



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

Episode 447: “The Other Committee Members: Robert Livingston, Roger Sherman, and the Declaration of Independence”

[00:00:00] Liz Covart: *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of Clio Digital Media, and support for this episode comes from the Massachusetts Historical Society, the first historical society founded in the United States in 1791.

[00:00:21] Joseph Adelman: Hello, and welcome to *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. I'm your host for today, Joe Adelman.

This summer, we're producing a series of episodes on the Declaration of Independence, as America celebrates its 250th anniversary this year on July 4th. Liz has talked with experts about the Lee Resolution, the Model Treaty, and the draft Articles of Confederation, and we also wanted to take another look at the drafting of the declaration.

Now, if you're a longtime listener, you know that *Ben Franklin's World* has a tradition of publishing Declaration-flavored episodes most years on July 4th. We've looked at the broader impact of the Declaration, we've considered how ordinary Americans experience the 4th, and of course, we've talked about Thomas Jefferson's drafting work and the editing he engaged in with John Adams and Benjamin Franklin as members of the Declaration Committee.

But then I remembered something. We've never examined the other two members of the committee. Who were those guys? If you're really into the history, or if like me, you're a fan of the musical *1776*, you know that the answer is Robert Livingston of New York and Roger Sherman of Connecticut. But we rarely discuss them, not on *Ben Franklin's World*, not in most histories of the Declaration, not even in *1776*, where the characters appear in the first song after the committee is appointed, and then they fall into the background while Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin write, sing, and waltz their way through Philadelphia.

So this year, we want these two men to get their due as contributors to the American Revolution. I talked with an expert on each of the men, Geoff Benton of the Clermont State Historic Site in New York about Livingston, and Michael Morand of the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale University about Sherman, so that we could learn more about them and their political work.

In this episode, our guests reveal how Robert Livingston grew from the heir to one of the most significant fortunes in the colony of New York into a patriot writer and political leader, how Roger Sherman developed an unimpeachable moral character and standing in every community he lived in during his adulthood in Connecticut, what they each contributed during the debates about independence in June and July of 1776, and why we should remember Livingston and Sherman as key members of the founding generation.

We'll get to that in just a moment, but first, let's hear from Liz with some announcements.



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[00:03:00] Liz Covart: Thanks, Joe. If exploring questions like who were those other guys on the Declaration's Committee of Five ignites your curiosity, then you belong in the History Explorers Club. The History Explorers Club is a virtual community for curious adults to explore, discuss, and indulge in early American history. No scholarly background is needed, and we'll applaud and thank you every time you bring up a cool historical fact.

Club members get access to live historian talks, workshops, and a 24/7 forum where you can ask questions and discuss history. And right now, for just a little while longer, we're running a sale. New annual members get three months free. To learn more about the History Explorers Club and to join, visit historyexplorers.club. That's historyexplorers.club. I can't wait to see you there.

[00:04:03] Joseph Adelman: Our first guest is an author, curator, and historian from Upstate New York. Geoff is the author of three books about the American Revolution: *The Kinderhook Reformed Church: Three Hundred Years of Faith and Community*, *The Fight for Tom Cod: Newfoundland in the American Revolution*, and *The Livingston Lion: Henry Beekman Livingston's Revolution* [transcript corrected].

After a career at a number of historic sites and libraries in Columbia County, New York, he's currently the historic site manager at the Clermont State Historic Site in Germantown, New York. Geoff, welcome. I'm really looking forward to learning more about Robert Livingston.

We know this summer that we're celebrating the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and as part of doing that, we're doing this series of episodes on the Declaration. And the first step for that was getting the Declaration drafted.

Congress heard a resolution from Virginia Delegate Richard Henry Lee on June 7, 1776 proposing independence, and they postponed a decision on that for the purposes in part of drafting a declaration, and they appointed a committee of five men to be part of that committee, one of whom was Robert R. Livingston, who's not as well-known as Jefferson and Adams and Franklin. So to start, Geoff, can you give us a little bit about Livingston's background, about his early life, where he was born and grew up?

[00:05:27] Geoff Benton: Sure. There's not a lot known about his childhood. We know he was born in November 1746, probably at the family's home in New York City. He would've spent his youth splitting time between a New York City home and their country mansion at Clermont.

He was given the best tutors and entered King's College in 1761. He graduated in 1765, and during his ceremony he gave an oration called "On Liberty." I haven't been able to find a copy of that actual speech, but the city press was quite impressed with it.



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[00:06:02] Joseph Adelman: Geoff, can you give us a sense, he spent some time in New York City, some time in Clermont. Can you tell us where Clermont is relative to New York City in New York?

[00:06:10] Geoff Benton: Sure. Clermont is about a hundred miles or so north of New York City. Clermont is an estate right on the Hudson River. It was originally part of the larger Livingston Manor tract, but when the first Lord of Livingston Manor died, he split his land between his elder son Philip, who got the title Lord of Livingston Manor, and the bulk of the land, but his younger son Robert got thirteen thousand acres on the Hudson, which he converted to more than half a million acres through land deals himself. We're almost right in the middle between New York City and Albany.

[00:06:46] Joseph Adelman: And with nice views of the Hudson, I hope.

[00:06:49] Geoff Benton: Yes. Beautiful.

[00:06:50] Joseph Adelman: So as you mentioned, Livingston is part of this long-lasting dynastic family in New York. The Livingstons are one of the leading families. Where in the politics of the colony of New York did the Livingstons fit?

I realize, I grew up in New York, so I have some vague understanding that New York politics were and still are relatively complicated, but where do the Livingstons fit in in this mid-eighteenth-century political dynamic in New York?

[00:07:16] Geoff Benton: In the middle of the eighteenth century, New York City is very factionalized. New York is very factionalized. And one of the biggest disputes is between the landed gentry and the merchant class. Both think they're more important to the New York economy, both think they should be in charge. The merchant class rallies behind the De Lancey family, and the landed gentry class forms behind the Livingstons, so they become the Livingston and De Lancey factions.

There's clashes over judgeships that are awarded by the crown, colonial assembly positions. In one case, Robert Livingston's father, Robert Livingston, was elected to the colonial assembly, and the De Lanceys refused to seat him for years, first claiming he wasn't an actual resident because of where his summer house was, and then once he was appointed judge, they said a judge couldn't sit in the assembly. And eventually, to get the seat, the Livingstons had to run a cousin instead of the judge to get that seat.

[00:08:15] Joseph Adelman: By the 1760s, Robert R. Livingston—by the way, for our listeners—what's the R stand for in the middle name?

[00:08:24] Geoff Benton: R. There's no document that shows it standing for anything other than R.



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[00:08:28] Joseph Adelman: Okay. So Livingston, our Declaration Livingston, is growing up in New York City in the 1760s and then attending college at King's College—what becomes Columbia—in that same era, at a moment when anti-imperial protests are rising against the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts.

But also New York City is the administrative center in North America for the British Empire. There's lots of high-ranking officials there, lots of offices. So New York City is also a bastion of loyalism, of pro-British sentiment.

How did Livingston, or do we know during his college years how he came to choose the anti-imperial side over the pro-imperial side?

[00:09:09] Geoff Benton: During his college years, he starts to see resistance to the imperialism. His father is actually a member and cohost of the Stamp Act Congress in New York City, and according to some stories that come out of there, writes one of the addresses to Great Britain that comes out of there. So he's seen that as a nineteen-year-old happening right in front of him, part of it at his father's house.

He sees, especially that course that last ten years between 1765 and 1775, the De Lanceys were seen as more minded for rebelling or fixing things with the Crown, and the Livingstons were seen as more conservative. Over that last ten-year period, those positions kind of flip-flop as the De Lanceys continue to seek more Crown positions and governor-appointed positions. And with that comes the Sons of Liberty in New York City, who had backed the De Lanceys, were over time backing the Livingstons.

It gets to the point where in 1772, Livingston is appointed Recorder of the City of New York, but resigns in 1773 because of differences with the opinions and the positions of the court in regards to the Crown.

[00:10:15] Joseph Adelman: It sounds like New York's factional politics are as much at play as any broad imperial ideological battles.

[00:10:23] Geoff Benton: For sure. And one of the things that really puts Livingstons and many other leading families in New York over the top in fighting against the imperial British rule is money.

There's lawyers and judges, and they have jobs, but their main fortune comes from their land. They rent it out in eighty-acre farms and then collect one quarter of what those farmers grow every year.

With the Intolerable Acts and different acts of Congress and taking away Massachusetts' charter, they start to feel that that land is threatened, and if their land is threatened, then their fortune and their livelihood is threatened.



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[00:11:02] Joseph Adelman: So we get to 1775 and the Second Continental Congress is preparing to gather in Philadelphia. New York is selecting delegates. And I want to take this moment to underscore just how young Robert Livingston was at this moment.

He's born again in 1746, in late 1746, so he's appointed to the Second Continental Congress at the age of 28. He's three and a half years younger than Jefferson, just to give another piece of context for this. At such a young age, how did he come to be one of the leaders sent to represent the then colony of New York?

[00:11:38] Geoff Benton: His legal career got off very well. He and John Jay were partners, became very prominent in the city. Eventually, they dissolve the partnership and start making plans and present plans to the royal governor for a new type of judgeship that would be handed to the two of them. And they would ride around handling cases higher than local judges, but not necessarily needing to go to a supreme court or a royal judge.

So they're thinkers. There's some evidence that Livingston published some pamphlets in the run-up to 1775, and there's also a large part of why he's chosen at such a young age is because of the man he will become.

Everyone knows who he is. And they know that his grandfathers are aging and his father is pushing 60 at this point, probably why he wasn't chosen instead. And when those three men die, Livingston will inherit all of their land.

And when you take the Livingston land that his grandfather has built up, that his father has added to, and the land that his maternal grandfather, Henry Beekman, owns, it comes out to about a million acres, which is slightly larger than Rhode Island. And that is right in the heart of New York. So he's a kind of a linchpin for New York.

[00:12:55] Joseph Adelman: Yeah, that's a significant portion of the land along the Hudson River between New York and Albany.

[00:13:00] Geoff Benton: Yeah. The land runs from the Massachusetts border to the western edge of the Catskill Mountains, from down into Dutchess County—kind of an odd shape part of it sticks down far more south than the rest—and then north to the edge of the Van Rensselaer land, which is what's now northern Columbia County.

[00:13:19] Joseph Adelman: Do you have any sense of what he did as a member of Congress in the first year or so that he was there before the Declaration became part of his story?

[00:13:29] Geoff Benton: One of the most significant things he did was in 1775, when Congress decided to send petitions to the King, the Parliament, the people of Great Britain, people of the colonies, people of Ireland, explaining what was going on in the colonies and



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explaining what they wanted to achieve and how they wished to achieve it, he was chosen to draft the address to the inhabitants of Great Britain, the people.

And we only found this out about twelve years ago or so when the original draft was found in the Morris-Jumel Mansion in New York City. So this address is significant because it shows a development for Congress and also for Livingston himself. And I should say it was edited by Richard Henry Lee. We know that from the draft that was found.

But it warns the people of Great Britain that if what the British Army was doing to American Englishmen in America, they could certainly do the same to Englishmen in England. He also points out that they're looking for a peaceful resolution, and they don't relish violence, but by that point he's resigned to it if it happens.

Bunker Hill is happening at the same time all these letters are being written. So he writes, quote, "On the sword we have compelled to rely for protection. Should victory declare in your favor, yet men trained to arms from infancy and animated by the love of liberty will afford neither cheap nor easy conquest. Of this we are assured that our struggle will be glorious, our success certain, since even in death we shall find the freedom which in life you have forbid us to enjoy."

[00:15:06] Joseph Adelman: Stirring words. And if I may say, starting to give some hints at what may be the answer to the next question, which is to talk about the committee that is chosen to write the Declaration after Richard Henry Lee made the resolution.

People can see he has writing talent. He's made networking connections to some of the other colonies and some of the other political leaders. Is that why Livingston ended up on the drafting committee? Was it partly to make sure there was somebody from New York, which is a colony of significant size? Were there other particular qualities he could bring to the committee?

[00:15:40] Geoff Benton: He's a talented writer. He's a talented speaker. He's a very well-educated man, and he is apparently, in most people's eyes, a more radical member of the conservative New York delegation.

His wealth of knowledge is certainly something that the committee can draw on, and there's been some comparison between the Declaration and the Dutch Act of Adjuration from the sixteenth century. The only member of the Committee of Five that was fluent in Dutch was Livingston.

But on the other hand, he had also become that man that they thought he would in 1775. Between June of 1775 and January of 1776, he lost both his grandfathers, his father, and his brother-in-law, Richard Montgomery, who fell at Quebec.



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So when he had gone home in the winter from Congress, he was the son of great landowners and the potential great man, and he comes back to Congress in the spring of 1776 as arguably the most powerful man in New York. So really, New York is probably going to go where he leads it at that point.

[00:16:45] Joseph Adelman: The drafting of the Declaration is very much behind the scenes and yet also this sort of famous mental image that Americans have of Jefferson drafting and Franklin and Adams looking over his shoulder and revising.

And the whole reason for this episode is we then don't hear a lot about what Livingston and Roger Sherman, his colleague from Connecticut, are up to. Do you have a sense of what he contributed to the committee in those few weeks during the process of drafting and revising before it's presented to the full Continental Congress?

[00:17:15] Geoff Benton: Not exactly. As you said, sources are scarce on this. This is a remarkably quiet period in his correspondence, which tends to happen with him when he's really focused on a project and the people he is working with are close by, where he doesn't need to write letters to them to make things known.

So really the only letters coming out at this time are letters from the entire delegation asking for new instructions from the New York Provincial Congress, since their instructions haven't changed since May of 1775, and the situation certainly has.

But beyond that, he's also working on a committee, the very beginning of the committee that writes the Articles of Confederation. He's named to that committee as well. He's probably splitting his time, but it's hard to imagine, having read letters and accounts of Livingston that he would stay quiet in any room.

And ultimately, I believe there's sixteen changes to the Declaration between Jefferson's draft and the draft presented to Congress, and nine of those have been attributed to either Adams or Franklin, which leaves more changes that haven't been attributed to anyone. And it's entirely possible that with his education and thoughts and things, that any one of those could be his or more.

[00:18:33] Joseph Adelman: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Obviously, you know it's a classic historical problem of what we have evidence for and what we're able to talk about, and then the shadows that those other three men cast are pretty long and dark.

[00:18:44] Geoff Benton: It doesn't help either that John Adams and Livingston did not get along basically from the time they met. When Livingston published that address to the people of Great Britain, Adams said it would appeal only to ladies. They just shoot each other.



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And later in life, Adams begins to leave Livingston off of his memories of the Committee of Five. He misnames him, or he just conveniently blanks on the fifth member. They were just lifelong enemies, and for no discernible definite reason.

[00:19:15] Joseph Adelman: We are *Ben Franklin's World*, but we are also John Adams fans, and yet at the same time, I am not shocked to hear that he was feuding or arguing with some of the other members of the generation.

As we get to July 2nd, Congress votes on independence, and then July 4th approves the declaration. And one thing that a lot of people know, either from a history course or from the musical *1776*, because I cannot let this go without making a reference to that musical, one thing people know is that New York abstained courteously from the vote on independence. So after July 4th, what role did Livingston play in getting New York to change those instructions, to get the state to say, "Yes, we'll sign on to independence"?

[00:19:57] Geoff Benton: This is one of those times Livingston just misses out on being a star in history. He leaves Philadelphia on July 6th or 7th to head to New York to go in front of the Provincial Congress and ask for directions and tell them what's going on in person.

And he's primed to do this. He's written letters about he's on his way and he's coming, and, you know, they'll have an answer soon. And New York goes ahead and votes for independence on July 9th before he can get there.

So that speech he would have made would have told us so much about his thoughts and the thoughts of New York. It's just one of those times that Livingston just misses out on really coming to the forefront of history.

[00:20:38] Joseph Adelman: And really just, it only took two days, maybe three, depending on the weather, to get between Philadelphia and New York City. So yeah.

[00:20:46] Geoff Benton: He was taking a coach because he had his wife with him, so it took a little longer.

[00:20:50] Joseph Adelman: After 1776, you referred earlier to his nickname, "The Chancellor." What is a chancellor, and what role did he play in, in New York's state government after 1776?

[00:21:02] Geoff Benton: Almost immediately after returning to New York, he and John Jay and Gouverneur Morris are tasked with writing the New York State Constitution, which goes into effect in April of 1777. And Livingston is appointed chancellor of New York under that new constitution.



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The chancellor is the highest judge of New York State with a lot of privileges that come with that. He can hold chancery court anywhere he wants. So frequently after 1794 or so, that's his house at Clermont, so you have to come up the river to argue your case for him.

And the chancellor also sits on the committee of revision, which it has the right to veto. It's not a power given solely to the governor. It's a committee that consists of the governor, the chancellor, and any three members of the Supreme Court.

But I think the real kicker is the position itself. By the time a case gets to him, he's allowed to decide what's right, which is not necessarily what's legal. Those two things can be mutually exclusive, so it's a very important position.

So he holds that position in New York. He also makes himself a presence in the New York Assembly, not necessarily a member, but always ready to speak in front of them, and he becomes, as New York starts passing laws to take away land from loyalists with little to no evidence or warning, he begins to argue against that. And eventually, they actually return him to Congress in 1779 to get him out of the state.

So once he returns to Congress in 1779, he's a voting member, and then when the Articles of Confederation come into effect in 1780, he's named Secretary for Foreign Affairs. Which is, people compare it today to a precursor to the Secretary of State in the 1787 Constitution, but it's a little loosely defined in the Articles of Confederation. He has room to make it his own. But he becomes kind of a locus of information between Congress and foreign diplomats and vice versa.

But again, we see that rivalry or disagreement with Adams comes up. And at one point, Adams doesn't write to him for six months, which when you consider the time it takes for information to travel across the oceans too, it's a huge length of time without hearing from one of your ambassadors to France.

And then the other side of that role is to keep the French delegation happy, so he's often a party planner. In fact, there's a time when he's putting together a party for the French delegation and members of Congress, and he's looking at the guest list and the most conspicuous name absent from the guest list is his own.

But I shouldn't make light of the position though, because he did do some very important stuff. Before the Yorktown campaign, he and Washington and Charles Carroll, who are all giant men, would've been interesting to be in that room. They have a meeting to discuss how and where, and the logistics of getting the money from the French to the American Army so that it can go on and engage Yorktown and win the South.

[00:24:08] Joseph Adelman: We're moving past the Revolution, but I don't want to let the opportunity pass without asking about Livingston playing a role in the introduction of steam



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navigation in the United States. Can you tell us just a little bit about his support or assistance in helping that come to pass?

[00:24:22] Geoff Benton: He's actually far more involved than people traditionally think. He'd been tinkering with steam travel as early as the 1790s. He actually got as far as building some scale models that he tested in Tivoli Bays in the river, which was a few miles south of his home at Clermont.

My personal favorite was he built one with a paddle wheel, but it was mounted underneath the boat parallel to the keel. So when they turned it on, it just spun in the water.

But he had gone to France as Jefferson's Minister Plenipotentiary to France. He negotiated the Louisiana Purchase, but also met Robert Fulton while he was there, and they bounced ideas off each other, and Fulton's ideas combined with his created the steamboat. His money funded it. He returned from France in 1805 to Clermont, and by 1807, the North River steamboat of Clermont is making its way up the river, and its first stop was at Clermont.

This is an idea he clings onto for the rest of his life. He's constantly working on the business and getting more steamboats going up and down the river.

He and Fulton actually have a steamboat built near Pittsburgh that's taken down the Ohio into the Mississippi, becoming the first steamboat on the Mississippi, which is a story in and of itself. There's a huge earthquake that makes the river run backwards while the steamship is trying to get to Louisiana, to New Orleans. And it's a whole adventure story.

But he also continues tinkering with the mechanics themselves, and there's a really interesting set of correspondence between him and Thomas Jefferson, where he's debating using mercury as a lubricant in part of the engine. And they start writing in physics and calculus formulas that my physics and calculus 101 just weren't there. First time I looked at that, I had to look up what some of the symbols even meant that they were using, so.

[00:26:16] Joseph Adelman: Well, I also want to give you a chance to talk about your current job and your role at Clermont State Historic Site, and to tell us about Clermont Historic Site, which is part of the New York State park system. Can you tell us about the work you do and, and how the site remembers and commemorates the Livingston family?

[00:26:33] Geoff Benton: As you said, Clermont's part of the New York State park system, and one of our major pushes for the last few years has been telling our whole history, not just talking about the Livingstons, but talking about all of the people who were in the orbit of Clermont: the enslaved, the paid servants, the tenants.



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And so we're really telling a much more complete story at Clermont. It's giving us a better sense of who the Livingstons are because we're finding out how they interacted with these people.

So we're learning about the enslaved and how Chancellor Livingston sat on the New York Manumission Society, but after he attended those meetings he came home to a staff of nine enslaved people.

But we're also learning other things, like this is actually a favorite story of my great aunt who passed away a few years ago. When the British burned the house down in 1775 because of the Livingstons' prominent role in the revolution, Margaret Beekman Livingston, the chancellor's mother, has it rebuilt during the war.

And she writes to Governor Clinton asking for men to be released from their militia obligations so they won't be disturbed when building her house. And one of the men she asked to be released was Conrad Lasher, who's my eighth great-grandfather. So I work in a house that my family helped build.

But since we're telling the whole story, the house is our best tool. It's set up as it was in 1931, shortly after the last man of the house died and while the last lady of the house was living there with her two daughters, because they lived there through the forties and then closed it down.

So when it was sold to the state in 1962, they were able to come in, it needed major restoration work, but after it came in, the daughters were able to come back and tell us exactly where the furniture went that was in those rooms.

So with the exception of having to make some adjustments for tour routes, it's where it was in 1931. And the great thing is the last lady of the house, Alice, decorated in the colonial revival style because her husband was also a huge fan of his family's history.

And one of the advantages that Alice had was she was able to go to the attics and the barns and the basements and pull out period furniture for her colonial revival look rather than going to Sears and Roebuck and getting reproductions. They also pulled out knick-knacks that belonged to different generations of the family.

There's portraits hanging on the walls of the chancellor, of the three lords of Livingston Manor, of Margaret, of the judge. All these are designed to get the visitor to ask questions about the family's history.

Essentially, John Henry, Alice, and their daughters were living in a museum, so we really got a ready-made museum in the sixties. And it's great the way it's set up because it allows us to show the visitor things and then have them ask questions about what the Livingston legacy is,



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because that's really the key here. I think our tour really relies heavily on legacy, because the last family was leaning so heavily into it, it's inescapable. So we have to confront that every day, both the good and the bad parts.

[00:29:36] Joseph Adelman: Geoff, thanks so much for telling us all about Robert Livingston and about your work at the Clermont State Historic Site. We're going to take a moment to hear from our episode sponsors, and then I'll come back and talk to Michael Moran about the last of the committee members, Roger Sherman.

[00:29:52] Liz Covart: The Declaration of Independence and the committee that produced it has been a thread that has run through *Ben Franklin's World*. For nearly twelve years, we've explored how the founders drafted the Declaration, how people in 1776 and the early years of the new republic heard, viewed, and interpreted the Declaration, and why it is left to every generation to wrestle with the Declaration.

And I'd love your help to continue this work. It's mid-July 2026, and we're in the final weeks of our annual fundraising campaign. Between now and the end of July 2026, we'd like to add fifty new donors. We're in the 250th anniversary year of the Declaration of Independence and the birth of the United States, a moment when the questions that this podcast has always asked feel more alive and needed.

So now is the perfect time for me to ask you. So if you've been thinking about supporting this show, now is the time to do it. Fifty new donors by the end of July, that's our goal, and we still need your help to do it. And if you've already given to *Ben Franklin's World*, I really hope you'll consider a return gift. You can make your first gift or a returning gift in any amount to benfranklinworld.com/donate. That's benfranklinworld.com/donate.

And as we're a 501c3, your gift is fully tax-deductible. Every gift helps keep this work going. So thank you so much for listening, thank you for caring about this history, and thank you for helping us continue to tell it. And a sincere thank you to Jared H., Daniel H., Patty H., Patricia H., Eric H., and Victoria H. for your generous support. Thank you so much. Thank you for helping me keep this work going.

[00:31:31] 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*.

[00:31:32] Joseph Adelman: Our next guest is a cultural heritage professional and civic leader in New Haven, Connecticut. Michael Morand is the author of a chapter in *Yale and Slavery: A History*, and has been a leader for the research of both that book and the Yale and Slavery Research Project more broadly.

He was the curator of two related exhibitions in recent years, *Shining Light on Truth: New Haven, Yale, and Slavery* at the New Haven Museum, and *Shining Light on Truth: Black Lives at Yale and in New Haven* at the Yale Schwarzman Center. Michael currently serves as



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Director of Community Engagement for the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale University, and has held several municipal appointments in the city of New Haven.

That includes his current work as the city historian, in which role he is co-chairing the local America 250 commemorations. And just this past April, Michael curated a pop-up exhibit at the library celebrating Roger Sherman on his birthday. Michael Morand, welcome to *Ben Franklin's World*.

[00:32:35] Michael Morand: Thanks so much.

[00:32:36] Joseph Adelman: Just to start, as we're trying to think about Roger Sherman and his role in the Declaration, many people just simply don't know who he is, which is the point, or if they know about him, maybe they know that he's connected to the Connecticut Compromise, or maybe they don't even know that. Can you give us some background on who Roger Sherman was, where his early life took place, where he was born and grew up?

[00:32:58] Michael Morand: Absolutely. It's great to be with you to talk about Roger Sherman, a man from ordinary circumstances who did extraordinary things to help create these United States of America.

I've known Roger Sherman fairly well since I first came to New Haven more than forty years ago, and it's great to be one of a number of people sharing his story in this 250th anniversary year of the nation.

There's a lot to know about Sherman. He was the person who signed all four basic documents of the nation. He's the only person who signed all four basic documents. By the time he died, he was a member of the US Senate. He didn't begin that way.

He was born on April 19, 1721, not in Connecticut, interestingly enough, in Newton, Massachusetts, to William and Mehetabel Sherman, who were farmers. They moved when Sherman was about two to Stoughton, Mass, not far away from Newton. And that's where Sherman spent most of his young life. Sherman's father died in the early 1740s, and by 1743, Sherman moved with his mother and siblings to New Milford, Connecticut, where he spent the next two decades of his life.

It's important to remember that Sherman did not go to college. Sherman was not born to great wealth at all. For his education, he had his family's modest library and a local grammar school. He also had support of the Reverend Samuel Dunbar, Congregational minister during his time in Massachusetts.

But while he didn't have formal education in a great degree, he had really great interest and knowledge. He was a very active learner and was always looking to learn new things and to



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do new things. So in New Milford, he joined his brother in a retail store that traded in various general merchandise, including books. Books he would be selling until the 1770s.

Sherman himself became very active in New Milford in town and regional affairs, was appointed county surveyor in 1745. When he was only twenty-seven years old, he was able to take the money he had put together and buy one of the most substantial houses in New Milford. And around that time in 1749, he married his first wife, Elizabeth Hartwell.

He began publishing almanacs in 1750, which he continued to do until 1761. Almanacs, as probably many of the listeners know, were one of the most read books of the time, and so he was major in that. And he also continued to invest in real estate.

He was admitted to the bar in 1754. Again, didn't go to law school, but he taught himself. A lawyer said you should read for the bar, so he did, based on his own learning and was chosen to represent New Milford in the Connecticut House of Representatives beginning in 1755, the next year, further expanding his public service.

So he became very much one of the big people in New Milford. And actually it's now called Sherman in Connecticut. Sherman's first wife died in 1760, which represented yet another time of change in his life. So in 1761, he moved here to New Haven, which at the time was the largest city in Connecticut, one of the largest settlements in the American colonies, and was co-capital of the colony with Hartford from 1701 until the 1870s.

So Sherman had begun trading here a little bit before but moved here in 1761. The streets did not have formal names yet. But he lived on what is now known as Chapel Street, one of the main streets in town, right across the street from the buildings of Yale, which was the largest college in America of the eight or so colleges at the time, and would remain the largest college until the early 1800s.

So he moves here to New Haven, the big city in Connecticut, and he lived at the house that was there originally but then built his own house later in the 1760s about what's now 1050 Chapel Street. And that's where he ended up living here until he died in 1793.

1762, Roger Sherman married Rebecca Mynock Prescott, and over his two marriages he had fifteen kids total, of whom twelve lived to adulthood, so he had a very big family.

And in New Haven he very quickly became one of New Haven's leading citizens. His store, which he ran until 1772 when he turned it over to his son, was a hub of activity, including, it's been said, a literary salon of sorts for professors and students at Yale, other people from New Haven, and visitors from out of town. So he was very much a big man in New Haven who was active in civic life.



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[00:37:24] Joseph Adelman: So after moving to Connecticut, he lives in New Milford, and just to fill in, can you help our listeners understand where geographically in Connecticut New Milford is?

[00:37:33] Michael Morand: Yeah, New Milford's on the western edge of Connecticut right next to the New York border.

[00:37:38] Joseph Adelman: So then he moves to New Haven and becomes really integrated into civic life. Can you talk in the 1760s and 1770s, he's in middle age in his 40s and 50s, he's a successful shopkeeper, he's been admitted to the bar.

In what ways does he get involved in politics, and what draws him into the imperial crisis and the debates about imperial politics?

[00:38:02] Michael Morand: Sherman was very active in civic life in Milford and continued in New Haven. He was very active as a church member. His member was called the White Haven Church, which was a New Light church, not the founding church of New Haven. Its minister was Jonathan Edwards, the younger, the son of the famous Jonathan Edwards.

And his public service really continued and continued to grow while he was in New Haven. He was served as a justice of the peace, a judge of the Court of Common Pleas, and then of the Superior Court, and he went from being a member of the House of Representatives effectively for Connecticut, to being a member of the Governor's Council, the upper chamber in the Connecticut General Assembly.

And he had a bookstore at the same time. But his mathematical prowess no doubt helped him get appointed as treasurer of Yale in 1765, which he continued to do until early 1776. The college actually gave him an honorary degree in 1768.

So he was very clearly a big man when he got to New Haven and continued to grow and become increasingly well-known, not just locally and statewide, but nationally. And he was involved in lots of different things, in correspondence with people in Massachusetts and other colonies, and becoming actively involved in Connecticut's role with other colonies here in New Haven before 1776.

He was definitely an independence person. We know some about his business, and he was somebody who was interested in independence for practical reasons. He was very much involved in the world of business, knew about taxes, all those sorts of things.

He was never accused of anything untoward in business. He was really through and through, never took part in any corruption or other types of less than wholesome conduct. Again, involved with real estate and general merchandise sales through his stores from the 1740s well into the 1770s. So for all reports, he was very detail-oriented in all of these works.



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So there's no doubt British efforts to interfere in business would have affected him. So dollars and cents-wise, he was against it. But at the same time, it's really clear that it wasn't just a matter of dollars and cents for Sherman. Fundamentally, he really believed in the possibility of people to do well, regardless of their position, regardless of where they were born or what family they come from.

His own life showed this to him, and it was fundamental truth for him that goes beyond the mere dollars and cents. We see him expressing in letters beginning in the 1760s and really does tell us that he was an independence man, both in the heart as well as in the wallet.

[00:40:39] Joseph Adelman: So when we get into 1775 and the military violence starts, obviously the colonies send delegates to Philadelphia for the Second Continental Congress, and Roger Sherman is among Connecticut's choices. Can you tell us what attracted him to his fellow residents of the colony to send him to represent Connecticut?

[00:41:00] Michael Morand: Again, he was a big man in New Haven and in the co-capital and in the colony at the time. And he was chosen to be one of Connecticut's delegation of three, along with Silas Deane and Eliphalet Dyer, to the First Continental Congress in 1774 that met, of course, at Carpenters' Hall in Philadelphia.

Interestingly, Sherman was not on the list of the first three people chosen for that. The two, Silas Deane and Eliphalet Dyer, said yes, but the other people wouldn't do it. So Sherman was eventually chosen fifth or sixth to be on the committee, and he agreed and served. So he was on the First Continental Congress, served well there, and then 1775, he's appointed to the Second Continental Congress.

And again, we should remember, and Christopher Collier, who would go on to be the state historian of Connecticut, really wrote a lot about Sherman, and the great sources about Sherman really go to Christopher Collier. And, and he said of Sherman around the time, "Aloof, reserved, and even severe are the words most often used to describe the self-educated surveyor, lawyer, and mathematician. Crafty, slippery, sly, and clever are others found frequently next to his name too. Taciturn among his family and friends, but talkative on the public stage. Thomas Jefferson called him, this is a quote from Jefferson, 'a man who never sought a foolish thing in his life.'" So I think that statement by Thomas Jefferson that Sherman was a man who never said a foolish thing in his life was something that people really were attracted to.

[00:42:28] Joseph Adelman: So I'm now wondering, once we get to June 1776 and Richard Henry Lee's resolution, Congress decides to form a committee to draft a declaration, and they include Sherman among those five representatives. So is it his propensity for levelheadedness that gets him onto the committee? Are there other reasons that you know of that would have made him make sense for that group?



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[00:42:52] Michael Morand: Connecticut at the time was a mid-sized colony, so it was not a small state as we think of it now. It was the sixth most populous of the thirteen total original colonies and states. Connecticut was an independence place. So Sherman's certainly chosen along with the three other people, Adams, Franklin, and Jefferson, as an independence man, with Robert Livingston sort of chosen as a nod to the conservative faction in the Congress.

And I think Sherman was chosen on the older side of people in the Continental Congress. So there's partly that, partly his solidity. Connecticut was a mid-sized colony, soon to be state, and an independence person. So I think all of those things sort of combined to make him somebody that they would choose.

As I think is fairly well known, Jefferson drafted the declaration with some minor input from Adams. According to Adams, Sherman saw the draft before it went to the full Congress, but he, according to Adams, had no changes. Adams wrote later about those days, and this is a quote from Adams, "We reported it to the committee of five. It was read, and I do not know that Franklin or Sherman criticized anything. We were all in haste," close quote.

So it appears that Sherman is there as a member of the committee, but not an active drafter. Not many people were active in drafting it. Maybe Adams had some role, but Jefferson really did the lion's share of the work.

So Sherman was part of it, and he was there. And when the committee go to the full Congress and they present it to the full Congress, Congress obviously does a bunch of work, cuts out about a quarter of the draft, as folks know, and finally twelve states vote yes on July fourth.

Sherman's role at the time, I think, was pretty well regarded, and you see it in all kinds of biographies and paintings of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. He's sort of singled out with the other Committee of Five in various different biographies and in through the 1800s as well as in great paintings.

And John Trumbull's epic painting, The Declaration of Independence, which is on view at the US Capitol has right in the center, Sherman's basically literally in the center of the painting, along with the Committee of Five in the center. And that painting, which you can see at the study here at Yale, is probably one of the two or three great paintings of the Declaration. Probably everybody who's listening to this has seen it and will continue to see it as America 250 continues. So Sherman's role was definitely known and thought of at the time and for a long time afterwards.

[00:45:27] Joseph Adelman: One of the things that I think basically every scholar of the Declaration has emphasized is that the committee's work was not the only thing that any of these men had going on in those weeks and months. That they were all on multiple committees. They're obviously from Philadelphia trying to help Washington prosecute a war. What else was Roger Sherman up to in Philadelphia in those weeks and months?



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[00:45:50] Michael Morand: As you note, everybody was doing all kinds of things. He was chosen on lots of committees. So there were a number of things that he was involved in, including work about revenue and about the budget and about waging war and getting supplies for the army at the time.

So while he was not active day to day in writing the Declaration, he was active in all kinds of ways in Philadelphia during that time as it was throughout all the time of the Continental Congress.

[00:46:16] Joseph Adelman: I want to jump ahead in time just a little bit because at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 Sherman again represents Connecticut, and he often earns credit for being central to one of the key decisions at the convention, what Americans learn in high school is the Connecticut Compromise.

Can you tell us briefly about that particular compromise and how it came to pass and why Sherman believed it would help resolve the debate about representation between the small states and the large states?

[00:46:48] Michael Morand: Sherman played a really important role at the Constitutional Convention. He's the second oldest person there, only Ben Franklin's older. And he was one of three or four people who spoke the most in the Constitutional Convention. So he's very active in the convention overall.

And the Connecticut Compromise, which is sometimes called the Great Compromise because that's how big of a deal it was in the Constitutional Convention, probably his greatest deal he did at any time, in addition to being signer of the four documents that founded the nation.

Basically, the Connecticut Compromise or the Great Compromise sets the bicameral legislature with one part, the Senate, based on equal state suffrage and the other with each state having two votes, and one part, the House of Representatives, based on relative population at the time, with each state having one member for each forty thousand in population.

So it basically gave something that the large states would like, the small states would like, and they could compromise. So it helped make the Constitution amenable to the large and small states alike. And Sherman really was the person who was key to making this compromise.

And again, to go back to Christopher Collier, he said of Sherman in his 1971 book, *Roger Sherman's Connecticut*, where he writes, quote, "In fact, this great keystone of the Constitution is so much his work that a recent historian has suggested that the most accurate name for the proposition would be Sherman Compromise."



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And the Connecticut Compromise, Collier continues, “was no sudden strike of brilliance inspired by the events of the Constitution, nor was it a scheme tacked together from the specific time and events of 1787. The great compromise was almost the climax of a career in national politics for the ranking republican, for Sherman. No similar system existed in Sherman’s Connecticut, nor had the system been attempted in earlier general congresses. It was then neither new nor old, neither forged on the anvil of experience nor produced in the stroke of sudden inspiration. It had been molded over a long period of time.”

So this is basically Sherman close to the culmination of his national service, putting a great thing together that he’d been thinking about for a long time and really bringing it something that was a compromise that allowed the large and small states to come together on the Constitution.

[00:49:05] Joseph Adelman: One thing that really struck me in thinking about Sherman is how committed he was to participating in deliberative bodies. So early at the outset of our conversation, you pointed out he is the only man to have signed the four basic documents of the American founding: so the 1774 Articles of Association at the First Continental Congress, the Declaration of Independence at the Second Continental Congress, the Articles of Confederation also at the Second Continental Congress, and then the 1787 Constitution.

And the connection that that struck for me is that that means he’s in Congress a lot, especially compared to many of the other people we think of as founders. So I know he served as mayor of New Haven for a time, so he had an executive position at, at a point. But he’s really, really known for his work in deliberative bodies and congresses and conventions. And then ends his life, he was a member of the House of Representatives in the first Federal Congress and then was elected to the US Senate and representing Connecticut in the Senate at the time of his death.

Many of the other founders did other things. They were governors. They went off to Europe to do things, right? And so they weren’t in place for all of these main events involving deliberative bodies. What do you think made Sherman so effective and so consistent in that context of deliberative bodies?

[00:50:28] Michael Morand: It’s really clear that he was really, really, really, really, really a believer in the supremacy of the legislature. He clearly believed in this, and if you look at James Madison’s writings on June 2, 1787, it writes, “Mr. Sherman contended that the national legislature should have the power to remove the executive at pleasure.” Didn’t win on that point, but he really, really believed in the supremacy of the legislature and that the legislature was the real keeper of the will of society.

So that really seemed to drive him. He was also involved as a judge. But the role as a legislature, he was involved for nearly fifty years as a state legislator and then as a national legislator for nineteen years from the first Continental Congress to eventually being a US senator, as you had noted.



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And there's something about him that made it possible for him to do that. Again, Christopher Collier talks about "unencumbered by pretension, guile, or sophistication, his mind always moved in a straight line." So that may have been part of it. Collier also notes "his demonstrated capacity for rational and logical argument and debate and his contemporary reputation for political success to testify to the efficacy of his intellect."

So there's something about him, and his mathematical skills suggest this as well, that he really was a person that was interested in testing everything out, looking at everything, and then getting the solutions.

Again, words from Collier, "if politics sometimes dictated a circuitous course or a two steps forward, one step backward campaign, his twistical behavior made him neither less logical nor less successful. If politics can make heroes, Roger Sherman was one."

He really, really did like the legislature and really, really fully believed in the supremacy of the legislative process.

[00:52:19] Joseph Adelman: Yeah. It's a very strong commitment. I have one more question of personal interest as a fan of the musical *1776*. In that musical, when they sing the song about who's going to write the declaration and Roger Sherman, the character, begs off because he says, "I am just a simple cobbler from Connecticut." Did he ever make or sell shoes?

[00:52:39] Michael Morand: It's a catchy turn of phrase, and it does have a little bit of reality to it, so it's not completely false. But by 1776 Sherman was not a shoemaker, and he hadn't been one for a really long time. He called himself a cordwainer, i.e. a maker of new shoes and boots until the late 1740s.

He became a freeman in New Milford as the owner of property in 1746, and his first civil appointment there as grand jurymen in 1749. And it's around that time that the word cordwainer disappears forever from Sherman's description of himself in documents.

So we can remember that he's a self-taught and self-made man, and he was a cordwainer at the beginning part of his life. But as we've talked about, he became a store owner, a land surveyor, a lawyer, and a public servant. And by 1776, he was a public servant. He was truly a public servant, a Puritan politician from New Haven in the service of this becoming new nation.

[00:53:38] Joseph Adelman: I'm glad to hear that there's some truth to it, and I completely understand that cordwainer is much more difficult to fit metrically into a lyric. Now we're moving into the segment of the show we call "1776 in Context," where we think specifically about the legacy of the American Revolution, looking back 250 years from 2026.



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I asked each of our guests what the legacy of their guy as a founder was. Let's start by going back to Geoff Benton talking about Robert Livingston.

[00:54:11] Geoff Benton: He's intelligent and idealistic, two things that were important at the time. But at the same time, as I said before, we work on both the good and the bad. He's also egotistical and self-promoting, and those things, one might overwhelm the other on any given day.

So his legacy is mixed. You know, in 1776, he's idealistic. He helps to draft the declaration in some form or another. He's in the room. But at the same time, he didn't come back for the signing on August second. He never actually signed the document. So whether he felt some resentment toward the people that had or what the situation was, but it's his ego that leaves him out of history a lot of times.

[00:54:53] Michael Morand: We have here at Beinecke the wonderful handwritten diary of Ezra Stiles, who at the time of Sherman's death from 1779 to 1795 was the president of Yale. So Sherman dies in 1793, and Stiles wrote of Sherman, "He was an extraordinary man, a venerable, uncorrupted patriot."

So I think that's worth thinking about, "a venerable, uncorrupted patriot." We can use that now 250 years when we think about our current time. "A venerable, uncorrupted patriot," and he had an exclamation point at the end of that. So that's important.

And I think there's two things that we can take from Roger Sherman and his life, his long life, many things that he did. For the general, we need to remember Roger Sherman was a strong believer in the supremacy of the legislature. There was no executive in 1774, 1776. That doesn't come until the Constitution really, to have an executive branch.

So the importance of the legislature is really important to remember. And we see these days many people rightly gathering to say no kings. There are many signs here and around New Haven that say, "Rejecting kings since 1776," and it has a little footnote that says even earlier around here. So that's one thing to remember.

And the second thing related to it is we get from Sherman and so many others at the time is that it's all about all of the people, regardless of where they're from or what families they come from. And I think it's always important to remember Roger Sherman was a self-made, self-taught guy. He ended up doing truly extraordinary things, but he didn't come from wealth, was not an aristocrat, did not have much formal education.

And as we rededicate ourselves in this America 250 year to America 251, 252, 253, and well beyond, we can use the spirit of Roger Sherman to be with us as we figure out what we can do and what should be done.



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[00:56:47] Joseph Adelman: One thing we hadn't planned on in thinking about this episode is that Livingston and Sherman represent two distinct generations involved in the Revolution. In 1776, Roger Sherman was fifty-five years old. He was already a grandfather. He came of age very much in the colonial era and lived most of his adult life in a world in which the relationship between the colonies and the empire seemed like it would be permanent. He remembered the entire reign of King George II and the imperial wars against France of the mid-eighteenth century.

Robert Livingston was just twenty-nine years old on July 4th, 1776. He was over three years younger than Thomas Jefferson. He graduated from King's College directly into the Stamp Act crisis in 1765, so his world was one of conflict between the colonies on one side and Parliament and King George III on the other.

But both of these men, when the time came, chose the path towards independence. As both Geoff and Michael outlined for us, they examined their personal ideologies and principles, the interests of their businesses and communities, and then made a calculated choice that took them to Philadelphia.

They made crucial contributions to Congress in the spring and summer of 1776 and continued to contribute to their states and the new nation for decades after. And for me, that's one of the big lessons I'd like us all to take as we commemorate America 250 this summer. Everyone has something to contribute, and every contribution matters.

You can find information about Geoff and Michael, their publications and work, plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today on the show notes page, benfranklinworld.com/447.

Friends tell friends about their favorite podcasts, so if you enjoy *Ben Franklin's World*, please tell your friends and family about it. Production assistance for the episode comes from Liz Covart, Karin Wulf, and Morgan McCullough. Breakmaster Cylinder composed our custom theme music. Finally, send your thoughts and questions about America 250 to me at joe@benfranklinworld.com.

[00:58:59] Liz Covart: If our conversation about the other committeemen piqued your interest about the Declaration of Independence, be sure to check out the Massachusetts Historical Society's new exhibition, *1776: Declaring Independence*. It's free to visit and open through December 16, 2026. Here's Sara Georgini with a curator's look at *1776: Declaring Independence*.

Sara Georgini: Sure. Thanks so much, Liz. Definitely come by the MHS, we are open for free six days a week, to see *1776: Declaring Independence*. Our goal with this exhibit was to walk you through some of the most pivotal manuscripts and artifacts that tell that story from our collections.



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So you'll see what the mood was like in Boston. You can see some Boston Tea Party tea that we saved from the harbor. You can see the drafting of the Declaration, kind of the room where it happened with John Adams and Thomas Jefferson's early drafts of the Declaration with the grievance against slavery left in, which will be familiar to folks who've listened to Brooke Newman just recently chat about it here.

And then finally, we considered kind of how the Fourth of July has become a beacon of both celebration and protest. And we thought about everything from how Anglicans changed their books of common prayer to paste over prayers for the king and change it to the president, the Congress, and the people, to nineteenth-century understandings of women's rights, of Native sovereignty rights, and the cause of abolitionism. And then we finally closed with some very new acquisitions from our No Kings protests here in Massachusetts.

So we hope you'll check it out, along with some Declarations, because there's a lot of Declarations that didn't quite make it into the show, and you can see them online at the MHS website coming soon.

[01:00:48] Liz Covart: Ben Franklin's World is a production of Clio Digital Media, and support for this episode comes from the Massachusetts Historical Society, the first historical society founded in the United States in 1791.