

Philip Van Cortlandt

Westchester County

Born: September 1, 1749, New York City

You were born September 1, 1749, in New York City to Pierre Van Cortlandt and Joanna Livingston Van Cortlandt, the eighth of nine children. Your father (b. 1721) was, and is, a prominent man in New York politics: member of the New York General Assembly (1768–75), member of the Provincial Congress and chairman of its committee of safety (1775–76), member of the body that voted the colony's approval of the Declaration of Independence (1776), and lieutenant governor of New York from its inception as a state (1777) to the present. Also notable was your great-grandfather Stephanus Van Cortlandt, first native-born mayor of New York City. The Van Cortlandts are one of the old manorial families of New York.

You were educated at Coldenham Academy in classical studies and worked thereafter as a surveyor and civil engineer. Along with your father, you were a member of the Provincial Congress (1775). When the war began, you served as an officer in the Continental Army, in command of the New York Fourth Battalion and then of the Second Regiment. You fought at the Battle of Saratoga in New York (1777), which ended with the surrender of General Burgoyne; and at the Battle of Monmouth Courthouse in New Jersey (1778), which bloodied the British on their return from Philadelphia to New York. You assisted General John Sullivan in his campaign against the Mohawk war chief Joseph Brant, who was attacking frontier settlements in New York and Pennsylvania (1779); Sullivan commended your efforts. When Benedict Arnold, as commandant of Philadelphia, was court-martialed for war profiteering, you were among the officers who sat in judgment; you thought him guilty and deserving of discharge, but Washington insisted on a reprimand instead—a decision all would come to regret, as Arnold became the war's great traitor. You led the rear guard of continentals marching toward Yorktown, fought gallantly in this decisive battle of the war (1781), and were mustered out of the army with the rank of brigadier general (1783). Quite a career, to be capped off with charter membership in the Society of the Cincinnati, the fraternal organization of former Revolutionary War officers. You served on the committee that created the bylaws for the New York chapter.

In postwar civilian life, you held several local offices of minor import: town supervisor of Cortlandt, member of the school board, and road commissioner. More prominent posts came in 1788, with election to the state assembly and then to the state ratifying convention. You are in Poughkeepsie now, representing Westchester County.

As a Federalist interested in strong national government, you favor ratification of the Constitution and will give hearty support to Chancellor Robert Livingston (party leader) and Alexander Hamilton (party lieutenant), as they, and others of your party, endeavor to ensure that New York votes to ratify.