

Gilbert Livingston

Dutchess County

Born: December 17, 1742, Dutchess County

The Livingstons of New York are among the state's oldest and most esteemed families, with many branches spread throughout the Hudson River Valley. Your branch, sadly, is but a twig. You are Gilbert Livingston, son of Henry Livingston Sr. and Susanna Conklin Livingston; you were born December 17, 1742, in Dutchess County. Your great-grandfather was Robert Livingston the Elder (1654–1728), the family patriarch. Robert arrived in Albany, New York, in 1674; became prominent in business and politics; and with the assistance of the royal governor, received from King George I a land grant of 160,000 acres in Columbia and Dutchess counties. On this acreage he constructed Livingston Manor and ruled over it as the first lord of the manor. He had three sons, Philip, Robert, and Gilbert, who through their offspring gave rise to three branches of the family. Philip inherited Livingston Manor and "reigned" as second lord of the manor. Robert inherited 13,000 acres in southwestern Columbia County and built on it Clermont Manor (his grandson is Chancellor Robert R. Livingston, the head of the Federalist party). Gilbert, your grandfather and namesake (1690–1746), inherited nothing of consequence—hence the slenderness of your branch. Although Livingston Manor is not your home, as a poor relation you are sometimes permitted holiday visits.

You grew up in Poughkeepsie, went to school in Fishkill, and then studied at King's College (later renamed Columbia College). But you did not take a bachelor's degree, because a smallpox epidemic in 1757 forced your early departure. Instead you read law and set up a small legal practice. Additionally, you farmed a few acres, ran a general store, and worked in a shipyard. If these modest employments returned no large profits, they did establish valuable connections. Your law partner was the renowned jurist (to-be) James Kent, the co-owner of your store was the brother of Melancton Smith, a leading Antifederalist essayist, and your associate in shipbuilding was the brother-in-law of Governor George Clinton. The Clinton connection brought you a position on a wartime committee charged with fixing the state's inflated currency. Afterward you were elected a member of the state assembly (1777–78) and a surrogate court judge (1778–85).

This spring you ran for both assemblyman and delegate to the state ratifying convention. The voters elected you in each case. You are an Antifederalist and at the convention will give hearty support to Governor Clinton, the Antifederalist party leader, and to Melancton Smith, the party lieutenant, as they, and others of your party, endeavor to defeat the Constitution or secure amendments thereto.