Constitution is the historical background leading to and including the actual composition, penmanship, and engrossing of the document. However, the chronicle does not end with the engrossing; the authors go on to follow the Constitution through its acceptance, ratification, amendments, and arguments until the present time.

The second part of the book is devoted to the collective and individual biographical sketches of the thirty-nine signers, arranged in alphabetical order according to the surname of each man. These are truly thumbnail résumés of the men's lives, and sharply remind one of obituaries.

The third part of the book is devoted to a survey of historic sites and buildings. As with the other sections, this too is well written — factual and concise — with photographs of most of the locations. These items are arranged in alphabetical order according to state. Each sketch is just that, and technically accurate as to description, giving rise to the impression that each was either written or dictated by an architect.

There is but one fault in this volume, and it is purely a quibble of personal preference. The Constitution and its history are relegated to the appendix, when they surely should have comprised a section of their own. As an added measure of interest, the actual travels and locations of the original engrossed document are followed to the present time. There was a time in the 1820s when James Madison did not know the location of the original document. In 1883 it was found folded in a small tin box at the bottom of a closet at the State, War, and Navy Building.

To the historically inclined, Signers of the Constitution is a must publication, precisely because it is a concise and accurate record of a great deal of factual information that is sometimes important and sometimes trivial — but always interesting.

Richmond, Virginia

Helen Collins


Traditionally Elbridge Gerry has been portrayed as a contradictory figure. He has been recognized as a stalwart defender of civil liberties, signer of the Declaration of Independence, framer of the
Constitution, governor of Massachusetts, and vice-president of the United States. On the other hand, he has been depicted also as an obstructionist who refused to sign the Constitution, the man who disgraced his country in Paris in the XYZ Affair, and one who disliked democracy and resorted to the “gerrymander” in political struggles. But George Athan Billias, in the first full-length biography to appear since 1828, explains Gerry’s apparent paradoxes by focusing on his consistent commitment to republican ideals. Billias argues persuasively that Gerry’s decisions throughout the post-Revolutionary period reflected a faithful dedication to republican principles formed early in his career and that the new American nation was served well by this strong-willed New England statesman.

Billias, Clark University professor of history and a distinguished scholar of early America, has painstakingly researched the Gerry papers and diverse other sources to present a lucid, enthusiastic account of his subject’s political and personal life. His major contribution is a masterful analysis of Gerry’s political thought. The analysis reveals that Gerry’s greatest concern was that the unchecked exercise of power might destroy the fragile American republic. He feared power in the hands of uncontrolled masses of men such as those involved in Shays’s Rebellion. Believing in a natural hierarchical order that divided society into rulers and ruled, he looked to the “virtuous patriots” — men like himself — to save the republic from anarchy. Of greater danger to the republic, however, was the threat of excessive governmental authority and standing armies. Indeed, the most enduring features of Gerry’s republicanism were his determination to stem further grants of power to the federal government and his antimilitarism. Thus he became a leading Antifederalist and made an important contribution to the protection of the rights of citizens and states by checking the excesses of central government.

Gerry also feared political parties and violently opposed factions as the destroyers of republicanism. But when he became convinced that the Hamiltonian Federalists represented the imminent threat of militarism and monarchy in the infant United States, he joined the Jeffersonian Republicans and employed the practice of gerrymandering in Massachusetts politics. Billias demonstrates that Gerry’s conversion as a rabid Jeffersonian Republican was consistent with his lifelong dedication to protection of the American republic.

The theme of republicanism is not new in interpreting the Revolutionary generation. Since the 1950s a number of scholars, led by Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood, have interpreted the Revolution
as an intellectual movement in which the most radical changes took place in men's minds. Rather than a socio-economic or even a political change, the Revolution constituted a complete transformation in the Americans' image of themselves as a republican people. The value of Billias's study of Gerry is that it brings the lofty republican concepts down to earth. Most scholars have emphasized the abstract thoughts of the handful of theoretically-minded leaders such as Jefferson and John Adams. But Billias finds in Gerry a less abstract, more practical side of republicanism. "The precise configuration of a man's republicanism," according to Billias, "was as much emotional and experiential as it was rational and theoretical" (p. 339). Thus by illustrating that Gerry derived distinctive ideas of republicanism from the same intellectual context that influenced more cerebral statesmen, Billias has given a more accurate picture of the impact that ideas had on the Revolutionary generation. He has shown that the intellectual framework of the Revolution was more than abstract political theory; it was a meaningful cluster of ideas and moral concepts for ordinary men.

Some readers may find Billias overly protective of Gerry, particularly in the evaluation of his role as an Antifederalist and diplomat in France. But most will agree that this meticulously researched portrayal of the founder as a principled republican in turbulent times is an important contribution. It is likely to remain the standard biography of Gerry for a very long time.

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Robert Detweiler


About twelve years ago, when this reviewer was the brand-new curator of Old Economy, he was exploring in one of the second-floor rooms of the Great House and stepped up on a mound of rubbish to get a better look out of a window. When he looked down, he found that he was not standing on rubbish but on the collection of music of the Harmony Society. I suppose that every collection has its ups and downs, but this was pretty extreme even for this collection. We placed