

***William Livingston's American Revolution*****James J. Gigantino II****Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018****270 pages****\$39.95****ISBN: 978-0812250640****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v5i1.180>**

William Livingston (1723-1790) was a prominent Whig lawyer, prolific writer on behalf of the cause of liberty, member of the Continental Congress, and the governor of New Jersey during the American Revolution. His personal papers are widely accessible to historians. It is thus surprising that until James Gigantino's *William Livingston's American Revolution*, the only biography of Livingston was James Sedgwick's hagiographical *A Memoir of the Life of William Livingston*, published in 1833.

Gigantino's biography adds to his growing collection of books on early New Jersey history, including *The Ragged Road to Abolition: Slavery and Freedom in New Jersey, 1775-1865* (2014) and his edited collection *The American Revolution in New Jersey: Where the Battlefield Meets the Home Front* (2015). In most books about the American Revolution, New Jersey is portrayed passively—a place that is acted upon by competing armies. By focusing on Livingston, Gigantino brings the specific needs, concerns, and trials of New Jersey's Revolutionary War leadership, and to a more limited extent its inhabitants, to the center of the story.

Gigantino portrays William Livingston as a "reluctant revolutionary." After more than a decade of work as a New York City lawyer and pamphleteer, Livingston moved to Elizabeth-Town in 1772 in the hopes of pursuing a life of writing, reading, and intellectual reflection. Instead, the Revolution pulled him into public service. Livingston was always a staunch defender of British liberty and Whig political thought, but it took him longer than many of his New Jersey colleagues to accept independence as the best way forward for the rebelling colonies. He despised the mobs

who took to the streets in opposition to British taxes and worried that the Revolution would degenerate into democracy and the breakdown of social order. His views eventually led the New Jersey Provincial Congress to replace him as the colony's representative to the Continental Congress in favor of more radical men who were eager to declare independence.

Livingston eventually made peace with independence and was appointed the first Governor of New Jersey in 1776, a position he would hold until his death in 1790. Gigantino argues that Livingston always understood the Revolution in moral terms. Through most of the war he struggled to raise a militia suitable for the support of George Washington's Continental Army and the removal of Loyalist agitators in the state. He criticized the people of New Jersey for their unwillingness to make the necessary sacrifices that he believed were essential to preserve American liberties. On the economic front, Livingston chided the inhabitants of New Jersey for engaging in illegal trade with the British in New York City and demanding paper money to alleviate their debts. His disappointment over the lack of virtue among ordinary New Jerseyans is dominant in his published and private writings and Gigantino rightly makes this theme central to his understanding of the founding father.

Gigantino is especially interested in Livingston as a war-time political leader. In this sense, *William Livingston's Revolution* is really a study in executive power. Livingston spent most of his governorship fighting with the New Jersey legislature for more freedom to execute the war on his own terms. With both Continental and British armies moving regularly through the state, literally taking the battle to the backyards of those living agricultural lives in the New Jersey, Livingston wanted the ability to raise militias, regulate the economy, and purge Loyalists without having to wait for the legislature to act. He eventually got his wish, if only for a couple of years, with the establishment of wartime Council of Safety. Between 1777 and 1778, Livingston used the Council

of Safety to try Loyalists for treason, confiscate their property, and defend the state from British foraging. But as the war continued, and as New Jersey fell deeper into debt and support for the war declined in the state, Livingston struggled to sustain such executive power. Gigantino tells this story well.

Gigantino has provided readers with a much-needed study of an important New Jersey revolutionary and an understudied founding father. While *William Livingston's Revolution* is an excellent model of political biography, it also provides us with a nice overview of the American Revolution in New Jersey using Livingston's story as a window. There are places in the book where Livingston fades from view as Gigantino delves deeply into the everyday experiences of ordinary New Jersey residents or accounts of local skirmishes. As a result, this book could easily serve as a textbook in a course on New Jersey history or the American Revolution writ large.

**John Fea**  
**Messiah College**