

Henry Wisner

Orange County

Born: 1720, Orange County

The ancestry of most New Yorkers is either English or Dutch. You are different for being of Swiss stock. Your grandfather was Johannes Weasner. He fought under the Duke of Marlborough in the War of Spanish Succession (1701–14). After his tour of duty, he and other Swiss veterans of the English army migrated to New York in 1710. You are Henry Wisner, born in 1720 to Hendrick and Mary Wisner, near Florida, Orange County, New York.

You made your mark in real estate and as the owner and operator of a grist mill in Goshen, New York. Your neighbors elected you a delegate to the colonial assembly in 1759 and reelected you for eleven consecutive years. In 1768 you also became a judge in the county's court of common pleas (law training was not a prerequisite then). With the coming of the war and the termination of British rule, you served in the Provincial Convention that elected members to the Second Continental Congress; you were elected a delegate (1775–76). Though a member when the Declaration of Independence was debated, you were not permitted to vote, because the interim New York government, the Provincial Congress, had not yet agreed to independence. Nor were you even present in Philadelphia, because as a member of that same government (1776–77), you were back home in the state. Not until mid-July did New York vote its approval; but still you were not on hand for a second signing opportunity held in August.

You put your milling expertise to the service of the Continental Army, building three gunpowder mills in Orange and Ulster counties. When at maximum production, your mills delivered 1,000 pounds of gunpowder to Washington's army each week. And in other ways did you help the war effort: You financed the construction of cannon and defensive works overlooking the Hudson River, and you were part of a secret committee that studied the feasibility of stretching heavy chains across the river to deny access to British warships. The first chain, at Fort Clinton and Fort Montgomery, was dismantled when the forts fell (October 1777); the second, at West Point (1778), was never challenged by the British.

In 1777 the Provincial Congress (the last of four of these congresses) converted itself into a convention for the purpose of drafting a new state constitution. You were on the committee charged with the task, though the actual drafting was done by John Jay, Robert Livingston, and Gouverneur Morris. Under that constitution, you served successive terms in the state senate (1777–82).

Education was another of your interests. In 1784, you established an academy in Goshen. Also in that year, you took a seat on the first board of regents of the University of the State of New York.

This past spring, your Orange County constituents elected you a delegate both to the state assembly and to the state ratifying convention meeting in Poughkeepsie to accept or reject the Constitution. You arrive as a committed Antifederalist, eager to support Governor George Clinton, the Antifederalist party leader, and Melancton Smith, the party lieutenant, as they, and others of your party, endeavor to defeat the Constitution or secure amendments thereto.