



# RevolutionNJ

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## “A Bundle of Silences: Reimagining Interpretive Approaches to the Past” FAQ and Additional Resources

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### **Interpretive Theme: New Jersey as a “Battleground”**

**Webinar Title: Political Participation and the Battlegrounds of the American Revolution**

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### **FAQ:**

The study of the Revolutionary America is, as historians like to call it, complicated. The main questions of political causation and political ideology are fraught with concerns over rewriting the past and challenging many engrained notions of civics taught in American schools for most of the twentieth century. In reality, everything in history, especially the Revolution, is much more nuanced.

#### **Causation of the American Revolution**

*What caused the American Revolution?*

Lots of issues, from multiple arenas. On the ideological side, one slogan that has stuck in almost every American school child’s mind is “no taxation without representation.” That argument still holds true and historian Bernard Bailyn would argue that the pamphlet literature that circulated during the 1760s and 1770s made the strong case that representation, or the lack thereof, for the colonies made a difference in the minds of many colonists. A more nuanced argument also engages the ideological components of the role of Parliament in the administration of the colonies. Many political leaders argued that Parliament had overstepped its role in administering the colonies since the Glorious Revolution of 1688, believing that historically, the King should be the decision maker when it comes to colonial affairs, not Parliament, whose authority ended at the shores of Britain.

On the economic side, there are severe economic factors that are damaging colonial standing in the world. From the 1720s onward, historian T.H. Breen argues that the colonies actually became more tied to Great Britain through the consumer economic that developed in the Atlantic. American colonists became strong consumers of British made products and readily identified with Britain because of it. At the same time, in the aftermath of the Seven Years War, the colonies suffered significant economic affects of Parliament’s actions to remedy the debt accumulated in fighting France and her allies in that conflict. The Stamp Act, though important in the drama of the unfolding revolutionary era, created more of a conflict not because of the tax imposed by it but instead by the idea that the colonies were being “double-taxed” or in reality, taxed enough already. The Navigation Acts, which mandated that colonial goods be shipped by British ships only, created a ready monopoly that could levy higher prices, which colonists took

as a “tax” on them. The Stamp Act, as a second tax—and a direct one versus the indirect nature of the Navigation Acts, was a bridge too far for many who had thought themselves dutiful consumers and loyal members of the British Empire.

Combined with the Currency Act of 1764, which outlawed paper currency produced by the colonies, debt levels caused by the Seven Years War mounted. The debt accumulated by British supplies of goods to the colonies led those suppliers to increasingly be concerned that the debt they had extended to American consumers would not be repaid. The lack of a viable currency in the colonies exacerbated that issue, leading many to embrace the boycott movements of the late 1760s and early 1770s as an outlet for their frustration of their mounting debt load, not necessarily that they believed wholeheartedly in the “no taxation without representation” mantra. Most colonists, especially in New Jersey, remained tepid about war and separation from Great Britain through 1775 and even into early 1776. The colonists had strong consumer relationships within the British Empire, enjoyed protection of the British Navy, and had prospered under the colonial system in place before the Seven Years War. Most colonists hoped for a return to that system. The outbreak of actual hostilities at Lexington and Concord in April 1775 made clear that those efforts might not be feasible. As 1775 dragged on and more conflict erupted, fewer and fewer colonists believed reconciliation possible. By April and May 1776, debate in the Continental Congress had shifted to thinking about the viability of independence—and if the colonists could actually win a war without a strong European ally—rather than if the colonists should separate from Britain. In New Jersey, the shift occurred in May 1776 as a new Provincial Congress elected by the people in the colony began to actively support independence.

*Does that mean people who fought in the Revolution did not actually believe ideologically in it?* No. Throughout history, people decide to fight for multiple reasons. This argument holds true to those in the American Revolution as it did in World War II, Vietnam, or Iraq. Historian Gary Nash argues for the “multiplicities of revolution,” which essentially means that various groups and individuals waged their own revolutions in the midst of the larger American Revolution. For poor whites, that might have meant that the military represented an opportunity for social or economic advancement through the bounty system (essentially what we would call a signing bonus today). Others saw it as an adventure. Still others saw the Revolution as an opportunity for their own freedom, such as slaves or Native Americans. Some agreed wholeheartedly with the ideological arguments that men like Thomas Paine published. It is important to see that one does not have to have a single reason for participating in the Revolution—again, individual motivations are complicated and can be overlapping.

*So does this mean that the American Revolution was not about ideas? It was all about money?* Absolutely not. Ideas are important, they drove the foundational documents of this period and they allowed Americans to engage in a whole host of debates over the question of freedom in this period. The important thing to note, however, is that not all people interpreted this idea of freedom the same way. Freedom is different based on time, place, and perspective. What the revolutionary ideology meant to an elite white male was very different than a poor laborer, an enslaved African American, or Native Americans. For some, money was a factor in pushing

them to adopt the revolutionary ideology of the Revolution. For others, money was a factor that caused them to join the Continental Army, just as money is a factor today. If ideology was the only motivating factor in encouraging those to serve in the military, few Army recruiters of that time or even today would hype the “enlistment bonus” offered to those who joined. It is not an “either-or” situation. Instead, it can, and frequently was, both motivated Americans then and now.

## **Loyalism**

### *What is a loyalist?*

A lot of different people could be classified as loyalists. In the 1970s, if you were taking a course on American history, a loyalist probably would have been identified as an elite white male who had strong affinity/ties to Great Britain. These could be through business relationships or through ties to the Crown in some way. Our historical understandings of loyalism has changed over the last fifty years. Now, loyalists can be almost anyone who saw an advantage in supporting the Crown versus the colonies. For example, the largest group of loyalists were Native American and enslaved Africans who saw the Crown as their best chance to secure freedom for themselves or for their people.

Likewise, loyalists could be commoners instead of elite, who saw economic or political advantages of aligning themselves with the Crown. In New Jersey, this happened frequently as British forces occupying New York provided a ready supply of gold and silver in exchange for New Jersey foodstuffs, while the Continental Army provided essentially worthless paper currency that had been so devalued it was not worth the paper it was printed on.

### *What makes someone a loyalist? Is it an action? A thought? An oath?*

Again, our historian understanding of loyalism has evolved over the last fifty years on this question too. In the 1970s, loyalism would have been tied to a belief, that the Crown was the proper ruler of the colonies. While belief is important, American actors like George Washington and New Jersey Governor William Livingston were far more interested in actions than beliefs. In their discussions about loyalists, essentially anyone who did anything to support the British military qualified as a loyalist. That would include trading supplies (even for renumeration) or, of course, serving in the British military. On the British side, however, loyalism was far more studied after the Revolution. The Loyalism Claims Commission, set up to assess damages due to colonists because of their loyalism, took a hardline on what a loyalist was, especially through studying actions. Joining the military and/or continued service towards the British Army or Crown as imperative in proving loyalty, far more than ideological concerns.

### *Did people change sides in the American Revolution? What were the consequences?*

Yes! We see situational loyalty happen quite often, especially in border areas like New Jersey, where different armies are moving back and forth frequently. Many changes allegiances based on the situation on the ground in what benefited them the most at that particular moment in time. In some cases, those that changed sides faced persecution. For example, there are examples of those New Jerseyans who fought for the British but then changed sides and joined the

Americans, but still faced judicial punishment for their previous loyalist acts. However, not long after the Revolution, loyalists gained pardons and reintegrated into American society in order to help build the new nation.

*Are you saying that people living in New Jersey were traitors?*

The word *traitor* is interesting, because it depends on whose perspective you are thinking about. From the Patriot perspective, yes, those who supported loyalists would have been classified as traitors. The same goes from the British perspective, the Patriots were the traitors. What is interesting about the dynamics in the Revolution, especially in a locale with fluid geographical boundaries like New Jersey, is that people floated between Patriot and loyalist identities at multiple points in time. And even more interestingly, many colonists saw no danger in crossing that boundary line. Many did it just for survival.

### **Additional Resources:**

The literature on early American history and the American Revolution is vast. Below are key works those interested in looking further at the role of politics and government in the American Revolution can pursue.

#### **Causation of the American Revolution**

Several works discuss the various ideological and economic interpretations of the American Revolution, specifically focusing on the role that government, politics, and people played in that process. Recommended works include:

Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967)

TH Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)

T. H. Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010)

Larry R. Gerlach, *Prologue to Independence: New Jersey in the Coming of the American Revolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1976)

Brendan McConville, *These Daring Disturbers of the Public Peace: The Struggle for Property and Power in Early New Jersey* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999)

Gary Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York: Viking, 2005)

Eric Nelson, *Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014)

Gordon Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1992)

Al Young and Greg Nobles, *Whose American Revolution Was It?: Historians Interpret the Founding* (New York: NYU Press, 2011)

### **Overview of Military and Political Affairs**

The military and political history of the American Revolution include discussions of how the militia interacted with the standing army, issues related to the operation of the American national government during the war, and the diplomatic history of the Revolution. Below are works that examine these issues broadly but also in New Jersey specifically.

Michael Adelberg, *The American Revolution in Monmouth County: The Theatre of Spoil and Destruction* (New York: History Press, 2010)

Ruth Bogin, *Abraham Clark and the Quest for Equality in the Revolutionary Era, 1774–1794* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982)

John Ferling, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)

David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

James J. Gigantino II, ed, *The American Revolution in New Jersey: Where the Battlefront Meets the Home Front* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014)

James J. Gigantino II, *William Livingston's American Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018)

Mark Kwasny, *Washington's Partisan War, 1775–1783* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1996)

Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)

Barbara Mitnick, ed, *New Jersey in the American Revolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005)

John Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990)

Rosemary Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008)

### **Loyalism and Larger Political Participation**

The study of loyalism in the American Revolution has evolved over the last several decades now to include the complexities of the role of African Americans and Native Americans in the Revolutionary environment. This addition to the historical literature adapts historical understanding of exactly what a “loyalist” was and how historians should understand their role in the Revolution. Below are a mix of recommended works that address this definition of loyalism nationally as well as in New Jersey and its environs specifically. Also included are key works on Native Americans and African Americans in the American Revolution.

Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000)

Colin Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995)

Ruma Chopra, *Unnatural Rebellion: Loyalists in New York City during the Revolution* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011)

James J. Gigantino II, *The Ragged Road to Abolition: Slavery and Abolition in New Jersey, 1775–1865* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015)

Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2011)

Sheila Skemp, *William Franklin: Son of a Patriot, Servant of a King* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990)

Aaron Sullivan, *The Disaffected: Britain's Occupation of Philadelphia During the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019)

Judith Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalists in Revolutionary New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002)