

STORIES of New Jersey

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THE FEDERAL CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION OF 1787

AND THE NEW JERSEY DELEGATES

One hundred and fifty years ago--May 14, 1787--a convention made up of representatives from 12 of the 13 States assembled in the State House at Philadelphia "for the sole and express purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation." Rhode Island alone did not participate in the Convention. At the end of 16 weeks of work and spirited debate--September 17, 1787--this group of 55 men had written a new law of the land: The Federal Constitution. A year and a half later the law went into effect and today, with the addition of 21 amendments, it still functions.

The various State legislatures picked delegates with care; they sent men with experience in Colonial and State governments, Congressmen and lawyers. Most of the members were large landowners, which has caused many people to think that they drew up a document that would work to the benefit of the propertied classes. Others think that the delegates were supermen, motivated entirely by the interests of the general welfare. Certainly they were an unusual group of men possessed of high intellect, much common sense, and enlightened vision.

The New Jersey Delegates

The State of New Jersey was represented by its wartime Governor, William Livingston; a former Attorney General, William Paterson; a Chief Justice of the State Supreme Court, David Brearley; a Princeton professor, William Churchill Houston; and a Revolutionary Army paymaster, Jonathan Dayton. Of the five, Houston became ill during the Convention and was unable to remain.

Two others named as delegates were unable to serve. They were Abraham Clark of Rahway, surveyor and signer of the Declaration of Independence, and John Neilson, merchant of New Brunswick, who had commanded a regiment of New Jersey militia in the war.

William Livingston (1723-1790)

Livingston, the senior delegate, was then 64 years old. He had gained the hatred of British and Tories for his service to the Colonies while Governor of the State during the struggle, and earlier as a member of the Continental Congress. He had been compelled to flee several times from his home near Elizabeth