

**NJS Presents****Invited Talks****In this Issue:*****William Livingston and New Jersey's Revolutionary Environment*****By James J. Gigantino II****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v3i1.63>**

*The impact of the environment on the American Revolution in New Jersey cannot be understated as environmental factors ranging from climate to crop yields to geography all intensely impacted the course of the Revolution. This talk, delivered on November 18<sup>th</sup> at the opening reception of the NJ Historical Commission's 2016 NJ Forum, explores the relationship between the natural environment and military and political policies through the eyes of William Livingston, New Jersey's first governor. Throughout the conflict, the environment became a constant actor and foil to Livingston, forcing him to make political decisions in tandem with not only British movements but more frequently, owing to climatic, geographic, or agricultural factors. In addition to looking at Livingston, the article examines the interplay between Livingston and his own conceptions on the environment from his pre-revolutionary past. Finally, the article discusses how average New Jerseyans understood the role of his revolutionary government in the context of various environmental factors. Most Jersey farmers and landless laborers based their support for the revolutionary movement not on ideology but on environmental factors that constantly challenged their loyalty to both sides.*

Thank you all for coming this evening. Today is a very special day in my professional career as exactly ten years ago today—November 18, 2006—I presented my first academic paper on a New Jersey topic at the New Jersey Forum in Trenton. Over these past ten years, the New

Jersey Historical Commission has been a great partner in both providing a forum to talk about and receive feedback on my work but also in providing needed research support. My colleagues are extremely jealous of me because of this support from the Commission—New Jersey has something very special here. We have a state organization that partners with local entities, local historians, and academics to understand the history of the state—this does not happen many other places so I think we all have to give a very special thank you to the staff at the Historical Commission for their support in this important endeavor.

My first book dealt with the institution of slavery in New Jersey but I promise I am not going to talk about that tonight, at least not too much. Instead, I am going to talk about a new project that really stems from that first book but takes a very different turn. In my first project, I became very interested in William Livingston, New Jersey's first governor, especially his thoughts on abolitionism during the American Revolution and his participation in the abolitionist struggle in the war's aftermath. My current project looks at Livingston more broadly than that though as I am interested in Livingston as a political actor and as a window into a much broader revolutionary world than just his abolitionism. I am really interested in what Livingston's life tells us about the times in which he lived, specifically what his interactions as the leader of the revolutionary government tell us about how poor whites, women, slaves, loyalists, and elite political actors dealt with New Jersey's precarious place within the American Revolution. To do that, we need to think about a variety of actors, but one that has frequently been left out of the discussion is the revolutionary environment—something environmental historians have been trying to remedy for some time and have been quite successful at in the last two decades. Few historians can now discount the power of the environment in defining history as the environment itself was a key actor in the revolutionary drama, one that we have found is actually quite important to the people living

at the time. Tonight I want to explore three different environmental issues within the context of Livingston's life and talk about how those factors influenced his interactions within the context of war. First though, I provide a word of warning. I am not an environmental historian and looking at the panels that are part of this year's conference, the many environmental historians in the room will soon figure that out. I use this concept perhaps a bit more broadly but I think that broad strokes are helpful in thinking about Livingston's interactions with the environment and the larger ramifications of that environment to political, social, and economic issues.

The first environmental issue I want to discuss is the question of Livingston's rural solitude. I would be remiss if I did not talk about Livingston's own interest in the environment before the war and how this impacts his understanding of the war as the environment is important to him from almost the beginning. But before that, I need to introduce Livingston a bit to help place his interest in the colonial environment in context. Livingston was not from New Jersey—he is a New Yorker and after living in Arkansas for the past seven years, I understand how easily people outside of this area get those two mixed up. He was born in Albany in 1723 into a powerful New York political dynasty with his father Philip inheriting the massive Livingston Manor along the Hudson River from the patriarch of the family, Robert Livingston, who had immigrated to the colony in 1674. Philip had amassed a huge business empire that heavily participated in the Atlantic trade as well as pulled on his family's Dutch roots to profit from New York's fur trade. Philip hoped that William, the eighth of eleven children, would become a lawyer to help advance the family business as its in-house counsel. William, however, wanted none of this. Instead, he hoped to study art and asked his father to send him to Europe to learn the ways of the great masters. Philip rejected William's repeated pleas against becoming a lawyer and arranged both his admission to Yale as well as his eventual apprenticeship to a lawyer in New York.

Begrudgingly, Livingston became a lawyer and a fairly successful one at that, making a tidy fortune during the Seven Years War working on Admiralty Court cases, all dealing with Atlantic shipping and disputes over war prizes, shipping claims, and a whole host of other Atlantic World legal issues. His success at law became particularly important as Philip had disowned him from his will before his death in 1749, leaving him without an inheritance from his father. Eventually, he did secure some lands and money after his mother died in 1756, though the rejection of his father's support stung hard as Philip never approved of William's marriage to his wife Susannah. For William, this was difficult, as he truly loved Susannah and her death in 1789 undoubtedly spurred on his demise the following year. However, her pregnancy out of wedlock (in 1747) and the couple's resulting hasty and secret marriage in New Jersey never sat well with the family patriarch. Additionally, Philip believed her family was rather unimpressive, a rural middle-class family in decline from the countryside around New Brunswick was no match for a son of such an elite New York family.

To William though, Susannah's humble rural upbringing stood as her most attractive quality as he had from a young age fell in love with the pastoral and rural. As an adolescent, Livingston had accompanied his tutor, William Barclay, on a year-long mission to the Mohawk under the direction of the Society for Propagating the Gospel in Foreign Parts and this experience began his interest in the purity of a rural life. His attachment to Susannah came from her rural upbringing and the fact that she was not a hoity-toity New York socialite. Part of this rejection of the urban environment came not just from his love of the rural but from his experience in the city—he never quite fit in. Some of that emanates from the fact that others generally saw him as not handsome—he supposedly had big ears and a big nose, two physical attributes that satirists would consistently poke fun at throughout his life. Others identified him as a plain dresser, among them,

John Adams, who described Livingston after meeting him at the Continental Congress as “a plain man, tall, black, wears his Hair—nothing elegant or genteel about him.” The most important factor in his rejection of urban spaces, though, came from that he was perhaps more cerebral and intellectual than most of the other elite New York socialites—he simply cared about things that they had little interest in.

In addition to seeing urban life as suspect, Livingston championed the rural and in 1747 at age twenty-four, articulated his thoughts in a poem called *Philosophic Solitude: or, the Choice of a Rural Life*. The poem reiterates his animosity of the luxury and pretentiousness of the aristocratic circles he was born into and champions the rural and pastoral as truly virtuous—the rural environment, he felt, was more virtuous and peaceful than any other form. This is a trope that comes up often in early America, the rural was at heart the true essence of republican virtue, the purest and most peaceful place. This, though, was not a rejection of classism in general. On the contrary, Livingston is probably one of the most elitist you would ever meet in revolutionary America. Instead, the rural and peaceful life is something to strive for, something that Livingston consistently hopes to one day have. He repeatedly dreamed of having a library where he could write, paint, and draw in a quaint rural setting—these hobbies dovetailed nicely with his other favorite hobby, gardening, all of which were the essence of an elite rural gentleman.

The draw to this environment then was a state of mind for Livingston, something he battled throughout his time in New York City. He made the decision to retire at age fifty to rural Elizabethtown, New Jersey and there built a stately rural mansion, Liberty Hall, as his new home. During the Revolution, Liberty Hall and rural solitude remained important for Livingston—the environment and what the environment meant for Livingston, however, created a tug of war in his mind. At his core, Livingston was a political animal, a propagandist for his family’s political

machine that really thrived on political debate in New York. He thought retirement to his rural solitude was going to be a good thing but by 1774 as the revolutionary movement grew, he wanted to get back into the action. He quickly gained election to the Essex County Committee of Correspondence and from there moved on to serve as a member to both the First and Second Continental Congress and then, of course, later as New Jersey's first governor.

This move back into politics though challenged him personally as the rural environment tried to pull him back to Liberty Hall. For the war's entirety, this idea of the environment was in the back of his head and something that he discussed on multiple occasions. For example, in May 1778, Livingston wrote to South Carolina's Henry Laurens, then serving as President of the Continental Congress, that he had successfully retired to Raritan "for a few days in the most sequestered woods I can find for the purpose of doing something in solitude which I cannot do in the noise and hurry" which the state's executive position had become. Likewise, in 1786, he remarked that he was excited about the relaxed pace of the post-war governorship, which had allowed him "to return to my library and rural solitude." He enjoyed that solitude "with infinitely greater satisfaction than any posts or titles which it is in the power of men to confer upon me." The absence of rural solitude made him become more frustrated and actually represented a burden for him. In 1777, for instance, he remarked to Washington that the burdens of the wartime office had been much greater than he had anticipated, largely because throughout that year he had consistently expanded the reach of his office, though the constant frustration at convincing New Jerseyans of the necessity to share the burden of the war likewise discouraged him. The constant movement for eighteen of the war's most intense months in New Jersey wore heavy on Livingston and at its end, he hoped he would "stand some chance of seeing my family at last." Likewise, he had just lamented to his cousin that he had "not been with my own family above two weeks in two

years,” a fact that had caused him much grief and torment, causing him to hope that “the Devil and the Tories may so manage their cards at the ensuing election that I may have no avocation to leave” his family again. Though to his cousin, he believed that “providence supported” him while being away from his family in order “in some measure” to be made “useful to my country,” he grew concerned that his participation and sacrifice for the war (and therefore his absence from his rural solitude) did not match the wider society’s burden.

While Livingston battled his own perceptions of the environment in his head, two other environmental features remain imperative in both understanding Livingston and in understanding the conduct of the war in New Jersey. These are issues that Livingston and every other New Jerseyan contended with during the Revolution. The first is geography. New Jersey’s geography has always taken center stage in discussions of the state in the American Revolution. Its proximity to New York City and Philadelphia made the flow of ideas, goods, and people quite easy in the colonial period—all of which sped discussions in the state over the question of independence. It also, of course, linked New Jersey’s economy to those two large urban centers. However, geography became Livingston’s number one enemy during the war since the state’s geography allowed for porous borders, especially on the state’s eastern frontier.

Livingston knew this porous quality quite well as his first post in the new state government was as a general of the militia, charged with defending East Jersey from June 1776 to August 1776. Though he never saw combat, Livingston knew that the border with New York was problematic in a number of different ways. First, New Jersey was separated from Staten Island only by a small strait, the Arthur Kill, and therefore easy to cross. Second, the waterways between Essex and Bergen Counties and New York City were extensive and also fairly easy to traverse. Third, the state’s northeastern land border with New York was very long, rugged, and relatively sparsely

populated. These geographic concerns created two major implications for Livingston's prosecution of the war.

First, the state's geography made defense difficult, especially with a relatively small numbers of troops. From 1776 onward, if you read a letter written by Livingston, there is a very high probability that if the letter does not complain about his interest in rural solitude, it complains about the lack of protection along the state's frontiers. By frontiers, Livingston mainly means the border between Essex and Bergen Counties and New York City. Of course, New York City was occupied early in the war and remained under British control until the very end. As the war dragged on, New York became increasingly hungry as the British occupied sections could not grow enough food for themselves, causing an increasing need to raid into New Jersey. This created a problem for Livingston as he routinely had to indicate the relative lackluster response from the militia to Washington and Congressional leaders in repelling them. More importantly though, the geography causes the war to unfold for Livingston and every other New Jerseyan in a way that did not happen in other locales—East Jersey is largely ravaged throughout the war through these raids from British New York and therefore grows increasingly impoverished because of wartime destruction. This has a few key results. First, it makes those in East Jersey more likely to be debtors, leading them to support post-war efforts to print state currency to pay off those debts and pay the increasingly heavy tax burden imposed on them—these are the same efforts that Livingston and other elites challenged because they represented democracy run amuck. This was, of course, the same reasoning that these elites used to support the Constitution, because it shored up the economy and suppressed the common man's ability to govern. Second, it made it harder to support abolitionism—the damage the war caused really made it far more problematic for those in East

Jersey to support the abandonment of slavery especially since the East had more slaves than any other part of the state.

The second environmental issue that Livingston and New Jerseyans dealt with during the war came from the state's historic status as an agricultural venue—its land use. New Jersey had always been an agricultural region, making a significant amount of money from selling its agricultural products both to New York and Philadelphia but also participating in the Atlantic Trade, selling foodstuffs to hungry Caribbean islands who could not afford to devote any land to foodstuffs themselves. Agriculture then is what both the British and American armies wanted from the state during the war—New Jersey was thought of as a place to feed both armies. Of course, environmental historians readily understand the importance of climate, labor, geography, patterns of land use, and a whole host of other issues when it comes to growth of an agricultural economy. Livingston understood this issue too and the state's agricultural mission impacted his prosecution of the war in two main ways. First, it limited the number of men available for military duty. Historians have argued much about the “myth of the minuteman,” the idea that in the American mythos we have far too often seen the militia as the bulwark of revolutionary power. This was not true nationally and was not true especially in New Jersey. Militia service was the thing that every New Jerseyan tried to get out of—it was dangerous, pay and benefits were minimal if they existed at all, and elongated military service economically hurt the man's family, causing frequent prolonged stints to further decrease the population's zealously for the cause. This was especially apparent in 1776 as the state prepared for the Battle of New York and experienced a British invasion in the battle's aftermath. New Jersey militiamen either refused to serve or demanded that they be released from duty to return home to work on harvesting that year's crop. Both Livingston and George Washington decried the militia's unpredictability and argued in their

correspondence that a freestanding Continental Army and New Jersey State Troops, not a militia, were required to win the war. The state legislature made the situation even worse though as they refused to do what Livingston wanted when it came to the militia the state did have. Ideally, Livingston wanted a stronger militia law, especially in 1777 after the invasion of 1776 and the failure of the militia to report for duty—and who could blame them, the British seemed invincible. He especially wanted strong fines or other penalties to force men to serve. However, the legislature refused to deliver and continued to refuse to deliver for the remainder of the war. Responding to the electorate who did not want to serve in the military, they never passed any laws to alter the ease with which men could pay fines or secure substitutes to remove themselves from militia duty.

This interest in agriculture actually impacted more than just militia recruitment, it limited recruitment in the Continental Army too since it was more profitable for someone to be bought repeatedly as a militia substitute than the bounty the Continental Army offered to join the New Jersey Line. Again, this issue took up much of Livingston's time during the war and really made him angrier than perhaps normal as yet another example of people not fulfilling their burden of the war while he felt he had done his fair share in taking time away from his rural pursuits to serve in the Patriot government.

Land use and geography also became far more important in militia duty as the state from its colonial beginnings had always been divided between East and West Jersey. West Jersey, especially areas like Hunterdon County, was the breadbasket of New Jersey, with strong agricultural production of wheat and other grain crops. The strong agricultural economy though made it more problematic when military leaders called militiamen for duty from West Jersey. They refused to go especially since they were usually called for duty in East Jersey, where the war raged, far from their homes. Here, we see geographical divisions and agriculture combine to limit

Livingston's ability to prosecute the war. With few militiamen willing to serve from West Jersey anyway, those willing became even less interested because of this geographical divide as most of the military needs were in East Jersey instead of West. The fact that the threat was not in their own backyards coupled with the need to stay close to their agricultural pursuits became a reason why many New Jerseyans did not engage in the war effort in the meaningful way Livingston hoped.

In conclusion, New Jersey's unique environment put into motion several factors that challenged and perplexed Livingston throughout his time in office. When coupled with other environmental factors like climate (which being at Morristown we have all heard a lot about), Livingston and other revolutionary leaders faced a difficult battle to overcome. Ultimately though, these limiting factors for Livingston built up to become not just a challenge but a reason to support wholesale change when it came time to rewrite the nation's government in the adoption of the Constitution. Issues involving the failure to serve in militia duty and the destructive aspects caused by the war and the war's crippling debt on the state encouraged Livingston to support federalist measures that created the Constitution. As the longest serving revolutionary war governor, Livingston's presence at the Constitutional Convention and his support for the final document made clear he was interested in remedying some of the follies of the revolutionary period in New Jersey, at least some of which, can be traced back to New Jersey's unique environment.

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