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“A Bundle of Silences: Reimagining Interpretive Approaches to the Past” Webinar Transcript

Interpretive Theme: New Jersey as a “Battleground”

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

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Thank you for joining me today to learn more about the question of political participation in the American Revolution. My name is Jim Gigantino, I am a faculty member in the history department at the University of Arkansas and for the past fifteen years I have been studying the American revolutionary era in New Jersey.

Today, we are going to explore some larger themes of the American Revolution, specifically thinking about the causation of the War and the question of loyalty. I will also be introducing a concept called multiplicities of revolution as a way to help us think about the multiple ways that Americans thought about and engaged in this pivotal time period, before shifting to a case study on New Jersey specifically to apply these concepts to the Garden State.

First, let's explore the causes of the American Revolution. Historians have traditionally delineated causation of the Revolution into two main overarching frameworks: Ideology and Economics. Of course, it is far more complicated than these two, but we will get into that more when we approach the idea of multiple revolutions.

The ideological origins of the American Revolution comes from a powerful historical work of the same name written by Bernard Bailyn in 1967. Bailyn was an influential historian at Harvard University who won two Pulitzer Prizes, a National Book Award, and the highest award given to an American historian, the Bancroft Prize. Bailyn likewise trained dozens of historians who continued to study the Revolution, challenging the predominant view at the time that the Revolution was economically motivated.

Bailyn believed in the power of pamphlet literature that circulated widely in the colonies in this time period. Many of these pamphlets were concerned about the question of freedom, specifically political freedom and were distrustful of the harsh governmental controls that British Parliament had imposed on the colonies. People wrote about freedom abstractly, they saw freedom as singular, that much of the political freedom discussed was somehow the same regardless of who you were.

Historians like Bailyn have used these pamphlets to argue that these were not elements of propaganda, but instead reflected real concerns and fears of the colonists. These colonists believed the Revolution was an ideological, constitutional, and political struggle, not economic or a social struggle between different groups or classes. Moreover, they reveal the influence of

Enlightenment thought---they do not want to overthrow the existing social order but instead try to support liberty threatened by the apparent corruption of how the colonies were being governed.

This outlook on the American Revolution was challenged by a new group of historians who came of age in the 1980s. These historians, unlike those in the early twentieth century who argued a baser economic interest, believed that the Revolution was about not just ideology but about ideology over economics. These social historians, interested in the interplay between classes with much more granular focus on the common people of the Revolution, saw the economic situation had degraded their condition. In the aftermath of the Seven Years War, the colonies suffered significant economic effects 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 loyal members of the British Empire. It was these economic conditions that were against American freedom.

Lately, historians have really been pushing to think about the American Revolution through the lens of a multiplicity of revolutions going on at the same time. There was significant amount of conflict among social classes and races, while at the same time the political drama was ongoing. This really gets to the heart of question of why Americans decided to fight (or not fight) in the Revolution.

Often, we think about causation of conflict and motivation of those who fight as the same thing. They can be, but not necessarily. Throughout American history, people have fought in wars for a variety of reasons. Sometimes, they were drafted. Sometimes they signed up for pay. Sometimes for adventure. Sometimes, for patriotism. It depended on the person, the time period, and the opportunity cost of joining the military.

Between 1775 and 1783, about 200,000 men fought in the American Army and the militia. Not all of these men believed in the American cause. Indeed, if we think about the famous winter of 1776 after George Washington had been beaten back from New York across New Jersey and into Pennsylvania before crossing the Delaware on Christmas evening to attack the Hessian garrison at Trenton, the timing of this event happened because the vast majority of his soldiers' enlistments would expire at the end of December. Those men had been hired to fight for a limited period of time—some would have stayed for patriotic reasons, but many more had done their time and would have left.

When it comes to this multiplicity argument, we need to see think about this too in terms of race and class. For example, some historians call the American Revolution one of the largest slave revolts in world history, since African slaves saw joining the loyalist cause and supporting the British as key to their future freedom. Thousands of slaves fled to British lines and fought

against their American owners. Now, that doesn't mean that all slaves fought for the British. We do have some examples of enslaved or free blacks fighting for the Continental Army or serving in the militia, but far more likely, they served with British as the British promised freedom for African Americans who escaped their Patriot masters.

The same goes for Native Americans. Many Indian tribes were fighting their own revolution against colonial encroachment on their lands west of the Appalachian mountains. Most, but not all Native Americans saw an alliance with the British as the key to their success in warding off this colonial encroachment.

A lot of this idea of political participation in the American Revolution is wrapped up in what one historian calls the myth of the minuteman. We have this idea that the minuteman, the citizen-soldier who was emotionally bonded to his home and community, was the one who fought the war. It was likely a large majority of property owning men served in the militia during the war, but very few joined the regular Army. As war progressed, enlistment among property owning men dwindled.

As time continued, more men from the lower echelons of society enlisted so others would not have to fight. These men were substitutes so that property men would not have to fight while others got involved in the Army because they could get a bounty or essentially a payment by richer men to serve in their place. In actuality, being a militia substitute actually was more lucrative than serving in the Continental Army—hence why Washington had a lot of difficulties in enlisting men to serve. More damaging than the enlistments, however, was the fact that many Americans just did not show up to militia duty when called. In New Jersey, this was a common occurrence, largely because the state legislature never imposed significant penalties that compelled militia service, despite constant pleas from George Washington and Governor William Livingston.

The Regular Army of Washington then, was a Hodge podge of people. Most were not landowners but instead laborers, mechanics, wage laboring farmhands, fresh immigrants from Ireland or Germany, convicts recently released from jail, or others who were poor and desperate. Many of them had three things in common: youth, a lower social and economic standing, and little attachment to any particular community---for example, in Concord, Massachusetts, the place where the war started, the town could not fill its quota for enlistments for the army. Ezekiel Brown, who heard the shots of the war from the town's jail where he was a debtor, joined up because of had nothing to lose—he was voteless, landless, and poverty stricken. He had no attachment to Concord, but at the same time, he saw an opportunity, a revolution of his own to seek economic success through this avenue.

The other missing piece we see when we are blinded by this myth of the minuteman is the role of non-Americans in fighting for the colonies. At the outbreak of the Revolution, American political leaders knew they could not win the Revolution without gaining a strong European ally to support them. Eventually, France, Spain, and the Netherlands joined the conflict. French troops served directly in the colonies, fighting for American independence, while the French Navy and Army attacked British outposts and colonies in the Caribbean and beyond. Likewise, the Spanish attacked British controlled Florida and waged war along the Gulf Coast and the

Dutch engaged British troops in the Atlantic and beyond, forcing the British to devote significant military resources to fight those threats instead of using them against the colonies. Perhaps even more importantly, French and Dutch loans floated a largely bankrupt American government, enabling the colonies to continue to fight. Without the support of these third parties, the minuteman would not have guns, gunpowder, or food to survive.

The final theme I would like to touch on is that of loyalists. Loyalists took many forms in the American Revolution—they were wealthy merchants, planters, English lawyers, as well as newly arrived English middling and elites. Some loyalists were also those who were afraid of too much social change—William Franklin, Ben Franklin's son, the last royal governor of New Jersey who you can see in the bottom right of this slide, was too afraid of “liberty-mad men engineering a needless revolution.” Now, for William, his social, political, and economic future were all wrapped up in his service as the colony's governor, so we have to take his thoughts with a grain of salt.

They were also ordinary farmers—in many cases, Loyalists were the patriot's enemies. The Regulators in North Carolina who were bitter at the now Patriots who had oppressed them, the upcountry SC farmers who hated the patriot merchants centered in Charleston, and the tenants of the Hudson River Valley who hated their patriot masters—Robert Livingston's tenants quickly sided with the British after he did with the Patriots.

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 remuneration) or, of course, serving in the British military. This fundamentally remakes the idea of a loyalist from this historical perspective. People from every walk of life became loyalists, it just depended in that moment in time if they could see a benefit from supporting the Crown. This goes for some of the largest groups of loyalists, enslaved African Americans who escaped their Patriot masters to British lines and freedom as well as the majority of Native Americans who sided against the Patriots in favor of the British who promised not to extend into their territory.

Patriots were obsessed with trying to prove loyalty—the Continental Associations of the pre-war period which supported non-importation were revived during the war and Patriots demanded that everyone sign these Associations as a loyalty oath—if you did not sign the oath then you could get harassed and lose out on key things like power positions. If you took up arms in the British service, then your land and property was confiscated and auctioned off.

On the British side, however, loyalism was far more studied after the Revolution. The Loyalist Claims Commission, set up to assess damages due to colonists because of their loyalty, 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 was imperative in proving loyalty. However, it's important to note that filing a claim was not easy. Most from the lower rungs of society who might have been loyalists never filed a claim—the expense of traveling to the

Commission in either London or Canada was costly and getting the necessary supporting documents to prove loyalty was difficult. Therefore, it's important to note that while those records show a lot of different pictures of loyalism, actions spoke louder than ideology in proving that loyalty.

So how do these larger concepts relate to the New Jersey example?

We are going to explore two ideas in our case study—the Revolutionary Multiplicities in New Jersey and the question of loyalty.

First, the causation of the war and multiplicities. We'll explore this through William Livingston, New Jersey's first revolutionary governor, who was a major player in a number of arenas.

Livingston was very tepid towards war---he represents the thousands of moderates in PA, NY, and NJ who did not support strong action against Great Britain and increasingly suggested limited intervention against British policies in 1774, 1775, and early 1776. He went to Philadelphia representing NJ to First and Second Continental Congress. On the ideological front, he believed in the unconstitutional nature of Parliament's actions against the colonies and the economic means through boycotts that the Congresses supported. He believed that Parliament had usurped the rights of the Crown after the 1688 Glorious Revolution and began to interfere with the colonies, something that should only be the province of the King. In Second Continental Congress, he served on the committee that drafted the Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms in Summer 1775. This used a natural rights rhetoric that challenged the constitutionality of Parliament's actions and insisted on military readiness.

This moment is key---Livingston served the longest in Congress from NJ and was at the forefront of the military affairs of the colonies in two ways. First, he served on committees in congress that were dealing with troop recruitment and supply issues and second, he actually commanded the East Jersey militia.

Livingston understood intently the weakness of the American military and the difficulty they would have in actually winning a war. He was likewise concerned about the destabilization of American society because of war. In January 1776 he began to participate in the Lord Drummond Peace Proposal---Drummond was working on an accommodation plan that he worked secretly on to try and reconcile the specific concerns over taxation and local control of economic concerns. Drummond believed Livingston's very 'much averse from independency' because he 'foresees that this species of government...would be attended with numberless immediate evils to that part of the continent where his property and everything connected with him lay.'

Now, New Jersey was changing in 1776. The Provincial Congress becoming more "whiggish" and therefore more radical. Livingston's fellow delegate to Congress, John DeHart ran for the Provincial Congress in an effort to control it believing it to be "a more important post" since someone needed to "control the mad fellows who now compose that body."

The key change came in May 1776 when more radical lower classes had gained the power to vote by the liberalization of the voting requirements in the state---50 pounds of personal property, not real property---this was a huge liberalization. This radicalism by the lower classes pushed NJ over the edge towards revolution but Livingston did not support for two reasons: (1) he still believed the American military was unprepared and (2) he wanted an ally first before war was declared, not later. And he did not believe France would ever join the colonies and fight for independence of a republic against a fellow monarchy.

In the end, when it came time for discussions of the Declaration of Independence, the new Provincial Congress created new slate of delegates that didn't include William Livingston. He is essentially ejected and a more radical slate is seated to support independence when independence is voted upon in July 1776.

This illustrates the important ideas of the complicated nature of causation of revolution by showing the role that class played in radicalizing the state while at the same time illustrating the reactions by elite moderates like Livingston.

Our final case study will be exploring the question of loyalty. In New Jersey, it is difficult to really understand who is a loyalist and who is not. New York was a base for loyalists and the late 1776 occupation of most of NJ made many in the state chose to support the King in droves.

On this slide, you can see a petition from after the Revolution from what was called the Loyalist Claims Commission, which we talked about earlier. In this petition, the petitioner makes clear that as soon as the British Army entered New Jersey, "on their first landing" he "rendered them every aid in his power during the whole of the war particularly in his profession," which in this man's case, was as a doctor in the British Army. We see a lot of people switching allegiances between the British and the Americans during the course of the war—to prove his loyalty to the British, this petitioner made a point to really make clear that he had been loyal from the very beginning to the very end of the war and had never waived because so many other people had.

This idea of wavering loyalty can most readily be seen through what is called the London Trade. Governor William Livingston and other Patriot leaders realized that the state's geography was particular problematic in actually helping to define what a loyalist was. As you can see from the map here, the border was quite porous, sometimes the boundary with Staten Island could be easily jumped over.

This porous border allowed for the London Trade to develop, which was essentially a trade of illegal goods from New Jersey to New York City. New Jerseyans were in search of gold and silver that the hungry British Army offered for New Jersey foodstuffs instead of worthless paper that the Continental Army could muster. London Traders as they became known could easily avoid American military lines and illegal trade with almost impunity.

Part of the dilemma with London Traders for Livingston and other state leaders was the issue of loyalty. By 1779, London Traders made up more of the loyalist threat for Livingston than any other group. But was a London Trader actually a loyalist? The ease at which geography created

the London Trade actually meant that ideology played little part in the decision to engage in illegal trade with the enemy.

Livingston argued forcefully that anyone who aided the enemy in wartime was a loyalist traitor and deserved to be executed—agreed with George Washington who wanted NJ to have a strong law that allowed for executions for trading with the enemy, but the legislature never passed such a law.

The frequency that people actually evaded the law challenged how individual New Jerseyans saw its illegality. Most juries acquitted those who evaded the law—they didn't sanction those for what they themselves were doing too. The ease at which people could illegally trade with the enemy, be deemed loyalist by the state government, but not suffer consequences of that, makes clear the complexity of the story of loyalty, especially in a place like New Jersey.