



Figure 17.

17. John Rutherford

George Catlin, *John Rutherford*, nd. Oil on panel (86.3 x 68.6 cm). Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University. Gift of Leonard F. Loree, 0356. Photo by Peter Jacobs

Of the three 1811 commissioners, John Rutherford (1760–1840) was the only one born in Manhattan but brought the least relevant experience to the work. He spent most of his life in New Jersey, attending

to his vast, mostly inherited landholdings; at his death he was said to be the state's largest landowner. He served briefly in the New Jersey General Assembly and represented the state in the United States Senate (1790–98), resigning during his second term to retire, as an obituary put it, "to the more agreeable pursuits of private life." It seems possible that he was tapped for the street commission through the influence of fellow commissioner and relative Gouverneur Morris (Rutherford was married to a daughter of Morris's half-brother), who may have desired a pliant ally. Rutherford was a Morris chauvinist; after Morris's death, Rutherford claimed that Morris had originated the idea of the Erie Canal, an assertion Morris never made. Judging from Morris's frequent diary references to Rutherford's absences from or lateness to meetings of the street commissioners, it seems likely that Rutherford contributed the least to the commission's

work, with the headstrong visionary Morris and the skilled surveyor De Witt dominating the decision-making.

Some contemporaries, prompted by the vagaries of cursive and pronunciation, mistakenly spelled his name Rutherford, which later generations of the family, perhaps with a sigh, eventually adopted. GK