

Benson the Historian and Writer

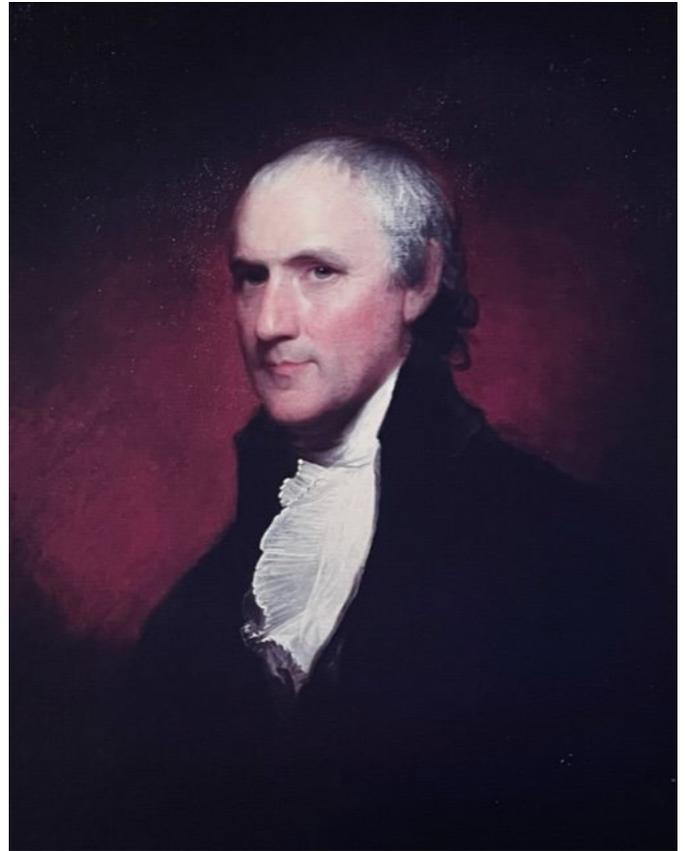
By Nancy Bendiner, Volunteer, HRH Collections Committee, September 5, 2024

This article continues as Part II of a pair of articles on Benson. [Read Part I here.](#)

Wint Aldrich, former Town of Red Hook Historian, said that perhaps Egbert Benson's greatest contribution was as an historian. As the first President of the New-York Historical Society, he demonstrated his interest in the maintenance of historical records and the preservation of history.

It is documented in the Society's records that on Nov. 20, 1804, a group assembled in the Picture Room of City Hall of the City of New York with the goals "to collect and preserve whatever may be related to the natural, civil or ecclesiastical History of the United States in general and of this State in Particular..." Benson was one of the three men who wrote the Society's constitution. His fellow founding members included DeWitt Clinton, Anthony Bleeker, and Peter G. Stuyvesant.

Benson's writings are also part of his legacy and some are listed in the appendix to this article.



A portrait of Egbert Benson by Gilbert Stuart, c. 1800-1810.

Save the Elmendorph! Introduce Egbert!

Previously thought of as a mere footnote in Red Hook history, at least by locals, Egbert Benson was linked to the Elmendorph Inn in the 1970s, and a new trend of recognition commenced. First, a group was formed to save the Elmendorph from demolition, and over time efforts grew to name a new historical society after Egbert Benson. The goal became to use the Inn as a repository for Red Hook History.

The Elmendorph Inn was built as a farmhouse in about 1760, and took various roles that included: stagecoach stop on the highway between New York and Albany, tavern, meeting center, and school. According to Coons, "Local farmers and tradesmen gathered at the Inn to exchange news and gossip." She noted that in the 1890s, the building was "a kindergarten financed by philanthropist Edward Martin." After 1812, when the Town of Red Hook was incorporated, the Inn hosted town meetings and local courts of law. The large room was added in 1803, which helped to better accommodate public gatherings.

Time, weather and neglect took their toll, and the Inn deteriorated. A few writings suggest that after

1966, the Inn remained vacant. That year, Grand Union, a British supermarket company, purchased the property and planned to construct a parking lot there. In 1974, the company decided to sell. Concerned local citizens banded together to form Friends of Elmendorph to save the Inn.

Beth Jones, who served as President of Friends of Elmendorph and is a longtime member of Historic Red Hook, recently told me that supporters of the Elmendorph drove to New Jersey, without an appointment, to see the CEO of Grand Union to get a deal for the sale. I wonder what Egbert Benson, Revolutionary Patriot, would have thought when the Inn was purchased from a British company planning a parking lot!



The Elmendorph Inn prior to restoration.

The restoration of the building was central to the Friends. They worked on fundraising which included a membership drive, auctions, yard sales, and requests for donations and grants. As the Bicentennial approached, local newspapers wrote about the plans for the Elmendorph, and the community's enthusiasm for local history grew.

In February, 1975, Coons wrote a letter to the New York Historical Society which said, "Other communities have their heroes, and we need ours." She asked for its help in learning more about Judge Benson: "We do not know when he was born...where he is buried, and who, if any, were his descendants and/or relatives." She added "The Schoolchildren believe that Red Hook had no part in the Revolution. It is our job as Historians, to educate them to the fact that there was much Revolutionary activity here, led by men such as Egbert Benson." In her letter, she asked if the Society might have a "picture" of Benson.

In April 1975, news reports covered the meeting of the town Bicentennial Committee at Christ Episco-

pal Church. It was announced that a “Friends of the Elmdorph” committee would be formed to “work on plans to preserve the Elmdorph Inn building on N. Broadway.”

Meanwhile, the Bicentennial celebrations commenced.

On June 21, 1975, as part of the Bicentennial celebrations, Red Hook was for a day renamed Hardscrabble, and the birthday of Egbert Benson was honored. Activities and displays centered on a Revolutionary War theme in order to tie Red Hook to its role in the Revolution. Children at the Junior High School created their own display for which the Bicentennial Committee later wrote a thank you, urging the school to “continue to work with us in making our community aware of our heritage.”

People walked around Red Hook Village in Revolutionary era costumes. Horse carts clattered and fifers and drummers wandered the streets while Masonic Hall displayed old items of the time. Streets for one day adapted names they held 200 years ago.

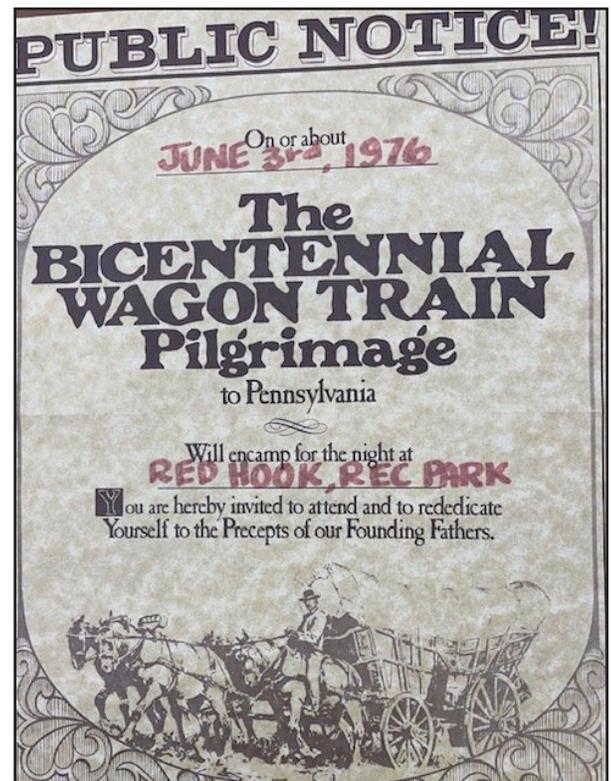
Linda Glowienka, Red Hook resident, recently identified



Attendees at the Red Hook/Tivoli Bicentennial Benefit Ball in 1977 held at Mills Manion.

family of her husband Jim, and neighbors, in a photo (left) from the Red Hook/Tivoli Bicentennial Benefit Ball held in 1977 at the Mills Mansion State Historic Site: Ann Glowienka, Carla Everhart, Jim Ross and Clem Glowienka. Everyone looked so elegant. Mentioned on the program were some of the local citizens who assisted with decorations for that ball: Mr. and Mrs. Oakleigh Cookingham and Mr. and Mrs. John Winthrop Aldrich, among others. The Bicentennial festivities continued for quite awhile.

Speaking of streets, a new street was created in Barrytown, and named with much fanfare: Egbert Benson Drive. As described in a newspaper account, the setting was a “tree enshrined rural roadway.... only a bulldozed swath of freshly overturned earth in a flower-filled meadow.” Aldrich said recently that the acreage in question “was a pasture on the west side of River Road just south of the house and old blacksmith shop at Barrytown Corners.”



The Bicentennial Wagon Train, a nation-wide event, came through Red Hook in June of 1976.



Bicentennial Ball program.

The dedication ceremony was the first event of the day and featured an address by Louis J. Lefkowitz, New York's Attorney General. Coons wrote to Lefkowitz to ask for his participation- he was a friend of Philip O'Brien, Town Attorney. Lefkowitz doused champagne over the new road marker- which was next to what Aldrich remembers as a "short entrance drive." An honor guard gave a musket salute. Aldrich told me that "nothing happened" with regard to the road plan. He added that the owner of the land, Chancellor Chapman, was not that enthusiastic about the plan- "he didn't want to front the substantial initial investment," and meanwhile the Town Planning Board "probably opined that it was the wrong scheme for that location." One can find today a "Benson Loop" not far from Old Farm Road, but the likely recent origin of that small street's name is unknown.

Coons expressed hope that Hardscrabble Day could become a tradition in Red Hook.

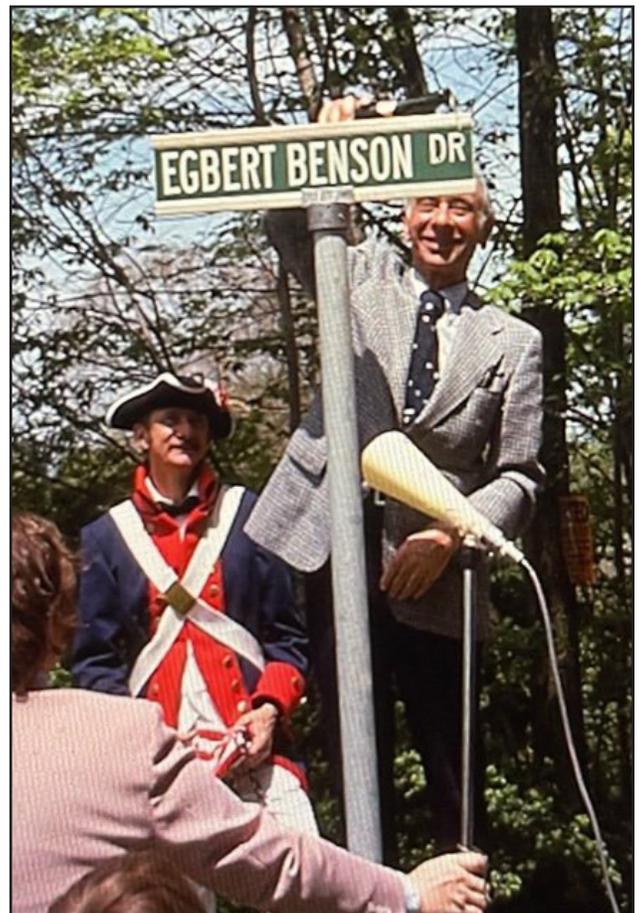
What's in a Name? The New Society and the Elmendorph

As part of the Bicentennial excitement, an historical society was formed in 1975. In her article, "Egbert Who?", O'Neill Carr wrote that Aldrich and Coons "hit upon the idea of naming the organization after one of the town's most illustrious, albeit, obscure, individuals."

In his recent talk with me Aldrich said, "We felt we discovered him." For the Bicentennial, he added, "the plan was to find someone to represent Red Hook," even more so because of Benson's commitment to history as a writer and as founder of the New-York Historical Society.

According to Aldrich, at least one other name came under consideration during the talks over what name to use- that of Israel Putnam, a general who led a number of anti-British exploits.

The minutes from the last meeting in 1977 of the Bicentennial Committee included an "upbeat" talk on the historical society, "why we need one," and "why Egbert Benson." A resolution was passed to change the Bicen-



A street in Red Hook dedicated to Benson for the Bicentennial.

ennial Committee to the Egbert Benson Historical Society of Red Hook. Provisional By-Laws and a Constitution were discussed. Ratification of the change was expected by the membership at the next annual meeting. Identified needs included the recruitment of new volunteers and members, a recording and corresponding secretary, and new committees. All three accounts were “changed over to the Egbert Benson Historical Society.” By October, the name change was official.

The first officers were “Winthrop Aldrich, Red Hook town historian and former chairman of the Red Hook-Tivoli Bicentennial Committee; Rosemary Coons, Red Hook Village Historian and vice-chairman of the committee, and Lottie Kittner, treasurer.” However, Coons wrote that this was a temporary arrangement because it was “not permitted for historians to hold office in historical societies because it was considered a conflict of interest.” According to membership chairman Maynard Ham, interviewed by the *Pine Plains Register Herald*, there were 88 charter members.

Meanwhile, the Elmendorph Inn underwent a slow restoration, in stages. The Master Plan Committee met in 1982 to develop a five-year plan. The focus at first was on the foundation, walls, and structural reinforcement. Over time, new rooms would become usable.

Eventually, the EBHS would store and display Red Hook’s historical items on the second floor of the Inn, named the Rosemary Coons Historical Archive and Research Center. Meanwhile, as spaces were restored, the community could meet and celebrate Red Hook history.

Before and during the renovation, society meetings were held at locations such as the Red Hook Grange and churches such as St. Paul’s Church. The first meeting in the Elmendorph Inn was reportedly held on October 17, 1977. However, meetings continued in other locations as well. In 1978, for example, the year’s EBHS “Program” listed the location as the V.F.W. Hall, 30 Elizabeth Street. Lectures planned included one by John Losee on “The Great Valley,” and by Richard Crowley on “Great Estates, Our 16 Mile Historic District.” Membership dues included \$3 for an individual, \$5 for a family, and \$1 for a student. A Sustaining member was asked to pay \$25, a Life member \$500.

In 1985, some members of the EBHS proposed a change to the society’s name. A group of those supporting the change asked whether Benson was of relevance to the town. An application for exempt status was in process, and some felt the name with Egbert Benson would be confusing or discourage membership. As noted by O’Neill Carr in 1985, Society President William Alexander said there weren’t adequate supporting records to identify Benson’s significance to Red Hook. He added, “it was both tiresome and difficult to answer the question, “Who is Egbert Benson and what did he do for Red Hook?”

After much debate and publicity, members voted unanimously to retain Benson as the society’s namesake. O’Neill Carr wrote in a 1985 Red Hook Journal article: “Although Benson’s place is now secure in the town’s historical society, the winners in the debate agreed to a thorough study of what that place is.”

Egbert in the Spotlight?

It seems likely to me that Egbert’s rediscovery in Red Hook was related to the need to have a local Revolutionary hero with whom the town could relate. However, descriptions by his contemporaries and others suggest to me that his personality in some ways worked against a legacy of fame and the spotlight.

He was known to never put himself in the forefront, for working behind the scenes. He was described as a man with few enemies, an orderly lawyer well educated in English common law, a compromiser and fair.

Ernst wrote that Benson described himself as living modestly, in Benson's words "observing the Maxim to cut my Coat according to my cloth...I have no soaring Ambition, no luxurious appetites to gratify and therefore very little will suffice."

Historians note that Benson did not keep diaries and his surviving papers lack juicy details that could gain attention. They also report that his work on the Supreme Court was not always published.

He was however described in his personal life as witty, someone who enjoyed lavish entertainment, with a great sense of humor: "No shrinking violet."

Mr. Aldrich said that Benson was a lifelong bachelor who was without "adoring descendants to keep things going for him." According to Aldrich, Benson is known to have written: "My children are all the people who love our country and who benefit from the history of our country."

Some papers and historical accounts propose that Benson married late in life and had eight children, which has been discounted many times over. It is thought now that the inaccurate accounts confused Benson with a nephew also named Egbert.

What Happened to the Collections?

Linda Keeling recently shared part of a grant submission she wrote in 2000 for the EBHS when she was President. It reviewed current and past progress with the archival collections. This description noted that EBHS "has always had monthly meetings and informative programs throughout the years, but always felt inadequate regarding its archival collection...Previously, the collection was stacked in an oversized cardboard wardrobe box and located in each president's home."

Her submission went on to note that an archivist was hired in 1988 to assess the collections and the result was the addition of a four-drawer filing cabinet, a metal five-shelf unit, some archival boxes and tissue paper. This collection was transferred in the mid 1990s to the Elmendorph Inn's attic. After another move to a small room, by 1999, the collection was moved to the 15X30 foot room on the second floor. There, researchers could work on a five-foot metal table and card tables. Fundraising allowed the purchase of various additional units and cabinets. She told me that as the effort grew to protect the Collections, she set up the Archives Room, adding that Patsy Vogel was also very involved.

As time went on, Keeling's report suggests that the computer age was introduced- "An Auction-purchased secondhand copier had too many repair problems so in October, 1999 a new Canon PC920 copier was bought for \$610. A Xerox printer (about \$200) had compatibility problems with the donated computer." The solution was to buy a more powerful Dell system (500 Mhz, 20 gigabyte memory) "with a rewritable CD and a scanner for about \$1850."

Meanwhile, according to Keeling's written account, the EBHS sought to increase the involvement of school children and retirees, and improve public use of the collections.

2012 - The EBHS Moves On

Changing needs, many of them economic and practical as well as educational- required over time an organization more suited to the needs of 2012 rather than 1975.

Beth Jones joined Friends of Elmendorph in 2006. She became aware, she says, that funds for the survival of the Elmendorph seemed deficient. She was concerned that the “beautiful old building was never open to the public,” and she felt she had a “mission” to open the building. She felt concern as well that the collections could “fall by the wayside.” She brought up the idea of consolidation of the EBHS and Friends of Elmendorph, yet this suggestion was not followed up by the boards at the time.

Meanwhile, the passions of the 2012 Red Hook Bicentennial, celebrating Red Hook’s 200th birthday (1812-2012) rivaled those of the Bicentennial of 1975. This time around, the theme was “Rural Traditions, Community Connections.” The Bicentennial souvenir handout announced the goals to “help strengthen the bonds of place, time and neighborly commitment that have grounded and guided Red Hook through the practical ups and downs of daily life and the upheavals of national and world events for more than eight generations.” The Hudson River, local farms and businesses, “our creative, industrious people,” became the focus.

Patsy Vogel, a past EBHS board member, spoke with me recently. She said she went to the Red Hook town supervisor and asked if funds were available to help the society fund the Bicentennial. Ultimately the Bicentennial was sponsored by the EBHS and the Bicentennial Celebration Committee. Donors included the Baright family, New York Council for the Humanities, Historic Hudson Valley, the Dutchess County Arts Council, the Red Hook Chamber of Commerce, Red Hook Central School District, Rokeby Farm, The Northern Dutchess News, Bard College, and many others.

Friends of Elmendorph and the EBHS worked together and discussed combining the two organizations for a number of reasons.

According to Ellen Phelan, who served on Friends of Elmendorph’s board and is a dedicated HRH volunteer, many members were “confused” before the consolidation. Originally the “Friends” took care of the Inn’s needs, and the EBHS took care of the history. “There were two purposes in the same building,” she said, “with two separate boards.”

According to Ms. Jones, who at the time was Friends of Elmendorph President, “each organization had its own work, own mission, and own fundraising,” and the missions were the “building” and the archives. She added that she felt communication between the two groups could have been better.

In the HRH Archives there are records of some of the communications between the two boards. Over many years, letters reflected concerns about finances. Financial assistance from the EBHS to the Friends was sometimes considered inadequate. In 2009, for example, the Friends requested an increase in the usual \$600 donation received from the Society. At that time, the Society board, headed by Patrick J. Higgins, decided it was not possible to increase the amount and declined the request.

Jones, as President of the Friends, wrote a letter in 2011 to Barbara W. Bielenberg, President of EBHS, that mentioned “our continued partnership in preserving Red Hook’s history of generations to come” and highlighted the great relationship between the Friends and the EBHS. The letter requested an increase in the amount of money donated to the Friends by the EBHS to pay for Inn maintenance and cited the need

for a capital campaign and grants. The board of the EBHS responded with a smaller increase than requested, with the thought that a larger donation could be considered the following year. The EBHS income, it was noted, came mainly from membership dues.

There was overlap in membership of the two boards and the Bicentennial Committee. Phelan added that consolidation of the two boards would help “clarify” the different board roles and form “one stronger organization.” Keeling said that having two boards of nine individuals each was “unwieldy.” According to some of those involved, there was initial resistance within the aging, original boards to new ways of doing things, and there was not full recognition that without more funds, the Inn would not survive.

Chris and Claudine Klose, newer members of the Bicentennial Committee and the EBHS Board, sought to change the name to Historic Red Hook. Aldrich said that the name change made perfectly good sense as we moved beyond the Bicentennial and Benson’s connection with Red Hook became fainter. Vogel said that many felt the EBHS name no longer reflected Red Hook. Ms. Jones remembers that a committee with members of both boards worked together to review and decide the future. The new name, Historic Red Hook, was unanimously approved by each board. One new board could take on all the roles that were previously assumed by two. New bylaws were written. In 2013, Historic Red Hook was founded by consolidating Friends of Elmendorph and the Egbert Benson Historical Society. Jones oversaw the creation of the Historic Red Hook logo.

Claudine Klose, former President of HRH and current head of the HRH Collections Committee, recently explained to me that one benefit of the name Historic Red Hook is that it suggests “inclusion”- everyone can be included- rather than the “exclusion” that a “society” implies. She said that in the early twentieth century, when the Upper Red Hook Historical Society was active, it was necessary for members to be “invited.” She added that in the past, history was seen as “one voice.” As recognized by Historic Red Hook, history is made up of “multiple voices- we don’t have just one narrative any more.” Chris Klose recently reminded me that HRH is the “keeper of the records,” but it is necessary to move forward with “longevity” as a goal.

What’s Left of Egbert’s Legacy?

As we have seen, Egbert Benson was a key player during and after the American Revolution. As Gordon stated when he spoke at the EBHS, “Benson’s life, in historical context, is the story of the origins of this state and this nation.”

He was chosen as the namesake of the Egbert Benson Historical Society at a timely moment for Red Hook. His name succeeded in bringing the Red Hook community together in recognition of its role in history. During his early years in Red Hook, Benson responded to the dramatic events of his time, and he built while here a foundation from which he pursued democratic ideals throughout his life. He still informs us, his words ring out: “I hope that People will always possess a Spirit not to elect as their representatives any Person who appears insensible of the Honor and does not accept the Office with Cheerfulness and Alacrity. One would imagine this Revolution had purified our manners...I can distinguish between mean Solicitations, and a Conduct discovering that You wish to be appointed to public Employments only

because you wish to serve your Country and that you conceive this Service your highest Honor.”

As he approached the last two months of his life, Benson wrote, “July 3, 1833. I have come to be 87 years old: the last of the Council of Safety in the State during the Revolution; with life and mind vouchsafed. I have witnessed two Revolutions: the one emphatically so; the other, the adoption of the present constitution, and for some months past, not without apprehension, I should have to witness a third. Happily the union Continues; the Constitution, however, still left as a bowing wall.”

Gordan, in his lecture at the EBHS, noted that Benson’s career was effectively over in 1802 when President Thomas Jefferson dismantled the court on which Benson had recently been appointed as Chief Judge. He returned to his law practice and helped found the New York Historical Society in 1804, then after a very brief second return to Congress in 1813, he formally retired. Benson, however, “a very handsome old man,” retained a vigorous mind and visited many friends, reportedly charming them all, until he passed away in 1833 at the age of 87.

Moving On

Time has moved on, his name has vanished from the title, but Egbert Benson is still along for the ride. The title of Andrew Checchia’s recent article in the *Daily Catch* says it all: “More Than Colonial Pewter: Historic Red Hook at 10 Endeavors to be Hip at Presenting Local History.” Egbert, who both made and revered history, would approve.

Wint Aldrich offered one way to consider Benson’s future in Red Hook: “maybe he will be rediscovered again with a new Bicentennial.”

THANK YOU to the following individuals for spending time to share their stories and/or providing information for this article: Wint Aldrich, Beth Jones, Claudine Klose, Chris Klose, Ellen Phelan, Linda Keeling, Patsy Vogel, Cathy Michael, Hop Michael, Elliott Bristol, Jim Haskin, Andrew Checchia, Linda Glowienka, and Jim Glowienka

Sources:

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- Speech transcript, “Egbert Benson: Man of the Law,” by John D. Gordan III, to EBHS, October 23, 2001
- “The Kerk,” newsletter of St. John’s Reformed Church, Upper Red Hook, N.Y., Aug. 1988
- “Egbert Benson- a Nationalist in Congress, 1789-1793,” by John D. Gordan III, The U.S. Capitol Historical Society, with multiple source footnotes
- Comments “For the N.Y. State History Conference,” by John D. Gordan III, June 8, 1996
- Paper, “Egbert Benson, Forgotten Statesman of Revolutionary New York,” by Robert Ernst, 1996, with multiple source footnotes
- “Egbert Benson,” New York Notes, by Wythe Holt, pub by the New York State Commission on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution, 1987
- “Egbert Benson and the Fourth Amendment,” by John W. Wasowicz, Dec. 1991, The New York State Bar Journal, donated by Wint Aldrich

- “Columbia’s Unknown Founding Father,” by John A. Wasowicz, Columbia College Today, Spring 1993
- Selected correspondence in the HRH Archives of the Egbert Benson Historical Society, Friends of Elmendorph, the 1975 Bicentennial Committee and Village of Red Hook
- Selected minutes in the HRH Archives of the Egbert Benson Historical Society and the 1975 Bicentennial Committee
- “Echoes” and “Elmendorph Echoes,” Newsletter, Friends of Elmendorph, 1989-1998
- Order of Consolidation of the Egbert Benson Historical Society of Red Hook and Friends of Elmendorph Inn, from the University of the State of New York Education Department, Oct. 22, 2013
- Letter from Linda Keeling for grant submission, 2000, about the EBHS archives
- Egbert Benson Historical Society Newsletter
- Letters and documents from the application for Red Hook’s historic status, HRH Archives
- Original pamphlets, flyers and programs of the EBHS, HRH Archives
- Friends of John Jay Homestead Newsletter, Summer 1996
- “New York Historical Society Quarterly Bulletin, July 1923
- Wills and Probate Records, Dutchess County

Books:

- *Chancellor Robert R. Livingston of New York, 1746-1813* by George Dangerfield
- *Historical Old Rhinebeck, Echoes of Two Centuries: A Hudson River and Post Road Colonial Town* by Howard Holdridge Morse
- *Old Dutchess Forever* by Henry Noble MacCracken
- *Tivoli, The Making of a Community* by Bernard B. Tieger
- *Upper Red Hook, An American Crossroad* by Roger M. Leonard

Newspapers:

- The following papers can be accessed for free through our [website here](#).
- *Barrytown Explorer*
- *The Gazette Advertiser*
- *Red Hook Journal*

Additional papers referenced:

- *The Daily Catch*
- *Daily Freemam*
- *The Pennysaver*
- *Poughkeepsie Journal*
- *The Register-Star-Hudson*
- *The New York Times*
-

Websites and Online Databases:

- Ancestry.com

- [Find a Grave](#)
- [Historical Society of the New York Courts](#)
- [New York Heritage](#)
- [The New York Landmarks Conservancy](#)
- [Wikipedia](#)

Appendix:

A Review of Egbert Benson's Career

Deputy to the provincial convention in 1775; member of the council of safety in 1777 and 1778; 1777 first attorney general New York, until 1789; member of New York State Assembly 1777-1781 and again in 1788; associate judge of the supreme court of New York 1784-1801; member, Continental Congress 1784, 1787, 1788; member, State constitutional convention 1788, which ratified the Federal Constitution; elected to First and Second Congresses, 1789-1793; regent of the New York University 1789-1802; judge of the US Circuit Court, second circuit, 1801; first president of the New-York Historical Society, 1804-1816; elected as Federalist to Thirteenth Congress, 1813, served five months.

Career list taken from David A. Nourse, essays, New York: Second Circuit Committee on the Bicentennial of the US Constitution, 1987 and ancestry.com Biographical Directory of the United States Congress

Selected Papers and Publications by Egbert Benson:

- "Vindication of the Captors of Major André," 1817 (there are a few later reprints)
- "A Biographical Sketch of Gouverneur Morris," 1816
- "Brief Remarks on the 'Wife' of Washington Irving," 1819
- "Memoir Read Before the Historical Society of the State of New York, December 31, 1816"
- "The Cartographical History of the North-Eastern Boundary Controversy Between the United States and Great Britain" circa 1796
- "Memoir on Dutch names of places," 1816