

# A Forgotten Patriot

by

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## A Forgotten Patriot

A leather hand reaches from a coat pocket and effortlessly pushes open the Philadelphia High Street tavern door. Having escaped the whipping salt-water wind, a weather-worn face emerges out from under his dark woolen coat to scan the room for the planned rendezvous. Beside the roaring fireplace, a large man looks up from behind a table littered with papers and flickering candles. As the sea-faring man sits down across from the patriotic merchant, his deep voice confirms the arrangement, “Mr. Morris?” Robert Morris nods and pushes the letter of reprisal<sup>i</sup> towards the privateer, “Captain, the enemy has multiple ships coming up the coast line with needed arms, ammunition and gunpowder. I’m confident you can profit dearly as you acquire their cargo.” Both men nod in silence as the Captain buttons his coat in preparation for his journey back to his ship through the bitter cold evening. An imaginary scene similar to this one, likely played out multiple times, and through it a lost patriot can be reintroduced.<sup>ii</sup>

History long remembers the knight whose honor shines brighter than his armor, a battle-field general whose strategic thinking finds victory against insurmountable odds, the once farmer whose incredible bravery is discovered in battle. However, memories swiftly fade for those contributors whose patriotic actions are shrouded in mystery or altruistic gifts of talent and money. Robert Morris was one of these men; forgotten in the shadow of war heroes such as General Washington and John Paul Jones and political statesmen like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. While not known for any significant battle or prodigious treaty, Morris clearly deserves to be considered among the greatest of American founding fathers as he demonstrated intellectual courage beyond many of the most important patriots, imbued an

innovative capitalist spirit into America, and embodied a willingness to sacrifice all for the cause of freedom.

On July 1, 1776, Robert Morris, not convinced independence was the right solution, led the Pennsylvania delegation to a 4-3 split decision vote against the Continental Congressional motion calling for America's independence. As Congress reconvened the following day, Morris refused to vote thereby allowing the other Pennsylvania delegates to vote for independence. As a result of his intellectual courage, history recorded 12 states in favor with no states opposed since the New York delegation voted later.<sup>iii</sup> Once the independence die had been cast, he devoted himself to the Revolution largely through funding and ensuring supplies continued to flow to General Washington and his rebel army.<sup>iv</sup> Furthermore, Morris signed his name to America's Declaration of Independence just to the right of the document's most famous signer, John Hancock.<sup>v</sup> Again demonstrating his courageous critical thinking, Morris later said of his signing, "I am not one of those politicians that run testy when my own plans are not adopted. I think it is the duty of a good citizen to follow when he cannot lead."<sup>vi</sup>

Economic freedom is a critical achievement for a fledging country attempting to gain its independence as it establishes world recognition. Morris realized in order for America to be free, it needed to be self-sufficient, trusted and respected by other countries.<sup>vii</sup> To gain economic freedom, he set up three of the now five Economic Freedom of the World indexes; sound money, international trade, and regulation.<sup>viii</sup> Morris knew the Continental currency held no value as the Revolution waged on, so he came up with his own system of Morris notes,<sup>ix</sup> as sound money. Morris notes were recognized by international traders, so early America could pay for food, supplies, and provide soldiers' their wages. Morris and his notes facilitated international trade with his fleet of merchant ships and connections, and enabled America to trade with all countries

without England's consent.<sup>x</sup> With his reputation, Morris set up regulation by paying for both privateered and merchant goods himself, and adjudicated disputes within the Philadelphia harbor.<sup>xi</sup> As America was able to adopt these core economic principles, other nations started to recognize America as a world trade partner, and thus an independent country. These steps show Morris' economic brilliance as he paved the way for the capitalistic spirit to flourish in America.

Demonstrating his selflessness as a patriot, Morris donated considerable sums of money, his mercantile expertise, and resources to the revolutionary cause, not expecting remuneration. Chief among the resources, Morris supplied a number of ships, starting with his company's best ship, the Black Prince, which was refitted into the Continental Navy's first ship, the USS Alfred.<sup>xii</sup> He owned and lost many privateering ships that helped raid English supply vessels carrying crucial war materials for the war. When successful, the raids would provide acquired supplies and ammunition to support the revolutionary soldiers. Additionally, money he amassed would be used to back Morris notes, which he used to fund the revolution thus earning the rightful title, "The Financier of the American Revolution".<sup>xiii</sup> Morris clearly demonstrated that he was involved by not only selflessly sharing his ships and money, but also he risked his personal reputation just like many of the founding fathers thus earning the right to stand amongst them as an equal.

Through his courageous intellect, economic brilliance, and selfless forfeitures, Robert Morris is truly an American patriot. While Morris wasn't a primary framer of the constitution or a battlefield general who led an army through an incredible campaign, his significant contributions enabled these world changing events to occur as a powerful economic invisible hand. Through a closing fictional scene perhaps Morris' legacy can be reignited, from the same tavern, the door opens and Robert Morris emerges to inspect seven horse drawn carts burdened

with the ammunition and gunpowder. Smiling to a Continental Army Colonel as he hands his letter addressed to General Washington, and says. "Please tell the General to stay warm and dry this Christmas, and I will arrange for more supplies as good fortune allows. God speed to him as our nation's independence is in his able hands."

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> "United States Constitution." loc.gov. The Library of Congress, 2013. accessed 19 December 2013. Web.

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/bdsdcc:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(bdsdccc0801\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/bdsdcc:@field(DOCID+@lit(bdsdccc0801))). The United States Constitution states that the congress shall have the power to grant letter of marque and reprisal, without separately addressing privateer commission.

<sup>ii</sup> Opening and closing paragraphs include fictional scenes created to show possible interactions that might have occurred in Robert Morris' life as a patriot.

<sup>iii</sup> Rappleye, Charles. *Robert Morris Financier of the American Revolution*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010. Print. p. 29-30.

<sup>iv</sup> Hart, Charles Henry. *Robert Morris, the Financier of the American Revolution: A Sketch*. Philadelphia: Collins, Printer, 1877. Print. p. 6.

<sup>v</sup> "Declaration of Independence." loc.gov. The Library of Congress, 2013. accessed 20 December 2013. Web. <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/DeclarInd.html>.

<sup>vi</sup> "Historical Documents" poconohistory.com Pocono History, 2013. accessed 25 December 2013. Web. <http://www.poconohistory.com/HistoricalDocuments.htm>.

<sup>vii</sup> Hart, Charles Henry, p. 12.

<sup>viii</sup> "What Is Economic Freedom?" Economic Freedom. Charles Koch Institute, 2011. accessed 22 December 2013. Web.

<sup>ix</sup> Rappleye. p. 106-108.

<sup>x</sup> Gould, David. *Life of Robert Morris an Eminent Merchant of Philadelphia, a Signer of the Declaration of American Independence, and Superintendent of Finance for the United States, from 1781 to 1784 ; with Extracts from His Speeches, Illustrating His Biography, and the Early History of Finance, Banking, and Commerce in the United States*. Boston: L.W. Kimball, 1834. Print. p. 18.

<sup>xi</sup> Oberholtzer, Ellis Paxson. "Senator Morris." *Robert Morris, Patriot and Financier*. New York: Macmillan, 1903. Print. p. 238-39.

<sup>xii</sup> "USS Alfred (1774)". Military Factory.com. JR Potts, 2013. accessed 26 December 2013. Web. [http://www.militaryfactory.com/ships/detail.asp?ship\\_id=USS-Alfred-1774](http://www.militaryfactory.com/ships/detail.asp?ship_id=USS-Alfred-1774)

<sup>xiii</sup> Rappleye. p. 16.