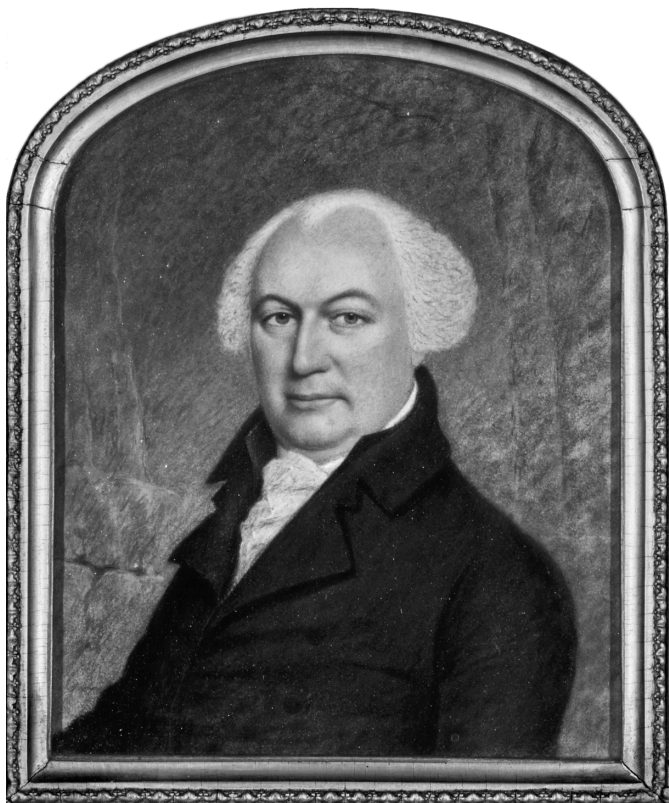


*To Secure the Blessings of Liberty*

Selected Writings of Gouverneur Morris



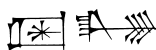
Gouverneur Morris

# *To Secure the Blessings of Liberty*

Selected Writings of Gouverneur Morris



EDITED AND WITH AN  
INTRODUCTION BY  
J. Jackson Barlow



LIBERTY FUND | *Indianapolis*

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The cuneiform inscription that serves as our logo and as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word “freedom” (*amagi*), or “liberty.” It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

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C 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
P 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*  
Morris, Gouverneur, 1752–1816.

To secure the blessings of liberty: selected writings of Gouverneur Morris  
Edited and with an introduction by J. Jackson Barlow.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 978-0-86597-834-8 (hc: alk. paper) —  
ISBN 978-0-86597-835-5 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. United States—History—Colonial period, ca. 1600–1775—Sources.
2. United States—History—Revolution, 1775–1783—Sources.
3. United States—History—1783–1815—Sources.
4. United States—Politics and government—1775–1783—Sources.
5. United States—Politics and government—1783–1865—Sources.
6. Morris, Gouverneur, 1752–1816. I. Barlow, J. Jackson. II. Title.

E302.6.M7A4 2012

973.2—dc23

LIBERTY FUND, INC.  
8335 Allison Pointe Trail, Suite 300  
Indianapolis, Indiana 46250-1684

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## *Introduction*

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IT SEEMS TO BE customary to begin any discussion of the life and legacy of Gouverneur Morris by lamenting his neglect by later generations, as all four of his recent biographers have done. But however shameful posterity's treatment of Morris may be, it is about what he expected. This was not because he despaired of America's future or thought that the mob rule of the Jeffersonians would ruin the country, nor was it because he worried that Americans would be somehow deficient in reverence for their Founding Fathers. It was rather because he expected them to be forever looking forward. He was optimistic about the American future because he thought the spirit of the people would triumph over all difficulties, even the self-imposed ones: their own political follies and ignorance of the past.

Morris was born into a political family in 1752, the son of Lewis Morris, an Admiralty judge in New York, and his second wife Sarah Gouverneur. Three generations of the Morris family had held important positions in colonial government, while the Gouverneurs were merchants and land-owners of Huguenot origin. It was as aristocratic a pedigree as anyone in the new world could claim.

Young Gouverneur was a good student, first at the Reverend Tetard's school in New Rochelle and then at the Philadelphia Academy. At the age of twelve, he enrolled in King's College (now Columbia University) and received his B.A. in 1768, at the age of sixteen, and a master of arts in 1771. Although a gifted student, Morris was hardly the ponderous academic. In his undergraduate years we have the first evidence of his irreverent streak coming to the surface, with his involvement in circulating a scandalous attack on one of the professors. For his oration at the commencement, he chose to speak on "Wit and Beauty."<sup>1</sup>

Since his older half brothers had inherited the bulk of his father's estate, Gouverneur needed a profession. Thus, upon completing his B.A. he began

1. The oration is in the Gouverneur Morris Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, item 794.



reading law in the office of William Smith, then one of the leaders of the New York bar. There he formed lifelong friendships with two of Smith's other young protégés, Robert R. Livingston and John Jay. Smith's busy practice brought Gouverneur into the center of New York's governmental and commercial life. While still a seventeen-year-old clerk, Morris wrote and published his first commentary on a public matter, a letter opposing a new issue of bills of credit by the New York colony. The letter earned favorable notice and gained the young lawyer a reputation for expertise in public finance.

Although Morris took the colonists' side in the constitutional dispute with Britain, he was a late convert to the cause of independence, giving him a reputation as a closet Tory that dogged him later. But once he became an advocate of separation, Morris never looked back. By early 1776 he was taking a prominent part in revolutionary committees and had become a strong advocate of setting up an effective machinery of government. Elected from Westchester County as a delegate to the first and third provincial congresses, his knowledge of law and public finance, together with his skills as a writer and debater, earned him a place on many of the important committees.

Morris and his fellow law clerks, Livingston and Jay, were largely responsible for drafting the New York Constitution of 1777. Later that year, Morris was elected a New York delegate to the Continental Congress, and he assumed his post early in 1778. He arrived in York, Pennsylvania, Congress's temporary home, to find American fortunes and morale at perhaps their lowest ebb. The British had occupied Philadelphia, forcing Congress to scurry to safety across the Susquehanna; the army—what was left of it—was encamped in dangerously inadequate conditions at Valley Forge.

Morris took on his duties energetically. No sooner had he arrived in York than he was appointed to a committee charged with inspecting the conditions of the army. During his visit to Valley Forge, Morris consulted closely with George Washington on the needs of the army and the reforms needed to make it more effective. Morris came away with a report for Congress, and also with a lifelong admiration for the general. Returning to York, Morris immersed himself in Congress's work, and over the next two years he served on many committees, often as chair, and drafted scores of resolutions and reports.

Morris's visit to Valley Forge convinced him that the organization of government under the Continental Congress was seriously flawed. By mid-1778 he was putting substantial energy into proposals for reform. The root

of the problem, in his view, was the absence of an effective executive power. Congress, however, was not ready to accept this conclusion, and his proposals were largely ignored. So were his suggestions for reforming the nation's finances, even though the depreciation of Congress's paper currency was beginning to create widespread economic distress.

In the spring of 1778 Congress, recognizing that American morale had declined sharply and apprehensive that the Carlisle Commission would bring proposals from England that would undermine it further, Morris began a public relations offensive. He was prominent in these efforts, not only penning Congress's public response to the Carlisle Commissioners' proposals, but publishing several letters of his own. In these essays Morris first used the pseudonym "An American," which he would use for the rest of his life.

Back home, Morris's enemies in the New York legislature accused him of neglecting the state's interests in Congress, and he was not reelected in 1779. Since New York City was still occupied by the British, he settled in Philadelphia, practicing law and engaging in business. While he was working to establish himself, he also found the time to solidify his reputation as a somewhat reckless young man-about-town. On May 15, 1780, as he leaped into his carriage, the horses started and Morris caught his foot in a wheel, badly breaking his ankle.<sup>2</sup> The doctors recommended amputation, and Morris submitted to the operation gamely. He seems to have adapted well to the wooden leg. Even late in his life he rode, hiked, and danced—"hobbled," he said—with few complaints and only minor mishaps.

One of Morris's business partners was the Philadelphia merchant Robert Morris (to whom he was not related). Robert Morris's financial genius was already legendary, and Gouverneur seems to have been an eager student. When "The Financier" became superintendent of finance for the Confederation Congress in 1781, he brought Gouverneur back into government as his assistant. Together they shaped American fiscal policy until the war ended. Many of Gouverneur's ideas for reforming public finance were adopted in Robert's "Report on the Public Credit" of 1782, which in turn influenced Alexander Hamilton's report of the same name a decade later. While he was in the finance office, Gouverneur also made the first proposal

2. There have been recurring suspicions that the carriage story is merely a cover and that Morris in fact broke the ankle jumping from a window to escape an inconveniently timed husband. At this distance in time, it is impossible to determine which is true.

to create a decimal currency in the United States. In 1787 Robert persuaded the Pennsylvania legislature to appoint Gouverneur a delegate to the Constitutional Convention.

In James Madison's words, Morris was "an able, an eloquent, and an active member" of the convention from the beginning of July on. Before that he had mostly been absent, called away to deal with his mother's estate and the harbingers of collapse for Robert Morris's business empire. Even so, he has the distinction of speaking more often than any other member. Although the final document differs substantially from the proposals Morris advocated in the convention, he supported it without reservation. What is more, he wrote the final draft, giving the Constitution its organization and its distinctive style. Madison said:

The *finish* given to the style and arrangement of the Constitution fairly belongs to the pen of Mr. Morris; the task having, probably, been handed over to him by the chairman of the Committee [William Samuel Johnson], himself a highly respectable member, and with the ready concurrence of the others. A better choice could not have been made, as the performance of the task proved. It is true, that the state of the materials . . . was a good preparation for the symmetry and phraseology of the instrument, but there was sufficient room for the talents and taste stamped by the author on the face of it.<sup>3</sup>

After the convention, Morris turned down Hamilton's invitation to help write *The Federalist Papers* and returned to business and his law practice. But his long-awaited opportunity to go to Europe came in 1788, as Robert Morris's European business interests soured further. Robert needed someone he trusted completely to oversee his European operations, and who better than his bright, energetic assistant? Gouverneur arrived in Paris early in 1789, and for the next three years was a private citizen, based in Paris but frequently traveling to London or elsewhere on business.

Because the United States did not yet have a minister in London, George Washington asked Morris to make some confidential soundings of the British government. Although Morris did not achieve his or Washington's aims in London (his enemies claimed, with some justification, that he compromised the mission by confiding it to the French ambassador), this did

3. Both quotations are from James Madison to Jared Sparks, April 8, 1831, in *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, ed. Max Farrand, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1911-87), 4:498-99.

not prevent Washington from submitting his name in late 1791 as U.S. minister to France. The appointment was controversial. He was known to be pessimistic about the course of the French Revolution, and to some, including Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, pessimism was identical with hostility. Worse, he had been known to have helped—and, it was rumored, advised—Louis XVI. Beyond that, his lack of reserve in expressing his opinions, his indiscretion in London, and his taste for fast living had given Morris a reputation as anything but diplomatic. Washington knew all this. Yet Morris was his candidate in spite of others' reservations:

I will place the ideas of your political adversaries, in the light which their arguments have presented them to me, vizt. That the promptitude, with which your lively and brilliant imagination is displayed, allows too little time for deliberation and correction; and is the primary cause of those sallies, which too often offend, and of that ridicule of characters, which begets enmity not easy to be forgotten, but which might easily be avoided, if it was under the control of more caution and prudence. In a word, that it is indispensably necessary, that more circumspection should be observed by our representatives abroad, than they conceive you are inclined to adopt.<sup>4</sup>

Over the next two years, Morris tried to live up to Washington's admonitions, even as he faced as challenging an assignment as any American diplomat has ever had. The Revolution entered its most turbulent phase in 1792, and often it was difficult even to know who was in charge. Each succeeding faction tried to destroy the members of the one that preceded it; any diplomat who had good relations with one government was likely to be *persona non grata* to the next. As long as he remained minister, Morris did what he could to protect Americans and French citizens alike from the worst ravages of the Reign of Terror. For a time he was the only foreign diplomat remaining in Paris; the others had all decided it was too dangerous. Of course, as one who was known to have advised the king, and whose lack of "caution and prudence" before his appointment made his opinions public knowledge, Morris was an obvious target, and in mid-1794 he was replaced by James Monroe.

Relieved to be a private citizen again, Morris left France in the fall of

4. George Washington to Gouverneur Morris, January 28, 1792, in *The Writings of George Washington*, ed. John Fitzpatrick (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939), 31:469.

1794 and spent the next four years in Europe, traveling, visiting French exiles, and conducting his business. Wherever he went, he circulated among the social and political elite, and he freely passed on intelligence and gossip as he made the rounds. Politics intruded frequently. In Vienna he lobbied the Austrian government, all the way to the emperor, to release Lafayette from prison. In Britain, he found time to write a pamphlet opposing the radical reform proposals of the London Corresponding Society. But finally in 1798 he came back to the United States and settled in at Morrisania, the family home in what is now the Bronx.

Morris filled one more public office, elected to an unexpired term in the U.S. Senate in 1800 but not reelected in 1802. After that, he continued to speak and write on public affairs and to perform public service when called upon. In 1807 he served on the commission that laid out the street grid for New York City. Despite their political differences, the Federalist Morris and the Democratic-Republican DeWitt Clinton (nephew of his old colleague and mentor, Governor George Clinton) would work together on many public projects. Their most enduring achievement came from their membership on New York's Commission on Internal Navigation, better known as the Erie Canal Commission.

Morris was deeply skeptical of innovations in politics and was persuaded that human nature dictated a powerful role for self-interest in any governmental scheme. He was thus distrustful of the elite and the mob equally, although at different times he saw each as the more immediate threat. After the Jeffersonians' victory in 1800, he was convinced that the mob had come to power. But this mob was not ruling in its own interest; it was being manipulated by a Southern slaveholding elite bent on using government to protect its privileges. The three-fifths clause, which Morris had opposed at the Constitutional Convention, gave the slaveholding power an edge in the House of Representatives and the Electoral College, but to secure its rule this faction needed to curb the power of Northern commercial interests. It proceeded to pick a series of unnecessary fights with England, and from 1806 forward, the Jeffersonians' trade policies seriously damaged the economies of New York and other trading states.

The Jeffersonian ascendancy left Morris gloomy about American politics in his last years. Nevertheless, he remained optimistic about the American future. His own last years featured a domestic contentment that he had never known before. In 1809 the fifty-seven-year-old bachelor finally married. His wife, Anne Cary Randolph, was a Virginia Randolph and younger sister of John Randolph of Roanoke. In spite of or because of her own scan-

dalous past, they were a good match. Their son, also named Gouverneur, was born in 1813. By this time Morris was an elder statesman, sought for Fourth of July speeches and civic committees, and he retained the optimism and the serene temperament that had always been part of his makeup. On his deathbed in November 1816 he expressed no regrets: “Sixty-four years ago, it pleased the Almighty to call me into existence—here on this spot, in this very room; and now shall I complain that he is pleased to call me hence?”<sup>5</sup>

5. *The Diary and Letters of Gouverneur Morris*, ed. Anne Cary Morris (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1888; repr., n.p.: Dodo Press, n.d.), 2:495.

## *Acknowledgments*

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THIS PROJECT HAS benefited from the help of many people. Foremost among them have been the staffs of the many libraries that I have consulted. Bernard Crystal, and later Jennifer Lee, of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University facilitated my access to the Morris manuscripts deposited there, as did Patrick Kerwin and Emily Howie of the Library of Congress. The staff of Houghton Library, Harvard University, guided me to the Jared Sparks papers, and Roy Goodman of the American Philosophical Society gave helpful encouragement and advice. The staffs of the Boston Athenaeum, Beinecke Library of Yale University, Pattee Library of Penn State University, and Firestone Library of Princeton University also provided helpful and timely assistance. This project would never have been completed, however, if it had not been for the staff of L. A. Beeghly Library at Juniata College. Lynn Jones was persistent in prying materials from reluctant lenders through interlibrary loan. Julie Woodling put me onto the Charles Brockden Brown Archive and Scholarly Edition and alerted me to the archivists' skepticism about Brown's authorship of "The British Treaty." Andy Dudash—Old Faithful—came through time and again with information and sources, and introduced me to the Juniata pamphlet collection. I am very grateful to all of them.

The James Madison Program at Princeton University provided me an incomparable place to work during my sabbatical in 2007–8. I am grateful to the program's founder and director, Robert P. George, and to Executive Director Brad Wilson, for being such generous hosts, and to the Garwood family for their support of my fellowship. Duanyi Wang is a magician with computer files; without her help this project would never have been done on time. Juniata College provided the sabbatical leave, and the Provost's Office—Jim Lakso and Joanne Krugh—has supported this project in many ways large and small since the very beginning.

A number of Juniata students have worked on this project over the seven years from its first conception until its completion: Nicole Watson, Rebecca Zajdel, Amber Laird, Emily Hauser, Sarah Weick, Mariel

Little, Jacob Gordon, Manal Daher-Mansour, Jordan Yeagley, and Madeline Rathey have all contributed in helpful ways.

Many colleagues have offered encouragement and support for the project as well, prominent among them Michael Zuckert, William B. Allen, John Kaminski, Art Kaufman, Melanie Miller, James Kirschke, and Barbara Oberg. My class of fellows at the James Madison Program—Robert L. Clinton, David Ericson, Paul Kerry, Daryl Charles, and Sebastien Viguier—provided help and good conversation. My Juniata colleagues Jim Tuten, David Sowell, David Hsiung, Emil Nagengast, and Dennis Plane have also been very supportive; Belle Tuten advised me on many of the Latin translations. Laura Goetz of Liberty Fund has been consistently helpful and patient throughout the project. I am also grateful for the very helpful and careful editing by the Liberty Fund staff.

Most of all I am grateful for the support of my family—my wife, Kathleen, and our children, Susan, David, and Julia—who have suffered through this project in many ways. My son David was the only one who actually had a hand in it, however, and I appreciate his careful editing of many of the headnotes and the introduction.

The errors are mine.



## *A Note on the Texts*

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IN THINKING ABOUT the selections for this collection, I considered what writings of Morris were already available, and what would be most useful. His diaries have been published twice, first in a heavily edited form by his granddaughter in 1888, and in a somewhat less censored form by his great-granddaughter in 1939. Many of his more interesting letters are quoted, sometimes (but not always) in their entirety, in Sparks's biography or in the 1888 edition of the *Diary and Letters*. His public writings—speeches, newspaper articles, and reports—were often difficult to find, however. In these writings, Morris develops his arguments more fully than is often the case in his letters, and so they help us attain a more complete view of his political and economic thinking. This selection includes published writings as well as several unpublished essays and speeches. They are presented chronologically for the sake of simplicity and to provide a minimum of editorial intrusion.

In the 1830s Morris's widow, Anne, turned over the full collection of his manuscripts to Jared Sparks, but since that time they have been scattered. Some have disappeared. Those published in Morris's lifetime were available in various newspapers or pamphlets but sometimes not identified or misidentified. Many are available in the American Antiquarian Society's useful collections of Early American Imprints and American Historical Newspapers. Even so, only someone with access to both the manuscript collection and printed sources could identify, with any confidence, writings that had been published anonymously or under pseudonyms.

Even with the restriction to writings for the public, I have had to be selective. Not included in this collection are his two graduation orations from 1768 and 1771, "Wit and Beauty" and "Love," respectively. Both of these are available in the manuscript collection at Columbia University, together with an 1805 "Oration on Music," also not included here. Among printed documents, I have omitted the "Observations on the American Revolution," written for Congress in 1778, because it is primarily composed of quotations from other documents. It, along with Morris's speech in the

Senate on the Ross Resolutions, his eulogy of George Clinton, and the joint Morris/Robert Fulton pamphlet "Advantages of the Proposed [Erie] Canal," are available in microform or electronically through the American Antiquarian Society's Early American Imprints series.

Several newspaper essays have also been omitted, most of them published in the *New-York Evening Post* under Morris's pseudonym "An American."<sup>1</sup>

All manuscript material is from the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. The material published in Morris's lifetime has long since become part of the public domain, but it is scattered widely, and I am grateful to the libraries and institutions that have allowed me access to their collections. I have included information on the holding institution with the documents. Where no holding institution is indicated, the material is from the microform collection in Pattee Library of Penn State University.

I have tried to track down all of Morris's quotations, as well as key references in the documents, although a few left me stumped. In several places I have silently corrected typographical errors in the published material. The transcriptions and all of the shorter translations are mine. I have used Sparks's translation of the French portions of the "Observations on the New Constitution of France," however, which seems to have relatively few errors and would scarcely be improved by adding new errors of my own.

1. Although these essays use Morris's pseudonyms, in some cases I am not entirely certain that they are his, although the probability is high. The essays in the *Evening Post* are: three essays on the naval operations in the Mediterranean, October 25 and November 21 and 28, 1804; three on American-British relations, February 13, 15, and 22, 1812; two on the Jeffersonians' public policies, January 7 and 8, 1813; one on the War of 1812, September 22, 1814. There are also several essays signed "An American" in the (Philadelphia) *U.S. Gazette*: three essays on the "Dispute with Spain," October 5, 8, and 11, 1804; and three very short pieces, October 20, 1804; August 23, 1806; and August 22, 1807.

Two essays signed "An Observer" in the *Evening Post*, February 11, 1815, and August 13, 1816, also may be Morris's.

Finally, Allan Nevins (in *The Evening Post: A Century of Journalism*, [New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922]) and Howard Swiggett have attributed three anonymous essays on the Peace of Amiens to Morris. They were published in the *Evening Post* November 30 and December 2 and 7, 1801.

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