



Figure 16.

extraordinary soul who is difficult to portray adequately in a brief description. In life, he was brilliant but often out of bounds, with reactionary political opinion and unfettered personal conduct; in legacy, he is often forgotten, having failed to achieve great things. Of all his accomplishments, Manhattan's iconic street grid is perhaps his most lasting, yet his biographers often ignore it.

Morris was born (and died) at Morrisania, the 1,900-acre family estate along the Harlem River opposite upper Manhattan. Once Westchester countryside, Morrisania survives only as a neighborhood name in the urban South Bronx. He served in the Continental Congress, among numerous field and government positions during the Revolution, and was a leader of the Constitutional Convention; he penned the final draft of the Constitution and alone crafted its lyrical preamble. He served courageously as the American minister in Paris during the Terror, the only foreign minister

who remained; he was later criticized for negotiating to save the king's head.

Morris had lost an extremity of his own—his lower left leg—in a 1780 incident involving either a moving carriage or a leap from a lover's window (the record is unclear). His wooden pegleg was no hindrance to his vigorous public and private affairs; the latter, most often with the willing wives of others, were reportedly enhanced by his special appendage. Late in life Morris happily married a proper but penniless younger woman with whom he quickly had a son, stunning and embittering the expectant heirs of the inveterate bachelor.

Coming long after his national relevance had faded, Morris's street commission service remains largely unexamined, especially compared with his contemporaneous service on the first commission exploring the possibility of an Erie Canal. There is little primary material outside of brief and vague mentions in his diary and other writings. Many have

16. Gouverneur Morris

Thomas Sully, *Gouverneur Morris* (1752–1816),

1808. Oil on canvas. © Philadelphia History

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Typical of many founding fathers, Gouverneur Morris (1752–1816) was an

credited Morris with running the street commission, which presumably chose a vision of order and regularity he had for Manhattan, but we have no evidence. He never detailed the commission's work in either public or personal documents. The explanatory remarks released with the commissioners' plan in 1811 are written with Morris's elegance and clarity but no individual authorship was claimed and no early drafts have emerged that might reveal Morris's specific contributions. GK