

## JOHN MORTON LIFE

John Morton (1724 to 1777)  
Ann Justice (Justis, Justic) (wife, 1732 to 1799)

## Signer of Declaration of Independence

Congressman John Morton was a gravely troubled man as the voice vote on the Virginia resolution for independence from Great Britain neared the Pennsylvania delegation late in the afternoon of July 2, 1776.

Morton had twice been elected to the Continental Congress on a platform of reconciling with England rather than rebelling against the mother country—a public policy that was in accord with his personal credo. "I most sincerely hope for reconciliation," he had said earlier, "for the contest is horrid...The longer the wound is left, the worse it will be to heal."

But now the mighty British armada converging on New York was forcing him to realize that King George III would proffer the olive branch only on the end of a bayonet. In any case, the Pennsylvania Assembly had the month before reconsidered its instructions of the previous November against any proposition "that might cause or lead to a separation from Great Britain."

The latest instructions to the delegates had concluded: "The situation of public affairs is since so greatly altered, that we now think ourselves justifiable in removing the restrictions laid upon you." In typical legislative double-talk, the Assemblymen had simply attempted to wash their hands of responsibility.

Moving steadily from north to south, from New Hampshire to Georgia, the roll call had reached New Jersey. That colony's five delegates—Witherspoon, Stockton, Hopkinson, Clark, Hart—"high-charged with independence," had voted unanimously for the resolution.

Now the men from the Penn proprietorship faced the acid test. Of the seven accredited delegates, only five were present on the State House floor, John Dickinson and Robert Mor-

ris having absented themselves in order that their 'nay' votes might not thwart what both men felt was the popular will. John Morton might have joined the two absentees but, recalling that the Assembly's instructions emphasized that the primary purpose of the delegates was to "serve the good people of Pennsylvania with fidelity," he stayed at his post.

A deeply religious man, Morton may have prayed that the votes of his Pennsylvania colleagues would lift the cup from his lips. But this was not to be, for when Congressional Secretary Charles Thomson intoned "Pennsylvania," Charles Humphreys and Thomas Willing promptly voted 'nay.' Wise old Benjamin Franklin voted 'aye,' as did James Wilson, who had long been tossed on the churning tides of public opinion.

The tie-breaking vote was now in the hands of John Morton. Worn by the inner conflict between his convictions and his duty, he arose and firmly voted 'aye.' Pennsylvania had supported a declaration of independence by the slender margin of three votes for to two against.

Little is known of John Morton's ancestry or early years. His great-grandfather emigrated from Sweden and settled near Philadelphia about the year 1654, but the Mortons had been neither distinguished nor prosperous. After the death of his father, John Morton's mother married a surveyor, a professional Morton himself practiced with such success that he was elected to the Pennsylvania Assembly at the age of forty.

Further evidence of Morton's reputation for good judgment and integrity among royalists and rebels alike was his election to the Stamp Act Congress of 1765, and his appointment as Justice of the Peace, a post of considerable pres-



JOHN MORTON  
(1724—April, 1777)

"...the most glorious service..."

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Signers of the  
Declaration of Independence

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tige and authority usually given only to the gentry. He also served as sheriff of Chester (later Delaware) County, capping his career under the Crown as an associate justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.

It is one of the harsher ironies of the American rebellion that John Morton was severely criticized by the constituents whose will he thought he represented when he supported the Declaration of Independence. He may have underestimated the persistently strong loyalist sentiment among Pennsylvanians of all classes and creeds. On the other hand, he may have simply chosen to support his changed convictions. In any case, he was cruelly ostracized by his constituents, friends and relatives.

A sensitive, moody man, Morton became ill in the winter of 1777 and died in the first month of spring. He was fifty-two years of age, the first of the Signers to die, and was survived by his wife, Ann Justis, and eight children. Thirty-two of Morton's descendants are on the roster of the Descendants of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence, but none has added luster to the Signer's name.

John Morton grievously regretted the loss of his friends but not the act that alienated them. "Tell them," he said on his deathbed, "tell them they will all live to see the hour when they shall acknowledge it (signing of the Declaration) to have been the most glorious service that I ever rendered to my country."