

## An Eyewitness Account of the First Rigged Election

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It seems that the events of this year's bizarre Presidential election are unprecedented. But a knowledgeable student of American history knows better. Allegations of rigged elections, executive corruption, misappropriation of funds, journalistic bias, sexual improprieties, and other abuses of power date back to long before our founding fathers signed the Declaration of Independence and wrote the Constitution.

In the disputed Presidential election of 1800 rival newspapers were rocked with valid charges of improper sexual conduct. It was rightly asserted in a partisan newspaper that the winner of that election, Thomas Jefferson, had fathered illegitimate sons with his female slave, Sally Hemmings. The leader of the rival party, Alexander Hamilton, was forced to admit in the press to an adulterous affair while he was Secretary of the Treasury with a woman named Maria Reynolds whose husband demanded hush money.

In 1876 there was no clear electoral victory because the results of three Southern states were in dispute. An unholy compromise was worked out in which the Republican candidate was awarded the Presidency in return for the withdrawal of federal troops in the South ending reconstruction. Freed African American slaves faced decades of lynching, segregation, and Jim Crow laws relegating them to the status of second class citizens. In the Presidential election of 2000 the Supreme Court was forced to decide on the victor because of possible improprieties in the state of Florida.

What almost no one knows is that perhaps for the first time in American history an eyewitness account exists in the press of an attempt to fix an election that occurred in the town of Eastchester two hundred and thirty three years ago. On October 29, 1733 a thoroughly corrupt royal governor of the British colony of New York named William Cosby made an attempt to fix an election to the colonial assembly from the county of Westchester. Cosby had failed in a lawsuit to garnish part of the salary of the former acting governor. In revenge Cosby fired the Chief Justice who had ruled against him. That judge, Lewis Morris, decided to run in Westchester County for a seat on the colonial assembly.

How did Cosby attempt to rig the election? Cosby put up his own hand-picked candidate and notified the public only about the date but not the time or the place of the election. His plan was to have his candidate elected before the supporters of Morris appeared. The supporters of Lewis Morris did not allow this. Independent farmers, artisans, and shop keepers appeared on Eastchester's village green the day of the election. They were opposed by a bloc of wealthy landowners and merchants, tenant farmers, and Church of England conservatives.

The use of secret ballots did not exist at this time. The conflicting factions faced each other on the village green. Can you imagine what it would have been like on this recent election day if the supporters of Clinton and Trump had to face each other publicly before they cast their vote? But when all was said and done it seemed that the supporters of Lewis Morris had a clear victory.

But Cosby had one more trick up his sleeve. The sheriff who counted the votes feared that he would lose his job if the opposition candidate won. He began to throw out the votes for Morris on a technicality. To vote, a person had to swear an oath on the Bible. Thirty-eight Quakers whose religion did not allow the swearing of oaths had their votes declared invalid. Despite this treachery, the citizens of Westchester County were successful in defeating the candidate of the royal governor in what historians refer to as the "The Great Election of 1733."

But Morris did not let this issue rest. He hired a printer of German descent named John Peter Zenger. Zenger had launched a different kind of paper, well-funded, intelligently edited, and launched to give opposition to the royal governor. Time and confusion have obscured the true significance of this important event. For the first time in American journalistic history an eyewitness account exists in a newspaper, the *New York Weekly Journal*, of a seriously contested election drawing over 400 people. The fact that the participants in this election that resulted in a victory over government tyranny by the voters of Westchester County in the town of Eastchester makes the significance of this election even more special.

To make exaggerated claims about this event and Eastchester's role diminishes from its significance. Zenger never set foot in Eastchester. When in 1735 he was put on trial for seditious libel the first edition of his newspaper was not part of the indictment. Zenger was not defended by Alexander Hamilton in his New York City trial (Alexander Hamilton) was not even born yet but by a Philadelphia lawyer named Andrew Hamilton.

Eventually the New York City trial of Zenger became a milestone as a justification for freedom of the press. But the colonial election of 1733 stands for our most basic human right, the privilege and responsibility of electing one's leaders. Without that right all the other freedoms are meaningless.

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*Please contact us [historian@eastchesterhistoricalsociety.org](mailto:historian@eastchesterhistoricalsociety.org) with any comments or questions you have about this column. For more information on the Eastchester Historical Society and its numerous programs go on the web to [www.eastchesterhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.eastchesterhistoricalsociety.org)*