

Edmond Charles Genet Biography

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Biography

Edmond Charles Genet (1763-1834), known as Citizen Genet, French emissary to the United States, influenced American foreign relations as well as the formation of America's early two-party system.

Edmond Genet was the scion of prerevolutionary French gentry. After an aristocratic upbringing and education, in 1781 Genet followed his father into the French Foreign Ministry. He was fortunate to be posted in Russia when the French Revolution began and was able to retain his position until 1792. After a brief hiatus he emerged as Citizen Genet to accept a Girondist appointment as French minister plenipotentiary to the United States. He was specifically told to use his compelling personality and diplomatic skill to convince America to side with the French Republic in the French Revolutionary wars.

Genet's arrival in America in 1793 precipitated a crisis in Franco-American relations. Pro-French Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, already at odds with the neutral Federalist administration, successfully insisted that Genet be accorded full diplomatic recognition. Genet, meanwhile, operating on the assumption that the American government and its people would look the other way while he chartered American vessels as privateers to prey on British shipping in the West Indies, set out to enlist popular support.

The Federalist administration's icy reaction to Genet's pursuit was quite the reverse of the adulation accorded him by American citizens at large. His journey from Charleston to New York in search of funds and private naval support was a triumphal tour. His undiplomatic activities in Philadelphia, however, coupled with his growing popularity, moved the administration to action.

The Federalists had noted that, along Genet's entire route on his tour through the states, the dynamic envoy had organized and left behind functioning political organizations known as "democratic societies." The creation of these societies justifiably alarmed the Federalists, for eventually they became key components of opposition, against the Federalists, in the expanding Jeffersonian-Republican party organization. This activity of Genet's, along with the diplomatic embarrassment he imposed on President George Washington by his repeated violations of the Neutrality Proclamation of 1793, resulted in the revocation of his diplomatic credentials in December 1793. Even Jefferson had come to view Genet with increasing mistrust.

Rather than return to France, Genet married the daughter of New York governor George Clinton and settled on Long Island. He is remembered as a central figure in the establishment of a firm line of demarcation between Federalists and Jeffersonian-Republicans during the 1790s.