

# Roger Sherman

**Roger Sherman**(April 19, 1721 - July 23, 1793) was an influential member of the Continental Congress (1774–81 and 1783–84) and Connecticut consultant and lawyer. He was elected to the committee which drafted both the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation, as well as many other important documents concerning national finances, military matters and Indian affairs. He also worked in shaping the New Jersey Plan and was a strong advocate of the Connecticut Compromise. Roger Sherman was a delegate to the Constitutional Convention and was the only Founding Father who signed all four of the documents that created the United States:

- Articles of Association in 1774
- Declaration of Independence in 1776
- Articles of Confederation in 1777
- U.S. Constitution in 1787

Sherman generally supported increased powers for the federal government and advocated higher taxes, borrowing, and issuance of paper currency to solve economic problems.<sup>[2]</sup> During the American Revolutionary War, Sherman served in Congress and on the supreme court of Connecticut. In 1783, Sherman was elected New Haven's first mayor.

Before ending his political career, Sherman served in the U.S. House of Representatives (1789–91) and U.S. Senate (1791-93), where he was elected to fill the spot left vacant by the resignation of William S. Johnson.<sup>[3]</sup> Thomas Jefferson described Sherman as "a man who never said a foolish thing in his life."<sup>[4]</sup>

## Founding Fathers



Roger Sherman

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|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| State              | Connecticut                                            |
| Religion           | Christian-Congregationalist <sup>[1]</sup>             |
| Founding Documents | Declaration of Independence, Articles of Confederation |

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## Early life

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Roger Sherman was born to William and Mehetabel Sherman at Newton, Massachusetts on April 19, 1721.<sup>[5]</sup> His great grandfather, Captain John Sherman, came from Dedham, in England, to Watertown, Massachusetts, about the year 1635. His grandfather, William Sherman, was a farmer, in moderate circumstances. In 1723, the family removed from Newton to Stoughton. Of the childhood and early youth of Sherman, little is known. He was neither assisted by a public education nor by private tuition, but did have a limited mentorship with Reverend Samuel Dunbar.<sup>[6]</sup> All the valuable attainments, which he exhibited in his future career, were the result of his own vigorous efforts. By his ardent thirst for knowledge, and his indefatigable industry, he attained a very commendable acquaintance with general science, the system of logic, geography, mathematics, the general principles of history, philosophy, theology, and particularly law, and politics. He was early apprenticed to a shoemaker,<sup>[7]</sup> and he continued to pursue that occupation for some time after he was twenty-two years of age. It is recorded of him, that he was accustomed to sit at his work with a book before him, devoting to study every moment that his eyes could be spared from the occupation in which he was engaged.

When he was nineteen years of age, his father died. His eldest brother having previously removed to New Milford, in Connecticut, the principal charge of the family devolved on him. At this early period of life, the care of a mother, who lived to a great age, and the education of a numerous family of brothers and sisters, brought into grateful exercise his warm, filial, and fraternal affections. The assistance subsequently afforded by him, to two of his younger brothers, enabled them to obtain the inestimable advantages of a public education. He continued to reside at Stoughton, about three years after the death of his father, principally employed in the cultivation of the farm, and in otherwise providing for the maintenance of the family. Before he was twenty-one, he made a public profession of religion. He thus laid the foundation of his character in piety. That unbending integrity, which has almost made his name synonymous with virtue itself, was acquired in the school of Christ and his apostles. Mr. Sherman used to remark to his family, that before he had attained the age of twenty-one years, he had learned to control and govern his passions. His success in these efforts, he attributed, in a considerable degree to Dr. Watts's excellent treatise on this subject. His passions were naturally strong, but he had brought them under subjection to such a degree, that he appeared to be habitually calm and sedate, mild and agreeable. All his actions seem to have been preceded by a rigorous self-examination, and the answering of the secret interrogatories, What is right? What course ought I to pursue? He never propounded to himself the questions, Will it be popular? How will it affect my interest? Hence his reputation for integrity was never questioned.

## Career

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In 1743, he removed with the family to New Milford, a town near New Haven, Connecticut. He performed the journey on foot, taking care to have his shoe-maker's tools also transported. He there commenced business as a country merchant, and opened a store in conjunction with his elder brother, which he continued till after his admission to the bar in 1754. He discontinued his trade as a shoemaker at the time this connection was formed. In 1745, he was appointed surveyor of lands for the county in which he resided. Astronomical calculations of as early date as 1748, have been discovered among his papers. They were made by him for an almanac, then published in New York, and which he continued to supply for several successive years.

Through the experience of running the business Sherman became distrusting of currency. In 1752 he wrote a pamphlet titled "A Caveat against Injustice", under the pseudonym of Phileunomos.<sup>[8]</sup>

About this time a providential circumstance led him to aspire after a higher station in life. He was requested by a friend to seek for him legal advice in a neighboring town. To prevent embarrassment and secure the accurate representation of the case, he committed it to paper as well as he could, before he left home. In stating the facts, the lawyer observed that Mr. Sherman frequently recurred to a manuscript which he held in his hand. As it was necessary to make an application, by way of petition, to the proper tribunal, he desired the paper to be left in his hands, provided it contained a statement of the case from which a petition might be framed. Mr. Sherman reluctantly consented, telling him that it was merely a memorandum drawn up by himself for his own convenience. The lawyer, after reading it, remarked, with an expression of surprise, that, with a few alterations in form, it was equal to any petition which he could have prepared himself, and that no other was requisite. Having then made some inquiries relative to Mr. Sherman's situation and prospects in life, he advised him to devote his attention to the study of the law. But his circumstances and duties did not permit him, at once, to follow this counsel. The numerous family, which the recent death of his father had made, in a considerable degree, dependent on him for support and education, required his constant exertions in other employments. But the intimation which he there received, that his mind was fitted to higher pursuits, no doubt induced him at that early period of life, to devote his leisure moments to those studies which led him to honor and distinguished usefulness.

At the age of twenty-eight years, he was married to Miss Elizabeth Hartwell, of Stoughton, Massachusetts, by whom he had seven children. She died in October, 1760. Two of his children died in New Milford, and two after his removal to New Haven. In 1763, he was married to Miss Rebecca Prescott, of Danvers, Massachusetts, by whom he had eight children.

## Public Service

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In May, 1759, he was appointed one of the justices of the court of common pleas for the county. He was, for many years, the treasurer of Yale College. From that institution he received the honorary degree of master of arts. After success, in some measure, had crowned his efforts, he still continued to apply himself to his studies, with the most unremitted diligence. Encouragement, instead of elating him, only prompted him to greater effort. In the profession which he had chosen, perhaps more than in any other, men are compelled to rely on their own resources. Such is the competition, so constant is the collision of various minds, that ignorance and incompetency will surely be detected and exposed.

In 1766, he was appointed a judge of the superior court of Connecticut. In the same year he was chosen an assistant, or member of the upper house of the legislature. The first office he sustained for twenty-three years, the last for nineteen years; after which a law was enacted rendering the two offices

incompatible, and he chose to continue in the office of judge. It is uniformly acknowledged, by those who witnessed his conduct and abilities on the bench, that he discovered in the application of the principles of law, and the rules of evidence to the cases before him, the same sagacity that distinguished him as a legislator. His legal opinions were received with great deference by the profession, and their correctness was almost universally acknowledged. During the last four years, in which he was judge, the late Chief Justice Ellsworth was an associate judge of the same court;4<sup>th</sup>nd from the period of his appointment, in 1785, until the death of Mr. Sherman, a close intimacy subsisted between them. The elder president Adams remarks, that it is praise enough to say that Mr. Ellsworth told me that he had made Mr. Sherman his model in his youth. Indeed, I never knew two men more alike, except that the Chief Justice had the advantage of a liberal education, and somewhat more extensive reading. The period of our revolutionary struggle now drew near. Roger Sherman, as it might have been expected, was one of the few, who from the commencement of hostilities, foresaw what would be the probable issue. He engaged in the defence of our liberties, with the deliberate firmness of an experienced statesman, conscious of the magnitude of the undertaking, and sagacious in devising the means for successful opposition.

## **Continental Congress**

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In August, 1774, Mr. Sherman, in conjunction with Joseph Trumbull, Eliphalet Dyer, and Silas Deane, was nominated delegate to the General Congress of the colonies. He was present at the opening of the first congress. He continued a member of this body for the long period of nineteen years, (till his death in 1793,) whenever the law, requiring a rotation in office, admitted it. One of the most important early efforts of the Congress of which Sherman took part, was the passage of the Continental Association.

In his new post of duty, he soon acquired distinguished reputation. Others were more admired for popular eloquence, but in that assembly of great men, there was no one whose judgment was more respected, or whose opinions were more influential. His venerable appearance, his republican simplicity, the inflexibility of his principles, and the decisive weight of his character, commanded universal homage. In the fatiguing and very arduous business of committees, he was indefatigable. He was always thorough in his investigations, and all his proceedings were marked by system. Among the principal committees of which Mr. Sherman was a member, were those to prepare instructions for the army in Canada; to establish regulations in regard to the trade of the United Colonies; to regulate the currency of the country; to furnish supplies for the army; to devise ways and means for providing ten millions of dollars for the expenses of the current year; to concert a plan of military operations for the campaign of 1776; to prepare and digest a form of confederation; and to repair to headquarters at New York, and examine into the state of the army.

## **Drafting of the Declaration**

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On the 11th of June, 1776, in conjunction with John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Robert R. Livingston, Mr. Sherman was appointed on the Committee of Five to prepare the Declaration Of Independence. The committee was elected by ballot. The Declaration, as it is well known, was written by Jefferson. What amount of influence was exerted by Sherman in carrying the measure through the congress, is not certainly known. The records of the proceedings of that illustrious assembly are very imperfect. John Adams says of Sherman that he was "one of the soundest and strongest pillars of the revolution."

# Mayor of New Haven

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While he was performing the most indefatigable labors in congress, he devoted unremitting attention to duties at home. During the war, he was a member of the governor's council of safety. In 1784, he was elected mayor of New Haven, an office which he continued to hold during the remainder of his life. About the close of the war, the legislature of Connecticut assigned to a committee of two, the arduous service of revising the laws of the State. Mr. Sherman was one of this committee.

## Constitutional Convention

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He was appointed in 1787, in conjunction with Dr. William Samuel Johnson, and Mr. Oliver Ellsworth, a delegate to the Philadelphia Convention to form the Constitution of the United States. Among his manuscripts a paper has been found, containing a series of propositions prepared by him for the amendment of the old articles of confederation, the greater part of which are incorporated, in substance, in the new constitution. In the debates in that convention, Mr. Sherman bore a conspicuous part. In a letter to Gen. Floyd, soon after, he says, "Perhaps a better constitution could not be made upon mere speculation. If upon experience, it should be found to be deficient, it provides an easy and peaceable mode of making amendments. But, if the constitution should be adopted, and the several States choose some of their wisest and best men, from time to time, to administer the government, I believe it will not want any amendment. I hope that kind Providence, which guarded these States through a dangerous and distressing war, to peace and liberty, will still watch over them and guide them in the way of safety."

His exertions in procuring the ratification of the constitution in Connecticut, were conspicuous and successful. He published a series of papers over the signature of "Citizen," which Mr. Ellsworth says, materially influenced the public mind in favor of its adoption. After the ratification of the constitution, he was immediately elected a representative of the State in congress. Though approaching the seventieth year of his age, he yet took a prominent part in the great topics of discussion, which came before Congress.

## Views on Slavery

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On the 11th of February, 1790, the Quakers presented an address to the house on the subject of the "licentious wickedness of the African trade for slaves." A long and violent debate occurred on the propriety of its being referred to a committee. Some of the southern members opposed it with great vehemence and acrimony. Mr. Scott, of Pennsylvania, replied, in an eloquent appeal to the justice and humanity of the house. Mr. Sherman, perceiving that opposition would merely serve to inflame the already highly excited feelings of members, with his usual calmness, remarked that it was probable the committee would understand their business, and they might, perhaps, bring in such a report as would be satisfactory to gentlemen on both sides of the house. Mr. Sherman and his colleagues were triumphant: forty-three members voting in favor of the commitment of the memorial, and eleven in opposition.

Mr. Sherman uniformly opposed the amendments to the constitution, which were at various times submitted to the house. "I do not suppose," said he, "the constitution to be perfect, nor do I imagine, if congress and all the legislatures on the continent, were to revise it, that their labors would perfect it."

He maintained that the more important objects of government ought first to be attended to; that the executive portion of it needed organization, as well as the business of the revenue and judiciary.

## Later life

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In 1791, a vacancy having occurred in the senate of the United States, he was elected to fill that elevated station.

On July 23, 1793, this great and excellent man was gathered to his fathers, in the seventy-third year of his age. He died in full possession of all his powers, both of mind and of body.<sup>[9]</sup>

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## External links

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- [Roger Sherman \(https://books.google.com/books?id=3MwzAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA77\)](https://books.google.com/books?id=3MwzAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA77)
- [The Life of Roger Sherman \(https://books.google.com/books?id=mWYsAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover\)](https://books.google.com/books?id=mWYsAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover)

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