



Elbridge Gerry

With the mood of the American people having shifted toward independence, many of the state legislatures decided to replace their passive-minded delegates. The two new delegates from Massachusetts were John Hancock and the lesser-known Elbridge Gerry—both were unwavering patriots. Gerry did not arrive until February 1776, but immediately made his presence felt. He was extremely vocal—on the floor of Congress, as well as in small private meetings—and convinced many of the undecided delegates that freedom would be achieved only through independence. In fact, John Adams said, “If every man [in Congress] was a Gerry, the Liberties of America would be safe against the Gates of Earth and Hell.” On August 2, during the signing ceremony, the Massachusetts contingent was the second group to be called to the signing table. The last of the Massachusetts delegation to sign was Elbridge Gerry.

Thomas Gerry, the father of our subject, immigrated to America from England in 1730 and settled in Marblehead, Massachusetts. He was a successful merchant, controlling ships and extensive trading routes. He also maintained a leadership role in both state politics and the local militia. Elbridge Gerry’s mother, Elizabeth, was from the Greenleaf family who

were also heavily involved in the mercantile industry. Together, Thomas and Elizabeth had eleven children, though only five reached adulthood.

Elbridge Gerry was born in Marblehead, Massachusetts, on July 17, 1744. He was given an excellent education that began with private tutors, continued with an undergraduate degree from Harvard in 1762, and culminated with a master's degree three years later. Soon after, he entered the family business, whereby he amassed a handsome fortune of his own. His business success, superior intellect, and high ethics earned him the trust of the good people of his community. Even though his business relied heavily on trade with Great Britain, he was extremely vocal about the burdensome taxation policies of Parliament. He willingly entered into non-importation and non-exportation agreements, which were created to counter the Crown's encroachments. During those years, he was in constant communication with all the leading patriots of Massachusetts and soon became completely obnoxious to the Royal government, but he was loved by the common folks.

In 1772, Gerry's public career was launched when he won a seat in the provincial general court. While in the legislature, he demonstrated great energy and a special gift for devising complex plans for the execution of all the Whig-inspired resolutions. He was always a fierce opponent of the Crown. In fact, he established Marblehead's Committee of Correspondence—the second such network in the province (after Boston). During the summer of 1774, he was chosen as a delegate to the First Continental Congress, but chose not to attend due to the recent death of his father.

The people of Massachusetts finally got their way when Gerry arrived in Congress in the early part of 1776. He supported Lee's resolution and signed the Declaration on August 2. The following year, he became more involved with the Continental Army, visiting the troops at Valley Forge and then rallying for their support before Congress. In 1783, with the War of Independence effectively won, Gerry resigned from Congress so that he might attend to his personal affairs and business, both of which had suffered in his absence.

As Gerry settled back into civilian life, his focus shifted to his domestic fulfillment. Ann Thompson, a young lady who was twenty years his junior, came into his life. She was from a wealthy New York family who was also in the mercantile business, so they had much in common. They were married in 1786 and eventually brought ten children into the world.

The Constitutional Convention that was convened in Philadelphia during the summer of 1787 attracted statesmen from every corner of the union. The people of Massachusetts once again called upon Gerry to represent their interests. In that body, he was one of the most vocal members, which was completely consistent with his nature. He argued for a distinct line between the state governments and federal authority, and he fought against the latter gaining too much power. He also was disturbed by the absence of clauses that would protect the individual rights of the people—so much so that at the conclusion of the convention, he refused to sign the Constitution. There were only a few members who took such a strong stance. He had developed a reputation for being opposed to a large central government—Gerry had become an anti-Federalist.

With the Constitution adopted, Gerry took his opposition down to the state level. He published a letter—which was widely circulated—detailing his opposition to it. However, once the Constitution became the organic law of the United States of America, he embraced it. He was immediately elected to the House of Representatives, where he toiled tirelessly for the Bill of Rights. He remained in that body until 1792, after which he semi-retired and returned to his home, where he could once again experience the domestic joys of his young family. Other than a short assignment to France (under President John Adams) as an American commissioner, he remained in Marblehead until 1810, when he was elected governor of Massachusetts. It was a narrow victory. Gerry was victorious again in his 1811 campaign, but lost his reelection bid in 1812, even though that same year his party swept the state senate—the success they enjoyed was due solely to one of Gerry’s vintage “complex plans.”^{ap}

^{ap} Elbridge Gerry’s “complex plan” required some redistricting of the Massachusetts political map into odd shapes in order to secure the most possible votes for his party. On March 26, 1812, the *Boston Gazette* published a political cartoon in which the Essex County state senate district was depicted as a strangely shaped animal—one complete with wings, claws, and a dragon’s head—to bring attention to some of Gerry’s newly drawn districts. The wording in that cartoon included “Gerry-mander.” It was the first time the word had been used, and since then, the term “Gerrymandering” has always been used in conjunction with any political party redrawing district maps for their constituent’s voting advantage.

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In 1812, the same year Gerry lost his governorship, he was asked to run with James Madison as his vice president. He was chosen because the party believed he could deliver the northern vote. He did, and Madison went on to win an easy reelection. Gerry was sworn into office in March 1813, but did not survive his first term. On November 23, 1814, Elbridge Gerry died from a hemorrhage of the lungs while fulfilling the responsibilities of his office. He was buried in the Congressional Cemetery, Washington, DC.