The Founding Fathers: A Brief Overview

The 55 delegates who attended the Constitutional Convention were a distinguished body of men who represented a cross section of 18th-century American leadership. Almost all of them were well-educated men of means who were dominant in their communities and states, and many were also prominent in national affairs. Virtually every one had taken part in the Revolution; at least 29 had served in the Continental forces, most of them in positions of command.

Political Experience

The group, as a whole, had extensive political experience. At the time of the convention, four-fifths, or 41 individuals, were or had been members of the Continental Congress. Mifflin and Gorham had served as president of the body. The only ones who lacked congressional experience were Bassett, Blair, Brearly, Broom, Davie, Dayton, Alexander Martin, Luther Martin, Mason, McClurg, Paterson, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Strong, and Yates. Eight men (Clymer, Franklin, Gerry, Robert Morris, Read, Sherman, Wilson, and Wythe) had signed the Declaration of Independence. Six (Carroll, Dickinson, Gerry, Gouverneur Morris, Robert Morris, and Sherman) had affixed their signatures to the Articles of Confederation. But only two, Sherman and Robert Morris, underwrote all three of the nation's basic documents. Practically all of the 55 delegates had experience in colonial and state government. Dickinson, Franklin, Langdon, Livingston, Alexander Martin, Randolph, Read, and Rutledge had been governors, and the majority had held county and local offices.

Occupations

The delegates practiced a wide range of occupations, and many men pursued more than one career simultaneously. Thirty-five were lawyers or had benefited from legal training, though not all of them relied on the profession for a livelihood. Some had also become judges.

At the time of the convention, 13 individuals were businessmen, merchants, or shippers: Blount, Broom, Clymer, Dayton, Fitzsimons, Gerry, Gilman, Gorham, Langdon, Robert Morris, Pierce, Sherman, and Wilson. Six were major land speculators: Blount, Dayton, Fitzsimons, Gorham, Robert Morris, and Wilson. Eleven speculated in securities on a large scale: Bedford, Blair, Clymer, Dayton, Fitzsimons, Franklin, King, Langdon, Robert Morris, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, and Sherman. Twelve owned or managed slave-operated plantations or large farms: Bassett, Blair, Blount, Butler, Carroll, Jenifer, Mason, Charles Pinckney, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Rutledge, Spaight, and Washington. Madison also owned slaves. Broom and Few were small farmers.

Nine of the men received a substantial part of their income from public office: Baldwin, Blair, Brearly, Gilman, Jenifer, Livingston, Madison, and Rutledge. Three had retired from active economic endeavors: Franklin, McHenry, and Mifflin. Franklin and Williamson were scientists, in addition to their other activities. McClurg, McHenry, and Williamson were physicians, and Johnson was a university president. Baldwin had been a minister, and Williamson, Madison, Ellsworth, and possibly others had studied theology but had never been ordained.

A few of the delegates were wealthy. Washington and Robert Morris ranked among the nation's most prosperous men. Carroll, Houston, Jenifer, and Mifflin were also extremely well-to-do. Most of the others had financial resources that ranged from good to excellent. Among those with the most straitened circumstances were Baldwin, Brearly, Broom, Few, Madison, Paterson, and Sherman, though they all managed to live comfortably.

A considerable number of the men were born into leading families: Blair, Butler, Carroll, Houston, Ingersoll, Jenifer, Johnson, Livingston, Mifflin, Gouverneur Morris, both Pinckneys, Randolph, Rutledge, Washington, and Wythe. Others were self-made men w ho had risen from humble beginnings: Few, Franklin, Gorham, Hamilton, and Sherman.

Geographic and Educational Background

Most of the delegates were natives of the 13 colonies. Only eight were born elsewhere: four (Butler, Fitzsimons, McHenry, and Paterson) in Ireland, two (Davie and Robert Morris) in England, one (Wilson) in Scotland, and one (Hamilton) in the West Indies. Reflecting the mobility that has always characterized American life, many of them had moved from one state to another. Sixteen individuals had already lived or worked in more than one state or colony: Baldwin, Bassett, Bedford, Dickinson, Few, Franklin, Ingersoll, Livingston, Alexander Martin, Luther Martin, Mercer, Gouverneur Morris, Robert Morris, Read, Sherman, and Williamson. Several others had studied or traveled abroad.

The educational background of the Founding Fathers was diverse. Some, like Franklin, were largely self-taught and had received scant formal training. Others had obtained instruction from private tutors or at academies. About half of the individuals had attended or graduated from college in the British North American colonies or abroad. Some men held advanced and honorary degrees. For the most part, the delegates were a well-educated group.

Longevity and Family Life

For their era, the delegates to the convention (like the signers of the Declaration of Independence) were remarkably long-lived. Their average age at death was almost 67. Johnson reached the age of 92, and Few, Franklin, Madison, Williamson, and Wythe lived into their eighties. Fifteen or sixteen (depending on Fitzsimmon's exact age) passed away in their eighth decade, and 20 or 21 in their sixties. Eight lived into their fifties; five lived only into their forties, and two of them (Hamilton and Spa ight) were killed in duels. The first to die was Houston in 1788; the last, Madison in 1836.

Most of the delegates married and raised children. Sherman fathered the largest family, 15 children by 2 wives. At least nine (Bassett, Brearly, Johnson, Mason, Paterson, Charles Cotesworth, Pinckney, Sherman, Wilson, and Wythe) married more than once. F our (Baldwin, Gilman, Jenifer, and Alexander Martin) were lifelong bachelors. In terms of religious affiliation, the men mirrored the overwhelmingly Protestant character of American religious life at the time and were members of various denominations. Onl y two, Carroll and Fitzsimons, were Roman Catholics.

Post-Convention Careers

The delegates subsequent careers reflected their abilities as well as the vagaries of fate. Most were successful, although seven (Fitzsimons, Gorham, Luther Martin, Mifflin, Robert Morris, Pierce, and Wilson) suffered serious financial reverses that left them in or near bankruptcy. Two, Blount and Dayton, were involved in possi bly treasonous activities. Yet, as they had done before the convention, most of the group continued to render outstanding public service, particularly to the new government they had helped to create.

Washington and Madison became President of the United States, and King and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney were nominated as candidates for the office. Gerry served as Madison's Vice President. Hamilton, McHenry, Madison, and Randolph attained Cabinet posts. Nineteen men became U.S. senators: Baldwin, Bassett, Blount, Butler, Dayton, Ellsworth, Few, Gilman, Johnson, King, Langdon, Alexander Martin, Gouverneur Morris, Robert Morris, Paterson, Charles Pinckney, Read, Sherman, and Strong. Thirteen served in the House of Representatives: Baldwin, Carroll, Clymer, Dayton, Fitzsimons, Gerry, Gilman, Madison, Mercer, Charles Pinckney, Sherman, Spaight, and Williamson. Of these, Dayton served as Speaker. Four men (Bassett, Bedford, Brearly, and Few) served as federal judges, four more (Blair, Paterson, Rutledge, and Wilson) as Associate Justices of the Supreme Court. Rutledge and Ellsworth also held the position of Chief Justice. Seven others (Davie, Ellsworth, Gerry, King, Gouverneur Morris, Charles Pinckney, and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney) were named to diplomatic missions for the nation.

Many delegates held important state positions, including governor (Blount, Davie, Franklin, Gerry, Langdon, Livingston, Alexander Martin, Mifflin, Paterson, Charles Pinckney, Spaight, and Strong) and legislator. And most of the delegates contributed in m any ways to the cultural life of their cities, communities, and states. Not surprisingly, many of their sons and other descendants were to occupy high positions in American political and intellectual life.

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