BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

Episode 425: Sarah Botstein and David Schmidt, "Ken Burns' *The American Revolution*"

[00:00:00] Announcer: You're listening to an Airwave Media podcast,

[00:00:04] David Schmidt: And I also just want to say like, I think there might be in part because of that, that paragraph-soundbite culture that you just want to be definitive about things, and that kills the opportunity to be patriotic. That shouldn't be a dirty word. You've got to care about the place you live in to improve it.

And I think that this, while giving the opportunity to look in the mirror and say, "we don't love that." It also gives you an opportunity to say, "we tried something new here, and that's really, really world important."

[00:00:42] Liz Covart: Hello and welcome to episode 425 of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present-day world we live in. And I'm your host, Liz Covart.

What does it take to bring the American Revolution to life? How can an event that took place 250 years ago be conveyed to us through modern day film? Ken Burns and his team work to answer these questions in their new, epic six part documentary, Ken Burns' *The American Revolution*. Their work promises to deepen, complicate, and transform our understanding of the revolution over twelve hours of film.

But how did Burns and his team make this film? What stories did the filmmakers choose to tell, and what challenges did they face in telling them? Today we're joined by two of the film's co-directors, Sarah Botstein and David Schmidt.

During our behind-the-scenes tour of their new film, Ken Burns' *The American Revolution*, Sarah and David reveal, how they tackled the visual and narrative challenges of documenting a war that has no photographs and very few surviving images from the period; the inclusive and ever evolving process that they use to uncover lesser known voices of the revolution, such as Native Americans, women, and free and enslaved African Americans; and why they believe history, and the history of the revolution in particular, can inspire civic engagement in our present moment.

But first, Ken Burns' *The American Revolution* debuts this Sunday, November 16th, 2025 on PBS. In honor of the event, I'm teaming up with fellow historians Michael Hattem and Jason Herbert for a Ken Burns watch party at 8:00 PM eastern. We'll watch the premier with you and offer live chat and commentary as we watch the premiere of the film together.

So if you'd like to watch this new documentary with fellow history lovers and ask historians questions that you have while you're watching, this is an opportunity you don't want to miss. To sign up for the watch party, visit benfranklinsworld.com/watchparty. That's benfranklinsworld.com/watchparty.

Alright, are you ready to go behind the scenes of Ken Burns' new project, *The American Revolution*? Let's go meet our expert guides

Today we're joined by two guests. Sarah Botstein is a documentary filmmaker at Florentine Films. Her work with Ken Burns and Lynn Novik includes the films, *Jazz*, *The War*, *The Vietnam War*, and *Hemingway*. She debuted as a co-director in 2022 with the film, *The U.S. and the Holocaust,* a documentary series that tells a story of how the American people grappled with one of the greatest humanitarian tragedies in history.

Today she joins us to discuss her work on the latest Ken Burns' project, *The American Revolution*, which is an epic, six-part documentary that premieres on PBS on November 16th, 2025.

Our second guest is David Schmidt, who is also a documentary filmmaker at Florentine Films. He's the producer and co-director with Sarah Botstein and Ken Burns of *The American Revolution*. David began his career as a filmmaker, as a researcher, and apprentice editor on *The Roosevelts*, which premiered in 2014, and *The Vietnam War*, which premiered in 2017. David's work on *The Vietnam War* won him the Jane Mercer Researcher of the Year Award [transcript corrected]. And he may also remember David and his work from episode 327 when we spoke with him about his two-part documentary with Ken Burns, *Benjamin Franklin* in 2022.

Welcome to *Ben Franklin's World*, Sarah Botstein. And welcome back David Schmidt.

[00:04:27] David Schmidt: Nice to be here, Liz.

[00:04:29] Sarah Botstein: Thanks for having us.

[00:04:30] Liz Covart: So the documentary that many of us have been waiting for, Ken Burns' *The American Revolution*, debuts on Sunday on PBS. Sarah and David, I wonder if we could talk about how you became involved in this documentary.

Sarah, I noticed that most of your film work has been in the twentieth century, so why did you decide that you wanted to help create a film about the eighteenth century? What drew you to this particular project?

[00:04:54] Sarah Botstein: Well, I'm a little later than Ken and David to the project. And David is definitely steeped in the eighteenth century and I am distinctly not, so thank you for calling that out. I've only worked on one film that was a little bit in the nineteenth century, which was *Prohibition*. So this was a big intellectual and artistic leap for me.

Ken decided that we were going to make *The American Revolution* as we were locking the Vietnam show in 2015. And he often says that when we were in the editing room looking at some really incredible maps, where we were sort of using Google Earth-like technology in a scene about the Ia Drang Valley in the third episode and turned us and said, "I'm ready to do the American Revolution."

He and David went on to do the Ben Franklin film. And then while that was brewing, invited me to the table on *The American Revolution*.

So I feel really, really fortunate and all the things that I thought were going to make the project really, really challenging and maybe not as rewarding, turned out to be really interesting and exciting and very rewarding artistic opportunities. So I feel really grateful to have worked on the project and to spend a little time in the eighteenth century.

[00:06:04] Liz Covart: And David, you went from working on a film project about one founding father, Benjamin Franklin, to working on a film about the entire revolution. So what was that shift like for you to go from one founding father to the entire revolution?

[00:06:18] David Schmidt: You know, there's no better individual to get the story of particularly the East Coast of North America in the eighteenth century than Benjamin Franklin, but he's only one person. And this was an opportunity to tell the story of millions of people who are impacted by this war, whether they fought in it, witnessed it, or were in other ways impacted by its outcome.

So, I don't know, it was definitely different, but it was really rewarding to get that other perspective on this story. So many other perspectives on this story. Benjamin Franklin is a wonderful individual, but again, he's just one of many.

[00:06:52] Liz Covart: Yeah. And all of these individuals were super complicated figures in their own way, you know, because we're all human, and they were human too. So we all have lots of good, bad, and gray areas in our lives. And working with Benjamin Franklin and then switching to the whole revolution, you would've been able to see that.

[00:07:08] David Schmidt: Yep. There's a lot to that too. And the American Revolution was so many different things to so many different people.

And I think we got one aspect, or maybe two or three or four aspects about the American Revolution in the Benjamin Franklin series. His son being a loyalist, him serving both as a statesman and as a diplomat, and also as somebody who's negotiating the treaties.

But there was so many different things to so many different people, and you don't get that unless you do this deep dive that we've been able to work on.

[00:07:38] Liz Covart: Now, we're students of history, so we understand that the past happened and history is made. We also know that historians work to be objective with the ways they talk about the past, and to be objective as they're reading and interpreting the historical sources that they locate that tell them about past people and events.

So with this in mind, Charles wonders what your approach was to telling the story of the American Revolution?

So would you tell us what story you set out to tell about the revolution and how your story of the revolution is different from other stories of the revolution? And how do you think our present-day world influence the stories that you researched and told?

[00:08:16] Sarah Botstein: I'm going to work my way backwards from your question, which I think is central to the art of the work that we do. And the approach that we take on any subject that we make a film about doesn't really change how we approach these topics, whether we're doing a very modern story of a twentieth-century biography or a big, big history.

When we take on a big subject that spans many years, and just has the title, *The American Revolution*, or *The Vietnam War*, or *Jazz* music, we really do try to pull all the way out and think about how to tell that story in two ways that are really important for audiences to think about.

One is we tell the story of that subject chronologically. We don't work thematically or biographically, so we're one foot in front of the other, one moment in front of the next. And then infusing that sort of stripped down chronological history with the well-known characters that we've heard of—Ben Franklin, George Washington, Marquis de Lafayette, General Cornwallis, Benedict Arnold, Abigail and John Adams —and learn about them and put them in the places that they should be and how they can help us understand the history and the leaders who are making decisions that affect everyone's life.

And then juxtapose them with people that most of us haven't heard of, and historians have spent, in this case, the last fifty or sixty years helping us bring new voices to life, whether those are the voices of Native American characters, Black people enslaved and free, a wonderful young girl from Yorktown, Betsy Ambler, who David deserves an enormous amount of credit for digging through the archives and finding out about as much about her as we can.

And then telling the history both biographically and events that are important. Battles are important, big political moments and showing how the American Revolution is not just a war on the thirteen colonies that we're used to hearing about, but a global war, a civil war, and something that took nearly a decade to fight and turned the world truly upside down.

[00:10:22] David Schmidt: I think there were two parts of your question that I just really wanted to get to. Which were, one was what story did you set out to tell? And to be quite honest, that's not really how we do it. We aren't setting out to tell a particular type of story. What you're seeing in the final film is really our discovery process.

We come in, honestly, this is a subject that I think a lot of people think they know something about. I grew up in Colonial Williamsburg, I thought I knew a lot about it. There's an awful lot that none of us knew. And piecing it back together with the help of lots of the former guests of your podcast, honestly, as well as several other really great writers and historians to get this story right, really was a process of discovery. And you see that in the final film.

We are trying to start from a point of not knowing anything and expecting the filmmakers and the viewers to come in with no previous knowledge. Let's get this story from square one, how it should be.

Your other part of the question was how the present day affects the product. I hope it doesn't in any significant way in terms of what's going on in the world. I hope we could tell a story that is a history that would've been true twenty-five years ago will be true twenty-five years from now; is evergreen, isn't reacting to the present moment. And I can honestly say I think that that's true, that this is just the story that we would've told at any point.

What is different is, Sarah referred to this a little bit, is all of the work that people have done in the last fifty years, which makes it different from what it would've been at the bicentennial. Just because we have so much more access through the archivists, through the archives, through digitization, through all the work the historians have done, that even reenactors have done, that living history museums and museums, colleges and universities, libraries. A lot of people have been committed to making this story more accessible and we really benefit from that.

[00:12:14] Sarah Botstein: I just want to echo what David said. Ken always says this, and we always say it, that our films are meant to be a journey and a process of discovery.

I think it would be naive for us to suggest that we don't make our films in a moment, and that the historians and writers that we're interviewing aren't living through whatever moment we're living through, and therefore the history has different echoes and different resonances.

I mean, I think we feel that every single day working on this film. "Oh, how is that relevant to what's happening today? What can we learn from it? How is history a great teacher and how is it instructive to understand the nearly ten years that we were working on it?" So those echoes and residences and the way that the film is reacting to what's happening change over time too.

[00:12:58] Liz Covart: We often say that a great history book will tell you just as much about the period it was written in, as a period it was written about. And it sounds a little bit like that might be true for documentaries as well.

[00:13:10] Sarah Botstein: No, I think actually we are trying, in a funny way, to have the film transcend that moment where a certain scholarship is of a moment.

So we have many generations of scholars, some of whom were students of some of the older and reacting to their work. So we do want to have many varied voices and interpretations to give the audience, and I think the film, as long a tale as it can have.

[00:13:37] David Schmidt: Yeah, and I think that the living can be quite chauvinistic about the past. And I think that we intentionally respected the work that people have done throughout the last 250 years to tell this story.

So you'll see in the film artwork created in the nineteenth century by somebody like Alonzo Chappel or Jenny Brownscombe or any number of other artists, to whom of course, the American Revolution is a really important part of their national understanding. And so Alonzo Chappel's painting of Bunker Hill isn't necessarily any worse than something we might create today. His artistry is pretty incredible. We respect that, and want to include that.

So this is, in many ways a collaboration with the generations of people who have come before us. Whether that's historians like Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood and their students, Friederika Baer, and there are people we interviewed for this film, or whether it's the work that historians did a hundred years ago to unpack this incredible story. 220 years ago, Mercy Otis Warren's history of the revolution, we cite some of that in this film.

But you want to hear from the people who live through it. So anyway, it's a collaboration with generations in all sorts of different ways. Not for nothing in the visual experience.

[00:14:50] Liz Covart: Could you take us into your process as documentary filmmakers so that we can understand where you're coming from, and how you go about your work and making a history based documentary?

David, I think this was something we talked a little bit about in episode 327 about your work on *Benjamin Franklin*, so would you remind us about your process?

[00:15:08] David Schmidt: Who can forget 327? Just kidding. Yeah, I mean, really, I think I referred to this earlier. You just kind of really start at square one. But the truth is that the script from Geoffrey C. Ward is really the first place that he and we continue to work on that throughout the whole process. But it's the, "in the beginning and there was the word," right?

So we have that with us. But also at the same time, while not reading the script, are reading all sorts of books written by people who we're going to end up interviewing. And we're never asking somebody a question that's like, "oh, can you get us from A to B in the film?" We're just asking them their impressions in kind of a conversational way, kind of like this: "What do you think this was? Where do we go from here?" It's not like, "please fit within our script" it's just give us your impressions, your understanding what happened.

At the same time, we're gathering all sorts of material. We've been filming for so long that we were filming during the height of COVID, and that meant that a lot of places, interiors were closed to us. But we could send our camera crews out all over the East Coast to these beautiful landscapes and catch them in different seasons, catch them without too many people out about.

We've been filming since then. I mean, we've been filming for years and years and years, but also gathering archival images from around the country and around the world. And basically we're just churning up as much information as we can by the end of the project.

Our logs of images from the eighteenth century are really substantial, and we've turned over as many rocks as possible. There are images that haven't seen a television screen ever. There are images that very, very few people have seen in 250 years. They're not hanging in a

museum. They're hanging on somebody's wall or they're in storage somewhere. There's just an awful lot of churning, I want to say, the whole time.

So the process is just keep going. And I know Sarah can speak to that much more elegantly than I can, but really it's just go, go, go, keep going.

[00:17:04] Sarah Botstein: Yeah, I think it's important for audiences and listeners to understand how fluid our process is, which is different from some filmmaking that people are familiar with. So as David said, Geoff Ward is constantly writing, rewriting, revising.

We're constantly figuring out different writers, historians, academics, politicians, people who might help us behind the screen, and also in front of the camera. And then for two or three years, we really become an archive. So we have researchers and producers who are bringing in material that David was just talking about, archival maps, pamphlets, news accounts of the day.

And then as David was just referring to, the depictions of these events, people, from the moment that those events happened, to art that we might commission today. And then we spent the better part of two years building a map that was as factually representative of eighteenth century North America as we could get.

So we have cartographers and artists and scientists and graphic designers creating a map—wide, medium, and close—that shows what the landscape was. Because one of the great characters of the American Revolution are the waterways, the ocean, the landscape, and then the weather. So you have to take those things into account and try to make them real and have the audience feel it.

So we're filming and researching at the same time while Geoff is writing and we're shooting interviews. And it's quite a fluid process actually. And then we spent the last year or so doing a lot of very technical post-production where we put all the sound into the show, we color correct and master every image and we fact-check every sentence. So it's an artistic and technical process at the very end, as well as academic.

[00:18:57] Liz Covart: Margie is curious to know about the images you use because there aren't any photographs of this period, and there aren't a lot of paintings that depict the revolution that were created during the American Revolution.

So Margie would like to know how you tackled this problem of not having images as you're producing a visual documentary?

[00:19:16] Sarah Botstein: So basically you take a person, place, or event. You find what is in the archival record from that. Is there a church log or a pamphlet or an etching or a letter? Is there anything from the time that is representative of that person, place, or event?

And then it's like a stone in the water and you go layer to layer to layer. So then, how has that been represented? Who has painted it? Who has depicted it? Did they write later? What kind of archive can we find? And in this project—just entirely different from the last big film

David and I worked on which was *Vietnam*, where we were trying to get as close to the actual person, place, or thing as we could, and we could get really, really close—we have to then think about the artistic representations and the time that those things are made.

And so we tried to signal in the first episode, even in the introduction to our viewer, okay, everybody, you're going to have a lot of different material, you're going to just get used to it. Sit down, you're going to have live cinematography, you're going to have letters, you're going to have archival maps, you're going to have new maps. We're going to use CGI.

And if there is nothing to represent a person, place, or thing, you'll see land that they might have walked on; a table they might have eaten at; a sunset they might have seen. So we're trying to bring those things to life that don't have any archival record by going as close to where they lived and what they saw and where they walked as we can.

[00:20:45] David Schmidt: Yeah, I mean, there are a fair amount of oil painting portraits from the eighteenth century, but they necessarily represent the people who had the time to sit for that portrait. The people who could afford to pay for that portrait or at least afford to take the time off of work to post for that portrait. And so that's a very small subsection of the population. We're talking millions of people versus maybe a few hundred portraits.

So, what other ways can we tell the story of these people? Well, a lot of people, a lot more than we had realized before we started working on this, were literate and left their writings behind. So there are times when you're going to see a manuscript. If you watch our film, you're going to see a manuscript with someone's handwriting. You might see their signature. Just proof that these people will really hear.

You might see a ledger or a muster roll or some sort of other document that lists people's names. That is really valuable to us, I think. And when you look at the manuscript, you can see the ink splotches, you can see the texture of the paper. I mean, it just feels really lived in, especially once we've got it in high resolution in the final film.

[00:21:51] Liz Covart: Jeremy is curious to know about other challenges you faced while creating your film, *The American Revolution*. He wonders if there were gaps in the historical record that you found particularly difficult to overcome, and how you were able to work through those challenges to make your film?

[00:22:06] Sarah Botstein: One important thing about making this film for audiences, and for us, was that we're constantly calibrating. And that's a great word Ken always uses. How much of this is the story of the American Revolution, the very difficult, complicated, bloody war that was a civil war and a war for independence, and the American Revolution, this entire revolution of how a government could function and what happened in Philadelphia between the Declaration of Independence and the ratification of the Constitution. So I think we're constantly trying to figure out how much of each, in each moment, in each episode we're going to talk about.

Even casualty figures, right? So let's just take the war piece. There's actually a lot more in the archival record of the American Revolution, this big revolution in how government should

function, because of Congress and congressional records and how literate that population was. And how much of that was actually written-down history, versus what happened on the battlefield, and how much of that are memories of soldiers and reporting and then how do you calculate eighteenth century casualties? Right. David, you just talk about the facts of the war.

[00:23:17] David Schmidt: Yeah.

[00:23:18] Sarah Botstein: And how we did that.

[00:23:19] David Schmidt: Yeah.

[00:23:20] Sarah Botstein: It's really, really tricky.

[00:23:21] David Schmidt: There's all sorts of things like that. Numbers, even going back to the Vietnam War, body count figures, casualty figures are intentionally inflated in some cases or minimized in others.

So yeah, I mean, you're not going to necessarily get the same figure from Henry Clinton as to how many people surrendered at Charleston as you might get from colonial authorities there. When you get those different numbers you might just want to make it so it's something like "at least this many people died." Or in the case of Charleston "5,618," maybe, "by Henry Clinton's count" is what we say.

So yeah, there's all sorts of stuff like that. I think that one thing that was interesting to keep in mind and the challenge is that these people were separated by, in the case of people in England and the people in North America, they're separated by thousands of miles and weeks in terms of communication. So we know from history that this one thing follow this other thing, follow this other thing. They aren't finding out about that stuff for sometimes weeks.

And so telling a story chronologically, you have to keep in mind that the shot heard around the world, which is what we sometimes think of as the battles of Lexington and Concord, they didn't even know there was a war on for forty days after the shot heard around the world in England.

So there's something about that that is its own challenge of how do you tell what's happening in the Philadelphia campaign and the Saratoga campaign when they don't know what's happening. Which order do you do things in when they don't know what's happening in the north versus the south? That was really complicated for us too,

[00:24:53] Liz Covart: As we'll discover on Sunday on PBS, *The American Revolution* is a six-part documentary series. Sarah and David, I've been doing some math in my head and it seems like you had approximately twelve hours to tell the story of the revolution, which was really big, multifaceted, complex event.

It's such a big event that I don't even think in twelve hours you can really cover everything. So after we take a quick moment to thank our episode sponsor, I hope you're going to tell us

how you were able to choose which stories to include and tell in your documentary, and which stories maybe you couldn't talk about in your documentary for want of time.

[00:25:31] Ad Break: Have you ever wondered what life was like in early America beyond the dates and battles? At *Ben Franklin's World* we dig into the details that our textbooks skip. The voices of women, Indigenous peoples, enslaved people, immigrants and ordinary men and women who shaped their world and ours. Each week, you hear from leading historians who bring new research and trustworthy insight so you can explore the past with confidence, not confusion.

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[00:27:01] Dynamic Ad Break: Audio varies and may shift timestamps in the second half of this episode by 1-2 minutes. Thank you for supporting Ben Franklin's World.

[00:27:02] Liz Covart: Sarah and David, how did you decide which stories to include and tell in your twelve hour documentary? Sarah, you mentioned earlier that you talk about the war, but what about the event's politics?

[00:27:14] Sarah Botstein: Well, we try to be somewhat comprehensive, while obviously not being comprehensive, right? We're saying this is a film about the American Revolution.

And again, we really rely on the scholars and writers and great thinkers who've spent their lives thinking about this time period to help us figure out how to include enough stories that we give our viewers a real sense of the, is kaleidoscope the right word? Like if you take New York state or New Jersey, or the main province of Massachusetts, like who's living there? How are they affected by the war? What's happening?

And then move to the—David always says this—the war is sort of in three chapters, right. It's the North, the Mid-Atlantic, it's the South, and then it's obviously the French, the Spanish, the world stage. So how much of each of those regions?

We always march chronologically. That helps us actually keep us without going crazy, right, because you're staying within a time period. What's interesting about any film about a war that I've worked on—and I've worked on three of the four that Ken has done—is the

beginning and the end tend to be a lot of time. We cover a lot of ground. So the causes of the war leading up to the first shots of the war, and then the last shots of the war and the legacy of the war tend to be the hardest things we do, the last things we do. And they cover the most ground.

And then in the middle of the film, we barely get six months. And so that happens in episode three and four where we're kind of making our way through the incredible Battle of Long Island, what happens in New York, getting through New Jersey, and hearing what's going to happen in Saratoga, and how the French are going to come in and help us. So that's like the fattest part of the war, we cover a very short amount of time, over four hours.

The lead up and the outro cover a lot more ground and go a lot more quickly than the middle of the show. We don't declare independence till the end of the second episode, and the middle of the show is the heart of both the war, and episode five is kind of the darkest moment in the war. And then episode six lifts us back up and out.

[00:29:22] David Schmidt: I think any of the historians that we worked with on this film, as well as probably all the eighteenth-century figures that we quote in this war, would have a different definition of what the American Revolution is, when it begins, when it ends, what it was about.

So we had to embrace that, but then also find our own goalposts for what years this story is going to cover. And what we ultimately settled on was this is going to be framed around the war.

Benjamin Rush famously said in 1787, I believe, around the time of the ratification debates "that the American Revolution is not over." I think there's an argument that that's true, but if we really followed that line of thinking, then we could have kept going till today with the story. And that's not what we were trying to do, we were trying to make it about the Revolutionary War.

Therefore, we needed to give some background for what led to the war. And then we needed to get into some of the immediate results of the war. Basic, that means that we're going to tell you an awful lot of what happened between 1775 and 1783. But we also need to tell you about the Bill of Rights, which consolidated what the revolution was fought for, for a lot of people.

[00:30:35] Sarah Botstein: And you have to know about the Seven Years War.

[00:30:36] David Schmidt: And you have to know about the Seven Years War and how we got there. So that's all in the film. I will also say that we wanted to be guided as much as possible by the testimony of the people themselves that lived through it. And as I was saying earlier, this is a much more literate society than we had realized going in.

And they knew this was history. So they're leaving their memories of this as it happened in a way that we're super grateful for. It makes for a much better story and comprehensive story. A story that makes sense; tells you a lot more about the United States that we all live in now.

This is the country that was created by this war and these people were people just like us who were living through really uncertain times. And I think that there's something really valuable to history, but also just really beautiful to humanity in hearing what they experienced and how they thought about it.

[00:31:22] Liz Covart: Speaking of experiences during the war, Marla notes that many histories of the American Revolution focus just on the great white men and the imperial story, but she notes that many times throughout the American Revolution, Indigenous people played pivotal and key roles.

So Marla wonders to what extent you included Indigenous people in your film and how you were able to share their stories and perspectives?

[00:31:46] Sarah Botstein: Can't make the film about the American Revolution without telling the story of what happened to Native Americans. We start the film there. We basically end the film there.

They are an important, an integral part of what's happening from the north to the south, from the first shots that are fired to the last shots that are fired. And in both very heroic and very devastating ways. So you can't tell the story of the American Revolution without telling that story. And we do that in every episode, in every instance. And I can't wait for you to see the show for that reason.

And David is a student of much of that subject and can tell you a little bit more about how we went about telling some of it. But we did work very closely with Native American historians, archives, groups, living history museums, archives. And we're very grateful to everyone who helped us bring that lesser known story of the American Revolution to the screen.

[00:32:40] David Schmidt: I took three classes in college at Dartmouth College with Colin Calloway, a former guest of your podcast, who said on the first day of class, "American history doesn't make any sense without American Indian history." He's absolutely right, and that's never truer than with this war.

All sorts of individuals and communities, not just Native individuals and communities, are making choices as to whether they want to involve themselves in this war, whether they're going to try to sit out, whose side they might choose if they do join it. We know what a lot of people chose to do because that's documented. Whether it's in their own voice or whether it's something of a British Indian agent writing down the gist of what was spoken at a certain treaty meeting.

We know that people like George Washington were really thinking about this. That it was really important to him what Native Americans might choose, whether they, certain people were fighting on his side or fighting against him. So to leave that out of the story is irresponsible. It's not an added thing. It's part and parcel of the story of the American Revolution.

Again, it's individuals. We know named people, we're going to name them in the film. It's individual nations that we're going to name in the film. It's not Native Americans writ large. A lot of people made different choices. A lot of nations made different choices. And we want to honor that.

[00:33:57] Liz Covart: Wow. You really dug deep into a lot of the complexities of the revolution, and that's really exciting. Now, Monica would like to know more about the role that Africans and African Americans play in your documentary, *The American Revolution*.

[00:34:10] Sarah Botstein: I mean, the answer is sort of the same as it is about Native Americans. You can't tell American history and you can't tell the story of the American Revolution without explaining what happened to free Blacks and enslaved Blacks, and trying to put some context around why they made decisions, how they were manipulated is sort of the right word, how they were used, and the choices that they made, and where they lived and what they did.

We don't subscribe to the great man theory of history as Christopher Brown has a great line about that in the film, but you also can't tell the history of the American Revolution without the great white men. So you need everybody.

It's a revolution, right? The revolution affects everybody. And we take very seriously, spent a lot of time to make sure that the voices are heard, that the context in which those voices are heard. That we give our audiences some understanding, some empathy, some historical context for why people made the decisions that they made.

Let alone, more than fifty percent of the population which were the women who, anytime you study a war, you have to really understand that the whole time the war is happening women are at the heart and center of what is going on. Whether it's early in the war, getting out the messages of resistance and trying to drum up support for what becomes the patriot cause. To traveling with the armies as they moved on foot from place to place. To taking care of the homesteads. To keeping the world moving the way women always do during war and taking care of the dead.

[00:35:42] David Schmidt: This war was everywhere. It's in Boston. It's in New York City. It's in Philadelphia, in Charleston, in Savannah, at Yorktown, in the back country, outside of the thirteen colonies, on the Gulf Coast, or an Indian country, overseas in the Caribbean. It is everywhere.

And unlike some of our maybe twentieth century wars that the American people have been involved in, it really is in the American people's backyard. If that's the case, then civilians are dealing with it in a real immediate way, and a lot of those civilians are women. A lot of those civilians are poor or enslaved.

This war really impacts a lot of people. There's war refugees that we follow very closely. I don't think we think about refugees when we think about the revolution. But it's a real refugee story: in the loyalist community, in different patriot communities, for a lot of Black

loyalists or white loyalists who end up leaving the country after the war. Also, of course, in Indian country, people are moved around then.

Now, just to refer back to your question about roles that Black people played during the revolution, I think. Something I said earlier that the revolution meant something different to all sorts of different people.

So to somebody like Harry Washington who was enslaved at Mount Vernon and chose to fight with the British Army in the American Revolution, I think the revolution was about his opportunity for freedom, for personal freedom. And he ended up winning that and moving on to Nova Scotia and later Sierra Leone.

For somebody like James Forten, who's a freeborn Black Philadelphian who served and fought with the patriots in the revolution, I think this story about everyone's liberty. And he was committed to his country, and to all the people in his country having their rights and liberties ensured. And he went on to continue that fight well after the war. So his revolution never ended in until he died.

And I think that's just important to understand. It's about all sorts of people making different decisions for different reasons. But that's what America is, and that's certainly what the American Revolution was.

[00:37:42] Liz Covart: And it wasn't just the war that was in people's backyards, it was the politics of the event too. Every American seemed to be grappling with the question of, what does this revolution mean? And like you said, it meant a lot of different things to different constituencies and different communities.

[00:37:59] Sarah Botstein: It's going to meet different things over the last 200 years. Maggie Blackhawk has, you know, a wonderful interview bite at the end of the second episode about how one of the important things to remember about the declaration is that it gave the people at the margins an inspiration to push the levers of power, and that's informed American history for 250 years. And that's at the heart of the film

[00:38:12] David Schmidt: And world history, a lot of people have taken the model of the American Revolution around the world over the last 250 years and used it to advance the cause of liberty elsewhere. I think that's nothing to sneeze at. That's really, really important.

[00:38:35] Liz Covart: Now, we've talked about your process. How you set out to tell the story of the revolution from its beginning, and how you aren't looking to talk about the revolution through any particular lens, except maybe that of curiosity, right? You want to talk about what happened during the revolution, and you thought deeply about how can we tell a story.

Beth would like to know more about your experience putting this film together in our particular moment, in our present moment. She wonders what you discovered about the meaning of the revolution? And why the meaning might be particularly relevant and meaningful for Americans today?

[00:39:08] Sarah Botstein: My gut answer to that question is, it's important to really think about and understand when you're studying the American Revolution and thinking about the times we're living in, that we were divided at our founding. And it's a very surprising story. It's an underdog story. It's an unlikely story. And we were not a monolith.

It was a perfectly reasonable and totally understandable choice to become a loyalist. This was a true civil war, which meant families were divided, neighborhoods were divided, communities were divided. When it comes to Native Americans, whole nations were divided, right? So it's a complicated and confusing history, and we're living in a complicated and confusing time. So that is actually helpful to understand.

And I think so much of the actual story of the American Revolution is little known to Americans. It's not taught. And that's not a fault of teachers. That's just the mythology has been so pervasive when it comes to the things we want to celebrate, which we should celebrate, that it misses so much for me of the story that is surprising and complicated and makes it so relevant and fun to study.

[00:40:21] David Schmidt: I haven't been in school in a long time. But I have been online a lot and I've been in conversations a lot. And I just think a lot of things that we do are reduced to soundbite level.

[00:40:31] Sarah Botstein: Yeah.

[00:40:32] David Schmidt: And you cannot do that with something this substantial. So we're grateful we have 12 hours. We're grateful, Liz, that you have at least 327 episodes, it sounds like a lot more, to tell the more complicated story, which is truthful, right. And I think if you just reduce it to a paragraph you come away with a real value judgment that's unfair to history.

And I thought early on that I wanted to avoid using the word "but" when talking about the American Revolution, because it implies one thing is more value but than the other. And I just want to say "and." And, I think, it's additive. There are all these different layers, people's experiences in the revolution. And the more and more and more and more and more you get, the more close to the truth you might get.

I think as the American Revolution meant something different to every individual, as I keep saying, I think this film will mean something different to all sorts of different people who watch it. I think a lot of people are going to have different takeaways, and I think you're going to have a different takeaway when you watch it this week than you would watch it in ten years. And I think that that's the mark of something truthful, that there are different ways to come away from watching it with different interpretations.

I also just want to say like, I think there might be in part because of that, that paragraph-soundbite culture that you just want to be definitive about things, and that kills the opportunity to be patriotic. That shouldn't be a dirty word. You've got to care about the place you live in to improve it. And I think that this, while giving the opportunity to look in the

mirror and say, "we don't love that." It also gives you an opportunity to say, "we tried something new here, and that's really, really world important."

[00:42:12] Liz Covart: In episode 408, we spoke with Michael Hattem about his book, *The Memory of '76*, which is really about the historical memory of the American Revolution. And in our conversation, Michael noted how Americans have been divided every time there has been a major anniversary of the revolution taking place.

So with this in mind, Miranda would like to know where you think your efforts with this documentary, *The American Revolution*, fit within our historical memory of the event. She specifically wonders whether you think your documentary will unite or divide Americans as they watch it?

[00:42:44] Sarah Botstein: I'm going to choose a different word, which is, I hope it will inspire us.

I think ultimately the American Revolution is a pretty interesting and inspiring story that could make us patriotic in ways that we often aren't. Which for me means that you are deeply engaged in your local communities. You vote in your local school board. You pay attention to your local congressional leaders. You interact with them. You don't just poke your head up every four years and worry about the presidency.

I think the founders debated at the time how to have a representative government. They cared deeply about Congress and how Congress's power was meant to check the executive branch. They wanted, as Annette Gordon Reed says in our last episode, to have an engaged and inspired citizenry.

And I hope the film makes people of all backgrounds and all persuasions excited about that. And to exercise their right to vote. I'm always surprised how few Americans do vote

[00:43:47] David Schmidt: And I just think there's not that much that we can all talk about, unfortunately, these days. There's sports, there's the weather. I that *The American Revolution*, the film, but also really the topic, in this next coming year of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, I hope that thinking about our founding, thinking about the war that made this country, we have something to talk about.

Something that really matters that we can agree on. The history of this all happened and it all matters and it all shapes who we are today, as does of course, everything that's happened in the 250 years since. That this is everybody's story. It belongs to everyone.

[00:44:29] Liz Covart: What do you hope we will take away from your film, *The American Revolution*, when we start watching it this Sunday on PBS? What will have made this film a successful project for you, Ken Burns, and Florentine Films?

[00:44:40] David Schmidt: I think every movie is a miracle, so I think we're already successful in getting it done. But I hope that people watch it, and I hope that they give it a chance, and I hope they give the people who made the revolution, not the filmmakers, but the

people who made the revolution 250 years ago. I hope they give them the benefit of the doubt. I hope they recognize in them people just like us whose thoughts on an extraordinary time, whose experiences through that extraordinary time, are worth considering.

[00:45:07] Sarah Botstein: We are so grateful that anyone would want to spend twelve hours with us and go on that journey. I think the film is twelve hours, so each episode can kind of stand on its own, but you won't get what we're trying to get at unless you watch all twelve hours and watch it in order. Because there's a rhyme and a reason to why we do what we do and the way that we do it.

So we beg your indulgence to please watch it all and reserve judgment until you've gotten to the last word. And we're really grateful for people's attention and the curiosity around this topic, particularly in the times we're living through.

[00:45:44] Liz Covart: Now it's time for the "Time Warp." This is the segment of the show where we ask you a hypothetical history question about what might have happened if something had occurred differently or if someone had acted differently.

In your opinion, what if we were living in more united times? How might a more united American populace today, have changed the story of your documentary, *The American Revolution*?

[00:46:08] David Schmidt: I hope it would not have changed the story we're trying to tell. But I do think it'll absolutely change the way people view it. I think it's completely against what we're trying to do to tell anybody how to think about the history. That's not in our intention at all.

We just want to give you the history and let you think what you will think. But I think that people are going to have certain ways of thinking about this history. You know, I said this before, they would've had different ways of thinking about it fifteen years ago, the same exact thing.

But just as an example, because I'm a crazy person, I've been rewatching *The Roosevelts* lately. And you think about that differently, and that was made eleven years ago. So I just think people are going to probably think about this differently just because of what's going on.

I also just want to say that this is not just the responsibility of the film, but the responsibility of everybody alive today. This next year is our time to reflect on the American Revolution and founding of our country. We are allowed to do that at any moment, but we really get the opportunity every fifty years. And I think that we should let ourselves do that even if we're worried about what's happening today.

[00:47:11] Liz Covart: *The American Revolution* premieres this Sunday on PBS. Sarah and David, do you have any tips for us as we watch your film? Are there any special parts that are your favorite that we should pay attention to, or any Easter eggs that we should watch out for?

[00:47:26] Sarah Botstein: Well, there are two big Easter eggs. It's the best cast of any Hollywood film I think ever. So have fun trying to figure out who's reading who.

There are sixty one voices, in addition to Peter Coyote. And it is just a tour de force of the great actors of our time, young and old, here and across the pond. So have fun figuring out who reads what and why we might have chosen those actors to bring those voices to life.

And like I was saying earlier, there are little visual references that if you watch closely over time, you'll pick up and try to figure out why we might have done that.

And then I think the other thing we haven't talked about today is the music. And we had a lot of fun figuring out what music to put in the show and working with our editors. And just a shout out to Buddy Squires, the indefatigable cinematographer who embedded with reenactment groups trying to figure out how to visually bring this history to life.

[00:48:24] David Schmidt: I'm not by any means meaning to throw shade at your medium, Liz, but we are not a podcast. So if you could keep your eyes on the screen, you're going to see some really, really beautiful, stunning footage that particularly Buddy shot over the last, a long time, eight years. And it's effective. It rests your attention while you listen to some pretty complicated information. So I encourage you to not double screen this one. If you can manage to look at the screen while you listen, you're going to get a much better takeaway.

[00:48:53] Liz Covart: You've both been on a media tour-de-force promoting this film, having visited many cities across the United States to call attention to your work, *The American Revolution*. Once you finish this film tour, do you have any projects that you're looking forward to going home and working on,?

[00:49:09] Sarah Botstein: Working on LBJ and the Great Society. So we are very much looking forward to jumping back in to the second half of the 20th century. And to see how his presidency can be understood both historically and a little bit in terms of what we're living through right now.

[00:49:24] David Schmidt: We're just starting that and to look at a photograph again is

[00:49:27] Sarah Botstein: going to be fun.

[00:49:28] David Schmidt: Really great.

[00:49:30] Liz Covart: If we have more questions about *The American Revolution* and the work you do, where's the best place for us to find more information about you?

[00:49:37] Sarah Botstein: pbs.org, Ken Burns' *The American Revolution*. There's an incredible website, enormous resources. And then in the Ken Burns Classroom, which is on PBS Learning Media, we have developed thirty-five different pieces of educational material, lesson plans, timelines, maps, to bring the film into classrooms from third grade to twelfth grade. We're doing a college and university initiative. There's a lot of background information on how we did it and why we did it the way we did it.

[00:50:09] David Schmidt: If you go to pbs.org/americanrevolution, you'll get the landing page for all of that.

[00:50:15] Liz Covart: Oh, that's wonderful. And I'll include a link in the show notes. Sarah Botstein and David Schmidt, thank you for taking us behind the scenes of Ken Burns' *The American Revolution*, which premiers this Sunday, November 16th, 2025, on PBS.

[00:50:28] Sarah Botstein: Thanks for having us.

[00:50:29] David Schmidt: Thank you, Liz.

[00:50:30] Liz Covart: Ken Burns' *The American Revolution* is more than a documentary. It's a reflection of who we are as a people and how we came to be. As we heard from Sarah Botstein and David Schmidt, this film project emerged from years of research, curiosity, and collaboration across generations of scholars, artists, communities, and institutions.

In this film, the Ken Burns' team will show us how the revolution wasn't just a war fought by a few great men, but how it was a vast and complicated struggle experienced by everyday people who were free and enslaved, loyalists and patriots, men and women, and members of Native nations and communities who were navigating for survival and for sovereignty.

Now, one of the most striking aspects of our conversation was the filmmakers' commitment to not entering this project with a fixed lens or a predetermined argument. Instead, they approached the American Revolution as a journey of discovery. A journey that led them to uncover voices, events, and perspectives as they researched.

The result of this work is that their film invites us to consider the foundational story of the United States for ourselves. Look for more information about David, Sarah, Ken Burns, and their film, *The American Revolution*, plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today on the show notes page, benfranklinsworld.com/425.

Friends, tell friends about their favorite podcasts. So if you enjoyed this episode, please tell your friends and family about it. Production assistance for this podcast comes from Joseph Adelman, Karin Wulf, and Morgan McCullough. Breakmaster Cylinder composed our custom theme music.

This podcast is part of the Airwave Media podcast network. To discover and listen to their other podcasts, visit airwavemedia.com.

Finally, after listening to Sarah and David talk about their journeys through the American Revolution, I'm curious about how your understanding of the revolution has changed over time. So let me know, liz@benfranklinsworld.com.