

ROBERT MORRIS JR.
“FINANCIER OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION”

“It’s funny to me”, as I was walking up here I was thinking “we all have a lot in common today”. None of us including myself really knows what I’m going to say!”

In fact asking me to speak to you today is like watching a dog walk on his hind legs. Even if it is not done well, you’re just amazed it can be done at all!”

Seldom do we find great men who have banished self-indulgence and devoted their lives, fortunes and honor to promote the best interests of the human race. In the history of the American Revolution we find a small grouping of such philanthropists whose memories we should honor but over time we have neglected and forgotten!

One of the most powerful and renowned giants of the early history of our nation who deserves to be remembered for his unselfish dedication, service and honor to the fledgling United States was Robert Morris, Jr., a American patriot who was born in Lancashire, England in 1734.

Upon his father’s direction young Morris immigrated to America at age 13 and settled at his father’s home at Oxford on the eastern shore of Maryland in 1746. Robert’s father was a successful tobacco factor and offered his son a moderate commercial education until his accidental death 2 years later. Robert Morris Sr. was wounded at a ceremony where he was being honored when the wadding from a ship’s cannon during a salute volley actually hit him in the arm. Most thought he would survive the accident but infection set in on the wound causing high fevers and he died several days later.

Shortly after arriving in Maryland young Morris was sent by his father to Philadelphia where he stayed with Charles Greenway, a family friend to apprentice at the shipping and banking firm of Willing & Company owned by Charles Willing who was also the Mayor of the City of Philadelphia. Robert prospered under his apprenticeship with the firm. When Charles Willing died in 1754 the family business was inherited by his son, Thomas who over time made Robert Morris his partner by the age of 24.

The partnership was forged just after the Seven Years War began in 1756. The company now known as Willing, Morris & Company maintained a fleet of ships which actively traded with India, the Levant, the West Indies, Spanish Cuba, Spain and Italy. The firm’s business of import, export and general agency made it one of the most prosperous firms in Pennsylvania. In 1784 Morris with other investors underwrote the voyage of the famous ship, “Empress of China”, the first American vessel to visit the Chinese mainland. The ship embarked from New York harbor for China on General Washington’s birthday, February 22, 1784.

On March 2, 1769 at age 35, Robert Morris Jr. married 20 year old Mary White. The marriage was a life-long adoring relationship and together they had 5 sons and 2 daughters. Mary came from a prominent family in Maryland and her brother was the well-known Anglican Bishop of Pennsylvania, William White. Robert and Mary were life-long members of the Anglican faith and they worshipped in Philadelphia at St. Peters Church and at Christ Church located on the corner of Second and Market Streets in the City of Philadelphia. Both churches were also places of

worship of many notable members of the Continental Congress, sometimes including George Washington.

Morris began his public career in 1765 by serving on a local committee of merchants organized to protest the Stamp Act which was a tax on all legal documents evoked by the British Parliament. He mediated between a mass meeting of colonial protestors and the Stamp Act collector located in the city whose house they determined to pull down “brick by brick” unless the gentleman refrained from collecting taxes.

Although Morris remained loyal to Britain at the time he believed that the new laws which were eventually lifted constituted “taxation without representation”.

After Britain passed the “Tea Tax” Robert Morris headed off conflict in Philadelphia as a Warden of the Port when the ship, “Polly” under Captain Ayers disregarded Philadelphia’s orders closing the port to such vessels carrying British tea. He convinced Ayers to sail the ship out of port which avoided another possible Boston Tea Party in the Colony of Pennsylvania.

Morris was elected to the Pennsylvania Council of Safety, the Committee of Correspondence, and the Provincial Assembly serving as a member for his colony from 1775 to 76. He served in the Pennsylvania legislature as a member from 1776 to 78. He was also elected to represent Pennsylvania in the Second Continental Congress from 1775 to 1778.

In 1775, the Second Continental Congress contracted with Morris’ company to work with the Secret Committee of Trade after March 14, 1776. Through his own company he was able to devise a system to smuggle war supplies from France a year before independence was declared by America. Robert handled much of the financial transactions, contracting with merchants and business firms to obtain needed war material and purchasing commodities for export to pay for them.

He served on the committee that wrote the Model Treaty or the “Plan of 1776” which incorporated his long held belief in free trade. On June 11th the Continental Congress resolved to create 3 committees, one for drafting the Declaration of Independence, one for drafting the Articles of Confederation and one for drafting the Model Treaty. The members chosen to draft America’s first diplomatic statement regarding trade with other countries of the world was John Dickerson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Benjamin Harrison and Robert Morris. The congressional document was an outgrowth of Morris’ trading system which acted as the basis for the 1778 Treaty with France. The Model Treaty was approved by Congress on September 24, 1776.

If all this was not enough for one patriot he served on the Marine and Maritime Committees of the Congress and gave his very best ship, the Black Prince to the Congress as a gift to America which was renamed the USS Alfred becoming the first vessel of the Continental Navy. John Barry who was employed as a ship captain for the Morris Company became the captain of the Alfred.

Of equal importance was the fact Morris used his extensive trading network as a spy network and gathered intelligence on British troop movements. One of his spies sent the information that allowed the Americans to defend Fort Moultrie near Charleston, SC.

Yet, on July 1, 1776 after all Robert Morris had done before independence was declared for America he personally voted against the congressional motion for independence. The first vote of the Pennsylvania delegation at the Second Continental Congress was a split vote of 4-3 which resulted in a negative vote from his state. The following day Morris and Robert Dickerson agreed to abstain allowing the other Pennsylvania delegates to vote for independence. The final vote was 12 states in favor and no states opposed. It must be noted New York's delegates voted at a later date.

On August 2, 1776 Robert Morris Jr. officially signed the Declaration of Independence saying, "I am not one of those politicians that run testy when my own plans are not adopted. I think it is the duty of a good citizen to follow when he cannot lead." Robert Morris' decision to abstain is considered the most pivotal vote of the congress.

During the American Revolution privateers seized cargo of English ships. Morris owned an interest in many of the privateers and his company helped in the sales of contraband as these goods came into port. He also personally engaged in profiteering and wrote a friend that his firm once had over 250 ships which were lost during the course of the war and he had personally lost one of the largest private navies of the American Revolution but he never asked for any reimbursement from his new government!

In fact it is common knowledge Robert Morris Jr. personally supplied the funding for over 80% of all bullets fired by patriots during the American Revolution and paid almost 75% of all other expenses for the fledgling government though he never asked for any reimbursement. However, he was not without critics such as Thomas Paine, Henry Laurens and others who openly criticized him and his firm for alleged war profiteering. In 1779 a congressional committee acquitted Morris and his firm on all charges of engaging in improper financial transactions, but his reputation was damaged regardless of the outcome.

Immediately after serving in Congress, Morris served 2 more terms in the state legislature from 1778 to 1781. At this time he worked on the constitution and legislation to restore checks and balances to state government in Pennsylvania and to overturn the religious test laws which excluded many religious denominations from being able to vote in his state.

After the State of Pennsylvania went into bankruptcy in 1780 due to Constitutionalist policies evoked which mandated state controlled markets and self-imposed embargoes he was called on to restore his state's economy which he did by opening the ports to trade and allowing the free market to set the values of goods and the currency.

In 1781 the United States was in a financial crisis with an accrued debt of well over 25 million dollars and a public credit all but collapsed. Once again, Robert Morris stepped up and paid the debt of our country from his own personal funds. During this panic Robert Morris held the Offices of Finance & Marine in the government. In a unanimous vote Congress appointed Morris to be the Superintendent of Finance of the United States from 1781-84. He insisted at the time he be allowed by Congress to continue his private business endeavors while serving in a related public office and his request was granted by Congress.

Three days after his appointment he proposed to establish a national bank. The idea had been promoted by others, such as, Alexander Hamilton. The Bank of North America was founded in 1781 and was funded in part by a significant loan Morris had obtained from France that same year. The bank's purpose was primarily to finance the war against Britain.

As the new Superintendent of Finance for the US, Morris reduced the civil list by using competitive bidding for government contracts, tightening accounting procedures and demanding individual states support the federal government in contributions of money and supplies. He was assisted in his endeavors by his friend, Gouverneur Morris (of no relation to Robert) in proposing a new national economic system in a document called "On Public Credit" which was the basis for Alexander Hamilton's plan submitted much later to the Congress.

On January 15, 1782 Morris drafted a proposal he later presented to the Congress to recommend the establishment of a national mint and the use of decimal coinage. Both Morris and Hamilton proposed to make American currency a decimal currency which ultimately failed to be approved but was a progressive idea for the time. The idea of the United States Mint became a reality in 1792 after further proposals by Hamilton and Jefferson.

In 1787 Morris was elected to the Constitutional Convention. He arranged to have his friend, G. Morris appointed to the Pennsylvania delegation. During this time it was said G. Morris wrote the polished draft of the Constitution while Robert's contribution to the convention was nominating his friend George Washington to be its president.

Washington wanted to appoint Robert Morris Secretary of the Treasury in 1789, but he declined the offer. Morris then was elected to the Pennsylvania legislature to serve as a United States Senator from 1789 to 1795. He served on 41 senatorial committees and reported for many of them. He also supported the Federalist economic program which included internal improvements such as canals and lighthouses to aid commerce for the new nation.

In 1781 Robert Morris purchased an existing home at 190 High Street in Philadelphia and rebuilt it while he was Superintendent of Finance and Agent of Marine. His family enjoyed the home for 9 years which became quite the showplace of the city. In 1790 the "Residency Act" was passed by Congress establishing the City of Philadelphia as the temporary home for the US Capitol for a period of 10 years.

In August of 1790 Robert Morris offered his home to President Washington which then came to be known as the "President's House". Washington lived in the President's House from November 1790 to March 1797. John Adams upon becoming president relocated from "Bush Hill", the Vice-Presidents home located just outside the city and moved into the President's House in March 1797 and it remained the presidential residency until Adams moved to the District of Columbia and into the White House on Saturday, November 1, 1800.

Morris and his family relocated to his sizable country estate outside of the City of Philadelphia known as "The Hills" located on the Schuylkill River. In 1794 he began construction of a mansion in the city located on Chestnut Street designed by Pierre Charles L'Enfant. The regal style mansion was never finished and became known as "Morris's folly" and the land became Sansom

Street. Marble from the home was eventually purchased and used to adorn buildings and monuments from Rhode Island to Charlestown, SC.

After his main political career was on the decline he founded canal companies, a steam engine company and possessed the first iron rolling mill in America. His icehouse was the model for one Washington installed at Mount Vernon. He helped form and provide financial backing for the Chestnut Street Theater in Philadelphia, started the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society and had a green house built where his staff cultivated lemon trees.

Robert Morris was a land speculator to a fault and in later life became land wealthy and cash poor. In the 1790's he was considered the largest landholder in the United States investing in the District of Columbia and personally owning over 6 million acres of land covering seven southern states. It was at this time that the financial markets of England, the United States and the Caribbean suffered from deflation associated with the Panic of 1797. At the very same time and expected loan to Morris from Holland never materialized because England and the Dutch declared war on France.

Robert Morris owned more land than any other American at the time but he did not have enough "hard money" to pay his creditors. In avoiding creditors and after being sued by a former business partner who had previously been imprisoned for fraud, Robert Morris was arrested. He was imprisoned for debt in the Prune Street Prison in Philadelphia from February 1798 to August 1801.

Out of public outcry, pressure and overall embarrassment the United States Congress elected to pass its first bankruptcy legislation, known as the temporary "Bankruptcy Act of 1800", in part, to get Robert Morris Jr. out of prison. After his release from prison Morris suffered from poor health and spent the remainder of his life in retirement. He had lost everything and he died in poverty on May 9, 1806 and is buried in the family vault of Bishop William White, his brother-in-law at Christ Church in the City of Philadelphia.

Robert Morris Jr. should never be forgotten by any of us and should be considered one of greatest patriots of his time and one of the most powerful men who ever lived during and after the American Revolution. He personally signed the Declaration of Independence, The Articles of Confederation, and the US Constitution.

In the "Apotheosis of Washington" the fresco painting by Brumidi located inside the dome of the United States Capitol Building in Washington DC, George Washington is depicted as a god-like figure adorned in royal robes with a rainbow arched at his feet. He is flanked by the goddess of Victoria on his left side and the goddess of Liberty on his right side surrounded by 13 maidens each having a star above their heads representing the 13 original colonies.

There are 6 beautifully painted scenes lining the perimeter of the painting of the "Apotheosis of Washington" which are named "War, Science, Marine, Commerce, Mechanics, and Agriculture.

In the section denoted as "Commerce" Brumidi has painted Mercury, the Roman God of Commerce offering a bag of gold to Robert Morris Jr. who is seated recording the transaction with quill pen and paper.

On Morris's left side men move a box on a dolly and on the right side the anchor and sails lead into the adjacent section known as "Marine".

It is fitting Robert Morris be offered a pot of gold by Mercury, the God of Commerce for acknowledged in the US Congressional Research Service referencing the Costs of Major Wars written in 2010 by Stephen Daggett, figures record and show a total expenditure for the American Revolution to be 101 million dollars.

Robert Morris's personal contribution to the United States for which he refused any form of reimbursement amounted to 79 million dollars of the 101 million dollar expenditure for the American Revolution.

Robert Morris Jr. was a true patriot and founding father who certainly did his part in helping establish the United States of America but he will forever best be known simply as the Financier of the American Revolution.

THANK YOU!

Speech written by William O. Stone, Alabama Society 2014

