

# Famous New Yorker: Robert R. Livingston

Robert R. Livingston helped create the Declaration of Independence, but never got to sign the historic document. Fortunately, Livingston had more opportunities to shape early American history.

The son of Judge Robert Livingston, Robert R. Livingston was born in New York City on November 27, 1746. He graduated from King's College in 1765 and studied law with a cousin before being admitted to the bar in 1770. In 1773, he was appointed Recorder of the City of New York. He presided over criminal trials before losing his post in 1775.

Livingston was replaced because he had spoken out in favor of American rights against the British colonial regime. He became a local patriot leader, then a New York delegate to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. Livingston was a moderate, warning against cutting ties with Britain too quickly, even though he thought the colonies would be independent eventually. Congress appointed Livingston to a five-man committee to draft a declaration of independence partly to make the document more acceptable to New York.

Livingston couldn't vote for the Declaration because New York hadn't issued instructions to its delegation. Before he could sign it, Livingston was recalled to New York to take part in an independence convention. By the time he reached New York, the convention had already approved the Declaration. Livingston played an important role in drafting New York's first state constitution before rejoining Congress in 1779. In reprisal, the British burned Livingston's home and his father's estate at Clermont, Columbia County, in 1777.

In New York, Livingston advocated the creation of a Board of Revision that would review all new legislation and the office of Chancellor, a Chancery Court judge who heard equity cases and appeals. He became the state's first Chancellor, and acquired the title as a nickname for the rest of his life. In Congress, he became Secretary of Foreign Affairs and supervised peace negotiations with Britain at war's end.

Livingston supported the strong federal government created by the U.S. Constitution of 1787, but soon joined the opposition faction led by Thomas Jefferson. He ran unsuccessfully for Governor in 1795, but returned to public life when President Jefferson appointed him Ambassador to France in 1801. In that post, he negotiated the Louisiana Purchase with Napoleon's government, vastly expanding America's western territory. Livingston considered the purchase his greatest accomplishment.

While in France, Livingston saw an opportunity to advance his own fortunes. He had been trying to develop steam-powered boats for years at home, and had a 20-year monopoly on steamboat navigation in New York before he even had a boat. While Livingston's plans had failed, inventor and fellow American, Robert Fulton suggested crucial technical innovations. After they returned to America, the Clermont, named after the Livingston family estate, became the first successful steamboat in 1807.

Livingston and Fulton's project eventually improved communications and expanded trade opportunities for all Americans. By the time Robert R. Livingston died on February 26, 1813, he had done much to make his country free, make it grow, and make it prosperous in generations to come.

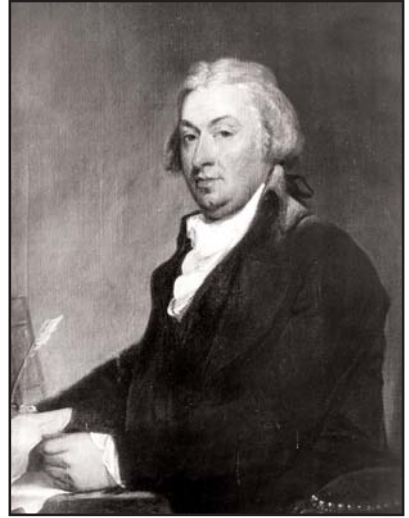


Photo of a portrait by Gilbert Stuart, courtesy of New York State Archives



**Clermont** is located on the east shore of the Hudson River approximately 50 south of the state's capital, Albany.

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*For a virtual tour of the Clermont Estate, Livingston's home go to [www.friendsofclermont.org](http://www.friendsofclermont.org). This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA - Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2008.*