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KNIGHT AT EGG HARBOR

In the middle of June 1777, Lieutenant John Knight of the Royal Navy proceeded north from the mouth of the Delaware in command of a small flotilla bound for New York City. He was to deliver two captured prizes and a number of American prisoners to the British Headquarters there, as well as convey a confidential report to Vice Admiral Lord Richard Howe, Commander-in-Chief, North American Station, from Captain Andrew Snape Hamond, Captain of HMS *Roebuck* and commanding officer of the Delaware Blockade.¹

Captain Hamond's dispatch regarded his preparations for an amphibious invasion on the Delaware River above Newcastle, as he had been secretly warned earlier that Spring by Lord Howe that his brother, General Sir William Howe, the Commander-in-Chief of British Army Forces in North America, had decided that the capture of Philadelphia would be his focus for the year's campaign. And with that goal in mind, General Howe intended transporting his army by sea and landing on the shores of the Delaware.²

But Lieut. Knight had one more mission. Capt. Hamond had tasked him with conducting a quick raid on the American blockade runners and privateers based at Egg Harbor.³

Egg Harbor had already become quite a problem to the British by June, 1777, along with the other principle smuggling and privateer bases of Boston, Salem, Portsmouth, New Bedford, New Haven, and New London. It has been estimated that at this time “. . . British ships in the Americas were being attacked at the rate of about one a week. . .”⁴ Mr. Woodbridge, a London alderman, testified in early 1778 to the disruption of commerce by American privateers in the House of Lords. The "value of these (lost) cargoes was declared to be moderately estimated at over ten millions of dollars.”⁵

Several privateer attacks prior to June 1777 are documented that concern the Egg Harbor area of operations.



Egg Harbor Area – Detail of Map of the coast of New Jersey from Barnegat Inlet to Cape May. 1770's. Library of Congress Geography and Map Division.

On June 6, 1776 Captain James Robertson's Pennsylvania privateer *Chance*, and the *Congress*, a Pennsylvania sloop commanded by Captain George McElroy, brought into Egg Harbor the captured ships *Lady Juliana*, *Juno*, and *Reynolds*.⁶ They had seized these vessels in May in the Florida Straits.⁷ These prizes were so important that John Hancock, then President of the Continental Congress, felt compelled to write of them to General George Washington. “. . . This Morning two small Privateers arrived here after a very successful Cruise; having taken three West India Ships with 22,420 Dollars on Board—1052 Hhds & Trs. of Sugar 70 Pipes best Madeira Wine, and a Variety of other Articles. The Captain and Owners this Moment called to acquaint me, the Money is now in this City, and have generously made an offer of it to the Congress.”⁸ The *Juno* also carried a valuable quantity of gunpowder that was later convoyed up the Delaware to Philadelphia.⁹

Barely a month later the same two privateers captured a British ship named the *Tamarea*, bringing her in to port at Egg Harbor on July 5, 1776.¹⁰ Then again the next month, according to the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* of August 1, 1776, Captain Craig, then in command of the *Congress*, carried in the brig *Richmond* from Nevis said to be worth twenty thousand pounds.¹¹

At the end of August 1776 the Continental Navy Schooner *Wasp* was ordered on a cruise to Bermuda by Congress's Marine Committee. Before the year was over Lieutenant John Baldwin, her commander, had captured three enemy ships and sent them to Egg Harbor.¹²

The attacks by these American commerce raiders continued. And not always were the prizes seized far away, sometimes they were taken close along the Jersey shore. On March 1, 1777, only a few miles from Egg Harbor, Privateers captured a British brig off Absecon Beach.¹³

Likewise, Egg Harbor, for years a haven for tax smugglers,¹⁴ excelled in her new role in evading the British embargo. Just the known war contraband deliveries there for the period between February and August 1776 are impressive - forty-eight tons of gunpowder, 60 tons of salt peter, and 1900 stands of arms.¹⁵

However dire the above facts seem, the British went at these problems vigorously. They retook 174 vessels from their American captors during the first two years of the war.¹⁶ And for the most part their blockade of American ports during this period, though incomplete, was effective.^{17,18}

Many successful British patrolling actions occurred between the Delaware Capes and Long Beach Island during these months. The Royal Navy's operations after the invasion of New York were oriented at maintaining the blockade of Philadelphia, protecting their vital lines of communication by sea along the Eastern Seaboard, and hunting down those who threatened these missions - be they Continental Navy, state's navies, smugglers, or privateers.

For example, just prior to Knight's mission to Egg Harbor, the Delaware squadron had a spate of coups in the South Jersey region. HMS *Daphne*, a frigate, took the brig *Cornelia & Molly* on March 28, 1777 loaded with gunpowder and sailcloths in Delaware Bay,¹⁹ and chased the American ship *Sally* ashore at Cape May and burnt her and her cargo on April 1, 1777.²⁰ This was followed by the frigate HMS *Mermaid* destroying a schooner off Egg Harbor at the end of the month.²¹

But who was this British officer who would first take action against the American base at Egg Harbor?

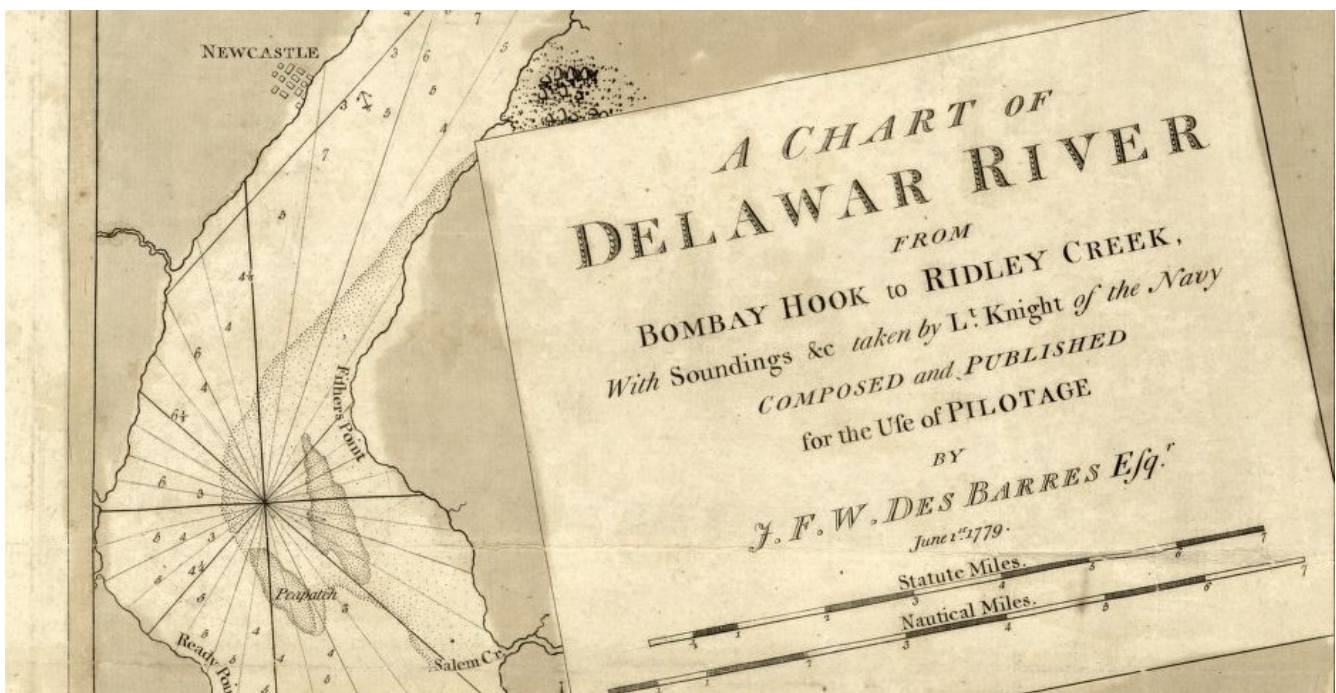
John Knight was born in Dundee, Scotland in 1747, the son of a Royal Navy officer. He followed his father to sea at the age of eleven and saw battle at Cherbourg in the Seven Year's War. In 1765 he transferred to the North American Station where he took part in navigational surveys as a midshipman aboard HMS *Romney*. In 1770 he was promoted to Lieutenant and given command of HMS *Diligent* and continued coastal surveys of New England and the Canadian Maritimes, assisting the noted Swiss-born cartographer, Joseph F. W. Des Barres with his major work, the *Atlantic Neptune*, for the British Admiralty.²²



John Knight Esqr Rear Admiral of the White Squadron, Smart. 1804. By Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-ShareAlike License, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London. <http://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/107590.html>

As captain of the *Diligent* he pulled into port at Machias, Massachusetts (now Maine) for resupply during one of these survey missions, a month after the Battle of Lexington, unaware of the civil unrest in the area. His ship was seized by local rebels and he and the crew made prisoner.²³

However bad that mistake, he was able to send off all of the valuable survey material aboard the *Diligent* (what John Lyon, one of Knight's jailers wrote in apology to James Otis Jr., of the Massachusetts Provincial Assembly, as "all the plans of this continent."²⁴) to British forces, in a sea chest containing his personal belongings, right under the noses of the unsuspecting Machias authorities. Thus securing for the British a great wealth of naval knowledge that they could capitalize on through the course of the war.



Detail of A chart of Delaware River from Bombay Hook to Ridley Creek, with soundings &c taken by Lt. Knight of the Navy. 1779. Library of Congress Geography and Map Division.

He was exchanged a year later, and acquitted of any blame for the loss of his ship at courts martial. Shortly afterwards, in February 1777, he was given command of HM Armed Sloop *Haerlem* and joined the Delaware Blockade.²⁵ The *Haerlem* was the former American privateer *Harlequin* that had been found scuttled in the Haarlem River. The Royal Navy had purchased her for £700 from the New York authorities, raised her, armed her with 12 4-pounders, and put a 65 man crew aboard.²⁶

Two months later, at the end of May, Knight recaptured the *Apollo* at Sinepuxent Inlet, Virginia. The *Apollo* was a schooner out of Whitehaven captained

by Tobias Collins, with a valuable cargo of cordage that had originally been taken by the Pennsylvania privateer frigate *Oliver Cromwell* under the command of Harman Courter in the West Indies. Courter had placed William Forsyth as her prize master with orders to take her to Philadelphia.²⁷

On May 29, 1777, three days after the recapture of the *Apollo*, the *Haerlem* and HM Brig Tender *Stanley*, Lieut. Richard Whitworth of the *Roebuck* commanding, seized the American sloop *Industry* (Capt. John Hutchins) as it sailed north from Bermuda with a cargo of salt.²⁸

While Knight's return to active duty was marked with these successes General Washington stood guard in New Jersey's Watchung Mountains. There, besieged with high desertion rates in his army, unmet recruitment quotas, and logistical and organizational difficulties, Washington still managed to repeatedly thwart General Howe's plans to lure him into a general engagement on the plains below New Brunswick.²⁹

But the artful American commander knew that Howe had more options. Washington employed several intelligence networks in his efforts to ascertain British intentions for the new campaign season. Would Howe attack Philadelphia, and if so - by land or by sea, or would he move north, up the Hudson River to cooperate with General Burgoyne's drive down from Canada? Or, it was plausible, that Howe might even descend on Virginia or South Carolina, or turn the other way and attack one of the New England colonies.³⁰

It was in this tense period of the war, with the British believing they were on the eve of victory, that Lieut. Knight sailed north out of Delaware Bay, skirting the Cape May coast. With the *Haerlam* were the *Stanley*, and the Armed Sloop *Hotham*, commanded by Lieut. Christopher Hele.

Knight's orders from Captain Hamond read as follows:

You are hereby directed to take under your Convoy the Several Prizes now in the Delaware and proceed with them to New York, where you are to deliver the enclosed Letter to the Right Hon'ble the Lord Viscount Howe, and waite His Lordships Orders for your further proceeding.

You are to receive on board the Sloop under your command the Prisoners named in the list sent with them and dispose of them at New York as the Commander in chief shall direct. And whereas I have received intelligence that several of the Enemies Vessels are lately arrived at Egg Harbour, You are therefore in your way to endeavour to look into that place, and if it shall appear to you to be practicable to cut them out or destroy them, You are to take the Hotham and Stanley Tenders under your command (who are directed to accompany you thither for that purpose) and use your best endeavours against the enemies Vessels; which Service being performed, You are then to give Orders to the Hotham Tender to join the Preston at New York, and Send the Roebucks Tender back to me with an Account of your proceedings; making the best of your way afterwards with the

Sloop under your command to join the Admiral without further loss of time.

**Given on board His Majesty's Ship the *Roebuck*
in the Delaware the 10th June 1777³¹**

Lieut. Knight followed those instructions. His small naval division arrived at the Little Egg Inlet on the evening of June 10, 1777. There, while the rest of his command stayed out of sight he sent the *Stanley* forward pretending to be an American vessel in need of a pilot.³² The unfortunate Joseph Sooy fell for the ruse and was captured along with the crew of his boat. Afterwards, Knight withdrew, and sailed 18 miles south to attempt the trick again at Great Egg Harbor Inlet. With two pilots he presumably was going to split his forces and attempt simultaneous raids on Egg Harbor and her sister smuggling/privateering community of Mays Landing.



Armed sloop at sea, D. Tandy. 1799. By Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-ShareAlike License, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, <http://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/124606.html>

However, Mr. Golder, the pilot signaled for on the Great Egg Harbor Inlet, saw through the scheme and escaped, though he had to abandon his boat to the

King's men.³³ This attempted kidnapping of Mr. Golder most likely took place on June 11th, as it wouldn't be until the following day, that the next phase of the British plan evolved.

In the early part of the day of June 12th, Knight struck with his force at Egg Harbor Inlet. It is presumed that Joseph Sooy was coerced into guiding the British through the inlet to the harbor at Fox Burrows.³⁴ The Americans were ill-prepared to resist Knight's bold strike. The militia commanders at the Forks of the Little Egg Harbor River had been alerted, and rightly suspected that the kidnapping of pilots meant a British raid was in the offing, but they were still scrambling to reinforce the small outpost at the inlet with men, arms, ammunition and supplies when the attack commenced.³⁵

Knight's sailors and Marines captured two vessels. One was the privateer brig *Nancy* under the command of Captain Montgomery. She was on a cruise out of St. Eustatius in the Dutch West Indies and had a small cargo of damaged salt on board.³⁶ The second vessel was the American merchant brigantine *Ann* under the command of Christopher Bradley. Her cargo was lumber and tar.³⁷

John Cox, owner of Batsto Furnace, Lt. Colonel in the Philadelphia Associators,³⁸ and former intelligence officer³⁹ and scout for General Washington,⁴⁰ and Lt. Colonel Elijah Clark of the 3rd Battalion, Gloucester County Militia,⁴¹ and former New Jersey Assemblyman⁴² chronicled certain of these event in a letter to Governor William Livingston, in his capacity as President of the New Jersey Council of Safety. The letter was sent to Livingston through the offices of Charles Pettit, New Jersey's Secretary of State, who was at Burlington, and had heard of the raid on Fox Burrows on the 14th of June (Saturday.) Pettit had sent a preliminary account of it to Livingston the next day in a letter he wrote to the Governor on Sunday, June 15th. “. . . I may, however, mention a report we had on Saturday last, (which seemed to come straight, and has not been contradicted,) that the enemy had invested Egg Harbor Inlet, and taken out two sloops and a larger vessel outward bound. . .”⁴³

But Pettit did not receive the Cox/Clark letter until the 18th, a week after the attack. They most likely sent it to him because of the highly mobile nature of Livingston's wartime governorship. Pettit himself worried about getting timely messages to the Governor. In April and May Livingston was situated at Bordentown, in the middle of June he was in Morristown and by the beginning of August he was in New Town.⁴⁴

Pettit forwarded the Cox/Clark letter to Livingston on the 19th enclosed in another missive of his own. He wrote: “. . . Last evening I received the enclosed letter from Col. Cox, and in order to convey it to you, I shall send this to the commanding officer at Bristol, with a request to forward it, either by the return of an express, or by some officer going to head quarters. I would beg leave to

recommend it to your Excellency's consideration, whether it would not be proper to order a part of the militia to watch the motions of the enemy about the Egg Harbor Inlets. . . ”⁴⁵

The Cox/Clark Letter⁴⁶

Forks of Little Egg Harbor, June 12th, 1777.

The Hon. the President of the Council of Safety.

Sir, — We this morning received information from Capt. Bradley, at the Foxborough, that on the 10th instant, about six o'clock in the evening, a brig appeared off Little Egg Harbor Inlet, and made a signal for a Pilot, on which Joseph Sovey with his brother and two boys went off to conduct her into port, and were unluckily taken and carried off. Immediately on taking them on board, the brig proceeded to the mouth of Great Egg Harbor Inlet, where she again threw out a signal for a pilot, on which Mr. Golder, a noted man in that way, went off with his boat, and on approaching near enough to discover what she was, finding her to be a vessel of force, and observing her to hoist out her boat to windward, which was managed with some degree of precipitation, he immediately put about, and pushed for the shore, the enemy's boat pursuing with only two men appearing, and on coming within about one hundred yards, a number of men instantly showed themselves, and fired on Golder and crew, who with some difficulty gained the shore, but were obliged to quit their boat, which fell into the hands of the enemy. As Sovey is one of our best pilots, and well acquainted with our Inlet, we doubt not he will be made use of by the enemy to bring in their tenders, and pilot them up the bay and river; which may be productive of the most fatal consequences, the inhabitants being in the most helpless condition and having a great number of cattle and other property that must immediately fall into the hands of the pirates, unless some spirited steps are immediately taken to prevent it; and being desirous of doing everything in our power to disappoint them, we have presumed to take from Capt. Shaler eight or ten pieces of cannon, belonging to a sloop of his lately cast away on the coast, which we have this day ordered down to the Foxboroughs, under his direction, with orders immediately to throw up a battery to defend the Inlet, and to annoy the enemy as much as possible, should they attempt an entrance.

There is now at Foxboroughs a guard of about 20 men, and Col. Clark will immediately order down as many more, to assist in doing the necessary work. Powder and provisions for the people will be immediately wanted. Shot can be procured here. We doubt not the hon'le Council will think it expedient to lose no time in giving the necessary directions for effecting what they may think ought to be done on this alarming occasion.

We are, with great respect, your most ob't and h'e ser'ts,

John Cox
Elijah Clark

We can see that the Cox/Clark dispatch was written before the two men had

knowledge of Knight's success in cutting out the two ships. Unfortunately, as they were preparing to defend the anchorage at Fox Burrows, the attack must have been already underway, if not completed.

How long it took for the Cox/Clark letter to reach Livingston at Morristown (or indeed how long it took Pettit's first alarm of the British raid in his letter of June 15th to arrive) is not known. But the affair was well concluded as far as the Royal Navy was concerned by the time these messages did reach the Governor. Lieut. Knight's flotilla reached New York City on the 15th, bringing in to port the captured vessels, *Apollo*, *Industry*, *Nancy* and *Ann*. There they were tried by the Vice Admiralty court and condemned in the following weeks.⁴⁷

After leaving command of the *Haerlem*, Knight served aboard HMS *Eagle*, Admiral Howe's flagship. There the Commander-in-Chief took great advantage of his knowledge of American waters. He went home to England with Howe in 1778, but returned to the war in 1780. He was First Lieutenant of HMS *Barfleur* a 90-gun second-rate ship of the line, Rear Admiral Samuel Hood's flagship in the Caribbean theater. He was then briefly post-captain of HMS *Shrewsbury*, a 74-gun third-rate ship of the line, in 1782, before returning to the *Barfleur* as her captain. His later years in the Royal Navy included very distinguished service during both the French Revolutionary Wars and the Napoleonic Wars.⁴⁸

John Knight was knighted for his service to the Crown in 1815 upon his retirement, and promoted to his final rank, Admiral of the Red, in 1830, the year before he died at the age of 84.⁴⁹

AFTERMATH OF KNIGHT'S RAID

Fully realizing the vulnerability of the Fox Burrows anchorage after Knight's raid, and the importance of the post there in safeguarding the approach to Chestnut Neck and Batsto, Colonels Cox and Clark, and Major Richard Wescott, also of the 3rd Battalion, Gloucester County Militia,⁵⁰ wrote to the New Jersey Council of Safety. Their appeal was heard by the Council at Newtown, Sussex County on July 5, 1777.

“A Memorial from Elijah Clark, Richard Wescott, & John Cox was read, Setting forth that the Enemy's ships of War entered little Egg harbor, Inlet, and seized two brigs lying at the Fox-barrows, just within the Inlet & carried them off, with a considerable quantity of Stock &c, and praying that little Egg Harbor may be fortified &c, and that this Board would issue the necessary orders for that purpose.

Agreed unanimously, That this Board is not competent to decide upon the subject-matter of the said Memorial; and therefore that it be referred to the Legislature.”⁵¹

On September 20, 1777 the New Jersey House of Assembly took up the matter of Egg Harbor's defense. On their discovery that Clark and Wescoat had fortified Fox Burrows at their own expense, they decided to repay the two Gloucester County Militia officers from the State's coffers.

A Memorial from Elijah Clark and Richard Wescott, Esqrs. was read, setting forth, "That they had erected, at their own Expence, a small Fort at the Foxburrows, near the Port of Little-Eggharbour; and had purchased a Number of Cannon for the Defence of the said Port; relying on the Publick for Payment of the Expence on that Occasion: That they had disbursed a Sum of Money, an Account whereof is annexed to the said Memorial, and praying a Re-imbusement of the Monies so advanced." Whereupon the House having taken the same into Consideration,

Resolved,

That the Treasurer pay the Balance due to the said Elijah Clark and Richard Wescott, being Four Hundred and Thirty Pounds One Shilling and Three-pence; and that their Receipt, or the Receipt of either of them, be a Discharge to the Treasurer for Payment thereof: That they be empowered and directed to sell such Stores as are not useful, and pay the Amount into the Treasury, and to take Charge of the said Cannon and necessary Stores for the Use of the State.⁵²

But only a short six months later, the New Jersey General Assembly decided that the threat to Egg Harbor had evaporated. They ordered that the fortifications at Fox Burrows were unnecessary and would be dismantled.

Whereas, by a Resolution of both Houses of the 20th of September last, Elijah Clark and Richard Westcot; Esquires, were empowered and directed to take Charge of a Number of Cannon belonging to this State near the Port of Little Egg-Harbour, for the Use of the State; and the said Cannon not being in Use, Resolved,

That the said Elijah Clark and Richard Westcot be empowered to sell and dispose of the same, and pay the Amount of Sales into the Treasury; and that the Receipt of the Treasurer shall be a sufficient Discharge to the said Elijah Clark and Richard Westcot therefor.⁵³

Then, of course, in October 1778, five months after the Assembly's unfortunate decision to sell-off Fox Burrows' armaments, Lieutenant General Sir Henry Clinton, the new British Commander-in-Chief, would send a more heavily structured force to return to Egg Harbor.

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7. John Viele, *The Florida Keys: True Stories of the Perilous Straits* (Sarasota, FL: Pineapple Press, 1999), 70.
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17. Gary M. Walton, *The Economic Rise of Early America* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 179.
18. Margaret E. Newell, *From Dependency to Independence: Economic Revolution in Colonial New England* (Cornell University Press, 1998) 299.
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21. David Munn, *Battles and Skirmishes of the American Revolution in New Jersey* (Trenton, NJ: Bureau of Geology and Topography, Dept. of Environmental Protection, 1976), 28.
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- 32 *Selections from the correspondence of the executive of New Jersey, from 1776 to 1786*, sourced at *Archive.org*, accessed on 1/01/2015, <https://archive.org/stream/selectionsfromco00newje#page/n3/mode/2up> ,61.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 Joseph Sooy had been taken-in by another British ruse nineteen months earlier. On October 16, 1775 he had mistakenly helped British officers escape from a troop transport that had grounded on Brigantine Beach. For that foul-up, he had been brought for investigation to Burlington. His excuse was that the Britishers had taken off their regimentals and he didn't realize that they were soldiers. "Joseph Sooy's Affidavit," *American Archives*, accessed on 1/01/2015, <http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/cgi-bin/amarch/getdoc.pl?/var/lib/philologic/databases/amarch/.7809>
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- 44 Deduced from William Livingston's letters, *National Archives, Founders Online*, accessed on 1/01/2015, <http://founders.archives.gov/?q=William%20Livingston%20Author%3A%22Livingston%2C%20William%22&s=1111211111&sa=&r=1&sr=>
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- 46 *Ibid.*, 61
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