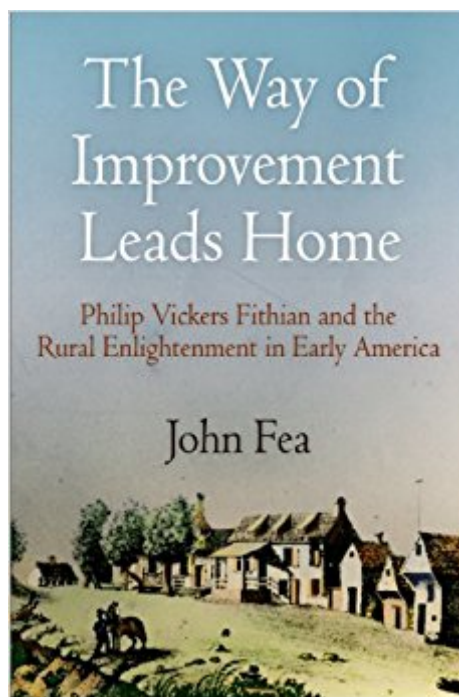


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# The Way Of Improvement Leads Home: Philip Vickers Fithian And The Rural Enlightenment In Early America (Early American Studies)



## Synopsis

The Way of Improvement Leads Home traces the short but fascinating life of Philip Vickers Fithian, one of the most prolific diarists in early America. Born to Presbyterian grain-growers in rural New Jersey, he was never quite satisfied with the agricultural life he seemed destined to inherit. Fithian longed for something more – to improve himself in a revolutionary world that was making upward mobility possible. While Fithian is best known for the diary that he wrote in 1773-74 while working as a tutor at Nomini Hall, the Virginia plantation of Robert Carter, this first full biography moves beyond his experience in the Old Dominion to examine his inner life, his experience in the early American backcountry, his love affair with Elizabeth Beatty, and his role as a Revolutionary War chaplain. From the villages of New Jersey, Fithian was able to participate indirectly in the eighteenth-century republic of letters – a transatlantic intellectual community sustained through sociability, print, and the pursuit of mutual improvement. The republic of letters was above all else a rational republic, with little tolerance for those unable to rid themselves of parochial passions. Participation required a commitment to self-improvement that demanded a belief in the Enlightenment values of human potential and social progress. Although Fithian was deeply committed to these values, he constantly struggled to reconcile his quest for a cosmopolitan life with his love of home. As John Fea argues, it was the people, the religious culture, and the very landscape of his "native sod" that continued to hold Fithian's affections and enabled him to live a life worthy of a man of letters.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Many historians of Revolutionary America have plundered the diaries of Philip Vickers Fithian, but until now no one has satisfactorily told the life story of this great diarist. John Fea's insightful book does just that—*and yet more*. By showing how Fithian pursued the values of a cosmopolitan Enlightenment, in concert with the values of Presbyterian Christianity and American patriotism, his study reveals much about an enduring American tradition."*—Mark Noll, University of Notre Dame*

"In this absorbing and elegantly written biography, John Fea . . . shows how seismic philosophical upheavals profoundly shaped the life of an ordinary man far from the epicenter. Perhaps Fea's signal contribution is his nuanced reading of the relationship between the Enlightenment and Christianity."*—Books & Culture*

"A wonderfully teachable volume in undergraduate classrooms. However, it is also a book for specialists . . . for its simultaneously clear and complex explanation of the social and intellectual climate of middling participants in the American Revolution."*—Journal of the Early Republic*

"John Fea has given readers . . . a gift in this delightful biography of diarist Philip Fithian. . . . Fea has captured a multifaceted world that teachers of American history should rush to share with their students."*—Dallett Hemphill, author of Bowing to Necessities: A History of Manners in America*

John Fea is Associate Professor of History at Messiah College in Grantham, Pennsylvania.

I first read Dr. Fea's work when I purchased "Was America Founded As a Christian Nation?". Now that I have read "The Way of Improvement Leads Home", I am even more impressed with his writing style, attention to detail and historical accuracy. As I read this book, I was able to see my self and my life in this book. I was a rural kid who grew up left the farm, traveled the world and went to college. This book helps people to see how improvement is not only possible it is crucial to developing a well informed society. As a high school teacher it would be awesome to see this type of a book written for young adults to use in our classrooms to help students see the reason why self improvement should be a continuous practice.

Dr. Fea brings Philip to life through integrating diary entries Philip has written over his life span. I became so involved that I was so invested in Philip's wellbeing. His life story is the enlightening period. The self examination pushes everything he does. As a teacher, it really would resonate with

my students the idea of examining each part of their lives and the importance of friendships. In the end, I cried like a baby at the tenderness of Philip's relationship with his wife and friends. May we all decide to seek an enlightenment experience in this crazy scene of today.

Through the brilliant writing of Dr. John Fea, I was introduced to a topic that is always briefly mentioned but never flushed out in most high school history classrooms: the Enlightenment. This movement of ideas consisted of much more than the traditional Europeans one thinks of (Locke, Voltaire); rather, the Enlightenment was a trans-Atlantic movement that spread from European countries to their colonies worldwide. Philip Vickers Fithian, a country boy born and raised in rural New Jersey prior to the American Revolution, comes face to face with these new and exciting ideas and chooses to step away from the family farm. Perhaps the greatest lesson of Philip's life is the tension in which the Enlightenment ideas which he encounters at Princeton co-exists with his loyalty to his native land. Philip, after experiencing a call from God, plans to become a preacher under the tutelage of one of British America's greatest intellectuals, John Witherspoon. Philip comes to embody the Enlightenment in British America: a shift from narrowly-focused parochialism to a universal love of humanity, a conscientious effort to control one's emotions and "passions", and a desire to improve not only oneself but society at large. Through the diaries left behind by Philip Vickers Fithian, John Fea has afforded his readers the opportunity to step back into the past and understand what it was like when Enlightenment thinking meshed with Protestant Christianity. I appreciate this book because of the lessons which it offers to those who seek self-improvement still today. Fea allows his readers to live with the tension. Philip, a man who wanted to control his passions, destroyed another couple's relationship because he could never let go of his love for Betsy (his childhood crush). Philip, an enlightened man who should have felt at home anywhere in the world, was always anxious to come back to Cohansey when given the opportunity. Philip, the minister who desired to love all humanity as equal members of God's family, joined the Continental Army as a chaplain to perform a patriotic duty for his country. This biography of Philip Vickers Fithian successfully portrays what history is all about: the study of the past and the flawed, imperfect human beings who lived it. This is a must read for anyone who wants to know more about the past, especially early American history, religious history, or simply a well-constructed and thoroughly-researched narrative. The Enlightenment was not a Europeans-only movement. Its influence spread to the Americas and influenced the lives of thousands. Many of whom, including Philip Vickers Fithian and John Witherspoon, would rally behind the cause of liberty to establish the United States of America.

A gem! A must read for understanding life on the eve of the Revolution in America. The author masterfully conveys complex information about religion and society in colonial America coupled with a driving narrative told through the life of Fithian. For those interested in the new trend of books about American history, add this book to your reading list!

I just completed a week long teacher seminar with Dr. Fea at Princeton University. We were asked to read his book prior. I did and I just loved it! I had the chance to speak to him about it. In fact, I told him that I cried a lot at the end while I was relaxing on a beautiful stretch of beach in Florida. My husband, and others, just could not understand my emotion. They are not history buffs. While talking to others this week, many had the same reaction. It is the kind of book that you do not want to put down because you want to see how life progresses for Philip Vickers Fithian. Several of us asked Dr. Fea to consider a rewrite for a younger crowd. I think with a great social studies teacher setting the scene, it could be a very worthwhile book to assign and use for many talking points about Early American history. I teach upper elementary and could, at the very least, use it as a read aloud but secondary school students could definitely have it assigned. I would have to determine that when it gets published... but I have taught middle and high as well and I truly feel with some reworking it could become a best seller for that population. I surely hope Dr. Fea can make this happen. If you ever have the chance to take a class or seminar with Dr. Fea do not pass up the opportunity. And read the book even if it is not for class! You will not be disappointed. This is Denise from RI. Our family account is under my husband's name.

John Fea's account of Philip Vickers Fithian's life is an interesting intersection of an academic work on the Great Awakening and Enlightenment thought in Colonial America and an engaging biography of a young man struggling with faith, love, and revolution. I teach 8th grade U.S. history and will use this book to help my students understand how Enlightenment ideas in Colonial America were not reserved for the urban elite, as well as understanding the implications of the Great Awakening and New Light ministers for spreading an American form of Enlightenment ideals.

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