From the Declaration to Valley Forge: John Morton's Family and the Work of Independence

As the United States marks the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, can appear to stand alone: a moment of political clarity in Philadelphia, preserved in memorable words and a famous parchment. Valley Forge reminds us that the Declaration was not self-executing. Congress could announce that the colonies were "Free and Independent States," but an army still had to defend that claim, governments had to sustain it, and individuals had to accept the danger and sacrifice it imposed.

The family of Pennsylvania signer John Morton offers an unusually direct way to connect those two parts of the national story. Morton died before Washington's army entered Valley Forge. Yet his son Sketchley participated in Pennsylvania's revolutionary political and wartime mobilization in 1776; his future son-in-law, Captain John Davis, served at Valley Forge with the 9th Pennsylvania Regiment; and another son, John, is identified in later family histories with a surgeon's mate appointed to the 4th Continental Artillery during the encampment. Their records place political decision, provincial organization, military endurance, and medical service within one Pennsylvania family, while also showing where the surviving evidence remains incomplete.

A Declaration in Need of an Army

Congress voted for independence on July 2, 1776, adopted the text of the Declaration on July 4, and ordered the document engrossed on parchment later that month. Most delegates began signing the engrossed copy on August 2. That chronology matters because the Declaration was both an act and an argument. The vote severed the political connection with Great Britain; the text explained why the separation was justified and proclaimed principles by which the new nation would be judged.

The Declaration's claims were sweeping, even as the society that issued them remained unequal. Its language of natural rights and government by consent reached beyond the limited political community of 1776 and became a standard later generations would invoke, contest, and expand. Yet in the immediate crisis, those claims depended upon a less elevated reality: recruiting soldiers, supplying regiments, maintaining roads and hospitals, collecting revenue, and holding an army together after defeat.

Eighteen months after independence was declared, more than 12,000 soldiers and roughly 400 women and children entered Valley Forge on December 19, 1777. They built about 1,500 huts and two miles of fortifications. Hunger, shortages, exposure, and disease created a prolonged institutional test, and illness killed nearly 2,000 people.

Valley Forge therefore belongs inside the history of the Declaration. The encampment showed what it meant to maintain independence after proclaiming it. The paper nation announced in Philadelphia had to become a functioning military and political community. The Morton family and its Davis connection help give that transformation individual names.

John Morton and Pennsylvania's Decision

John Morton was born in 1725 in Ridley Township, then in Chester County and now in Delaware County. Descended from the early Finnish settlers of the Delaware Valley, he became a farmer, surveyor, justice, sheriff, judge, and exceptionally experienced member of Pennsylvania's colonial Assembly. He served nineteen terms and was unanimously chosen Speaker in October 1775. His career was grounded less in revolutionary performance than in local government, legislation, land, and law.

That background makes his vote in 1776 especially revealing. Pennsylvania was divided over independence. Benjamin Franklin and James Wilson supported separation, while John Dickinson and other delegates remained opposed or cautious. Morton joined Franklin and Wilson. When Dickinson and Robert Morris absented themselves from the final vote on the independence resolution, Pennsylvania cast a three-to-two vote in favor. Morton's choice was decisive within the Pennsylvania delegation, though later retellings sometimes overstate it as the single vote upon which national independence depended.

Morton then signed the Declaration with Pennsylvania's other signers. His importance lies in the conjunction of local responsibility and continental consequence. A man formed by county courts and the provincial Assembly helped commit a divided Pennsylvania to a national break with Britain. He placed his name behind an assertion whose military cost was only beginning to become clear.

Morton did not live to see Valley Forge. He died at his Ridley Township home on April 1, 1777, nine months after the Declaration was adopted and more than eight months before the encampment began. His connection runs through the war inherited by his family and through the service of three younger people linked to his household: his sons Sketchley and John, and his future son-in-law John Davis.

A Family Drawn into the Revolution

The Morton family's story shows how quickly a congressional decision became a family obligation. The elder Morton's public act belonged to the political founding of the United States. His son Sketchley took part in Pennsylvania's revolutionary transition and local wartime mobilization. His son John was remembered in later family and county histories as a Continental medical officer. His daughter Ann later married a Pennsylvania officer whose service stretched from the first disastrous campaigns of the war through Valley Forge and Yorktown. The signer's household thus touched legislation, provincial organization, wartime logistics, medicine, and Continental command.

Ann Morton and John Davis married after the war, so Davis was not yet Morton's son-in-law while at Valley Forge. Later generations knew him as General Davis because he became a brigadier general in the Pennsylvania militia in 1800. During the Continental Army's winter at Valley Forge, however, he was Captain John Davis. These distinctions reveal the different stages of a Revolutionary life. The young Continental captain who endured years of war later entered a signer's family and served his county as a judge.

Major Sketchley Morton and Pennsylvania's Turn Toward Independence

Another of John Morton's sons belongs in this story: Sketchley Morton. Contemporary proceedings list "Major Sketchley Morton" among the deputies from Chester County to Pennsylvania's Provincial Conference, which opened at Carpenters' Hall on June 18, 1776. The conference met while Pennsylvania's existing government and its delegation in the Continental Congress remained divided over independence.

The Provincial Conference was not itself the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention. It declared the existing provincial government inadequate, called a separate convention to form a new government on the authority of the people, and on June 24 announced its willingness to concur in a congressional vote declaring the colonies free and independent states. This creates a striking father-and-son connection to the Declaration: while John Morton deliberated in Congress, Sketchley participated in the provincial movement that cleared the way for Pennsylvania's political break with Britain.

The timing makes the father-and-son juxtaposition even more striking. On June 14, four days before the Provincial Conference opened, the existing Pennsylvania Assembly—still presided over by John Morton—entered revised instructions removing its earlier prohibition on measures that might lead toward separation from Great Britain. The instructions were signed "By Order of the House, John Morton, Speaker." When Sketchley took his seat at Carpenters' Hall on June 18,

father and son thus stood on adjacent sides of Pennsylvania's institutional transition: John at the head of the old provincial legislature, Sketchley among the deputies helping create the political machinery that would replace it. They were not ideological opposites—John Morton himself was moving toward independence—but the contrast between an "Old Guard" Assembly and a "New Guard" revolutionary conference captures the generational and institutional change occurring within a single family.

Sketchley's work did not end with the conference. He had already been named in December 1774 to Chester County's committee charged with carrying out the Continental Association. On July 26, 1776, provincial authorities approved a request that he furnish supplies to guard boats stationed in Darby Creek. These records give concrete substance to his role in the local political and logistical machinery of the Revolution. Later sources also identify him with Pennsylvania militia service, though no record reviewed places him at Valley Forge.

The same family story also carries one of the Revolution's central contradictions. Chester County's official 1780 slave register, compiled under Pennsylvania's Gradual Abolition Act, lists Sketchley Morton, a Ridley Township grazier, as the owner of an enslaved fourteen-year-old boy named Jeffrey. The act did not immediately emancipate people already enslaved. The record therefore brings the Declaration's unresolved tension close to the Morton household itself: expansive language of liberty existed alongside slavery in the Pennsylvania society fighting for independence.

Captain John Davis at Valley Forge

John Davis was born in Chester County on February 28, 1753. He was commissioned a first lieutenant in the Pennsylvania Rifle Regiment on April 6, 1776, and served at the Battle of Long Island on August 27. On November 15, 1776, he became a captain in the 9th Pennsylvania Regiment. By the time the army reached Valley Forge, Davis had already experienced the collapse of the New York campaign and the dangers of the 1777 struggle for Philadelphia.

As a captain in the 9th Pennsylvania, Davis served at Brandywine on September 11, Paoli on September 19, and Germantown on October 4, followed by the Whitemarsh encampment in November and early December. Those actions formed part of the Philadelphia Campaign. The army did not arrive after a neatly concluded campaign; it entered winter quarters after months of maneuver, battle, loss, and exhaustion.

Davis's Valley Forge service is unusually well documented. The Pennsylvania Society of the Cincinnati places him with the 9th Pennsylvania throughout the encampment, from December 19, 1777, to June 19, 1778. The Valley Forge Muster Roll Project likewise lists Captain John Davis

among the regiment's company commanders. The 9th Pennsylvania entered the encampment with 229 officers and men assigned, only 146 of them fit for duty. It departed with 212 assigned and 117 fit. A Continental captain was responsible for discipline, returns, assignments, equipment, and the welfare and readiness of his company. At Valley Forge, those ordinary responsibilities became urgent amid shortages, sickness, and the continual need to maintain order.

Davis's presence also helps correct the older image of Valley Forge as a static pause. He arrived after Brandywine, Paoli, Germantown, and Whitemarsh. Nine days after the army left the encampment, he fought at Monmouth. He later served at Springfield and Bergen Heights, transferred to the 1st Pennsylvania Regiment in January 1781, joined the Southern Campaign, and took part in the siege of Yorktown. He remained in service until June 1783.

The arc of his career is what makes him so compelling. Davis connects defeat on Long Island, the defense of Philadelphia, the Valley Forge winter, the army's performance at Monmouth, and the culminating victory at Yorktown. He was not a famous general passing briefly through the encampment. He was one of the long-serving Continental officers whose persistence gave the Declaration military durability.

After the war, Davis married Ann Morton, the signer's daughter. In 1800 he was appointed a brigadier general in the Pennsylvania militia, and in 1803 he became an associate judge of Chester County, an office he held until his death in 1827. His postwar life returned military service to the local civic world from which John Morton had emerged. The family connection therefore ran in both directions: from local public service to national revolution, and from Continental service back to county government.

Dr. John Morton and the 4th Continental Artillery

The signer's son, also named John Morton, followed a less visible path. Later family histories and military compilations identify him with the John Morton appointed surgeon's mate in Colonel Thomas Procter's 4th Continental Artillery Regiment on February 11, 1778. A surviving Pennsylvania military return records "John Morton, S. Mate," from Philadelphia County, with that commission date. The return firmly establishes the officer and appointment; the identification of that officer as the signer's son rests on later family and biographical sources. Because the signer's family was rooted in Chester County while the military return identifies the officer with Philadelphia County, the family identification should remain qualified.

A surgeon's mate was a junior medical officer rather than the regiment's principal surgeon. He assisted in the treatment and management of sick and injured soldiers within a medical system strained by limited medicines, uneven hospital facilities, shortages of food and clothing, and the enormous burden of disease. At Valley Forge, where disease caused nearly 2,000 deaths during the encampment, such service belonged to the central work of keeping the army alive.

The 4th Continental Artillery entered Valley Forge in January 1778 with 167 men fit for duty, and the Muster Roll Project lists a Surgeon's Mate John Morton among its regimental staff. His February 11 appointment fell during the encampment. That establishes a Valley Forge-period connection to a regiment serving there, but the records located for this essay do not independently establish where this John Morton was physically stationed on any particular date.

The younger Morton's later fate is likewise preserved chiefly in later histories rather than in a complete surviving service file. Ruth L. Springer's documentary study states that the signer's son John died as a prisoner of the British. Henry Graham Ashmead's 1884 History of Delaware County identifies the signer's third son as a Continental surgeon and adds that he died aboard the prison ship Falmouth in New York Harbor; the Descendants of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence repeats the same tradition.

Taken together, the evidence supports a real but carefully bounded connection. Later histories identify John Morton's son with Continental medical service and death in British captivity, while the army record independently places a John Morton in Procter's artillery during the Valley Forge winter. His fate offers a sharp contrast to Davis's long career: a brief medical appointment ending in captivity and early death.

Valley Forge as the Work of Independence

Placed together, the family record complicates the familiar separation between "the Founders" and "the soldiers." John Morton's vote was political, but it created obligations that others had to carry. The father-and-son juxtaposition is especially revealing: one of Morton's last consequential acts as Speaker belonged to the old provincial Assembly, while Sketchley entered the revolutionary conference that helped prepare Pennsylvania's new political order. Sketchley Morton's role then remained provincial and local, extending into wartime supply work. John Davis's service was Continental and military, protecting a political experiment whose institutions were still weak. John Morton Jr.'s story survives less cleanly.

The family also gives the Declaration a specifically Pennsylvania geography. Morton came from Ridley Township and represented Chester County. Sketchley represented the county at the Provincial Conference. Davis was a Chester County officer serving in a Pennsylvania regiment at

an encampment established within the same broader region. Ann Morton's postwar marriage joined the signer's family to a Valley Forge veteran. The national story moved through local landscapes, kinship networks, churches, courts, farms, militia associations, and county offices.

Valley Forge itself was not a single moment of miraculous transformation. That is why the muster roll matters. National anniversaries naturally emphasize documents, leaders, and decisive dates. A roster restores the scale of collective effort. It shows that independence depended on captains and surgeons' mates as well as congressmen, and on thousands of soldiers and civilians whose names rarely entered the most famous narratives. The muster roll turns the Declaration from an abstract promise into a record of human obligations.

Conclusion: From Parchment to Perseverance

John Morton never walked the hut lines at Valley Forge. He did not witness the shortages, the hospitals, the drilling, or the June departure. His death in April 1777 placed him on the political side of a story whose military consequences continued without him. Yet the war he helped authorize reached deeply into his family. Major Sketchley Morton participated in Pennsylvania's decisive provincial transition only days after his father, as Speaker of the old Assembly, signed revised instructions removing its restrictions against separation, and he later took part in local wartime supply efforts. Captain John Davis served through the entire Valley Forge encampment and continued to Monmouth and Yorktown. Later family histories associate John Morton Jr. with the surgeon's mate appointed to the 4th Continental Artillery during the winter and with a death in British captivity.

At 250, the Declaration and Valley Forge should be remembered together. The Declaration articulated why a new nation ought to exist. Valley Forge tested whether that nation could endure long enough to possess a future.

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Image: John Morton, signer of the Declaration of Independence. Unknown artist, eighteenth century. Wikimedia Commons.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:JohnMorton.jpg

Caption:

John Morton of Ridley Township represented Pennsylvania in the Continental Congress and signed the Declaration of Independence. He died on April 1, 1777, before the Valley Forge encampment. His family connected the political and military phases of the Revolution: his son Sketchley participated in Pennsylvania's June 1776 Provincial Conference and local wartime mobilization; his future son-in-law, Captain John Davis, served at Valley Forge with the 9th Pennsylvania Regiment; and later family histories identify his son John with a surgeon's mate appointed to the 4th Continental Artillery during the encampment.

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