

Unhappy Catastrophes: The American Revolution in Central New Jersey, 1776-1782**Robert M. Dunkerly****El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2022****192 pages****ISBN: 9781611215274****DOI: [10.14713/njs.v11i1.381](https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v11i1.381)**

On November 17, 1776, General George Washington wrote Governor Jonathan Trumbull of Connecticut, discussing the British capture of the North (Hudson) River, and his wish to prevent consolidation of Britain's control over it. He saw the river's strategic importance, and unsuccessful American efforts to thwart British objectives, as "the causes of this unhappy catastrophe" (xv). The British capture of New York forced parts of the American army to retreat into New Jersey. For years to come, that state bore the brunt of the fighting. New Jersey has thus earned the soubriquet "Crossroads of the American Revolution," the site of many "unhappy catastrophes." The state is best known for battles that had a decisive impact on the outcome of the war, such as Trenton, Princeton, and Monmouth Court House, and appropriately so. But, at least arguably, of equal importance are the skirmishes that took place when the Continental Army and its British opponents fought as they moved back and forth across central New Jersey. Of equal importance to those skirmishes is the impact of military maneuvers on the allegiance of the civilian population in the region. As fortunes on the battlefields shifted, New Jerseyans often shifted their personal stances between allegiance to the newly independent state, loyalty to the British crown, ambivalence in the face of the shifting fortunes of war, or a conscience-based effort to avoid participation in the war at all.

Robert N. Dunkerly has provided a study of such lesser-known battles, skirmishes, and raids that defined the Revolutionary War in central New Jersey. He points out that both sides often sought to evade direct military engagements. For example, in the summer of 1777, General William Howe sought to lure his counterpart, General George Washington, from the Watchung

Mountains as he prepared to march to the American capital of Philadelphia. Washington did not take the bait, and Washington's decision may have led to Howe's decision to take the indirect approach around the Virginia capes and up the Chesapeake Bay (77-88).

Dunkerly appropriately devotes considerably attention to the plight of the civilian population. He discusses the impact of the "forage war" on those folks who had to give up livestock, foodstuffs, and personal property to meet the demands of advancing and retreating armies. He points out that civilians living in the "fertile prosperous region" of Somerset, Essex, and Middlesex counties "found themselves literally caught in the middle" (61). Civilians in the "beautiful little city of Amboy" and its environs found themselves beset by raiding parties from both sides (63).

Throughout his work, Dunkerly provides relevant historical context. Indeed, an introduction by Todd W. Braisted provides a general overview of Revolutionary New Jersey (xi-xiii). Dunkerly himself points out the devastating impact of wartime inflation for the American army and the civilian population, further noting the advantages inflation afforded the British, who could pay American civilians in hard currency. Dunkerly finds even the weather, which often "impeded progress," as worthy of mention (40).

Another important objective of Dunkerly's work is to pinpoint the locations of crucial points of conflict to better illustrate the shifting fortunes of war, and to enable students of the war's history to visit those sites of conflict. At the conclusion of each chapter, he identifies and lists "sites to visit," providing street addresses and GPS coordinates for those sites. Oftentimes, as Dunkerly notes, the landscape has changed drastically since the Revolutionary War years. When original buildings or remnants of a once-rural landscape remain, Dunkerly makes note of

their availability to visitors. If not, he makes note of the location of relevant historical markers or monuments.

Robert Dunkerly has provided historians, both professional and casual, and others wishing to learn about the “unhappy catastrophes” in central New Jersey with a careful and precise study of the significant events and landmarks in that region connected with the Revolutionary War. His work includes numerous relevant illustrations. Furthermore, it commendably includes a regional map, along with maps of encampments at Morristown and Middle Brook, as well as maps of the engagements Bound Brook, Short Hills, and Springfield. Three appendices and a comprehensive bibliography provide interested readers with resources for further research. Those seeking to understand the significance of events in central New Jersey to the outcome of the American Revolution will find *Unhappy Catastrophes* interesting reading, as well as a valuable guidebook and reference. With Dunkerly’s work, one can find the many crossroads within the “Crossroads of the American Revolution.”

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