

NEW INTRODUCTION

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Published on a subscription basis by the Knickerbocker Press in 1910, *The Livingstons of Livingston Manor* provides a rich history of one of the most important families in the early history of New York State as well as the fledgling nation. The book was written by a rather adoring descendant, Edwin Brockholst Livingston (1852–1929), who, though his prose might be a bit flowery at times, did his research well and appears to have left no stone unturned in revealing the long history of his clan—but with a few strategic gaps.

It is nearly impossible to overstate the role of the Livingston family in the early development of the economy and politics of early New York State and, indeed, of the country as a whole. “Livingston Manor”—granted to Robert Livingston the Elder (1654–1728) via royal charter from King George I of Britain in 1716—embraced 160,000 acres, including nearly all of what is today Columbia County, as well as much of Sullivan and Delaware Counties. The immediate successors to the Lordship were Philip Livingston (1686–1749) and Robert Livingston (1708–1790). The latter Robert Livingston, upon his death, divided the manor amongst his several children, giving each a smaller (but still substantial) fiefdom.

The primary family estate in Germantown, New York, where the leaders of the clan lived for more than 200 years starting 1728—*Clermont* on the Hudson River—is now a New York State Historic Site. Succeeding generations included “Chancellor” Robert R. Livingston (1746–1813) who served on the famed “Committee of Five” charged with drafting the Declaration of Independence (collaborating with Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Roger Sherman). The term “Chancellor” came from the prominent New York State office that he held for a quarter of a century.

Other members of the clan also played major roles in New York State as well as nationally. Philip Livingston (1716–1778, known in the family as “Philip the Signer”) was a delegate to the Continental Congress from New York and signed the Declaration of Independence. William Livingston (1723–1798) was a Delegate to the Constitutional Convention and a signatory to the US Constitution.

It was Chancellor Robert R. Livingston who funded the design and building of Robert Fulton’s “North River Steamboat,” also known as “The Clermont,” in 1809. This established a Livingston/Fulton monopoly on Hudson River steam transport which stood strong until the famous *Gibbons v. Ogden* Supreme Court decision (a challenge argued by Daniel Webster) eradicated it in 1824. The author gives rather short shrift to the Livingston/Fulton interpretation of the Commerce Clause of the US Constitution, with which they argued unsuccessfully that the Commerce Clause did not give total authority to regulate interstate commerce to the Federal Government. The Supreme Court’s decision broke the back of the Livingston/Fulton monopoly by negating the relevant New York State statutes and opening all New York State waters to competition from Cornelius Vanderbilt and others.

The author also gives rather short shrift to the policies of various Livingston heirs—branches of the clan that had inherited individual portions of what by then was called the “Livingston Patent”—which led rather directly to the Anti-Rent Wars of 1839–1845, a key episode in the history of New York State. (Anya Seton’s critically acclaimed Rent-War novel *Dragonwyck* [1944] featured a vast estate that most scholars believe was inspired by the homes, lands, and politics of the various Livingstons. Seton [1904–1990] had been born to great northeastern wealth and counted several Livingston descendants in her social circle.)

The writer of *The Livingstons of Livingston Manor*, Edwin Brockholst Livingston, was born in New York City but spent nearly all his life living abroad in London, where he pursued a career as a broker of shipping insurance. In his spare time, he appears to have devoted himself nearly entirely to researching Livingston genealogy and family history. Edwin’s father was Jasper Livingston Jr. (1815–1883). He was in turn the son of Jasper Hall Livingston (1780–1835), who himself had been married to one of his Livingston cousins, Eliza Livingston (1786–1860). Edwin was the husband of Alice Mary Power (born 1850, death date unclear), daughter of the famed Irish politician Maurice Power (1810–1870) and his wife Catherine Livingston (1815–1890, yet another cousin). Edwin and his wife had two children. There are a number of descendants, all in Europe.

The first section of Edwin's book, detailing the family's Scottish roots, was actually a simple reprint of an earlier work, *The Livingstons of Callendar and Their Principal Cadets: A Family History*, published by Scott & Ferguson in 1887. In this, Edwin established that the family had been nearly as significant in Scotland as they were destined to become in the New World. The Livingstons were descended from the Callendar clan, a family prominent from medieval times with an ancestral seat called Callendar House, situated within the grounds of "Callendar Park" in Falkirk. The house—more of a castle than a house—still stands and dates back to the 1400s, although it has been extensively remodeled and expanded through the intervening years. Amongst the guests in olden times were Charles Edward Stewart (Bonnie Prince Charlie), Oliver Cromwell, and Mary, Queen of Scots.

Previous to the building of the house, the so-called "Callendar Lands" had been granted in 1345 by King David II to a Sir William Livingston, who was married to a Callendar heiress at a time when women, for the most part, did not own lands. From there on, the Livingstons seem to have become accustomed to lordships and the overseeing of vast tracks of terrain worked by vast armies of renters and/or serfs. Through several centuries, the family thrived, moving upward in ranks through the Peerage (various members becoming Regent of Scotland, and Earls of Linlithgow, Callendar, and Newburgh). But all this came crashing down when during the early 18th century—1715 to be precise—James Livingston (5th Earl of Linlithgow, 4th Earl of Callander) chose the wrong and losing side when he backed the heir of King James II of England during the Jacobite Uprising. Away went the lands. And away went James Livingston to exile on the Continent. It was a cousin, from a branch of the clan that had relocated to Holland and thence to the New World, who received what became Livingston Manor from King George I in 1716.

Our author Edwin is (needless to say) a devout cheerleader for all things Livingston. Of course, some embarrassments were likely unknown to Edwin. For example, in 1812 Philip Henry Livingston (1769/70–1831, grandson of Philip the Signer), followed in the tradition of several of his grandfather's fellow signatories (notably Thomas Jefferson) in fathering a child by a black slave: a Jamaican woman by the name of Barbara Williams. This fact was for a long time obscure, only to be discovered in the late 20th century by several black descendants, one of them being Laura Murphy, who at the time served as the Director of the National Legislative Office of the American Civil Liberties Union, and who made something of a hobby of genealogy.¹

Ms. Murphy and her clan were promptly and—and, for the most part, graciously—accepted by contemporary Livingston cousins. (Thirty-four black descendants received invitations to a Livingston family reunion at Clermont in 1997. Nevertheless, one of them later spoke truth when she wrote: “The Livingstons were powerful, wealthy, and influential, but instead of being instruments for change, they perpetuated slavery and grew rich using slave labor. ... The Livingstons and every other white American who has enjoyed the fruits of this system has either directly or indirectly profited from the misery of slaves.”²)

It should be noted that the Livingston line remains quite prominent in many realms. Descendants include the Bush clan, Eleanor Roosevelt (through her mother), and former New Jersey Governor Thomas H. Kean. (Eleanor’s maternal grandmother was Mary Livingston Ludlow Hall [1843–1919] by whom she was raised at a family estate located on the Hudson at Tivoli, not far from Clermont.) More recently, Representative Robert Linlithgow Livingston Jr., Republican of Louisiana, was slated in 1998 to replace outgoing Newt Gingrich as Speaker of the House of Representatives. However, that otherwise likely occurrence got derailed when allegations of an extra-marital affair surfaced. The job instead went to Dennis Hastert, a man destined for his own scandal in 2015.

The value of *The Livingstons of Livingston Manor* is its rich detail gleaned from voluminous family archives many of which to this day remain quite private. Edwin’s intimate portrait of a clan of signal importance in the history and development of both New York and the United States remains a vital resource for anyone wishing to understand the rich period of American history during which the Livingstons stood as one of the most powerful forces in the young nation.

Notes

1. David W. Chen, “A Livingston Legacy Revived,” *The New York Times*, November 23, 1998, Section B, Page 1.
2. Madeline Wheeler Murphy, “Slavery – A Family Divided History: The Relationship of Two People Long Dead Reaches Down Through Time to Shape the Lives of Their Descendants, Black and White,” *The Baltimore Sun*, June 29, 1997.