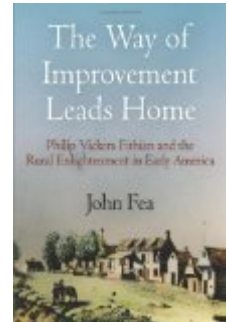


**John Fea.** *The Way of Improvement Leads Home: Philip Vickers Fithian and the Rural Enlightenment in Early America.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. 269 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4109-9.



**Reviewed by** Maxine N. Lurie

**Published on** H-New-Jersey (July, 2008)

Philip Vickers Fithian is best known for the diary he kept while spending one year as a tutor on the plantation of Robert Carter III in the northern neck of Virginia. Numerous books on colonial history quote his comments on southern life and culture, particularly the practice of slavery. By his own count, Fithian filled seven diaries over the course of ten years, including his final diary recording his experiences as a military chaplain. He also wrote numerous letters to friends and Betsy Beatty, the young woman with whom he fell in love and eventually married. While the original diaries do not appear to have survived, transcriptions (most undertaken but not completed by his brother shortly after Fithian's death) and his other papers are housed at Princeton University Library. John R. Williams published a partial collection in 1900. John Fea has mined all of these materials to write a brief but detailed and nuanced biography, describing how this middle-class farmer's son, from one of the middle colonies, was caught up in the momentous events of his times--the Great Awakening, Enlightenment, and Revolution. At each step of the story, Fea carefully puts Fithian in the context of his places and times,

offering insights into his changing eighteenth-century colonial American world.

The title of the book indicates what Fea finds most interesting about Fithian, his attempt at "improvement"--his ambition to move beyond the local agricultural world in which he was born by obtaining an education first and then a position as a Presbyterian minister. In the process, Fithian participated in the intellectual life of the Enlightenment, while maintaining his Christian beliefs. He joined an increasingly "cosmopolitan" community of like-minded colonists, while always yearning to return "home" to his south Jersey friends and family. Fithian worked, sometimes with difficulty, to balance conflicting ideas, expectations, reason, and passion, but had the Revolution and death not intervened he most likely would have succeeded in working out a solution.

In tracing Fithian's life, Fea covers his family's origins, farming in the lower Delaware valley, the Great Awakening (in particular, how it first tore apart the Presbyterians and then reunited them), the rise of education (especially at the College of New Jersey), John Witherspoon and his ideas,

colonial courtship, and the Revolutionary tide in the Cohansey River area. Using Fithian's travels, Fea also looks at life among the planters of Virginia, as well as the backcountry frontier regions of Pennsylvania and Virginia, places Fithian visited as a tutor and itinerant minister. This book is simultaneously both broadly and narrowly focused, offering readers information on a wide range of topics. Of greatest interest in this biography are its discussions of the Enlightenment, a pursuit of knowledge, and reading of essays, books, and novels; and its examination of how these ideas spread into such rural areas as southern New Jersey in the years before the Revolution.

Fithian was born and grew up in the area around Greenwich, New Jersey, along the southern reaches of the Delaware River. His was the third generation of the family to farm in the area, and if he had arrived a few years earlier, he probably would have been content with the annual harvests. In 1766, he had a conversion experience and thought about becoming a minister. At age twenty, he asked his father to provide him with an education. He spent two years at Reverend Enoch Green's new academy in the area, and then another two at the College of New Jersey (today's Princeton University), graduating in September 1772. His return home to study for the ministry was cut short by the deaths of both parents in his senior year; rejection of his proposal of marriage by Beatty; and a push from Witherspoon, the president of the college, who urged him to accept a position in Virginia. After one year as a tutor, he again returned home and to his studies. Once licensed as a Presbyterian minister, he preached in area churches and accepted an appointment to tour the Pennsylvania and Virginia backcountry and later the Shenandoah Valley. In the course of two long trips, he covered much ground holding services in unfinished buildings and the open air, wherever he could attract enough Presbyterians. In between the two tours, he married Beatty.

Some of the most interesting, dramatic, and even humorous parts of the book deal with Fithian's courtship of Beatty. First, he apparently was too forward and was rejected. Then, he persisted, even when she was close to marrying another man and several south Jersey elders warned him off. The whole business lasted several years. It provides a lesson in colonial courtship, or, at the very least, in how it was not supposed to happen, excused perhaps by the fact that both Fithian and Beatty were orphans without parental guidance. Fea notes that the last few months of the courtship "contain all the drama of a modern day soap opera" (p. 131). Beatty eventually agreed to marry Fithian; sadly he died a little less than one year later.

While Fithian courted Beatty and became a minister, he also participated in the region's growing intellectual life. He helped form the Bridge-Town Admonishing Society (an informal group whose members tried to improve each others morals and knowledge), wrote letters, attended discussion groups, and socialized with friends and neighbors. During the same period, he was caught up in the protests of British policies. On December 22, 1774, when a group of locals decided to dispose of a shipment of tea headed for Philadelphia (temporarily stored in Greenwich), Philip was "probably" among the twenty-three "burners." On his role in this event the journal is silent, but local tradition maintains his presence. His early support for the patriot cause is clear in his journal entries, and it grew from an intellectual commitment to what Fea characterizes as a second "conversion"--this one to the Revolutionary cause with the willingness "to even sacrifice his life to this cause" (p. 186). Just when he enlisted as a chaplain is unclear, but on July 2, 1776, he wrote a will, and then went off to join the local New Jersey militia forces in the campaign for New York City. Caught up in the Battle for Long Island, Fithian tasted defeat (and barely made the last of the evacuation boats). Stationed outside of Fort Washington, he came down with dysentery and missed

the disaster that followed. He died as he lived, surrounded by relatives and friends from the Cohansey region. In death as in life he carried "home" with him.

While Fea is generally surefooted in this book, and there are only few minor errors, at times the positive becomes negative. Throughout the book, Fea does a wonderful job of tracing family and friends in the Cohansey area and making clear connections among them. He also skillfully develops colonial intellectual life. However, he is so focused on Fithian's "circle" that he does not compare south Jersey Presbyterians even with those in north Jersey, or the College of New Jersey with other colonial colleges (the college turned out the largest percentage of patriots). He mentions several Tories in the Greenwich area and also notes the existence of many Quakers, but he says little of their impact. He portrays Fithian and his circle as "cosmopolitan," but while increasingly widely read, none traveled very far, nor did they correspond (as did Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and others) with European intellectuals. As the title notes, this was a "rural Enlightenment." For the context this book provides, in the end it, at times, leaves the reader wanting even more. Finally, and this is undoubtedly a decision made by the series of which this book is part, there is no bibliography or discussion of sources (aside from the appendix on Fithian's papers). One would be useful for other scholars and students.

That said, this is a good book, well worth reading. It offers a new perspective on rural America in the colonial period. It should be read by historians of New Jersey and elsewhere. With its clear thesis and chapter ending summaries, it will be accessible for undergraduates and a more general audience as well.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-new-jersey>

**Citation:** Maxine N. Lurie. Review of Fea, John. *The Way of Improvement Leads Home: Philip Vickers Fithian and the Rural Enlightenment in Early America*. H-New-Jersey, H-Net Reviews. July, 2008.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14746>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.