he was not behind his contemporaries either in spirit or action.

In the election for delegates to the congress of 1776, Mr. Ellery was a successful candidate, and in that body took his seat, on the seventeenth of May. Here, he soon became an active and influential member, and rendered important services to his country, by his indefatigable attention to duties assigned him, on several committees. During this session, he had the honor of affixing his name to the declaration of independence. Of this transaction he frequently spoke, and of the notice he took of the members of congress when they signed that instrument. He placed himself beside secretary Thompson, that he might see how they *looked*, as they put their names to their *death warrant*. But while all appeared to feel the solemnity of the occasion, and their countenances bespoke their awe, it was *unmingled with fear*. They recorded their names as *patriots*, who were ready, should occasion require, to lead *the way to martyrdom*.

In the year 1777, the marine committee of congress, of which Mr. Ellery was a member, recommended the plan, and it is supposed, at his suggestion, of preparing fire ships, and sending them out from the state of Rhode Island. Of this plan, the journals of congress speak in the following terms:

"If upon due consideration, jointly had by the navy board for the eastern department, and the governor and council of war for the state of Rhode Island, and for which purpose the said navy board are directed to attend upon the said governor and council of war, the preparing fire ships be judged practicable, expedient, and advisable, the said navy board immediately purchase, upon as reasonable terms as possible, six ships, or square-rigged vessels, at Providence, in the state of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, the best calculated for fire ships, with all possible expedition; that the said navy board provide proper materials for the same, an employ a proper captain or commander, one lieutenant, and a suitable number of men for each of the said ships, or vessels, of approved courage and prudence; and that notice be given to all the commanders of the continental ships and vessels in the port of Providence, to be in readiness to sail at a moment's warning: that as soon as the said fire ships are well prepared, the first favorable wind be embraced to attack the British ships and navy in the rivers and bays of the state of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations: that the officers of the continental navy there, favor, as much as possible, the design, and use their utmost efforts to get out to sea, and proceed to such cruise, or to such ports, as the said navy board, or the marine committee, shall appoint or order."<sup>8</sup>

During the year that the British army under General Piggot took possession of Newport, where they fortified themselves, and continued their headquarters for some time, the inhabitants sustained much injury in their property. Mr. Ellery shared in the common loss, his dwelling house being burned, and other destruction of property occasioned.

Mr. Ellery continued a member of congress until the year 1785, and indeed, through that year, when he retired to his native state. Soon after, however, he was elected by congress, a commissioner of the continental loan office, to which was subsequently added, by the citizens of Rhode Island, the office of chief justice of their superior court, a station which he did not continue to hold long. On the organization of the federal government, he received from General Washington the appointment of collector of the customs for the town of Newport, an office which he retained during the remainder of his life.

On the 15th of February, 1820, this venerable man--venerable for his age, which had been prolonged to ninety-two years, and venerable for the services which he had tendered his country, was summoned to his account. His death was in unison with his life. He wasted gradually and almost imperceptibly, until the powers of nature were literally worn out by use.

On the day which his death occurred, he had risen, as usual, and rested in his old flag bottomed chair, the relict of half a century; he had employed himself in reading, Tully's offices in Latin.

While thus engaged, his family physician called to see him. On feeling his pulse, he found that it had ceased to beat. A draught of wine and water quickened it into life, however, again, and being placed and supported on the bed, he continued reading, *until the lamp of life, in a moment of which his friends were ignorant, was extinguished.*

In the character of Mr. Ellery there was much to admire. He was, indeed, thought by some to have been too tenacious of his opinion, and not always free from asperity to others. But years mellowed down these unpleasant traits of his character, and showed that he had exercised a watchfulness over himself, not entirely in vain. He manifested an uncommon disregard of the applause of men. It was often upon his lips: "humility rather than pride becomes such creatures as we are." He looked upon the world and its convulsions with religious serenity, and in times of public danger, and of public difficulty, he comforted himself and others, with the pious reflection of the psalmist, "The Lord reigneth."

In conversation, Mr. Ellery was at once interesting and instructive. His advice was often sought, and his opinions regarded with great reverence. In letter writing he excelled, as he did in fine penmanship, which latter would be inferred from his signature to the declaration of independence. In stature, he was of middling height, and carried in his person the indications of a sound frame and an easy mind. In the courtesies of life, he kept pace with the improvements of the age; but his conversation, and dress, and habits of life, plainly showed that he belonged to a more primitive generation.

**Source: Rev. Charles A. Goodrich *Lives of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence*. New York: William Reed & Co., 1856. Pages 183-186. (Some minor spelling changes may have been made.)**

William Ellery was quoted in his 84th: "As to employment of time, I have experienced such instruction and delight in reading, and investigating truth, that I mean, as long as my mind is capable of bearing it, to keep it in exercise and doze as little as possible. Blessed be the man who invented printing. For this important art I am thankful to that glorious Being from Whom all our blessings flow."

## **Resources:**

- 1) Library of American Biography Vol VI, by Jared Sparks.
- 2) Rev. Charles A. Goodrich *Lives of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence*. New York: William Reed & Co., 1856.

- 3) Collection of Massachusetts Historical Society Vol 74, Preface [XXVII]. Edmund Trowbridge was an eminent lawyer, Attorney General in 1749; in 1764-65, a member of the Council; and later Justice of the Superior Court of Judicature of the Province of Massachusetts Bay.
- 4) The Rhode Island Signers of the Declaration, by Robert P. Brown and Henry R. Palmer, 1913.
- 5) Newport Historical Magazine Vol V.
- 6) United States Manual of Biography and History, James V. Marshall 1856 American Archives Series 5, Volume 1, 1776
- 7) American Archives Series 4, Volume 4, 1776.
- 8) Ratification of the Constitution by the States: Pennsylvania, Volume 2, 1776-1787 Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1789, Vol VII, 1777, May 22-October 2.

### **Additional Sources:**

- 9) The United States Manual of Biography and History – James V Marshall 1856
- 10) Biography of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence, by Robert Waln Jr. Vol VI, 1824
- 10) Sanderson's Biography of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence, 1876
- 11) The Signers of the Declaration of Independence by B.J. Lossing - The Federalist Papers Project
- 12) Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia 1766-1769
- 13) Address to the Convention of the Colony and Ancient Dominion of Virginia on the Subject of Government in General, and Recommending a Particular Form to Their Attention, dated 1776.