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An Examination of the Ancient Pillars of the United States through

William Livingston

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Abstract

Through the analysis of the writings and library of New Jersey's first elected governor, William Livingston, I will connect the origins of the political beliefs of an American Founding Father to the Greco-Roman writers and texts that he read. Livingston's book list contained dozens of classical authors, and his weekly essays in "The Independent Reflector" provide his opinions on the workings of government and public institutions. Nearly every essay found in his weekly publication begins with a quote from antiquity, and he justified his thoughts with these statements from the ancient world. Understanding Livingston's beliefs and connecting them to his cited authors of antiquity will provide further information on the influence of ancient history, its ideals, and its politics on the concepts of the American founders. Comparing Livingston's use of direct quotations of Greek and Roman authors to the content of the classical books held in his library will aid in understanding the ideas that emerged in his political thought. The evidence from Livingston's essays and book list reconstructs a picture of the classically influenced ideals of an American Founding Father and the formation of the United States in ways that continue to connect the ancient world to the present.

Keywords: Classics, Ancient, History, Founders

Greece and Rome appear to Americans not only through the architecture of government buildings, but the founders who preceded those structures. One of these Founding Fathers, William Livingston, became the first elected governor of New Jersey in 1776 and held the office until his death in 1790. He received an education inspired by classical antiquity, possessed dozens of ancient works, wrote poetry and political commentary that drew upon his knowledge of the Greco-Roman world. Livingston completed his classical education at Yale College in 1741. He demonstrated the influence of the ancient world in his anonymous 1747 poem, *Philosophic Solitude*, and his 52 weekly essays published under pseudonyms in *The Independent Reflector* from 1752-53. Livingston also exhibited his classical education in the holdings of his library. In the 1780s book list that details his library collection, at least 53 of the roughly 400 listings contain primary works of Greco-Roman authors. The list includes an undetermined amount of secondary works that examine the literature, history, and art of antiquity (Livingston, “Book List”). Many of the titles found in Livingston's library also appear in the collections of other American founders, such as the examined Benjamin Franklin, John Witherspoon, and Thomas Jefferson. The evidence from Livingston's poetry, essays, and book list reconstructs a picture of the classically influenced ideals of an American Founding Father and the formation of the United States in ways that continue to connect the ancient world to the present.

William Livingston's *Philosophic Solitude* tells the reader about the type of life he wished to live. The lines of the poem describe how he wished to organize his home, where he wished to live, his religious views, the books he read, and other elements of a young man's mind. From the contents of the poem, Livingston's understanding of the classical world, particularly Rome, became evident. Within the work, he mentioned various parts of Roman civilization, its

culture, and its institutions that he observed in surveys of the ancient society and in Latin prose and poetry. Written under English tyranny, *Philosophic Solitude* provides Livingston's views on monarchy and republicanism in the Rome he seemingly admired (Livingston, 1747).

The writings of William Livingston found within *The Independent Reflector* provide the greatest insight into his understanding and use of classics and ancient history. Livingston's essays essentially serve as opinion pieces where 36 of his 52 essays involve Greeks or Romans in some capacity. To put Livingston's use of the ancient world into perspective, a search of modern opinion articles in giants such as *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and other publications would likely fail to produce any contemporary author who utilized Greece and Rome in nearly 70 percent of his or her essays. Livingston found the history of the classical world vital in his argumentative essays, but he also found its words empowering. Of the 36 essays, 24 of the writings preface the introduction of the essay with a classical quote. Nearly each of the 24 quotes comes mostly from Latin poets such as Horace and Virgil among others. Livingston used these quotes to begin his argument while likely playing to his audience through authors they understood. These quotes, along with those implemented in the body of his essays, always appear in Latin, whether it remain in its original language or a translation from the original Greek (Livingston, 1963).

The book list of William Livingston serves as either an inventory of his collection or a sort of wish list of books he believed one should possess. A physical collection of his books does not survive, but it's likely that Livingston used the list to maintain the works he possessed and how he organized them on his shelves. Livingston listed the various title of his list under an array of categories. His taxonomy contains nearly 40 sections and subsections that illustrates the distinctions Livingston made among works organized into the sections: "Proper Books

Provisions for the Study of History,” “General Histories,” “History of Europe,” and “Roman Histories” among others. Livingston interestingly gave Roman authors a separate category while he placed the Greek authors under his European history section. Livingston likely had a preference for the Romans, which may have derived from a superior understanding of the Roman world over that of the Greeks. An analysis of his essays in *The Independent Reflector* demonstrates Livingston’s preference for Latin quotes without any sign of Greek, perhaps he and his readers felt more comfortable with the Latin. However, his book list demonstrates that he widely read the ancient world from at least 53 primary authors and dozens of secondary works in his book list that surpasses 400 titles (“Book List”).

The American founders educated themselves with works and knowledge stemming from antiquity, and the ancient impact shows itself in Livingston's remarks on education. Livingston wrote six consecutive essays addressing his desire and the design of a college in New York. After a six-month printing of other topics, he returned to the college. He mused about a sort of subsidized grammar school education that should see students meet the Latin and Greek requirements for entry into the proposed college. The college eventually came to light in 1754 as King's College, now known as Columbia University (Columbia University, “History”). Greek and Latin reside at the core of Livingston's educational requirements. He highly valued these educational requirements and felt education as the principal duty of society. Livingston remarked on ancient legislators' understanding that the strength of their civilizations resided in producing virtuous and knowledgeable citizens. His example called upon Plato, Aristotle, Lycurgus, and unnamed ancient politicians who he argues made education their highest priority (March 22, 1753). Livingston's classification of ancient societies arrived in a returning essay on education. He credits Egypt with military and academic prowess. Livingston attributed the military defense

of Greeks to their ability in the arts. Rome received Livingston's most considerable praise and attributed them science and the most significant military power. He believed in the necessity of reading the works of these ancient societies in their principal tongues and argued for the installation of these languages in grammar schools. Hints of public education arrived in Livingston's call to subsidize tuition for students unable to afford an education in his proposed college, and the significance of the county schools educating their students in Latin and Greek (November 8, 1753). Livingston's care for the subject of language learning survived likely until the end of his life as a 1788 letter mentioned his anticipation of a Latin letter from his twelve-year-old grandson (John Jay, 1788).

Possessing the ability to read classical works in their original language allowed Livingston to read ancient philosophers. These philosophers seemed to have impacted Livingston in a manner that showed itself in his view of how to live a productive life. The title page of Livingston's *Philosophic Solitude* contains two Latin quotes from Virgil and Seneca the Younger. A translation of the Seneca phrase reads, "Leisure without study is death; it is a tomb for the living man" (1747). Livingston invokes this same thought in an essay he titled "Of the Waste of Life." His essay delves into how men should spend time in ways that contribute to society. At its end, he invokes a parable of an unnamed Roman Emperor on his death bed, asking if he performed his duties becomingly (October 25, 1753). The vibes given by Livingston's writing in this essay reflect on the thoughts of the Roman Stoic philosophers, Seneca the Younger, Epictetus, and the emperor Marcus Aurelius. They all reside in his book list. Livingston likely stood by these principals as a guiding point for how to serve in public office.

Public officials must concern themselves with projects such as how to maintain the streets of a society. Livingston pointed out the Romans' care, system, and design of their roads as

exemplary models for his community (December 14, 1752). Another essay found British culture using the practice of oaths so much that oaths lost their significance. He relied heavily on the Greek, Roman, and Egyptian perspective of oaths to address their misuse. Cicero, Diodorus Siculus, Plutarch, and unnamed legislators of antiquity remarked that humans should only invoke the practice of oaths at the most critical moments, which contrasts Livingston's perspective of the British (June 21, 1753). Modern American society sees oaths when standing before a jury of one's peers and assuming public offices.

Public officials often break their oath of office. Livingston spends many of his essays focused on the failures of political appointees. One of the essays invoking the most classical references concentrates on the sale of offices. Beneath the title, rests one quote from Sallust and another from Horace. A translation of Sallust reads, "everything at Rome was for sale," which in its original context does not necessarily pertain to political offices, but Livingston expressed it in this manner (Sallust 20.1) The feeling that Livingston held came in his quote from Horace, "O citizens, citizens, money you must first seek; virtue after pelf" (Horace 1.52). Livingston viewed many politicians as putting themselves before the public. The essay goes on to address corrupt politicians and using Republican Rome as an example of necessary virtuous politicians who succumbed to the self-serving monarchs of Imperial Rome (January 25, 1753). Livingston noted that the corruption of public officials causes the decay of patriotism and public spirit. He interprets both Greek and Roman civilizations sitting at their greatest point when the love of country reached its apex. When selfish men gained control of the state, corruption rose, patriotism and the society succeeded into collapse (May 3, 1753). The breakdown also derived from wasteful spending for luxury. Livingston noted that Lycurgus enacted severe punishments against prodigality, and the Romans maintained equally harsh laws. He interpreted luxuries

brought into Rome from Greece and Asia as the reason for its decline. The luxury of Greece derived from its enslavement under Phillip of Macedon and Alexander the Great that instituted universal monarchy (June 14, 1753). One could guess that as an American Founding Father, Livingston took issues with the practice of monarchy.

Livingston also found issue with damaging devotion to one's political party. A problem that perhaps shows itself in the modern United States. Livingston presented an idea of party over country, that in the end concludes poorly for attaching one's self to populism. Julius Caesar, Pompey the Great, and Crassus, the first triumvirate, served as an example of those who support a party over the good of one's nation as reaching their demise because of avarice (February 22, 1753). Morality became a central point of Livingston's beliefs for public service. He harked back to the Greeks, declaring that a man's virtue served as more decisive than another individual's social rank in terms of public office. Livingston pointed out that a man of morals would use his position of influence for the people he served, not for his personal gain. Livingston attributed a thought to Plato as he wrote, "so to watch the Safety of the People, as to aim all his Actions to that Mark, while he forgets his own Advantage" (September 13, 1753). Forgetting that the power of office could benefit personal desires also involves the understanding that the title of the office means nothing without proper actions. Livingston wrote a humorous description of this issue: "A fool, says an author, has great need of a Title. It teaches Men to call him Count and Duke, and to forget his proper Name of Fool." Following this line, Livingston used a Spartan dialogue and the failures of Roman Emperors, to assert that titles meant nothing without merit and contributions to society (September 20, 1753).

To have public offices, a government must exist. Livingston directly described the significance of history as he wrote this revealing passage: "In those free Governments of old,

whose History we so much admire, and whose Example we think it an Honour to imitate; a Man would have suffered Death for such an iniquitous Attempt." The attempt Livingston referenced involved interfering in elections. He used the example of Spurius Maelius trying to buy the support of the citizens of Rome, only to find the sword for his greed. Livingston then referred to "The Liberties of Rome, that original Soil of Freedom" (July 6, 1753). Livingston admired the system and products of Republican Rome and looked to history as a framework of how to govern a grand society. His government would eventually feature religious liberty to maintain public peace, where he used a line from Tertullian to begin his argument on why religion should not be prosecuted (January 14, 1753). The notion of religious liberty continued when Livingston prefaced an essay against government interference in matters of religion as he quoted Horace: "If you will but turn over the annals and records of the world, you must needs confess that justice was born of the fear of injustice" (August 2, 1753). Laws that sought to protect religious liberty would come about to condemn the injustices caused by the persecution of religion. For those who question how law should handle manners of religion, Livingston again invoked Horace: "Rescue your neck from the yoke of shame; come, say, 'I am free, am free'" (September 27, 1753). Livingston had issues with various sects of Protestantism, and the Catholic church, but Livingston found it best that the government not raise questions of how to handle religion.

Livingston, an American Founding Father, understood but took issue with certain forms of monarchy. He implored those who accepted their current monarchy to learn about Rome and named his heroes of the Republic, such as Scipio Africanus, Cicero, Brutus, and one or both of the Catos (December 21, 1752). Another pillar of the United States, freedom of the press, appeared in an essay where Livingston used the tyranny of Nero as a precursor to why particular governments attempt to suppress the influence of the media. Livingston also used Nero to deliver

his point that the direction of a society should not crumble because of a monarch. Society should continue to flourish after the absence of the king (August 30, 1753). For kings, and all humans, Livingston quoted Persius to ask, “What role is assigned you by God and where in the human world have you been stationed?” (July 12, 1753). Following his introductory quote in this essay, Livingston pointed out that antiquity provides examples of the effects of good and bad government that modern rulers should examine. On the following page, he provided examples of where ancient history demonstrates good and bad monarchs. He provides Nero and Caligula as the examples of abominable tyrants, while considering Trajan as a beneficent and patriotic dictator (July 12, 1753).

Monarchs exist, politicians exist, but the character and actions of various rulers differ. Antiquity provided examples of the examples men in the eighteenth-century should avoid or follow in their political leadership. When discussing the Roman rulers that arrived after the political change inflicted by Julius Caesar, Livingston described the effects of a relationship with a leader and his people: “When their Ruler found his Happiness in the Prosperity of his People, they enjoyed the Sweets of Liberty; but no sooner did his Views center in the Pursuit of his own Interest, and the Gratification of his private Passions, than they were reduced to the wretched condition of Slaves” (July 12, 1753). Political leaders must serve the goals of the common people, not the self-interests of the leader, or so Livingston invoked Ancient Rome to assert his understanding.

Livingston regarded the beauty of Rome deriving from its principle of liberty. He noted that this considerable period of government fell between two monarchies (August 23, 1753). The Roman Republic likely served as the model by which Livingston hoped to succeed the kingship governing the colonies. Justinian’s codification served as perhaps Livingston’s second most-

favorite system of laws behind the common law of England for its ability to administer justice in ways more preferable than any other system of law. Livingston, the lawyer, noted that England's common law provided an advantage in securing a correct adjudication in comparison to Roman law (June 7, 1753). Livingston and many of his contemporaries admire a Roman lawyer whom they affectionally called *Tully*, Marcus Tullius Cicero, commonly known as Cicero. The framers, such as Livingston, used Cicero as the leading author and viewed as the zenith of oratory and a leader of liberty against tyranny (Bederman, 17). In *Philosophic Solitude*, Livingston remarked on the duties of senators before they submitted to Julius Caesar. The poem follows immediately with the lines, "Immortal Tully plead the patriot cause, While ev'ry tongue resounded his applause (1747, 18). The term *immortal* demonstrates Cicero's survival and examination under men such as Livingston. Cicero became a principal inspiration for founders such as Livingston, who would take on "the patriot cause" to break away from the English monarchy and form a new nation.

In his poem, Livingston later returned to the subject of tyranny and provided evidence for the classical authors he read by this point in his young life. An excerpt of the poem proves useful:

Th'unconquerable *Sage* (Cato the Younger) whom vertue fir'd,
And from the tyrant's lawless rage retir'd,
When victor *Caesar* freed unhappy *Rome*
From *Pompey's* chains, to substitute his own.
Longinus, *Livy*, fam'd *Thucydides*,
Quintilian, *Plato*, and *Demosthenes*,
Persuasive *Tully* (Cicero), and *Corduba's Sage* (Seneca the Younger),

Who fell by *Nero's* unrelenting rage;
Him (Socrates) whom ungrateful *Athens* doom'd to bleed,
Despis'd when living, and deplor'd when dead; (1747, 36-37)

Livingston made his understanding of the fall of the Roman Republic and its characters clear. He italicized the men to emphasize their usage. Works of Longinus, Livy, Thucydides, Quintillian, Plato, Cicero, and Seneca all rest on the pages of Livingston's book list. Their existence in the book list demonstrates that Livingston still found these authors important enough to possess near the end of his life. Caesar and Demosthenes had published works, and they may exist in the book list, but about 30 titles in the list remain illegible and without a transcription. Cato the Younger, Pompey, Nero, and Socrates do not have any surviving works, so Livingston would not have possessed them. Livingston likely took his quote from the syntopical reading of the ancient world from one of the works of history found in the book list ("Book List").

William Livingston provides evidence for who influenced the thoughts and actions of the American founders. He also gives information for what these ancient men said to those who formed a new nation. His work shares the reason for why these men decided to form their republican system of government. *Philosophic Solitude* and *The Independent Reflector* when combined with the book list provide insight into the influence of antiquity on William Livingston. From establishing how a society should construct its roads, schools, and laws to determining how a society should morally operate in its political system, Livingston developed a significant understanding from the ancient world. Livingston demonstrates how the ancient world contributed to the education, philosophy, society, politics, and government that created the United States.

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