

An Assembly of Demigods

James Wilson

Common Sense (Thomas Paine), *Pennsylvania Packet*, October 16, 1779

That Mr. Wilson is not a favorite in the State, is a matter which I presume, he is fully sensible of.

William Pierce: Sketches of Members of the Constitutional Convention, 1787

Mr. Wilson ranks among the foremost in legal and political knowledge. He has joined to a fine genius all that can set him off and show him to advantage. He is well acquainted with Man, and understands all the passions that influence him. Government seems to have been his peculiar Study, all the political institutions of the World he knows in detail, and can trace the causes and effects of every revolution from the earliest stages of the Grecian commonwealth down to the present time. No man is more clear, copious, and comprehensive than Mr. Wilson, yet he is no great Orator. He draws the attention not by the charm of his eloquence, but by the force of his reasoning. He is about 45 years old.

Otto's Biographies, Fall 1788

Distinguished lawyer. This is the man who was designated by M. Gerard as lawyer of the French nation, a position which has since been recognized as useless. Known by the name of *James the Caledonian*, which his enemies have given him. His active involvement in public affairs has deranged his fortune and has not permitted him to set his affairs straight. Moderately attached to France.

Benjamin Rush to Tench Coxe, Philadelphia, February 26, 1789

. . . J_____n is indefatigable—& confident—But more unpopular than ever. His appointment [as Chief Justice] would be very disagreeable to some of the best men in the State of Pennsylvania.

Benjamin Rush to John Adams, Philadelphia, April 22, 1789

Your influence in the Senate over which you have been called to preside, will give you great weight (without a vote) in determining upon the most suitable Characters to fill the first offices in government. Pennsylvania looks up with anxious Solicitude for the commission of Chief Justice for Mr. Wilson. It was from an expectation of this honor being conferred upon him, that he was

left out of the Senate, and House of Representatives. His Abilities & knowledge in framing the Constitution, & his zeal in promoting its establishment, have exposed him to a most virulent persecution from the Antifederalists in this state. With these our president general Mifflin has joined. . . . Should Mr. Wilson be left to sink under this opposition, I shall for ever deplore the ingratitude of republics.

John Adams to Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, March 5, 1796

Mr. Wilson's ardent Speculations had given offense to some, and his too frequent affectation of Popularity to others.

Benjamin Rush: Commonplace Book, December 1796

[After suffering bankruptcy] Judge Wilson deeply distressed; his resource was reading novels constantly.

James Iredell to Hannah Iredell, Philadelphia, August 11, 1797

All the Judges here but Wilson who unfortunately is in a manner absconding from his creditors—his Wife with him—the rest of the Family here! What a situation! It is supposed his object is to wait until he can make a more favorable adjustment of his affairs than he could in a state of arrest.

Robert Troup to Rufus King, New York, October 2, 1798

Poor [Robert] Morris remains in gaol. Judge Wilson lately died in North Carolina in the hands of the Sheriff—a victim to misfortune and liquor!