

Hijinks on the Hudson?



Today it can sound like a cliché, but “follow the money” is actually pretty good advice if you’re a reporter looking to get a foothold on a story. It’s also been just as useful to me in my work as a historian who looks at the intersection of business, politics, and public infrastructure, the field we broadly call “political economy.”

Since I first started looking into an 18th-century water company-turned-bank called the Manhattan Company back in 2003, I’ve been following the money in New York during the early republic—to banks, steamboats, railroads, and the Erie Canal. Eleven years later I’m checking copyedits for what will soon be my first book on the subject. But in between teaching, a new project on corruption, and the rest of academic life, I’ve also spent a good portion of this year on the third floor of 30 Rockefeller Plaza on MSNBC talking about bridges, infrastructure, and New Jersey politics. This wasn’t how I expected to be using my PhD, but here’s why being a historian of the early republic helped prepare me for an ongoing twenty-first-century political economy caper.

I can tell you exactly when I became interested—really interested—in the scandal we call Bridgegate.



1. Brian Murphy, in an appearance on The Rachel Maddow Show on MSNBC, February 21, 2014. Photo courtesy of MSNBC

On Wednesday, January 8, 2014, Chris Hayes opened his 8 p.m. MSNBC show with a roundup of the latest news out of New Jersey regarding the weeklong September 2013 lane closures on the George Washington Bridge. New documents had come to light showing that in August a top member of New Jersey Governor Chris

Christie's staff had been in touch with one of Christie's top appointees at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (the agency that owns and operates the bridge), informing him that it was "time for some traffic problems in Fort Lee." In response the appointee e-mailed back, "got it."

Hayes spent the next few minutes walking viewers through other revelations in the document leak, which linked other top Port Authority officials and members of Christie's team to the lane closures and made clear that, despite claims to the contrary, Fort Lee's local traffic woes had not been caused by a "traffic study."

I know almost all of the people involved in this story. Before I went to graduate school at the University of Virginia, I had been a reporter at *Money* magazine, writing about financial markets and mutual funds. During the 2000 presidential election, I left *Money* to write for *George* magazine, where I continued to look at finance and how it intersected with national politics. In early 2001 *George* folded, and I briefly ended up working for a New Jersey state senator and then a newly elected assemblyman. It was in that job that I first met David Wildstein, who owned and operated a political news Website called *PoliticsNJ.com*. Wildstein later became the Christie appointee who would write "got it" and actually implement the lane changes.

In early 2002, David hired me to be the site's first full-time reporter. In that job I covered Chris Christie when he was a U.S. attorney in New Jersey. I met Bridget Kelly, the woman who sent the "time for some traffic problems" e-mail, back when she was an aide to a mild-mannered Republican assemblyman from Bergen County. I became a friend of Bill Baroni, who later became a top political appointee at the Port Authority, back when he was a candidate for the state legislature. When I left reporting to go to graduate school, Bill and I kept in touch. He was a UVA law school alum, and when he came to Charlottesville for reunion events we occasionally went to football games. During one of those visits I met his successor at the Port Authority, who is also a UVA law grad. I kept in touch with many of the people I met in New Jersey politics, from legislative aides to reporters, to even a few members of Congress. So when politicians showed up in newspaper articles and on television expressing outrage about this new story involving the George Washington Bridge, I had people to e-mail and call. I already knew some of the state legislators leading the investigation.

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But I did not know and had never met the mayor of Fort Lee, Mark Sokolich, who was Chris Hayes's guest that night during what I now know is called the A-block—the first segment of a television broadcast.

Sokolich is a tall, affable real estate attorney. During the September 2013 lane closures he had written to Bill Baroni asking for a meeting, hoping that he wasn't being punished for declining an invitation to endorse the Republican incumbent Christie across party lines in the November 2013 gubernatorial election.

I watched Sokolich's back-and-forth with Hayes to take a measure of the man who claimed that he had no idea why he or his town might have been targeted by the Christie administration. Then Sokolich said something really interesting:

"And I'll tell you, we've done phenomenal things in Fort Lee, and that truly is the tragedy here, we're in the middle of a renaissance, we're in the middle of a billion dollar redevelopment, we are arguably the most progressive community in the state of New Jersey run by this idiot [Christie], and we should be applauded for that, not penalized for it."

A billion dollar redevelopment.

I remember sitting with my wife on our couch and saying: "So why is a local mayor nobody's ever heard of from a town nobody's ever heard of using time during his national television debut to mention that?"

The next day Governor Christie gave a marathon lunchtime press conference with what I thought was an internally contradictory narrative. A half hour later David Wildstein refused to testify before a state legislative panel but, through his lawyer, offered to talk if given immunity from federal and state prosecution. The following day, the legislature released more than 2,000 pages of subpoenaed documents—e-mails, text messages, letters, and memos—relating to the bridge lane closures.



2. Traffic problems in September 2013 on the George Washington Bridge, viewed from the Manhattan side of the Hudson River, proved to be the thread that reporters followed to the larger story of the confluence of money and power in New Jersey politics. Photo by Fly Navy, and used here under a Creative Commons license.

I read all of it. Most of it that day and into the night. This was how it started for me.

Truth be told, I hadn't been following Bridgegate throughout the fall. My wife gave birth to our daughter on September 30 as I was furiously trying to finish revisions on my book manuscript and renovations to our kitchen. Then in mid-October my father woke up with double vision in his right eye, something that turned out to be the first symptom of an aggressive lymphoma. He died three

weeks later in an ICU. He was 69.

Devastated, all I could do after that was work to finish the manuscript he would never see finished—a heavily revised reboot of my dissertation about political economy and state formation in New York in the early republic. I was rewriting a chapter on the Erie Canal and what I see as a monumental decision by New York lawmakers and canal promoters to finance the project with state-backed bonds rather than stocks, which would have conveyed ownership of the project to private investors. This was a pivotal moment in public infrastructure finance and the application of political economy principles that tried to sort out distinctions between public and private interests. In the back of my mind as I worked on the book was Robert Moses and Robert Caro's biography of him, *The Power Broker*, one of the most important books ever written about power and infrastructure. So was work by other distinguished scholars of the early American economy like John Larson, Cathy Matson, and Peter Onuf.

I went to graduate school to study with Peter because I was interested in looking at the intersection of politics and finance within larger institutional and jurisdictional federal frameworks. This had been the main question that interested me as a magazine journalist, and I likely would have kept on working it at *George* magazine or elsewhere had the presidential election of 2000 turned out differently. But Al Gore lost and my chance to become a White House correspondent slipped away. Then *George* folded and the economy slipped into a recession. After 9/11 it was clear that time was precious, and I revisited the idea of going to graduate school.

Working as a journalist had helped me see a set of questions that I knew I would never have the time, space, or guidance to explore as a reporter. I had done stories that touched on lobbying and financial regulation, and I had gone to enough political fundraisers to see how transactional policymaking could be. I knew that many legislators were not policy wonks; if you interviewed them about legislation they supported, and even bills named after them, they did not necessarily know what was inside. On the other hand, you could bet that their staffs and lobbyists with an interest in those bills did; they knew exactly what was at stake in the wording of particular subsections and clauses. But being able to detect when and why bills are drafted or amended isn't ordinarily possible in conventional political reporting undertaken with conventional methods. Influence is hard to detect at the moment it's exercised, and favors are often part of a long game. Campaign finance disclosures just cannot capture the scale or nuance of the economy of influence that is the backdrop to our political economy. Similarly, the disciplinary boundaries of political, legal, and economic history, even when only lightly enforced, can obscure the bridge-building connections forged by early American political entrepreneurs who married finance to political connections and legislative skill in order to build the nation's first financial and transportation infrastructure projects.

Before I applied, my undergraduate advisor at Haverford College, Roger Lane,

wisely and responsibly cautioned me that it would not be easy to find an academic job. Truth be told, I was never under any other impression, and I wasn't really going to graduate school to find a specific career anyway. I finished college knowing that there were things I wanted to study more deeply, and for a time being a reporter had quenched that desire. If I could get lucky enough to land a decent job in academia, that would be great. But if I ended up not having any good career options in academia when it was all over, so be it. I was going to do the best work I could do to take on questions that I could not avoid, which in my mind was—and remains—a perfectly respectable reason to go to graduate school if you can do so without incurring loads of debt.



3. New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, pictured here on July 1, 2013. Photo by May S. Young, and used here under a Creative Commons license.

Sometime after I decided to go to UVA, I briefly took a job with *PoliticsNJ.com*, run by an anonymous editor who went by the name of a long-deceased governor of New Jersey named Walter “Wally” Edge. Wally, I learned years later, was David Wildstein. David/Wally taught me a lot about power, and one of the more interesting things I observed while working for him was how much power is wielded by people whose names never appeared on a ballot and who operate in a mixed economy where public and private interests collide. In New Jersey, you might think that the political system bends to the will of a small group of public figures: the leaders of the state legislature or the governor, and maybe a few political party bosses and fundraisers. But in truth, some of the most influential political operators can be found at three agencies most people have never heard of: the Casino Redevelopment Authority (think Atlantic City), the Sports and Exposition Authority (which runs the Meadowlands and Giants Stadium), and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (in charge of tunnels, airports, the World Trade Center, and of course the George Washington Bridge).

There were 2,040 pages of documents released in seven appendices on January 10, 2014, the day after Wildstein refused to testify to the New Jersey legislature. I began reading them at lunchtime after collating them into a single PDF that I ran through optical character recognition software to make them text-searchable. I also started taking notes and began building a rough timeline in a spreadsheet.

One of our great strengths as historians is that, like journalists, we are trained to not be intimidated by paper. We can organize information. Put us in a room full of boxes at an archive and we can use close reading, tenacity, and patience to sift through it all to find the dozen pieces of paper we need to tell a story. Even if not all of us write narrative history, we can rely on narratives to build persuasive cases that tease out tension and illustrate

change over time.



4. This lithograph from 1825 reflects the scale of the Erie Canal as an infrastructure project. “Deep Cutting Lockport,” lithograph, 12.5 x 19 cm., by Imbert’s Lithographic Office (New York, 1825). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

As I kept reading through the documents, I had the growing suspicion that the Fort Lee mayor’s throwaway line about a real estate development was significant. Sometime that Friday night I chatted with another former David Wildstein employee, Steve Kornacki, who hosts a weekend morning show on MSNBC. Over the course of three hours we started pulling together documents from Fort Lee’s local government Website—minutes of city council and planning board meetings—along with financial disclosures from the developers behind the billion dollar project, news articles, and items from within the newly released documents. Steve and I thought we had found something important. We had evidence showing that the lane closures jeopardized sensitive late-stage financing of the redevelopment project Mayor Sokolich had mentioned two nights earlier, and that people at the Port Authority were aware that the project’s viability hinged on its proximity to the George Washington Bridge. As I later wrote in a story for the political news site TalkingPointsMemo.com, “the Hudson Lights project is a billion dollar project because it offers unparalleled access to the George Washington Bridge. But take away that access and it’s no longer a billion dollar project.”

With the same exhilaration I felt after making a key discovery in a box of archival materials at the New-York Historical Society, I climbed into bed around 3 a.m. saying “I think we found something really big here.” Steve and I reconnected after he was finished with his Saturday morning broadcast and invited me to come on his show on Sunday, where he presented our reporting. I wrote up a version of the story at TalkingPointsMemo.com, owned by Joshua Marshall, who also has a PhD in history from Brown University (he was a Gordon Wood student). The following day, the mayor of Hoboken reached out to Steve saying she had a story to tell—and that she had documents to back it up. Her allegations are now at the center of a federal investigation that, according to recent reports, is targeting the former chairman of the Port Authority and possibly Governor Christie as well. Our reporting, then, relied on a mix of convincing people to give us things and a close reading of things that were already in the public domain, hidden in plain sight—in short, a combination of the skills I had gained as a reporter and the research habits I had learned as a historian. The timeline I began building has yielded several headlines, [one of which was significant enough](#) that MSNBC brass brought me in for a meeting to make me one of their official contributors.

For me, none of these insights would have jumped out had I not spent the better part of a decade thinking about how financial and transportation infrastructure

projects were incorporated and structured into a public-private mixed economy regime that exists within a layered federal union of divided and competing jurisdictions—even though the projects I had been thinking about for ten years took place in the 1810s and '20s. Within American government, parties do not field candidates and electioneer only to win elections; they have priorities and agendas driven by both ideological convictions and material interests.

When I began thinking about how an institution like the Port Authority fit into partisan politics in New Jersey and into Bridgegate specifically, the questions were framed by my past work on the 1799 founding of the Manhattan Company (founded by Aaron Burr to provide clean water to lower Manhattan, the company also had banking privileges; in 1955 it would merge with Chase National Bank to become Chase Manhattan, now part of J.P. Morgan Chase & Co.). New York Republicans considered the company to be an essential factor behind Jefferson's election as president in 1800. Back in 2002 I began wondering why would a water utility that ran a bank mattered so much for electioneering. In time, I realized that it had really been a tool for party development. This newly incorporated bank enabled Republicans to offer discretionary financial rewards to their allies, recruit new supporters, and punish mutinies, all while offering New York voters an institutional alternative to the city's Federalist-run banks, which were dominated by Alexander Hamilton. My research on the Manhattan Company (originally a seminar paper in graduate school) eventually became an article in the *William and Mary Quarterly* and a revised chapter of my book, *Building the Empire State*. Intellectually that piece set the trajectory for much of the work I do by establishing a fixed point for me to begin thinking about political economy in a sustained way.

After a few years of presenting work that garnered feedback from colleagues in the Early American Seminar at Virginia and a few conferences' worth of supportive SHEAR audience members, it was becoming clearer to me that material interests—something I don't want to necessarily label as "greed," but rather an interest in extracting benefits and turning profits—was at the heart of early American state formation. Competing ideologies of liberalism and republicanism that dominate the historiography seemed less immediately relevant to the group of people I study than what seems to me to be a widespread assumption that one of the fundamental purposes of government is to foster commercial relations by actively and aggressively structuring the economic marketplace. The landscape of political opportunity in the early republic was defined not only by public laws and regulations adopted by legislators and enforced by courts. It was also dotted with corporations that mobilized private capital and sought public benefits to serve both public and private interests by building a financial infrastructure of banks and commercial enterprises that depended on a transportation infrastructure of roads, bridges, steamboats, canals, telegraphs, and railroads. The high-minded way to look at the ensuing institutional matrix was to see it as knitting together an expanding union by manufacturing common material interests among distant citizens; a more *realpolitik* take would be to say that political entrepreneurs were searching for ways to make politics profitable. Although twentieth-century reformers

tried to professionalize and depoliticize these practices by creating agencies like the Port Authority, in reality they pushed those politics out of view. In spite of its professional engineering and management staff, the Port Authority has proven to be incredibly vulnerable to partisan tampering and responsive to political pressure, reinforcing my contention that the agency's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antecedents are all the more relevant to how we understand it today.



5. An Act of Incorporation of the Manhattan Company (New York, 1799). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

I bring all of this work to the reporting I've done for TPM and MSNBC—it's impossible to stop being an early Americanist, even when you're on television. If there were footnotes to accompany television segments, they'd be populated with the scholarship of Richard John, Andy Shankman, and Cathy Matson, not to mention Sean Adams, Robert Wright, Johann Neem, and Brian Balogh. I read court cases differently because of the way Chuck McCurdy taught his legal history seminar. I think about alliances in light of the Aaron Burr letters edited by Mary-Jo Kline and the work of Joanne Freeman. And I cannot even begin to imagine how I would have put any of those early stories together without Peter Onuf's guiding influence. There is no time on a 7-minute-long television segment with 5 minutes of "talk time" to properly offer these credits. But make no mistake—the work I've done on the events of 2013 flows directly from the work I and other historians have done on the early 1800s.

I appreciate that being a contributor for a cable news network is not an easily replicable model for how to be a publicly engaged academic. But I would say this: as historians we are blessed with numerous avenues to reach the public. Many of these have been catalogued in response to [Nicholas Kristof's New York Times column](#) calling on scholars to be more engaged in public life. Kristof offered us only a narrow set of options when, in reality, we can do so much more through a vast array of media.

The challenge is to take those opportunities when they arise. I see no conflict in doing reporting on a major modern New York institution and a national political story while also being a history professor. My colleagues and my dean at Baruch have been nothing but supportive. Some other colleagues in the field, however, have referred to all this as "a distraction," as if the opportunity to discuss transportation agencies and political institutions in front of an audience of 750,000 viewers is something I should be worried about. It is an odd thing to wake up at 5 a.m. on a weekend, put on a shirt and tie, get driven into New York, and put on makeup, only to be on camera for 5 or maybe 10 minutes. As historians, we don't usually get to see the inner workings of the news cycle, or labor over things where we can't discuss work in progress. It's more than a little ironic that the biggest story I've ever worked on is happening for me more than twelve years since I "left" journalism. But how

often do you get to be a part of a story that gets enough attention that you can tell friends and family—in complete seriousness—that even if they miss your television appearance, they’ll still hear about your latest work by putting on news radio or checking the wires soon after?

But rather than being distracted by this media work, reporting on the intersection of politics and money in New York and New Jersey in 2014 has only sharpened the focus that I bring to studying the intersection of politics and money in New York and New Jersey in 1820.

Historians are trained to understand narrative and provide context. We understand tension and can spot change over time. Those instincts make our voices valuable in the public sphere, and we cannot afford to retreat inward at moments when our presence is welcomed and even needed. As a state senator said to me in the green room outside Studio 3A after I walked him through the redevelopment story back in January: “You guys see that it’s all about land,” he said, “and you get what politics is really about in this state: wringing as much f—ing money out of the system as you possibly can before you get caught.”

The only way you begin to understand a “system” like that is by looking at its origins and its history. If this story had fallen into my lap in 2001 I might not have known what to do with it. I had to become a historian to try to get a handle on the present.

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