

Peter Van Ness

Columbia County

Born: November 30, 1734, Kinderhook

You are Judge Peter Van Ness of Kinderhook, Columbia County, New York. Born November 30, 1734, you are the son of William Gronesbeck Van Ness and Gertrude Hogeboom. Your sister Jane is the wife of Robert Yates, prominent jurist and merchant from Schenectady, former delegate to the Constitutional Convention, and faithful follower of Governor George Clinton. That said, it was Yates who married up.

As a colonel in command of the Ninth Regiment of the Albany County Militia, you saw action at Saratoga in October 1777 and were present for the surrender of British General Burgoyne. You were the first judge of Columbia County and were a member of the state senate. This spring you were elected to the New York State Ratifying Convention meeting in Poughkeepsie to accept or reject the Constitution.

Columbia is Antifederalist territory, and you ran on the Antifederalist ticket, garnering, though, the fewest votes of any of the successful candidates. The reason may be that you are more nationally minded than the standard Antifederalist. Indeed, you are a Moderate, open to the idea of ratification and frightened at the prospect of New York's remaining outside the union.

Game Play Instructions

Consult the Moderate role sheet for your primary instructions.

Moderates as a group are intended to be fair-minded judges of the speeches and proposals offered by others, honest brokers without interests or objectives of their own. In fact, the power lies with you to determine if the Constitution is ratified or rejected. The formal factions, Federalists and Antifederalists, are equal in number and will largely cancel each other out.

But you may divide into opposing parties, because among you are two delegates resolved to move the Moderates into the Federalist or Antifederalist camp — Jonathan N. Havens for the Federalists and Jacobus Swartwout for the Antifederalists. Listen to the liaisons and listen to the arguments. Then cast your votes, issue by issue, favoring what you believe to be the better arguments. You may go back and forth; strength on one issue might not carry over to another. Your best judgment is what the game is asking of you.

Also your participation in debate: you double your vote on any issue to which you make a substantive contribution. Needless to say, participation will improve your grade.

Because you don't write and deliver speeches (not enough time), you instead take a short exam before the start of the game, based on the Gordon Wood reading found in the game book. The exam winner(s) casts an extra vote throughout the game, including the final vote to ratify or reject the Constitution.