

Burlington Biographies: A History of Burlington, New Jersey, Told Through the Lives and Times of Its People

Robert L. Thompson

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Burlington Biographies by Robert Thompson presents an interesting and readable history of one of New Jersey's most important colonial communities. Rather than recount Burlington's history in a simple linear narrative, the volume provides a series of generally chronologically organized vignettes to tell the story of the city and its inhabitants. This approach gives readers the option of cracking the book open and enjoying the chapters as individual stand-alone pieces rather than reading the volume through from front to back. Although not encyclopedic, the volume is thorough and engaging and will leave the reader with a renewed appreciation of one of New Jersey's colonial capitals and its history from the 17th century until the early 20th century. Thompson, a former historic preservation planner for the City of Camden and adjunct professor of architectural history and historic preservation planning at Rutgers University Camden, is an enthusiastic and compelling storyteller whose fondness for Burlington City shines through.

After a foreword by distinguished South Jersey historian Paul Schopp and a brief preface and acknowledgements, the historical sketches begin. The volume opens with a series of essays on the first European settlers of Burlington City, a community that was, in many ways, a Quaker Zion on the Delaware River. The first essay covers the life of Thomas Budd, an English merchant and a successful brewer. Thompson's illustration of the brewery at the intersection of High and Pearl Streets is a special treat (5). Budd is also noteworthy as an early commissioner elected under the Concessions and Agreements, a key political document in early West Jersey. He was also a political leader in the new colony and is perhaps best remembered today as the author of *Good*

Order Established in Pennsylvania and West New Jersey, published in 1685. This volume, which has been reprinted several times, is a treasure trove of information about the initial European settlement of the Delaware Valley. Budd was also involved in early controversies over the East Jersey/West Jersey line and was involved in the Keithian schism, which shook the Quaker community. Thomas Budd's life history provides a solid beginning to the volume.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given Thompson's architectural background, other early chapters focus on buildings and builders. These chapters introduce the reader to Master Builder Francis Collins, Houses of Timber and Brick, John Tatham's Great House, and Isaac Conaroe. I found these pieces to be some of the most interesting in the volume. Collins was one of the talented builders and bricklayers who constructed the pattern brick houses, which became such an integral part of the architectural landscape of the lower Delaware Valley and continue to pique the interest of architectural historians today. A substantial chapter is devoted to John Tatham's "Great and Stately Palace." Tatham was the land agent of Dr. Daniel Coxe, the colony's chief proprietor. The house, characterized as "the best house in America," was distinguished enough to be considered for an Anglican bishop's house and had a number of illustrious tenants. Sadly, it was lost to fire in the mid-18th century. Thompson's chapter on Conaroe, another talented builder, is outstanding. I had always assumed Conaroe, the builder of the Sandy Hook Lighthouse, to be a New Yorker. Thompson shows that he had a long and productive career in Burlington before relocating to New York and building his famous lighthouse.

Other chapters share the stories of Governor Jeremiah Basse, clockmaker Isaac Pearson, historian Samuel Smith, and Burlington's troubled Revolutionary War-era Mayor John Lawrence. Thompson also debunks the idea that Captain James Lawrence, of "Don't give up the ship" fame, lived at 459 High Street, a site commonly associated with him.

Politically and strategically important, Burlington City did not escape the depredations of the American Revolution. Thompson's vignettes present the conflict in all its complexity. Jonathan Odell, physician, Anglican minister, and political ally of William Franklin, served as the fourth rector of St. Mary's Church. He was a staunch loyalist who ended his days in exile in Frederickton, New Brunswick. His story contrasts with that of Quaker abolitionist Samuel Allinson who remained a pacifist throughout the conflict and was abused by a Continental officer for his beliefs. We also learn about Cesar Closs, an African American who escaped to freedom during the American Revolution and ultimately moved north to Canada. His story contrasts with the story of Oliver Cromwell, a private who served with the Second Regiment, New Jersey Continental Line, and participated in several significant military engagements.

The 19th-century personages discussed are no less interesting. They include successful merchants such as Charles Ellis and James Sterling. The latter was also an important Methodist leader. Key political figures are introduced, such as Federalist William Griffiths, Democrat Garret D. Wall, William Allen, and, of course, James M. Wall. The latter, a Copperhead, or antiwar Democrat, gained fame during the Civil War as an advocate for freedom of the press, which led to his arrest by federal agents, but only after a fierce struggle.

Burlington was an important center for abolitionist activities, and we are introduced to noteworthy abolitionists such as William J. Allinson. Thompson also sheds light on members of the African American community, such as Joshua Woodlin, and discusses Burlington City's AME Church and segregated schools. Thompson does a good job of revealing the community's African American history.

Unsurprisingly, given Thompson's interests in architecture and historic preservation, chapters also deal with important 19th-century builders such as John Hoskins Jr. and architect

George Wattson Hewitt. Other pieces explore the Burlington Town Plan, the Isaac Collins Print Shop and the distinctive polychrome brick cottage built by Furness and Hewitt for General E. Burd Grubb.

As Burlington is a historic city, it is also a city of historians, and the reader is introduced to several, including Samuel Smith, Amelia Mott Gummere, William Schermerhorn, Henry Haines, and Henry Bisbee. Perhaps, if we are lucky, some future historian will tell Robert Thompson's story. For now, we are the beneficiaries of his love of Burlington. His volume will stand as a testament to the inhabitants of one of New Jersey's great colonial towns. One hopes that other historians will follow his lead and give us historical biographies of other early communities across the state, both south and north.

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