

13 Governor William Livingston to the
New Jersey State Legislature

[*Votes and Proceedings, August 27, 1776-June 7, 1777 (Burlington, 1777), pp. 10-12.*]

Statehood became official on July 18 when the Provincial Congress unanimously resolved to "assume the style and title of the Convention of the State of New Jersey." The first meeting of the General Assembly of the state, scheduled for August 27, was delayed for three days for want of a quorum; on August 31, William Livingston was elected the first governor of the state by joint session of the legislature. Livingston's opening address to the legislature constitutes a charge to the people of the state as well as the representatives. The members of the revolutionary generation had the rare opportunity to erect a government of their own choosing; whether their efforts would be successful or not turned in large measure upon their willingness to pay the military and political price of independence.

Princeton, September 13, 1776¹

Gentlemen of the Council, and General Assembly,

Considering how long the Hand of Oppression had been stretched out against us; while the most assiduous Applications for Redress were either totally disregarded or treated with Insult:—How long the System of Despotism concerted for our Ruin had been insidiously pursued, and was at Length attempted to be enforced by the Violence of War; Reason and Conscience must have approved the Measure had we sooner abjured that Allegiance, from which, not only by the Denial of Protection, but the hostile Assaults on our Persons and Properties, we were clearly absolved. It may however, afford some Consolation to every Man duly regardful of the Convictions of his own Mind, and the Honour and Reputation of his Country; that America deferred this important Step, till the decisive Alternative of absolute Submission, or utter Destruction, announced by a numerous Fleet and Army, had extinguished all Hope of obtaining Justice; and the whole Continent, save a few self-interested Individuals, were unanimous in the Separation. In a Word, till the most scrupulous Conscience could, on the maturest Reflection, find itself justified before God and Man, in renouncing those Tyrants who, after having ravaged a great Part of Asia, and dissipated in Venality and Riot, the Treasures extorted from its innocent Inhabitants by the Hand of Rapine and Blood; finally meant to prolong their Luxury and Corruption, by appropriating to themselves the hard-earned Competence of the American World.

Thus constrained to assert our own Independence, and dissolve all political Connection with a nation insatiate with Plunder, and deaf to the Voice of Reason, of Justice and Humanity; the late "Representatives of the Colony of New-Jersey in Congress assembled, did, pursuant to the Advice of the Honourable the Continental Congress, the Supreme Council of the American Colonies, agree upon the form of a

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Constitution;”² which by tacit Acquiescence and open Approbation, hath since received the Assent and Concurrence of the good People of this State, to whose Consideration it was, for that Purpose, submitted.³ Agreeable to this Constitution, you Gentlemen, have been chosen the Legislative Council and Assembly of this State; and being jointly met, have, in farther Pursuance of it, proceeded to the Choice of a Governor.⁴

Having conferred that Honour upon one who feels himself very unequal to the Task; but at the same Time upon one, who, having during the whole Contest, taken an active Part in opposing the meditated Bondage, now disdains, in its most perilous Period, to shrink from a Station, which must render him peculiarly obnoxious to the common Enemy; he can with great Sincerity assure you, that it shall be his constant Endeavour, faithfully to discharge the Trust reposed in him.

He is moreover, confident, that how greatly soever you may find yourselves deceived in the favorable Opinion, you may have been pleased to entertain of his Abilities; he will never give you any Reason to call in Question, the Rectitude of his Intentions.

Gentlemen,⁵

In the present Situation of Affairs, it is absolutely necessary to turn our first Attention to the Operations of War.

The Pay of our Militia lately called out for the Defence of New-York (which has acquired signal Renown by the Spirit and Alacrity with which it engaged in the common Cause) admits of no Delay.

That of half our Militia now on Duty, will be due in a few Days.

Some farther Regulations respecting the better ordering the Militia, merit your speedy Attention.

A Law for regulating the impressing of such Articles as the Exigencies of the Service require, is of great Importance.

No Allowance having been made for the Provender of the Light Horse when in actual Service, and it being impossible from their perpetual Change of Station, and being frequently employed as Expresses, for the Commissaries to provide them, it is reasonable the Men should be allowed an Equivalent for keeping their Horses themselves.

The fixing the Seat of Government in some convenient and plentiful Part of the State, calls for your seasonable Deliberation.

Such other Matters as may occur to me during the Session, and appear more particularly conducive to give Vigour to the executive Branch of the Constitution, I shall take the Liberty to lay before you.

To enable me, Gentlemen, the more successfully to execute the arduous Office, wherewith your unsought and unexpected Predeliction hath invested me, it affects me with singular Pleasure, to find both Houses composed of the most respectable Characters. This affords a happy Presage of your Zeal and Unanimity, in promoting the true Emolument of that State, of which the *uncorrupted* Voice of a free People, has made you the Guardians and Protectors. As it is our indispensable Duty, may it be our invariable Aim, to exhibit to our Constituents, the brightest Examples of a disinterested Love for the common Weal; and be inflexible in our Resolution, to know neither Friend nor Favourite, whenever his Solicitations appear incompatible with the general Good. In our publick Capacities, we ought to rise superior to all private Attachment or Resentment, and make the intrinsic Merit of every Candidate

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for an Office, our sole Rule for his Promotion. Let us, Gentlemen, both by Precept and Practice, encourage a Spirit of Oeconomy, Industry, and Patriotism; and that publick Integrity and Righteousness which cannot fail to *exalt a Nation*: Setting our Faces at the same Time like a Flint, against that Dissoluteness of Manners, and political Corruption, which will ever be *the Reproach of any People*. May the Foundation of our Infant State be laid in Virtue and the Fear of God; and the Superstructure will rise glorious, and endure for Ages. Then may we humbly expect the Blessing of *the most High, who DIVIDES to the Nations their Inheritance, and SEPARATES the Sons of ADAM*. In fine, Gentlemen, while we are applauded by the whole impartial World, for demolishing the *old Fabric*, rotten and ruinous as it was; let us unitedly strive to approve ourselves Master-Builders, by giving Beauty, Strength and Stability to the *new*.

WIL. LIVINGSTON.

1. Dated the eleventh, the address was actually delivered on September 13.
2. See Doc. 6.
3. The constitution was not submitted to the people for approval; copies of the new instrument of government were printed and distributed throughout the state without any formal procedure for the populace to indicate approval or disapproval.
4. The initial ballot for governor resulted in a tie between Livingston and Richard Stockton. Thanks to adroit behind-the-scenes maneuvering by John Stevens and John Cleves Symmes, Livingston was elected governor; Stockton was offered the post of chief justice of the state supreme court, but declined.
5. Livingston is now addressing only the assembly.