

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Examining what constitutes a Founding Father — if there is such a thing
- » Running down their demographics and résumés
- » Profiling ten who contributed to the revolutionary cause

Chapter 1

Scoping Out the Founding Fathers

Some historians find the term *Founding Fathers* misleading, or insulting, or both. Misleading because it implies a finite and easily identified group of people; insulting because it denigrates the contributions of “ordinary” people — the common soldier who fought the war, the women who kept things going at home — and ignores the situations of unrepresented and victimized segments of the era’s population, such as Native Americans and African American slaves.

Identifying America’s Founding Fathers is not an exact science. No list at the time tallied up who did and didn’t contribute and therefore qualified as a Founding Father. No one in the late 18th century is likely to have used the term, and that group did not represent the American population at the time. They were all male and all White. Many, but not all, were better off financially than the average American. Some, but by no means all, stood to profit handsomely if a strong and stable central government could be established.



REMEMBER

Still, an extraordinary blend of temperaments, backgrounds, and great personal effort came together to do (mostly) the right thing at the right time.

"I know of only two occasions when the people in power did what needed to be done as well as you can imagine its being possible," the 20th century British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead observed. One, he said, was Rome under Caesar Augustus. The other was the American Revolution.

Rising Up to Meet the Moment

Just how the right people came together at the right time to found the American nation became a topic for speculation almost as soon as it occurred. George Washington thought the sheer difficulty of creating a new and different nation "called forth abilities which would otherwise have not perhaps been exercised." David Ramsay, a South Carolina physician who published a two-volume history of the Revolutionary War in 1789, wrote that when America "*needed* the ability of all its sons, a vast expansion of the human mind speedily formed. It seemed that the war not only required, but *created* talents."

Those talents, and the varied perspectives of these Americans, complemented one another almost perfectly in the masterful writers Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine; the liberal firebrands Patrick Henry and Sam Adams; and the conservative contrarians John Dickinson and John Jay. John Adams was the resident sourpuss and Ben Franklin the resident humorist. The group had the towering political intellects of James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, and a figure who towered over the others in leadership ability (and even literally, at 6'2"): George Washington.

Why the founders bothered

Eighteenth-century political leaders felt a strong sense of "*noblesse oblige*" — the obligation of privileged people to act nobly and serve in leadership roles. The Founding Fathers weren't all so noble or well-off that they didn't occasionally grumble about taking on the job. Washington noted that public service was expected to come "with a certain Expense and trouble without the least prospect of Gain." Jefferson complained that "public service and private misery (are) inseparably linked together."



REMEMBER

But these leaders were by nature generally optimistic, believing that well-intentioned and capable leaders — in Madison's words, "men who possess wisdom to discern and virtue to pursue the common good of society" — would inspire confidence in government and lead people to continue to select more well-intentioned and capable leaders in the future. There was also a confidence, bordering on arrogance, that somehow America would be different, that it would rise above the pettiness and avarice of the Old World.

In *Common Sense*, Tom Paine asked rhetorically whether America could be happy, and he answered himself: “. . . as happy as she pleases; she hath a blank sheet to write upon . . .” and, signifying a break from old ways of thinking, he declared that “we see with other eyes; we hear with other ears; and think with other thoughts.”

What the founders accomplished

Bucking very long odds, the Founding Fathers and their supporters won a war against the world’s most powerful nation. They created the first large-scale republic in the history of the human race. They removed the possibility of any single, powerful religious group having dominant influence over the affairs of a secular government.

They crafted a masterful document, the United States Constitution. Through it, they created an overlapping, multilayered system, designed to prevent any one segment of government from dominance over the others, as well as balancing the rights of individual states with the overall welfare of the country as a whole. And they did it with a clear-eyed view that a nation governed by laws would do much better than a nation governed by men.

“If men were angels, no government would be necessary,” Madison wryly noted. “If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: You must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.”

Kicking the Slavery Issue Down the Road

The single biggest failure, particularly in hindsight, of the Founding Fathers was their refusal to come to grips with slavery and what it portended for the country’s future. Most, if not all, of them knew it was a morally wrong and indefensibly evil practice. But none knew or offered up a politically and economically practical solution to end it.



REMEMBER

Abolition almost certainly would have meant a dissolution of the Union, with southern states such as South Carolina and Georgia on record as threatening to go off on their own if that happened. With the ink still drying on the documents binding the states together, that might have been much easier for those states to do than it was later, in 1861. Moreover, it would have set an early precedent for other states to pack up and leave the Union whenever they didn’t like something done by the federal government.

Even if abolition had been accomplished, the question remained — as it did after the Civil War — as to how to assimilate into free society more than half a million impoverished, uneducated African Americans, who many White Americans, both in the North and South, regarded as other than human.

Recognizing slavery as a problem

In the 157 years between the arrival of the first African slaves at Jamestown and the Declaration of Independence, no groundswell of opposition to the practice existed in America. People generally accepted slavery as a part of American life in all the colonies, along with indentured servitude and tenant farming.

“Prior to the great Revolution,” noted John Jay, the New Yorker who would become America’s first U.S. Supreme Court chief justice, “the great majority . . . of our people had been so long accustomed to the practice and convenience of having slaves that very few among them even pondered the propriety and rectitude of it.”

But as talk of liberty, equality, and freedom grew, the glaring contradiction that slavery presented to such conversations became both obvious and discomfiting. More Americans began to think about the issue, and some began to take action. Benjamin Franklin, for example, helped establish America’s first abolition society, in Philadelphia, and John Jay did likewise in New York. Both, however, continued to own slaves themselves.



REMEMBER

John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and New York’s Gouverneur Morris opposed slavery and had never owned slaves. George Washington was the only one of America’s nine slave-owning presidents who freed his slaves — but only after he died. Thomas Jefferson continually decried slavery as an evil institution, yet had a slave as his mistress and was convinced that as “naturally inferior” and “untrustworthy,” freed slaves could never successfully integrate into American society. And Patrick Henry frankly admitted he didn’t think that abolition was worth the trouble: “I am drawn along by the general inconvenience of living without them (slaves),” he admitted. “I will not — I cannot justify it (abolition), however culpable my conduct.”

Taking small antislavery steps

Some of the Founding Fathers, Jefferson included, hoped the problem would solve itself if slavery could be confined to the South. There it might gradually die out as the tobacco industry waned and it became too expensive to own slaves. Many Northern states, where slaves were not an integral part of the economic system,

had already taken steps to gradually prohibit it. It had been banned from the vast territory covered by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.



REMEMBER

The invention of the cotton gin in 1793, however, made cotton the king of America's economy. It was a labor-intensive crop that was especially profitable with unpaid labor. The result was an explosion in the number of slaves — from 900,000 in 1800 to 4 million in 1860. The number of “slave states” went from 6 in 1790 to 15 in 1860.

In the meantime, the founders nibbled at the edges of the issue. In 1794, the U.S. Congress enacted the Slave Trade Act of 1794, which banned the export of enslaved people from America to sell in other countries. In 1800, the government prohibited U.S. citizens from engaging in the slave trade within other countries and forbade importing slaves in 1808. In 1820, importing slaves became a capital offense. Could the founders have done more and still kept the newly born United States of America alive and whole? Another fellow who wrestled with the same issue put it this way:

“Necessity drove them so far, and farther they would not go,” said Abraham Lincoln in 1854. “Thus we see, the plain unmistakable spirit of that age, towards slavery, was hostility to the principle, and toleration only by necessity.”

Sorting Out Signers, Framers, and Founders

A convenient way for historians to sort out who qualifies as a Founding Father revolves around a list of those who signed the *Continental Association*, which established a formal boycott of British goods, in 1774; the *Declaration of Independence* in 1776; the *Articles of Confederation*, which served as America's first constitution, in 1777; and the *U.S. Constitution*, in 1787.



REMEMBER

Historians' sorting-out list is not a comprehensive collection of Founding Father names. For example, neither Thomas Paine nor Patrick Henry signed any of the documents, yet both played key roles in the American Revolution. Neither did George Mason, who refused to sign the Constitution as a delegate at the constitutional convention, but is considered the “father of the Bill of Rights.” Nor did Edmund Randolph, who also refused to sign the Constitution, yet is credited with helping to establish the three-branch system of the federal government and served as America's first attorney general and second secretary of state. Historians often include Mason and Randolph in a broader group of *framers* of the Constitution.

In fact, only one man, Roger Sherman, a Connecticut lawyer, signed all four documents, and only six signed three of the four. Of the 194 individuals who signed at least one of the documents, 104 signed only one.

Still, it is a starting point from which to compile some facts and figures:

- » Of the 145 men who lived through the period from the Continental Association's signing in 1774 and the U.S. Constitution's signing in 1787, 67 were lawyers, which probably isn't surprising. But only 9 actually made a living as a full-time politician, although many had held some political office. The rest were merchants, farmers or plantation owners, doctors, teachers, ministers, soldiers, and other occupations.
- » Of the first four American presidents, none signed both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. George Washington was running the army when the Declaration was signed and James Madison was not yet a member of Congress. Both signed the Constitution. When the Constitution was signed, Thomas Jefferson was serving as U.S. ambassador to France, and John Adams was the ambassador to Britain. Both signed the Declaration.
- » Six of those men who signed one or more of the four documents became U.S. Supreme Court justices; 19 became U.S. senators; and 32 became governors. Forty-eight had college degrees; 16 were born in foreign countries; 3 were later killed in duels; and 2 were lost at sea. Only 4 were lifelong bachelors.

HOISTING A FEW

If there was one thing many of the Founding Fathers were good at besides putting together new nations, it was bending their elbows. In other words, they drank. A lot. John Adams, for example, reportedly started each day with a large tankard of hard cider. George Washington owned his own whiskey distillery. And Thomas Jefferson spent an estimated \$10,000 on wine (that's \$223,000 in 2019 dollars) during his eight years in the White House. He even had a 16-foot-deep, clay brick-lined wine cellar built next to the presidential mansion, with bottles on racks above a bed of ice that was replenished monthly.

When the founders gathered in groups, they also put away the sauce. A gathering of delegates to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 consumed 54 bottles of Madeira; 60 bottles of claret; 8 bottles of whiskey; 22 of porter (a kind of beer); 8 of hard cider; 12 of beer; and 7 bowls of punch. But not all Founding Fathers drank. Dr. Benjamin

Rush, for one, frowned mightily on the habit. “A people corrupted by strong drink cannot long be a free people,” he wrote in a 1790 tract entitled “An Enquiry into the Effects of Spirituous Liquors Upon the Human Body.” To get off the booze, Rush departed from his usual cure-all of bleeding. Instead, he recommended drinking lots of bitter tea, “or a few glasses of sound old wine every day.”

A Brief Look at Ten Top Founders

Some of the Founding Fathers’ contributions were so great and so varied that there is almost no argument they deserve the term (if the term is deserved by anyone). The following sections offer (in alphabetical order) some factoids and tidbits about ten influential Founding Fathers.

John Adams

Résumé: *First U.S. vice president; second U.S. president; first U.S. minister to United Kingdom and the Netherlands; chief author of Massachusetts Constitution; chief U.S. negotiator for the 1783 Paris Peace Treaty with Great Britain; and delegate to First and Second Continental Congress.*

Massachusetts-born and raised, John Adams didn’t much care if people liked him — and many didn’t. He was acerbic, grouchy, and sometimes mean-spirited: He refused to go to the inauguration of Thomas Jefferson after Jefferson defeated him in his bid for reelection as president. But Adams was a tireless worker for the American cause before, during, and after the Revolutionary War — and so outspoken that he was one of a handful of Americans marked for execution if the British had won the war.

Adams spent years in Europe as a U.S. envoy, separated from his beloved wife Abigail, to whom he wrote hundreds of romantic letters over their 54-year marriage. In his old age (he lived to be 90), Adams even became pen pals with Jefferson, his longtime political foe. Adams’s last words before he died — on July 4, 1826 — were “Jefferson survives.” He was wrong, however, since Jefferson had died a few hours before.

John Adams was one of only two presidents whose son also became president. (George H.W. Bush was the other.) He was the first president to live in the White House (for the last four months of his one term in office). He thought the president should be addressed as “His Highness” (so critics referred to the overweight Adams as “His Rotundity”). He was instrumental in forming the U.S. Marine Band and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. No monument to John Adams

exists in Washington, D.C., but one of the four buildings at the Library of Congress is named after him.

Samuel Adams

Résumé: *Governor of Massachusetts; President of Massachusetts Senate; delegate to First and Second Continental Congress; and signer of Declaration of Independence.*

According to Dr. Benjamin Rush, Samuel Adams (shown in Figure 1-1) once told Rush that “if it were revealed that 999 out of 1,000 would perish in a war for liberty, he would vote for that war, rather than see his country enslaved. The survivors in such a war, though few, would propagate a nation of freemen.”

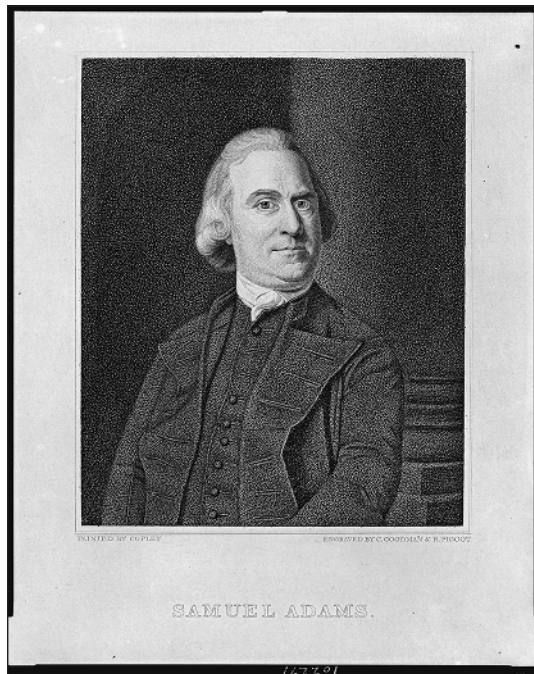


FIGURE 1-1:
Samuel Adams.

Library of Congress

Sam Adams is often overlooked as a key player in the American Revolution, but he was an early and ardent advocate of independence from Britain — so much so that he overlooked other aspects of life, such as making a living. Fortunately, he was, unlike his cousin, a very well-liked fellow, and while he organized resistance to various British acts and churned out eloquent and persuasive pamphlets to help the Patriot cause, friends rebuilt his barn and house and provided him

with a wardrobe deemed suitable for a leader. Although something of a flop at business, Adams's efforts in such pre-war groups as the Sons of Liberty and the Minutemen helped keep the early flame of independence alive. By the time of his death at age 81, he had dropped from prominence.

Adams attended the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia, and his instructions to Boston's legislative representatives on how to react to the Sugar Act in 1764 are regarded as the first written public protest to British policy in America.

Benjamin Franklin

Résumé: *First U.S. postmaster; U.S. minister to France; U.S. minister to Sweden; Speaker of Pennsylvania Assembly; President of Pennsylvania; Continental Congress representative to France; U.S. negotiator of 1783 Paris Peace Treaty with Britain.*

When at the age of 70 Benjamin Franklin was unanimously selected by Congress to represent America in France, he accepted with his signature humor: "I am like the remnant of a piece of unsaleable cloth. You may have it, as the shopkeepers say, for what you please." That's a pretty modest self-description for a man who has been labeled by eminent historians as "the First American" and "the most accomplished American of his age." Other than possibly George Washington, Franklin was also the best-known American in the 18th century. Not bad for someone who'd once been a 17-year-old runaway printer's apprentice with just two years of education.



REMEMBER

Franklin was primarily responsible for securing the indispensable support of France for the American cause, and his editing of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence was invaluable. His humor and diplomatic skills helped smooth over tensions among his fellow founders on more than one occasion. Franklin was so well-loved that when he died at the age of 84, more than 20,000 people attended his funeral.

Despite inventing many useful objects, from bifocal glasses to the lightning rod, Franklin never patented anything, deeming the inventions gifts to the public.

Alexander Hamilton

Résumé: *First U.S. secretary of the treasury; Senior Officer of the U.S. Army; delegate to Congress; chief author of the Federalist Papers; considered founder of the U.S. Coast Guard; and first Founding Father to be title subject of a smash Broadway musical.*

Alexander Hamilton wasn't your average Founding Father; he was a Caribbean-born orphan of an unwed mother who became a war hero and then a lawyer who

helped his chief political enemy become president and, ultimately, died in a duel. Coming to America as a teenager, he attended Kings College (now Columbia University) and then enlisted in the Patriot cause, rising to be a top aide to George Washington and leading a bayonet charge at the Battle of Yorktown.

Hamilton served briefly in Congress and then became a lawyer. As a delegate to the convention drafting the U.S. Constitution, Hamilton contributed little. But he was enormously valuable in helping to get it ratified by the states and by serving as the chief writer of a series of pro-Constitution newspaper essays, known as *The Federalist Papers*. He also served as Washington's treasury secretary and contributed greatly to establishing a firm financial foundation for the infant U.S. government.

Hamilton found himself in the unenviable position in the 1800 presidential election of having to choose to support Thomas Jefferson, his chief political rival, or Aaron Burr, a bitter personal enemy, whom Hamilton regarded as amoral and corrupt. Hamilton chose Jefferson — and was killed in duel with Burr in 1804, at the age of 47, or 49.

Hamilton founded the *New York Evening Post* newspaper, which is still publishing. He served as a co-counsel on the first U.S. murder trial for which there is still a record. One of his two co-counsels later became a U.S. Supreme Court justice. The other was Aaron Burr.

John Jay

Résumé: *First chief justice of the United States Supreme Court; first Secretary of Foreign Affairs; governor of New York; U.S. minister to Spain; U.S. negotiator of 1783 Paris Peace Treaty with Great Britain; and delegate to First and Second Continental Congress.*

Of all the key Founding Fathers, the quiet and reserved John Jay is probably the least well-known (see Figure 1-2), partly because he spent less time than others in publicizing himself, plus his own papers and other historical documents concerning him were not made public until the first decade of the 21st century.

Born into a wealthy family of New York merchants, Jay graduated from King's College (later Columbia University) and set up a law practice in New York. At first he tended toward reconciliation with the mother country but ended up becoming an ardent Patriot. Jay's career included serving as a diplomat, a congressman, a jurist — and something of a propagandist. With Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, he wrote a series of newspaper essays extolling the virtues of the newly drafted U.S. Constitution, which became known as the *Federalist Papers*. Although an unwavering conservative, Jay leaders across the political spectrum valued Jay for his intelligence, integrity, and willingness to take the heat for unpopular decisions.

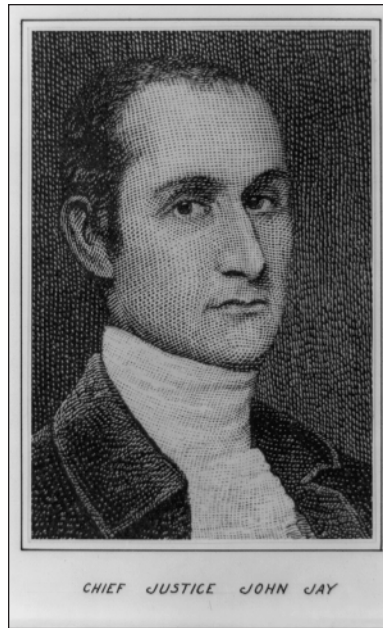


FIGURE 1-2:
John Jay.

Library of Congress

Thomas Jefferson

Résumé: *Third U.S. president; second U.S. vice-president; first U.S. secretary of state; U.S. minister to France; Governor of Virginia; chief author of the Declaration of Independence; founder of University of Virginia; and delegate to First and Second Continental Congress.*

President John F. Kennedy once hosted a White House dinner with a guest list so impressive that he quipped it was the most impressive group of genius and talent to gather there “since Thomas Jefferson dined alone.”

But Jefferson, shown in Figure 1-3, was not only multitalented; he was a bundle of contradictions. He hated slavery, but owned slaves; regarded African Americans as inferior, but had an African-American mistress; preached frugality but died deeply in debt; and believed in sticking closely to the Constitution but bent it to the breaking point at a crucial time in his presidency.

“He possessed a genius of the first order,” noted Dr. Benjamin Rush. “It was universal in its objects. He was not less distinguished for his political, than his mathematical and philosophical knowledge.”

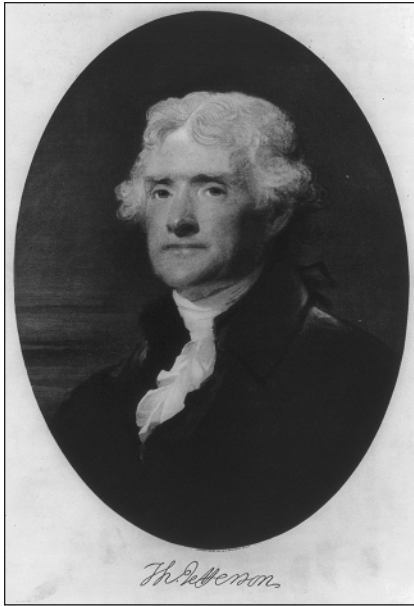


FIGURE 1-3:
Thomas Jefferson.

Library of Congress

The son of a wealthy Virginia plantation owner, Jefferson went to the College of William and Mary and became a lawyer, several times representing slaves seeking freedom through the courts. He authored a landmark Virginia law guaranteeing religious freedom (although he despised organized religion). As a member of Congress, Jefferson was chosen to write the Declaration of Independence. He missed the drafting of the U.S. Constitution because he was serving as U.S. minister to France, but sent crates of books to James Madison to aid Madison's research into drafting the document.

James Madison

Résumé: *Fourth U.S. president (and also the shortest); U.S. secretary of state; member of Congress; member of Virginia legislature; considered chief architect of the U.S. Constitution; and coauthor of The Federalist Papers.*

It was easy to underestimate James Madison, and people did (see Figure 1-4). A Massachusetts politician said Madison was “a little too much of a book politician and too timid.” A journalist remarked, “There appears to be a mixture of timidity in his disposition.” Alexander Hamilton suggested he “was very little acquainted with the world.” It was also easy to understand why people viewed Madison in that light. He was slight, frail, and shy and an awkward public speaker. But although it was easy to underestimate Madison, it was also a mistake.

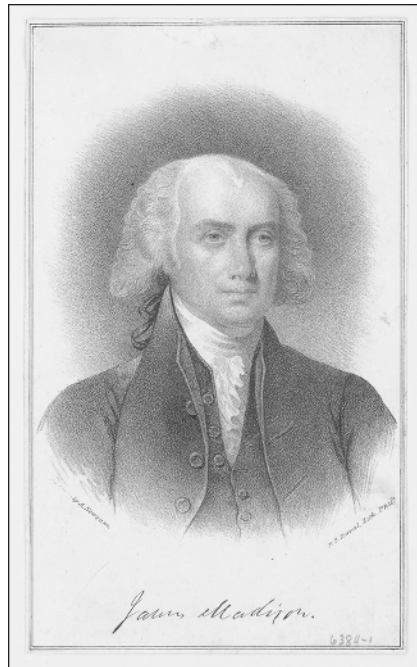


FIGURE 1-4:
James Madison.

Library of Congress

Perhaps none of the Founding Fathers put as much effort into preparing for the job of, well, founding, as did Madison. For months before the convention to draft a new U.S. constitution, he spent days and weeks reading dozens of books, making lists of the pros and cons of virtually every republican form of government that had ever existed. As a result, in the words of fellow convention delegate William Pierce of Virginia, “In the management of every great question he took the lead . . . From a spirit of industry and application which he possesses in a most eminent degree, he always comes forward the best-informed Man of any point in debate.”

Born in Virginia to a wealthy tobacco planter, Madison was a sickly child. He was a Princeton University graduate, but was one of the rare founders who never had a job outside politics. His quiet, bookish personality actually served him well in an era where hammy theatrics by politicians often irritated rather than convinced. Madison, according to Pierce, had “a remarkable sweet temper. He is easy and unreserved among his acquaintance, and has a most agreeable style of conversation.”

Thomas Paine

Résumé: *Journalist, political theorist, and propagandist.*

Thomas Paine, shown in Figure 1-5, signed no momentous documents, cast votes on no significant proposals, won no military battles, and held no political office, elected or appointed. He had no formal training as a writer, philosopher, or political scientist. In fact, he was pretty much a failure at almost everything he tried. But Thomas Paine qualifies as a Founding Father all the same.

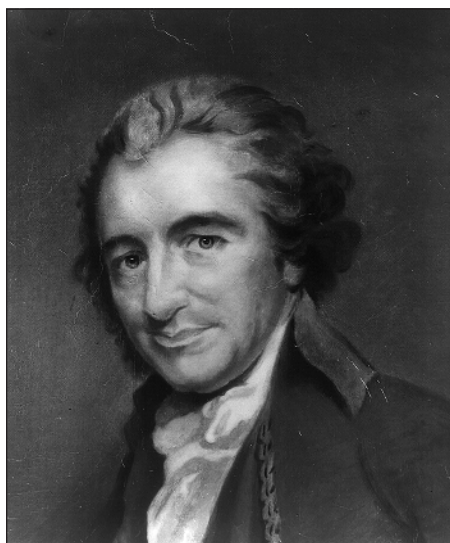


FIGURE 1-5:
Thomas Paine.

Library of Congress

Paine's essays, *Common Sense* and *The Crisis*, electrified Americans at a time when many of them were wary of separating from Great Britain and weary of a political conflict they could not fathom had anything to do with them. His direct, simple, and yet passionate writing style was hugely popular and widely credited with providing an easily understandable explanation of what the American Revolution was all about. "I never tire of reading Tom Paine," an admirer named Abraham Lincoln said, a half century later.

Paine left America for Europe in 1787, where he wrote a brilliant tract, *The Rights of Man*, supporting the French Revolution. The French lionized him, right up until the revolution turned into the Reign of Terror, whereupon he was imprisoned and narrowly escaped the guillotine. In his later years, he bitterly and publicly criticized George Washington and others who he said had failed to support him. He died, almost friendless, in New York in 1809.

Paine advocated for a form of social security as early as 1795. He was widely scorned in the late 19th century as an atheist (although Mark Twain praised him), but a 2002 BBC poll ranked him No. 34 among the 100 greatest Britons of all time.

Roger Sherman

Résumé: *U.S. senator; member of Congress; first mayor of New Haven, Ct.; only signer of all “Big Four” American historical documents; lawyer, professor of religion; and cobbler.*

For a Founding Father most people have never heard of, Roger Sherman got a lot done in his 72 years of life. He made shoes. He became a lawyer, with a formal education that stopped at grammar school. He served as a mayor, a judge, and a member of both houses of Congress, along with teaching religion at Yale University. And he still had time to have 15 children.

Born in Massachusetts in 1721, Sherman moved to Connecticut in 1743. An avid reader with a natural aptitude for math, he gave up shoemaking to become surveyor for New Haven County and gravitated to politics. After passing the bar and becoming a lawyer, Sherman served as a Connecticut delegate to nearly every major convention and conference in America. He is the only person to have signed the Continental Association (the formal boycott of British goods), the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the U.S. Constitution. At the constitutional convention, Sherman was an extremely active delegate, making or seconding 160 motions on the proposed plan (compared to James Madison’s 177). He was a key player in crafting major components of the document, including establishing the structure of the legislative branch and banning the issuance of paper money without a solid backing of gold or silver.

Although one of his colleagues described him as “awkward, unmeaning and unaccountably strange in his manner,” Thomas Jefferson said Sherman “never said a foolish thing in his life.”

Sherman was one of five men selected to draft the Declaration of Independence. One of his descendants, Henry L. Stimson, served in the cabinets of four different presidents. Another, Archibald Cox, was a federal special prosecutor and helped topple Richard Nixon from the presidency.

George Washington

Résumé: *First U.S. president; Commander-in-chief of Continental Army; president of Constitutional Convention; member of Second Continental Congress; “Father of His Country;” and guy on the one-dollar bill.*



TIP

George Washington is such a mythical figure in U.S. history that his importance may seem overrated — but it isn’t. Along with Abraham Lincoln and perhaps Franklin D. Roosevelt, Washington is an American leader whose presence at a key period in the nation’s history was invaluable.

Despite his scant education, Washington became a graceful writer and talented surveyor. Before he was 16, he had memorized 116 maxims on how to behave correctly in public (“don’t puff out your cheeks,” “don’t rub your hands together”), and he religiously adhered to them — except when his fearsome temper erupted into swearing. He bowed, rather than shook hands, but was so charming with women that they sometimes literally swooned in his presence. He kept his powdered hair (no wig) neatly coiffed and seldom smiled because of his terrible teeth. Obsessed with correctness, he sometimes laboriously recopied even a casual letter to fix mistakes. He declined to go to France to be honored because it embarrassed him to rely on an interpreter. Contrary to legend, his dentures were not made of wood but rather from metal alloy, hippopotamus ivory, and human teeth, at least some of which were likely purchased from slaves.

“He is polite with dignity, affable without formality, distant without haughtiness, grave without austerity; modest, wise and good,” said John Adams’s wife Abigail. “More than all, and above all,” said Adams’s grandson, Charles Frances, Sr., “Washington was master of himself.”