

THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION



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The Atlantic

NOVEMBER 2005

REVOLUTIONARY ERA

The Atlantic

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The American Experiment

**At 250, the Revolution's goals
remain noble and indispensable.**

by Jeffrey Goldberg

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Pennsylvania Magazine:



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AMERICAN MONTHLY MUSEUM.

FOR JULY 1776.

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P H I L A D E L P H I A:

Printed by R. AITKEN, the Publisher, opposite the London Coffee-
House, Front-Street.

The Pennsylvania Magazine had a brief run: It was published monthly from January 1775 to July 1776. The Declaration of Independence appeared in its last issue, in a regular section called "Monthly Intelligence." (Photograph by

Rythum Vinoben for The Atlantic. Document courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library.)

“A magazine, when properly conducted, is the nursery of genius; and by constantly accumulating new matter, becomes a kind of market for wit and utility.”

Thomas Paine made this (true) statement in 1775, in the first issue of *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, for which he served as editor. In this same manifesto, he had unkind words for the magazine’s older cousins. “The British magazines, at their commencement, were the repositories of ingenuity: They are now the retailers of tale and nonsense. From elegance they sunk to simplicity, from simplicity to folly, and from folly to voluptuousness.”

Paine, though enamored of the new American style of magazine making, resigned his post after less than a year because the owner refused to give him a raise. His premature departure allowed him time to write *Common Sense*, so a skinflint publisher inadvertently aided the cause of freedom.

The John Carter Brown Library, a treasury of American history on the campus of Brown University, holds the complete run of *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, and on a recent visit I became preoccupied with the July 1776 issue, the last one ever published. It is richly idiosyncratic. One article discusses the most effective way to prevent scurvy at sea (“one ounce and an half of the juice of oranges or lemons,” mixed with grog), and a lengthy exhortation warns women that their hairpins could kill them. “How little do our ladies imagine, when they surround their heads with wire, the most powerful of all conductors, and at the same time wear stockings, shoes, and gowns of silk, one of the most powerful repellants, that they prepare their bodies in the same manner, and according to the same principles, as electricians prepare their conductors for attracting the fire of lightning?”

Hidden near the back of the magazine we find a set of documents, collected under the rubric “Monthly Intelligence.” These documents include the newly written constitutions of Virginia, Connecticut, and New Jersey, as well as ... the Declaration of Independence.

I personally might have given the Declaration more of a boost. This was the July 1776 issue, after all, and I must imagine that the decision by the united colonies to declare independence from King George III counted among the more important news events of the month. I asked Karin Wulf, the historian who leads the library, why the editors might have buried the Declaration. She speculated that they took seriously the format of their monthly book. “It’s true that we think of the Declaration of Independence as a broadside publication, not something to run up against the New Jersey state constitution,” she said. But editors, even then, were “committed to the structure and order of the magazine, and that’s where a document like this belonged.”

Entirely plausible. And yet, I would argue—noncontroversially, I hope—that the Declaration, and what it stood for, deserved better placement. And a big, clangy headline.

The Atlantic in your hands does not make the mistake of downplaying the Declaration, or the events of 1776. You will see that we are not simplistic, jingoistic, or uncritical in our approach, but we are indeed motivated by the idea that the American Revolution represents one of the most important events in the history of the planet, and its ideals continue to symbolize hope and freedom for humankind.

You have no doubt noticed that this issue commemorating the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States comes not long after the 249th anniversary. We are publishing this at the end of 2025 for a number of reasons: This month marks the launch of [an *Atlantic* project](#) meant to explain the meaning of the Revolution and its consequences, which we will carry through all of next year. We wanted to place ourselves, in the coming discussion, ahead of the curve (and ahead of our more voluptuous competitors). We also recognize that the American experiment is under extraordinary pressure at the moment, and we think it important to do anything we can to illuminate the challenges we face.

And one more, specific reason as well: Last year, in conversation with the great documentarian Ken Burns about his forthcoming series, [The American Revolution](#), I realized that a companion issue of the magazine would be appreciated by our readers, and be useful to the general public—especially

to people who are worried about the staying power of the American idea. The documentary, which will be broadcast on PBS in six parts beginning on November 16, is accompanied by [a fascinating article written for this issue](#) by Burns and his co-directors, Sarah Botstein and David Schmidt. In it, they describe the difficulties of putting on film a war fought before the advent of photography, and they suggest that the Revolution is so enveloped in myth that it would take a lifetime to make clear its stakes. (The three directors, expert documentary makers all, actually needed only 12 hours to capture the shocking complexity of the period.)

In pursuit of illumination, we have assembled in this current issue an extraordinary range of writers. Here are just a few: Rick Atkinson tells us [the complicated truth of King George](#) (there is more to him than mere madness); Annette Gordon-Reed looks at America's unmet promise; Stacy Schiff examines [the civil war within the Franklin family](#); Caity Weaver [learns to fire a musket](#); John Swansburg, who led the team that edited this issue (our largest in years), revives Rip Van Winkle; George Packer makes the case for an enlightened patriotism rooted in the ideals of 1776; Fintan O'Toole asks what the Founders would make of America today; and Jake Lundberg, *The Atlantic's* in-house historian and archivist, writes about Lincoln and the way in which he called upon the spirit of 1776 to remind his fellow Americans of the work still before them. "As the nation fractured, Lincoln summoned the Revolution as neither empty hypocrisy nor mindless triumph," Lundberg writes, "but as an unfinished project whose noblest values could redeem the past and heal the present."

The project is still unfinished, and troubled, but it remains a project worth pursuing. That is the argument of this issue.

Thank you to the British Library, which opened its doors to us, including the doors to King George III's (suitably majestic) 65,000-volume private collection, and supported research. Thank you as well to the John Carter Brown Library, which shared artifacts from its remarkable collection of Americana.

This editor's note appears in the [November 2025 print edition](#).

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Behind The Atlantic's November 2025 Issue Cover

Capturing the Revolutionary era in its complexity, contradictions, and ingenuity. Plus: A guide to the figures.

by Peter Mendelsund

The Atlantic's November 2025 issue commemorates the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution. For our cover image, the artist Joe McKendry painted a tableau of figures drawn from the stories in the issue. Some of the figures will be instantly recognizable—Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson—and some of the depictions are based on historical portraiture. The image of Paul Revere, for instance, is an homage to John Singleton Copley's painting of the silversmith and Patriot, which hangs in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts.



Other figures will be less familiar. Standing beside George Washington is a man he enslaved. Like thousands of enslaved people, Harry Washington abandoned the plantation when the war began and fought for Great Britain. No image of this Washington survives. For such figures, McKendry imagined their visages, taking cues from written descriptions when possible. No occasion would have brought all of these people together in the same room (certainly, it is difficult to imagine King George in the same room as the other George). They represent different sides of the war, of the period's political ferment, and of early American society itself. One figure existed only in a work of fiction. But together they convey the ambition of this special issue: to capture the Revolutionary era in all of its complexity, contradictions, and ingenuity.



1. James Madison
2. King George III
3. George Washington
4. Harry Washington
5. Abigail Adams
6. Paul Revere
7. Benjamin Franklin
8. Benedict Arnold
9. Pontiac
10. William Franklin
11. Thomas Jefferson
12. Thomas Paine
13. Robert Hemmings
14. Prince Hall
15. James Armistead Lafayette
16. Eliza Schuyler
17. Patrick Henry
18. Priscilla Timbers
19. Rip Van Winkle
20. Alexander Hamilton
21. Ralph Waldo Emerson
22. Lord Dunmore
23. John Adams

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The Myth of Mad King George

**He was denounced by rebel
propagandists as a tyrant and
remembered by Americans as a
reactionary dolt. Who was he
really?**

by Rick Atkinson



Three miles south of Windsor Castle, in the western exurbs of London, stands a 25-ton equestrian statue of King George III, cast from old cannons in the decade after his death in 1820. Dressed as Marcus Aurelius, in toga and laurel crown, he sits astride his charger, regal and oversize, honored if

not revered for a reign that lasted almost 60 years, from the creation of the first British empire in the Seven Years' War through the final defeat of Napoleon.

A similar statue of George as a mounted Roman emperor once stood in New York City atop a marble plinth on Bowling Green, at the lower tip of Manhattan. Commissioned by grateful American colonists following the 1766 repeal of the detested Stamp Act—intended by Parliament to raise money from the lightly taxed colonials—the august figure lasted less than a decade. In July 1776, inflamed by a public reading of the newly adopted Declaration of Independence, Continental Army soldiers and other vandals broke through the iron fence surrounding the statue, lassoed George with ropes, and tugged him to the ground—“levelled with ye dust,” as a witness reported.

The mob decapitated the King and whacked off his nose. Musket balls punctured his torso, and looters scraped away the 10 ounces of gold leaf that coated rider and horse. The severed head, initially impaled on a spike outside a tavern, would be recovered by a British Army officer and shipped to England to illustrate the “Disposition of the Ungrateful people.” Rebels carted the headless rider and mount in fragments to Connecticut, where Patriot women melted the lead, ladled it into molds, and soon sent George Washington’s army 42,088 bullets. “It is hoped,” an American surgeon wrote in his journal, “that the Emanations of the Leaden George will make ... deep impressions in the Bodies of some of his red Coated and Torie subjects.”

George was that kind of king, inspiring both admiration and regicidal contempt. As the British monarch during the American Revolution, he has, for two and a half centuries, symbolized haughty intransigence and been portrayed as a reactionary dolt incapable of grasping the fervor for liberty that animated his American subjects. On Broadway, he minces through *Hamilton* as a foppish, sinister clown, singing to the estranged rebels, “You’ll be back” and adding, “I will kill your friends and family to remind you of my love.”

In truth, [the public opening by the British Crown of George III's papers](#) in the past decade reveals him to be a far more complex, accomplished, and even estimable figure than the prevailing caricature. He could also be

ruthless, self-righteous, and so mulish that he threatened abdication unless his government maintained a hard line against American independence. The struggle with America, which he considered “the most serious in which any country was ever engaged,” was lost on his watch, at an estimated cost to his kingdom of £128 million, plus tens of thousands of British casualties and a reduction of the empire on which the sun supposedly never set by half a million square miles. Not long after the British defeat at Yorktown, Virginia, in October 1781 all but ended the war, George asked “that Posterity may not lay the downfall of this once respectable Empire at my door.” Yet posterity has indeed blamed him for what his biographer Andrew Roberts called “the colossal disaster, the worst in British history until the loss of India in 1947.”

As bloodshed in America intensified following the initial gunplay at Lexington and Concord in 1775, George chose as his country seat Windsor, “a place I love best in the world.” In this redoubt, with its stout stone walls overlooking the Thames, away from the nattering courtiers and importunate government ministers in London, he could play the country squire with his growing family. A military band tootled martial airs every evening when the King was in residence, and in 1777 he personally designed the so-called Windsor uniform, a tunic of dark blue with red cuffs that George—his nation’s captain-general—wore as a costume of discipline and duty.

He would spend the final 14 years of his life at Windsor. Here he would be buried, and here his papers were deposited in the Royal Archives. In the 10 years since they were made widely accessible through an initiative, approved by the late Queen Elizabeth II, to catalog and digitize this trove, historians and biographers have climbed the 102 stone steps and 21 wooden stairs to the garret of the Round Tower, begun by William the Conqueror in the 11th century. Here are the papers, several hundred thousand pages in gorgeous red binders. Many are written in George’s tidy, looping hand—he served as his own secretary, personally drafting most of his correspondence until late in life, when he began to go blind. Anyone thumbing through these pages gets not only a tactile feeling of being in his presence but also a vivid sense of who he was and why he chose to wage war against his own people for eight years across 3,000 miles of open ocean in the age of sail.

George had ascended the throne in 1760, at the age of 22, England’s youngest king in more than two centuries. Unlike the two German-born

Georges who preceded him—the House of Hanover had been offered the crown in 1714, when Britain was desperate for a Protestant monarch—this George was thoroughly English. “Born and Educated in this country,” he proclaimed, “I glory in the name of Britain.”

A lonely, diffident prince—“silent, modest, and easily abashed,” as one courtier recorded—he had grown into a robust, confident king, with a regal bearing, ruddy cheeks, a high forehead balanced by a dimpled chin, and what were described as “extremely fine” teeth. One writer reported that he considered it effeminate to have a carpet in his bedroom, and he often took to his horse for a gallop early in the morning regardless of the weather. George was habitually moderate; a biographer describes him as a “good-mutton man” who preferred a jug of barley water to wine. Shrewd rather than brilliant, he was not easily duped, and he possessed what one duchess called “a wonderful way of knowing what is going forward.”

His “unforgiving piety,” in the phrase of a contemporary, caused him to resist political concession and to impute moral deficiencies to his opponents. He disliked disorder and loathed disobedience. “My opinion is formed on principle, not on events,” he acknowledged, “and therefore is not open to change.” He saw himself as John Bull, the commonsensical embodiment of Great Britain, for which he should remain a moral exemplar—a thankless task, given his conviction that he lived in “the wickedest age that ever was seen.”

A few guiding precepts shaped his reign. The monarch must shun Roman Catholicism and preserve the British constitution, enshrined in documents such as the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights of 1689. His powers were far broader than those wielded by a British monarch today. But he could not rule by royal caprice; rather, he needed cooperation from his ministers and majorities in both houses of Parliament, restrictions that he embraced as a proper restraint on despotism. Not once would he exercise his right to veto a parliamentary bill, even those he opposed. He believed that maritime power and colonial policy should promote commerce, the bedrock of national prosperity. “I am born for the happiness or misery of a great nation,” he declared, “and consequently must often act contrary to my passions.”

Good kingship also required that he produce an heir, and toward that end he recruited a spouse in Charlotte, a 17-year-old princess from a small German duchy. It was said, unkindly, that George winced the first time he saw his homely bride, but they married six hours after meeting, and the happy union proved fertile: She produced children with regularity, eventually to number 15, in sharp contrast to George's French rival, Louis XVI, who consummated his marriage to the Austrian archduchess Marie-Antoinette seven years after they wed.

Charlotte—"the Queen of my heart," George called her—shared his religious zeal as well as his affection for Handel, country dances, and the theater. (For his part, he indulged her enthusiasm for dogs, jewelry, and snuff.) As an Enlightenment monarch, he promoted both arts and sciences, sponsoring the Royal Academy's founding, in 1768, and building an observatory at Richmond Palace, where he personally took measurements of the transit of Venus across the sun, in 1769, to help gauge the size of the solar system.

He played the flute, piano, harpsichord, and organ; wrote a treatise on crop rotation for *Annals of Agriculture* under the pseudonym "Ralph Robinson"; and copied out [a recipe for cough syrup](#)—rosemary, rue, vinegar, and brown sugar, all "boiled in silver." Always intrigued by how things were made, from buttons and pins to canals and warships, George also collected 2,000 clocks, watches, chronometers, barometers, and other devices, some of which he disassembled. In his lifetime he amassed the 65,000 books that would form the core of the British Library.

Today the so-called King's Library is housed in a six-story glass tower that rises through the lobby of the British Library. The shelves hint at the breadth of George's interests: a 1476 edition of Chaucer's [Canterbury Tales](#)—reputedly one of the first books printed in England—as well as a dozen editions of [Don Quixote](#) in various languages, a 1759 treatise by Thomas Barnes titled *A New Method of Propagating Fruit-Trees, and Flowering-Shrubs*, and 200 versions of the Bible, including a 1455 Gutenberg. "He was an Enlightenment-type collector, in that he wanted to collect everything," Karen Limper-Herz, the head of Printed Heritage Collections, told me. "Effectively, he was trying to collect his kingdom."



The 65,000 books amassed by King George III are today housed in a six-story glass tower at the British Library. (British Library; © Sam Walton)

That extended to his realm in North America, as he tried to make sense of the colonial agitation. The collection includes *An Account of the European Settlements in America*, by Edmund Burke; *The History of the British Dominions in North America*, which started with their first discovery, by Sebastian Cabot, in 1497, and ended with the conclusion of the Seven Years' War, in 1763; and 14,461 pamphlets, among them a 1776 edition of *Common Sense*, in which the polemicist Thomas Paine, who had recently emigrated from England to Philadelphia, denounced George as “the Royal Brute of Great Britain.”

If habitually curious, George remained a homebody, never once visiting his dominions in Scotland, Wales, Ireland, or even northern England, much less Europe or America. Nonetheless, the wide world seemed to lie at his feet. Early in his reign, spoils won from France and Spain during the Seven Years' War included Canada, Florida, several West Indian sugar islands, and an immense tract between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. “Our bells are worn threadbare with ringing for victories,” one happy

Briton reported. London became the center of the Western world, and Britain now possessed both the most powerful navy in history and a merchant fleet of some 8,000 vessels.

The creation of this first British empire brought its own vexations. Weighted with war debts, the treasury spent half of the government's annual tax revenue on interest payments. It seemed only fair to the King and his government that colonists should help shoulder the burden; a typical American, by Treasury Board calculations, paid no more than sixpence a year in Crown taxes—one-50th of the average Englishman's payment—even as Americans benefited from the eradication of the French and Spanish threats and from the navy's protection of North American trade.

Yet Americans bridled at all attempts by Parliament to extract further revenue from them without the approval of their own provincial assemblies. For generations, a British policy of “salutary neglect” had left colonists accustomed to self-sufficient autonomy. They also resented British prohibitions against making hats, woolens, and other goods that might compete with manufacturers in the mother country. The deployment of British army regiments in America to keep white colonists from encroaching on Native lands to the west further aggrieved men such as George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, who saw opportunity and wealth just over the horizon. Almost imperceptibly, a quarrel over taxes and filial duty metastasized into a struggle over sovereignty.

While rescinding earlier tax measures, including the Stamp Act, Parliament, with the King's agreement, asserted its own fiscal authority by keeping a small residual tax on tea. Whooping insurrectionists, said to be “dressed in the Indian manner,” responded by dumping 45 tons of British tea into Boston Harbor in December 1773. The King's heart hardened. Spurning pleas for moderation, he denounced “a dangerous spirit of resistance” among “my deluded subjects” in America, whom he likened to foward children. This resistance to Crown authority, with its sulfurous whiff of republicanism, threatened not only to undermine Parliament's authority but also to bring moral disorder and the collapse of European hegemony in the New World. “Blows must decide,” George wrote of the colonists in November 1774, “whether they are to be subject to this country or independent.” He advocated “the most coercive measures.”

From the February 1874 issue: Oliver Wendell Holmes's poem 'A Ballad of the Boston Tea-Party'

The blows began to fall, first at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, then at Bunker Hill in June. By August, George had declared the colonies—"misled by dangerous and ill-designing men"—to be in "open and avowed Rebellion." Anyone abetting the rebel cause was deemed a traitor. To his prime minister, Frederick Lord North, he wrote in October 1775, "Every means of distressing America must meet with my concurrence."

Some Britons opposed the eventual deployment to America of almost two-thirds of the British army and much of the Royal Navy. William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham, who had orchestrated Britain's victory in the Seven Years' War, was incensed. "You cannot conquer America," he told the House of Lords. "If I were an American, as I am an Englishman, while a foreign troop was landed in my country, I would never lay down my arms, never — never — never!"

But Parliament year after year supported the King's hard line.

Certain strategic misconceptions, however, had seeped into British war policy. The presumption that military firepower would deter the other 12 colonies from following Massachusetts into armed rebellion proved wrong; bloodshed at Lexington and on other battlefields inflamed rebels from Georgia to New Hampshire. The King and his ministers, encouraged by senior British generals and self-serving Loyalist functionaries, also insisted that a majority of the 2 million white Americans remained at least tacitly loyal to the Crown. Yet that, too, was delusional. Modern scholarship suggests that Loyalists constituted perhaps 20 percent of the colonial population, never sufficient to control the levers of power—the Second Continental Congress and state governments—or to prove decisive in combat, despite the thousands of armed Loyalists who transformed the Revolution into a civil war.

Perhaps most wrongheaded was the conviction, embraced as an article of faith by the King throughout the war, that failure to reassert London's authority would eventually unstitch the empire by encouraging insurrections in Ireland, Canada, the Caribbean, and India. Dominoes would topple.

Conceding independence to America would plunge Britain into “a state of inferiority,” as George wrote to Lord North, and “into a very low class among the European states.” He added, “I hope never to live to see that day.”

Unlike most of the English monarchs who preceded him, George lacked military experience, although he had long considered the army “to be his own department,” one adviser reported. He threw himself into the details of expeditionary warfare: the choice of field commanders, the use of secret codes, the decision about whether seagoing colliers should be converted into men-of-war.

As the fighting intensified in America, he reviewed not only government correspondence to and from his generals but also intelligence reports, paymaster instructions, and commissary dispatches. He was consulted about the shipment of salt and candles across the Atlantic and about whether an amphibious expedition should strike North Carolina. He weighed in on which widows and orphans of redcoats killed in Boston should receive pensions, and whether American prisoners ought to be transported to India, where British territories were short of white settlers. He visited his troops in military camps and drafted detailed lists: of “Ships Building and Repairing” and “Oak Timber in Store” at various dockyards; of the commanders of his cavalry units; and of royal ships “in Ordinary”—the reserve fleet—including the number of guns each mounted.

George’s extensive library of military texts and books about America included *Establishments of His Majesty’s Land Forces and Garrisons* (1778), a volume bound in red morocco, with every British regiment recorded in wispy threads of black ink, along with its size, per diem allotments for officers, and other statistics. *A List of Your Majesty’s Royal Navy*, also in red morocco, informed the King across more than 100 pages that he commanded 125 ships of the line—each carrying 60 guns or more—plus 270 frigates and lesser craft, down to sloops, cutters, and hoy. Those vessels would collectively be manned by 45,000 sailors in 1777.

In addition to a first edition of *Paradise Lost* and a two-volume 1775 treatise titled *American Husbandry*, the King amassed tens of thousands of maps, allowing him to study his realm from an armchair. Those included exquisite

battle maps of various British clashes against the American rebels, in Boston, Brandywine, Germantown, Charleston, and, ultimately, Yorktown. A particularly poignant map, annotated in 1783, depicts “the boundary of the new republic of the United States.” The King’s Library, one scholar wrote, provided “a retreat and even a solace for a monarch of retiring disposition whose long life was punctuated by bitter political acrimony.”



Hessen Hanau Regt. Erbprinz.
1778. F. v. Germann

E. Sack

A Hessian mercenary's watercolor depiction of a fellow German soldier
(EMU History / Alamy)

George also took the lead in hiring auxiliary troops in Germany, which he insisted could be had “at a much cheaper rate, besides more expeditiously than if raised at home.” In seeking such mercenaries to bolster his British legions, he dictated the deal points for pay rates, transportation arrangements from Europe to America, and the war materiel to be provided. On his orders, the British colonel negotiating with various German princelings was told, “Get as many men as you can,” because “the King is extremely anxious.” Eventually some 30,000 “Hessians”—as all German troops were called, regardless of their specific origins—would battle the rebels.

At first those rebels had avoided accusing the King of complicity in prosecuting the war, preferring the fiction that only his hard-line ministers and other bellicose Britons were at fault. That discretion ended with the publication of Paine’s scathing *Common Sense*, which excoriated George and repudiated monarchy in general. Soon enough, his portrait was burned throughout the colonies; the royal arms vanished from American street signs and buildings; and he was subject to mock trials, executions, and funerals, a contempt that wounded him personally. The Declaration of Independence listed what Samuel Adams called George’s “Catalogue of Crimes,” a hyperbolic, 16-sentence indictment that charged him with tyranny, turpitude, and bad faith. Down came that gilded statue on Bowling Green in New York.

So much about this war baffled George, including how his reign had become entangled in a squalid brawl in the empire’s most distant marchlands. Crushing the insurgency proved far more vexatious than the King and his men had anticipated. Paine pressed the point in [an open letter to the British published in 1777](#). “In all the wars which you have formerly been concerned in, you had only armies to contend with,” he wrote. “In this case, you have both an army and a country to combat.”

British officers deftly adapted European combat tactics to American terrain by stressing mobility, extended battle lines, and uniforms better suited to woodland fighting. But frictions beset the King’s cause. Senior commanders feuded with one another and with their political masters at home. Penny-

pinching prevented a timely expansion of the Royal Navy and full mobilization of the army early in the war. An inept British supply system splintered responsibility for transporting troops and supplies across the Atlantic among the Ordnance Board, the Navy Board, the Victualling Board, and the Treasury, depending on whether the cargo to be shipped was a gun, a man, a horse, camp equipage, food, or other war necessities.

The King and his men continued to misjudge the American temperament, both in the broad, visionary commitment to a republican future and in the seething resentments that fueled the insurrection—not least from Britain’s incineration of more than half a dozen American towns. After General Washington’s successful surprise attack on the Hessian garrison at Trenton on Christmas night 1776, Lord George Germain, who directed the war from London as the American secretary, told his emissaries he hoped “that the unexpected success of the Rebels there will not so far elate them as to prevent them from seeing the real horrors of their situation.”

Months later, the last remnants of an Anglo-German army of 8,000 men, who had invaded New York from Canada, surrendered at Saratoga on the Hudson River—a “most fatal event,” in the judgment of Prime Minister North. Unbowed, the King declared the calamity “very serious but not without remedy.” Yet soon the French would come into the war against Britain, to be followed by the Spanish and eventually the Dutch. Britain remained all but friendless, as the kingdom had been since 1763, with only tiny Portugal as a putative ally.

Parliament sought a way out by renouncing its authority to tax the Americans and appointing a peace commission empowered to offer other concessions. But granting full independence to the rebels remained nonnegotiable. George refused “to enter into what I look upon as the destruction of the empire.” Lord North, miserable and overmatched as a wartime prime minister, pleaded a dozen times to resign, but the King balked at releasing his most trusted courtier. “Recruit your mind,” he urged North. To the Earl of Sandwich, he declared, “If others will not be active, I must drive.”

Drive he did. Always stalwart in the face of peril, George rallied the nation when a huge Franco-Spanish invasion fleet appeared off England’s southern

coast in August 1779. Soon enough the armada sailed away, beset by sickness, poor seamanship, and confusion, without a single enemy soldier setting foot on English soil or the opposing fleets exchanging salvos. Yet victory remained out of grasp. Even a British military triumph was unlikely to yield an enduring political solution, given the animosity aroused by years of killing and the prodigious expansion of the American colonies, which were doubling in population every quarter century, an explosive growth unseen in recorded European history and four times England's rate.

With the surrender of another British army at Yorktown in October 1781, the war was all but over, although another two years would be needed to negotiate the peace treaties. The House of Commons had delivered a stunning rebuke to the King by resolving that "the influence of the Crown has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished." George contemplated giving up the throne, and in March 1783 drafted an abdication announcement, "a self-indulgent and characteristically self-pitying private expostulation written to make himself feel better," Roberts, the biographer, would write. George set aside the speech undelivered, to be discovered in his papers. As the King later admitted to John Adams, the first minister to the Court of St. James's from the newly independent United States of America, "I was the last to consent to the Separation."



The American artist William Walcutt's 1857 painting of the toppling of the King George III statue (Bettmann / Getty)

Such obstinacy would define his legacy for centuries to come. Failing to recognize the wide gap that had developed between Britain and the colonies,

he could not understand the primal American yen for autonomy or the grievances accumulating across the Atlantic. Perhaps only great wisdom and a knack for compromise could have averted the violent rupture of 1775, but George possessed neither virtue.

His life still had almost 40 years to run after the American Revolution, a span replete with glory—including Napoleon’s crushing defeat at Waterloo—but also abject misery. As a young king, George had been briefly afflicted by a mysterious illness once thought to be porphyria, a rare blood disorder that can ravage the nervous system. In October 1788, when he was 50, the malady returned with intensity, perhaps, one physician speculated, as a result of reading *King Lear*. Over the course of several months, he grew erratic, delirious, and “so ungovernable,” [an aide wrote](#), “that recourse was had to the strait waistcoat: His legs were tied, & he was secured down across his Breast.” A phalanx of doctors also used such dubious treatments as leeches applied to the temples and blistering of the head and feet. The attacks abruptly ended, but returned with redoubled fury for several months in 1804, to again be treated with the straitjacket.

From the May 1876 issue: The madness of George III

This “madness,” as the behavior would be labeled in a 20th-century stage play and film, is now believed to have been “mania, a severe version of what we now label ‘bipolar disorder,’” according to Sir Simon Wessely, a former president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. Perhaps triggered by the death of George’s youngest child, Princess Amelia, in 1810, the manic agitation recurred, this time lasting the remainder of his years. With the King incapacitated, his eldest son, George, the Prince of Wales, acted in his stead under the Regency Act of 1811.

George soon descended into abject dementia and no longer recognized his family. Queen Charlotte saw him briefly at Windsor for the last time in June 1812, then never visited again. Blind and partially deaf, he grew a long white beard and played the harpsichord despite being unable to hear the notes. He died of pneumonia in 1820 at age 81, after 59 years on the throne, but without ever meeting the granddaughter who had been born a few months earlier to Prince Edward, his fourth son. That child, named Victoria,

would take the crown in 1837, then rule for more than six decades and preside over the rise of a second British empire.

As for that equestrian statue of George on Bowling Green: The whereabouts of the head are unknown—it disappeared shortly after it was shipped to England. All that remains of the rider and horse are a few fragments, including the mount’s tail, displayed by museums in New York and Philadelphia, plus a few unearthed musket balls with the same chemical signature as the original lead statue.

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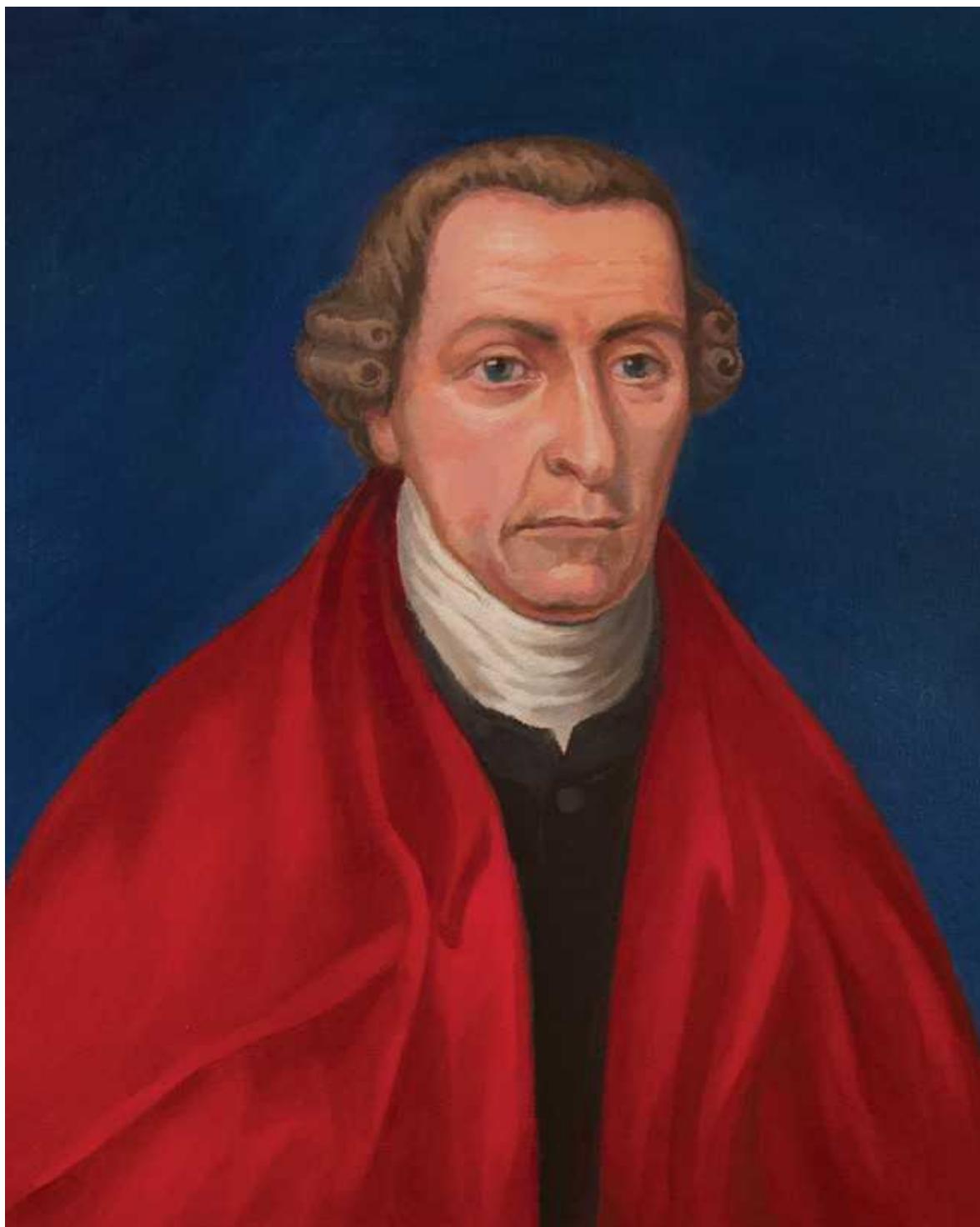
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No One Gave a Speech Like Patrick Henry

How he roused a nation to war

by Drew Gilpin Faust



Patrick Henry is generally treated as a second-string Founding Father. He didn't write—or even sign—the Declaration of Independence. He didn't write the Constitution. Instead, fearing that it allocated too much power to a centralized government, he did all he could to defeat it. He was not a

Revolutionary military hero. He did not explain lightning, invent bifocals, take Paris by diplomatic storm, or write [an autobiography that has become a classic in American literature](#). Henry did attend the First and Second Continental Congresses, but made little mark. After 1775, he remained in his home state of Virginia, where he would serve five terms as governor. He did not again take up national service.

What Patrick Henry did above all was talk—and get talked about. He astonished his listeners as the most compelling public speaker they had ever encountered. He was, John Adams proclaimed, the Demosthenes of his age. Thomas Jefferson hailed him as “the greatest orator that ever lived.” In the opinion of Edmund Randolph, the country’s first attorney general, Henry’s eloquence “unlocked the secret springs of the human heart, robbed danger of all its terror, and broke the keystone in the arch of royal power.” Many of his contemporaries agreed that he made the Revolution possible with words that rendered it both desirable and inevitable.

He certainly had no rhetorical rival among the other Founders. George Washington was frightened of public speaking, and trembled visibly during his first inaugural address. When a speech was required of him, Jefferson customarily spoke so softly that he could scarcely be heard. Benjamin Franklin offered copious advice on rhetoric to others, but himself preferred print to oratory. [His most famous “speech”—urging unity at the Constitutional Convention in 1787](#)—was a written text that he gave to another delegate to read aloud. James Madison, in spite of his brilliant legal mind, was a nervous speaker, with a shrill and off-putting voice.

Henry reminds us of how our inability to hear the past before the advent of audio recording has left us with an incomplete and even distorted understanding of history. He lived in an era when the spoken word had not yet been overtaken by the power and reach of print. This was a time—and Henry was a figure—we can only poorly understand if we do not recognize the centrality of oratory.

An assiduous scholar has [located nearly 100 responses](#) by individuals who heard Henry’s speeches, so we at least have secondhand access to the impact of his words. We can’t retrieve his voice, but we can find accounts of how it made audiences feel. As one contemporary explained, there was “an

irresistible force to his words which no description could make intelligible to one who had never seen him, nor heard him speak.” On a trip through Virginia as a young man, the future president Andrew Jackson sought out the orator he had heard so much about. “No description I had ever heard,” he reflected, “no conception I had ever formed, had given me any just idea of the man’s powers of eloquence.” Patrick Henry had become a tourist attraction.

We can’t even read Henry’s most important speeches. The potency of his rhetoric derived in no small part from its extemporaneity. He left no texts or notes of his Revolutionary-era addresses, and observers described being so swept up in the moment that they were unable to document his performances. “No reporter whatever could take down what he actually said,” the Virginia judge Spencer Roane remembered. “Much of the effect of his eloquence arose from his voice, gesture, etc., which in print is entirely lost.” Today, Henry’s legacy is left chiefly to schoolchildren tasked with memorizing and reciting a reconstruction of [his “Liberty or Death” speech](#) of 1775, pieced together by his biographer William Wirt from witnesses’ testimony two decades after his death.

Henry clearly possessed a particular genius. But his gift took on great significance because of the time and place in which he was able to use it. The rhetorical style that Henry embraced to advocate for the Revolution was a revolution in its own right. Casting himself as a “plain man,” he ignored prevailing conventions of classical oratory that foregrounded carefully reasoned addresses influenced by the teachings of Cicero and Quintilian. Instead Henry regarded the human heart, not the mind, as the appropriate target for his words. His intended audience was not just the small world of learned men, but the far larger one of ordinary citizens—many with meager, if any, education—whom he sought to move as much as persuade. “Your passions are no longer your own when he addresses them,” George Mason, the Virginia planter and politician, observed. Henry’s was a popular and democratic, rather than elite, rhetoric. At the same time, his critics saw it as potentially—and dangerously—demagogic. Edmund Randolph explained that Henry was “naturally hailed as the democratic chief.”

Embracing Henry was, in the minds of many Virginia aristocrats, a bit like supping with the devil. Jefferson admired him extravagantly, but belittled

him as well, deplored his coarse appearance and vocabulary, his seeming lack of learning. But that vulgarity was exactly what Americans needed as they sought to mobilize against British rule. Henry was, in Jefferson's view, vulgar in the sense of "offensive to elevated taste." But he was also vulgar in the sense of "pertaining to the common man." Virginia's Tidewater aristocrats accepted the first in order to leverage the latter. They needed a people aroused in support of independence, even as they understood what empowerment of the people might ultimately imply for their own status and control. In 1824, Jefferson confessed that it was "not now easy to say what we should have done without him." Henry's speeches transformed both political discourse and American politics.

Whereas the scions of Virginia's elite resided in brick mansions in the Tidewater, Henry came from the more rugged Piedmont region of the interior. His father was a well-educated landowner and enslaver, but lacked the refinement and status of the Byrds or Carters or Randolphs. Henry had a haphazard education, and at about the age of 10 left school to be tutored by his father. He at first scrambled to make a living, working as a store clerk, toiling in the fields as a farmer, and running a tavern before finding his way to the law—not through formal education but after a series of individual examinations with prominent jurists.

His Piedmont home provided a different sort of education. In the 1740s, a series of religious revivals swept through the Virginia backcountry, sparked by the preaching of the extraordinary itinerant English evangelist George Whitefield, then carried forward by a Presbyterian minister named Samuel Davies, who, as one observer noted, turned Henry's Hanover County into "the suburbs of Heaven." Henry heard Whitefield preach in 1745, when he was only 9 years old. After his mother became a devoted adherent of evangelical Presbyterianism, sermons and religious rhetoric became a central part of young Henry's life. She took him regularly to hear Davies and made him repeat the essence of each sermon on the way home. Henry was transfixed by the power of Davies's words and always acknowledged the minister's influence.

Davies represented a phenomenon that extended well beyond Virginia. Whitefield had traveled close to 5,000 miles up and down the Atlantic Seaboard, speaking to substantial crowds on some 350 occasions. His tour

had sparked revivals throughout the colonies, with preachers such as Jonathan Edwards in Massachusetts and Gilbert Tennent in New Jersey, as well as Davies in Virginia, building on his message after his return to England. As the first colony-wide, American experience, this Great Awakening was a harbinger of things to come. But it represented more than an initial example of intercolonial connection. The message of the new evangelical preaching was one of the heart and the emotions, not just of learning and reason. It offered the hope of salvation to all its listeners, regardless of education or social standing. It was an implicit and sometimes explicit challenge to privilege and status.

In Virginia, the wave of conversions in the 1740s was followed by a second surge of evangelical fervor in the 1760s, once again in areas near Henry's home, but this time focused among Baptists and even more democratic in its implications. Authorities regarded these eruptions, chiefly coming from lower-class and uneducated white people, as a threat to the social order that required suppression and even arrests. Henry was an active defender of the right of Baptists to preach and assemble and was even said to have ridden an extra 50 miles on one occasion to offer his legal services to a group of Baptists jailed in Spotsylvania County for disturbing the peace.

From his experiences in Hanover County as the son of an evangelical mother, Henry brought rhetorical influences and democratic impulses to his public life. His voice became one dedicated to conversion—though in the realm of man, not of God. Henry rapidly established himself as a country lawyer. His courtroom successes created widespread demand for his services as well as a considerable stream of income. His extensive speculation in lands in western Virginia and Ohio contributed to his growing wealth, and he acquired more than 60 enslaved workers. Henry's oratory would establish him as a voice of the people, but economic and social circumstances placed him among Virginia's privileged gentry.

The speech that vaulted Henry into political prominence came during a 1763 court case that was known as *Parson's Cause*. Voicing the resentment of ordinary Virginians against the clergy of the established Anglican Church, Henry advanced arguments well beyond the tenets of prevailing law. Instead, he successfully appealed to the jury with abstract—and inspiring—principles of local self-determination in the face of what he characterized as

monarchical tyranny. Henry's rhetoric foreshadowed positions he would soon take against presumptions of British power. Just two years later, as a new member of the House of Burgesses, he proposed what came to be known as the Virginia Resolves, instigating the colonies' unified opposition to the Stamp Act. Henry soon became one of the earliest advocates for American independence. His success as a lawyer and as a political speaker derived in no small part from his tactic of elevating specific issues into the transcendent realms of justice and virtue. He inspired his audience with a changed understanding of what was at stake, casting his arguments as matters of life and death.

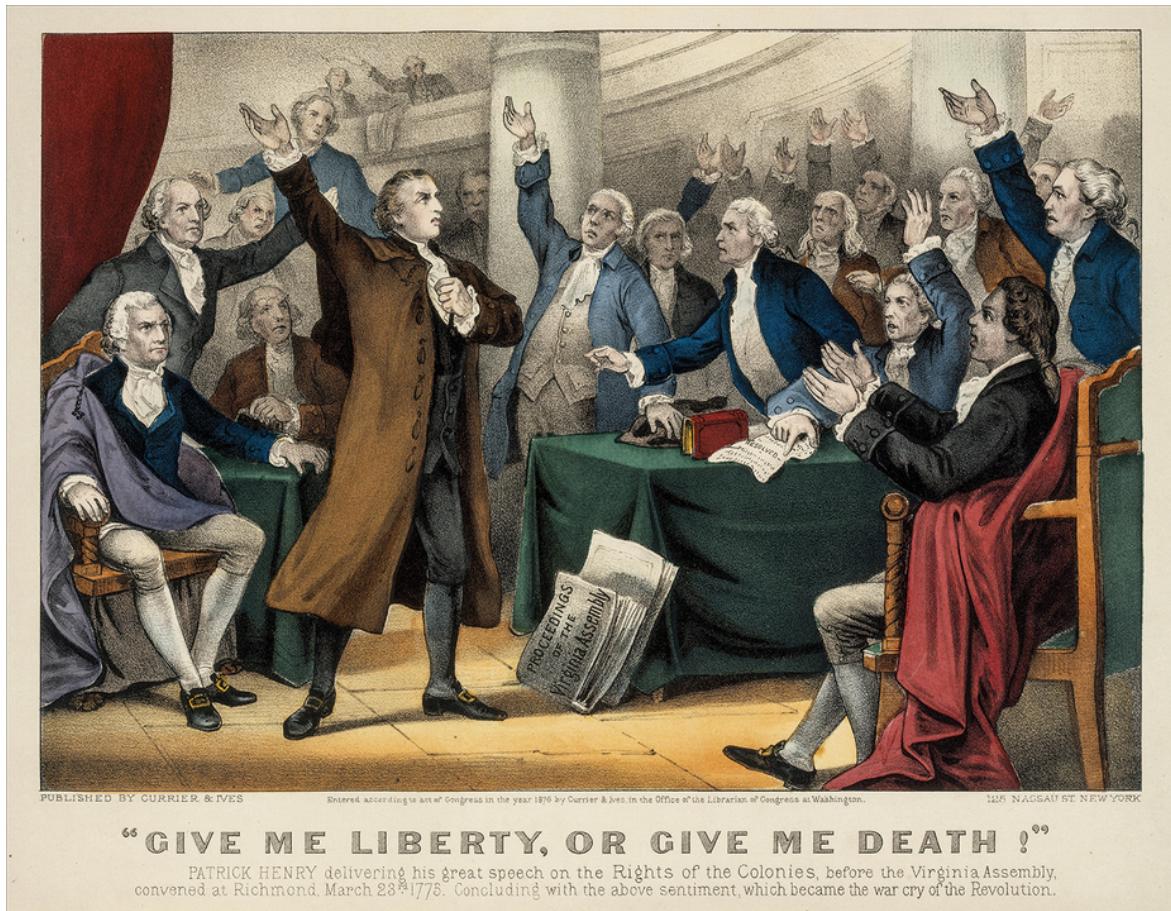
Henry delivered his legendary "Liberty or Death" speech on March 23, 1775, at the meeting of the Second Virginia Convention in Richmond's Henrico Parish Church. The colonies were already well on their way to war with England, which would begin just a month later at Lexington and Concord. The First Continental Congress had the previous fall created a Continental Association committed to resisting British incursions on American rights, and Virginians were assembling to prepare for the conflict that was coming to seem inevitable. The decision to meet in Richmond, a modest town 50 miles beyond the reach of the royal governor in the capital of Williamsburg, was itself an indication that the representatives recognized the boldness of their actions.

Yet many members of the Virginia gentry remained nervous about what lay ahead and uncertain whether preparation was simply prudent or would in itself escalate differences and make reconciliation with Britain impossible. These men of status, reputation, and means were not yet ready to risk their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. It would be Patrick Henry's job to get them there.

Some 120 Virginians, including such worthies as Jefferson and Washington, gathered on a hill high above the James River, crowding into the pewboxes of the wood-framed church, the largest structure available in a town that had only recently grown to 600 souls. After lengthy discussion ultimately approving the work of the Continental Congress, Henry rose on the fourth day of the convention to ask the clerk to read a set of resolutions proposing that "this Colony be immediately put into a posture of defence." The time had come for "embodying, arming, and disciplining" a Virginia militia, he

maintained. When cautious delegates objected to such a public declaration of military mobilization as unduly provocative, Henry responded with his famous speech.

The text that schoolchildren have declaimed and aspiring orators have studied since the early 19th century was derived from recollections that the distinguished jurist St. George Tucker provided to Wirt, Henry's biographer, sometime between 1805 and 1815. Tucker was present at the convention to hear Henry speak, and judged that "nothing has ever excelled it, and nothing has ever equaled it in its power and effect." The version he provided for Wirt and for posterity rests upon the accuracy of his memory of a day more than three decades earlier. Historians have sparred for more than two centuries now over the reliability of this rendering. William Safire, the late journalist, presidential speechwriter, and authority on language and rhetoric, offered the measured assessment of an informed critic: "My own judgment is that Patrick Henry made a rousing speech that day that did conclude with the line about liberty or death; that a generation later, to respond to the wishes of his friend writing a biography of the patriot, Judge Tucker recalled what he could and made up the rest. If that is so, Judge Tucker belongs among the ranks of history's best ghostwriters." A unique ghostwriter whose work followed rather than preceded the text.



March 1775: Patrick Henry gives his most famous speech, a month before the fighting at Lexington and Concord. (Sepia Times / Universal Images Group / Getty)

Henry customarily appeared in public in simple, sometimes even stained, rustic clothing—caring, a contemporary remarked, “very little about his personal appearance” and on occasion seeming as if he had come fresh from the hunt. For a gathering of the colony’s most prominent citizens, Henry likely chose more respectable clothing: a plain dark suit appropriate to his presentation of himself as an ordinary man. At odds with expectation and elite fashion, Henry usually wore a shabby, unpowdered wig. Observers described how Henry impressed audiences with his look of severity, his piercing blue-gray eyes in constant motion beneath thick, dark eyebrows. He held his long, thin frame in a pronounced stoop, and the tendons of his neck conveyed his intensity, standing out “like whipcords,” one witness recalled, as he began to speak.

Critics frequently commented on the “homespun” character of Henry’s language, and Jefferson dismissed Henry’s voice and pronunciation as common and unrefined. John Page, who served on Virginia’s Privy Council while Henry was governor and was later governor himself, confirmed that Henry habitually employed such coarse usages as *yearth* for “earth,” *naiteral* for “natural,” and *larnin* for “learning.” He used common words to appeal to common men.

Henry was known for beginning his speeches with understatement. It was his pattern to lull his listeners into moderating their expectations by holding back on his passion and rhetorical display. Henry opened his remarks to the 1775 convention calmly, with deference to “the very worthy gentlemen” who had just spoken in support of caution and with an apology for any disrespect his expression of differences with them might seem to imply. Henry’s words were intended to appear not only as a winning act of goodwill but also as a means of establishing his humbleness before the elite Virginians from whom he wished to distinguish himself.

Yet Henry’s humility was in no sense meekness. He intended to offer his sentiments “freely and without reserve,” and overcome any “fear of giving offense.” Silence and decorum, he insisted, would not be gestures of respect but acts of treason. Henry had quickly moved from polite deference to defining “the magnitude of the subject” at hand—“nothing less than a question of freedom or slavery.” He had transported his audience and his argument into the domain of the existential. For the members of the Virginia gentry who sat before him, there could be no more palpable contrast than the one they experienced and enforced every day: the rights they prized and enjoyed enabled by the bondage of the 40 percent of the Virginia population they enslaved. The very force of the paradox made freedom seem all the more precious. They lived as perpetual witnesses to the meaning of liberty denied.

From this opening, Henry pivoted to the framework of evangelical religion as he cautioned his audience about the dangers inherent in “illusions of hope.” They must be shaken out of their complacency to seize their own “temporal salvation.” Like [Jonathan Edwards](#), who used the image of a spider dangling over a flame to beseech his congregation to “consider the fearful danger you are in,” Henry invoked both Old Testament and New, the

Book of Jeremiah and the Gospel of Mark. Were his listeners like those who, “having eyes, see not, and having ears, hear not?” he demanded. He insisted that Virginians must act, “whatever anguish of spirit it may cost.” Don’t believe any conciliatory gestures, he warned, for Britain, like Judas, will deceive you: “Suffer not yourselves to be betrayed with a kiss.”

Henry issued a cascade of rhetorical questions—partly to clarify Britain’s nefarious intentions, but also, more important, to compel his listeners to interrogate their hopes and acknowledge them as false. We don’t know whether any of his questions evoked a verbal response from the delegates. Did they shout “No!” when Henry asked, “Are fleets and armies necessary to a work of love and reconciliation?” or “Shall we resort to entreaty and humble supplication?” Perhaps. The convention seemed to reflect something of the call-and-response characteristic of evangelical and enthusiastic religion. But Henry’s questions certainly demanded soul-searching from the individuals subjected to his challenge. With the rising cadence of his injunctions—“Ask yourselves ...”—he not only confronted but connected with each of his listeners. In the role of exhorter—a term often used in this era for evangelical preachers—he addressed his audience less as a convention than a congregation. Having destroyed the grounds for illusion—“Let us not, I beseech you, sir, deceive ourselves longer”—he proceeded to provide answers to his questions in a call to action: “We must fight.”

From the February 1888 issue: Patrick Henry

In a series of declarative phrases that recounted the fruitlessness of the colonies’ efforts to “avert the storm,” Henry made repeated use of anaphora and parallel constructions to unite his audience in the pounding rhythm of his words. “We have ... we have ... we have.” “If we ... if we ... if we.” As a young man, Henry had become known as an accomplished fiddler and often played at local dances, luring people onto the floor with his musical virtuosity. Now he invited the delegates to the Second Virginia Convention to join him as he performed his oratorical dance.

He returned to a barrage of questions that challenged his listeners to imagine the future—and the choice that was theirs to make. Would they wait, irresolute, “until our enemies have bound us hand and foot?” Or would they recognize that with God’s blessing “in the holy cause of liberty,” they would

be invincible? “War is inevitable”; the alternative to action was “chains and slavery.” Henry could have chosen no more threatening or motivating an image.

By establishing the premise that war was unavoidable and by raising the dread specter of enslavement as the inescapable outcome of inaction, Henry recast Virginians’ choice as no choice at all. Yet a few voices from the floor still called out “Peace! Peace!” Henry launched his peroration with a direct response, invoking the authority of Jeremiah: “Gentlemen may cry, ‘Peace! Peace!’—but there is no peace.” Henry embraced the full theatricality of his oratorical genius. First, exaggerating his characteristic stoop, he crossed his hands as if enchain. But then he suddenly propelled himself upward to his full height, hurling his arms apart as if throwing fetters to the winds. Henry was speaking with his body as well as his tongue. In triumphant tones, he declared: “I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty—” He paused to let the word echo. Then, raising his right hand as if he held a dagger, he cried, “Or give me death!” And he thrust his hand to his heart.

Some observers remembered a paper cutter in his hand, and one of whalebone with a very complex provenance is displayed as the object in question at the Patrick Henry National Memorial, a museum at his last home and grave site, in Charlotte County, Virginia. Whether or not he used a prop, Henry was able to transform a theoretical British threat into a real and tangible assault on his own body. Like a convert testifying at a revival gathering, Henry was making a bold personal and public commitment to his faith in the “holy cause of liberty.”

The delegates sat silent. Henry had defeated any rational basis for opposition to resistance by claiming that the war had already begun, and that there was thus no argument to be had at all. But their silence did not represent just a quiet acquiescence to the force of his reason. His words were too serious and of too much import to be greeted with cheers and huzzahs. The delegates were emotionally spent by what he had required of them—with his relentless interrogation of their courage and integrity, with his repeated reminders of the crucial line between freedom and slavery, and with the shock of the performance of a life-and-death moment before a staid deliberative body. Henry had made revolution seem not just inevitable but necessary; he had

converted the delegates to his cause, with all the risks and costs it would entail. They now had the privilege and burden of a new and daunting responsibility. In their silence, they recognized that sobering reality—and the dangerous path before them.

A little more than a year after Henry inspired and propelled Americans into military conflict, the “thirteen united States” proclaimed themselves a nation. The [Declaration of Independence](#) was put to a vote of the Continental Congress not as the handwritten parchment manuscript we can all see in our mind’s eye. It was written to be read aloud; Thomas Jefferson marked the document to indicate his desired phrasing and pauses. The Declaration was first delivered as a speech.

Speech caused and then defined the Revolution. Speech became the engineer of consent. A trope emerged in the early years after the Revolution: [describing the United States as](#) a nation “spoken into existence.”

More than a century ago, the eminent historian Carl Becker defined the stakes of the American Revolution. The two paramount issues, he wrote, were the question of home rule (separation from Britain) and the question of who should rule at home (the character of a new American government). Patrick Henry’s oratory represented the intersection—and apotheosis—of these two imperatives. There was no more eloquent advocate for independence. But Henry’s ability to galvanize support for the American cause rested on his success in rousing those who had not before been welcomed as full participants in political discourse and action. His oratory embodied the transfer of authority not just away from the King, but into the hands of the newly created citizens who were soon to be promised that all were created equal. Americans would not of course be even politically equal for many generations to come. Property ownership as a requirement for voting was only gradually abolished in the years leading up to the Civil War; women did not gain the right to vote for more than a century; African Americans were not truly enfranchised until the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Yet Henry’s oratory set the emerging nation on a path toward these unfolding freedoms. His words—his appeal to heart as well as mind, to music as well as reason, to the transcendent as well as the temporal—made revolution seem imperative. The new nation would have no king, no

standing armies to enforce the government's will. In 1806, John Quincy Adams observed that power and authority in the new American nation rested on the “arms” of “persuasion.” Patrick Henry was the Revolution’s consummate persuader.

This article appears in the [November 2025](#) print edition with the headline “No One Gave a Speech Like Patrick Henry.”

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Why Concord?

The geological origins of the American Revolution

by Robert A. Gross, Robert M. Thorson



Woods along the path of the British retreat from Concord to Boston

Concord, Massachusetts, 18 miles northwest of Boston, was the starting point for the War of Independence. On April 19, 1775, militia and minutemen from Concord and neighboring towns [clashed with British regulars](#) at the Old North Bridge and forced a bloody retreat by the King's men back to safety in Boston. Some 4,000 provincials from 30 towns answered the call to arms. Concord claimed precedence as the site of THE FIRST FORCIBLE RESISTANCE TO BRITISH AGGRESSION, the words

inscribed on the town's 1836 monument to the battle (to the enduring resentment of nearby Lexington, which actually suffered the first American deaths that day). Concord's boast took hold thanks to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who in 1837 portrayed the brief skirmish at the bridge as "the shot heard round the world." That moment has been a key to local identity ever since.

Concord is widely known for another aspect of its history: It is intimately associated with the Transcendentalist movement in the quarter century before the Civil War. That distinction, too, it owes to Emerson. Born and raised in Boston, the most prominent public intellectual of Civil War America was the scion of six generations of New England divines, going back to Concord's founding minister. In 1835, at age 32, Emerson returned to "the quiet fields of my fathers," and from that ancestral base forged his career as a lecturer in Boston and beyond. He quickly became known as an eloquent voice for a new philosophy—calling on Americans to shed outmoded ways of thinking rooted in the colonial and British past and to put their trust in nature and in themselves. Partaking, as he saw it, of a divinity running through all Creation, Americans had an unprecedented opportunity to build an original culture on the principles of democracy, equality, and individual freedom. Emerson's project was to unleash this infinite force.

In Concord, Emerson attracted a coterie of sympathetic souls who shared his vision, including Henry David Thoreau, who, as the author of *Walden* and "Civil Disobedience," would ultimately surpass Emerson in renown. As the town gained literary stature, *Concord* became a byword for the philosophical movement it hosted. Henry Adams called Transcendentalism "the Concord Church." Emerson projected his influence by means of books and lectures. He was among the founders of *The Atlantic*, [calling in its pages for the abolition of slavery](#) (and, a few months later, [mourning the death of Thoreau](#)). Concord itself emerged, in the words of Henry James, as "the biggest little place in America."

Why Concord? How did a small town of some 2,200 inhabitants in 1860 become a cradle of not one but two revolutions? The best-known explanations distort the town's history while inflating its self-regard. One view, popularized by Van Wyck Brooks's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Flowering of New England* (1936), emphasizes Concord's bucolic beauty, agricultural economy, and limited industrial development. It was a place fit

for poets and philosophers, where nature and man came together in rare harmony. A second view, advanced by the Yale historian Ralph Henry Gabriel in 1940, holds that the Transcendentalists were the intellectual heirs of the minutemen. By challenging the materialism of business and politics and by insisting on the ideals of a democratic faith, Gabriel argued, Emerson and Thoreau were “carrying on the fight which had been started by farmers at the bridge.”

It’s no wonder that locals and tourists alike continue to indulge such explanations. An attractive civic identity can brand a town and bring in business; ironically, Concord’s reputation as a place of principle, carrying the torch of democratic ideals, serves just this purpose. Still, as history, the public image of the Transcendentalists as heirs of the minutemen has little foundation. The minutemen had fought for collective liberty, the communal right to govern themselves and uphold a way of life going back to the Puritan founders. Transcendentalists, by contrast, stressed individual rights in a break with tradition. Forsake inherited institutions and involuntary associations, Emerson urged. [“Trust thyself”](#) was his strategy for changing times.



A reconstruction of Concord's Old North Bridge, where militia and minutemen forced British soldiers to retreat on April 19, 1775. (Amani Willett for *The Atlantic*)

The town of Concord was not some sheltered enclave, slumbering through the revolutions of the age. In the Transcendentalist era, the community was economically dynamic, religiously diverse, racially heterogeneous, class-stratified, politically divided, and receptive to social and political reform. It stood in the mainstream of antebellum America. It offered no asylum from change.

It's easy to overstate the uniqueness of Concord in politics as well as culture. Why was the town at the forefront of the Revolution? Not because it was more militant than most. In the opposition to British taxes and "tyranny," it took its time, reluctant to unsettle authority and break with the Crown. Then again, so did most towns in Massachusetts, until Britain revoked the colony's provincial charter and assailed local self-government. Moderation

made Concord a safe place to store military supplies; its leaders were unlikely to act rashly and precipitate a war. So did its distance from Boston and its pivotal place on the Massachusetts road network. The town was a market center, a seat of courts, and a staging ground for military expeditions —such as the march to Boston in [1689 to overthrow](#) the authoritarian royal governor, Edmund Andros. But other towns, such as Weston and Worcester, could have performed a similar service in 1775.

As for Concord's status as the center of Transcendentalism, the claim is inflated. The movement drew support across the Boston area.

Transcendentalists preached from Unitarian pulpits not only in Boston but also in nearby towns such as Watertown, Arlington, and Lexington. So Concord was not alone: Its citizens experienced the same forces unsettling life all over Massachusetts. Its writers just happened to address that social transformation with a vision of nature and the self so compelling that Concord became the symbolic rather than literal center of Transcendentalism.

[From the December 2021 issue: Emerson didn't practice the self-reliance he preached](#)

In one key respect, though, Concord truly was unique. In 1635, when the Massachusetts General Court authorized the founding of the town, it possessed a natural setting with distinct advantages replicated nowhere else in New England. Over millennia, the forces of geology had fashioned a physical landscape that the Native inhabitants had improved to sustain their way of life, and had unwittingly made ready for appropriation by the newcomers from across the sea. These resources drew pioneers into the interior, well beyond the seaboard, for the first time, and enabled the creation of new social and intellectual landscapes. Nature blessed Concord from the start. Emerson rightly invoked the universal currents of being, whose natural laws, as he saw it, were the same in his era as at the beginning of time.

The Concord River runs north, rather than southeasterly down the regional slope toward the sea. When the edge of the great ice sheet began to retreat from the area about 17,000 years ago, the Concord River was dammed up by the ice to create a ribbon-shaped glacial lake with a muddy bottom.

Eventually the lake drained away, allowing the Concord River to cut an inner valley beneath a moist and fertile lowland.

This process set the stage for the creation of what the Indigenous Massachusett, Nipmuc, and Pawtucket peoples called Musketaquid, meaning “grass-ground river,” a marsh about 20 miles long and so flat and so uninterrupted that Thoreau [skated the entire round-trip](#) distance one freezing day—January 31, 1855. The languid stream passed through broad meadows to create a northern version of the Everglades (without the alligators). Nathaniel Hawthorne lived along the bank for three weeks before he discerned which way the river flowed.

This riparian ecology attracted colonists: Concord became the first English town in North America above tidewater, beyond the sight and scent of the sea. Here the lush growth of freshwater hay would undergird a system of English husbandry dependent on livestock. Here migrating shad, herring, and salmon thrived in the aquatic richness, furnishing plentiful protein sources, vitamins, and minerals. Here the firm, muddy banks made an ideal habitat for the freshwater mussels on which other animals depended: muskrat, otters, turtles, human beings. On July 3, 1852, Thoreau estimated that more than 16,335 freshwater clams lay along 330 feet of the riverbank. Migrating waterfowl followed the meadows. Songbirds nested along their edges.

Transplanting Old World methods, the founders of Concord harvested natural hay in its Great Meadow, which was annually enriched with nutrients by flooding. Thoreau gazed at the scene and imagined a river as fertile and ancient as the Nile. “It will be Grass-ground River as long as grass grows and water runs here,” he predicted in the [opening lines of his first book](#), *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849). Above the meadow stood the Great Field, an unusually flat, loamy, well-drained terrace that the Native people had long cleared for cultivation, using fish for fertilizer. For the colonists, this was a place to grow cereal grains, including the novel crop of Indian corn, fertilized by manure from cattle fed on hay from the Great Meadow. Above the Great Field was a broad expanse of fairly level habitable land covered by old-growth forest. This extensive lowland gave inhabitants room to spread out on mostly stone-free soils, unlike so much of New England, and create productive farms.

Concord lies at the midpoint of Musketaquid, a place where the Assabet River, a typical midsize New England stream, enters from the west to bisect the ribbon of meadowland, creating the Sudbury River to the south and the Concord River to the north. It's no accident that Concord village was settled in this strategic spot, where three rivers touch—the *axis mundi* of a most unusual valley.

Eighteen miles. That's the distance from Boston Harbor to Concord village. A regiment of British soldiers walked it on their ill-fated expedition. In October 1833, Thoreau hiked the route to Concord from his Harvard dormitory in Cambridge, blistering his feet in the process. Eighteen miles was far enough from the capital to serve as the primary depot of provincial military stores; it made for a long march in the dead of night through hostile countryside, as the British regulars learned to their sorrow. In times of peace, Concord could take advantage of its favorable location—far enough from more urban coastal settlements to cultivate a rural identity centered on agriculture, but close enough to enjoy proximity to educational institutions, literary culture, markets and wharves, and the statehouse. Concord became a right-size county seat, its central village of shops, taverns, courthouse, and meetinghouse surrounded by farms no more than a few minutes' walk in any direction.

The physical separation between Boston and Concord involves more than the linear distance between two points. The population centers occupy different watersheds—the Charles River watershed to the east and the Concord River watershed to the west. In fact, they lie on different bedrock terranes that originated in different places in different eras. The terrane boundary coincides with the Bloody Bluff fault, named for a rocky notch where British troops were trapped by ferocious provincial fire. Here the land leans toward the security of the sea. To the west, it leans toward a hinterland where pioneering residents looked to one another for community support. Without the Lexington Road and its regular stagecoach traffic, 18th-century Concord would have remained an agricultural village. Instead, it became a prominent node in an expanding trade network. The significance of the watershed divide between country and city diminished only after the Fitchburg Railroad reached Concord in 1844.





Top: The woods surrounding Walden Pond. *Bottom:* Concord's Great Meadow. The construction of a railroad in 1844 made the town a day-trip destination for middle-class urbanites. (Amani Willett for *The Atlantic*)

Before steam power and the internal combustion engine, the main source of mechanical power in Concord derived from flowing water. Harnessing hydropower required the construction of a dam, behind which a reservoir filled up with streamflow. For much of its history, Concord village was defined by a man-made pond, the filling of which was the counterpart to our putting fuel in a tank or recharging a battery.

At Concord's beginning, in the 1630s, its settlers clustered in a central village to take advantage of the waterpower of Mill Brook. A dam was built on the stream in a constricted space—the site of an abandoned fishing weir put in place by Indigenous occupants to capture the seasonal runs of shad and salmon coming upstream to spawn. The mill dam was sufficient for two

centuries to power a diversity of small-scale manufacturing enterprises, including grist- and sawmills and blacksmith shops, but it was not enough to expand and compete even with the small factory cities west of Musketaquid, such as nearby Maynard and Stow, not to mention the industrial behemoths Lowell and Lawrence to the north. The enduring legacy of Mill Brook was to foster the growth of a central village in a colony where dispersed residences became the norm. Together with the Great Field and Great Meadow, the nucleated village of Concord, where people settled thickly under the watchful eyes of neighbors, manifested the Puritan ideal of community on the ground.

Above the marshy meadows of Musketaquid, but below the fairly level wooded land over which Concord center sprawled, is a discrete alluvial floodplain dominated by river-transported silt and sand. And where this alluvium is absent, the meadows have low, natural-edging levees, high and dry enough to provide a habitat for a beautiful “gallery” forest fringing all three rivers on both sides. This extensive strip of trees constituted a buffer zone between the deforested open landscape of farms, fields, and pastures and the never-forested wetland of meadows and streams. As Thoreau floated down the rivers and walked along their banks, he delighted in this woodland composed not of tall pine and hickory, but of willow, alder, birch, red maple, and other species.



Ralph Waldo Emerson's home in Concord, and the nature reflected in its window (Amani Willett for *The Atlantic*)

While drafting *Nature* from his second-floor study in the Old Manse—the house near Old North Bridge later occupied by Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne—Emerson would look out over a field and stone walls toward a gallery forest on both sides of the Concord River. Thoreau's views, when he traveled the river by boat, skates, or snowshoes, were flanked by woods on both sides. Owing to its hydrology, Concord's gallery forest persisted, even during the peak deforestation of the mid-19th century, when forest cover was reduced to about 10 percent of the town's land area.

Along the southern edge of Concord lies an elevated tract of droughty, infertile, and often bumpy land that remained unfit for development well into the 20th century. The uphill climb to that tract, [known as Brister's Hill](#) for a once-enslaved Black man who made his residence there as a free man, is the north-facing escarpment of a forested plateau known as Walden Woods. Composed mainly of river gravel and sand, this upland is an ancient glacial delta that built outward over buried blocks of stagnant glacial ice. When those blocks later melted underground, the result was a chain of sinkhole lakes and ponds called kettles. The largest and purest of these is Walden Pond, the deepest lake in Massachusetts.

For the Transcendentalists of the 1830s and '40s, Walden Pond served as a source of inspiration within an easy walk of Emerson's parlor. When Thoreau lived there in the mid-1840s, the lake became the imagined interlocutor for his philosophical musings—"Walden, is it you?"—and a powerful symbol of the unity of nature. Though the still-beautiful Concord River had been greatly changed by this time, Walden Pond, "earth's eye," became Thoreau's exemplar of purity and eternity in a landscape denuded of trees and drained of its wetlands.

But the commercialism and superficial mass culture that dismayed Emerson and outraged Thoreau intruded even here. An entrepreneurial agent for the Fitchburg Railroad built an amusement park at "Lake Walden." In the Gilded Age, it became a day trip by train for middle-class urbanites and poor children from the Boston tenements. Eventually, the Emerson family acquired the bulk of the woodland surrounding the pond and donated it for public use.

Concord is not unique in having one or more beautiful lakes within its borders. What makes it singular is that Thoreau's book of the place made the place of the book world-famous. *Walden* became the foundational text for the aesthetic strand of the American environmental movement. Its emphasis on nature's beauty and the spiritual inspiration that could be enjoyed at a humble kettle pond presented a pointed contrast to the utilitarian strand of the movement pioneered by George Perkins Marsh, the author of *Man and Nature* (1864), who sought to conserve nature for economic purposes. Of course, unwittingly, Thoreau's classic also enhanced the tourist trade.

In the 20th century, Concord, a town whose motto at times could be "Resisting change since 1775," became a progressive leader on environmental and sustainability issues. Its otherwise inauspicious lake is now a global symbol and a destination for admirers of Thoreau. The more than [160,000 international pilgrims](#) who come to visit every year, together with the attentions of nearby residents, threaten to love the pond and woods to death. It has been an ongoing political struggle to preserve Walden as it was in Thoreau's day—an admittedly impossible task. Attempting to live up to that responsibility earned Concord acclaim across the world, notwithstanding the town's decision in 1958 to site the town landfill within 800 feet of the lake—a choice considered temporary at the time and that local activists are now seeking to mitigate.

Not everyone has appreciated the distinct landscape created by Concord's geological history. In 1844, Margaret Fuller accused Emerson of settling for a placid suburban existence. A noble soul like his, she believed, required a sublime setting—dazzling waterfalls and mountain peaks—rather than the "poor cold low life" of Concord. Defensively, the country gentleman counted his blessings. If the town lacked "the thickets of the forest and the fatigues of mountains," it was easy to reach and traverse. It was close enough to the city to attract big-name lecturers and performers, and yet distant enough to possess "the grand features of nature."



More than 160,000 pilgrims from around the globe visit Walden Pond each year. (Amani Willett for *The Atlantic*)

Thoreau put the matter succinctly: Wildness lies all around us, and in it is “the preservation of the world.” Could not every town, he proposed, create a park “or rather a primitive forest of five hundred or a thousand acres, where a stick should never be cut for fuel,” but be “a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation”? His neighbors took the suggestion to heart. In the 160-plus years since his death, they preserved a sizable portion of the town’s farms, forests, and wetlands from economic development. Of Concord’s nearly 16,200 acres of land, roughly 6,120 acres, or 38 percent, are now “permanently protected open space,” according to a 2015 town plan. Thoreau’s own close studies of natural phenomena, including his phenological notes on seasonal events—when plants leaf, for example, and when birds migrate, and when the river ice breaks up—are now

indispensable records with which scientists assess the advance and toll of climate change today.

Yet the challenge to care for that environmental heritage is ongoing. Concord is not frozen in time. It is an active, changing community facing unrelenting pressures for economic development—for instance, controversial proposals for a cell tower in Walden Woods and for expanded private-jet flights from nearby Hanscom Field. Thoreau witnessed the same root conflict. With geology emerging as a science in his time, he intuited that nature was as subject to change as human society; it was no fixed backdrop.

For all our extraordinary human achievements, we remain earthlings. Rocks and minerals give rise to ecosystems, upon which human cultures are dependent. That's the direction of human history in deep time: up from the ground. In our unprecedented modern geological epoch, the aptly named Anthropocene, human beings have become the dominant geological agents, thanks to the power of fossil fuels—also up from the ground, but exhaustible and not enduring. That change has its origins in the Industrial Revolution, against whose excesses the Transcendentalists warned.

On April 19, 2025, some 70,000 people converged on Concord to celebrate [the 250th anniversary](#) of the battle that started it all. Marching in the parade were representatives from some of the 97 communities in the United States that take their name from the birthplace of the Revolution. The celebrations proved to be patriotic as well as inclusive, paying tribute to the heritage of liberty and self-government that is the legacy of the New England town. They were also surprisingly cheerful for our polarized time, though a good many participants did carry signs inspired by the minutemen: NO KING THEN, NO KING NOW.

Every place is unique because every place is the contingent outcome of its own inescapable cascade of events—from rock to ecosystem to culture. Concord was lucky in its location, inheriting advantages from natural landscape and history on which its inhabitants could build a sense of place and community. It was a fierce determination to defend that community, with its tradition of town-meeting government, that inspired the resistance to the British regulars. The location of the Old North Bridge at a bedrock-anchored narrows between two large meadows made a logical place for the

shot heard round the world. The Battle Road that led to it was flanked by stone walls and trees lining the edges of fields, at times narrowing to pass over streams or curving sharply to follow landforms. The character of the Concord fight owed much to geology. It helps explain the rout of the redcoats—and the ensuing popular confidence in the possibility of a military victory that lay eight years ahead.

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What We Learned Filming The American Revolution

The co-directors of the new PBS series describe how they made a documentary about a war distant in time and shrouded in myth.

by Ken Burns, Sarah Botstein, David Schmidt



Filming at George Washington's headquarters at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, where the Continental Army endured a brutal winter (The American Revolution Film Project / Florentine Films / Megan Ruffe)

On June 24, 1778, [a total solar eclipse covered](#) a wide swath of North America—from the Pacific Coast of Mexico to Virginia’s Eastern Shore. The eclipse occurred just a few days before the Battle of Monmouth, when George Washington’s Continental Army engaged General Sir Henry Clinton’s British Army—a standoff that nevertheless allowed the Patriots to claim a much-needed victory. The British, meanwhile, continued their retreat from Philadelphia to New York City. We wanted to depict this eclipse for our series [*The American Revolution*](#), and in this we had a stroke of luck: There would be a total solar eclipse across much of North America on April 8, 2024.

Filming the eclipse would be technically complicated, and if we were hampered by clouds or anything else—if we failed to get the shot—there could be no second take. (The next such eclipse in the United States will occur in 2044.) Our crew headed north from New York City, armed with four cameras. Three would be pointed at the sky and the fourth at the sun’s reflection on water. The exposure was going to change wildly in the course of the eclipse, and totality would last only a few minutes. We had intended to film in western New York, in what had been Seneca Country in 1778. But changing weather forecasts pushed us to consider other locations, and we ended up far to the east, in the Adirondacks. Somehow, everything worked out, and the footage we got is some of the most stunning camerawork in the series.

Challenging though it was, filming the eclipse was in one sense easy: We knew when and where it was going to happen, and we knew the effect would be powerful. Endeavoring to make a 12-hour documentary on a subject that predates the invention of photography, and whose sources are written in an 18th-century vernacular, was in other respects a daunting mission. For our series on World War II and the Vietnam War, we could talk with living witnesses and access archival footage. We had tens of thousands of photographs from the Civil War. The American Revolution had none of those elements.

Read: Ken Burns tells America's history through six photographs

Our subject was also complicated by the myths that enveloped it. Generations of Americans have wrestled with the meaning and reality of the American Revolution, our national origin story. Even in 1783, John Adams knew how hard it would be to tell that story. “It would require the whole of the longest Life,” he warned a French historian, “to assemble from all the Nations and Parts of the Globe” all of the documentary materials needed “to form a compleat History of the American War, because it is nearly the History of Mankind for the whole Epocha of it.” The French historian never wrote the book.

As the historian Maya Jasanoff points out in the film, coming to terms with the Revolutionary War is an almost impossible task. The stakes are so high, the events so complex, the mythology so entrenched, “that it has made the way that Americans think about this period very unreal and detached.”

The challenges of making the documentary, by contrast, were quite concrete. We tried to capture the lives of the millions of people the Revolution affected—to make the uncertainties of their time palpable and vivid, even though we all know the outcome, and to represent faithfully the circumstances in which so many people chose to fight for and against the Revolution. This work led us to new perspectives on the fundamental questions about the founding: What is the role of government? What responsibilities come with the privilege of citizenship? What would I be willing to risk in the service of my country and my principles? What am I willing to die for?

By January 2024, Philadelphia had gone almost two years without an inch of snow on a single day. For many people, this was a welcome relief. For our team, it was a big problem. The Pennsylvania State House (now Independence Hall) was the Patriot seat of government for much of the war, and Congress stayed in session there through several winters. We had already filmed winter scenes in Deerfield, Massachusetts; Valley Forge, Pennsylvania; and Ticonderoga, New York, among other locales. But the winters of the Revolution were notoriously harsh, and the film wouldn’t be complete without more snow.

With a major winter storm expected to hit the East Coast from the Chesapeake Bay to the Canadian border on Martin Luther King Jr. Day and the following Tuesday, we quickly mobilized. There was an obstacle: Historic sites would be closed for the long weekend, and their staff hard to reach. We had to plan everything overnight, get permits ironed out, and send four camera crews in four different directions: to Providence, Rhode Island; Charlestown, New Hampshire; Tivoli, New York; and Philadelphia.

We came back with beautiful footage—and a realization. The East Coast's ever-changing, unpredictable climate was at times our most unanticipated and vexing adversary in bringing the story of the Revolution to life. Even with all the benefits of modern weather forecasting, along with plowed roads and airport deicing, we were still at its mercy. That constant challenge made what Washington and the American soldiers faced during their war all the more remarkable to consider. Weather guided the course of the Revolution far more than it guided our production.

[Eliot A. Cohen: The secret of George Washington's revolutionary success](#)

“Turns of weather that we know are coming for weeks on end hit the people of the 18th century completely by surprise,” the writer Nathaniel Philbrick explains. “They’re not just fighting each other. In a profound way, they are fighting the American climate and geography and topography.”

Weather became an unexpected and unheralded character in deciding battle after battle: What an American private called [an “outrageous” storm](#) contributed to the Continental Army’s doomed assault on Quebec City in 1775; what the historian Rick Atkinson describes as a “providential fog” saved Washington’s army by allowing it to escape to Manhattan after the disastrous Battle of Long Island in 1776.

Weather was not the only unpredictable natural force at play. From 1775 to 1783, far more people succumbed to disease than died in combat. Typhus, typhoid, dysentery, and, worst of all, smallpox—that “dread disease of humanity,” as the historian Colin G. Calloway calls it—incubated in fetid army camps before spreading across the continent. Even [people far from the battlefield](#)—on the Pacific Coast, in Spanish Mexico, and in the Caribbean

—suffered from the war through famine or epidemic. Few in North America were untouched by the Revolution.

The process of filmmaking brought an intimate understanding of geography as well as weather. Archival maps are works of art, and we use many in the film. They told us where troops were positioned and what commanders were thinking as they drew up their plans; they also staggered us with their beauty. Those maps marked how battles played out and where campaigns went wrong. They recorded patterns of settlement and made wildly speculative claims to western lands. But we had to be careful about how we used them, because those maps reflected their makers' point of view. Sometimes cartographers were working with bad information, and sometimes they intentionally misrepresented reality. "Maps at the time show the colonies extending well into the interior," the scholar Maggie Blackhawk points out. "They're aspirational, in many ways. They're an argument rather than a conclusion."

To account for discrepancies in the cartographic record, we created more than 100 new maps for the series and spent years ensuring their accuracy. The challenges were many; far more than borders have been altered since 1775. Dams have redirected waterways, and rivers have changed course all on their own. Kaskaskia, Illinois, for instance, today lies on the western side of the Mississippi River, the opposite bank from where it stood when George Rogers Clark claimed it for the United States, in 1778. Coastal cities have spent the centuries reclaiming land by filling in marshes. A bird's-eye view of 21st-century Boston does not much resemble [one from the Revolutionary period](#), when the Back Bay was still a bay. Major arteries on the modern map, such as the Erie Canal, hadn't yet been dug, so we had to erase them.

Though we expected to have little to go on when recharting 18th-century eastern North America, old maps and other documentation gave us hundreds of places where people lived in 1775. But amassing those data from various sources and plotting them accurately on our new maps was a much bigger undertaking than we had imagined. North America changed rapidly in the second half of the 18th century as more people arrived from Europe or were taken forcibly from Africa and the settler population pushed farther into Indian Country. We hired the geographer Charles E. Frye, who scanned data from hundreds of archival maps and placed them over modern maps based

on satellite imagery, correcting for changes in topography and hydrography, as well as the imprecision of the original mapmakers. Our resulting maps show North America as it was. The 13 colonies have no drawn western borders, reflecting ongoing boundary disputes and a moving line of settlement. Native nations across the continent, and especially those that shared a frontier with the early United States, are prominently marked, while Cherokee, Shawnee, Delaware, and Haudenosaunee towns have as visible a place as many settler towns in Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Quebec.

Lindsay Chervinsky: The ‘dirty and nasty people’ who became Americans

At the time of the Revolution, “70–80 percent of the continent is still controlled by Indigenous people—politically, economically, and militarily,” the historian Michael Witgen notes. “It’s not a separate place. It’s not this timeless space where Native people are sort of existing in harmony with nature and that they have no interest in the outside world. Native people want the good stuff that Europeans are bringing. Europeans want the wealth that they can get from Native people. Native powers are as important to the global market economy as a place like Virginia or a place like New York.”

“The small scale of our maps deceived us,” [a Londoner wrote](#) as the war entered its third year, “and, as the word ‘America’ takes up no more room than the word ‘Yorkshire,’ we seem to think the territories they represent are much of the same bigness, though Charleston is as far from Boston as London from Venice.” The Londoner drew an unwelcome conclusion: “We have undertaken a war against farmers and farmhouses, scattered through a wild waste of continent.”

Armies carried their destruction across the former colonies, over the mountains to Cherokee and Haudenosaunee lands, onto the Great Lakes and the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, south along the Gulf Coast, into Florida, and north to Canada. After France and later Spain and the Netherlands entered the war with Great Britain, navies brought it to the West Indies, Western Europe, the Mediterranean, even India.

The American Revolution was a world war fought in the age of sail. Thousands of miles separated its theaters of action, and coordinating campaigns at that distance proved a nightmare. The post roads and sea lanes,

typical avenues of communication in peacetime, were under constant threat during the war. Many letters were intercepted or lost. Even unimpeded transmissions could carry orders only as fast as the fastest horse or the quickest ship. It took weeks at best for the British high command in London to get news from North America, and their orders heading west, unaided by the Gulf Stream, took even longer. In 1775, people in England didn't even know there was a war until 40 days after "the shot heard round the world."

In 1781, American and French armies had to walk hundreds of miles in the heat of summer to get from Westchester County, New York, to Yorktown, Virginia. "It's hot and humid, and, as the French write, 'infested by mosquitos,'" the historian Iris de Rode observes. "They have to create bridges. They have to get obstacles out of the way. And we're not talking just about men marching. We have a lot of animals behind them. In order to not walk in the middle of the day, they start in the middle of the night. So it's pitch-dark. You're walking on little paths, probably quite muddy. And you just walk."

The North American landscape itself became a star of the series. We filmed for 165 days at more than 150 locations in and outside the original 13 colonies, in every season, at every time of day, and from every vantage. We often reduce the East Coast to the I-95 corridor and easily dismiss its natural beauty—particularly within the megalopolis of asphalt, concrete, and steel between the Potomac and Merrimack Rivers. It's undeniable that we have paved over much of our past, but there's still grandeur to see, and we tried to capture as much of it as we could with our cameras. Filming pine trees on Maine's seacoast and palmettos off Charleston left us with stark reminders of North America's botanical diversity as well as its vastness.

The true protagonists of our series are, of course, the people who experienced the war, and we devoted much of our research to understanding the texture of their lives. There are oil-on-canvas portraits from the period, but they depict only a very small subset of society, people who had the time to sit for a painting and the means to pay for one. Because so few portraits were made, we can't know what most people looked like. But there's no shortage of first-person testimony from the Revolution. Even if someone's likeness died with them, their writing may have survived. Several times

throughout the series, we put handwriting on the screen as evidence that these lesser-known characters had been alive too.

We pored over papers at historical societies, combed through old newspapers, exhausted museum catalogs. We got involved with online ancestry forums, stalked auction houses, cold-called collectors. Some of the portraits in our film are in private hands and haven't been on public display in decades, including understandably rare portraits of Benedict Arnold, a figure shunned by postwar American artists.

The central question was this: How could we understand the experiences of people who lived through our founding—not from our own perspective, but from theirs? “War in itself, however distant, is indeed terrible,” [16-year-old Betsy Ambler, of Yorktown, wrote](#) when the British army invaded Virginia in 1781. “But when brought to our very doors—when those we most love are personally engaged in it, when our friends and neighbors are exposed to its ravages, when we know assuredly that without sacrificing many dear to us as our own lives, our country must remain subject to British tyranny—the reflection is indeed overwhelming.” We wanted the film to bring the audience closer to the reality of how North America felt and looked and sounded to the men, women, and children who waged and witnessed this war. These were real people, with real hopes and fears not so different from our own.

[Read: A view of American history that leads to one conclusion](#)

The commitment of reenactors and historical interpreters to this project was crucial. Their period-perfect, handsewn clothes are just the start. They have spent countless hours researching the lives of the people they give over their weekends to portraying. We were with reenactors on the battlefield, with blacksmiths at their forge, with weavers at their loom—anywhere our cameras could capture the scale of the war effort required to win independence. We worked with several reenactor groups throughout production, but [the Jersey Greys](#) most of all. They agreed to drill for us at night in a snowstorm, to march through deep mud, and to build what they believe to be the largest redoubt in North America, which gave us insight into how much work went into being a soldier.

Thousands of civilians followed armies during the Revolution. The soldiers were willing to cook food or mend clothes, but laundry, we learned, was mostly women's work. And clean clothes were a necessity, given the ever-present threat of disease. We filmed reenactors washing bloody garments, which is one of the very first shots in the first episode, and we return to that imagery at a key point in the series. "Imagine what a battlefield looks like after a battle," the historian Kathleen DuVal says. "It has a lot of bodies. It has a lot of blood and gore. And it was the job of women to go in and take care of those bodies, to clean them up, to identify them, if they could, to see over the burial of bodies. Part of the work of war is dealing with death."

The bloody civil war at the heart of the Revolutionary story was far beyond what we had previously appreciated. "The United States came out of violence," Maya Jasanoff observes. Those seven words ought to be self-evident; a war is a war, after all. And yet, welcoming that idea can shock the system because our popular conception of the American Revolution is so often encased in bloodless, gallant myth. The real Revolution was a savage civil war: eight years of uncertainty, brutality, and terror that tore communities apart and left tremendous loss in their aftermath. That doesn't in any way diminish its inspiring outcome; it only underscores how much people were willing to sacrifice to create the United States.

One of the most astonishing aspects of the Revolutionary War, the historian Christopher L. Brown says, "is that you had such different places come together as one nation. I'm not sure there is a state, anywhere in the world, in the late 18th century, that has as wide variety of people who inhabit it." And so, the nation "ends up cohering, not around culture, not around religion, not around ancient history. It was coming together around a set of purposes and ideals for one common cause."

When the Revolution began, many American rebels had no intention of breaking with the British empire. They still wanted Parliament to leave them alone, to treat them with the same "salutary neglect" that had allowed previous generations of American colonists to flourish. Most of them still wanted to remain subjects of the British King. War would change that. To win, the Patriots would have to unite the colonies, declare American independence, promise more political participation to grow their coalition, secure French support, and ultimately create a government strong enough to

function without jeopardizing individual rights and liberties. None of that was on the table from the start. The United States that emerged from the war was a nation no one could have imagined before the shooting began in April 1775.

The war changed how Americans thought about themselves, their connections with one another, and their relationship to their government. Understanding that—understanding the circumstances under which the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights were created—only reinforces the vitality of those founding documents.

By the end of the American Revolution, Betsy Ambler had lived for years as a refugee and lost her hometown forever. “The War,” she later remembered, “tho’ it was to involve my immediate family in poverty and perplexity of every kind was in the end to lay the foundation of independence and prosperity for my Country, and what sacrifice would not an American, a Virginian, at the earliest age have made for so desirable an end?”

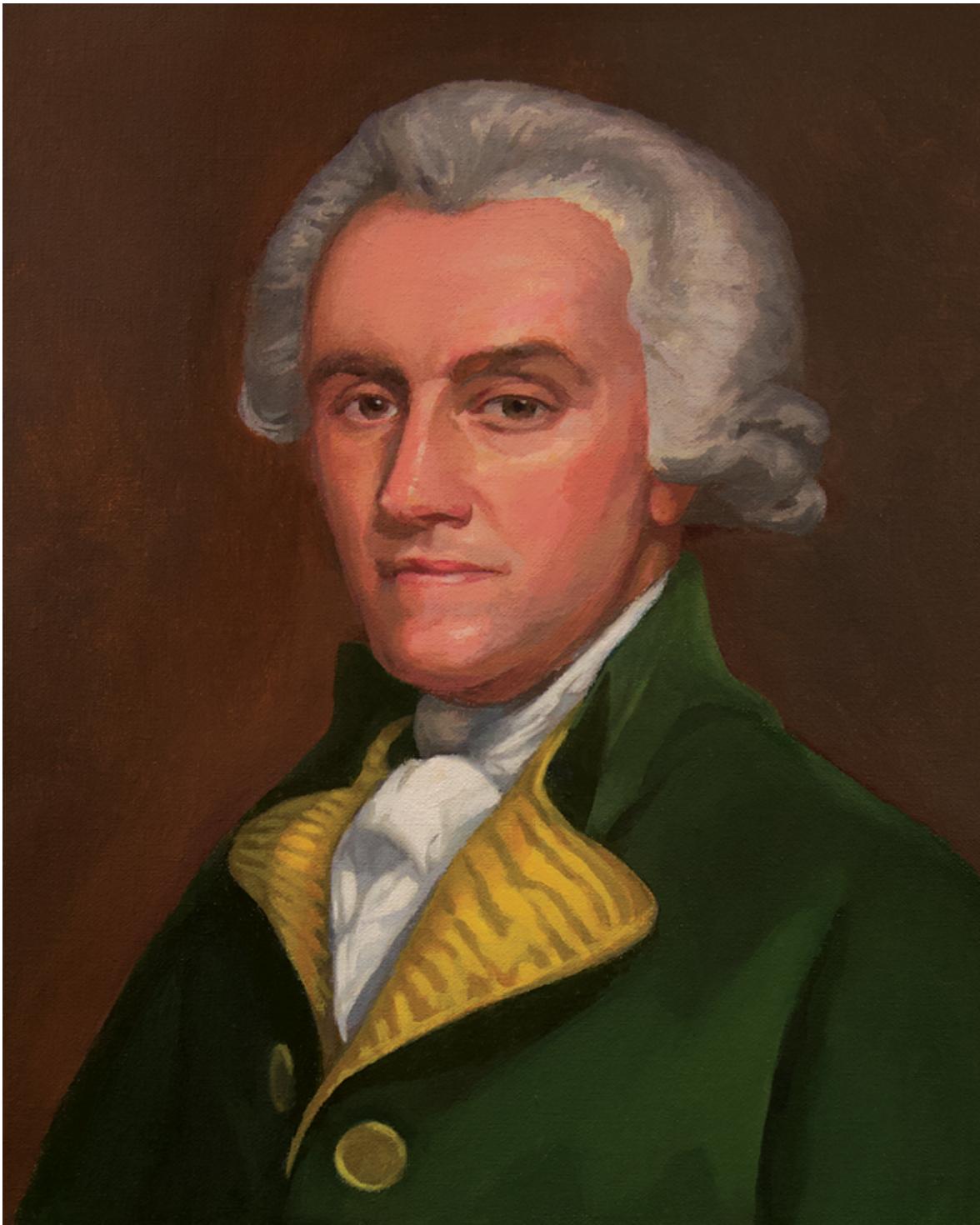
[The American Revolution](#) will air on PBS beginning November 16, 2025. This article appears in the [November 2025](#) print edition with the headline “How Do You Film the Revolution?”

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Why Did Benjamin Franklin's Son Remain Loyal to the British?

One of the most influential and ardent Patriots couldn't persuade his son to join the Revolution.

by Stacy Schiff



On the whole, the Founding Fathers, those towering patriarchs, fared poorly when it came to sons. George Washington and James Madison had none. Thomas Jefferson's only legitimate one died in infancy. Samuel Adams also outlived his. With the exception of John Quincy Adams, no other son of a

Founder rose to his father's stature. The unluckiest of all may have been Benjamin Franklin, who, in the course of a deeply familial contest, lost a cherished son the hardheaded way: to politics.

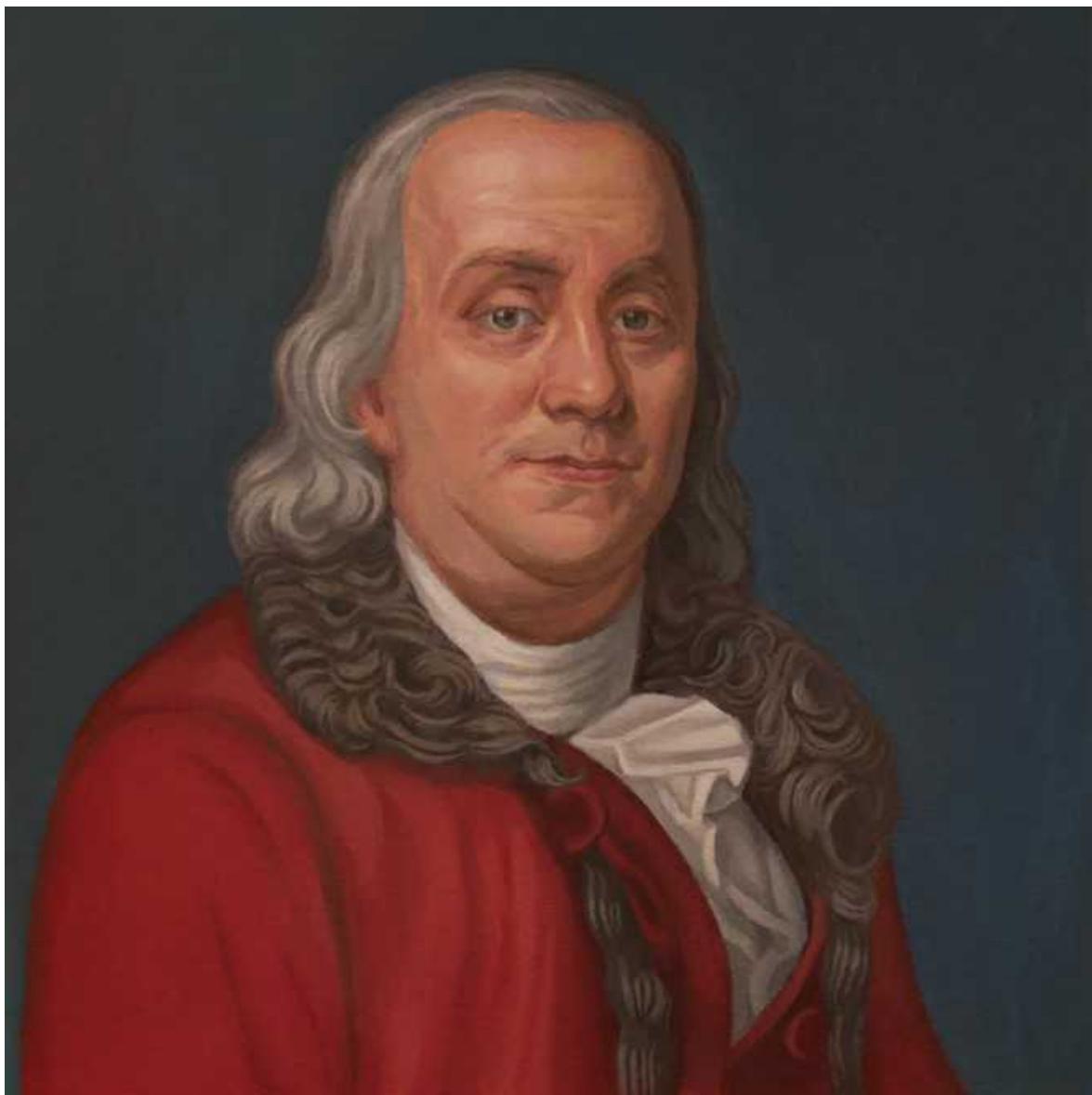
The two were for years each other's closest confidant. As one associate noted, William Franklin had, by his late 20s, become his father's "friend, his brother, his intimate and easy companion." Franklin raised his son with all the advantages he had not enjoyed. Where he had only briefly attended school, William studied with a private tutor. He kept a pony. He signed no indenture papers.

Similarities surfaced early. Around the time he turned 15, William ran off to join the crew of a ship docked in Philadelphia, from which his father retrieved him. Franklin could hardly argue with the dash for freedom, having made his own at 17. He too had longed, as a youth, for the sea. Shortly after his escapade, William was allowed to enlist in the British army. The concession seemed to affirm that he in no way suffered from the brand of "harsh and tyrannical treatment" that Franklin had known as a boy, treatment he thought might explain his later aversion to arbitrary power. He was, and knew he was, an indulgent parent. He once counseled a friend to give a child all he wanted, so that the child would develop a pleasant countenance. William was exceedingly handsome.

William's military career ended in 1748, with the conclusion of King George's War. While studying law, he over the next few years stepped into a string of political posts as his father vacated them. Father and son joined the same clubs and supported the same charities. They performed electrical experiments together and campaigned for office together. They were nearly shipwrecked together when, in 1757, they sailed to London, where together they visited the British Museum and watched David Garrick play Hamlet. (A fiancée of whom Franklin disapproved was left behind, soon forgotten by William.) William made business calls on his father's behalf when Franklin found himself confined, by a months-long illness, to bed. He took his dictation. Oxford conferred an honorary doctorate on Franklin in 1762 for his electrical discoveries. Farther back in the same procession marched William, then in his early 30s, who received a master's degree.

[Read: Ben Franklin's radical theory of happiness](#)

Deeply grateful for his father's "numberless indulgencies," William in 1758 professed himself willing to follow him to America, or to go to "any other part of the world, whenever you think it necessary," and he did. The two traveled around the British Isles and to the continent, from which they returned in time for the 1761 coronation of George III. (William alone obtained a special ticket that allowed him to join the procession, all the way into Westminster Abbey.) They visited Northamptonshire, where Franklin filled in some blanks in the family history. He returned to that visit later [when he began his *Autobiography*](#), which masquerades as a letter to William.



Friends commented on how much the two men resembled each other in manner and bearing. There could be no tributes to the other side of the family; it was common knowledge in Philadelphia that Franklin's wife was not William's mother. If William knew her name, he was among the few who did. For all intents and purposes, he seemed to have been the love child of Ben Franklin and Poor Richard. His mother's identity frustrates us as much today as it did the 18th-century gossips, who turned her—especially in the thick of an election season—into an abused handmaid or oysterwoman, left by Franklin to beg in the streets. She was likely a household servant for whom Franklin provided, having arranged to raise their son himself.

The stain of William's birth reared its head in London only when—at a surprisingly early age—he was named a royal governor. He was too young to have made enemies of his own, but his father's weighed in loudly. For years William would face down cracks about his “exalted birth.” As a rule, royal governors were gentlemen, if not always gentlemen with experience. Franklin was not on hand when William married that fall in London, but he was very much on hand for William's 1763 New Jersey inauguration. He had reason to feel proud: The son who had grown up above a Philadelphia print shop, the keeper of his secrets and his political alter ego, was now “His Excellency William Franklin, Esq., Captain-General, Governor and Commander in Chief in and over the province of *New-Jersey*, and territories thereon depending in America, Chancellor and Vice-Admiral in the same.” William looked forward to “an easy agreeable administration.” In an office that did not count among his father's hand-me-downs, he came into his own, proving an especially able governor, if one who continued to submit reports to his superiors first to his father, for editing.

From the February 1871 issue: The story of Dr. Franklin's famous book

In 1764, Franklin returned to London as a colonial agent. An ocean away, William remained expert at guessing which essays in the press were his father's at a time when “An Admirer of Truth and Goodness,” “Timoleon,” and “Undeniable Facts” counted as bylines. If *The London Chronicle* reminded the arbiters of colonial affairs of “the lasting power of resentment on the human mind,” William was quick to recognize the hand behind it.

When rumors flew in the colonies that Franklin had personally designed the Stamp Act, William refuted the charges. When his half sister fell in love, William stepped in, on his father's behalf, to attempt to head off what seemed a disadvantageous marriage. (He was unsuccessful. The purported fortune hunter became his brother-in-law.) Franklin's most intimate letters—the reports on the compliments that puffed him up, the hints that he might expect an appointment in the British administration, the violent longings for home—went to William. With no other man was Ben Franklin ever so naked on the page.

A spark of discord flared in 1773, after [Franklin mailed a packet of confidential Crown correspondence](#) to Boston, to sensational effect. Not for a minute did the royal governor of New Jersey believe his father capable of retailing stolen letters of his fellow Crown officers; he was appalled to discover him behind such a morally dubious transaction. As Franklin explained once his secret was revealed, he had hoped the documents might temper colonial animosity toward London. He did not mind throwing a royal governor—at least a Massachusetts royal governor—under the bus. [He had come around to the belief](#) that Parliament “has no right to make any law whatever” for the colonies. He knew William disagreed but would not attempt to convert him. He hoped only that William would act with integrity, leaving his constituents happier than he had found them.

That was before Franklin was hauled before the Privy Council to answer for the stolen letters and—in a quirk of timing—take the blame for the destruction of the tea in Boston Harbor, in which he had played no role. He had believed himself impervious to censure. A brutal, public evisceration proved him wrong. His first instinct, days later, was to suggest that William resign in solidarity. Given Franklin's disfavor in London, William could expect no promotion. (William had been angling for a more lucrative post in Barbados. For years, Franklin had subsidized New Jersey's royal governor, his salary insufficient to meet his needs.) Two weeks later, Franklin changed his mind. Surely the Crown would expect a resignation. He preferred to deprive it of that satisfaction.

The advice hardly mattered, as William had not the slightest intention of resigning. He did assure his father of one rule of colonial physics; with the London drubbing, Franklin's American popularity soared to new heights.

William permitted himself to vent a little about the absurd entity that called itself the Continental Congress. The split screen opens around this time: William was shocked that Boston had no interest in reimbursing the East India Company for the 342 chests of tea the town had launched into its harbor. By September 1774, Franklin was arguing that *Parliament* should reimburse the company's loss, with the monies it had extorted from the colonies. Then, as if out of the blue, came a poisoned dart. "But you," Franklin wrote to his son, "who are a thorough courtier, see every thing with government eyes."

By the time he replied, in late December 1774, William had cause for anger. He was fresh from having buried his stepmother. Her disappointment in not having seen her husband in a decade, William reported, lips pursed, "had preyed a good deal on her spirits." He could not understand why his father remained abroad. Franklin would change no minds in London, where he was regarded with "an evil eye" and where he risked arrest. Would he not be more useful quieting the turbulent spirits in America? William assumed the paternalistic role, reminding his father of his responsibilities; it was the older generation that had been radicalized. However lunatic Franklin might think the London administration, surely he had to admit that there was equal lunacy in America. This was, William ultimately acknowledged, "a disagreeable subject, and I'll drop it."

As he finally sailed for Philadelphia in 1775, Franklin composed [the longest letter we know him to have written](#), a 196-page behemoth that catalogs the raised and dashed hopes of his final London months, during which he labored—in a tour of drawing rooms and a round of covert discussions, with sweet words and in "cool sullen silence"—to work out an Anglo-American compromise. He reported on the searing insults and abject flattery; the hints of bribes; the contempt for a people understood to be "the lowest of mankind, and almost of a different species from the English of Britain"; and his conviction, in the end, that the House of Lords appeared "to have scarce discretion enough to govern a herd of swine." This account he addressed to the son whom he had not seen in a decade. As Dr. Franklin wrote on the high seas, Governor Franklin was secretly passing every scrap of intelligence he could gather on the activities of the Continental Congress to London. Franklin disembarked to the news that shots had been fired at Lexington and Concord.

There was an additional wrinkle. Illegitimate children seemed to run in the family. With Franklin sailed William's 15-year-old son, Temple, born in London. Neither William's wife nor the rest of the family knew of his existence. Initially William hoped he might introduce Temple as the son of an unfortunate relative whom he had agreed to raise as his own. Franklin preferred the direct approach. "I brought over a grandson with me," he baldly informed his sister. There is no record of how William's wife greeted the news of the instant stepson with the polished manners, who impressed even his hard-driving grandfather. Franklin had taken charge of Temple's education, a statement that spoke volumes, as did the fact that Franklin billed William for the expenses.

Along with much of America, William waited to see on which political side his father would land. Franklin remained so tight-lipped that some wrote him off as a British spy. The reserve persisted for some time, though William had his suspicions, as would any close reader of that 196-page letter. More than anything, he wished that his father would retire from all public affairs. He warned him that if Franklin intended "to set the colonies in a flame, he would take care to run away by the light of it," a friend later recalled.

When finally it came, the confrontation was loud. At William's stately New Jersey home that summer, the two men quarreled so violently that they roused the neighbors. Franklin warned William that his position would soon prove uncomfortable, as William well knew. As early as June 1775, he anticipated arrest. His legal authority seemed at an end. His militia no longer reported to him. He begged London to observe strict secrecy with his correspondence, every shred of which could prove his undoing. Despite the dangers, he assured London that nothing would induce him "to swerve in the least from that loyalty and duty, which I owe His Majesty which has been the pride of my life to demonstrate upon all occasions."

Not for the first time, a tussle broke out over the word *patriotism*. In America after 1775 an honest patriot subscribed to American independence. In the mind of the New Jersey royal governor, those individuals were "pretended patriots," "desperate gamesters," "banditti," and delusional dupes. "A real patriot," William informed his disgruntled legislature, "can seldom or ever speak popular language. A false one will never suffer himself to speak anything else." Those lines figured in his last address as governor.

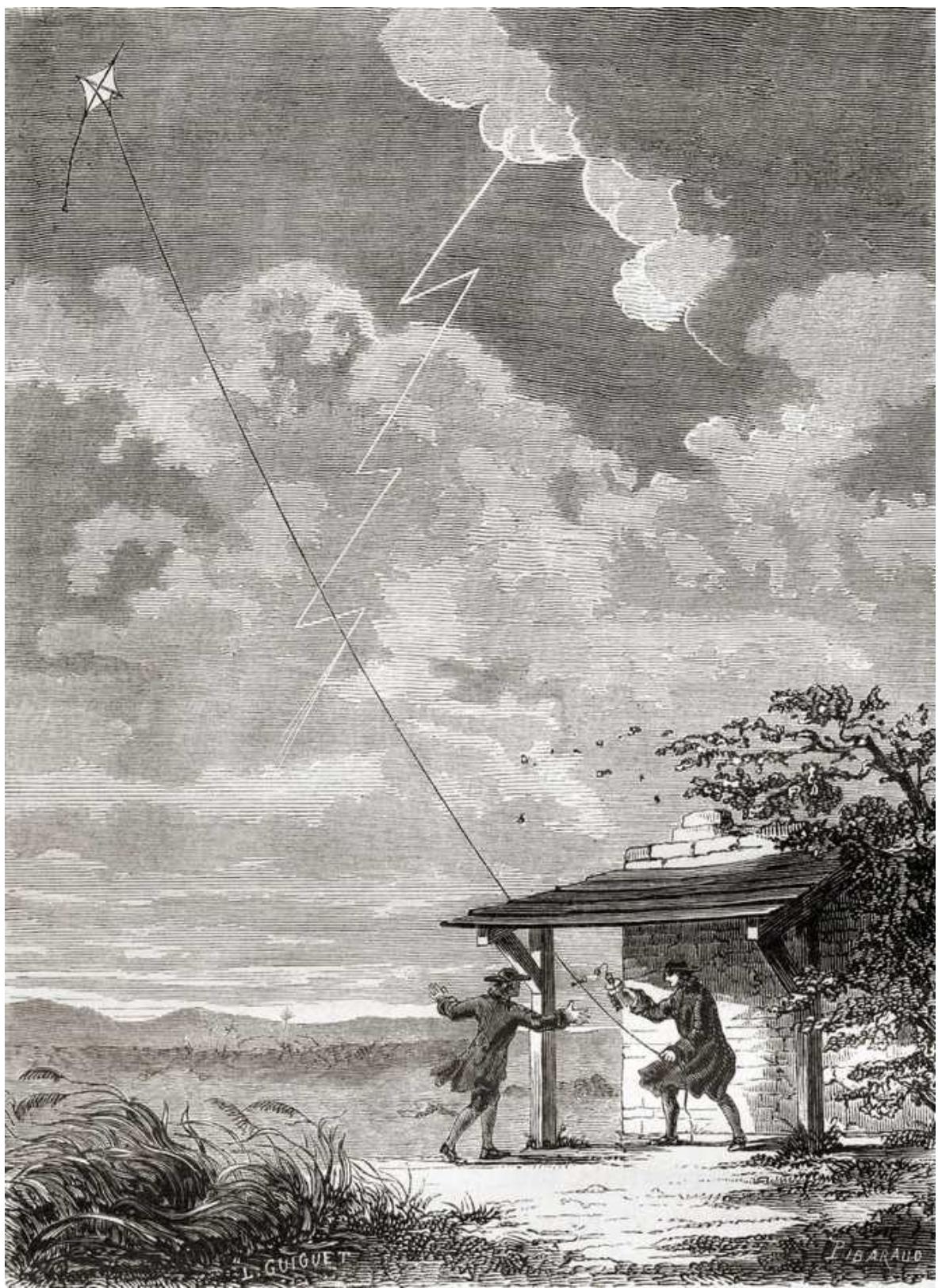
As his father read drafts of the Declaration of Independence, William was carted off, to jeers and insults. He refused to answer questions, railed that the Continental Congress had usurped the King's authority, and attempted escape. Under heavy guard, he reached Connecticut on July 4, 1776. He left behind a wife nearly out of her wits with fright.

As the son of a leading Loyalist and the grandson of a leading Revolutionary, Temple turned overnight into a sort of walking embodiment of civil war. To deliver word from his stepmother, he requested Franklin's permission to visit his father in prison. It was denied, but not, as Temple parried, because Franklin feared that his grandson might share dangerous intelligence. At his address, William could make little use of such information even if Temple happened to impart it, Franklin dryly observed. Temple might retire any political suspicions; Franklin was acting solely from "tender concern" for his welfare. He belonged, Franklin chided, at school rather than rambling about Connecticut. Or so Franklin wrote on September 22. He was soon to have a better idea.

William meanwhile remained recalcitrant. For collaborating with British officers while on parole, he was transferred to solitary confinement in a filthy cell. He felt buried alive, in the company of rats. He preferred to be taken out and shot. After three months he appealed, in moving terms, to George Washington. William could hardly eat or sleep. He was "one of the most miserable wretches breathing." His wife's failing health was paramount in his mind. Might he be granted permission to visit her? He assured Washington that his father, too, would be grateful were he to grant William's request. The two men differed in their political convictions, "yet it has not lessened his natural affection for me, any more than it has mine for him, which I can truly say is as great as ever." If Franklin knew of the appeal, he made no effort to intervene. By the time William emerged from prison, he looked his father's age. He was also a widower.

William did not share Franklin's gift for "cool sullen silence." When the time came to discuss a prisoner exchange, he made for a poor candidate, as he seemed unlikely to desist from launching counter-Revolutionary raids. His stubborn loyalty is easier to explain than is Franklin's stubborn anger. A royal governor for 13 years, William had finally clambered out from under Franklin's shadow. His father's politics had spoiled the earlier love affair,

from which the London trip had removed him. William may have been unwilling to submit to a second sacrifice. It could not always have been easy to be Ben Franklin's son; a little rebellion may have brought relief. William had moreover swallowed an early, heady dose of Anglophilia. Only one Franklin had processed into Westminster Abbey with George III.



L. GUIGUE

PIBARAO

Before the war divided father and son, the two joined the same clubs, supported the same charities, and conducted electrical experiments together. (Universal History Archive / Getty)

The royal governor of New Jersey had moreover heard enough about base-born bastards. Respectability mattered to him in a way it did not to his iconoclastic father, whose rags-to-riches story appeals more to us than it did to the Philadelphia elite. William initially resisted arrest because he refused to answer to an illegal assembly but also because his inquisitors had failed to treat him as a gentleman. The assault on his authority was an attempt to “filch from me my good name,” he howled in 1776. That name was “of more value than all other considerations,” as he later explained. For it he maintained always an outsize regard; his father tended to let the insults fall where they might. Having arrived at last at an exalted status, nothing would pry William from it. He had risen above dishonor. Where Franklin well knew he had difficulty submitting to his superiors, William prided himself on his devotion to the King. While Parliament drafted the 1774 Intolerable Acts, he insisted—as he alone among Crown officials needed to do—that “no attachments or connections shall ever make me swerve from the duty of my station.”

From the earliest days of his governorship, William professed himself willing to risk his life in His Majesty’s service. And by 1775, he had begun to feel more validation from the British administration than from his father. The tragedy was that for all his eloquent tributes to the Crown, he remained Ben Franklin’s son, suspect, for different reasons, in both camps. Or as Lord Howe’s secretary put it while William languished in prison, “His father is and has been every way his misfortune.”

Both men availed themselves of substitutes. When Franklin sailed to France in late 1776 to secure aid for the Revolution, he did so with Temple in tow. He needed a trusted secretary. Temple was excellent, bilingual company. A European education was at the time superior to an American one. The exchange also constituted a bit of underhanded score-settling, as Franklin acknowledged. He had, he wrote several years later, rescued a valuable young man from the clutches of the Tories, instilling in him honest republican principles. “It is enough that I have lost my *son*,” Franklin cried,

in a rare nod to the emotional toll, for which he enlisted an equally rare exclamation point. “Would they add my *grandson!*”

William was long in learning of Temple’s departure and flabbergasted when he did. Christmas Eve 1776 found Temple at Versailles, the ideal messenger for a sensitive, exploratory overture to the French minister of foreign affairs. Having raised an Englishman, Franklin over the next years inadvertently raised a Frenchman, which is what happens when you send an impressionable adolescent with a carriage and servants on an overnight mission to Versailles.

No word passed between father and son over the next nine years. Friends evidently intuited that it was best not to mention William to Franklin, though occasionally someone blundered ahead. Family members tiptoed around the awkwardness by referring to William, when necessary, as “Temple’s father.” Franklin’s Parisian friends universally spoke of Temple as Franklin’s son, erasing the intermediate generation. So as not to muddy either the political or familial waters, Franklin discouraged Temple from any contact with his father. Comfortable at Versailles, devoted to his grandfather, Temple ably acquitted himself of his duties. Franklin had great ambitions for the teenager, on whom he doted. He seemed to understand that he had been granted a do-over. He did not intend to get this one wrong. “The doctor,” the Marquis de Lafayette would note, introducing Temple to General Washington, “loves him better than any thing in the world.”

Franklin had his work cut out for him in Paris, where Congress expected him to appeal to a monarchy for assistance in establishing a republic. Surrounded by spies, at odds with his colleagues, forced to proceed by stealth in a second language and an unfamiliar culture, Franklin had difficulties enough without having to hear of his son’s Loyalist activities. Those reports came his way all the same, especially when William made a noisy 1782 return to London. Given the prison time, he was no longer simply a Loyalist. He was a Loyalist hero. Franklin claimed that he made it a fixed rule never to confuse private and public resentments and the evidence is largely on his side. When the time came to negotiate a peace in 1783, however, no one argued so vehemently against compensating the Loyalists for their lost American properties as the sole commissioner with a Loyalist son. If the people whom Franklin preferred to call royalists—he believed the true

Loyalists to have been those who had fought for American liberty—were to be compensated for their losses, surely the Americans should be too? Coolly conflating the personal and the political, he cited the destruction of his library, carried off by the British officer who had occupied and looted his home. He happened, as Franklin surely knew, to be an associate of William's.

Franklin relented a little in 1784, hinting that he would welcome renewed contact with William now that the countries had settled their differences. William was surprised, having concluded from his father's "total neglect and inattention" during his prison years that the relationship was over. Leaping at the overture, he offered to come to Paris. He himself had buried all his American hatchets at the signing of the peace. He hoped "to revive that affectionate intercourse and connection which till the commencement of the late troubles had been the pride and happiness of my life." (The line rhymes with the 1776 "pride of my life" tribute to George III.) William believed he had acted purely out of duty to his sovereign. Given the same circumstances, he would comport himself no differently. He was forthright: "If I have been mistaken, I cannot help it. It is an error of judgment that the maturest reflection I am capable of cannot rectify." He hoped they might each forget the past. He refrained from any mention of his father having spirited off his son.

From the November 2005 issue: Free and easy

Franklin agreed to the mutual amnesia, though not before hurling a few thunderbolts. Nothing had ever hurt him so much as the abandonment in his old age of his only son, who had gone so far as to take up arms against him "in a cause wherein my good fame, fortune and life were all at stake." He could have understood had William remained neutral. But "there are natural duties which precede political ones," stressed the man who had defied his parents and missed his wife's funeral and both children's weddings.

Consciously or not, he echoed William's 1774 words: It was a disagreeable subject. He would drop it. He preferred William not come to Paris, but—bowing to Temple's ardent wishes—Franklin would send Temple to London. He submitted operating instructions. Franklin intended Temple to study law. William was to supply him with his old law books. He should introduce him to no improper company. He could confide any and all family matters in

Temple. They had no secrets. Temple appears to have had at least one: Franklin seemed unaware that the 24-year-old left behind in Paris a (married) mistress, pregnant with his child.

Franklin often could not remember to be angry. He shied from open confrontation. He found disputes as useless as they were unpleasant. Most of all, he reminded feuding relatives, he disliked family feuds. He insisted that he preferred immortal friendships to immortal enmities. Both he and Poor Richard advocated always for forgiveness. But he could not, or would not, fold William back into his affections. The embarrassment and dishonor, the sense of betrayal—all words he avoided, preferring to detour around what was for him the greatest casualty of the war, which had cost him his best friend—ran too deep. He continued to believe there was not a man on Earth who could justly say that Ben Franklin had wronged him, wholly overlooking the one in London. He could brook dissent—he corresponded with any number of friends who saw the Revolution differently—but not by someone who shared his name.

Long after he had signed the Treaty of Paris, establishing America's existence, Franklin remained implacable on the subject of Loyalist compensation. A hired assassin, [Franklin conceded](#), "has a right to his pay." But surely his employers should compensate him rather than his victims. He loaded his anger into [an unpublished fable](#), writing off the royalists as a fratricidal "mongrel race," lines he could not have written without realizing that his own son belonged to that genus. To the end of his life, the resentment burned bright. "We are commanded to forgive our enemies," he reminded one correspondent, "but we are nowhere commanded to forgive our friends."

There was a brief 1785 reunion in Southampton, as Franklin prepared to sail to America. It was probably not much helped that he could have read, days earlier, that William continued to petition the Crown on behalf of the Loyalists. Franklin was affectionate in person but also adamant that William assign his American properties to Temple, to settle his debt to him for the years of subsidies. William balked. The properties were worth twice as much. He assumed he was being penalized for his politics, as he indisputably was. He was wounded; the transaction drove home that his father "preferred my son's interest to mine, and that I held not an equal place

in his affections.” For the sake of family harmony, he agreed all the same to his father’s terms. Franklin afterward went silent, refusing to answer his letters. Temple explained that he was offended still by William’s bristling at his terms. On the rare occasion when he referred to William, Franklin explained that they were estranged and that William kept aloof, which was untrue. Father and son never saw each other again.

When Franklin’s will was read in 1790, William discovered that he had essentially been disinherited all over again. The first item was a rebuke for the wartime part he had played against his father, a part, Franklin added revealingly, of “public notoriety.” William was struck by Franklin’s “shameful injustice” but also furious for practical reasons, having made little progress with the British administration in securing reparations. To prove his loyalty to the King and to put an end to a rumor that he and his father had hedged their bets, he had submitted Franklin’s pitiless letters to him, now lost. Not only had there been no collusion, but he had placed his duty to his sovereign over “the wishes of a revered parent.” In the process he had forfeited every shred of his father’s affection.

Having claimed damages of £48,000, William received £1,800, along with a pension that barely covered his London expenses. (When his sister came to visit, he regretted that he did not have room to put her up. There had been multiple guest rooms in the New Jersey mansion, far more lavish than Franklin’s Philadelphia home.) Temple returned to London after Franklin’s death but preferred Paris, where he settled after siring a second illegitimate child. (The first had died in infancy.) Franklin’s son and grandson quarreled. William wrote Temple out of his will, substituting his granddaughter. William was more hurt, he claimed, than he had ever been. He did not relish the idea of “dying at enmity with one so nearly connected.” He and Temple never reconciled.

Aside from his supersize 1775 letter, Franklin left only one other piece of sustained writing. Though he added to his *Autobiography* nearly until his death, he never carried the story of his life beyond the late 1750s, when he was still a loyal British subject. William, too, endures as a devoted subject, if one who fades from view in the book’s later sections. The “lasting power of resentment on the human mind” figures nowhere in Franklin’s pages, the most popular autobiography in America and a clear-eyed ode to tolerance

and reason. Franklin had ample opportunity to revise the work, and he did. He never touched the first words, which remain “Dear Son.”

This article appears in the [November 2025](#) print edition with the headline “Dear Son.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

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The Black Loyalists

Thousands of African Americans fought for the British—then fled the United States to avoid a return to enslavement.

by Andrew Lawler



The man who would come to be called Harry Washington was born near the Gambia River, in West Africa, around 1740. As a young man, he was sold into slavery and endured the horrors of the Middle Passage. In Virginia, he was purchased by a neighbor of George Washington, who then bought the

young man in 1763 for 40 pounds. After working to drain the colony's Great Dismal Swamp—one of George Washington's many land ventures—he was sent to Mount Vernon to care for the horses.

Then came war. With General Washington in Massachusetts leading the Continental Army, Harry Washington, like thousands of other enslaved people, abandoned the plantation, risking torture and imprisonment, to join the British cause. In exchange for his freedom, he enlisted in what was known as the Ethiopian Regiment.

Virginia's royal governor, Lord Dunmore, had created a base to oppose the rebels near the port of Norfolk in the summer of 1775. Encouraged by the large numbers of enslaved people who sought sanctuary behind British lines, [he published the British empire's first emancipation proclamation](#) in November, granting liberty to any person in bondage, owned by Patriots, who would take up arms for King George III. These recruits—Harry Washington among them—formed the empire's first Black regiment. Together with Dunmore, they launched what would amount to the biggest slave insurrection in the nation's history until the Civil War. Their uniforms bore the motto "Liberty for Slaves"—a tart retort to the "Liberty or Death" slogan favored by Patriots.

The prospect of freed Black men armed and trained by the British terrified white Patriots. George Washington, who had been a close friend of the royal governor before the war, [now referred to him as](#) "that Arch Traitor to the Rights of humanity." He worried that Dunmore and his multiracial army (which also included regiments of British redcoats and white Loyalists) were fast becoming his own men's "most formidable Enemy." The Continental Congress made it the first mission of the U.S. Navy to crush Dunmore's troops, and later sent General Charles Lee—second only to Washington in rank—to defeat them. Both campaigns failed.

In May 1776, as the representatives in Philadelphia remained divided over whether to declare independence, the Virginia delegation—convinced that Dunmore's alliance with Black Americans made negotiation with Britain impossible—broke the deadlock, unanimously urging separation from the mother country. Within months, a combination of Patriot artillery, smallpox, typhus, and drought forced Dunmore and his surviving soldiers and their

families to retreat from Virginia to New York City. There, Harry Washington and others joined the successful British invasion of the city and were absorbed into the Black Pioneers, a military construction unit founded by British General Henry Clinton. Washington then went on to serve in an artillery unit in Charleston, South Carolina.

By the war's end, some 20,000 Black Americans had served as active members of the British military—about three times as many as had fought as Patriots—and many tens of thousands more had fled plantations to support the King's cause by cooking, cleaning, and caring for livestock.

Their motives for allying with the British, then the world's foremost slave traffickers, were clear: Emancipation was not on the Continental Congress agenda. "Slaves are devils," one Virginia Patriot wrote, "and to make them otherwise than slaves will be to set devils free." For their part, British leaders like Dunmore did not necessarily oppose slavery or consider those in bondage to be their equal, but many were willing to back mass liberation as a tool to crush the rebellion. The unlikely alliances they forged set in motion a series of events that would, in time, help undermine the foundations of slavery on both sides of the Atlantic.

Dunmore had made his decree without approval from London, but it was never repudiated. [This encouraged General Clinton to issue his own in 1779,](#) though he declined to arm Black men. That same year, the British commandant of New York, David Jones, proclaimed, "All Negroes that fly from the Enemy's Country are Free—No person whatever can claim a right to them." Not every British military leader agreed: When British General Lord Cornwallis invaded the South, he refused to consider freeing Black allies, much less arming them. Nevertheless, thousands volunteered to assist in the fight against their owners.

By His Excellency the Right Honourable JOHN Earl of DUNMORE, His
MAJESTY's Lieutenant and Governor General of the Colony and Dominion of
VIRGINIA, and Vice Admiral of the same.

A PROCLAMATION.

AS I have ever entertained Hopes that an Accommodation might have taken Place between GREAT-BRITAIN and this Colony, without being compelled by my Duty to this most disagreeable but now absolutely necessary Step, rendered so by a Body of armed Men unlawfully assembled, firing on His MAJESTY's Tenders, and the formation of an Army, and an Army now on their March to attack His MAJESTY's Troops and destroy the well disposed Subjects of this Colony. To defeat such treasonable Purposes, and that all such Traitors, and their Abettors, may be brought to Justice, and that the Peace, and good Order of this Colony may be again restored, which the ordinary Course of the Civil Law is unable to effect; I have thought fit to issue this my Proclamation, hereby declaring, that until the aforesaid good Purposes can be obtained, I do in Virtue of the Power and Authority to me given, by His MAJESTY, determine to execute Martial Law, and cause the same to be executed throughout this Colony: and to the end that Peace and good Order may the sooner be effected, I do require every Person capable of bearing Arms, to resort to His MAJESTY's STANDARD, or be looked upon as Traitors to His MAJESTY's Crown and Government, and thereby become liable to the Penalty the Law inflicts upon such Offences; such as forfeiture of Life, confiscation of Lands, &c. &c. And I do hereby further declare all indentured Servants, Negroes, or others, (appertaining to Rebels,) free that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining His MAJESTY's Troops as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper Sense of their Duty, to His MAJESTY's Crown and Dignity. I do further order, and require, all His MAJESTY's Leige Subjects, to retain their Quittrents, or any other Taxes due or that may become due, in their own Custody, till such Time as Peace may be again restored to this at present most unhappy Country, or demanded of them for their former seditious Purposes, by Officers properly authorised to receive the same.

GIVEN under my Hand on board the Ship WILLIAM, off NORFOLK,
the 7th Day of NOVEMBER, in the SIXTEENTH Year of His MAJESTY's Reign.

DUNMORE.

(GOD save the KING.)

In 1775, Virginia's royal governor, Lord Dunmore, published the British empire's first emancipation proclamation. (Wikimedia)

The British loss at Yorktown in 1781 was a catastrophe for the many Black Americans who now found themselves facing the prospect of being forced back into slavery. Some 10,000 scattered across four continents. They built the largest North American settlement of emancipated people, in Canada; melted into German city-states; eked out a precarious living on the streets of London; endured the brutality of Australia's convict colony; and established the first home in Africa for people freed from bondage.

The story of the Black Loyalists and their postwar diaspora highlights an irony long ignored: Thousands of those with the biggest stake in securing liberty ultimately had to flee a country founded on the premise that all are created equal.

Almost as soon as Cornwallis surrendered to George Washington at Yorktown, marking the end of major military operations, victorious white Americans sought to recover what they considered their stolen property. Washington retrieved seven people who had fled Mount Vernon. Thomas Jefferson recovered five people, some of whom he later sold at auction. Virginia Governor Benjamin Harrison [fruitlessly sought the return of Emanuel](#), “a good Barber”; Tabb, “a good cook”; John, “a house carpenter”; Gloucester, “a good Ship Carpenter and caulkier”; Charles, “a house carpenter and Saw miller”; Dennis, a “very artful. Brush maker”; and Nedd, “an exceeding fine sailor but a great Rogue.”

Cornwallis looked the other way when a few favored Black Loyalists boarded the Royal Navy warship Bonetta for transport to New York, which was still under British control. Other officers went further, evacuating large numbers of Black Americans, despite bitter protests by Patriot slave owners. During the British withdrawal from Savannah, Georgia, and Charleston in 1782, about 10,000 Black Americans sailed away. Scanty records make it difficult to determine their identities, their destinations, or even how many had been freed during the conflict. Some likely remained the property of white Loyalists who fled the young nation after their defeat. At least 3,000 Black Americans arrived in British-controlled St. Augustine, “and more are daily coming,” the governor of East Florida wrote. Others landed in Jamaica

or the Bahamas, where many were trapped in bondage on pineapple and sugar plantations (slavery was still legal in much of the British empire). A British investigation found that a few unscrupulous officers had sold free people into bondage, though the authorities forbade the practice.

At least 400 refugees reached England, where slavery was not legal but life was difficult nonetheless. A Quaker may have been referring to them when he observed in 1785 “the almost naked and miserable negro, prostrate at many a corner” in London. At least one Black American, John Caesar, was found guilty of theft and sent on the first fleet of ships bearing convicts to Australia, where he became a legendary figure who refused to bow to his jailers.

Several dozen Black Americans, mostly young men who had served as drummers in mercenary Hessian units, made their way to Germany as free men. Their fates are difficult to track. One “prospered, married well, and had the gracious Landgrave himself”—a nobleman—“as a sponsor at his child’s baptism,” a historian writes. When another died in the city of Kassel, his corpse was dissected in the town’s anatomy theater, “proving to the astonished witnesses that under the black skin he was just like a white man.”

By late 1782, New York was the sole American port still under British control. George Washington’s army was encamped about 60 miles north on the Hudson River as Harry Washington and thousands of his fellow Black Loyalists crowded into tenements and refugee camps across the city. Whether they would be surrendered to the victorious Patriots and returned to slavery or find freedom in some distant land remained uncertain.

On November 30, 1782, American and British negotiators were in the final hours of completing a peace treaty in the drawing room of a Paris mansion when Henry Laurens, a wealthy South Carolinian planter, appeared at the door. Laurens had been captured in 1780 while crossing the Atlantic and imprisoned in the Tower of London. A year after being exchanged for Cornwallis, he arrived in Paris. Laurens was aghast when he learned that the Americans—Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and John Adams—were poised to sign a document that made no provision for the recovery of the men and women the Patriots had held in bondage.

“Mr. Laurens said there ought to be a stipulation, that the British troops should carry off no Negroes, or other American property,” [Adams wrote in his diary](#). “We all agreed. Mr. Oswald”—Richard Oswald, the lead British negotiator—“consented.” That consent was no surprise, given that Laurens had served as a slave-purchasing agent for Oswald, a Scottish merchant who had built a fortune as a major slave trader and plantation owner. Adams noted that the treaty was then “signed sealed, and delivered, and we all went ... to dine with Dr. Franklin.”

Word of the last-minute addition arrived in North America in early 1783. On April 15, the Continental Congress ordered General Washington to arrange for “the delivery of all Negroes and other property of the inhabitants of the United States in possession of the British forces.” Harrison, the governor of Virginia, made a personal plea to the general. “I observe by a clause in the articles we are to have our negroes again,” [he wrote](#). “I have thirty missing, many of which I understand are dead, but there are still some that are very valuable.” He promised to cover the cost of their return to his plantations, insisting that “my well being depends on their being recovered.”

By then, rumors were spreading that the commander in chief of the British forces, Sir Guy Carleton, would override the treaty by evacuating Black Americans. Panicked enslavers decided to act. On April 28, George Washington asked a New York-based merchant to locate and return some 20 enslaved people who had escaped Mount Vernon during the war, including Harry Washington. Boston King, a freed South Carolinian then living in the city, recalled in his 1798 memoir that “we saw our masters coming from Virginia, North Carolina, and other parts, and seizing upon their slaves in the streets of New York.” Such seizures, although likely limited by the presence of British troops, terrified Black Loyalists.

George Washington, meanwhile, demanded a meeting with Carleton. He aimed to fix a date for the British withdrawal and insisted that the British return the Patriots’ enslaved property. Carleton responded that the American’s demand was “inconsistent with prior Engagements binding the National Honor, which must be kept with all colours.” Citing the Dunmore and Clinton proclamations, he explained that the Black Loyalists were already free. He would not allow them to be returned to bondage and

subjected to severe punishment or perhaps even execution by their former owners.

Washington ended the meeting abruptly. That night, in [a letter to his British adversary](#), he warned that he was prepared to “take any measures which may be deemed expedient, to prevent the future carrying away of any Negroes.” The implication was that the Continental Army was prepared to march into New York City to recover people whom they considered Patriot property. [Carleton stood firm, responding that](#) as a British official, he had no right “to prevent their going to any part of the world they thought proper,” and adding archly that any “breach of the public faith towards people of any complexion” reflected poorly on the new nation.

Writing to Franklin in Paris, Elias Boudinot, the Confederation Congress president, [said that the British move](#) “has irritated the Citizens of America to an alarming Degree.” Members of Virginia’s assembly, which was made up mostly of slave-owning planters, recommended halting the release of British prisoners until Carleton reversed course. In Philadelphia, James Madison decried the British general’s decision as “a shameful evasion.” There was even discussion of reactivating the Continental Army, as Washington had hinted in his letter to Carleton. But Congress decided not to challenge the British, fearing, as one member put it, that “a renewal of hostilities might be the consequence.” Amid much grumbling, the idea was shelved.

American enslavers hoped that King George would force Carleton’s compliance with the treaty provision, but the monarch gave the general’s interpretation his enthusiastic approval. The British secretary of state concluded that it was “certainly an act of justice due to them”—Black Loyalists—“from us.” An internal British-government memo accused Washington of acting in the matter “with all the Grossness and Ferocity of a Captain of Banditti.”

Black Loyalists were grateful to learn that Carleton was not planning to leave them at the mercy of the Patriots. In the summer of 1783, they lined up outside [Fraunces Tavern](#) to request permission to leave New York. When their turn came, the men and women stood before a panel of British officers in the tavern’s Long Room—the same room where, a few months later,

General Washington would give his farewell address to officers following the British evacuation of the city and the war's official conclusion.

At the end of July, Harry Washington and Boston King, along with his wife, Violet, boarded L'Abondance, a French cargo ship that had been captured by the British. Along with 3,000 others, they had received certificates of freedom signed by Brigadier General Samuel Birch, granting them permission "to go to Nova Scotia, or wherever else." They would not allow themselves to be enslaved again.

In a clearing carved out of dense forest in southwestern Nova Scotia, a striking modern building of glass and steel houses the [Black Loyalist Heritage Centre](#). The museum commemorates what once was the largest free Black community outside Africa, made up of displaced Americans. Most of their descendants long ago moved away, but a restored church and school remain, along with battered house foundations hidden in thick foliage.

The 410 passengers on L'Abondance landed nearby, at the port of Shelburne. The Indigenous Mi'kmaq had long lived there, but British officials were eager to repopulate an area that was sparsely settled after the eviction of Acadians—descendants of French colonizers—in the 1750s. Lured by promises of free land, copious provisions, and no taxes, [white American Loyalists were flocking to the site](#), and many brought their human chattel, who would remain enslaved in their new home.

The emancipated Black refugees, who also were promised British support, immediately encountered indifference from the authorities and outright hostility from the white Americans. Most were denied sufficient land and supplies; they were forced to seek menial work for low wages, which angered unemployed white residents. Less than a year after the Black refugees arrived, in July 1784, [a mob attacked](#) and destroyed nearly two dozen of their homes on Shelburne's outskirts. "Some thousands of people assembled with clubs and drove the Negroes out of the town," one Nova Scotian reported. Only the arrival of British troops halted the brutality. Many displaced residents retreated to a Black settlement across the harbor, called Birchtown after the man who had certified their freedom. But interminable winters, inadequate rations, and continued white wrath made survival an ongoing struggle.

On Nova Scotia's west coast, in the town of Annapolis Royal, [Thomas Peters](#) encountered similarly desperate conditions. Peters, who was born in Africa, had been enslaved in North Carolina. He had made his way to New York in 1776 and joined the Black Pioneers. With his wife, Sally, and their two children, Peters took part in the exodus to Nova Scotia in 1783, and soon emerged as the leader of his community's 200 Black Loyalists, scraping by as a millwright while awaiting his promised acreage.

In 1790, still waiting, Peters, then 52, sailed to London to put forward the grievances of his people. Any Black man traveling alone by ship risked re-enslavement by a rapacious crew, but Peters arrived safely with his petition, and through the abolitionist Granville Sharp was able to get it to British government officials.

Sharp had spearheaded a 1787 effort to create a Province of Freedom on the West African coast, recruiting members of London's poor Black community. More than 400 settlers, including freed Black Americans, had landed in St. George's Bay, about 500 miles south of the Gambia River, to found Granville Town. But conflict with local peoples, most of whom had recently converted to Islam and resented the Christian invaders, soon led to the settlement's dissolution.

Sharp and his fellow abolitionists Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce were now attempting an approach that offered commercial as well as moral benefits, wooing investors with the promise that a West African colony of free Black people would prove of "great national importance to the Manufactories, and other Trading Interests of this Kingdom." Shortly after Peters's arrival, they had overcome fierce opposition from slave interests to create the Sierra Leone Company. Although they'd had little success enlisting settlers for this new venture, Peters was excited to hear of their plans, and his enthusiasm reinvigorated the stalled project.

He returned to Nova Scotia with the task of persuading Black Loyalists to once again relocate, this time across the Atlantic. Thomas Clarkson's younger brother, John, a naval officer in his 20s, accompanied Peters as the company representative. While Peters went to the province's west coast, Clarkson sailed down the east coast to drum up recruits in Birchtown. He

was shocked to find the people there “kept in the most abject state of servitude.”

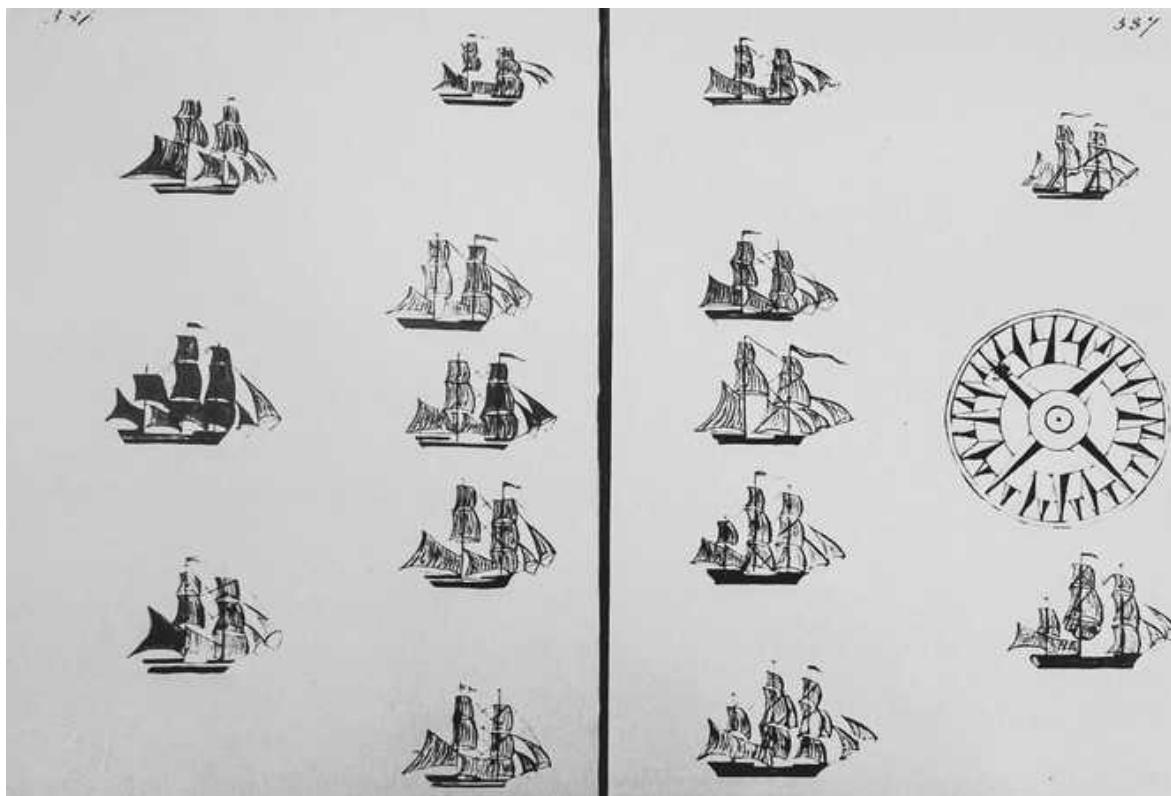
On a rainy late-October day in 1791, hundreds of people crammed into the Methodist chapel to question Clarkson. They knew of the disaster that had befallen Granville Town; they wanted assurances of land, provisions, and no annual rent in their prospective new home. Clarkson sympathized. “People will not consider how often they have been deceived and how suspicious they are in consequence,” he wrote, “and how necessary it is to be open and candid with them.” This time, he insisted, would be different.

Some of the Black Loyalists remained unconvinced. Stephen Blucke, a former Black Pioneers officer and a leading citizen of Birchtown, denounced the plan and predicted “utter annihilation.” Still, 514 of the town’s residents signed up within three days, with more expected to join; Peters gathered 132 others.

In December, Harry Washington, Boston and Violet King, and hundreds of others gathered in Halifax to prepare to emigrate. Clarkson, not Peters, would lead the voyage. The Nova Scotia governor, who had given his blessing to the venture, called Clarkson “a fit person, to have the charge of the said Free Blacks.”

On January 15, 1792, 1,196 passengers, each with a document guaranteeing their right to a plot of land in Africa, boarded 15 ships and set sail.

The settlers, a mix of ardent Baptists and Methodists, came ashore in Sierra Leone in March 1792 singing “The Year the Jubilee Is Come.” Harry Washington and Thomas Peters were some of only a handful of passengers who had seen Africa before. Most had parents and grandparents born in North America. The historian Ira Berlin has written that these newcomers brought to West Africa a peculiarly American brand of “evangelical Christianity, commercial capitalism, and political republicanism.” They called their coastal settlement Freetown.



John Clarkson's sketch of the 15 ships that sailed from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone in 1792 (The New York Historical)

Less than 20 miles upstream stood the notorious British slave-trading fort on [Bunce Island](#), which remained in operation. The colonists also had to navigate relations with the Indigenous peoples in the area, much as their predecessors in Granville Town had. But the primary tensions were between the Black settlers and their managers, an eight-person governing council of white men. John Clarkson, who had been named governor, had only a single vote. But although Clarkson had limited power, Peters was excluded from governance altogether. Within weeks, with supplies dwindling and no land allotted, the colonists chafed under “the obnoxious arrogance of their rulers,” according to Anna Maria Falconbridge, who was married to the colony’s surgeon and wrote the first history of the settlement.

On Easter Sunday, a month after landing, Peters confronted John Clarkson with a petition outlining the settlers’ grievances. Perceiving this as a direct challenge to his authority, Clarkson ordered the town’s bell rung and declared publicly that “one or other of us would be hanged upon that tree”

before the dispute was settled. The assembled crowd, spooked by this sudden ultimatum, declined to back Peters, who stalked away in disgust.

Peters's sudden death two months later, likely from malaria, removed the biggest challenge to Clarkson's rule. But on the day he died, the settlers presented the governor with two petitions, including one insisting that Black men serve as peace officers. "We can have rules and Regulations among ourselves," they argued, while still honoring British law. Clarkson negotiated a compromise, but he was locked in his own disputes with company directors in London, who demanded immediate financial returns. He sailed for Britain at the end of 1792, promising to advocate for the settlers.

In London, however, the company refused to abide by the pledges Clarkson had made in Nova Scotia. He was dismissed, never to return to Freetown. Still, Black settlers continued to send him letters in subsequent years requesting his intervention on their behalf—a tragic testament to the trust they placed in him long after he had moved on, as well as a sign of their mounting desperation.

The council in Sierra Leone, meanwhile, ignored the pleas for land by Black settlers, who continued to fight for their dignity. "We have not the Education which White Men have," a 1793 petition stated, "yet we have feeling the same as other human beings." That summer, the settlers Cato Perkins and Isaac Anderson, veterans of Dunmore's regiment, sailed to London to present the complaint to the company directors, asking for "nothing but what you Promised us." The directors refused to consider the petition.

Freetown's Black settlers eventually organized their own legal system and elected an assembly; the white overseers refused to recognize it. And so, in 1800, the heads of 150 families, likely representing about half the settlement's homes, met to announce that their law system would soon go into effect, essentially declaring independence from the white-controlled government. One of them was Harry Washington. When the colony's marshal attempted to arrest the faction's leaders, Washington retreated to the outskirts of town with 40 or so others.

The British quickly put down the uprising and captured the rebels. Thirty-one men were tried for “open and unprovoked rebellion.” Two were hanged. Others, including Washington, were banished to the far shore of the Sierra Leone River. Washington was named the head of this group, but the paper trail ends there. His final fate is unknown.

The Sierra Leone Company did not survive the turmoil, and the British government took over Sierra Leone in 1808, a year after Parliament outlawed the slave trade. The new governor was appalled to find a colony of “runaway slaves” filled with “absurd enthusiasm” in their religion and “wild notions of liberty” in their politics. They displayed, he added, “everything that is vile in the American.”

Relations between the British rulers and Black settlers remained tense. After 1819, the Royal Navy used Freetown as a base for its anti-slaving campaign, a relocation center for those intercepted on slave ships, and, soon after, the capital of British West Africa. Occasional rebellions were brutally suppressed. Only in 1961 did Sierra Leone’s Black population gain independence.

Today, citizens in Sierra Leone and Nova Scotia continue to honor their Black American roots, but elsewhere the diaspora that followed the American Revolution has been largely forgotten. It ought not to be; the unlikely alliance between British military leaders and enslaved Americans, in fact, helped plant the seeds for broader emancipation.

Individuals like Washington and Peters demonstrated that those who had been enslaved were as willing to fight and die for the British empire as any other redcoat, chipping away at entrenched notions of racial inferiority. And in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, they boldly demanded equal justice, representation in government, and a measure of prosperity. After imposing its 1807 ban on the slave trade, Britain abolished slavery throughout the empire in 1833.

In the young United States, enslavers did not soon forget what they saw as Britain’s theft of their property. But American abolitionists such as John Quincy Adams would come to view Britain’s wartime proclamations as important legal precedents in their own struggle to end lifetime servitude.

A Massachusetts lawyer named Benjamin Butler had also studied the British documents. When the Civil War began in 1861, he was made commander of Fort Monroe, near Norfolk, which remained in Union hands. Shortly after Butler arrived, three enslaved men who had been ordered to dig trenches for the Confederates sought refuge at the fort; General Butler declared them spoils of war and refused to hand them over to the enemy. “Out of this incident seems to have grown one of the most sudden and important revolutions in popular thought which took place during the whole war,” wrote two of President Abraham Lincoln’s secretaries.

Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts privately lobbied Lincoln to emancipate and arm Black Americans, but the president feared this move would incur a court challenge from white northerners. Sumner, however, insisted that the edicts made by British leaders like Dunmore during the Revolution provided the necessary legal cover.

This argument eventually persuaded Lincoln. His famous 1863 Emancipation Proclamation was, like those made some nine decades before, tentative and conditional. This time, however, it sounded the death knell for the American institution of slavery.

“Hats and bonnets were in the air, and we have three cheers for Abraham Lincoln,” Frederick Douglass wrote after witnessing a reading of the decree in New York City. “And three cheers for about everybody else.” Those cheers should sound for Black Patriots who fought for American independence, as well as for exiled Black Loyalists like Harry Washington, who helped pave the way for a nation more willing to uphold its most vaunted ideal.

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You Have No Idea How Hard It Is to Be a Reenactor

Benedict Arnold's boot wouldn't come off, and other hardships from my weekend in the Revolutionary War.

by Caity Weaver



A (reenactor portraying a) British soldier at Fort Ticonderoga

This article was featured in the One Story to Read Today newsletter. [Sign up for it here.](#)

Benedict Arnold had been growing hunkier all afternoon.

Incarnated, at the moment, by Cameron Green, the director of interpretation at historic Fort Ticonderoga, Arnold had spent much of this May Friday on horseback. Sixty rain-numbed Revolutionary War reenactors had sloshed in his wake, marching up forest trails and past a Texaco station, in period-correct leather buckle shoes (not engineered to withstand repeated impact with modern Vermont's asphalt highways) and period-correct wool coats (now ponderously wet, stinking of sheep). "Give 'em hell, boys!" a local resident had hollered from his farmhouse.

Saturday morning would mark the 250th anniversary of [the fort's seizure in 1775](#) by the Green Mountain Boys—a rumbustious militia of proto-Vermonters who spent years violently defending their bite-size territory—but so far the rain was at best blighting and at worst obliterating every enriching activity the Fort Ticonderoga staff had dreamed up. A plan for the reenactors to sleep under starlight when we'd arrived on Thursday had been downgraded to a plan to shiver in a barn all night. A plan to shoot muskets had been canceled. A plan to teach elementary-age children how to cook a meal over an open fire in a town green had devolved into a horde of famished, filthy adults flooding into a schoolroom; propping their dripping muskets against shelves of picture books; and scavenging pencil-shaped cookies leftover from Teacher Appreciation Week. Everything was going less smoothly than it had in 1775. If the partially defrosted reenactors under Cam Green's supervision—individuals who had come from as far away as North Carolina; who had had to submit color photos of themselves in 1770s-era clothing and proof of insurance to be granted the privilege of portraying 18th-century guerrillas—camped out again tonight, there was likely to be a mass hypothermia event.

And so the majority of the group—approximately 40 men in 18th-century clothes, one 16-year-old boy in 18th-century clothes, and one reporter who had been explicitly forbidden from attempting to wear 18th-century clothes (because, a senior member of Fort Ticonderoga's staff had insisted, she did not possess the fortitude to dress in leather breeches and buckle shoes for the first time *while* hiking 18 miles *while* conducting interviews, and he was right, he was right; thank God she had dressed in tactical hiking togs woven of such state-of-the-art ultralight moisture-wicking plastic that she herself could be said to be reenacting [the life of a Poland Spring bottle](#))—had crammed into a one-bathroom family lake house for the night.

Its living room rapidly reached the swelter and volume of a blacksmith's forge operating as a front for an unlicensed tavern. Upon entry, about half of the company sloughed off their soaking breeches to stand around in voluminous shirts, pantsless, like giant toddlers; within minutes the place reeked of sodden natural fibers, sweaty armpits, and, intermittently, a tropical kiss of summer, owing to a decision by some of the men to repurpose some scrounged-up kids' sunblock as cologne. "Okay, so this is not—this is *not* coke," a man told me as he sprinkled a pinch of the brown powder he had just snorted off a sword onto the web of skin between my thumb and forefinger. (It wasn't coke! It was snuff—"battle crank," they called it—dispensed from a porcelain canister with HONOUR TO THE KING hand-painted in spidery letters on its lid.)

Yet as the tide of fiascoes rose around him, Benedict Arnold (still, in 1775, a charismatic Patriot; it would take five years of grievances to whet him into [the traitor of 1780](#)) was becoming—I will say this as clinically and dispassionately as possible—ravishing.

Cam had appeared in the barn that morning looking neat as a nutcracker. His regimental coat was festooned with epaulets (fringed) and silver buttons (dazzling). His Tresemme waves were bound tidily back. His calves were encased in trim black riding boots with cognac cuffs.



Benedict Arnold on the shore of Lake Champlain (Scott Rossi for *The Atlantic*)

But as the day sploshed on, Cam came to resemble more and more a windswept pirate on the cover of a romance novel. By dusk, the men in the lake house—men with wives and girlfriends wisely absent—were cracking jokes about his comely dishevelment. One observed that Cam, a 34-year-old father in buff breeches and a billowing white shirt, had metamorphosed into the group's "zaddy." Cam's hair escaped its binding. He shed his scarlet coat. His swaggering boots remained powerfully on.

His swaggering boots would not come off, actually. Cam couldn't get—*huff*—he couldn't—*gasp*—he couldn't get the—*goddamn*—boots off.

Now Cam was levitating horizontally. Men dressed as sailors and farmers and fopdoodles were yanking his arms and left leg toward opposite ends of

the lake house, as if attempting to pull apart a stupidly huge party cracker. Cam had to be wrenched free because the alternative—having one's feet totally and permanently encased in period-correct leather riding boots—would be a suffocating fate, and also because he ran a real risk of developing trench foot if he slept in the boots.

“How you doing over there, Cam?”

In reply, a voice, muffle-crushed beneath three men who were using their body weight to pin Cam to the floor while other men pulled on his right boot, or on the shoulders of the men in front of them who were pulling on his right boot, or on the shoulders of the men in front of them who were pulling on the shoulders of the men in front of them, etc.—in a chain that extended out the door to the stairs—a voice so tiny, it sounded like it was coming from the bottom of a well: “I’m good!”

Baby powder was sifted into Cam’s boot. PAM cooking spray was *chhhh’ed* around the cuff’s rim. Half a bottle of olive oil was glugged down into it. Cam lay on the floor with his eyes shut in concentration as a man wearing a floral neckerchief tied around his forehead, Rambo-style, attempted to rip Cam’s foot off his body.

“I’ve seen this happen before,” said a lanky apprentice leather-breeches maker from Colonial Williamsburg. “The long heel measurement wasn’t taken correctly!” Fresh hands kept appearing—at one point I counted 20 people in the bedroom—eager for a chance to pull the sword from the stone. Cam’s leg, by the way, was now fantastically slippery, because it was drenched in olive oil. A man in a red knit cap yanked as hard as he could. “That’s just—my ankle—breaking!” Cam yelled.

No one suggested slicing the boots open with kitchen shears. Custom leather footwear cannot be destroyed lightly—especially if you have to wear it tomorrow because you are starring in a 250th-anniversary commemorative reenactment of the capture of Fort Ticonderoga.



The Green Mountain Boys cross the lake in a hand-built boat. (Scott Rossi for *The Atlantic*)

Americans have been reenacting the Revolution since before the war was even over: In 1778, a lieutenant colonel in the Continental Army [wrote in his journal](#) that his men had marked the anniversary of a “Glorious victory Obtain'd over the british” at Saratoga with “a Grand sham fight.” Flurries of Revolutionary War battle reenactments were also recorded around the centennial, in 1876; participants then included many Civil War veterans, separated from real battlefield carnage by only a few summers.

Reenactors have no official governing body, though many belong to associations that coordinate events among local groups, whose members share tips and gear. Estimating how many Americans participate in reenactments is a bit like trying to figure out how many people carve jack-o’-lanterns. Counting buckle-shoe sales won’t help you any more than

counting harvested pumpkins would; some reenactors make their own shoes. But I can tell you that, as the United States barrels toward the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of its proclaimed independence, they are legion.

Beverly Gage: America is suffering an identity crisis

The reenactor community generally discourages members from claiming to be dressed as specific historical figures—though a few key roles may be assigned in highly choreographed public-facing reenactments. A reenactment of Washington crossing the Delaware, for instance, needs to have a Washington. With the exception of Arnold and a pugnacious Ethan Allen (the leader of the Green Mountain Boys, famous for yelling, as interpreted that weekend by a man named Tommy Tringale), plus a coterie of commanders at a reenactment of the attack on Bunker Hill, few reenactors I met purported to be dead people. They portrayed, instead, historically plausible types (a scraggly farmer; a wealthy townsman), which reenactors call “impressions.”

Who would you be if you traveled to America’s colonial past in 2025? If you have a large disposable income, an obsessive personality, an idolatrous affection for protocol, or ideally all three, then you possess the trappings for a fine portrayal of a member of the King’s army. Top-notch redcoat impressions are renowned among “RevWar” reenactors for requiring an exceptional degree of precision, and also for their eye-bursting expense. The stiff bands of contrasting fabric, or “lace,” sewn around each button on the front of a British regimental coat can cost several hundred dollars. Again, just the part around the buttons. An entire “kit”—reenactors’ term for all the clothing, weapons, and associated paraphernalia—can easily cost thousands. (Reenactors reject the assumption that they wear “costumes,” which they do not consider functional clothing.)



A man named Sean, who works as a military contractor—one of several Green Mountain Boys who normally “do British” but were slumming it as rebels for the weekend—told me that he likes to portray a British officer because of how hard it is. British Army reenactors, he said, possess “a desire

to do things to a level of research perfection.” Unlike the tailors, sailors, and shopkeepers who took up arms against them, the British forces were professional soldiers. “We can’t look like a quote-unquote ragtag band of militia,” Sean said. “We have to look like people who, this is their job.” Emily, a college student studying music—one of three women dressed up as a Green Mountain Boy—told me she delights in “the degree of organization” and “very standardized drilling” inherent in redcoat portrayals.

(Note: People who spend thousands of dollars outfitting themselves as 18th-century British soldiers reacted so strongly when I asked if they considered themselves Anglophiles—they do not—that I felt embarrassed to have even suggested they might.)

If you want to be a reenactor but are laid-back, messy, or broke, you might be better suited to portraying an American. Or rather, a “Patriot”; technically, there were no “Americans” at Fort Ticonderoga or Lexington and Concord. The American Revolution began as a British civil war; before the Declaration of Independence in the summer of 1776, indignant colonial citizens considered themselves as “British” as the crimson-coated soldiers sent to patrol them.

If you have a contrarian streak, you could portray a Loyalist—a colonial civilian who supported the British Army. This is a less popular impression. On Friday morning at the Green Mountain Boys’ first campsite, standing over the simmering pot containing “breakfast” (rice mush and meat hunks, with sprinklings of rainwater), I asked Brian, a public-school teacher from Connecticut, why he’d chosen this role.

“Because we’re the good guys,” he told me, with the grin of a man who has tricked his fourth-period social-studies class into engaging with today’s lesson. Loyalists “were law-abiding citizens who didn’t want a war,” Brian said. “They’re not for rebellion. They’re not for insurrection.” In lieu of breeches—too tight, he said—Brian’s kit included goldenrod-yellow plaid trousers and a coat of pine-needle green. “I’m a dirt farmer,” he replied, when I asked what sort of person might have worn such attire.

“The American war for independence was started by the 1 percent, and the 99 percent fought it,” Brian told me. “It wasn’t a change for the better.

Slavery increased. We were in debt.” The new government even broke its promise to pay the soldiers who had fought to create it. “Hence Shays’s Rebellion in 1786,” he said. “*Hey, man, I fought for this country and I can’t afford my farm now.* It’s very sad.”

(If you enjoy having sex with multiple partners, that could make you a British soldier, too—*allegedly*. At an event weeks later, one bubbly young reenactor portraying a Patriot civilian murmured to me out of the corner of her mouth that “a lot of the Brits are swingers.” The Americans, she said, tend to keep things more family-oriented. I was unable to confirm any of this.)

Who exactly does this kind of thing? (Revolutionary War reenacting, I mean!) I met a former punk rocker who now works in marketing, a Delta pilot, a nurse, a priest, an attorney, every kind of teacher, an admin guy from MIT, a park ranger, someone who works on historical sailing vessels, a woman who retired from a software company, a guy who had a gun pulled on him during sex by his then-girlfriend, and a man who’d driven from Arizona with his wife. Many of the reenactors I met were from Massachusetts, with accents so vehement, they can be transcribed only with symbols that evolved in the lacunae of standard English orthography (“BunkÃ Hill”).

Men far outnumbered women, and a bright ribbon of divorce wove through the older males, girding some and racing toward others. Most were white; the current crop of Revolutionary War reenactors might be whiter than the original Continental Army, of which Black and Native American soldiers are believed to have constituted as much as 15 percent by 1780. Many of the reenactors were far younger than I’d expected, in their 20s and 30s, though a significant portion were considerably older; nearly everyone was older than the average Continental soldier, who was 22.

Reenactors can be roughly divided into two sects: “progressive,” whose members’ fervid commitment to historical accuracy typically leads to them hand-sewing every layer of their 18th-century ensembles; and “mainstream,” whose practitioners are fine buying machine-stitched garments off the rack. I met more progressives than mainstreamers but, regardless of faction, age, or gender, participants’ politics skewed markedly left. Revolutionary War

reenactors, an anthropologist noted in [a 1999 report for the National Park Service](#), tend to be politically more liberal than [their Civil War peers](#). (This is perhaps because a person is most likely to reenact a conflict that occurred within driving distance of his or her home, and deep-blue New England was not a combat zone in the Civil War.)

Three different white men emphasized to me the necessity of incorporating the perspectives of “those who only appear in legal documents, but were real human beings,” as one put it. Patriot reenactors insisted that their aim is not to lionize the Americans. “It’s not ‘The British were bad and the Americans were good,’” one told me. American colonists indiscriminately killed the men, women, and children they encountered already living on the continent, and imported new ones solely to enslave them. “Like, we are not this noble country here.”

Multiple reenactors mentioned that they found the fiddly work of sewing historical garments relaxing. Others cited the pleasure of socializing without cellphones. A nurse named Alicia, wearing a beautifully hand-stitched gown the color of dark sea glass splattered with blood-red flowers, told me she doesn’t like the 18th-century aesthetic “at all” but enjoys reenacting this era, because many of its associated activities (solving problems without modern implements, cooking over open fires) are physically grueling and require getting dirty.

One trait common to every reenactor with whom I spoke was a scorching, irrepressible desire to share factual information with strangers. Among the things I learned: It was fashionably expensive for a man to order his coat, waistcoat, and breeches “ditto”—meaning made of the same fabric and color—in which case the resulting suit of clothes would be referred to as “[a ditto suit](#).” An herbal analogue to aspirin can be made from decocting the bark of a willow tree into tea. Many redcoats’ coats were, in fact, slightly orange (enlisted men’s coats were colored with inexpensive dye made from the root of the madder plant; the darker carmine dye of crushed cochineal bugs was reserved for the coats of officers). The amount of forest covering Massachusetts has increased more than 100 percent since the 1830s. No one who wore one called it a “tricorn hat.” Muskets with an external safety catch, called “doglocks,” were considered obsolete by the 1770s—

“Sorry,” said the 19-year-old who had just spent four minutes describing certain particulars of 18th-century French firearm mechanisms to me. “That was a lot of autism.”

My foremost anxieties about pretending to live in the 18th century:

1. I would have to camp, which I hate.
2. I wouldn’t be able to wear my glasses, which I need (because, although one Pilgrim came over with a pair of spectacles in 1620, eyeglasses were still relatively uncommon in colonial America).
3. I would have to be a woman.

This last one stings to admit. Because—actually—I am a girl’s girl! You can ask any girl (from a list of girls I have preapproved for questioning). My initial research into the roles of women during the Revolutionary War produced a list of horrible jobs. I could:

1. Do laundry.
2. Have sex in exchange for rice.
3. Get murdered, my death inspiring troops to battlefield glory.

This last item was the job(?) of Hannah Caldwell, a mother of nine from New Jersey who was shot in 1780 while looking out her bedroom window, apparently by a British soldier. Fury over Caldwell’s killing is often credited with reinvigorating American troops; as such, she is frequently included in lists of women important to the war effort. (North Caldwell, New Jersey, Tony Soprano’s hometown, is named for her … husband.)

My list was not exhaustive, of course. I could also be a nurse or cook food—okay, now it’s exhaustive. Historians estimate that some 2,000 female “[camp followers](#)” marched with American troops. Many of them were the wives of enlisted men; some were widows, runaway servants, or otherwise impoverished; some brought children. These women performed vital tasks in exchange for food, and George Washington complained about them repeatedly. He issued orders that “expressly forbid” the women “to ride in the waggons”—for any reason “at all.” “A clog upon every movement,” he called them. (It was as if he knew me personally.)

I do not intend to denigrate the contributions of, for instance, Continental Army laundresses, who stripped the skin from their hands boiling, wringing, and scrubbing a modicum of sanitation into Washington's fetid forces, far more of whom died of disease than in combat. This labor was strenuous, challenging, and shamefully undervalued—and that is why it was impossible to feel excited about the prospect of performing or even pretending to perform it. I wanted to shoot a gun.



Irritatingly, it seemed that reenactors' fetishistic commitment to gun safety meant that I would be stuck (with the peerless honor of) being a woman. The only thing the average reenactor loves more than accurately portraying life in the 18th century is: safety precautions. "Safety—No. 1," I overheard one Revolutionary War veteran remind a newcomer. "Authenticity—No. 2. Have fun—No. 3."

For me to portray an armed man with an established unit, a reenactor named Dakota warned me in a phone call, would likely entail completing a “labor intensive” six-month training process that included memorizing the exercises of a 1764 drill manual until I could perform them perfectly while maneuvering a 12-pound musket (which itself would run me more than \$1,000). I had stumbled into the only cranny of American culture in which firearms are tightly controlled.

At times, reenactors’ twin fascinations—authenticity and preventive safety measures—are irreconcilable. A stitch-perfect reproduction of a fisherman turned militiaman’s indigo-dyed knit Monmouth cap can lend only so much veritas to a deadly battle re-created with prescheduled water breaks.

Did you know that it is against the rules of America’s national parks to pretend to die in them? If you are reenacting a real battle, that is. Reenactments that imitate exchanges of fire, hand-to-hand combat, “or any other form of simulated warfare” are prohibited in all 433 prelapsarian sites under the stewardship of the National Park Service. “Even the best-researched and most well-intentioned representation of combat cannot replicate the tragic complexity of real warfare,” [the park-management guide beseeches](#). It is hard to argue with this, particularly if one has ever read, for instance, the memoir of [Private Joseph Plumb Martin](#), who was 19 when he wintered in New Jersey under Washington’s command. “We were absolutely, literally starved,” he wrote. “I saw several of the men roast their old shoes and eat them, and I was afterwards informed by one of the officers’ waiters, that some of the officers killed and ate a favorite little dog.”

And yet. If one’s goal is to captivate the public with wonders of the past, so much so that they might care about a former age enough to actually learn something, explosive combat reenactments are probably the most efficient way to accomplish this. Things that are shocking and terrible provoke our curiosity; if nothing ever went wrong, there would be no newspapers. Also: If you’ve spent six months learning how to properly fire a musket that set you back more than \$1,000, you don’t want to just walk around holding it.

It is fortunate, then, that some areas of this country (most of it, in fact) are considerably more lax about who is allowed to carry a weapon. While trying to find some work-around by which I would be able to fire an 18th-century

musket without sacrificing months of my life learning how to do it safely, I heard of a ginormous reenactment of the Battle of Bunker Hill, the war's first major contest, taking place in June. The original battle site is preserved today by the National Park Service as a darling little plot penned in on all sides by urban Boston. This precludes it from accommodating thousands of visitors eager to witness simulated slaughter. The reenactment, therefore, would be held 35 miles up the coast, in Gloucester, Massachusetts. "And because it's not happening on National Park property," my tipster informed me, "we have a little more flexibility."



An American militiaman fires his musket—containing black powder but no projectiles—at the Battle of Bunker Hill. (Scott Rossi for *The Atlantic*)

But first, I would have to be a woman.

After several weeks harassing various kind reenactors by phone call and email, I was dumped into the aproned lap of Stacy Booth, a member of Colonel Bailey's 2nd Massachusetts Regiment, which provides impressions of individuals who might have lived between 1770 and 1783. Stacy was coordinating civilian activities (that is: activities relating to 18th-century civilian reenactors) for the Bunker Hill event. She agreed to help me fulfill my dream of enacting reenacting, and we decided that I would spend one day as a civilian woman and one as an enlisted man.

I do not know how to sew anything, including a suite of 18th-century clothing. I got my husband to help me take a dozen persnickety measurements of my physique so that I could order custom garments from some of the foremost retailers of 18th-century-clothing reproductions—companies whose product quality, frequently mocked by hard-core reenactors, is, at the same time, generally deemed passable. Stacy introduced me to Susan Stewart, another stalwart of the 2nd Massachusetts, who agreed to help me learn to dress myself, and to provide additional clothing for me to borrow, if I flew to Boston a couple of weeks before the event.

This was fortunate, because neither my custom-made “Green Linen Gown” (\$385 plus shipping) nor my “Linen Frock Coat—Short Collar” (\$425 plus shipping) remotely fit. (How far off were my measurements? I am an adult woman of above-average height, and the nonreturnable gown, which I donated to the 2nd Massachusetts, is set to be repurposed for a 6-year-old girl.)

Within an hour of meeting Susan, I was nearly naked in her home. She laced me into my stays, instructing me in how to “fluff” my breasts upward as part of the process, and kindly yet firmly correcting my assumption that I would not be allowed to wear underwear during the reenactment. (“They did not. We all do.”) The nearly \$2,000 this magazine had splashed out for my clothing, much of which did not fit, appeared to cause her bodily pain. She seriously considered spending hours altering my child-size dress, but in the end settled for loaning me virtually everything I needed, and she also made me lunch. I remind the reader that this is merely Susan’s hobby—a hobby in which she pays to participate.

I felt uglier as a middle-class woman in 1775 than I ever have in my life. From the inside out, I wore: low-rise hip-hugger underwear (not period-correct); white thigh-high cotton stockings fastened with cotton ribbon garters; a white linen shift with commodious sleeves; the buff-colored linen stays, which blockaded my torso yet neglected to bestow the fetching hourglass silhouette imposed by modern corsets; a green linen petticoat (essentially a skirt split into two panels of fabric hung on cotton string); mushroom-brown hanging linen pockets (tied around my waist); a brown linen petticoat; a green linen bedgown (functionally, the ensemble's shirt); a linen apron of bitsy blue and white checks; an enormous neckerchief hand-dyed with soft-red and dark-pink flora on a field of olive brown, folded in half diagonally and stretched over the shoulders; leather mules; and a white ruffled cap fastened around my skull with a burgundy ribbon tied in a bow (and further secured via a hidden plastic comb—not period-correct).

I had removed my makeup, nail polish, wedding ring, and earrings, and inserted contact lenses. When I studied myself in the mirror of the public restroom at the park where the Bunker Hill reenactment was taking place, what looked back at me was a shapeless mound of fabrics crowned by my plain stupid face—devoid of the natural glow I daily simulate with cosmetics—and the mortifying bonnet.

I probed my reflection for some trace of my own Revolution-era ancestor, whose features are a mystery to me. Priscilla Timbers was 18 in 1775 and resided in Virginia, about 16 miles (via I-95) from the farm where George Washington spent his childhood. Like me, she was the daughter of a white woman and a Black man; her mother was most likely a free servant working in the same household as her father, an enslaved man. I tried to picture myself as I imagine Priscilla: a tastefully sexy teen. Would she have looked better than I did under so many yards of fabric? How big was the bow on her cap? Did she have any inkling, in March 1775, that, as her fellow Virginian Patrick Henry thundered in a speech in Richmond, “The war is inevitable, and let it come!” Might a second- or thirdhand account of Henry’s cataclysmic conclusion—“Give me liberty or give me death!”—have reached her by June? How, if at all, would such news make its way to a really quite striking teen?

Meandering through these thoughts, I was assaulted by a traumatizing realization: I am 36. I therefore, in all likelihood, more closely resemble a faintly suntanned version of Priscilla's white mother, who was about 40 years old in 1775. In fact, Sarah's whiteness is the only reason I am aware that her daughter existed; it created a vine of legal paperwork that curlicued across generations, hundreds of years later spiraling through free online genealogy forums, where I tripped across it one day after Googling my grandfather's name. Under Virginia law, Sarah's free status, impoverished as it was, conferred upon her daughter, and her daughter's sons and daughters, the same freedom.

The traces of Priscilla in written records mostly take the form of attestations in which various Caucasians state under oath that they have long been acquainted with Priscilla's family, and know her mother to have been a free white woman; or know that certain people are Priscilla's children and grandchildren and, thus, descended from free, white Sarah. If Sarah had been enslaved, there would be no documents to give me even this brumous view into her and her daughter's existences.

I have no idea how these members of my family, only a few generations removed from me, experienced the Revolution. This is one of the reenactors' central points: Sarah and Priscilla were part of the reality that formed my country and my self, and I don't know anything about their lives.

The Bunker Hill reenactment coincided with the first sunny Saturday to enlighten the Boston area in 15 weeks, which may explain why some 20,000 people turned out to Gloucester's Stage Fort Park that weekend to witness it. The organizers were hell-bent on doing it right, which meant huge, which meant six British tall ships in the harbor, which meant they needed a harbor. They also needed sufficient space (and porta-johns) for 1,000 camping reenactors, a hill for soldiers to run up, and room for members of the public to watch it all unfold. The seaside site in Gloucester satisfied all these criteria. And because the interpretation would take place in a random municipal park, people were free to die there, as long as they were only pretending to.



The British arrive at Bunker Hill. (Scott Rossi for *The Atlantic*)

I emerged from my tent that Saturday morning half dressed, in my bedgown and just one petticoat—Susan had promised to help lace me into my stays—and picked my way through alleys of spectral white tents to the 2nd Massachusetts’ commissary. For \$20 and a volunteer shift, group members would receive five meals, plus snacks. A cast-iron pan the size of an extra-large pizza box sat atop flaming logs; inside it were more scrambled eggs than I’d ever seen in my life (“23 dozen”). Hot water for coffee dangled in a metal pail. By 7 o’clock, I was shoveling down expertly charred bacon like one who has overwintered with General Washington in New Jersey. Stacy’s husband, Mark, the captain of the 2nd Massachusetts, sipped a gleaming Capri Sun. Visible anachronisms were permitted until eight, when the event would officially open to the public.

The June 17, 1775, Battle of Bunker Hill was fought between forces roughly quadruple the size of those in our reenactment. But, like the 2025 event, it did not occur on Bunker Hill. Patriot militia forces, encircling British-occupied Boston, had been instructed to work through the night to fortify a strategic position atop one of two hills—Bunker Hill—overlooking the city. When the sun rose on the 17th, it was revealed that the colonists—possibly out of a last-minute change of plans, possibly out of moonlit confusion—had built a rough defensive fort on the other hill, Breed's Hill. [That's the one the British charged.](#)

Even at one-quarter scale, the re-created battle really was something. Weapons were loaded with black powder. Real cannons boomed every few seconds, and the rackete-crack of real muskets was constant. The smoke was thick enough to cast its own shadows upon the hill. The sulfurous scent of hell wafted on the sea breeze.

The British reenactors could not help but lure the audience's attention away from the Patriots. They moved, in their smart red coats, with ordinary intention, firing in sequence, attacking, falling back, and redoubling their fake efforts. The colonists, at first, simply picked off oncoming redcoats from behind the safety of their redoubt, until, excited and discombobulated by the macabre spectacle of the slope disappearing beneath the bodies of the enemy, they began firing randomly—all of this playing out as it had on the day, when the undisciplined Patriot forces quickly ran out of ammunition.



For someone like me, who has trouble picturing things that are not immediately in front of her, watching people run up the hill was illuminating. A historian with a mic provided play-by-play narration for the crowd, explaining actions that were inscrutable to the casual viewer. “You can see Americans are pounding stakes in the field in front of the redoubt,” he said. Why did the audience think they were doing that?

“Trip wire,” a spectator in a beach chair in front of me confidently told a child.

In fact, the stakes were distance markers. Smooth-bore muskets, the emcee explained, fire inaccurately beyond about 50 yards; markers like these helped the colonists hold their fire until it would be most deadly. (The possibly apocryphal imperative to delay shooting “’til you see the whites of their eyes” infiltrated the American lexicon from Bunker Hill.)

The most difficult job any reenactor performed that day was not scattering white mice with painted red eyes around the food area (the task I was assigned at lunchtime). It was not shouting historically attested quotations during the simulated battle. It wasn't even manning the smoldering cannons—a job that has, for centuries, put both soldiers and reenactors in a position to possibly have their arms blown off. (One cannoneer reenactor told me that her mom's cousin "lost his hands" operating a cannon during the bicentennial.) It was being a British soldier who was killed in the redcoats' first failed charge up the hill. These reenactors were forced to lie face down in the sun-scorched grass for nigh on an hour, baking in their red wool uniforms (and, in the cases of those outfitted as grenadiers, towering fur hats).

Hours after the battle, when the spectators had gone home for the day and the undead soldiers had dusted themselves off, hundreds of reenactors, including several I had known back when they were Green Mountain Boys, gathered in the dark for a "jollification"—a chance to drink free cider, ale, lager, wine, and molasses rum that various participants had managed to procure in great quantities. An 18th-century-dressed stranger materialized out of the black night—there was no electricity at the jollification—and offered me psychedelic mushrooms. (I declined her offer.) The reenactors were still scream-singing 18th-century prison ballads when I descended the hill back to my tent, clawed myself out of my stays, and fell asleep on the ground.

So many reenactors explained to me so many times the mechanics by which a marble-size lead musket ball is ejected through the (smooth, not rifled) barrel of a musket that I am tempted to recite them here, just to prove that I can. But I can't spare 5,000 words. By the time I got to the Bunker Hill reenactment, I had heard enough musket horror stories—about a gun kicking back and breaking a man's nose because he didn't realize he had loaded it with three charges of gunpowder; about how, if a paper-wadded musket ball is not nestled in powder at the very bottom of your gun's breech, "you have yourself a pipe bomb"—that I had grown afraid to shoot one. But I had begged to do it, and so I would have to.

On Sunday morning, I dressed as a man in birch-colored linen breeches that fastened in front with two quarter-size buttons; a linen "work shirt" worn

over a chest binder from Amazon (the latter neither period-correct nor—we’re all friends here; we can say it—greatly needed); a pale waistcoat with 12 silver buttons; a cumbersome brown frock coat; a black cocked hat; a raspberry kerchief knotted jauntily around my neck; the most discreet black sneakers I could find; and gigantic, flappy gaiters to hide them.

Though the men’s kit was even more stifling, I was less bothered by my appearance in it, because I looked so completely foreign to myself. (Also, no member of the public reached out to rub the fabric of the men’s garments between their fingertips—“Nice linen!”—as one had when I was a woman in skirts.)

Thus attired, I stood on the Atlantic shore, clutching the musket to what my instructor referred to as “the meaty part” of my shoulder. The gun was so heavy, I had to cantilever my upper body backward to keep it aloft. I pulled the trigger, producing a tiny fireball and a loud crack. “*Baaaaaaaah!*” I said. To my relief and delight, the firearm had not exploded in my face, maiming me for life. I couldn’t wait to put it down.

In the afternoon, the reenactors staged the Battle of Bunker Hill all over again, for the Sunday crowd. On both days, nuance was pulverized in the heat of war. “These are the good guys,” a father told his son, pointing at the Patriot forces. He probably did not know that, actually, many soldiers serving the Crown held ideas about liberty that were at least as, if not more, radical than those held by many Patriots, as had been explained to me at the lake house, right before our emergency pizzas (thank you, Cam) arrived.



The careful observer might spy signs of modernity. (Scott Rossi for *The Atlantic*)

Watching a dozen redcoat reenactors face-plant in the grass probably did not help the assembled spectators better comprehend the horrors of war. But many did learn something. A significant portion of the crowd seemed surprised and disappointed to discover—as they watched the King’s soldiers surge over the redoubt on their third charge attempt, taunting retreating colonial militiamen—that the Americans lost the Battle of Bunker Hill.

Back in Vermont, it took Cam’s men an hour to prize him out of his leather boots, which popped off in choking puffs of oiled baby powder. I was the only woman in the lake house of 41 people, and so was offered one of its three beds. (“A clog upon every movement!” Commander Washington snarled across the centuries.) The luckier Green Mountain Boys used couch parts for pillows; most lay on the bare floor. Ian, a 26-year-old preschool

teacher, who had slept Thursday night on a pile of straw, spent Friday night in a closet, on a mattress of pizza boxes. When morning came, Cam was back in his wet boots.

We resumed the march in winterish May drizzle and by mid-afternoon reached the spot whence, in 1775, the Green Mountain Boys launched their assault against the fort, silently sneaking across Lake Champlain. To ferry reenactors across, the astonishing Fort Ticonderoga staff had hand-built two flat-bottomed bateaux. The sun emerged while we rowed across the lake. On the New York shore, it shone through the fuzzy caterpillar heads of giant foxtail grass. The effect was enchanting, but not period-correct. Giant foxtail was introduced to North America by accident in the 1920s, mixed in with grain imported from Asia.

Because I was not wearing [period clothing](#), I could not participate in the climax of the reenactment, when the Green Mountain Boys, led by Ethan Allen and Benedict Arnold, would rush in and seize the fort. I wished them luck with the mission, and split off to claim a bleacher seat. The original Green Mountain Boys had stormed the gates at 3:30 a.m. When the commemorative reenactment—“REAL TIME REVOLUTION™ 3-Day Reenactment: No Quarter!”—[began 250 years later](#), the first evening stars were tiptoeing out. A fort historian set the scene: The British garrison was small, he explained, occupied by only 66 people—not just soldiers, but their families as well. In real life, the Green Mountain Boys had been guided the final stretch to the fort by a local lad who knew it better than any militiaman; he had spent all that day “playing with the boys” who lived there, he later recalled. He saw the soldiers’ sons “most every day.” They were his closest friends.



The careful observer might spy signs of modernity. (Scott Rossi for *The Atlantic*)

A few minutes later, cries of “Halt!” and “Alarm! Alarm!” echoed off the fort’s stone entryway. Reenactors portraying British sentries were bum-rushed by a swarm of whooping Green Mountain Boys. At a word from Arnold—“Get them out of their beds!”—a horde rushed into the garrison, emerging seconds later, dragging and pushing bewildered men, women, and children dressed in flimsy nightclothes into the hollow heart of the fort. The night had grown cold, and the families were ordered to kneel on the packed dirt. Some were in bare feet. “Be careful!” a woman called out. “There’s an infant right here!” There was an infant right there—a two-month-old boy, swaddled in period-correct cloth against a reenactor’s chest.

The Green Mountain Boys encircled the hostages, muskets aloft. Allen thundered a command for the British to hand over the fort. “If you do not

comply, or a single gun from this fort is fired, neither man, woman, or child will be left alive!" he yelled. "What?" gasped a cowering woman. A few Green Mountain Boys flipped their muskets around and menaced the kneelers with the butt ends. "For the sake of your men and their families," Arnold said to a British officer, "surrender this post."

All of this was surprisingly upsetting to witness. These were my sweet Green Mountain Boys? The ones who had spent two days drawing my attention to interesting birds' nests we marched past, sharing with me the orange peels they had candied themselves, and teaching me about buttons? When I'd first been introduced to them, they had been interchangeable old-timey people. Now I could easily distinguish between the beech-nut and ash browns of their wool coats. I knew exactly how damp those coats were, how overpoweringly they reeked of wet sheep. That was Emily, the fifer, dragging a man out of bed. That was Wilson, the genial leather-breeches maker, shoving a soldier to his knees. These were my friends? Holding a baby hostage at gunpoint? When the fort commander surrendered his sword, shrieks of glee ripped from the throats of the Green Mountain Boys.

I spent the night in a Super 8 and, when I returned to the fort the next morning, was jarred to realize that the reenactment had resumed. Oxen were taking part in it now; they were being used to tow the imprisoned soldiers' belongings, as the British-garrison reenactors—now prisoners of war—were marched toward the parking lot. When, I wondered, would the past end? I spotted a Green Mountain Boy I knew, Avi, and confessed to him that I'd found the reenactment unsettling. "It was a big tragedy," he said. "These people"—he cast his eyes over the parade ground—"were as American as us in a lot of ways."

This, perhaps, is the chief merit of reenacting: not that it glorifies past accomplishments or condemns past failures, but that it emphasizes how any action humans have ever performed, whether for good or for ill, has been carried out by ordinary women and men. The Green Mountain Boys were not hellhounds. They were farmers. Kind and generous fellows were no doubt among the British soldiers killed at Bunker Hill. George Washington turned out in clean military dress because women did his laundry.

This is an emboldening and disquieting way to apprehend history: not as a logical march toward an inevitable destination, but as a free-for-all dash subjected to the whims of regular people. It could end up anywhere.

And if people in the present fawn over history, it is no less true that many in the past were preoccupied with how the future would regard them. Take, for instance, these lines of poetry commemorating the 99th anniversary of American independence, in 1875:

They pierced the veil
Of distant years, lov'd us, although unborn,
And purchased, with their arms, and purest blood,
The bright inheritance we now enjoy.

The sentiment strikes 21st-century ears as unremarkable; we are accustomed to adulating the revolutionaries. But, in fact, the words sweat on the page. The poem, titled “The Anticipation for the 99th Year of American Independence,” was published in 1780, in the middle of the war. Independence was a fantasy, not yet secured. The writer dreamed of someday being remembered kindly—hopefully by Americans.

*This article appears in the [November 2025](#) print edition with the headline “*Into the Breeches.*”*

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Chapter Three: Independence

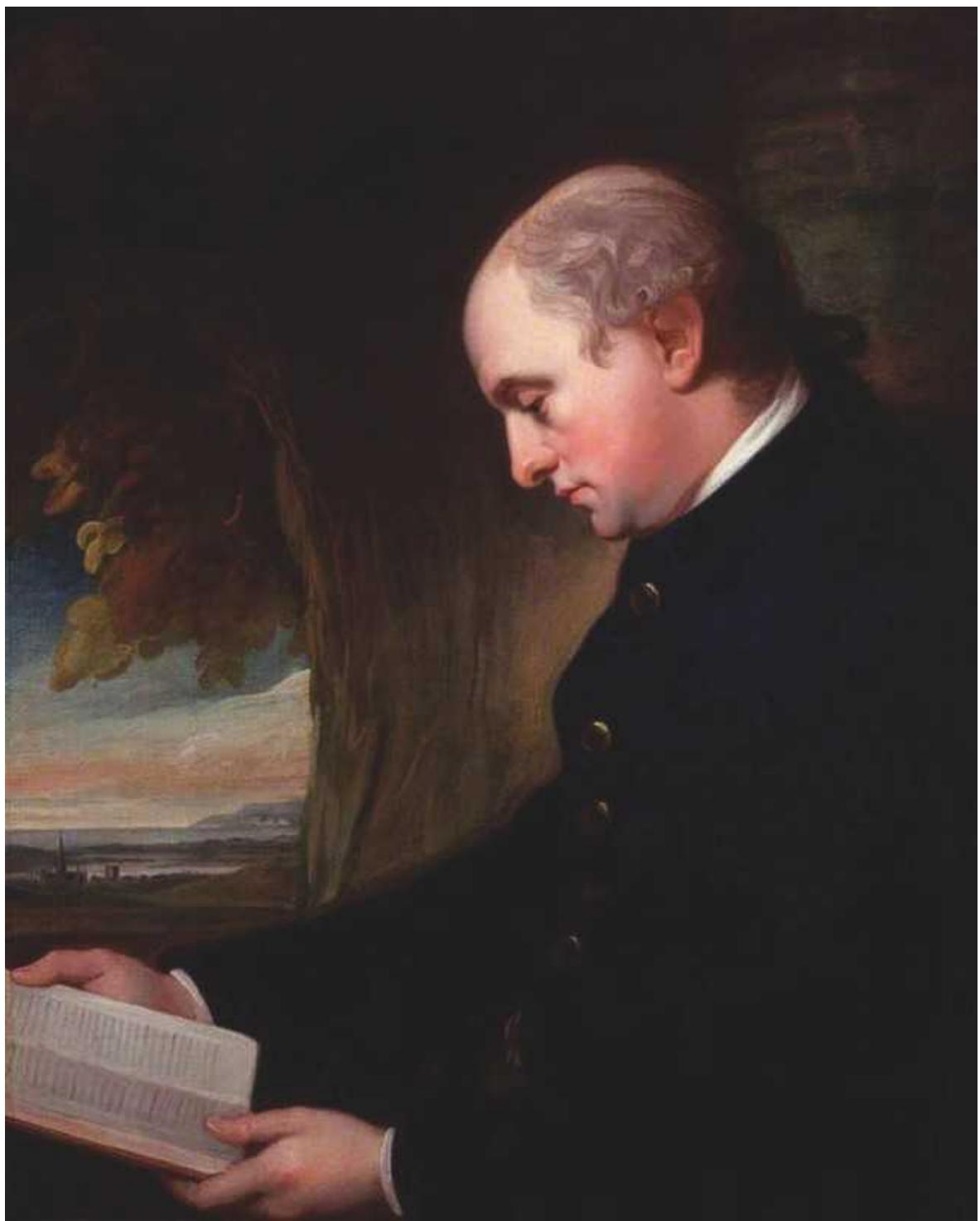
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Secrets of a Radical Duke

How a lost copy of the Declaration of Independence unlocked a historical mystery

by Danielle Allen

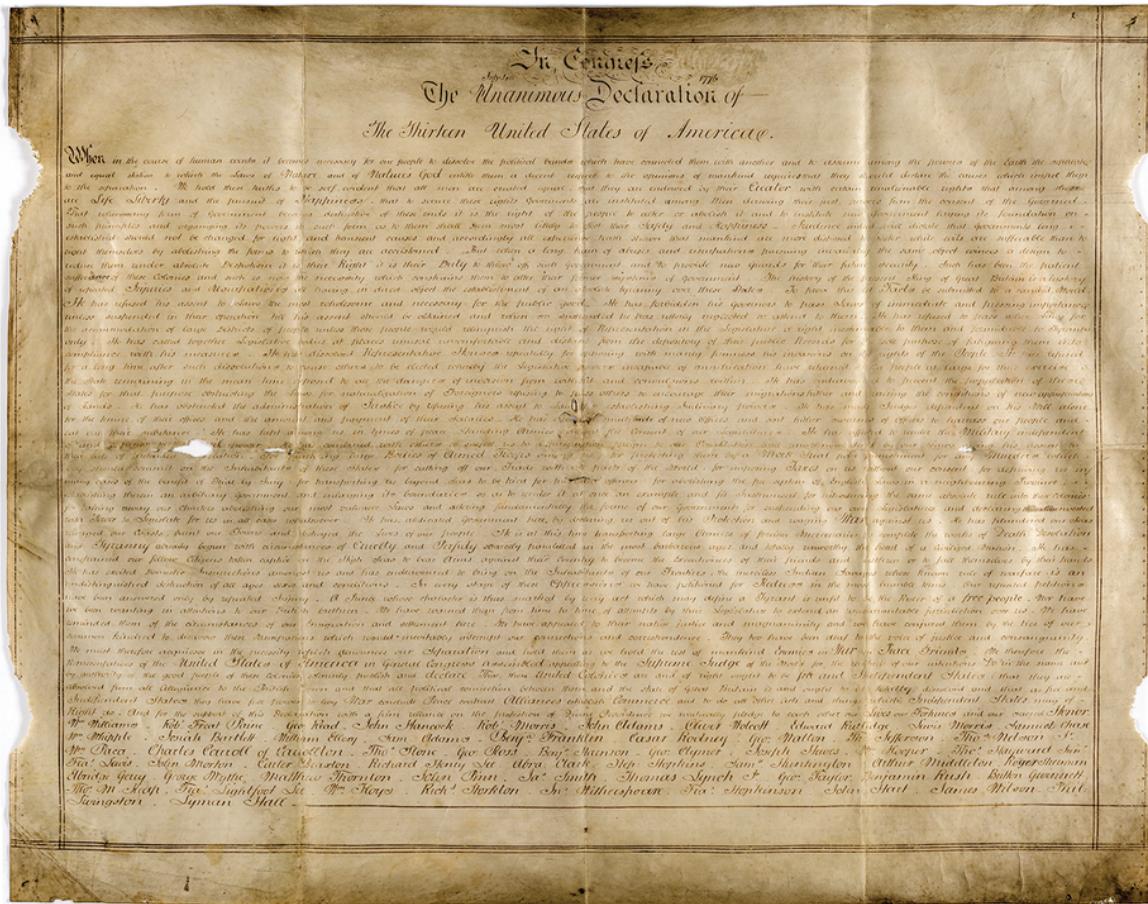


Portrait of Charles Lennox, the third Duke of Richmond, by George Romney, circa 1776 (The Picture Art Collection / Alamy)

In the summer of 2016, my family flew ahead of me to England for a vacation. Their taxi driver from the airport to London was chatty, and somehow the conversation drifted to the fact that he was from Lewes, in Sussex. This led to a bit of trivia about his hometown that the driver thought would be of interest to visitors from America: Thomas Paine, the Englishman turned American whose *Common Sense* would become the best-selling political pamphlet of the 18th century—and tilt America toward independence—had lived in Lewes for six years, working as a tax collector. When my husband relayed this to me by phone that evening, I sat up. I hadn't known that detail of Paine's biography but immediately saw its possible relevance to a historical puzzle I was trying to solve.

The research team I directed at Harvard had just made a startling discovery. As part of a project to find all copies of the Declaration of Independence produced between 1776 and 1826, we had stumbled on something special the previous year in the small West Sussex Record Office, in Chichester. Among its holdings was a large-scale ceremonial parchment of the Declaration of Independence. Prior to this find, it had been thought that a single large-scale parchment existed: [the one tourists can see protectively encased at the National Archives](#), in Washington, D.C. Although the Sussex Declaration, as it is now called, has the names of the signatories written out in a single clerk's hand, rather than with actual signatures, and is engrossed on sheepskin rather than the more expensive calfskin, it is otherwise as grand and impressive as the parchment in Washington. The unanswered question was how it had found its way to West Sussex.

We hypothesized that it had originally belonged to Charles Lennox, the third Duke of Richmond, a man of deeply radical views who was politically active in Britain before, during, and after the American Revolution. Goodwood, the Duke's family seat, is in Sussex. At some point prior to the 1950s, when it was deposited in the record office, [the Sussex Declaration](#) had come into the possession of the law firm that worked for the Duke of Richmond. It was unclear when or how the document might have found its way into the hands of the Duke himself. But that tip from the taxi driver suggested a possible answer: Had Charles Lennox and Thomas Paine known each other?



The Sussex Declaration, discovered in the West Sussex Record Office in Chichester in 2015—the only known large-scale parchment of the Declaration of Independence other than the one on display at the National Archives (West Sussex Record Office, Add MSS 8981)

Unexpectedly for a person of his class—a senior peer of the realm, coming immediately after the Royal Family—Lennox was committed to the political empowerment of British citizens. His commitment was unmatched by any other member of the aristocracy during the Age of Revolution.

Tall, rich, and beautiful, Richmond was hard to ignore. His eyes in particular were “superb,” as one contemporary remembered; Joshua Reynolds, who painted the Duke in his youth, remarked on their “fine and uncommon” dark-blue color.

As lord lieutenant of Sussex, Richmond was the first politician to take up the work of prison reformers and build a new prison within his jurisdiction on principles of rehabilitation. For him, economic and penal reform were necessary to improve the lives of the working poor and people in debt. In the House of Lords, the Duke castigated the ministry for allowing contractors and sinecurists to enrich themselves at public expense. In 1780, he became the first person to introduce a bill in Parliament to extend the right to vote to all adult men in Britain 21 and over. At the time, the franchise was limited to men owning a certain amount of land; some cities had no voice at all, and tiny “rotten boroughs” in the countryside with only a few voters returned members under aristocratic patronage. The result was a House of Commons riddled with corruption and profoundly unrepresentative. Although Richmond’s bill went nowhere, it laid the foundation for a century of reform to come. The Duke’s social standing gave fellow radicals a legitimacy they would not otherwise have had.

And now we surmised that he had possessed a large-scale copy of the Declaration. Textual clues yielded insight. The document appears to have been [commissioned by James Wilson](#), a Scottish American lawyer who himself signed the Declaration, participated in the Constitutional Convention, and became one of the first U.S. Supreme Court justices. Wilson read out the Declaration during the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, in June 1787, and would have needed a large, readable copy to do so. The Sussex Declaration, a colleague and I proposed in a scholarly article, was one of a set of two or three identical handwritten copies produced in advance of that occasion. Only the Sussex copy is known to have survived.

After we discovered the document, I found myself delving ever more deeply into Richmond’s world. At the time of the Duke’s death, his library held some 9,000 volumes. On the shelves at Goodwood you can find not only classics, as you might expect—first editions of Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and of works by Voltaire and Rousseau—but also, intriguingly, the 1775 and 1776 editions of the *Journals of the Continental Congress*, a reflection of Richmond’s political interests.

[Goodwood remains in the hands of the Lennox family](#) (the current Duke is the 11th). The south-facing wing of the great house contains the Large

Library and the Small Library—rooms linked by a hidden door behind a bookcase. The Small Library is a dreamy reading nook, with two floors of books, an ottoman, an armchair, and a desk. As I worked there over several summers, the butler, Monty, in a pinstripe vest and trousers, brought sparkling water, tea, and cookies.

I paid particular attention to the Duke's extensive collection of political pamphlets, each bound volume stamped with the word Tracts on the spine. Among those dozens of pamphlets, I came across one called *The Juryman's Touchstone*, a 95-page essay published pseudonymously in 1771 under the pen name Censor-General. The pamphlet offers a stirring defense of the rights of jurors in support of a publisher named Henry Woodfall. He had printed and distributed the famous anti-government Junius letters, and as a result faced criminal prosecution by the Crown.

The Junius letters grew out of the case of John Wilkes, a radical member of Parliament who had published essays that were vociferously critical of King George III's administration—and who then faced a charge of sedition. The Wilkes affair provoked some of the most influential newspaper broadsides of the age: a stream of pointed, angry, deeply informed letters about the government, all appearing under the name "Junius." Published from 1768 to 1772, the Junius letters rocked Britain and took down a prime minister. They also articulated a right to revolution well before the Declaration of Independence, inspiring Americans seeking to defend their own endangered rights.

[From the September 2003 issue: Our reverence for the Founding Fathers has gotten out of hand](#)

For me, *The Juryman's Touchstone* palpably summoned this episode from the past into the present. A few of the pamphlet's pages bore small corrections from what I knew to be the pen of the Duke. And on the flyleaf of the pamphlet was a handwritten dedication: "To the Duke of Richmond as A Tribute due to him for His Strenuous Efforts & unwearied perseverance in the Defence of Constitutional Liberty this Pamphlet is presented by the Author."

The existence of the pamphlet in the Duke's library had been unknown. There are only two other extant copies, one at Yale and the other in the New York Public Library. It did not occur to me at first to wonder if the firm, plain handwriting of the anonymous dedication might belong to Thomas Paine. His first book was widely accepted to have been *Common Sense*, as he himself maintained, and that book was published five years after *The Juryman's Touchstone*. But the pamphlet addressed two matters of great concern to Paine—the Wilkes case and the rights of jurors. And then there was the geographic alert from the London taxi driver. Paine had indeed been living in Lewes, a day's ride from Goodwood across the wildflower-strewn South Downs. And he was living there when the pamphlet was published.

I eventually went back to the inscription and checked it against examples of Paine's handwriting. To my eye, it looked like a match—especially the capital *T*'s and the capital *P*. A weightier verdict than mine was provided by the editors of *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings*. They confirmed the handwriting match and tested the pamphlet's text by means of computer-assisted author-identification software, applying statistical techniques to word choice and grammar as a way to compare texts of known authorship and texts whose writers are unknown. The comparison produced a match: About half of *The Juryman's Touchstone* was written by Paine, the editors concluded, and about half by an American friend of his who had been living on and off in London as a representative of the Pennsylvania colony—Benjamin Franklin. One paragraph, specifically about the House of Lords, appears to be the work of Richmond himself.

So this, not *Common Sense*, was Thomas Paine's first book. The inscription not only established for the first time a personal connection between Paine and the Duke of Richmond but also, given the nature of the book's content, put Paine definitively in the Duke's intimate circle of radical associates. Here was a crucial piece of validation for our hypothesis about the source of the Sussex Declaration. Richmond had been the first patron of a writer who would do more than any other to stir revolutionary sentiment in the colonies.

It can be easy to think of the American Revolution as a fire lit at the margins of empire, where distance made it hard for central authorities to wield control. The American colonists, we've come to understand, learned how to govern themselves partly because the British government was an ocean

away. Then, when Crown and Parliament sought to assert more control, the homegrown spirit of self-government rose up to resist.

But this leaves out an earlier chapter, one centered not in Boston but in London, where the memory of Charles I—beheaded by order of a court established by the House of Commons in 1649—and the Glorious Revolution decades later had immense staying power for aristocrats and commoners alike. The theory of revolution, the demand for popular sovereignty, the idea of something called “the rights of man”—all of these developed earlier in London rather than in the colonies. Radical energy spread from the capital across the Atlantic as rabble-rousing dissidents fled London for fear of punishment, and as business and personal letters tied together conversations between the colonies and the mother country.

For every act that provided a drumbeat in the march to revolution in America, something similar had already occurred in Britain. In 1765, the American colonists rioted against a new tax on paper known as the Stamp Act. But in 1763, the British themselves had already rioted against a newly imposed tax on cider, one that hit ordinary people especially hard.

Or consider the Boston Tea Party. The fiercely self-reliant colonists were again protesting economic policies—a tax on tea that gave a protective advantage to the East India Company at the expense of colonial importers. But this came after protests by weavers in London: the so-called Spitalfield Riots. For a sustained period in the 1760s—years before Bostonians dumped shipments of tea into the harbor—weavers in Britain vandalized workshops and organized angry demonstrations to protest government policies that eroded their earnings.

Or take the Boston Massacre. In 1770, British soldiers fired into a crowd gathered outside the statehouse, a modest brick building adorned with a heraldic lion and rearing unicorn that was home to the royal administration in Boston. The soldiers killed five people and further provoked anti-British opinion. But two years earlier, in 1768, British troops in London had fired into a crowd of protesters on the grasslands at St. George’s Fields, just south of the King’s Bench Prison, and killed seven people. The protesters had been angered by the imprisonment of Wilkes. The killings at St. George’s Fields

roused England's radicals to more strenuous effort, just as the Boston Massacre would rouse the Americans.

Paine, the son of a Quaker corset maker from Thetford, in Norfolk, bounced around with unstable employment—as a sailor and then corset maker himself—before becoming, at 25, a collector of excise taxes along England's eastern coast. He also became immersed in radical politics, writing for London newspapers either anonymously or under a pseudonym, and sometimes in collaboration with others. Paine could pick a fight with his own shadow—as Sarah Franklin wrote to her father, Paine had “at different times disputed with everyone”—but his polemical gifts were unrivaled. Though the nature of Paine's political writing meant that his identity had to be concealed, his name was widely known among radicals, including prominent men such as the philosopher and politician Edmund Burke. And, as is now clear, Paine was known to the Duke of Richmond.



Portrait of the Revolutionary polemicist Thomas Paine by Laurent Dabos, circa 1792 (Heritage Art / Heritage Images / Getty)

In 1768, after a period of unemployment, Paine received a new assignment as an excise collector for Sussex, based in the town of Lewes. Given that jobs in excise offices were controlled by local patronage, it is hard to believe that Paine was assigned to Sussex by accident. Paine would be working under the authority of the lord lieutenant in the area—none other than Richmond. As one of 200 voters in Lewes, Paine would have a role to play in local politics, alongside the Duke. And he was ripe for recruitment into the Headstrong Club, a group of Lewes literati and radicals who published anonymous articles in the local paper and met at the White Hart tavern—also the location of the excise office. Securing stable employment for Paine at a place relatively close by would have permitted the Duke to easily engage him for other purposes.

Paine arrived in Lewes during one of the most dramatic election seasons in British history. Wilkes had written to the King to ask for a pardon, stood for election without having received that pardon, and won. The government, however, refused to accept Wilkes as the victor. His subsequent arrest and confinement led to riots. Some 15,000 people turned up outside the prison shouting “Wilkes and liberty!” That was when soldiers had fired into the crowd.

The government called a fresh election for Wilkes’s seat. He ran again, from prison; won again; and was expelled again, producing fresh waves of outrage. The cycle would be repeated several times, before the government insisted on seating Wilkes’s opponent. Meanwhile, the Junius letters had begun to appear. What has only recently become known is that the guiding hand behind the Junius letters was in all likelihood the Duke of Richmond.

The evidence takes many forms, some of it circumstantial. It once was argued that a man named Philip Francis, at the time a clerk in the War Office, later knighted, was solely responsible for the letters. He did play a part, but the writing also displays knowledge and perspective that Francis did not possess. Junius, for instance, had personal acquaintance with the King and his cabinet; had a detailed understanding of the workings of the House of Lords; had access to a certain set of books, nearly all of which are in the Duke of Richmond’s library; and had a memory of the 1747 elections, in which the Duke participated as a surrogate speaker, when Francis was 7 years old.

Independent of my own investigations, computer-assisted identification has in recent years matched the various Junius letters to specific individuals—a small group of radical pamphleteers, including not only Francis but also Paine. We now know from other sources that the major writers identified in this way all had ties to Richmond, and that some had been hired by him on other occasions. The ideas expressed by Junius closely track Richmond's own, and are fully aligned with his policy agenda. The Duke had a far-flung patronage network at his disposal. And he could handle secretive logistics: His coachmen essentially ran a mail service for him—faster and more private than the post, as Edmund Burke acknowledged in one of his letters. A onetime ambassador to France, Richmond was also accustomed to the use of ciphers.

Whatever their origin, the Junius letters became a cause célèbre on both sides of the Atlantic. One of the most incendiary of them was published toward the end of 1769. Addressed to the King, it began with no invocations of George's majesty or any of the other polite and florid boilerplate customary at the time. Rather, it started like this: "Sir, It is the misfortune of your life, and originally the cause of every reproach and distress, which has attended your government, that you should never have been acquainted with the language of truth." Junius characterized the urgency of the moment in words that bring to mind the "When in the course of human events ..." language from the Declaration of Independence:

When the complaints of a brave and powerful people are observed to increase in proportion to the wrongs they have suffered; when, instead of sinking into submission, they are roused to resistance ...

Junius presented a relentlessly damning account of George's reign—including the "decisive personal part" the King had taken against the Americans, who, despite being "divided as they are into a thousand forms of policy and religion," had nevertheless come together in their detestation of the monarch. Junius concluded by recalling the fate of the Stuart monarchs, one of whom, Charles, had lost his head. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 had put the throne into other hands, leading eventually to the House of Hanover and a succession of Georges. But a crown "acquired by one revolution," Junius warned, "may be lost by another."

No one had so directly threatened the King in more than a century, and the publisher, Henry Woodfall, was charged with seditious libel. But the damage was done. A few weeks after the letter was published, the King opened a new session of Parliament. Within days, his government fell apart. The lord chancellor attacked his cabinet colleagues over the Wilkes affair, opposing their continued resistance to seating the victorious candidate. King George promptly dismissed him, along with four other royal appointees. Then the commander in chief of the military forces resigned. The new lord chancellor died three days after accepting that office, and was generally thought to have killed himself rather than serve. The collapse was complete when the prime minister resigned.

In the end, Woodfall got off, thanks to a limited judgment by the jury and a mistrial. Remarkably, nothing came to light at the time about the people behind the Junius campaign. If Richmond was indeed the mastermind, his necessary reliance on secrecy is one reason knowledge of that role—and of his association with Paine in the first place—followed him to the grave. His account books and most of his correspondence from the Junius years seem to have been deliberately destroyed. Only now are we getting a clearer picture of the various actors, and the role played by the Duke himself.

Richmond's energies for political combat were renewed as he watched Britain's conflict with its American colonies intensify after the fighting in Lexington and Concord. By then, Paine had taken himself to Philadelphia, where he was hired straightaway as editor of the new *Pennsylvania Magazine*. Soon—telling people he'd never written a word before arriving in America—he published his masterpiece, *Common Sense*.

Paine was always straining at the leash (and often slipping it). Richmond was not that kind of man, but his political instincts and personal temperament did make him sympathetic to the Americans. When he engaged the rising artistic talent George Romney to paint his portrait, he posed himself in somber dress, reading a book, rather than in bright satins with his dogs, the vogue at the time. He looks like he would be more at home with the American colonists than among the embroidered and bewigged grandes of George's court. In October 1775, as this portrait was being painted—and as the situation in the colonies continued to deteriorate—debate began in Parliament on what was called the American Prohibitory Bill, which would

cut off the colonies from trade with Britain. Under the law of nations, a trade embargo is an official act of hostility—which Richmond pointed out: “I think it a most unjust, oppressive, and tyrannical measure. I perceive, my lords, that this Bill is a formal denunciation of war against the colonies.”

The rhetoric reached a new level in America in early 1776, when Paine published *Common Sense*, directly arguing for American independence from British rule. The book sold 120,000 to 150,000 copies in the colonies in its first year—this in a population of about 2 million free people. Written in a plain, vigorous style, it laid out the case against monarchical government and hereditary succession, emphasizing the natural rights of individuals and the inherent flaws of the British system. When John Adams returned to the new Continental Congress, a month after *Common Sense* was published, his to-do list included “Declaration of Independency.”

Richmond saw, perhaps more clearly than anyone, that the conflict with America was not simply a problem of public order but a wide-ranging constitutional crisis. The question of how to incorporate the Americans into the British system of government forced intellectually serious people like the Duke to think hard about British sovereignty and constitutional order, and about representation—what it was, how it should work, what role it should play in a system of governance. Leaving America aside, how should representation function in Britain, where the House of Commons was a decayed institution controlled by the few? How could “the people” make their voices heard in a constitutional monarchy? Universal male suffrage would be one of Richmond’s answers.

He closely followed events in the colonies. On February 6, 1778, Benjamin Franklin and two other American representatives signed the Treaty of Alliance and the Treaty of Amity and Commerce with France. That country’s entrance into the war—against Britain and on the side of America—changed everything. Later that month, before Britain had learned about the agreements and before the United States had ratified the treaties, the House of Lords would debate a set of bills, called the Conciliatory Bills, designed to entice the colonies to cease hostilities—the first serious British peace offer since the outbreak of the war. Richmond was skeptical that the bills themselves were fit for purpose. He was, according to William Cobbett’s parliamentary account of the debate, “convinced, that nothing

solid was intended by the peace bills”; rather, they were “framed with a design to divide America on one side, and to keep up appearances with those who supported the measures of government here at home.” Richmond proposed as an alternative that Britain recall its troops from America—a sign of respect—and enter into favorable trade agreements with the Americans before the French could. His proposal did not pass. The Conciliatory Bills did.

And, as Richmond had predicted, they failed to conciliate. The Americans rejected the peace offer. They were committed to independence. The Duke now proposed that Britain send commissioners to the colonies and “arm them with powers to declare America independent, if they chose it.” This, he believed, was the only way to avoid a war with France, as well as the best method “to secure the friendship and commerce” of the colonies in the future. In making this argument, Richmond became the first member of the House of Lords to propose acknowledging American sovereignty.

The Duke had been glad to accept the Revolution, but in the end, he and Paine took divergent and irreconcilable paths. Richmond remained loyal to the British monarchy all his life, but he was equally loyal to the British people and promoted popular sovereignty, embodied in an expanded idea of representation, as essential to the constitutional order. Like the political philosopher Montesquieu, Richmond revered the British constitution, with its balance and its separation of powers among the three estates of monarch, aristocrats, and commoners. His involvement over several decades in rousing the people—to support Wilkes, to support parliamentary reform—made popular sovereignty real in Britain for the first time in the modern era. His unusual gift was to be able to see through the chaos of his age to what his society would ultimately need for durable stability and health: in other words, to envisage the political system that Britain enjoys today. The superb eyes noted by that admiring contemporary are a metaphor.

For his part, Paine became the advocate for a secular republicanism through and through, achieving wide renown and becoming the personification of the revolutionary spirit. He threw his support fully behind the French Revolution, whose terrors made onetime allies such as Burke and Richmond, and indeed most of Britain, recoil. Paine’s break with Richmond would ultimately become bitter and personal. The disagreement was fundamentally

about whether popular sovereignty required republicanism or could be made compatible with monarchy.

But relations were not yet fully ruptured in 1787, when the parchment Declaration now in the West Sussex Record Office was delivered, I believe, into the hands of the Duke. Paine had been in Philadelphia in 1787, around the time of the convention, and he was close to James Wilson, the man who had ordered copies of the Declaration made. Paine [sailed for France](#) from Philadelphia—returning to Europe after 13 years—just weeks before the convention started, and eventually made his way to England. Paine likely brought the parchment as a gift for his earliest patron. What better memento could there be?

[From the December 1859 issue: Thomas Paine in England and in France](#)

The gesture would have been in character: Paine was a courier of revolutionary talismans. He visited Paris frequently in the months after the French Revolution began, and in March 1790, the [Marquis de Lafayette gave him the key to the Bastille, with a request that he pass it along to George Washington](#). Paine brought the key back to England, where he entrusted it to John Rutledge Jr., the son of a former governor of South Carolina and delegate to the Constitutional Convention, to carry back to the American president.

You will find it hanging on the wall in the central hall at Mount Vernon to this day.

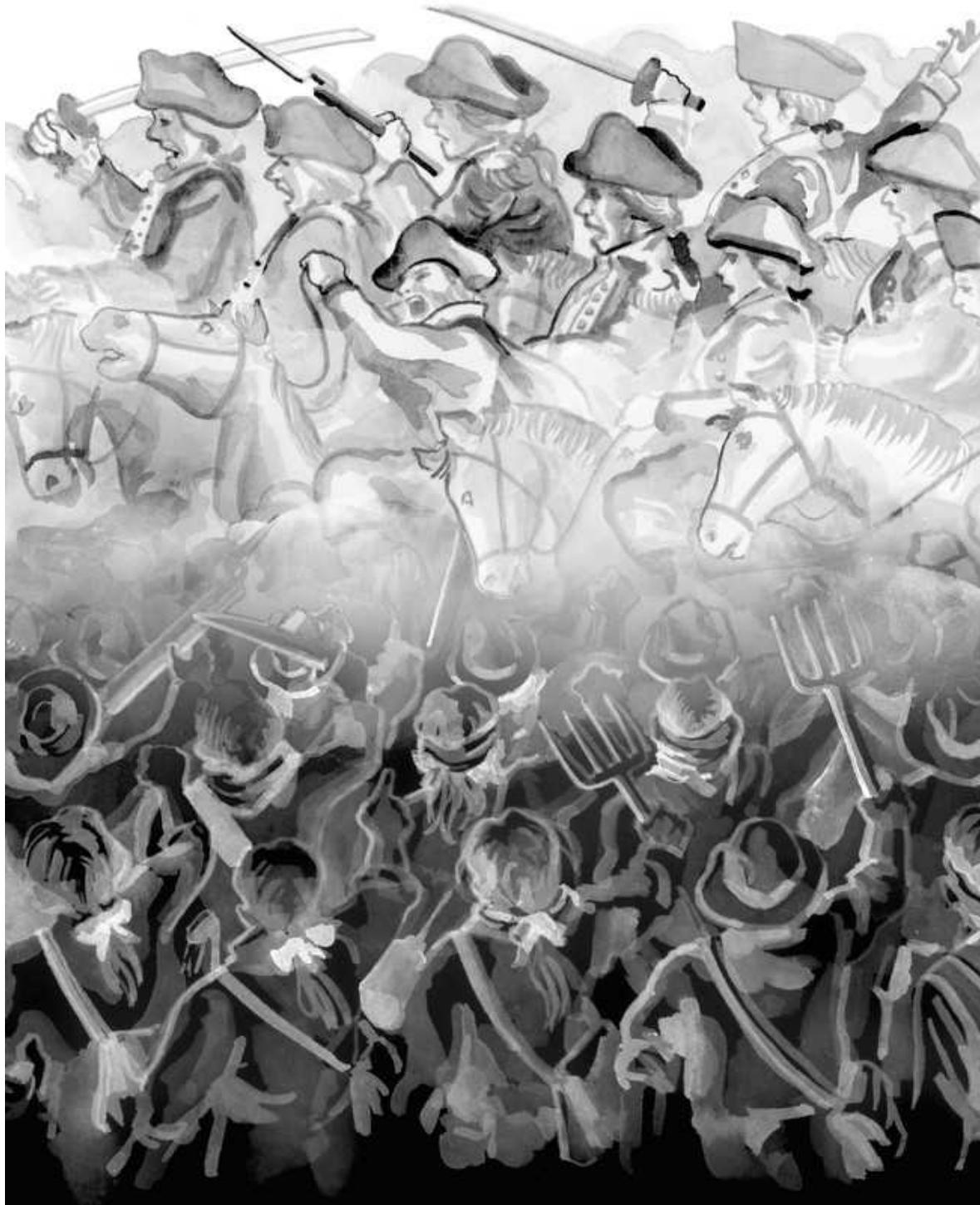
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The Insurrection Problem

Violence has marred the American constitutional order since the founding. Is it inevitable?

by Jeffrey Rosen



Shays's Rebellion filled Alexander Hamilton with dread. In 1786, armed men shut down courts in five counties across Massachusetts and, early the next year, marched on the federal armory in Springfield. The mobs included debtors trying to prevent the courts from foreclosing on their farms, and

opponents of centralized government. The insurrectionists believed that [the newly adopted Massachusetts Constitution](#), drafted in 1779 by John Adams, would shift power from the poor to the rich, from the many to the few, from the backcountry to Boston, from democracy to aristocracy. They were led by Daniel Shays, a dashing Revolutionary War veteran who'd had to sell a sword given to him by the Marquis de Lafayette to pay his debts.

Observing the rebellion from New York, Hamilton worried that civil unrest in Massachusetts could augur the rise of a demagogue on the national stage, one who might pander to angry debtors across America and threaten the stability of the new nation. The insurrection was eventually put down by a private army hired by Massachusetts Governor James Bowdoin, after members of the state militia refused his call to do so. But what might have happened, Hamilton wrote, if, instead of Shays, the rebellion "had been headed by a Caesar or by a Cromwell"?

In Hamilton's view, the greatest threat to the American experiment was a demagogue who might flatter the people, overthrow popular elections, and consolidate power in his own hands. "Of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics," he wrote in "Federalist No. 1," "the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people."

Afraid that Shays's Rebellion might spread, Hamilton and James Madison called the Constitutional Convention in 1787. George Washington agreed to attend, because he shared Hamilton and Madison's concern that, under the Articles of Confederation, the [new nation was vulnerable](#) to men like Shays. "I could not resist the call to a convention of the States," [he wrote to Lafayette](#), "which is to determine whether we are to have a Government of respectability under which life, liberty, and property will be secured to us," or one "springing perhaps from anarchy and Confusion, and dictated perhaps by some aspiring demagogue."

[From the October 2018 issue: Jeffrey Rosen on how James Madison's mob-rule fears have been realized](#)

A central goal of the convention was to check populist mobs in the states and empower the national government to defend itself. Because the undisciplined Massachusetts militia had failed to stop Shays, the new

Constitution gave Congress the power to nationalize the state militias “to execute the Laws of the Union, suppress Insurrections and repel Invasions.” Hamilton would have gone even further in creating a strong central government and an energetic executive. In a notorious speech at the convention, he proposed a president elected for life who would have no temptation to resort to demagoguery to extend his term.

Thomas Jefferson was serving as the American minister in Paris when he learned of Shays’s Rebellion. His reaction differed dramatically from Hamilton’s. In Jefferson’s view, the government should be restrained in its response to popular uprisings. “The late rebellion in Massachusetts has given more alarm than I think it should have done,” [he wrote to Madison](#). “Calculate that one rebellion in 13 states in the course of 11 years, is but one for each state in a century & a half. No country should be so long without one. Nor will any degree of power in the hands of government prevent insurrections.”

Jefferson remained in Paris during the Constitutional Convention but followed its progress from abroad. “Our Convention has been too much impressed by the insurrection of Massachusetts,” [he wrote to John Adams’s son-in-law in 1787](#). “What country can preserve it’s liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms.”

Jefferson would have pardoned the rebels, relying on a free press to disabuse those who had participated based on misinformation. “The remedy is to set them right as to facts, pardon and pacify them. What signify a few lives lost in a century or two? The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is it’s natural manure.”

Jefferson felt that the presidency created by the new Constitution was too strong. He, too, feared a Caesar: His study of ancient history had convinced him that all “elective monarchies” had ended with popular leaders converting themselves into hereditary despots. But if Hamilton envisioned a demagogue who would flatter the majority from below, Jefferson foresaw one who would thwart majority will from above. He was especially concerned that an unscrupulous president might narrowly lose a bid for reelection and falsely insist that the contest had been stolen.

“He will pretend false votes, foul play, hold possession of the reins of government, be supported by the states voting for him,” Jefferson wrote to Madison. His solution was not a life term but a one-term limit for the presidency—“an incapacity to be elected a second time.”

Hamilton’s and Jefferson’s radically different responses to Shays’s Rebellion represent an opening skirmish in one of the most consequential intellectual battles among the Founders. In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson had defined America in terms of three shining ideas: liberty, equality, and government by consent. Just a decade later, after the new Constitution was drafted, he and Hamilton began a debate about the relationship among these three ideas that has shaped American life ever since.

For Jefferson, centralized power threatened liberty; for Hamilton, a vigorous national government could help secure it. Jefferson, the author of the Declaration, was determined to expand democracy; Hamilton, the defender of the Constitution, viewed democracy as a turbulent force to be filtered and checked. Jefferson believed in local self-government and states’ sovereignty; Hamilton believed in the Union and national supremacy. Jefferson, the gentleman planter, exalted rule by the people and feared the tyranny of consolidation; Hamilton, the scholar-warrior, preferred rule by elites and dreaded the anarchy of the mob. Jefferson revered the white farmers of the agricultural South; Hamilton championed the financiers and manufacturers of the urban North. Their opposing visions led to opposing approaches to the Constitution. Jefferson interpreted it strictly, to limit federal power; Hamilton interpreted it liberally, to expand federal power.

The competing positions of Hamilton and Jefferson are like golden and silver threads woven through the tapestry of American history, sometimes running parallel to each other, sometimes crossing, and at crucial moments pulling so far apart that they threaten to snap. From the founding until today, a productive tension between the two men’s ideas has mostly kept American politics from descending into violence. Whenever the threads have been pulled too far in one direction, however, the shooting begins.

The new Constitution wasn’t yet five years old when the nation was tested again by internal violence. White farmers in Western Pennsylvania resented a new federal tax on grain, one of their main sources of revenue—and the

fact that those accused of evading the tax had to stand trial in federal court in Philadelphia, far from the frontier. In July 1794, an armed mob of about 500 men attacked the federal tax collector. Like the Shaysites, the Whiskey Rebels saw themselves as a protest movement against economic inequality.

Once again, Hamilton and Jefferson reacted to the violence in radically different ways. The whiskey tax had been Hamilton's idea. It was the centerpiece of the financial plan he'd proposed in 1790, intended to help the new federal government pay interest on debts it had assumed from the states. Hamilton recommended a military response to the rebellion, with himself at the head of an expanded army; he believed an "imposing" force was needed to "suppress the insurrection and support the Civil Authority in effectuating Obedience to the laws and the punishment of offenders." Jefferson, by contrast, viewed the uprising as a legitimate form of civil disobedience. He saw the yeoman farmers as virtuous freedom fighters reluctantly trading their plowshares for swords.

On September 25, Washington issued a proclamation calling up the militias of Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Several days later, he and Hamilton convened on Market Street in Philadelphia and decorously set off for war in a carriage. Washington inspected his troops in Carlisle and traveled with them as far as Bedford, becoming the only sitting president to command an army in the field. Then he returned to Philadelphia, leaving Hamilton in charge of a force that eventually swelled to nearly 13,000 men. Advancing west, the army found the resistance melting away. By late October, the insurrection was over.

Hamilton was confident that the successful suppression of the insurgency would ultimately strengthen the Union. Jefferson, once again, pleaded for leniency for the insurgents. Washington's response found a middle ground. He ordered local leaders of the insurrection arrested, but absolved rank-and-file followers. Over the next year, the federal government tried a dozen men for high treason. Two men were convicted and sentenced to hang. In the end, Washington pardoned both, the first pardons to be issued by an American president.

It took the political chameleon Aaron Burr to make Hamilton and Jefferson see the other man's perspective. Though the Whiskey Rebellion had only

hardened their differences, they could agree that Burr posed a unique threat to the republic. Hamilton supported Jefferson over Burr in the 1800 election; he recognized, in Burr, a man who might become the American Caesar he'd foreseen. At a dinner in February 1804, Hamilton shared his fears that Burr would foment insurrection; an account of Hamilton calling Burr a "dangerous man" found its way into the newspapers. Burr demanded an apology. Hamilton's refusal to apologize led him, on July 11, to the dueling grounds below the cliffs of Weehawken.

After slaying his rival, Burr vindicated Hamilton's fears. He offered his services to the British ambassador as the leader of an insurrectionist movement that would incite the western states to secede from the Union. During Burr's eventual trial for treason, one of his associates testified that he had also hoped to enlist the Marine Corps in a plot to seize Washington, D.C. ("Hang him!" Burr reportedly said of President Jefferson, praising dictators from ancient history, including "Caesar, Cromwell, and Bonaparte.")

In 1806, Jefferson was sufficiently alarmed by the reports of Burr's activities that he asked Madison what powers the president had to put down insurrections by force. Madison responded that, according to the Insurrection Act of 1792, state militias could be called to repel insurrections against the U.S., but "it does not appear that regular Troops can be employed."

Jefferson then sought new tools. In December, he drafted "a Bill authorising the emploiment of the land or Naval forces of the US. In cases of insurrection." He sent the bill to Congress through proxies and signed the amended Insurrection Act on March 3, 1807.

Burr was arrested for conspiracy before he could foment any kind of revolt that would require using the amended Insurrection Act. But Jefferson invoked it in 1808 to quash protests in Vermont against his Embargo Act. The Insurrection Act has served ever since as the most important legal instrument authorizing military force for domestic law enforcement. From the Civil War to the civil-rights movement, presidents have invoked it to put down violent resistance to federal authority. Having previously held that "a

little rebellion now and then is a good thing,” Jefferson might not have appreciated the irony.

Insurrectionary violence has recurred throughout American history. It erupted during the secession crisis in 1861 that sparked the Civil War and the white-supremacist insurgencies across the South during Reconstruction. It reemerged in the Ku Klux Klan terror of the 1920s, and during the civil-rights era as violent opposition to racial integration, including at Little Rock in 1957 and Selma in 1965. Nearly all of these outbursts of what the historian Jefferson Cowie has called “white resistance to federal power” led presidents [to invoke Jefferson’s Insurrection Act](#). They also used the act against a separate strain of Black resistance to state and federal power, beginning with the slave rebellion in Virginia suppressed by Andrew Jackson in 1831 through the violent protests against racism suppressed by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1943, Lyndon B. Johnson in 1967, and George H. W. Bush in 1992.

But nothing in American history anticipated the events of January 6, 2021, when men and women stormed the U.S. Capitol at the urging of the president of the United States. They had been sold a conspiracy theory: that the 2020 election had been stolen. The leader of the Proud Boys, the far-right militia group that led the attack, [invoked an apocryphal line](#) from Thomas Jefferson to justify the insurrection: “When governments fear the people … There is liberty.”

President Donald Trump defended January 6 as a “day of love” on which there was “nothing done wrong,” and denounced the prosecution of the insurrectionists. Like Jefferson, he supported pardons rather than prosecutions. He was less interested, though, in disabusing the participants of the conspiracy theory that had motivated their actions.

On January 20, 2025, the first day of his second term, Trump pardoned or commuted the sentences of about 1,600 people involved in the January 6 attacks. He then set out to consolidate executive power, with the acquiescence of Congress. Asserting the president’s unitary control over the executive branch, he fired or bought out more than 100,000 federal workers; he also fired the heads of independent agencies and challenged the agencies’ constitutionality before the Supreme Court.

Trump's defenders insist that his actions fall squarely within the tradition of the Hamilton-Jefferson debate. Allyria Finley, a member of *The Wall Street Journal*'s editorial board, [wrote in February](#) that Hamilton would have approved of Trump's vigorous use of executive power. Alan Dershowitz, who had defended Trump in his first impeachment trial, [argued](#) that Jefferson would have approved as well. "As soon as our third president was elected, he fired many Federalist government officials and issued blanket pardons to people the previous administration had prosecuted for sedition," Dershowitz noted in a letter to the editor of the *Journal*. In Dershowitz's view, Trump was making a legitimate effort to consolidate political power and authority in the executive branch.

Many of Trump's supporters see him not as a Caesar but as a modern-day Andrew Jackson, resurrecting a version of Jackson's "spoils system" to shrink the size of government and return power from the elite to the people. Trump himself has encouraged the comparison: On Jackson's 250th birthday, he visited the Hermitage, Jackson's Tennessee home, and likened himself to the hero of New Orleans. "It was during the Revolution that Jackson first confronted and defied an arrogant elite," Trump said. "Oh, I know the feeling, Andrew."

Trump's critics, by contrast, see him as the second coming of Aaron Burr, a man who unites Hamilton's and Jefferson's greatest fears for American democracy: Hamilton's demagogic Caesar and Jefferson's oligarchic one. History suggests that they were both right about the threats to popular sovereignty; since the fall of the Greek and Roman republics, authoritarian rulers have sought to consolidate power in their own hands by flattering the mob and co-opting the financial elite.

Throughout American history, followers of Hamilton and Jefferson have warned that when Americans abandon their devotion to the principles of the Constitution, political conflict ends in tyranny, violence, or both. The warnings have taken the form of what [the Puritan scholar Sacvan Bercovitch](#) called the "American Jeremiad." Just as Puritan political sermons warned that Americans, like the ancient Israelites, had lost their way by violating their covenant with God, so Revolutionary-era jeremiads warned that Americans, like the citizens of ancient Rome, risked losing their way by abandoning their devotion to liberty, civic virtue, the rule of law, and the

principles of the Constitution. In 1772, three years before he was killed at the Battle of Bunker Hill, the Patriot Joseph Warren wrapped himself in a toga and cautioned that the Romans' spurning of their "noble attachment to a free constitution" had enabled Caesar to consolidate absolute power. He urged Americans not to do the same.

The success of the American experiment doesn't require agreement between Hamiltonians and Jeffersonians about how to balance liberty and power; it requires a good-faith commitment to participate in the inevitable tug-of-war between them. In his final years, Jefferson placed [a bust of Hamilton](#) in the front hall of Monticello, facing his own bust. He viewed his greatest foe not as a hated enemy to be destroyed but as a respected opponent to be defeated, and he accepted his own defeats as an opportunity to fight another day. During the two decades that he survived Hamilton, Jefferson would remark to visitors that the two men remained "opposed in death as in life," sometimes emphasizing the point with a smile. The two busts remain on opposite sides of the main entrance at Monticello today, an enduring sign of Jefferson's respect, if not affection, for his most significant foe.

This article was adapted from Jeffrey Rosen's new book, [The Pursuit of Liberty: How Hamilton vs. Jefferson Ignited the Lasting Battle Over Power in America](#). It appears in the November 2025 print edition with the headline "The Nightmare of Despotism."

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So Much Madeira

What the Founding Fathers ate—and drank—on July 4, 1777

by Victoria Flexner

When John Adams arrived in Philadelphia for the First Continental Congress, he immediately went out to eat. “Dirty, dusty, and fatigued as we were,” [he wrote in his diary that night](#)—August 29, 1774—“we could not resist the Importunity, to go to the Tavern, the most genteel one in America.” A few days later, when George Washington rode into Philadelphia, he made straight for the same establishment.

[City Tavern had opened the previous year](#), backed by a group of wealthy Philadelphians who’d decided there was no place in town that met their standards for decent food and drink. Although the tavern’s sophisticated culinary style was influenced by Europe, it was also uniquely American, and a reflection of the colonies’ global ties. There was likely shad from the Delaware River, fresh corn and lettuces from nearby farms, sugar and pineapples from the Caribbean, spices from Asia.

But the multistory building at the corner of Walnut and Second Streets was more than just a place to eat. In addition to dining rooms, it had a bar, lodgings for travelers, and a room for coffee. It also had a subscription room, where newspapers and magazines from across the colonies and Europe were delivered regularly.

The tavern quickly became a favorite meeting spot for the Founding Fathers. Thomas Jefferson took almost all of his meals there [as he wrote the Declaration of Independence](#). Many of his compatriots routinely ate and

drank in its rooms as they worked to construct a new nation. And on July 4, 1777, with the war unfolding not far away, the Congress gathered there for a meal to celebrate the United States' first birthday.

Peter Moore: The inspiration for Jefferson's 'pursuit of happiness'

As naval vessels filled the Delaware River that day, crowds amassed along the shorelines to cheer. When the sun began to set, fireworks, bonfires, and candles were lit throughout the city. Philadelphia glowed with fresh patriotic spirit.

That afternoon at City Tavern, the delegates "were very agreeably entertained with excellent company, good cheer," and music from a band of Hessians, [Adams wrote to his daughter Abigail](#). Throughout the meal, they listened to toasts "in honour of our country, and the heroes who have fallen in their pious efforts to defend her." They sat in the Long Room, a private dining room on the second floor with generous windows that allowed light to pour in. Though we don't know for sure what they ate on July 4, 1777, we can make an educated guess based on bills of fare and descriptions of other dishes served in the period, as well as the diary entries and letters of the Founding Fathers documenting their day-to-day lives. The meal would have been served family style, with many dishes laid out on the table all at once, next to their accompanying sauces and jellies.

The delegates would have started with tureens of soup set at both ends of the table. Turtle soup, a delicacy of Colonial American cuisine, used green sea turtles, typically immersing the sweet meat in a delicate veal broth with a final splash of acidity from imported sherry or Madeira wine. West Indies pepper-pot soup was a favorite of Philadelphians (it also figures in [a myth about how George Washington's troops survived at Valley Forge](#)). The dish came to the city by way of the Caribbean, where enslaved people working on the brutal sugar plantations had re-created a leafy-green West African stew called callaloo. One of the variations that became popular in Philadelphia utilized ingredients native to the Americas, such as chili peppers. It also used Asian spices such as cloves and mace, alongside meat like beef and pork, which had not been available on the American continent until Europeans introduced them.

Large platters of fish would have dotted the table too. Sturgeon from the Delaware River were likely fastened to a spit and basted with butter, then sprinkled with flour, nutmeg, mace, salt, sweet herbs, and breadcrumbs before being dressed in a tangy sauce that usually included anchovy, lobster, lemon, horseradish, and white wine. Other fresh fish were lightly dredged in flour, fried, baked, and then garnished with parsley and black walnuts.

The dense woods of 18th-century North America were teeming with wildlife, and deer, turkey, rabbit, pigeon, and game birds all likely made regular appearances on City Tavern's tables; they would typically have been roasted over the fire in a style reminiscent of medieval cooking (it's worth remembering that the Founding Fathers were closer in time to the Tudors than they were to us, their culture and cuisine on the cusp of a yet-to-be-defined modernity). The French gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin once referred to turkey as a culinary gift from the New World. At City Tavern, it was probably prepared using Old World techniques—slowly braised with onions, garlic, and bacon and then garnished with fresh herbs and gravy.

Smaller plates of vegetables would have surrounded the platters of roasted meats. Potatoes, native to Peru, were a staple in the colonies—and were quickly becoming one in other parts of the world as they made their way along colonial trade routes. Cucumbers, peas, and summer squash likely gave seasonal color to the July 4 table.

The quantity of alcohol served at such a meal would be astounding by today's standards (in part because [people at the time rarely drank water](#)). One [bill from a dinner at City Tavern](#) in 1778 for 270 people included 522 bottles of Madeira, 24 bottles of port wine, 116 big bowls of punch, nine of toddy, six of sangaree, two tubs of grog for artillery soldiers, one gallon of spirits for bell ringers—and an extra fee for the dozens of glasses and plates that, perhaps unsurprisingly, broke during the course of the evening.

[Read: Colonial Americans drank roughly three times as much as Americans do now](#)

The celebratory July 4 meal would certainly have kept the innkeeper, Daniel Smith, busy replenishing the finest bottles of Madeira from behind

the locked bar—perhaps overhearing snippets of chatter among the delegates. But Smith, a Loyalist, may not have been in as jubilant a mood as his guests. When the British withdrew from Philadelphia in 1778, he, too, [got on a ship and sailed to England](#).

As platters emptied, they would have been removed from the table to make way for nuts, fruits, and sweet biscuits that were variously spiced with nutmeg from the Maluku Islands, in Indonesia; cinnamon from Sri Lanka; or ginger grown in the Caribbean. Perhaps there was also an apple pie. With the exception of the bitter crab apple, which is native to North America, the apple's origins lay far away; initially from Central Asia, the sweet fruit wasn't introduced to the continent until at least the 1500s. But by the 1800s, some sources estimate that thousands of varieties were growing in the colonies, making the apple a frequently used ingredient in America's emerging cuisine. In time, the apple's proliferation on American soil and the ubiquity of apple pie on American menus would help turn the dessert into a patriotic symbol.

In ways large and small, the meal that took place at City Tavern on July 4, 1777, was the result of a thousand unlikely events put into motion by untold numbers of people across time and space. The foods on the table in Philadelphia that day, like the men who ate them and the country they were building, had traveled by way of the mercantile seas and through the American colonies to create the basis of a new culture, a new cuisine, and a new, revolutionary identity.

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Whose Independence?

**The question of what Jefferson
meant by “all men” has defined
American law and politics for too
long.**

by Annette Gordon-Reed



When Thomas Jefferson was chosen to draft the Declaration of Independence, he had an exceedingly difficult task ahead of him. The 33-year-old planter, who had left law practice just before Britain's imperial crisis began in earnest, needed to do nothing short of lay the groundwork for

a new nation. He had to explain in both philosophical and legal terms the Second Continental Congress's decision to break away from Great Britain, provide a list of grievances against the Crown that justified complete separation as a remedy, and plant the seeds of diplomacy for the fledgling country. His job was to place the newly formed United States of America among "the powers of the earth."

In the course of writing a document capacious enough to do all of that, Jefferson formulated the Declaration's second paragraph, with language that has become its most quotable passage: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and [the pursuit of Happiness](#)." Those words, now held as perhaps the world's most important statement of universal human rights, were so powerful that they are often described as the "American creed."

But those words also created a glaring contradiction. Of the estimated 2.5 million people living in the American colonies, about 500,000 were enslaved people of African descent, the majority of whom lived in the southern colonies. About 200,000 lived in the largest colony, Jefferson's Virginia. At the time Jefferson wrote that part of the Declaration, he owned nearly 200 people at his home plantation, Monticello, and other sites. While working on the document in Philadelphia, he shared rooms with [his enslaved valet, Robert Hemmings](#), the 14-year-old half brother of his wife, Martha.

In the centuries since, Jefferson's Enlightenment-influenced flourish in the Declaration's second paragraph has occupied an ever-greater space at the core of American law and culture. Over that period, a question has recurred: Did Jefferson really intend his statement of equality to apply to everyone?

Two hundred and fifty years on, however, it's time to move past the fixation on Jefferson's intent. It was never realistic to think that the meaning of a document suffused with revolutionary possibilities could remain within the parameters of Jefferson's personal beliefs, however we might divine them. Through the exertions of Black Americans and others concerned about progress toward a more just society, the Declaration has been given life and purpose beyond what we take to have been its author's sight. Perhaps their intentions are what matter most now.

For the substantial number of Americans who have wished over the years to exclude Black people from the polity, Jefferson's intent has always been paramount. As one argument goes, Jefferson and other members of the founding generation did not think African Americans were equal to white people; therefore, they were not endowed by the Creator with the rights that European Americans claimed in 1776. This particular message has been delivered in the United States in countless ways in everyday life and in powerful venues at crucial moments.

[From the June 2021 issue: Annette Gordon-Reed on Black America's neglected origin stories](#)

Notably, the idea that Black people were simply not part of the Declaration's "all" was at the center of the Supreme Court's decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. The infamous 1857 ruling held that people of African descent were not citizens of the United States. [Writing for the majority](#), Chief Justice Roger B. Taney looked to his version of history and found that "neither the class of persons who had been imported as slaves, nor their descendants, whether they had become free or not, were then acknowledged as a part of the people, nor intended to be included in the general words used in that memorable instrument."

Taney's decision was more than a statement about how legal status determined the right to citizenship, or, we might say, the right to be called an "American." It was one thing to explain why the enslaved, treated by law as property, were well outside civic equality. It was quite another to do what Taney did in extending the prohibition to free Black Americans, who, by 1857, could have been the product of generations of legally free people who had paid taxes, fought in American wars, and, in some cases, voted and held office. In Taney's formulation, even people born of white mothers and Black fathers in states that determined a child's status by that of their mother were ineligible to be citizens. Taney's issue, of course, was race. For him, being white was the basic requirement for being an American.

Taney's was not the only view on the Court, however. Writing one of the two dissenting opinions, Justice Benjamin Curtis corrected Taney's flat assertion that no state had ever treated Black people as citizens, listing several states that had done so. Curtis entertained the question of the Founders' intent in

the Declaration warily. But he insisted that the Declaration “would not be just to them, nor true in itself, to allege that they intended to say that the Creator of all men had endowed the white race, exclusively, with the great natural rights which the Declaration of Independence asserts.” The Founders could not have marked God as having played favorites in that way.

The *Dred Scott* decision ultimately helped tilt an already deeply fractured nation toward all-out war. Six years after Taney delivered his verdict on Black citizenship, Abraham Lincoln weighed in. At Gettysburg, Lincoln referenced the Declaration’s dedication “to the proposition that all men are created equal” as the basis for the country’s “new birth of freedom,” made possible by the sacrifice of soldiers in the Army of the United States.

After the Civil War concluded, the Fourteenth Amendment was designed to settle the matter. All people born in the United States—enslaved or free—were citizens entitled to the privileges and immunities of citizenship, the right to due process, and equal protection under the law. The amendment effectively killed the notion that one had to be white to be an American. Or it should have.

Those who are ambivalent about, or even hostile to, the concept of Black people as equal American citizens tend to bypass this most transformational period in American history—the Lincoln presidency, the Civil War, the postwar amendments to the Constitution, and Reconstruction—to promote the founding era as the one true source of our present-day civic conventions. This creates the opportunity, for those who want one, to adopt Taney’s understanding of the connection between race and citizenship: What many white Americans may have thought about Black people’s humanity in the 1770s should bind us today and, presumably, forever.

One of the many maddening things about the institution of American slavery is that we know far more about the views of white politicians and planters than we do of the enslaved people they lorded over. The contemporaneous thoughts and feelings of individual enslaved people are mostly lost to history. We do not, for example, know what Robert Hemmings thought of the Declaration’s pronouncement about equality: whether he ever wondered at the fact that the man who wrote those words had enslaved him, or that he and five of his siblings shared a father with Jefferson’s wife.

In his first draft of the Declaration, the depths of Jefferson's contradictions are even clearer. In [one passage that was later deleted by delegates to the Second Continental Congress](#), Jefferson referred to enslaved Africans as a "distant people" whose "sacred rights of life & liberty" had nevertheless been violated by King George III's insistence on keeping the slave trade open. In whatever way slavery began in the American colonies, by the time Jefferson wrote those words, generations of Black people had lived there, and a number, like Hemmings, shared a lineage with Europeans. They could not be considered a "distant people."

We do have some direct evidence of what other African Americans of Hemmings's time, enslaved and free, thought about what the Declaration of Independence, and indeed the Revolutionary War, had to offer them. Even before July 4, 1776, the chaos of the conflict between Great Britain and the Americans created opportunities to change the status quo. Many enslaved people threw themselves into the mix. They left plantations, including some of Jefferson's outlying farms, and joined the British, who promised them freedom if the men became soldiers. Some men of African descent made a different choice, joining the American military effort in exchange for their freedom. Others were coerced. They shed blood for the new nation, and one—Crispus Attucks—is often regarded as the first man of any race to do so.

Although not themselves guaranteed equal legal protections, African Americans were part of Anglo-American culture, and understood how the law shaped their society. From the moment the Declaration was presented to the people, Black petitioners relayed their ideas about what role the document should play in their lives and the life of the United States. Several of those appeals reached the public sphere and attracted notice in their time and ours.

In January 1777, African Americans living in Massachusetts wrote the first known post-Declaration petition to a legislature to abolish slavery. [The petition speaks of](#) the "unalienable right" to freedom, "which the great Parent of the Universe hath bestowed equally on all Mankind," and makes an explicit connection between the struggle against Great Britain and Black people's struggle for freedom. Were they to move against slavery, legislators would no longer be "chargeable with the inconsistency of acting, themselves, the part which they condemn & oppose in others."

Among the petitioners, some of whom signed with an X, was Prince Hall, the founder of America's first lodge of Black Freemasons and [a noted antislavery activist](#). By some accounts, Hall had been born in Barbados and had come to Boston in his late teens. A literate man, he became extremely active in Boston's small Black community, working on many fronts to improve the lot of African Americans. He complained about injustices done to them and argued for educating Black children. But he didn't think the United States was the only answer for Black people. Before and after the Revolution, he and other Black men in the state urged the Massachusetts legislature to provide funds for those who wanted to emigrate from America to Africa.



The anti-slavery activist Prince Hall

Following the American victory over the British, a Black man writing under the name Vox Africanorum sounded the same theme as Hall and his fellow Massachusetts petitioners. Vox Africanorum took to the pages of *The Maryland Gazette* to compare the situation the Americans had faced in the

confrontation with King George to the circumstances that Black Americans faced in the new country. He then suggested that those in power should attend to the truth of the Declaration's words about liberty and equality. The writer [refused to mount an argument for Black humanity](#), stating that even entering such a debate would mean that America "has already forgot those exalted principles she has so lately asserted with her blood."

So began a long tradition of using the contradiction between the ideals expressed in the Declaration and the reality of the treatment of African Americans to appeal to the consciences of white people. Vox Africanorum, Hall, and like-minded petitioners were, in effect, daring white people to say that Black people, also created by God, were not "people" in the same sense as they were.

[From the March 2021 issue: Danielle Allen on Prince Hall, American revolutionary](#)

Early Black petitioners were also helping create a new way of thinking about what it meant to be an American. With the destruction of ties to Great Britain, through a document that set forth principles justifying the establishment of a new nation, the people in the 13 colonies—very different societies each—took on a new identity. Tying that new American identity to the belief in the language of the Declaration made sense in a place that was more religiously, racially, and ethnically diverse than Great Britain. Anyone who arrived on American shores and committed to the country's ideals could become an American. The principles that propelled the colonists to rebellion would hold their union together.

We can see the aspirational aspects of these interpretations in Jefferson's own correspondence. In 1791, when he was secretary of state, he exchanged letters with Benjamin Banneker, a free Black almanac maker and astronomer from Maryland. Banneker had written to Jefferson to share the new almanac he had produced and to make the case against slavery. [He reminded Jefferson](#) that, once, the "Arms and tyranny of the British Crown were exerted with every powerful effort in order to reduce you to a State of Servitude," which the white colonists had designated a form of "slavery." Then Banneker quoted Jefferson's words—"We hold these truths to be Self evident"—back to him.

The letters exchanged between the two men were made public and created something of a sensation, in part because of [Jefferson's polite response](#) to Banneker, in which he signed off: "I am with great esteem, Sir, Your most obedt. humble servt." Critics ridiculed Jefferson for the salutation, for the suggestion that he and Banneker were on equal terms as correspondents.

[From the December 2019 issue: Annette Gordon-Reed on Thomas Jefferson's doomed educational experiment](#)

Banneker's approach to Jefferson and the Declaration was mild compared with the metaphorical hammer that would be dropped 38 years later. In 1829, at the dawn of the Jacksonian period, David Walker, a Massachusetts clothing merchant and abolitionist, released his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, a pamphlet exhorting Black people to fight for their freedom. [Walker's Appeal](#) purposefully used the contradictions of the founding generation to shame white readers and hopefully inspire Black recipients to rebellion. In one of the most frustrating near misses in history, Walker published his *Appeal* three years after the Sage of Monticello's death, and was robbed of the possibility for a direct confrontation. Nevertheless, he conjures Jefferson as a rhetorical foil, describing him as having "gone to answer at the bar of God, for the deeds done in his body while living."

Walker wrote in the tradition of the Revolutionary pamphleteers, whose calls to arms were answered in the Declaration. If his own embrace of violence inflamed white people—and it did—then their very reaction proved his point. "I ask you candidly," Walker wrote, "was your sufferings under Great Britain, one hundredth part as cruel and tyranical as you have rendered ours under you?" If White colonists had had the right to rebel against British tyranny, as the Declaration said, then Black people had the right to rebel against the tyranny imposed by slavery.

One would love to have Jefferson's response to Walker's pamphlet. He had predicted that, one day, enslaved people would rise up to strike a blow against slavery, which was [part of the reason he came to favor a policy of emancipation and expatriation](#). Black people's actions during the Revolution had made it clear to him that if the opportunity arose, Black men would fight for their freedom. In later life, when talking about the dangers of postponing

emancipation and expatriation, [he predicted their response](#): “One million of these fighting men will say ‘we will not go.’”

By the end of his life, Jefferson had heard from enough individuals from different backgrounds, races, and religions to know that what he had written in the Declaration spoke to people’s aspirations for equal treatment and personal liberty. Indeed, he noted as much in [a letter written just a month before he died](#), on the 50th anniversary of the Declaration, predicting that the ideas in the document would someday apply “to all.” Following Enlightenment principles, Jefferson believed (maybe too much) in the notion of inevitable progress. Succeeding generations would be “wiser,” he said, and the new information and ideas they possessed would bring changes in attitudes. The tenets of the Declaration would be a useful guide. It is a safe bet, however, that Jefferson would have seen Walker’s *Appeal* as coming too soon, because it would have immediately disrupted life as he knew it.

By the time Walker wrote his *Appeal*, the country’s relationship to the institution of slavery had changed. When the Massachusetts petitioners made their case in 1777, and when Banneker wrote Jefferson in 1791, they had reason to believe that change through legal and rhetorical avenues was possible. Influenced by the rhetoric of the Declaration and overall talk of liberty, states in the North had begun to abolish slavery. Although Jefferson’s Virginia had not gone nearly that far, it did liberalize the laws of emancipation in 1782, allowing enslavers to free people without having to get permission from the government.

But over time, as the Revolutionary generation in the South gave way to children and grandchildren, any qualms about slavery faded. Members of the founding generation had often portrayed slavery as a necessary evil, but their descendants, who were beginning to see the enormous potential profits in the cotton-planting economy, saw slavery as a positive good. And they began to define and defend their way of life in opposition to that of the North. Once [the Missouri Compromise of 1820](#) formalized the division of America into slave and free states, the sectional conflict over slavery became more intense.

The Jacksonian era saw the militant assertion of a right to a white man’s government. States that had given a modicum of civil rights to free Black

citizens began to retrench. In the early 1800s, some states removed voting rights for Black men. Even Pennsylvania, which had been a seat of abolitionism, amended its constitution to make clear that the franchise was open only to “white freemen.” Walker had every reason to write about the Declaration from a position of anger and despair.

By 1852, when Frederick Douglass gave [his famous speech commemorating Independence Day](#), titled “What to the Slave Is the 4th of July?,” the battle lines over slavery had been sharply drawn. There was an organized interracial effort to oppose the institution, arrayed against a faction of white southerners who were vocal and implacable in their defense of slavery. The abolitionist movement, of which Douglass was a shining star, also had global momentum: Four months before Douglass’s speech, [Harriet Beecher Stowe](#) published *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to much attention and acclaim—and vilification, from the South and its supporters.

In tone, Douglass’s oration sits somewhere between Walker’s incendiary *Appeal* and the more measured passion of people like the Massachusetts petitioners, Vox Africanorum, and Banneker. No doubt to please his largely white audience, Douglass began on a note of praise for the “fathers of this republic.” After these preliminaries, he moved into familiar territory, launching an extensive and devastating critique of the gap between the ideals the Founders claimed for themselves and the circumstances of Black people. “I am not included within the pale of glorious anniversary!” Douglass exclaimed. “Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us.” He continued with an indictment: “This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.”

At this point, Douglass sounded as pessimistic in his assessment of the situation as Walker had, without the intimations of violence. But then he offered a bit of hope. “Notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented,” Douglass said, “I do not despair of this country.” He told his audience that he drew encouragement from the Declaration of Independence itself, from the self-improving tendencies in its institutions, and from the public sentiment of the moment, in which slavery had been thrown into crisis. Douglass and his forebears had helped manifest that crisis by using the Declaration as both a shield and a sword. He had hope, and it had been

granted to him by Prince Hall and David Walker as much as by any Founding Father.

Hope has been at the center of the efforts of marginalized people who have used the Declaration to make their way into full American citizenship: hope that the document's inclusive message could overcome the reality of a society sundered by the doctrine of white supremacy. From Hall to Douglass, Black American freedom seekers were never ignorant of the reality of race. They knew that their arguments would be seen through the prism of their country's racial hierarchy. They were counting on the idea that a nation born of aspirations could improve. Once slavery was over, Black and white citizens could begin the process of becoming Americans together.

That short-lived process [started in earnest during Reconstruction](#), as abolitionists, Radical Republicans, and the formerly enslaved themselves struggled toward a multiracial society based on the ideals announced in the Declaration. White southerners, unrepentant and unwilling to share power or social position, mounted a second rebellion to attack Reconstruction, and this time the federal government capitulated. With the establishment—and federal endorsement—of Jim Crow, the South once again built an order based on Roger Taney's logic.

It took a concerted, decades-long effort during the 20th century to bring the hope engendered by the Declaration's ideals back into the discussion of Black America's fate. The architects of the legal strategy for the 20th-century civil-rights movements followed in the footsteps of African Americans who'd seen opportunity in the Declaration.

This was [the spirit that animated Martin Luther King Jr.'s “I Have a Dream” speech](#), given at the culmination of the March on Washington in 1963. King spoke in the tradition started by the Massachusetts petitioners who attempted to hold Americans to the standards of their country's creed. He did so at a time when the so-called second American Revolution was raising the same type of hope as the first. When the civil-rights movement finally compelled the federal government to act, the Declaration was the rhetorical dynamo. In [a 1965 speech to Congress in favor of the Voting Rights Act](#), President Lyndon B. Johnson referenced that American creed. “Those words are a

promise,” he said, “to every citizen that he shall share in the dignity of man.”

A great deal has happened since those heady days. Johnson’s speech was not the end of the debate, but rather the beginning of a new chapter. Even as the 1960s civil-rights legislation was being signed into law, a counterrevolution was born, one that we now see in its maturity. As happened during the Age of Jackson, and the period of Redemption after the end of Reconstruction, the part of the citizenry that has resisted the equal citizenship of Black Americans is in political ascendancy. Although hope is always embedded in the Declaration itself, imbued by the struggle of those who’d once been held as property, we should recognize that just as freedom is part of the nation’s heritage, so is racism. Politicians have always known the value of stoking anti-Black sentiment as a means to gain power.

We approach the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States with much less reason to hope that the country’s long-standing racial problems will be mitigated, or that they will not, in fact, ultimately destroy the experiment the Declaration set in motion. As devotees of the Enlightenment and believers in the scientific method know, sometimes experiments succeed, and sometimes they fail.

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The Moral Foundation of America

The idea that everyone has intrinsic rights to life and liberty was a radical break with millennia of human history. It's worth preserving.

by Elaine Pagels



For thousands of years, the view that only rulers conferred rights or privileges on everyone else was taken for granted in traditional societies around the world. In the ancient empires of Babylonia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, only those whom rulers regarded as their peers had value, or what the

Romans called *dignitas*. Hindu societies enshrined the ruler as one who embodies the divine order of the gods, and established a hierarchical rank for everyone else. The caste system even defined some people as “outcaste,” with no right to move freely and little recourse from lifelong servitude.

The anonymous Babylonian scribes who wrote the legal code of Hammurabi some 4,000 years ago seem to have regarded human value as a quality that the king could grant to certain people and deny to others. This code assigned privileges, and what we call “rights,” according to a strictly hierarchical view of social power.

The archaeologists who discovered Hammurabi’s code must have been surprised, at first, to see that it offered certain protections from mutilation, torture, and execution. But it became clear that these were dependent on one’s social rank. The king—who authorized the code—assigned punishments based on the social status of the offender and the victim.

Ancient kings and emperors enforced their power through terror and violence. They claimed to derive their own prerogatives from the gods—from Marduk, in Babylonia; Ra, in Egypt; Jupiter, in Rome. Ancient philosophers held similar views. More than 2,000 years ago, [when Plato wrote his famous treatise](#) on “The Laws,” he declared that human laws merely articulate the will of the gods, and extend privileges to people like himself, members of the aristocratic class in Athens.

Aristotle took a different approach, invoking what would later be known as biological determinism. Observing that among wild animals, different creatures possess different innate abilities, he argued that the same is true of humans—for instance, that disparities in intelligence and physical strength predispose people to be natural-born rulers or slaves.

The Declaration of Independence, by contrast, speaks of the rights to life and liberty as sacred gifts that “Nature” and “Nature’s God” have given freely to all humanity. These principles were inspired partly by the Enlightenment, the philosophical movement that emerged in Europe after hundreds of years of horrifying religious war. But they originated in the Book of Genesis, which declares that every human being has value.

As Thomas Jefferson knew when he wrote the Declaration, the idea of innate rights to life and liberty was a bold innovation. The “truths” for which the Founders risked their lives were not in fact “self-evident.” That makes preserving them all the more important.

By suggesting that ultimate value resides in the individual, regardless of their sociopolitical status, the Bible defied some of the world’s most enduring conventions of rank and worth. Genesis declares that *adam* (Hebrew for “man” or “humankind”) was created in the image of God, thus affirming the intrinsic value of all human beings—a fundamental theme for “peoples of the book,” Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike.

The Bible describes how, for several hundred years, the ancient Israelites governed themselves by tribal councils, maintaining a measure of equality. In a crisis, when tribal councils failed to reach consensus, Israel’s people agreed to choose a king, “like the other nations.” But they also developed methods to resist autocratic power. Those who wrote the Bible well remembered the oppression that Israel’s people had experienced in Egypt and Babylonia.

Biblical chronicles that tell of the great King David’s triumphs also show that when he acted wrongly, the prophet Nathan rebuked him, speaking on behalf of the Lord, and ordered him to repent and reform. In that culture, moral law remained as binding for the king himself as for his subjects—David obeyed the prophet’s command. Other kings of Israel, too, were reprimanded by prophets when they failed to act morally. Jesus of Nazareth amplified the theme of innate rights by advocating generosity and love toward all people.

Jefferson admired the Bible’s ethical principles, but was skeptical of its metaphysics. He famously took a razor to the New Testament, excising the miracles while leaving intact the teachings of Jesus, whom Jefferson venerated as a philosopher and the author of “the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man.”

From the November 2020 issue: James Parker on reading Thomas Jefferson’s Bible

In drafting the Declaration, Jefferson cited the “sacred and undeniable” truth that “all men are created equal.” He also drew on the idea of natural law that ensured human rights—a concept that had been popularized in mid-18th-century Europe with the Enlightenment. The final version of the document, of course, [referred to humans’ natural rights](#) as “self-evident.”

Above all, the Founding Fathers agreed that because these are innate rights, they can only be recognized, and not conferred, by human beings. They went on to state, “To secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

This contradicted prevailing views not just from ancient times but also from their own day. From the fifth to the 18th centuries, Europe’s Catholic and Protestant kings claimed to rule by “divine right,” insisting that the lower status of everyone else, whether aristocrat, merchant, servant, or slave, was simply God’s will. (To this day, the [British Crown’s ancient motto](#) proclaims: “God and My Right.”) This was also an ideal that Jefferson himself did not live up to. Glancing out his study window at Monticello, he would have seen [people whom he had bought as property](#) working in his fields, people denied rights of any kind.

It took another war to extend those rights to Black Americans, and the work of protecting the rights defined in the Declaration is an ongoing project. But over the course of its first 250 years, the United States became the strongest and most prosperous nation on Earth, offering hope to countless people worldwide. Starting with Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and their courageous colleagues, many of the fiercest defenders of intrinsic rights have been people who understood the alternative all too well—power maintained by means of fear, autocracy, and military force. Many of these people had faith in God and the biblical vision of human nature, both in America and throughout the world, whether they were explicitly religious or not.

The Founders knew that monarchy had been the norm for most of human history, and they saw how difficult that would be to change. The cruel and dangerous reversion to rule through fear and violence that we are seeing now was among their greatest concerns. But I have faith in their 1776 vision; I

believe that the rights to life and liberty are the sacred inheritance of every human being, grounded in a transcendent reality.

Now is the time for those of us who love what the Founders entrusted to us to pledge anew—to one another, to our children, and to all who come after us—that we stand for their Declaration.

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How Native Nations Shaped the Revolution

The Founders were inspired—and threatened—by the independence and self-governance of nations like the Iroquois Confederacy.

by Ned Blackhawk



An 1877 depiction of Pontiac speaking at a tribal council (Hulton Archive / Getty)

The Declaration of Independence is venerated for its poetic language and universalist prologue, with the soaring, “self-evident” truth that all men have the right to “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” But, less famously, the Declaration is also a set of specific grievances. There are 27 in total, building to a defining final charge against the Crown: The King of England has attempted to afflict frontiersmen with “merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.”

The most famous text of the Revolution culminates not with an idealistic wish but with a derogatory indictment, legal as well as moral. The drafters drew upon nascent doctrines of international law and made England’s incitement of “Savages” the ultimate unjust act against a “Free and Independent” people. In this so-called Age of Reason, Native Americans were charged with having none at all. They were not only lawless but also irrational, incapable of self-governance, and lacking moral capacity.

[Jeffrey Ostler: The shameful final grievance of the Declaration of Independence](#)

This one-dimensional vision of Native Americans was new. Having lived alongside Native communities for generations—during war, peace, and constant trade—the colonists had ample evidence that they were capable of self-government. Native people maintained distinct customs, laws, and forms of sovereignty, many of them in defiance of both British and colonial authorities. Long before the arrival of Europeans, the nations of the Iroquois (or Haudenosaunee) Confederacy centralized political, military, and diplomatic practices. Throughout the 1740s and ’50s, Benjamin Franklin commented on the durable forms of union exercised by the Iroquois, whose confederacy, as he wrote, “has subsisted Ages, and appears indissoluble.”

In fact, Native self-governance was so evident and persistent that it became a source of colonial frustration. Pamphleteers often decried the Crown’s diplomacy with Native nations, as well as its inability to control them. Across the colonies, and particularly beyond the Appalachians, Native independence was seen as a threat to colonists, who had begun to envision their own claims to the same lands as necessary to their independence and sovereignty.

The colonists sought not just territory, but unchallenged dominion. To achieve this, they needed to erase the legitimacy of Native governance and justify violent dispossession. It was precisely because Native societies mirrored some of the colonists' own ideals (autonomy, law, liberty) that they had to be cast as savages. By 1776, American colonists had positioned Native peoples—and their resistance to conquest—as the antithesis of their own vision of an enlightened society: merciless, uncivilized, and geared toward “undistinguished destruction.” The founding documents of the United States may have been modeled on Enlightenment philosophy, but they were informed by the conflict among settlers, Native nations, and the Crown.

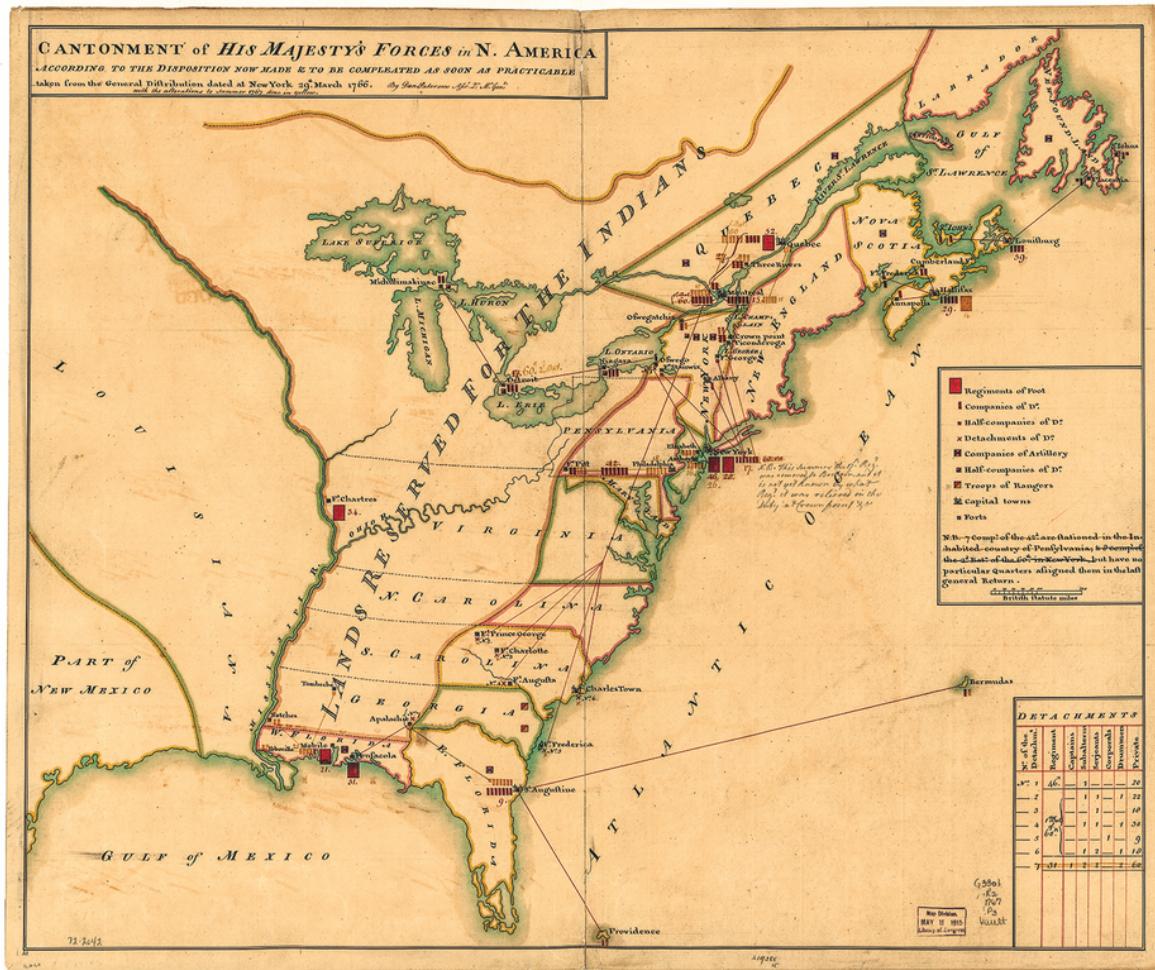
Understanding this history is not a matter of diminishing the Revolution’s accomplishments, but of recognizing the contested ground from which they arose—and the Native lives, lands, and liberties they attempted to foreclose.

The origins of the American Revolution stretch back further than the fabled year of 1776, and the poetics of the Declaration. The year 1763 stands out because of the momentous Treaty of Paris, which transferred most of New France to the English, more than doubling the Crown’s claims to North America. Now a person could travel from the Florida Panhandle to Hudson’s Bay and remain within the purported realm of King George III. The Crown (and its colonists) claimed all lands east of the Mississippi River, despite knowing that Native peoples governed much of this territory. The treaty would eventually inform the territorial boundaries of the United States, but Native dominion remained even as land transferred between European countries—a geopolitical reality absent from most current textbooks.

In the summer of 1763, the Great Lakes region exploded when Indigenous villagers under the Odawa leader Obwandiyag (also known as Pontiac) destroyed a series of English forts. Pontiac, born around 1720, had experienced the withdrawal of French trade and authority and now rallied other Native villagers to fill the power vacuum. This Native resistance compelled British officials to the bargaining table—trade would eventually resume—and the Crown fatefully altered its own laws to accommodate Native resistance. In October, [a royal proclamation prohibited colonial settlements past the Appalachians](#).

Natives “with whom We are connected, and who live under Our Protection, should not be molested or disturbed,” King George declared.

Early in the Revolutionary era, then, recognition of Native sovereignty both shaped the laws of the Crown and limited the prospects of its colonial subjects—kindling their eventual rebellion. Rather than accept new English prohibitions, and the Crown’s growing diplomacy with Pontiac, colonists formed new resentments, from which sprung new ideas, politics, and militancy.



This map, issued by British General Thomas Gage in 1766, declared lands west of the Appalachians “reserved for the Indians.” (Library of Congress)

Around that same time, an anonymous author published “[Some Hints to People in Power, on the Present Melancholy Situation of Our Colonies in](#)

North America,” which was addressed to the King’s secretaries of state and concerned the “destructive Tumult” that was “raging on our Frontiers.” The author advised making Natives “dependent upon us” in order to thwart their supremacy over colonial farmers, whose commitment to a sedentary pastoral life rendered them slow and prone to attack. For as long “as the Bark of the Trees furnishes them with Shelter, and their endless Forests and numerous Rivers with Food, they know they cannot be seriously distressed,” the author concluded, arguing that Native peoples’ relationship with nature gave them advantages over a “civilized and settled Race of Men.” The pamphlet exposed a paradox in colonial reasoning: While colonists viewed Indigenous peoples as “savage” and inferior, they simultaneously recognized—and some even envied—their different forms of government and social organization.

Across the Pennsylvania colony, men formed militia units. The frontiersman James Smith and his “Black Boys” militia donned Native dress, darkened their faces for concealment, and attacked supply trains from the Crown destined for Pontiac’s forces. In December, another militia unit known as the “Paxton Boys” massacred a Conestoga community in Lancaster County for allegedly ferrying information and supplies to Pontiac’s warriors. Benjamin Franklin, then a member of the Pennsylvania Provincial Assembly, published a pamphlet condemning the attack as lawless and immoral. In his description of the event, “White People” were the “Barbarians” guilty of “Wickedness,” while Natives had historically demonstrated “Kindness and Hospitality.” The Paxton Boys, Franklin said, had brutalized the innocent Conestoga out of pure racism.

“The only Crime of these poor Wretches seems to have been, that they had a reddish brown Skin,” he wrote.

Prior to the Seven Years’ War—which began in the mid-1750s and involved conflict among France, Great Britain, and Native tribes—the term *white people* had rarely been used. It had appeared a little more than once a year in colonial newspapers. During the war, however, there was a more than tenfold increase in newspapers’ use of the term. In 1757, George Washington, then an officer for Britain, wrote to a fellow colonel about a Cherokee conspiracy to attack “Traders and white people.” In Natives, white colonists found yet another group to define themselves against.

When James Smith defended his militia's violence, he framed British treaties with Native nations as alliances with "the enemies of Mankind." In doing so, he revealed the new ethos of the era. In print, spoken verse, and everyday parlance, *white people* became synonymous with *mankind*, a notion not universal—as the Declaration would have one believe—but exclusionary.

This racial logic was embedded in the founding documents of the United States. In 1776, Smith represented interior interests at Pennsylvania's constitutional convention in Philadelphia, helping [draft the state's first constitution](#). The document, in its opening paragraph, scolded the King for employing "savages and slaves" in a "cruel and unjust war" against the commonwealth—an echo of the final grievance of the Declaration of Independence, adopted mere steps away, 12 weeks earlier.

The founding documents thus served a dual purpose: to oppose both tyranny and "savagery." Colonists saw themselves besieged by an oppressive monarch abroad and by violent "savages" on their frontiers, with no guarantee that they would share in "the blessings of peace" or the profits of "victory and conquest," as it was [phrased in the July 1775 Olive Branch Petition](#) signed by Thomas Jefferson and other delegates to the Second Continental Congress.

In essence, their Revolution was not only for liberty but also for the ability to expand and to govern the lands and resources of Native nations—lands that they felt they and the Crown had "won" on the battlefield, and that they would soon win again by rejecting the Crown and declaring sovereignty.

The Revolution was not, however, a contest between the order of the state (reason) and the perceived disorder of nature (savagery). It was a contest between competing visions of governance and law, and between colonial sovereignty and the sovereign traditions of Native nations.

The Declaration of Independence opened the world to democratic possibility, sparking a wave of revolutions, yet it also marked the narrowing of political possibilities *within* the nascent United States. The very document that proclaimed a new kind of liberty also stifled other forms of governance, particularly those practiced by Native nations, which became outsiders to the

new American body politic. Across eastern North America, European forms of authority and landownership were now imposed on Native communities, displacing matriarchal clan systems that had long governed village politics and intertribal diplomacy.

In the story of America, Native peoples are reduced to a perpetual “thorn in the side” of the state, in the words of the political scientist James C. Scott, who argued that modern states were built to manage nonmigratory, easily categorized populations that could be taxed, conscripted, and surveilled. Much of American history has involved efforts to impose constrained visions of liberty—rooted in individualism, private property, and patriarchal norms—on Native peoples. Settler societies, like the colonies in 1776, are legible to a state. In contrast, Indigenous communities exist outside that frame, with fluid, seasonal, and relational systems of economics and politics that remain hard to regulate and control. Native nations have long fought to secure fishing and hunting rights through treaties, and therefore preserve migratory economies and animal resources.

Studying the contradictions of the Revolution disrupts the myth of a singular founding moment and reveals a contested process. Thousands of Native people fought and an untold number died during the Revolutionary War, not all in opposition to the colonists; Daniel Nimham, a Wappinger Indian who was made a captain in the Continental Army, perished with colonial troops while leading the Stockbridge Indian Company at the Battle of Kingsbridge (in what is now the Bronx) in August 1778. And if Native peoples formed the “climax of the Declaration,” as the historian Robert Parkinson put it, then their history is central to the country’s. Native nations retain sovereignty despite colonization, and acknowledging this makes them parallel rather than peripheral to the American story—which, in turn, gives the Revolution fuller dimension and meaning.

The United States continued to grow after its founding by displacing and subordinating generations of Native nations. A century after the Declaration, [federal assimilation programs removed Native children](#) from their families, placed them in institutions, and subjected them to abuse and indoctrination. The goal was clear: to break familial and cultural ties and instill new values. Depriving nations of their children is how peoples are destroyed, which is why the United Nations lists this tactic among its definitions for genocide.

Textbooks have inched toward acknowledging these histories, yet they still fall short of explaining how “liberty and freedom” for some was often used to justify the conquest and dispossession of others. Indeed, the lofty ideals at the core of our founding documents risk becoming hollow if they are stripped of their historical failures and limitations. Rather than smoothing over the Declaration’s paradoxes—which Native peoples have long sought to expose—Americans should confront them directly. As the Lakota author Luther Standing Bear reflected in 1933, recalling his time at the notorious Carlisle Indian Industrial School: “I can well remember when Indians in those days were stoned upon the streets as were the dogs that roamed them. We were ‘savages,’ and all who had not come under the influence of the missionary were ‘heathen.’”

Standing Bear’s words, written a full century and a half after the Declaration’s signing, remind us that the phrase *merciless Indian Savages* was never just rhetorical; it was strategic in its vilification. The U.S. Constitution and the Fourteenth Amendment both explicitly excluded “Indians not taxed,” as did civil-rights laws of the Reconstruction era. Not until 1924 were Native peoples granted U.S. citizenship through congressional legislation, in part to advance Indian assimilation and alienate more reservation lands.

Reckoning with this complex legacy requires a reframing of American independence, nationhood, and the self-evident truth that “all men are created equal.” Perhaps, upon its 250th anniversary, the United States can envision the Declaration as one of *interdependence*—expansive enough to confront its own contradictions and inclusive enough to honor the sovereignties it sought to erase.

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What the Founders Would Say Now

**They might be surprised
that the republic exists at all.
**

by Fintan O'Toole



When the American republic was founded, the Earth was no more than 75,000 years old. No contemporary thinker imagined it could possibly be older. Thus Thomas Jefferson was confident that woolly mammoths must

still live in “the northern and western parts of America,” places that “still remain in their aboriginal state, unexplored and undisturbed by us.”

The idea that mammoths or any other kind of creature might have ceased to exist was, to him, inconceivable. “Such is the œconomy of nature,” he wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, “that no instance can be produced of her having permitted any one race of her animals to become extinct; of her having formed any link in her great work so weak as to be broken.”

Those illusory behemoths roaming out there somewhere beyond the Rockies remind us that the world of the Founding Fathers is in some ways as alien to us as ours would be to them. A distance of two and a half centuries is too long for us to be able to fully inhabit their universe, but not long enough for us to be capable of viewing them disinterestedly or dispassionately. In trying to imagine how they would perceive the state of their republic in 2025, the risk is that we invent our own versions of Jefferson’s nonexistent beasts. The originalist fallacy that dominates the current Supreme Court—the pretense that it is possible to read the minds of the Founders and discern what they “really” meant—in fact turns the Founders into ventriloquists’ dummies. We express our own prejudices by moving their lips.

[From the October 2025 issue: Jill Lepore on how originalism killed the Constitution](#)

Yet asking what the Revolutionary leaders would think of America now has long been a spur to critical thinking. The interrogation of how well or badly the present condition of the nation matches the founding intentions is one of the vital forces behind the American political project. It kindles the fire that blazes in Frederick Douglass’s Fourth of July speech of 1852, during which he said of the Founders that their “solid manhood stands out the more as we contrast it with these degenerate times.” It is the test Abraham Lincoln presents in the Gettysburg Address: whether the form of republican government created “four score and seven years ago” by “our fathers” might be about to “perish from the earth.” It underpins Martin Luther King Jr.’s resplendent rebuke at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963: “When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.”

We do not have [to sanitize the Founders into secular sainthood](#) to ask what their republic has done with that legacy. We can use their magnificent words to reproach many of America's contemporary follies even while recognizing that some of their actions prefigure those follies. It is quite possible, for example, that many of the Founders might be enthusiastic supporters of Donald Trump's unilateral imposition of swinging tariffs on foreign trade—albeit not of the bellicose rhetoric that accompanies them. In 1807, Congress, with Jefferson as president and James Madison as secretary of state, [prohibited cargo-bearing American vessels from sailing to foreign ports](#) and forbade the export of all goods out of the country by sea; imports also declined, largely because it was impractical for ships from abroad to make the trip if they had to return empty.

[From the September 2003 issue: Our reverence for the Founders has gotten out of hand](#)

Jefferson thought of this as the invention of an experiment in “peaceful coercion” that might do away with war and make possible an enlightened era of universal peace. He persisted with this foolishness for 14 months while agricultural prices fell sharply and thousands were thrown out of work. In his book [Empire of Liberty](#), about the early republic, Gordon Wood notes, “Perhaps never in history has a trading nation of America’s size engaged in such an act of self-immolation with so little reward.” If he were to update the book, he might wish to add “until now.”

Conversely, most of the leading revolutionaries would likely be dismayed to discover that their republic now allows women not only to vote but to hold public office. The [vile misogyny of Trump’s invective](#) against Kamala Harris in the 2024 presidential election would have repelled them, but they would have been more astonished that one of the main contenders for the office was female than that she was a person of color.

To acknowledge that the Founders could be as wrongheaded as any of their successors is also to marvel at how acute their thinking could be—even when they were woefully misguided. George Washington, Jefferson, and Madison all owned slaves. Their unwillingness or inability to confront at the birth of a new nation what Jefferson acknowledged as an “abominable

crime” is the gaping crack in the foundation on which they built the republic: the “self-evident” truth that “all men are created equal.”

Yet they were not stupid. “[I tremble for my country,](#)” Jefferson wrote, “when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever.” The Founders knew very well that the simple word *all* was indeed, as Martin Luther King would point out, a promissory note. [Lincoln put his finger on it](#) when he said that Jefferson “had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times.”

Lincoln’s point remains potent: Equality was indeed a cruel abstraction for women, [Native Americans](#), and the nearly [one-fifth of the American population that was enslaved](#) at the time of the republic’s founding. But the word was intended to transcend the time and circumstances of its utterance and to make a claim on the future. There is no going back from that *all*. The Founders might at first be amazed by the evolution of their republic into one that guarantees the principle (if not the practice) of racial equality, but they would recognize on reflection that they had planted a seed that would blossom in heroic struggles for justice.

The Founders would be taken aback, not just by the geographic scale of contemporary America but by its cultural and ethnic diversity. It is true that they already lived in a multicultural world—in 1790, only about 60 percent of white Americans were of English ancestry. Most of the rest were Irish, German, Scottish, French, Dutch, or Swedish. The French immigrant J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur celebrated “that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country.”

Yet the Founders preferred to imagine American blood as unmixed. [The Federalist Papers call Americans](#) “people descended from the same ancestors.” In the aftermath of a war of independence that was also in effect a civil war, they were for obvious reasons much more interested in generating a sense of unity than in recognizing diversity. It seems likely that they would be confounded by the problem of how to preserve an “unum” when the “pluribus” is ever more disparate. They might in fact wonder at the ability of the United States to do so at all—to survive as a multicultural, let alone multiracial, entity.

They might have concluded, though, that they had left it an invaluable legacy by writing on their new nation's birth certificate a phrase that can be—and has been—easily mocked. When the Founders included “the pursuit of happiness” in the Declaration of Independence as one of the three primordial human rights, they were making large claims, not just about the meaning of a republic but about the meaning of life.

They were drawing on one of the basic ideas of the Enlightenment—[John Locke, for example, had declared](#), “I lay it for a certain ground, that every intelligent being really seeks happiness, which consists in the enjoyment of pleasure, without any considerable mixture of uneasiness.” Pleasure, in this sense, is more about human self-fulfillment than the self-indulgence of the rich. We might now call it well-being. This happiness is a radically egalitarian idea—everyone has an innate right to seek it. And there is an implicit embrace of diversity in that equality: No two ideas of happiness will be exactly the same.

But [the elevation of happiness](#) was also a radical challenge to the religious insistence that the point of life was to pursue sanctity through suffering. It is easy to forget that Christian Churches taught their flocks that our fate as human beings was to spend our time on Earth (in the words of a prayer I recited as a child) “mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.” To declare happiness as a foundational idea for a new kind of state was to suggest that human beings should be able to live enjoyable lives in the here and now.

Both of these ideas of happiness are under attack in contemporary America. Trumpism is all about the “considerable mixture of uneasiness” that Locke wished to exclude—the wallowing in self-pity, the horror-movie thrills of imagining American carnage, the terror of invasion by migrant hordes. Even the pleasures that Trump offers his followers are sadistic ones, predicated on his invitation to enjoy the pain of others. His happiness is a zero-sum game: “Real” Americans can experience it only if others are miserable.

This would be anathema to the Founders. The Declaration of Independence does not rest on any claim to American exceptionalism. On the contrary, it bases the necessity “to institute new Government” on the alleged violation of rights that are not national but universal. They belong to mankind first,

not to “America First.” Likewise, [the Bill of Rights is, as Jefferson wrote](#), “what the people are entitled to against every government on earth.”

The Founders would be equally repelled by a contemporary-American reaction against their belief that the meaning of collective political life is not dependent on religious faith. The separation of Church and state was essential to their republic. They understood from European and recent colonial history that true religious freedom is impossible if faith is intertwined with government. Thus the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States begins: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Or [as Jefferson put it](#): “It does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.” The neighbor who believes in 20 gods or no god must therefore have the same political rights as the one who is an orthodox monotheist.

The Founders would thus be dismayed to find their insistence on establishing the political sphere as a neutral space in relation to religious belief and unbelief now flatly denied by, for example, Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, who insists that what they really meant was that “they did not want the government to encroach upon the Church—not that they didn’t want principles of faith to have influence on our public life. It’s exactly the opposite.” The Founders would have asked Johnson which set of religious principles they wished to hold sway over public life.

If the Founders would not have recognized themselves in this distorting mirror, there is nonetheless far too much about today’s America that they would recognize all too well. They did not know where their republic would go, but they knew exactly where it was coming from. They knew what theocratic politics were like, because they or their ancestors had lived under established Churches—[as Madison put it](#), “We revere this lesson too much soon to forget it.” They knew exactly why it was necessary to stop officeholders from accepting gifts from “any King, Prince, or foreign State” without the consent of Congress; Benjamin Franklin, when he received a valuable snuffbox from the king of France, was so sensitive to possible perceptions of bribery that he sought congressional approval to keep it. It is not hard to surmise what he would have done with [the offer of a Boeing 747 from Qatar](#).

It is true that the Founders did not think of their republic as one in which all citizens could be active participants in political life. Every state retained property qualifications for voters or officeholders, and this of course suited the interests of the economic elite, to which the Founders belonged. But their limitations on democratic participation were not mere expressions of snobbery and self-interest. The Founders were not wrong to believe that full citizenship is possible only for people who have the economic means to exercise it. It is hard to be free when you're mired in poverty—and easy to override the principle of equal citizenship when you are superrich.

The great problem of contemporary democracy is, indeed, that suffrage became universal but the kind of economic dignity imagined by the Founders as its necessary condition did not. In this regard, one thing we can say with certainty is that the Founders would be [horrified by the spectacle of Elon Musk handing out \\$1 million a day to voters](#) in swing states—a subversion of the democratic process even cruder and more grotesque than their worst fears.

The Founders imagined that access to property—then thought of primarily as the ownership of land—would spread, and that the political nation would expand accordingly. This may be a very conservative idea, but if we apply it to contemporary America, it would have radical consequences. The Founders would surely be distressed to find, for example, that the modern equivalent of land ownership—having one's own home—is ever more out of reach for young Americans.

The Founders would also be perplexed by the growth of oligarchy. They were mostly rich men who believed, as the rich usually do, that economic inequalities arise naturally from the “diversity in the faculties of men”—so wrote Madison in “Federalist No. 10.” Yet, as Gordon Wood observed, they nonetheless “took for granted that a society could not long remain republican if a tiny minority controlled most of the wealth.” If they were told that [the top 0.1 percent of Americans currently holds 14 percent of the country’s wealth](#) while the bottom half holds just 2.5 percent, they would surely have calculated that the odds on the survival of their republic had become very steep.

Likewise, they would be deeply depressed by America's rapid loss of a common sphere in which political arguments can be teased out as a collective enterprise. What is most invigorating about the Founding Fathers is not even what they thought. It is *how* they thought. They did their thinking aloud. The pseudonym used by Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay for *The Federalist Papers* is Publius, redolent of both *public* and *the people*. *The Federalist Papers* think through complex questions but do so in a language written to be read in coffeehouses and taverns. When Jefferson observed that "where the press is free and every man able to read, all is safe," the second requirement was as important as the first. The Founders imagined a republic of readers.

Even while they were anxious to limit the vote to men of property like themselves, they understood that there were no such limits on the right to hold an opinion. The opening of the Declaration of Independence acknowledges that it is written out of "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind"—not, notably, heads of state or popes or grandees but people in general. And its authors knew that the opinions even of women and working people percolated upward into political institutions. Madison wrote, "Public opinion sets bounds to every government, and is the real sovereign in every free one." The quality of public discourse thus mattered as much to him as the forms of government did. This much wider public sphere had to be capable not just of dealing with intricacies but of guarding them. Madison wrote that the chief responsibility of the people was to maintain the "complicated form of their political system."

The public arena therefore had to be kept clear of the detritus of mere insult. Franklin, who made his fortune in what we would call the media business, boasts [in his Autobiography](#),

In the Conduct of my Newspaper I carefully excluded all Libelling and Personal Abuse, which is of late Years become so disgraceful to our Country. Whenever I was solicited to insert any thing of that kind, and the Writers pleaded as they generally did, the Liberty of the Press, and that a Newspaper was like a Stage Coach in which any one who would pay had a Right to a Place, my Answer was, that I would print the Piece separately if desired, and the Author might have as many Copies as he

pleased to distribute himself, but that I would not take upon me to spread his Detraction.

In drawing attention to his own refusal to publish personal abuse, Franklin was of course acknowledging that the newspapers were otherwise full of it. The Founders themselves were often fractious, splenetic, and happy to attack one another through paid proxies. But they nonetheless believed that the vigor of public debate must ultimately serve rational purposes. The press was a blacksmith's shop full of heat and resounding with heavy blows, but that was because it was where ideas of the common good were being hammered out.

In this light, there is little doubt that the Founders would be particularly appalled both by the loss of so many local newspapers in contemporary America and by the conduct of a president who smears the press as "the enemy of the people." [Madison wrote that](#) "a circulation of newspapers through the entire body of the people" was as vital as good roads to the maintenance of "a general intercourse of sentiments." The shattering of public opinion into algorithmically generated echo chambers, the monetization and weaponization on a massive scale of insult and detraction, and the reduction of complexities to tribal slogans would probably have led him to conclude that the republic was on its way out.

The collapse of a shared public sphere has in turn made possible a closed-mindedness that would dismay the Revolutionary generation. Political tribalism inhibits one of the essential tools of democracy: the capacity to change one's mind, which is what the Founders did so radically throughout the Revolutionary period. Franklin was well into his 60s when he began his journey from loyal British monarchist to supporter of American independence. Jefferson didn't want a federal constitution but came to regard the one that emerged as "unquestionably [the wisest ever yet presented to men.](#)" Madison initially believed that the attachment of a bill of rights to that Constitution would be unnecessary and perhaps even dangerous. When he came to think differently, he not only drafted the Bill of Rights but did more than anyone else to get it adopted.

This capacity not just to change one's mind but to transform it was essential to the very creation of the United States as we know it. The American

revolutionaries were men who changed their minds. In 1776, almost no one thought of an independent America as anything other than a broad alliance of 13 sovereign states, bound together by friendship, mutual interest, and bilateral treaties. A decade later, few thought of it as anything other than a federal state. Which also suggests that most of the Founders would be at once proud that their Constitution has endured so long and puzzled by the obdurate retention of institutions and practices (the Electoral College; the Senate's grossly disproportionate representation of voters) that worked for the 18th century but do not work for the 21st. They would have [agreed with Chief Justice John Marshall when he wrote in 1819](#) that their Constitution was "intended to endure for ages to come, and consequently, to be adapted to the various crises of human affairs." They might even have regretted their failure to create more workable mechanisms to amend it.

There is also a more fundamental sense in which the Founders would struggle to understand how contemporary America can continue to function. They would wonder how it might be possible for anyone to fully envision a country as large as the U.S. became after their deaths. They wanted a big country—one of the core arguments of *The Federalist Papers* is that a large republic is likely to be better at resisting control by self-interested political factions than a small one. They certainly imagined their new nation becoming a continental power.

But how large is too large? Madison in particular worried that a very extensive country would become prone to autocracy. If, [he wrote, a republic were to acquire “the dimensions of China,”](#) it would be difficult to resist a government capable of "veiling its designs from distant eyes" while "turning the prejudices and interests real or imaginary of the parts agst each other." This would "gradually enable the Executive branch of the Govt. to overwhelm the others, and convert the Govt. into an absolute monarchy."

The United States does indeed now have the same physical extent as China, and the rest of Madison's prediction for the likely fate of a republic on that scale has moved far beyond the realm of speculation. The sight of ICE agents on the streets of America veiling their designs behind masks would have appalled the Framers. They would have demanded their own history lesson to help them understand how a republic founded, above all, on civil

liberty had over time generated a massive apparatus of national security with so little public scrutiny.

They would need no such lessons, however, to understand how Trump has mastered the art of turning the republic's red and blue parts against each other by stoking both real and imaginary prejudices. They would see how this polarization has both enabled and been enabled by the overwhelming domination of the executive over the legislative branch. The danger they were most anxious to avoid—a government that ([in Hamilton's words](#)) “unites all power in the same hands”—is now a peril they would recognize as urgently and immediately present.

What would surely have sickened them most is the sycophancy of legislators who abandon their duty of independent judgment and act as fawning courtiers of a monarchical presidency. Whatever else the Founders can be accused of, they were spectacularly innocent of servility. They would have had nothing but contempt for representatives who surrender their constitutional powers because they are afraid of arousing the ire of the president's supporters.

In “Federalist No. 71,” [Hamilton writes of the people](#) “beset, as they continually are, by the wiles of parasites and sycophants, by the snares of the ambitious, the avaricious, the desperate.” He suggested that citizens needed politicians “who had courage and magnanimity enough to serve them at the peril of their displeasure.” He had a ready-made term for the sheer cowardice of so many legislators in today’s Congress: “servile pliancy.”

The Founders knew what a swaggering oligarchy looks like when it floats above the rest of society, as Jefferson saw in the European societies of his own day, “where the many are crouched under the weight of the few, and where the order established can present to the contemplation of a thinking being no other picture than that of God almighty and his angels trampling under foot the hosts of the damned.”

They knew what it was like to be subject to a despot who, in Locke’s words, “set up his own arbitrary will as the law of society”—this is the essence of their complaints against King George III and his junto of ministers. And they knew how demagoguery could turn into despotism. Hamilton forcefully

cautioned in “[Federalist No. 1](#)” “Of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants.” They knew that these rough beasts, unlike the mammoths of Jefferson’s imagination, were real and would never go extinct.

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What Is Colonial Williamsburg For?

Telling the full story of the town's past is an easy way to make a lot of people mad.

by Clint Smith



Thirty-one years ago, there was a slave auction at Colonial Williamsburg.

On October 10, 1994, two Black men and two Black women were led up the steps and onto the porch of an 18th-century tavern. They were made to stand

in front of thousands of people as their bodies were examined by prospective buyers. An auctioneer informed the crowd that only gentlemen with appropriate letters of credit would be permitted to bid. Some in the crowd looked on in astonishment; some turned away and began to cry. That the people onstage were actors did not make the spectacle easy to watch.

“It was done realistically, with all the horror and pain that you’d expect,” Ron Hurst told me recently. Hurst, who has worked at Colonial Williamsburg for more than 40 years, was a curator at the time. He now oversees preservation and education efforts at the site. Reactions to the event were mixed, he recalled. Some people thought it was a powerful indictment of the 18th-century injustice. Others were deeply upset; members of the local Black community had tried to stop the auction from happening. Two protesters sat on the steps of the tavern and challenged officials to call the police. How, they wondered, could the event’s organizers not have understood the pain and humiliation it would cause?

The slave auction was the first and last of its kind. But it was hardly unique for Colonial Williamsburg in its blurring of the lines between performance and reality. In the ’90s, visitors might encounter the sounds of human beings being whipped, or the sight of fugitive slaves trying to escape. Black actors would portray enslaved people while white actors portrayed men on slave patrol. A few visitors attacked the white actors, attempting to wrestle away their muskets. Another visitor tried to lead a revolt against the enslavers. “There are only three of them and a hundred of us!” he shouted. The site no longer depicts slave patrols, but it does not shy away from the realities of slavery.

In June, I went there to find out how the nation’s largest living-history museum is telling America’s origin story at a time when [questions of how best to convey the truth about the past](#) have become highly politicized. Since January, the Trump administration has put pressure on schools, universities, and museums to provide students with a so-called patriotic education. In March, [an executive order](#) outlined a policy to “restore” federal historical sites “to solemn and uplifting public monuments that remind Americans of our extraordinary heritage” and “unmatched record of advancing liberty, prosperity, and human flourishing.” In this environment, even private historical sites that rely on federal funding have been forced to lay off staff

and halt the opening of long-planned exhibits. Colonial Williamsburg, which is run by a private foundation and receives no federal funding, has largely been spared these painful choices.

Clint Smith: What it means to tell the truth about America

Still, the site, which welcomes hundreds of thousands of visitors a year, has long had to consider questions of whose history it is telling, how, and to whom. The land on which it sits was purchased during the 1920s by John D. Rockefeller Jr., who used his wealth to [re-create Virginia's colonial capital](#) with an eye toward nostalgic patriotism. Colonial Williamsburg's founders, Hurst told me, holding his thumb and index finger about an inch apart, were seeing "a picture that was this big." World War I had just ended, and Rockefeller wanted the site to look back fondly on the nation's founding.

This sensibility persisted through World War II and well into the Cold War. The site made extensive efforts in the 1980s and '90s to incorporate more stories of Black life—hence the slave auction and the whippings. But critics argued that these efforts did little to change the overall narrative put forward by Colonial Williamsburg, in which, they said, slavery was not so much part of a greater set of American contradictions as a speed bump on the otherwise straight road of progress. In 1997, the scholars Richard Handler and Eric Gable referred to the site as a "Republican Disneyland."

Black people visiting and working in Colonial Williamsburg have felt these tensions keenly. Parts of Colonial Williamsburg, notably its facilities for employees, remained segregated throughout the 1950s and '60s. In more recent decades, up through the present, Black "interpreters"—Colonial Williamsburg's word for its employees who dress in period costume—have shared stories of being subjected to harassment and abuse from visitors: *Are you going on the auction block today? How much do you sell for?* On other occasions, Black interpreters have had "boy" shouted at them jeeringly or had the old Dixie anthem whistled in their direction.

As we sat in front of the Governor's Palace, where Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry once lived, Hurst said that Williamsburg has tried to become more thoughtful about the way it depicts the history of Black life, both free and enslaved. Today, for example, one can go on the Freedom's Paradox

walking tour, which examines how America's revolutionary ideals of liberty and freedom could exist at the same time as the savagery of chattel slavery. "I think our founders in the 1920s and '30s would be shocked at the stories we tell today," Hurst said.

So are many contemporary Americans. In 2023, Hurst said, Colonial Williamsburg was criticized by both "The 1619 Project" docuseries and the Heritage Foundation: "'1619' saying we weren't doing enough history of the enslavement. Heritage Foundation saying we were doing too much. So we figure we must be in the right place."

To Hurst, talking about things like slavery is a matter not of politics, but of empirical truth. He cited the fact that more than half of Williamsburg's population was Black at the time of the Revolution. Colonial Williamsburg, he said, has [a duty to tell the stories](#) of the people who were, in fact, the majority, most of whom were enslaved. If that makes some visitors uncomfortable, so be it.

From the December 2023 issue: Lonnie G. Bunch III asks why America is afraid of Black history

According to Hurst, the foundation's board deliberately reflects a mix of political views and professional backgrounds; Carly Fiorina, who ran for president in 2016 as a Republican, serves as chair. Interpreters are careful not to give contemporary political opinions when interacting with the public, and to ground their commentary in the historical record. "We're not trying to convince them of anything," Hurst said. "We're teaching them American history." Mostly, visitors are grateful. "What we hear most often, and we hear it again and again, is 'I had no idea. Thank you for doing this.'"

The goal, Hurst said, is "to tell you everything that happened—the good and the bad." But of course that isn't as simple as it sounds.

"So my nephews were shocked to hear that you owned slaves," a woman behind me said to the man playing Thomas Jefferson. How, she asked, could this Founding Father have held people in bondage—more than 600 over the course of his lifetime, including four of his own children—while proclaiming that all men were created equal?

Beneath a canopy of white oaks and red maples, “Jefferson” stood onstage in a knee-length navy-blue coat and a black tricorn hat. He leaned forward with both hands on his cane to make eye contact with the woman’s 5-year-old nephew, Nathan. “Is that the question, young friend?” Nathan nodded.

The actor, Kurt Smith, straightened up. “The truth is, I grew up in one world,” he said as Jefferson, extending his left arm, “and I’m hoping to create another”—here he extended his right arm. He explained that when his father died, he, as the eldest male, had inherited everything, including his father’s enslaved property. “This is a strange thing,” he said, “to be 14 years of age and own people.” His voice became softer. “I grew up with them. I grew up in that society. And yet, in ’76 we had the opportunity to convert what we grew up with, what we literally inherited, and ask ourselves, *Can we do something else? Can we do something better? Can we create a society that is different from the one that we inherited?*” Jefferson and the other Founding Fathers, of course, failed to rid the nation of its original sin; in many ways, they actively codified it.

Earlier, during Jefferson’s monologue, Smith had posed another rhetorical question. “We have asked ourselves an audacious question in 1776—is mankind ready to self-govern?”

“Doesn’t seem like it,” a woman said from the back row. Some in the audience laughed nervously. Others shook their head.

A few hours later, I met Smith, who was still in costume, under the shade of an oak tree behind Wetherburn’s Tavern, a popular gathering place in Williamsburg in the 1750s. It was swelteringly hot and humid, and sweat rolled down both of our faces. “Can I take this thing off?” Smith asked, pointing to his wig. He fanned himself with his tricorn hat. Even when he was out of character, his voice carried the melodic cadence of theatrical performance, as if he was always within a moment of transitioning into song or soliloquy.

Smith started playing Jefferson nearly 10 years ago, and is one of two people in the world who play the role full-time. (The other, Bill Barker—who plays an older Jefferson—worked at Colonial Williamsburg for 26 years before moving to Monticello in 2019.) His job involves research as well as acting:

Smith told me he's read tens of thousands of documents written by Jefferson. The day we met, he had just come back from the Huntington's library in San Marino, California, which has an extensive collection of the third president's letters.

Smith often does a presentation on the contentious election of 1800, in which Federalists in the House of Representatives, faced with a choice between Jefferson and Aaron Burr, two Democratic Republicans, began [plotting how they might steal the election](#), preventing either candidate from being elected by appointing someone of their choice. After January 6, 2021, Smith said, people would ask, *Are you trying to say something?* "And the truth is, no. This is just what's in Jefferson's life."

During his tenure, which has included two Trump presidencies, COVID-19, and the murder of George Floyd, Smith has encountered visitors from all across the political spectrum. Most audiences, he said, ask about Jefferson's slave ownership. Some people think that Jefferson has been unjustly castigated by the woke mob, while others see him as an indefensible monster. "I had someone right down the street put his finger in my chest," Smith told me. "He said, 'You are America's original sin.'" Another time, a man stood up in the middle of Smith's performance and yelled, "Why do you hate white people?"

"I think in many ways, our job here is just to provide a place where we can talk about ourselves," Smith said. As visitors learn America's founding story, he believes, they inevitably make connections to the present, and think about the ways America is moving closer to, or away from, what is laid out in its aspirational documents. "It's safer to talk about them"—colonial Americans—"even though we're actually talking about us."

Stephen Seals grabbed his wide-brimmed straw hat to stop it from blowing away. He adjusted his glasses and straightened his brown waistcoat. Seals, who has worked at Colonial Williamsburg for 17 years, portrays James Armistead Lafayette, an enslaved man who served in the Continental Army. He estimates that he has performed as James Lafayette more than 1,000 times.

Many Black people would find the idea of playing an enslaved person at a public historical site emotionally taxing or simply humiliating, and Colonial Williamsburg has always had a difficult time finding actors to fill those roles. I myself was uneasy when I realized that Seals would be doing a first-person interpretation of an enslaved man. I worried, in part, that he would try to use an exaggerated 18th-century Black vernacular in a way that can render enslaved people as caricatures and obscure their humanity and intellect.

But Seals doesn't use dialect; he wants the audience to focus less on how he's speaking and more on James Lafayette's story. Born on a Virginia plantation, James was enslaved by William Armistead, an ardent Patriot who allowed him to enlist in the Continental Army. James may have done this hoping his service would be rewarded with freedom. He soon began working for the Marquis de Lafayette as a spy: Pretending to be a runaway slave, he crossed British lines, pledged his allegiance to the redcoats, and became a courier on their behalf. During the remainder of the Revolutionary War, James operated as a double agent, sharing important tactical and operational information with the Americans and feeding British officials false information about American military plans. Many historians credit his espionage with helping American and French forces defeat the British during the siege of Yorktown, which effectively ended the war. In 1787, James was granted his freedom by the Virginia Assembly, in part thanks to Lafayette's personal advocacy. After he was emancipated, he chose to adopt Lafayette as his last name.

Seals is constantly reading new documents that historians have discovered and refining his presentation, and he keeps in touch with James Lafayette's descendants. He finds it particularly gratifying when people tell him that he's helped them understand enslavement, and the revolution itself, in new ways. Growing up in Charleston, West Virginia, and later Richmond, Virginia, Seals attended predominantly white schools that he said mostly overlooked the role of Black Americans in their curriculum, except during February. "I don't want any Black kids coming to a historic site and not seeing themselves reflected in their history like I did," he told me. "Because it made me worry that maybe there was no place for me in this country."

We stood together outside the Williamsburg Bray School, one of the first schools in America created to educate Black students. Ann Wager, the founding teacher, opened the school in 1760 with the aim of using it to convince hundreds of Black children between the ages of 3 and 10 that their position at the bottom of the social hierarchy was a natural one, ordained by God, and that, as such, they should be “obedient to their masters.” The school closed in 1774, after Wager died, and is the oldest remaining 18th-century structure in which Black children were educated. After undergoing an extensive renovation and relocation, it was reopened to the public this summer as a new exhibit in Colonial Williamsburg.

To Seals, the site is a moving testament to the creativity, ingenuity, and resilience of Black people in 18th-century Williamsburg. Even though the school’s intent was to use education to indoctrinate Black students about their own inferiority, he said, many of them used the education they received, specifically the ability to read, to more fully imagine a future where freedom was possible, and to advocate for it. (This was before white Virginians made it illegal, in 1831, to teach an enslaved person how to read.)

Seals never planned to remain at Colonial Williamsburg for this long, but he hadn’t anticipated how fulfilling he would find it to talk about slavery every day. Discussing it made him emotional. “I’m realizing just how powerful what I’ve been able to do over the last 17 years has been, and how much of an honor it is to give a voice to the ancestors after all this time.”

Not every Black person working at Colonial Williamsburg has had such a straightforwardly positive experience. For Janice Canaday, who has worked at the site in various capacities for 22 years, it’s been far more complicated.

Canaday attends and serves on the board of the same nearby church to which her relatives belonged generations ago. It traces its origins to the American Revolution, when a small group of free and enslaved Black worshippers began gathering on plantations near Williamsburg. They were led by an enslaved tavern worker and minister, Gowan Pamphlet, and in the early 19th century, they built the First Baptist Church on land that a local businessman had offered them. The project came with enormous risks: Virginia law prevented Black people from assembling freely, out of fear that such a gathering could lead to revolt.

After the church was destroyed by a tornado, congregants built another, larger structure in 1856. They would continue to worship there for a century, until they relocated again; Colonial Williamsburg bought the second church building in 1956 and subsequently demolished it. This was consistent with how Colonial Williamsburg had approached its relationship to the Black community throughout the early-to-mid-20th century. As Colonial Williamsburg expanded, Black people were bought out, pushed out, and left out.

In September 2020, a few months after nationwide protests erupted following George Floyd's murder, Colonial Williamsburg's archaeology department began to excavate the original church site, in consultation with the local Black community. Below what had become a parking lot, they discovered pieces of the original church building, as well as a cemetery that held the remains of more than 60 of the congregation's members.

I met Canaday, who is 68, at the excavation site this summer. "The history's bubbling up out of the ground," she said. Colonial Williamsburg is one of the largest employers in the area, and Canaday told me it had been a part of her life for as long as she can remember: "Everybody in my family worked at Colonial Williamsburg." Her 91-year-old sister worked there for nearly 50 years. Her grandfather worked at Colonial Williamsburg in the 1940s. Each of her six children has worked there; one son started as a junior interpreter when he was 5. Today he drives a carriage bringing visitors around the grounds.

Canaday is the first person to serve as Colonial Williamsburg's engagement manager for the African American community. But as a young person, Canaday did not feel a connection to the site. "I never saw myself in the story," she said. "I can't tell you how depressing that was."

When she first applied to work there as a teenager, she told me, she was offered a job as a maid. She refused the job, seeing it as a symptom of what many in the local Black community perceived to be a flattening of their historical contributions. A local Black minister once suggested that Colonial Williamsburg was trying to bring back "slavery times." Canaday told me that some Black people in Williamsburg still feel this way, and tell her she shouldn't be working there.

But Canaday believes that, today, Colonial Williamsburg does a better job of telling the truth about its whole history, even if some visitors aren't always receptive to what they hear. "It depends on where they come from and how they grew up—what their grandma and granddaddy told them. Because when you tell *our* story"—she brought her index finger to her chest—"you're really shaking the foundation of *other* people's stories."

[From the August 2019 issue: Drew Gilpin Faust on race and history in Virginia](#)

The way people react to this foundation-shaking has contributed to the difficulty Colonial Williamsburg has had [in hiring and retaining Black interpreters](#). "You can ask any of the Black interpreters here—every week, somebody is going to remind you of who you are," she told me. Not long ago, Canaday was taunted by a group of teenage boys wearing MAGA hats. In what seemed like an attempt to goad her, they asked her how she felt about the hats. "It's on your head; it's not on mine," she responded. When they realized they could not provoke her, the boys lost interest and moved on.

For Canaday, the provocations and insults she's heard from visitors are reminiscent of her experiences being called the N-word while she was growing up in Williamsburg. Her mother would try to comfort her by telling her that eventually these people would all die off and things would get better. But Canaday doesn't see it that way. "People die, but [the idea doesn't](#)," she said.

This notion, of history continuing to reverberate across generations, is central to understanding the fight taking place at historical sites across the country: The Trump administration's [attempt to reshape what is taught](#) in museums and classrooms is fundamentally an attempt to obscure the relationship between the past and the present. It is not so much that proponents of "patriotic education" want to end any discussion of slavery because they don't believe it happened, but more that they don't want people to see how slavery continues to shape social inequality in America today.

[Clint Smith: The meaning of Trump's attack on the Smithsonian](#)

Colonial Williamsburg's commitment to evidence-based public history helps visitors see the relationship between the past and the present, and discover that the story of America is perhaps more complex than their textbooks had them believe. America's founding history, the site shows, is the story of both the Marquis de Lafayette's fight for American liberty and James Lafayette's petition for his freedom. It is the story of Patrick Henry's Governor's Palace and of Gowan Pamphlet's demolished church. It is the story of enslaved children being taught to read the Bible to make them more subservient, but instead using what they learned to forge a deeper connection to freedom. It is what Jefferson said, and it is what Jefferson did.

Canaday told me about a teacher who brought her students to Williamsburg on a field trip a few years earlier. After Canaday told the group about the experiences of Black people in Colonial Williamsburg, both historically and in the present, the teacher became upset, Canaday said, and began yelling at her, saying she disagreed with Canaday's interpretation. To Canaday, she seemed like an example of someone whose ideas would never change. But two years later, the teacher wrote to Canaday and apologized, admitting that she had been wrong. This is why Canaday believes that it is important to continue pushing Williamsburg to embrace the contradictions of American history.

"We don't always get to see what we plant," Canaday said, nodding to a large oak to our right. "But that doesn't mean that something doesn't bloom."

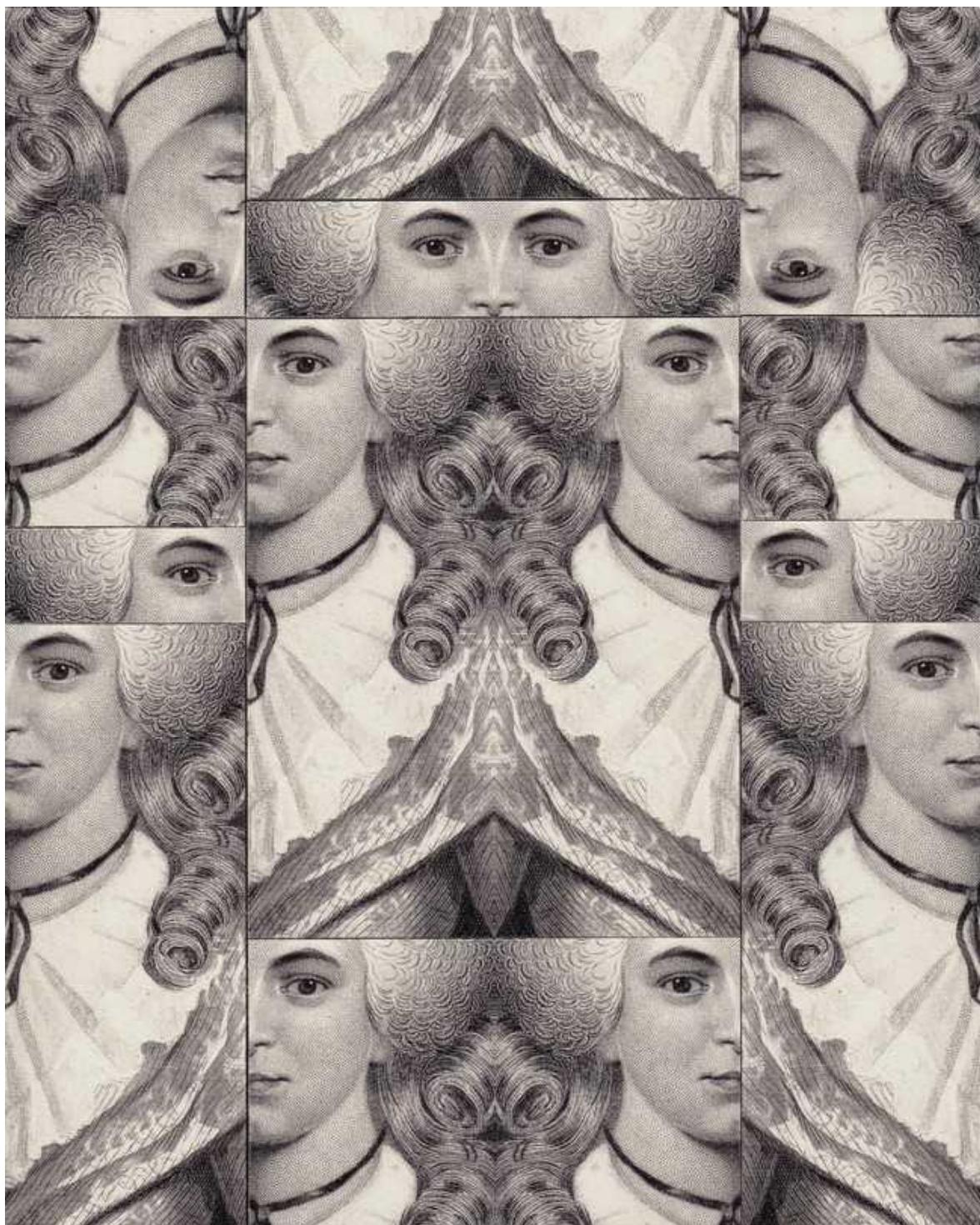
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The Many Lives of Eliza Schuyler

**She lived for 97 years. Only 24 of
them were with Alexander
Hamilton.**

by Jane Kamensky



Monticello was Thomas Jefferson's home in retirement, after decades of public service, including as the nation's third president. It was also, on any given day, crowded with women and young people—Jefferson's daughters by his wife, Martha; their 12 surviving children (six of them girls); his sister.

Female visitors, including First Lady Dolley Madison, often popped by. Among the plantation's large enslaved workforce, women and children outnumbered men by roughly two to one. Some of those enslaved children were Jefferson's own, by Sally Hemings, who was also the half sister of his dead wife. Throughout the Age of Revolution, families made Monticello run.

And so [the site](#), where I serve as president, debuted a tour called "Women at Monticello" in 2024. Our guides prepared with customary rigor, reading widely in the ever-growing scholarship on women in the early republic. They devised a premise as sound as it was simple: The extraordinary stories of ordinary women, free and enslaved, would take center stage. And areas where women mostly spent their time, which guests are moved through quickly on regular tours, would claim pride of place.

Reviews were glowing. "I have been coming to Monticello for fifty years. This was in the top three best experiences ever," one visitor wrote. Yet only a third of the tickets sold. At year-end, we made the difficult decision to concentrate the tour in the ghetto that is March: Women's History Month.

The fate of "Women at Monticello" hinged, in large part, on men. We built it; they didn't come. Barely one in five people who took the tour was male, though roughly 40 percent of our visitors are, which illustrates a long-standing problem: The general public doesn't much care about women's history. In the world of nonfiction best sellers—those wide-spined histories and biographies sold at airports—the wielding of public power remains the big story. The kitchen, the marriage bed, and the cradle are sideshows at best, and women's thoughts rarely make it onto the page.

Once upon a time, Abigail Adams hoped that America's Revolution might shift perspectives and priorities. "In the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies," [she famously urged her husband](#) in March 1776.

"I cannot but laugh," [John Adams replied](#).

In the quarter millennium since, scholars and activists have in different ways done their damnedest to wipe the smirk off his face. From the Revolution to

the suffrage movement to the campaign for an Equal Rights Amendment and beyond, advocates have worked to wedge women's lives into the laws of the land. For decades, academic historians have painstakingly documented those efforts and their mingled successes and shortcomings. Field-altering books have deepened scholars' understanding of the domestic turmoil of Revolutionary America, among other moments.

Yet there has been no women's-history equivalent of Ron Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton* (2004), which has sold more than 2 million copies, much less of David McCullough's *John Adams* (2001), reprinted 19 times during its first three months, reaching 1 million copies well before the acclaimed HBO miniseries. In 2006, *Publishers Weekly* wondered whether a "Distaff David McCullough," as a headline put it, might appear on the horizon. First ladies and other women close to male power seemed likeliest to break through. Yet *PW*'s candidate, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*, by the historian Catherine Allgor, fell short of high sales expectations. Women read novels, men read about influential men, and the world goes round.

Now, nearly two decades later, Amanda Vaill's *Pride and Pleasure: The Schuyler Sisters in an Age of Revolution* has a chance to inspire some welcome crossover. Vaill has an impressive track record [as a biographer](#) (character!) and [a screenwriter](#) (plot!). She need not plead, "Remember the ladies"; her trio of luminous sisters is lodged in public memory already. Thanks to Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*, Eliza Schuyler (the middle sister who married the musical's eponymous hero), fiery Angelica Schuyler Church (the eldest), and clear-eyed Peggy Schuyler Van Rensselaer (the youngest) come with their own playlist. America's 250th anniversary makes securing their position on the country's patriotic bookshelf an especially worthy challenge.

But for Vaill to take her place as the "Distaff David McCullough" demands more than familiar protagonists and narrative brilliance. The core premise of women's history has long been that when we reorient the inquiry, we not only introduce new characters but change the story itself, upending ideas about what lies at the margins and what at the center. One mustn't, as the saying goes, simply add women and stir. Half the human race aren't mere chips in the batter; their inclusion calls for a whole new cake.

The colonial struggle against the British Crown began in the household, over taxes on home goods. One of the earliest artifacts of what would become the independence movement is [a teapot](#), produced in London circa 1766, emblazoned with the motto No Stamp Act. Tea was consumed chiefly in private; Mother poured out. Newspapers were filled with columns urging women to boycott imported items. “Love your country much better than fine things,” exhorted an “Address to the Ladies” in *The Boston Post-Boy*. Many women did so, forswearing British wares, spinning flax on town greens, and swapping handwritten patriotic verse while drinking herbal-tea substitutes.

Up and down the Eastern Seaboard, women spoke the language of American liberty. The poet Phillis Wheatley, whose literary renown had helped secure her freedom from slavery, addressed George Washington, praising America’s struggle on the battlefield as “freedom’s cause,” which any reader would have recognized as her own. “And be it known unto Britain, even American daughters are Politicians & Patriots,” Boston’s Hannah Winthrop told her friend Mercy Otis Warren, who would become, in 1805, the author of one of the first comprehensive accounts of American independence. In a preface to her three-volume *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution*, Warren said she had written it because “every manly arm was occupied,” a convenient fiction.

Abigail Adams was hardly alone in raising what soon came to be called “the woman question.” Her husband’s laughter was the nervous sort. “We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where,” he explained: “Children and Apprentices were disobedient—that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent—that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters.” But women, he continued, were a “Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest.” He feared “the Despotism of the Petticoat.” Thomas Jefferson was likewise discomfited by the revolutionary possibility of female citizenship. He understood Warren as a political ally, and helped fund the publication of her trilogy, which he placed on a list of recommended titles by authors including Herodotus, Voltaire, and Benjamin Franklin. Yet he counseled Angelica Schuyler Church, with whom he had grown quite chummy in Paris, that the “tender breasts of ladies were not formed for political convulsion.” Angelica had been reading up on the struggles of the Federalists, especially her brother-in-law Alexander Hamilton’s, to ratify their blueprint for the nation.

The “question on the new Constitution,” so consuming for men, “need not agitate you,” Jefferson wrote. She mustn’t imitate Parisian *salonistes*: “French ladies miscalculate much their own happiness when they wander from the true field of their influence into that of politicks.”

At home as in society at large, the Revolution really did threaten to turn the world upside down. Still, what John Adams called “our Masculine systems” mostly held fast.

The American Revolution clearly meant something to North American women. Some of them waged it, encamping with the armies, cooking, cleaning, and nursing, and, in a few exceptional cases, grabbing muskets themselves. Many reckoned with its ideals; pervasive talk of liberty held particular portent for women’s lives. And virtually all women east of the Appalachians experienced the violence, sickness, and scarcity of a civil war in which front lines and home fronts were never far apart.

But what did women mean to the American Revolution? Modern scholarship on its formative role in women’s lives, and vice versa, took an important turn in 1980, when two young historians published landmark books on the subject—second books, because each had been told that a dissertation on a topic quite so pots-and-pans wouldn’t do. Mary Beth Norton offered a social historian’s answer in *[Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800](#)*. She focused on “the constant patterns of women’s lives”—bleeding, marrying, birthing, tending—and the ways the Revolutionary War altered them. The shifts she analyzed were more personal than political: subtle changes in duties, in self-conception, and occasionally in willingness to advocate. Judith Sargent Murray, who in 1790 published the pseudonymous essay “[On the Equality of the Sexes](#),” offered one case in point. In 1798, Murray “confidently predicted the dawn of ‘a new era of female history.’” Norton’s own assessment of the Revolution’s “ambiguous” legacy for women was far more sober.



John Trumbull's portrait of Angelica Schuyler Church, her son Philip, and a servant, circa 1785 (The Picture Art Collection / Alamy)

In *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, Linda K. Kerber addressed the ideas that remade the political family. Instead of a royal patriarch ruling over voiceless subjects, America would be a fraternity of virtuous (male) citizens, created equal in their potential for self-government. Even those who thought women shouldn't meddle in government acknowledged that they "could—and should—play a political role through the raising of a patriotic child," and needed education to do so. The figure Kerber called the "Republican Mother" forged the polity at one step's remove, "a citizen but not really a constituent." Kerber underlined the "inherent paradox" of republican motherhood: It thickened the boundary between male and female realms. Yet her book is sunnier than Norton's, more confident that the Revolution set American women on a road toward equality, however steep and circuitous.

Two years after Norton and Kerber launched their revolutionary books, the Equal Rights Amendment went down in defeat. In the ensuing decades, feminism stalled, regrouped, and fizzled again. One major party put forth its first female candidates for president, both of whom lost, consequentially. Women's rights rolled back, and a new pronatalism—republican motherhood for the 21st century—marched forward.

All the while, historians remembered the ladies, broadening the cast of Revolutionary-era female figures to include enslaved and self-liberated Black women, Loyalist women, poor women, Native women, and "female husbands," who rejected the gender binary altogether. Across their differences, shared status bound most women in the early republic. Their paths to property blocked by law and custom, and their literacy limited by education and expectation, their lives left fewer traces. In other words, they resisted the McCullough treatment.

Washington, Adams, Hamilton, Jefferson, Franklin; rinse and repeat: A new life of one of the Revolution's male heroes appears in bookstores most years around Father's Day. In the 1990s, a time of crisis for the publishing industry, Founders' biographies revived an old tradition. At least since 1800, when Parson Weems published his *Life of Washington*, biography has been the medium through which most Americans have understood the birth of their country. That is not a bad thing: The genre admits nuance, with every human life as patterned yet unique as a fingerprint. And it insists that

everyone, past and present, lives in both epochal and personal time, making and made by history.

So, too, Amanda Vaill's Schuyler sisters. Staking a claim not just to the significance of her protagonists but also to her own stature as a portraitist in the grand manner, Vaill builds on some of the most compelling writing about women in early America, which has peered into the households of famous men, drawing on ample records to cast light in otherwise shadowy corners. Annette Gordon-Reed's *The Hemingses of Monticello* (2008) made Sally Hemings, from whom not a word survives, a figure crucial to understanding the workings of power in the early American republic. Jill Lepore deftly explored the chiaroscuro nature of famous-man/hidden-woman histories in *Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin* (2013), her biography of Benjamin Franklin's sister.

The Schuyler sisters' proximity to male power similarly helps them assert main-character status. Eliza, Angelica, and Peggy may not have been "in the room where it happened," as Lin-Manuel Miranda puts it. But a lot of things did happen in the elegant rooms where they lived and loved. Born into a wealthy Dutch landowning clan in upstate New York, they led a cosmopolitan and politically connected existence, surrounded from childhood by political ferment. The combination of their privilege and their family's mobility—scattered by war, public service, and personal ambition—created a rich trove of correspondence, more of which has surfaced since Chernow published *Hamilton*.

The short life of Alexander Hamilton both feeds and fetters Vaill's project. The book opens with his violent death, in 1804, before he turned 50. By then Peggy was dead, her health having declined after a string of miscarriages. Angelica had barely a decade left, but Eliza lived another half century. Tragic though Hamilton's early death was, it offers Vaill a rare opportunity: less time to worry about the capital-*F* Founder dominating the foreground, and more space in which to figure out what flavor and texture that whole new cake might have. It also creates a rare burden: Can Eliza make history on her own?

Vaill's bold choice to narrate the family's experience in the present tense, as they lived it, while rendering the broader course of human events in the

simple past, keeps us close to the action. Indeed, it redefines what counts as action. The sidelining of women's lives, Vaill argues, leaves readers with the illusion of "two histories": a vivid chronicle of events without women, and quieter female annals without events. To encompass both, she swaps foreground and background. She muses: What if the painter John Trumbull —a side character in the Schuylers' lives—had portrayed an exchange of marriage vows with the stylistic gravitas of history painting? Vaill creates that canvas, dismantling the false binary of public and private that Linda Kerber's work analyzed long ago.

Philip Schuyler, the father of Angelica, Eliza, and Peggy, was, like so many others of his day, a marriage-made man. In wedding Catherine Van Rensselaer in 1755, as the Seven Years' War began, he increased his wealth, acreage, and political standing. He represented his Albany district in the provincial assembly in Manhattan, regularly shuttling between the two cities. As the imperial crisis deepened, he joined the second of the colonies' Congresses in Philadelphia, in 1775; before the delegates debated independence, he departed to serve as a major general in the new Continental Army. "My heart bleeds as I view the horrors of civil war," he wrote that spring.

Meanwhile, Catherine continued to bear child after child, 15 in all. As fighting began, the three eldest Schuylers—now marriageable young ladies—attended dancing assemblies, on the lookout for mates. For a time, "the war—if it is a war yet—makes little difference in their lives," Vaill writes. The girls' second cousin and sometime guardian hoped to keep it that way, noting: "Our Sex are doomed to be obedient in every stage of life so that we shant be great gainers by this contest." About this, she was both right and wrong.

The Schuyler sisters and their friends, not unlike European heads of state, knew that intimate alliances cemented political ones. But Angelica, Eliza, and Peggy participated in a marriage market where young people's preferences had begun to trump parental wishes. The sisters received gentleman callers, including, in Eliza's case, the dashing young officer and future British spy John André. In a startling number of instances, women eloped, making their choices before parents could intervene—or even, in Angelica's case, flying in the face of paternal disapproval. At 21, she ran off

with an English émigré calling himself John Carter, a match that set the course of a wild and roaming life.

A combination of lusty letters and Vaill's writerly gifts gives Eliza's courtship with Hamilton dramatic momentum. How quickly he pivots from assuring his bosom friend John Laurens, in 1779, that he had no use for a wife—"I have plagues enough without desiring to add to the number that greatest of all"—to telling Eliza, the following year, that his love for her has induced "a sort of insanity." As their wedding nears, Hamilton reminds Eliza, "You are going to do a very serious thing," because husbands "retain the power of happiness and misery." As Abigail Adams said, all men would be tyrants if they could.

Hamilton was no tyrant, but he wasn't a very good husband, either. Low-born and yearning, he was in many ways insatiable. He told Eliza she was "a woman I love to weakness," and he meant it. But to say that he loved *women* to weakness may have been more accurate. [John Adams later attributed Hamilton's passionate nature](#) to a humoral imbalance: "a superabundance of secretions which he could not find Whores enough to draw off." The Freudian in me senses an attachment disorder. Deprived of a father, mortified by his mother, he craved the reflection he saw in women's eyes. Marrying Eliza was, as a friend told him, an epic "conquest" that delivered him riches and family station. His life would have been longer, and happier, had he stopped there.

From the start, Hamilton ingratiated himself with Eliza's sisters, especially Angelica. By 1781, as he fought alongside Washington to win the new country, Hamilton had begun to tuck saucy private notes for his sister-in-law into letters to his wife. In 1783, Carter, soon to be revealed as the absconded and bankrupt John Barker Church, spirited Angelica to Europe. Over the years they spent in London and Paris, Angelica adopted ever more continental manners, playing the coquette with Jefferson, the Marquis de Lafayette, and Franklin, and communicating regularly, and secretly, with her brother-in-law.

Meanwhile, Hamilton drew Eliza into his public world after the war, moving their growing family to Lower Manhattan, where he practiced law and entered government. Vaill places the writing of *The Federalist Papers* in a

busy household context, with Hamilton testing out arguments on Eliza, his “sounding board” and sometime amanuensis. When the essays were published in book form, Eliza dispatched an early copy across the Atlantic to Angelica, but not before she inked her own name on the title page, “giving herself a position of ownership, if not authorship,” Vaill writes. “See? she all but says to her sister, *I do important things, too.*”

In London, Angelica used her private connections to elevate her husband’s public power, scheming to ensure Church’s election to Parliament in 1790. She pitied Eliza, whom Hamilton had by then dragged to Philadelphia, the new seat of the federal government. “Are you obliged to bear the formalities of female circles, and their trifling chit chat?” she asked. But Eliza knew that the role of hostess was political. Angelica, too, helped shape Hamilton’s thinking, sending him Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* from a London bookshop. Men at the time acknowledged such contributions: Noting Eliza’s facility with the household accounts, Secretary of War James McHenry told Hamilton that she “has as much merit as your treasurer, as you have as treasurer of the wealth of the United States.”

Would that Hamilton had had a republican mother to teach him the straight and narrow path of self-government! He might have been warier when, in the summer of 1791, a 23-year-old stranger named Maria appeared on his doorstep with a terrible tale. Seduced at 15, she’d been married, abused, and abandoned by a man named James Reynolds. Maria said she needed money, which Hamilton agreed to supply. But no sooner had he repaired to her boardinghouse with a check than he felt moved to offer softer solace. “Some conversation ensued,” he later wrote, “from which it was quickly apparent that other than pecuniary consolation would be acceptable.”

As any reader of novels should have realized, the ardent Cabinet secretary with a savior complex had wandered into a trap, which James Reynolds soon sprang: He had pimped his wife in a blackmail scheme. Eliza, who had taken the children to Albany for several months, returned and was soon pregnant with the Hamiltons’ fifth child. A block away, the affair and the extortion continued.

So far, so wretchedly private.

Then, in late 1792, James Reynolds was arrested for fraud. When Hamilton refused him legal help, Reynolds told all who would listen that the Treasury secretary had masterminded his financial chicanery. Maria, doubtless at her husband's direction, supplied Hamilton's political opponents with revealing letters that she and Hamilton had exchanged. A delegation confronted Hamilton, who confessed to being an adulterer, but no thief. They took him at his word of honor, and gave him theirs.

But five years later, copies of the incriminating letters found their way to the scurrilous newsman James Callender, the same columnist who would soon break the story of Jefferson's sexual relationship with Sally Hemings. Hamilton, convinced that salvaging his fiscal reputation required him to air his personal failings, published a lengthy tract, baring all.

The Reynolds affair has long been well documented. Chernow lavished pages on it, as Vaill does. His chief concern was the impact on the great man's career; she cares more about what Eliza experienced. Nothing has surfaced to document her anguish. And so Vaill leaves the disgraced politician and his wife where the evidence does, "alone with their thoughts in the dark."

"A disappointed politician is very apt to take refuge in a Garden," Hamilton wrote to a friend in 1802 from his new home, the Grange, in Upper Manhattan. Relegated to private life, he was in his mid-40s, father to seven living children. (The eldest, Philip, had died the year before, in a duel.) But his last two years proved anything but an idyll. They swirled with rumors and reckless dares, and, finally, public insults directed at his longtime rival Aaron Burr, whose bullet killed him in 1804. Philip, Eliza's father, died just months later.

Chernow's *Hamilton* ends there; widowed Eliza gets a scant nine pages. "For Eliza Hamilton, the collapse of her world was total, overwhelming, and remorseless," Chernow writes. Vaill has a different project, which demands different proportions. Eliza lived to the astonishing age of 97, having spent just 24 years with Hamilton. Vaill devotes about a quarter of *Pride and Pleasure* to Eliza's widowhood, in a section called, fittingly, "Nameless Satisfactions."



An 1851 charcoal sketch of Eliza Schuyler Hamilton at age 94 (Historic Collection / Alamy)

Vaill reads Eliza's widowed years as a kind of breakout: Nora's life after *A Doll's House*. "Until now, she's been—while not passive—a person to whom things happened," she writes. "Now she begins to be, as much as her circumstances allow, a person who makes them happen." Eliza had been enmeshed in world-historical events through the careers of her father and her husband. After their deaths, the headlines receded. And after Angelica's, so did the family letters.

Yet the second half of Eliza's life remained quietly consequential. She joined the kinds of organizations that American women pioneered in the early 19th century—activism that made claims on the public purse and prefigured demands for formal political rights. Even as she coped with her husband's

debts and her father's incomplete will, she focused on others less fortunate, becoming a director of New York's Orphan Asylum Society, which tried to fill with charity the holes in a legal system that had yet to address the lives of women and children. The society had a constitution, written by women, and public meetings gaveled and attended by them. The directors petitioned New York State for an official charter, which they received, like a woman-run bank. They bought land and put up a building, housing numerous poor children.

Eliza also lobbied Congress to safeguard the historical records of the Founders. She arranged and preserved Hamilton's archive, painful though the work could be. Vaill paints a wonderful scene in which Eliza discovers, among her husband's personal effects, "sheets and sheets of paper covered with Angelica's distinctive slanting handwriting," some sent directly to his office. "Suddenly all the hints and whispers and sideways glances Eliza has spent years trying to ignore make sense." She sets them aside but does not destroy them. Her advocacy shaped Hamilton's official papers, too. Eliza sued the politician Rufus King to repossess the documents establishing Hamilton's authorship of [George Washington's farewell address](#), which she knew about because she had been in the room where it happened. Every book that has been written about Washington's administration since—whether scholarly or popular, whether great-man or women's history, or Vaill's marvelous fusion of both—owes a debt to Eliza Schuyler Hamilton.

In 1848, Congress invited Mrs. Alexander Hamilton, venerable relic, to the ceremony laying the cornerstone for the Washington Monument. She attended, sweltering in widow's weeds, on July 4, weeks shy of her 91st birthday. She had lived to see the flesh-and-blood brotherhood that waged Revolution turned to marble memorials. She can't have remembered them that way, and Vaill won't let her readers do so, either. Her book is an act not only of recovery, but of world building, restoring the connections between home and history that made the American Revolution.

Vaill's historical and literary achievement is to convey what it felt like to be a woman who, as she writes of Angelica, longed "to put her fingertips to history," even if she touched it only softly. Just as important, she restores the era's male headliners to the households that nurtured and sustained them. Her Founders were fathers, and mothers, too. But for *Pride and Pleasure* to

escape the fate of “Women at Monticello,” male readers will need to find Vaill’s truths self-evident: that women mattered to the political life of the early republic. And that household life mattered, and still matters, to history.

This article appears in the [November 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The Many Lives of Eliza Schuyler.”

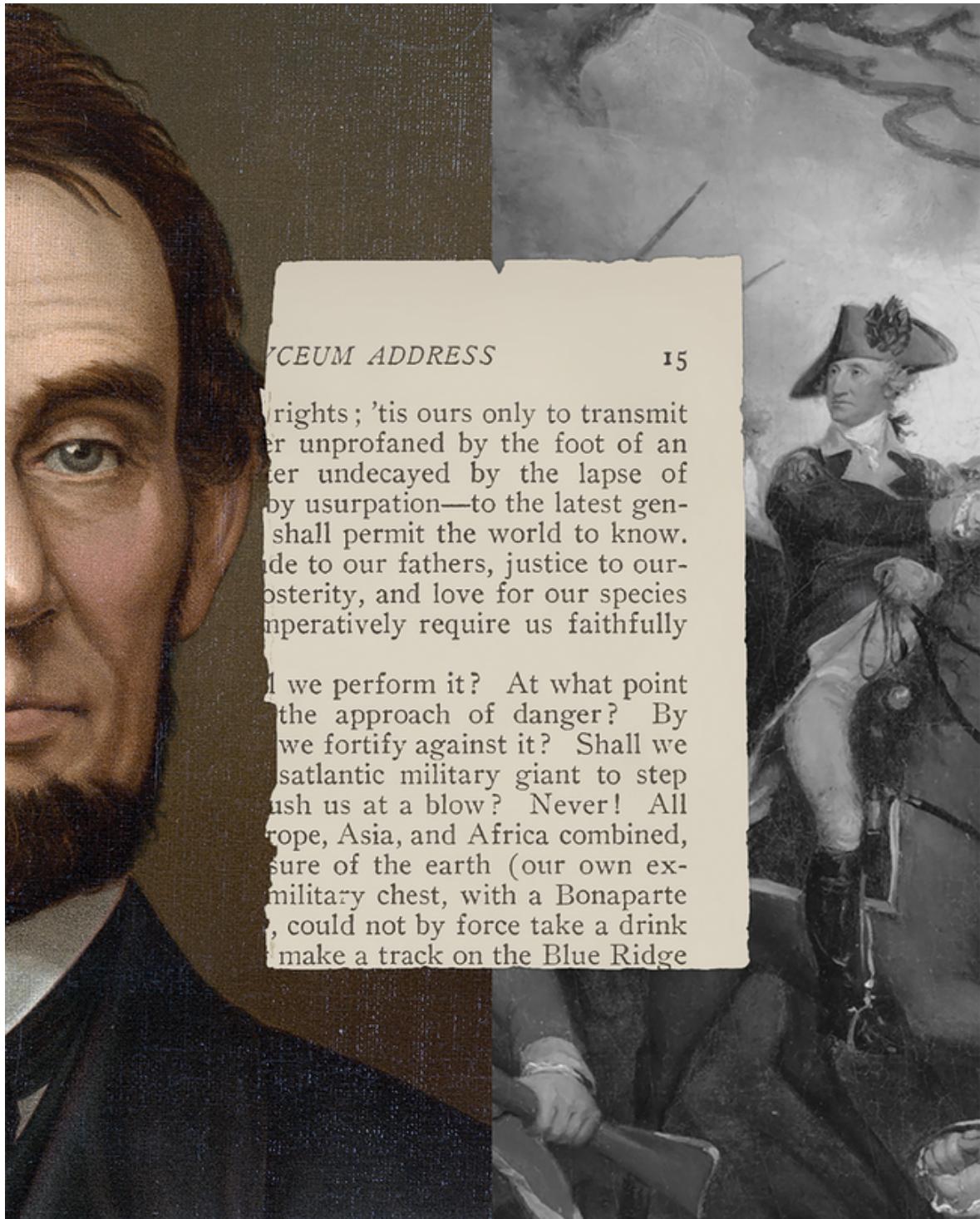
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The Lincoln Way

How he used America's past to rescue its future

by Jake Lundberg



VICEUM ADDRESS

15

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, could not by force take a drink
make a track on the Blue Ridge

Abraham Lincoln's [first inaugural address](#) is a dense, technical affair. Delivered in March 1861, before the outbreak of the Civil War but after seven states had left the Union, it could hardly have been the occasion for much else. After a long treatise on the illegality of secession, Lincoln closed

with a single flourish. His plea to the “better angels of our nature” is so familiar that we can miss the very particular intercession he imagines. The better angels will touch “the mystic chords of memory” reaching “from every battle-field, and patriot grave” into the hearts of all Americans and “yet swell the chorus of the union.” It is a complex, orchestral vision: angels as musicians, shared past as instrument, the nation itself stirred back into tune.

We can still hear in Lincoln’s final, lyrical turn something of what the American Revolution sounded like in his head: transcendent and alive. With good reason, he believed the same to be true for other Americans. They, too, had been reared in a culture of deep veneration for the Revolutionary past; they, too, had heard the stories, memorized the speeches, attended the parades, and worshipped “the fathers.” The problem was that he saw himself as the protector of the Revolution, while those who formed the Confederacy claimed to be its rightful heirs. What he called “the momentous issue of civil war” could not be averted.

On the verge of 250 years from 1776, the mystic chords of memory are badly out of tune, the better angels nowhere to be seen. The Revolution does not live for us in the same way it did for Lincoln. Its remains lie dry and brittle, ready fuel for culture-war conflagration. We are caught between caricatured versions of the Revolutionary past. One presents the Founders as hypocrites who could do no right; the other casts them as heroes who could do no wrong. The first forecloses the possibility of a collective and usable past; the second locks us into a limited vision of who we are based on who we were.

We would do well to hear something of Lincoln’s Revolution in our own heads. Lincoln rose to prominence at a moment of crisis, when the legacy of the Revolution was at stake. He did not shy away from what he called “the monstrous injustice” of slavery—and he certainly did not seek to purge it from the country’s story. Instead, he confronted it directly. Slavery threatened to invalidate the founding’s most hopeful ideals as lies, and to recast its universal promise as the particular inheritance of white people alone. As the nation fractured, Lincoln summoned the Revolution as neither empty hypocrisy nor mindless triumph, but as an unfinished project whose noblest values could redeem the past and heal the present.

Born in 1809, Lincoln was a product of America's first great age of Founder worship. A generation removed from the Revolution itself, he took in its history as did others of his era—through a growing body of myth and hagiography. This was the world in which George Washington could not tell a lie (in 1806, [the biographer known as Parson Weems](#) had added the cherry-tree story to the fifth edition of his *Life of Washington*); in which children dutifully studied the canon of founding speeches and documents; in which orators offered florid reflections on the Revolution's heroic deeds each Fourth of July.

This mythology spoke to a particular set of anxieties. Keen students of history, Americans knew republics to be fragile things, vulnerable to tyrants, demagogues, conquering generals, ambitious men, and citizens of declining virtue. They worried, too, about growing partisan rancor, ongoing regional differences, and threats of further revolutionary upheaval. Founder worship seemed to settle these fears: Honoring “the fathers” taught necessary virtue, offered subsequent generations a stake in the republic itself, and let them share in the glory of the Revolution without starting one of their own.

By the time Lincoln was an adult, he wasn't just a participant in this culture; he was a practitioner. His 1838 speech on “[The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions](#),” delivered at the Springfield Young Men’s Lyceum, in Illinois, is best known for its anticipation of civil war: “If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.” For all its grim prescience, though, Lincoln’s speech was a fairly conventional contribution to the genre of Founder worship. Watching as the Revolutionary generation died away, Lincoln asked what would become of the republic in the absence of their living example. Borrowing heavily from Daniel Webster’s famous 1825 speech at the groundbreaking of the Bunker Hill Monument, Lincoln wondered if those who “toiled not” in making the republic could be trusted to maintain it.

He wasn’t so sure. A troubling lawlessness—what he called a “mobocratic spirit”—had surged in recent years. In Mississippi in 1835, enslaved men accused of plotting a rebellion had been hanged from trees. In 1836, a mob in St. Louis had lynched a mixed-race man named Francis McIntosh, who’d been accused of killing a police officer. Elijah Lovejoy, an abolitionist-

newspaper editor, had the temerity to defend McIntosh and condemn the violence. For his trouble, another mob forced Lovejoy out of town. When he reestablished himself up the Mississippi in Alton, Illinois, mobs there destroyed two of his printing presses. They killed Lovejoy as he tried to defend a third.

In the face of such upheaval, Lincoln turned back to the Founders and offered what he called “the political religion” of the Revolutionary past. Echoing Webster—“Let the sacred obligations which have devolved on this generation, and on us, sink deep into our hearts,” he had said—Lincoln asked his contemporaries to “swear by the blood of the Revolution” that they would remain faithful to the noble order that had been bestowed upon them.

Lincoln’s argument for Founder worship was reverent, impassioned, and familiar. He also seemed to recognize that it was insufficient. His examples of lawlessness all stemmed from the confounded and violent problems surrounding slavery and race. Could Founder worship—dutiful and rote—confront that? In 1852, Frederick Douglass would excoriate the bland hypocrisy and hollowness of the cult of the Founders [in his famous Fourth of July speech](#), noting that it amounted to blindness and inadequacy in the face of a moral emergency. Lincoln was not there—not in temperament and not yet in politics—but the Lyceum address opened the question of whether mere celebration of the past would be enough. Bigger problems were coming, and something livelier was needed than conjurings of the Founders’ ghosts.

When Lincoln gave the Lyceum address, he was an obscure lawyer and state-level politician working on the margins of national politics. He had little reason to expect that his words would outlive the moment. With the exception of a single term in Congress, he remained a minor figure for the next decade and a half. He reemerged only in 1854, to meet [a crisis far more serious than he’d anticipated](#).

The litany of events that generations of students have scratched into blue-book essays felt to Lincoln like an open, concerted assault. The Mexican War, the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and the subsequent violence of Bleeding Kansas, the caning of Charles Sumner in Congress in 1856, the *Dred Scott* Supreme Court decision in 1857—all

confirmed the sense that the so-called slave power was on the march, reversing the broad promise of the Revolution itself. The pronouncements of pro-slavery agitators gave Lincoln and the new Republican Party little reason to think otherwise. Slavery, once handled cautiously as a “necessary evil,” had become in some eyes a positive good, the foundation of all liberty and social harmony for white men. Pro-slavery ideologues complained that Thomas Jefferson had been mistaken to announce the principle of universal equality in the Declaration of Independence, and that the Constitution was deficient in the absence of an explicit guarantee of the right to own slaves. In a speech in early 1861, before the Civil War began, Confederate Vice President Alexander H. Stephens boasted to applause that the Confederacy’s new constitution had fixed all that.

Many recognized the drift of events and the arguments beneath them; Lincoln was clear and forceful in drawing out their implications for the Founders’ vision of the nation. Early in the fall of 1854, as he prepared his most detailed statement on the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which turned territory designated as free into contested ground for slavery, [Lincoln was seen “nosing around for weeks”](#) in the Illinois state library. He was assembling the response that would carry him to prominence in speeches and debates for the remainder of the decade.

Lincoln’s argument began in a version of Revolutionary history—careful, lawyerly, selective—that amounted to a mandate to place slavery on the path to “ultimate extinction.” The Founders had deliberately avoided the words *slave* and *slavery* in the Constitution, he said, but they had betrayed their true feelings in a series of measures, including the prohibition of slavery in the Northwest Territory and the Constitution’s ban on the international slave trade, to take effect in 1808. As Lincoln saw it, the Founders had compromised with slavery and left the resolution to future generations. “The thing is hid away,” Lincoln said, “just as an afflicted man hides away a wen or a cancer, which he dares not cut out at once, lest he bleed to death; with the promise nevertheless that the cutting may begin at the end of a given time.” He did not specify when the cutting could or should begin—only that when it did, it would be consistent with the Founders’ wishes.

To flout those wishes was to tarnish the Revolution, and deny the promise of the nation itself. Slavery was a blight on America’s claim to be an example

of liberty and self-government. Taking on his rival Stephen A. Douglas's professed indifference to slavery, Lincoln made the stakes clear. "I hate it," he said, "because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world —enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites."

For Lincoln, history was not just a record of what the Founders had done, but a living force animated by the ideals they enshrined. The facts of land ordinances and constitutional silences revealed intentions, but the ideals reached further, imposing obligations on the present.

Nowhere were those obligations clearer or more urgent than in the Declaration of Independence. Scorned by pro-slavery ideologues and mocked as a pathway to racial equality by Douglas, the Declaration's universal principles were, Lincoln said, "a standard maxim for free society which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere."

Lincoln's defense of the Declaration worked a certain alchemy over the impurities of the past and the present. He cast its promise as something to be "constantly approximated" over generations, a vision that allowed him both to affirm universal equality in principle and to reassure white audiences wary of its implications. Pressed by Douglas, he carefully parsed the Declaration to mean equality in natural rights, not necessarily in "all respects." He insisted that he did not favor political or social equality for Black Americans, and he gave support to colonization schemes that imagined freedom only by removal from the United States. In this way, Lincoln's notion of equality unfolding through time was both a genuine belief and a shrewd dodge: It kept faith with the Declaration's ideals without forcing him to confront racism directly, not to mention his own doubts about whether Black and white Americans could share full social equality.

Cautions aside, Lincoln's claim that the Declaration carried across generations set him squarely against those who sought to narrow its promise.

In its *Dred Scott* decision, the Supreme Court declared that Black Americans “had no rights which the white man was bound to respect” and sought to anchor that exclusion in the very history of the founding. To Lincoln, that teaching did not merely misread the past—it rewrote it, extinguishing the Revolution’s promise in the present. He claimed that whoever “teaches that the negro has no share, humble though it may be, in the Declaration of Independence” was “muzzling the cannon that thunders” the Revolution’s “annual joyous return.”

The conditions of the Civil War put to rest any lingering idea that it was enough merely to venerate the Revolution. After Fort Sumter, it became necessary to live it. Throughout the war, Lincoln put into practice what had mostly been a theory of Revolutionary history. Some bemoaned his excesses while others lamented his limits, but he demonstrated what it meant to live in dynamic relation to the past.

Amid brutal setbacks on the battlefield and at the polls in late 1862, Lincoln offered his Annual Message to Congress, another bland text with an abrupt shift from the dry and detailed to the poetic. Without dwelling on the Revolution itself, he defined the moment as revolutionary, akin to 1776, when every action would reverberate through the ages, down to the last generation. The “stormy present,” he said, demanded forgetting the “dogmas of the quiet past” and embracing revolutionary action—“as our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.”

Lincoln and his party were doing just that. Legislation passed by Congress that summer had already turned Union armies into instruments of emancipation. That fall, Lincoln’s administration had effectively reversed the *Dred Scott* ruling and begun recognizing the citizenship of freeborn Black Americans. And although the Emancipation Proclamation had, as the historian Richard Hofstadter said, “all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading,” it marked a revolutionary action in its own right. Anticipating its arrival, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in *The Atlantic*, “In so many arid forms which States incrust themselves with, once in a century, if so often, a poetic act and record occur.”

At Gettysburg, in November 1863, Lincoln made it plain that this revolutionary present was grounded in the Revolutionary past. There among

the patriot graves, [he distilled the argument](#) he'd been making for the past decade into scarcely more than two minutes. Beginning with his old, biblical math, he drew a direct line between 1863 and 1776. If 1863 had taken a revolutionary turn—vaguely referenced in the speech as “a new birth of freedom”—it had done so only in service to 1776; if it marked a second founding, it was only to improve the first. To think anew and act anew was not to reject the Revolution, but to fully realize it.

Like the Revolutionaries he tried to redeem, Lincoln was never free of contradiction or compromise. His new birth of freedom was fragile and incomplete, barely surviving more than a decade after his death. In the country's 250th year, though, we might well look back at 1776 by way of 1863. In a year when some will use the Revolution as a bludgeon of a retrograde politics of restoration, Lincoln offers another way. He invites us to carry its living ideals forward without denying its contradictions. The glory of the Revolution, he knew, belonged to those who'd made it. The test of whether it still lives falls to us.

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Wake Up, Rip Van Winkle

**Washington Irving's story isn't just
about a very long nap. It's about
the making of America.**

by John Swansburg



Washington Irving was born just as the news reached New York City: The war with England was over. To celebrate, his mother named him after the victorious American general. When he was a boy of 6, Irving was out for a walk with a Scottish maid-servant, who spotted George Washington, now the

nation's first president, on a Manhattan street. The enterprising maid-servant followed him into a shop. (Apparently, presidents once ran their own errands.) "Please, Your Honor," she said. "Here's a bairn was named after you." Putting his hand on the young man's head, Washington bestowed his blessing.

Thus anointed, Irving went on to become America's original literary celebrity. During the first half of the 19th century, Charles Dudley Warner [wrote in *The Atlantic* in 1880](#), "probably no citizen of the republic, except the Father of his Country, had so wide a reputation as his namesake, Washington Irving." Irving wrote one of the first, and still one of the best, American ghost stories: "[The Legend of Sleepy Hollow](#)," about a Hessian soldier who lost his head to a Patriot cannonball. He wrote satirical sketches, romantic tales, travelogues, and, near the end of his life, a five-volume biography of George Washington.

Yet the story that established Irving's literary reputation is, at first glance, not a likely one to build a new national literature around. Irving wrote it during a sojourn in Britain. He took its bones from a German folktale. And although set in the Revolutionary era, the story doesn't dramatize America's fight for independence. Rather, the protagonist dozes right through it.

"Rip Van Winkle" is one of those stories that is at once familiar and obscure. Its contours remain well known: Man takes long nap, grows very long beard, returns to changed world. Its hero has become shorthand, to the point of cliché, to describe any long slumber. Yet Irving's short story is not as widely anthologized or read as it once was. Its complexities and peculiarities are only dimly recalled, if at all, by many readers.

That is a shame, because unlike a lot of antique American writing, "Rip Van Winkle" has retained much of its original appeal. Mark Twain famously accused Irving's contemporary James Fenimore Cooper of committing [114 of a possible 115 literary offenses](#) on a single page of *The Deerslayer*. That may not have been entirely fair to Cooper, but his violations of Twain's rules ("Employ a simple and straightforward style"; "Use the right word, not its second cousin") can make reading the *Leatherstocking Tales* an arduous walk in the wilderness. Irving's stories, like Twain's, are as funny now as the day they were written.



Painted by

Alonso Chappel

Washington Irving, the first American author to win international acclaim
(Universal Images Group Editorial / Getty)

“Rip Van Winkle” isn’t merely comic, however. More than just an account of a very long nap, it is a story about the role of memory in the young republic; it’s about how to create something new while retaining a connection to what came before. America’s first folktale, in other words, is a folktale about the making of America.

“[Rip Van Winkle](#)” appeared in [The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.](#), a collection of stories and essays published serially beginning in 1819. The title character is “a simple, good-natured fellow” who lives in a village at the foot of New York’s Catskill Mountains. Ostensibly a farmer, he abhors the drudgery of tending his land, which has dwindled under his management to little more than a sorry patch of potatoes and Indian corn. Rip, we’re told, is “one of those happy mortals, of foolish, well-oiled dispositions, who take the world easy, eat white bread or brown, whichever can be got with least thought or trouble, and would rather starve on a penny than work for a pound.”

Rip is a beloved figure in his village, quick to help a neighbor build a fence or teach a child to fly a kite. His laziness seems to set in only when he is called to attend to his own affairs, and it is only in his own home that he finds an adversary—his wife, Dame Van Winkle, who deplores his loafing. Years of marriage have done nothing to diminish her disdain. On the contrary, Irving writes, “a tart temper never mellows with age, and a sharp tongue is the only edged tool that grows keener with constant use.”

It is to escape Dame Van Winkle’s “petticoat government” that Rip, together with his equally put-upon dog, Wolf, repairs to the woods to do some squirrel hunting. Here, a bit of magic enters the story. Venturing into the wild, Rip encounters a strange group of men, done up in traditional Dutch dress and playing ninepins—bowling—in a mountain hollow. These, we later learn, are the ghosts of Hendrick Hudson’s crew, the first Europeans to explore the Hudson River, aboard the Half Moon.

After helping one of the Dutchmen lug a keg of liquor to the game, Rip drinks several flagons, passes out, and wakes up two decades later. He returns to his village, fearing the wrath of Dame Van Winkle, only to find most of the people he knew, his wife among them, dead or gone.

Writing at a time when there was little American literature to speak of, Irving borrowed liberally from European sources. The nap, the beard, and even the mysterious bowlers are lifted directly from “Peter Klaus,” a German folktale about a goatherd. In terms of style, the story is something of a mock-epic, a form that would have been familiar to readers of the time. The Irving biographer [Andrew Burstein](#) has described Rip as “a lazy Odysseus,” and the story can be read as a series of clever inversions of Homer’s poem. Whereas the Greek hero knew to avoid the Lotus-Eaters’ soporific drug, Rip drinks deeply of the enchanted Dutch liquor. Rather than returning to a patient Penelope, Rip has fled the termagant Dame Van Winkle. Arriving back in Ithaca after a 20-year absence, Odysseus is recognized by his loyal dog, Argos. Rip, gone for the same duration, is greeted with a snarl by a dog he takes for Wolf. No less an authority than James Joyce noted the similarities, weaving allusions to “Rip Van Winkle” into the story of his own wayward Ulysses, Leopold Bloom.

Yet “Rip Van Winkle” isn’t just a pastiche of Old World mythologies. By sending Rip off to sleep precisely at the moment America declares its independence, Irving underlines how radically life would be altered by the ensuing Revolution. The village Rip returns to is strange to him: “The very character of the people seemed changed. There was a busy, bustling, disputatious tone about it, instead of the accustomed phlegm and drowsy tranquillity.” So abrupt was the shift that the portrait of King George III that had hung above the village inn seems not to have been replaced but rather hastily updated: “The red coat was changed for one of blue and buff, a sword was held in the hand instead of a sceptre, the head was decorated with a cocked hat, and underneath was painted in large characters, GENERAL WASHINGTON.” Irving was writing before the Americanized spelling of words like *scepter*, pioneered by [Noah Webster](#), had fully taken hold, a reminder that the transformations the story describes were still very much ongoing.

Rip wakes from his torpor not just on any day, but on an election day, which allows Irving to magnify his hero’s disorientation. The men with whom he used to gossip at the inn are nowhere to be found. “In place of these, a lean, bilious-looking fellow, with his pockets full of handbills, was haranguing vehemently about rights of citizens—elections—members of congress—liberty—Bunker’s Hill—heroes of seventy-six—and other words, which

were a perfect Babylonish jargon to the bewildered Van Winkle.” When the townspeople encounter Rip, wizened and unrecognizable, they buffet him with questions he can’t comprehend: For which side did he vote? Is he “Federal or Democrat?” Rip tries to quiet them by pledging his allegiance to King George—only to be denounced as a Tory.

Irving was clearly fascinated—and perhaps not a little frightened—by the question of what it means for a nation to spring into existence. What could unite this bustling, disputatious new country? It was founded on noble ideas (rights of citizens, representative government), and the Revolution had produced its own mythology (Bunker’s Hill, heroes of seventy-six). But could ideas hold a country together? In the early decades of American history, these were open questions. They still are.

As a storyteller, Irving was particularly concerned with how America would fare without a common culture. He worried, the scholar Howard Horwitz has written, “that the legendary transmission of tales and thus of cultural memory was fragile in the new republic.” In “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” also published in *The Sketch Book*, Irving wryly explains that the village of the title was rife with ghost stories because it was an old Dutch village; elsewhere in the country, such stories were uncommon: “There is no encouragement for ghosts in most of our villages, for they have scarcely had time to finish their first nap and turn themselves in their graves, before their surviving friends have travelled away from the neighborhood; so that when they turn out at night to walk their rounds, they have no acquaintance left to call upon.” Americans were too rootless and restless, too eager to seek their fortune—they didn’t stay in one place long enough to be haunted by ghosts.

“Rip Van Winkle” is a story about the young nation making room for a figure from the past. In an unpublished fragment written while Irving was serving as minister to Spain under President John Tyler—this was a time when literary achievement could lead to a choice diplomatic appointment—he described what he was up to: “When I first wrote the Legend of Rip van Winkle my thought had been for some time turned towards giving a colour of romance and tradition to interesting points of our national scenery which is so deficient generally in our country.”



The American painter Albertis del Orient Browere's 1833 depiction of the moment Rip returns home after his 20-year nap (Courtesy of the Met)

While the events of the story's first half (the nap, the return) remain familiar, the less famous denouement is crucial to understanding Irving's purpose. The village is initially skeptical of Rip, but eventually his identity is established and his fantastical account confirmed. Peter Vanderdonk, "the most ancient inhabitant of the village, and well versed in all the wonderful events and traditions of the neighbourhood," explains that it is widely known that Hendrick Hudson returns at regular intervals to the Catskills "to revisit the scenes of his enterprise, and keep a guardian eye upon the river"—and to bowl a few frames. His strange story thus corroborated, Rip is welcomed back to the village. He seems more relieved to be free of his wife's tyranny than that of the English—to have "got his neck out of the yoke of

matrimony.” (Irving’s portrait of Dame Van Winkle, who is never granted so much as a first name, has made the story a ready target for feminist critique.)

Irving was an inventive stylist, with tricks up his ruffled sleeve. The tale of Rip Van Winkle is nested within various layers of storytelling, to a degree that can be confounding even for contemporary readers accustomed to such authorial gamesmanship. *The Sketch Book* was published under the name Geoffrey Crayon, one of Irving’s literary alter egos. “Rip Van Winkle,” though, opens with a prefatory note explaining that *this* story was discovered among the papers of the late historian Diedrich Knickerbocker—[another of Irving’s alter egos](#). In a note appended to the story, Knickerbocker reveals that he has talked to Rip himself and is certain his account is true.

Knickerbocker allows, however, that it took some time for Rip to arrive at the version we’ve just read. “He was observed, at first, to vary on some points every time he told it, which was, doubtless, owing to his having so recently awaked. It at last settled down precisely to the tale I have related, and not a man, woman, or child in the neighbourhood but knew it by heart.” That didn’t mean they all believed it. “Some always pretended to doubt the reality of it, and insisted that Rip had been out of his head,” Knickerbocker writes, before assuring the reader that the old Dutch inhabitants of the village “almost universally gave it full credit.” *Almost* universally—lurking over Knickerbocker’s shoulder, Irving raises an eyebrow: *This historian is credulous, and not entirely reliable.*

What is the purpose of this layering and undermining of the story’s authenticity? In the end, what matters isn’t whether the story is true, but rather that everyone in the village knew it by heart. Rip returns to his favorite old haunt, the inn, where he tells his story to all who will listen: “He took his place once more on the bench at the inn-door, and was reverenced as one of the patriarchs of the village, and a chronicle of the old times ‘before the war.’” He’s become a link to the past, a living connection to the history that predates the Revolution.

The remarkable achievement of Irving’s fiction is that it solved the very problem it identified: “Rip Van Winkle” itself became a story that the nation knew by heart. It propelled *The Sketch Book* to blockbuster sales and Irving to international acclaim, a first for an American author. The story was

widely anthologized, including in *McGuffey Readers*, making it a staple of American childhood. It was also adapted into a popular stage play, with the same actor, [Joseph Jefferson](#), in the title role for an astonishing [four-decade run](#). The production, which toured the country, made its debut just after the Civil War, when its pastoral setting and evocation of the Founding may have soothed audiences still scarred by sectional conflict.

What was it about Rip? As the critic Donald R. Anderson has written, he embodies few traditional American values: “He has an aversion to hard work; he is an apparently inadequate family man; he is, from what we are told, without those Leatherstocking virtues of courage and inventiveness; he is lacking in Yankee shrewdness; he is not a ‘winner.’”

Perhaps this is what made him so beloved. Irving may have intuited, at the dawn of American history, that the nation would need a foil for flintier heroes like Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, self-improvers like the Benjamin Franklin of the *Autobiography*, and secular saints such as Parson Weems’s George Washington.

Herman Melville, one of Rip’s admirers, called him a “good-natured good-for-nothing.” That’s an American archetype, too. He presides over Hart Crane’s modernist masterpiece [The Bridge](#), published in 1930, at another moment when the nation’s past and present seemed to be sundering: “And Rip forgot the office hours, / and he forgot the pay; / Van Winkle sweeps a tenement / way down on Avenue A.” In his influential study [Love and Death in the American Novel](#), Leslie Fiedler saw Rip’s “old scapegrace charm” in Jiggs, the hero of the long-running comic strip *Bringing Up Father*, and in Dagwood Bumstead, of *Blondie*. This past spring, when the actor George Wendt died, it occurred to me that Norm Peterson of *Cheers* was a descendant of Rip, too: the man at the corner stool, adored by all but his long-suffering wife, avoiding the responsibilities of work and home in favor of one more flagon.

The *Cheers* finale, which aired in 1993, was watched by [an estimated 93 million Americans](#). It’s impossible to imagine a television series, let alone a short story, uniting that share of the country today. Irving’s animating concern in “Rip Van Winkle” is also a problem for the present: Can a nation with no common stories, and a fleeting sense of its own history, hope to

hang together? Rip has wandered back into the mountains. Maybe it's time to wake him up and hear what he has to say.

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The Beacon of Democracy Goes Dark

For nearly 250 years, America promoted freedom and equality abroad, even when it failed to live up to those ideals itself. Not anymore.

by Anne Applebaum



“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” Within weeks of their publication in July 1776, those words spread around the world. In August, a London newspaper reprinted the Declaration of

Independence in full. Edinburgh followed. Soon after that, it appeared in Madrid, Leiden, Vienna, and Copenhagen.

Before long, others drew on the text in more substantial ways. Thomas Jefferson himself helped draft the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, issued by French revolutionaries in 1789. The Haitian Declaration of Independence, of 1804, drew on both the American and French precedents, calling for the construction of an “empire of liberty in the country which has given us birth.” In subsequent decades, declarations of independence were issued by Greece, Liberia (the author had been born in Virginia), and a host of new Latin American nations. In 1918, Thomáš Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia, [signed a Declaration of Common Aims of the Independent Mid-European Nations at Independence Hall](#), in Philadelphia, using the Founders’ inkwell.

On that occasion, a replica of the Liberty Bell was rung, not because any American president or official had asked for it to ring but because Masaryk had been inspired by the story of the American founding. He evoked the Declaration not because of any pressure applied by U.S. foreign policy, but because of Jefferson’s words and what they signify. Since 1776, Americans have promoted democracy just by existing. Human rights and the rule of law are in our founding documents. The dream of separation from a colonial empire is built into them too. Our aspirations have always inspired others, even when we did not live up to them ourselves.

In the 20th century, we moved from simply modeling democratic ideals to spreading or promoting them as a matter of policy. We did so in part because the language of democracy is in our DNA, and when we are confronted by autocrats and despots, we use it. Woodrow Wilson, when arguing for entry into the First World War, said America should advocate the “[principles of peace and justice](#)” in opposition to “selfish and autocratic power.” In 1940, Franklin D. Roosevelt referred to America as an “[arsenal of democracy](#)” determined to aid British allies against the Nazis: “No dictator, no combination of dictators, will weaken that determination.”

During the Cold War, we connected words such as *freedom* and *rights* not just to our military strategy but to our national identity, to our culture. We were advocates of free markets, a free press, abstract expressionism, and

jazz, and we exported those things too. Plenty of people wanted them. Willis Conover, the host of Voice of America's nightly jazz broadcast in the 1960s and '70s, had an audience of 30 million people, mostly in Russia and Eastern Europe. The Congress for Cultural Freedom, founded in 1950, pulled together anti-Communist intellectuals from all over Europe into a single movement.

Many people found our language hypocritical, and they were right: Americans were perfectly capable of backing dictatorships while talking about democracy. The contradiction between the ideals we said we fought for abroad and their failure at home bothered foreigners as well as Americans. In 1954, the Department of Justice filed an amicus brief in the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case that argued in favor of desegregation because, among other reasons, racist laws prompted "doubts even among friendly nations as to the intensity of our devotion to the democratic faith."

Democratic faith. Because it was at the center of our foreign policy, we aspired to it, even if we didn't live up to it. Others did too. Over time, the number of these democratic aspirants increased. After the Second World War, the dream of American freedom and prosperity strengthened what were initially shaky democracies in Western Europe and Asia, including recently defeated West Germany and Japan. Their political and economic success drew others into the fold. Greece and Spain joined the club of democracies in the '70s; South Korea and Taiwan in the '80s; Central Europe in the '90s. Asked in 1989, the year they voted out Communism, what kind of country they wanted to be, most Poles would have said, "We want to be normal." And by "normal," they meant a European democracy, a capitalist state with a welfare system, a close ally of the United States.

We Americans were inspired by our own language too. We always think about America's postwar role in Europe as an act of great generosity, the defense of allies from Soviet aggression. But by putting democracy at the center of our international and national identity, we also helped strengthen our own political system. If nothing else, all Americans, even those on different sides of our deepest cultural divides, had a common cause: Right-wing or left-wing, Christian or atheist, we could all be in favor of freedom.

Considering how deeply we were divided about so many other things, it's extraordinary how bipartisan our foreign policy was for so long, and how many energetically bipartisan institutions we built to promote it. Radio Free Europe and Voice of America—and later Radio Free Asia and a clutch of other foreign-language broadcasters—always enjoyed support from Democrats and Republicans, as well as every president from Harry Truman onward. From the time of its founding in 1983, so did the National Endowment for Democracy, which was inspired by Ronald Reagan's call for new institutions to "foster the infrastructure of democracy—the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities—which allows a people to choose their own way, to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means." The National Endowment, run by a bipartisan board, makes small grants to groups that monitor elections, promotes free speech, and fights kleptocracy and authoritarian propaganda.

The dramatic shift we have undergone in just a few months—away from a foreign policy based on democratic faith and toward the promotion of a more cynical, more authoritarian, view of the world—has hit these institutions very hard. The fact that the Trump administration has tried to shut down all of America's foreign broadcasters is telling. The president appointed Kari Lake, who lost races for both the U.S. Senate and Arizona governor, to [eviscerate Voice of America](#), and she did so with enthusiasm, even ostentatiously revoking the visas of VOA employees, reporters, and translators, in some cases giving them 30 days to leave the country after many years of work on behalf of Americans. Though the National Endowment for Democracy has rallied its many supporters in Congress, on both sides of the aisle, it remains the target of a small group of conspiracy theorists who have influence in this administration because they have large followings on X or have appeared on Joe Rogan's podcast. It's strange to think of Reagan as a naive idealist, but that's what he looks like now, for having founded an institution that promotes fair elections and the rule of law.

[Anne Applebaum: America surrenders in the global information wars](#)

The shift against these historically bipartisan institutions, against the belief that Americans should defend and promote democracy around the world, and against the democratic faith itself is part of something broader. We have

a president who regularly attacks judges and journalists, who bullies CEOs into handing over stock in their companies and university presidents into paying meritless fines, who sends military forces into American cities, who is building a new form of interior police, and who rauously encourages the deepening divide between red and blue America. Abroad, Donald Trump appears much happier with dictators than with democratic allies. His random, punitive tariffs sent Lesotho, a small African country, into economic decline. His demands to occupy Greenland created a political crisis in Denmark, a longtime U.S. ally.

His vice president's single notable speech since taking office, made in a room full of people expecting a serious discussion of security, berated Europeans with a list of dishonest or exaggerated attacks on them for alleged assaults on free speech. Trump's own attacks on "radical-left judges" and "fake-news media" now travel around the world much faster than "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" did. Vladimir Putin has banned media that spread "fake news"—that is, accurate information—about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The autocratic ex-president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, called Rappler, a [famous investigative-reporting site](#), a "fake-news outlet" to discredit its work. In places as varied as Egypt and Myanmar, the fake charge of "fake news" has been used to destroy legitimate journalists.

All of these changes are part of a larger shift, a revolutionary transformation in the way Americans present themselves to the world, and the way they are therefore perceived by others. The most ubiquitous form of American culture nowadays is not jazz programming going out on shortwave radio across Eurasia, but the social-media platforms that pump conspiracy theories, extremism, advertising, pornography, and spam into every corner of the globe. After Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was exiled from the Soviet Union for political dissent, the U.S. government facilitated his arrival in America. Now we have different heroes: The Trump administration went out of its way to rescue and welcome the Tate brothers, who had been arrested and briefly held in Romania, charged with rape in Great Britain. (The Tates deny the charges.) Instead of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, we now have the Conservative Political Action Conference, a kind of movable rent-a-troll event. Identikit nationalists anywhere—Hungary, Poland, Britain, Mexico, Brazil—can pay the CPAC team to come to their country and

produce a MAGA show. Steve Bannon or Kristi Noem will show up, deliver a rowdy speech alongside the local talent, and help them make headlines. A CPAC conference held near Rzeszów a few days before the second round of the Polish presidential election featured Noem and was sponsored by a Polish cryptocurrency company that wants a U.S. license.

American culture is no longer synonymous with the aspiration to freedom, but with transactionalism and secrecy: the algorithms that mysteriously determine what you see, the money collected by anonymous billionaires, the deals that the American president is making with world leaders that benefit himself and maybe others whose names we don't know. America was always associated with capitalism, business, and markets, but nowadays there's no pretense that anyone else will be invited to share the wealth. USAID is gone; American humanitarian aid is depleted; America's international medical infrastructure was dismantled so quickly that people died in the process. The image of the ugly American always competed with the image of the generous American. Now that the latter has disappeared, the only Americans anyone can see are the ones trying to rip you off.

The impact of this change around the world will be profound, far-reaching, and long-lasting. The very existence of American democracy inspired people in every corner of the planet, and the decline of American democracy will have the same effect. Perhaps the mere existence of Trump's America will boost new autocratic parties that will carry out assaults on their own democratic political systems, as Jair Bolsonaro's supporters have already done in Brazil. Perhaps the Chinese and Russian propagandists who replace Voice of America and Radio Free Europe will simply win global ideological arguments and undermine American economic influence and trade.

More unpredictable is the impact of the change on Americans. If we are no longer a country that aims to make the world better, but rather a country whose foreign policy is designed to build the wealth of the president or promote the ruling party's foreign friends, then we have fewer reasons to work together at home. If we promote cynicism abroad, we will become more cynical at home. Perhaps expecting Americans to live up to the extraordinary ideals that they proclaimed in the 18th century was always unreasonable, but that language nevertheless shaped the way we thought about ourselves. Now we live in a world where America is led by people

who have abandoned those ideals altogether. That will change all of us, in ways we might not yet be able to see.

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America Needs a Mass Movement —Now

**Without one, America may sink
into autocracy for decades.
**

by David Brooks



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Other peoples have risen. Other peoples have risen up to defend their rights, their dignity, and their democracies. In the past 50 years, they've done it in

Poland, South Africa, Lebanon, South Korea, Ukraine, East Timor, Serbia, Madagascar, Nepal, and elsewhere.

In the early 1970s, for instance, the democratically elected leader of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos, tried to centralize power in his own hands. Students rose up: A clash between them and police left six protesters dead. Transit workers went on strike, followed by joint student-worker demonstrations. Marcos countered by declaring martial law. Led by Cardinal Jaime Sin, the archbishop of Manila, Catholics arose to resist.

In 1983, Marcos's key opponent, Benigno Aquino, was assassinated. Marcos banned TV coverage of Aquino's funeral. But 2 million mourners showed up for what turned into an 11-hour rally against the regime. The middle and professional classes then joined the protesters. The Manila business community held weekly demonstrations. The following year, there was a general workers' strike. After Marcos stole the next election, members of the armed forces began to mutiny. Millions of ordinary citizens marched to defend them. The Reagan administration threatened to cut off aid to the regime. By early 1986, Marcos and his family had no choice: They fled the country. It had taken more than a decade, but the people had defeated the autocrat.

Such uprisings are not rare. For their 2011 book, *[Why Civil Resistance Works](#)*, the political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan looked at 323 resistance movements from 1900 to 2006, including more than 100 nonviolent resistance campaigns. What Chenoweth and Stephan showed is that citizens are not powerless; they have many ways to defend democracy.

For the United States, the question of the decade is: Why hasn't a resistance movement materialized here? The second Trump administration has flouted court decisions in a third of all rulings against it, according to *The Washington Post*. It operates as a national extortion racket, using federal power to control the inner workings of universities, law firms, and corporations. It has thoroughly politicized the Justice Department, launching a series of partisan investigations against its political foes. It has turned ICE into a massive paramilitary organization with apparently unconstrained powers. It has treated the Constitution with disdain, assaulted democratic norms and diminished democratic freedoms, and put military vehicles and

soldiers on the streets of the capital. It embraces the optics of fascism, and flaunts its autocratic aspirations.

I am not one of those who believe that Donald Trump has already turned America into a dictatorship. Yet the crossing-over from freedom into authoritarianism may be marked not by a single dramatic event but by the slow corrosion of our ruling institutions—and that corrosion is well under way. For 250 years, the essence of America’s democratic system, drawing on thinkers going back to Cicero and Cato, has been that no one is above the law. Public officials’ first duty is to put the law before the satisfaction of their own selfish impulses. That concept is alien to Trump.

Although Trump’s actions across these various spheres may seem like separate policies, they are part of one project: creating a savage war of all against all and then using the presidency to profit and gain power from it. Trumpism can also be seen as a multipronged effort to amputate the higher elements of the human spirit—learning, compassion, science, the pursuit of justice—and supplant those virtues with greed, retribution, ego, appetite. Trumpism is an attempt to make the world a playground for the rich and ruthless, so it seeks to dissolve the sinews of moral and legal restraint that make civilization decent.

If you think Trumpism will simply end in three years, you are naive. Left unopposed, global populism of the sort Trumpism represents could dominate for a generation. This could be the rest of our lives, and our children’s, too.

So why are we doing so little? Are we just going to stand in passive witness to the degradation of our democracy?

By this past spring, Trump’s actions had become so egregious that I concluded that the time for a mass civic uprising had arrived. On April 17, I published a column in *The New York Times* arguing that all sectors of America needed to band together to create an interconnected resistance coalition.

That column got an enormous amount of attention and support. For a moment, I thought the mass civic uprising I was hoping for was at hand. So where is it? Yes, there were the (very good) “No Kings” rallies in June. And

yes, groups such as Indivisible continue to organize conventional progressives. But for the most part, a miasma of passivity seems to have swept over the anti-Trump ranks. Institution after institution cuts deals with the Trump-administration extortion racket. In private, business leaders will complain about the damage Trump is doing—but in public, they are lying low. University presidents were galvanized by Harvard’s initial decision to stand up for itself, but many other schools (including now possibly Harvard) have agreed to pay what are in effect compulsory bribes to the Trump administration.

We all understand the first reason many people and institutions have remained quiet: intimidation. Leaders say, *If I speak out, it will cost my organization millions*. Acquiescence to the government begins to seem prudent. So instead of a mass movement, we have separate institutions each drawing up a self-preservation strategy. In the absence of a broad social movement to support and protect them, leaders all face the same collective-action problem: *If I stand alone, I’ll be crushed*.

The problem with this strategy is that it allows dominance to become a habit. Bullies who go unresisted keep on dominating. Submission becomes a habit too. One way to tell if you’re living in an autocracy is by asking this question: Do people feel free to express their dissent? All around me, I see civic leaders not saying what’s really on their mind. And over time, self-censorship can lead to internal spiritual and moral collapse. When Trump initially defeated the GOP establishment a decade ago, the conquered went along only grudgingly, maintaining their capacity to be privately appalled by him. But over the years, acquiescence appears to have bled inward—and before long, they were conquered on the inside, too. They have become the very people who, not so long ago, they professed to be appalled by.

But a second reason people are quiescent is that they don’t understand the fight we are in. They’re still thinking in conventional political terms. This crisis is not about election cycles. It’s about historical tides. Every so often, a political-cultural-social tide sweeps the world, leaving everything rearranged in its wake. Two hundred and fifty years ago, the democratic tide swept across the West, producing the American and French Revolutions and eventually the democratic revolts of 1848. The totalitarian tide of the early 20th century produced revolutions in Russia, Germany, and China. The

1960s gave us the tide of liberation, which produced the decolonization movements, the civil-rights movement, and the feminist movement. The neoliberal revolution of the 1980s and '90s produced Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the West and Deng Xiaoping and Mikhail Gorbachev in the East. Since 2010 or so, the tide of global populism has risen, a movement that has brought us not just Trump, but Viktor Orbán, Narendra Modi, the revanchist version of Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, and Brexit. Drowning in this historic tide, conventional parties and politicians, whose time horizon doesn't stretch past the next election, are hapless. Conventional politicians don't have the vision or power to reverse a historical tide. Chuck Schumer is not going to save us.

Trumpism, like populism, is more than a set of policies—it's a culture. Trump offers people a sense of belonging, an identity, status, self-respect, and a comprehensive political ethic. Populists are not trying to pass this or that law; they are altering the climate of the age. And Democrats think they can fight that by offering some tax credits?

To beat a social movement, you must build a counter social movement. And to do that, you need a different narrative about where we are and where we should be heading, a different set of values dictating what is admirable and what is disgraceful. If we fail to build such a movement, authoritarian strongmen around the globe will dominate indefinitely.

Will enough Americans rise up to reverse the tide of populist authoritarianism? The Filipinos did it under Marcos. One morning the autocrats woke up and were no longer in control; the marchers were. That needs to happen here.

[Adrienne LaFrance: A ticking clock on American freedom](#)

When we think of social movements, we think of rallies, protests, marches. But those tend to come at the tail end of a social movement. Rallies and marches are pointless if they are not done on behalf of an overarching ideal.

Historical tides shift when there is a shift in values. A group of thinkers conceives a new social vision, and eventually, a social and political movement coalesces around it. John Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers

came up with the ideas that made the Declaration of Independence and thus the Revolution possible. In 1848, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels created the vision for what became the Communist revolutions of the 20th century. Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and William F. Buckley Jr., among others, created the vision for what became the Reagan Revolution.

What became Trumpian populism drew on older movements—such as the anti-immigrant Know-Nothing party of the 19th century and the isolationist America Firsters of the 20th—and then coalesced over the past eight decades, in the writings of people such as Albert Jay Nock, James Burnham, Sam Francis, Pat Buchanan, and Christopher Lasch. Lasch's 1995 book, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, is to MAGA what Marx was to Lenin. Almost everything that Trump and J. D. Vance are saying today was said first by Lasch 30 years ago: The establishment betrayed the people and created a culture that makes the working class feel like strangers in their own land.

About a decade ago, I stopped by the desk of a young man named James Hitchcock, who was then my brilliant and generally wonderful editorial assistant at the *Times*. *The Revolt of the Elites* was lying on his desk. *How odd, I thought, that James would be reading a 20-year-old book of social criticism.* I failed to see this for the early warning it was: James is now a speechwriter for Vance. The vice president channels Lasch, and millions of Americans who have never heard of the late historian resonate with the critique he laid out 30 years ago.

With his intuitive genius for recognizing what will inflame and divide, Trump has deepened the Laschian critique by repeatedly telling the people that their democracy has been usurped by a permanent ruling class of educated elites. Every day, he launches initiatives to remind people that he is waging an existential class struggle on their behalf against the elites: Trump against Harvard, Trump against the Washington bureaucrats, Trump against the law firms, Trump against the mainstream media.

This narrative has been persuasive to millions of Americans. Since Trump first declared his candidacy in 2015, some 1,400 American counties have moved in a more Republican direction, while fewer than 60 have moved in a more Democratic direction. Trump used this narrative to build a multiracial

working-class coalition; a fifth of all Trump voters in 2024 were people of color.

How can those who oppose Trumpism construct a more accurate and compelling narrative?

The first step is to capitalize on the weaknesses at the core of the MAGA narrative. For 250 years, the American idea has been partly rooted in the notion that we are not like class-riven European nations. Our ancestors left that behind to build a nation where all people would have a fair chance. We rejected the politics of class conflict and built a country around social mobility—the idea that the poor kid today could be the rich executive tomorrow.

“It was a spiritual wind that drove the Americans irresistibly ahead from the beginning,” the Italian writer Luigi Barzini Jr. observed, and [Abraham Lincoln declared](#), “I hold the value of life is to improve one’s condition.” This gospel of social mobility gives Americans a sense of purpose and direction. Social mobility also reduces class conflict, because where you are today is not necessarily where you’ll be tomorrow.

The traditional American story is built on hope and possibility. The MAGA story is built on menace and threat. The traditional American story embraces risk. The MAGA story clings to security. For most Americans across our history, utopia has lain in the future; for Trumpian populists, utopia lies in the past. The traditional American mindset is premised on the possibility of limitless growth that can be widely shared; the populist mindset assumes that everything is a zero-sum competition.

The story Trump tells isn’t truly American; in fact, his story is the one Russian nationalists tell: *The good people of the heartland are under threat from foreigners and urban modernizers; I will protect you.* If the representative American images were once the covered wagon or the car, today’s representative MAGA image is a wall.

Americans will eventually reject MAGA, not only because it’s like a foreign implant in the body politic but also because over time, it will become clearer that Trump’s ethos doesn’t address the real problems plaguing his working-

class supporters: poor health outcomes, poor educational outcomes, low levels of social capital, low levels of investment in their communities, and weak economic growth. The Trumpists focus on their civil war against the elites—hurting Harvard, hurting USAID, hurting the National Institutes of Health. Cutting off public broadcasting may be emotionally satisfying in an own-the-libs kind of way, but how does this help the working class? Trump's biggest legislative achievement is a tax cut for the rich. How does that help the working class?

The second task is to construct a vision of America that is more inspiring than MAGA's. Roughly 125 years ago, when the Declaration was half as old as it is now, America was struggling to cope with the Industrial Revolution. The 1880s witnessed the vicious depression of 1882–85, massive political corruption, astounding concentrations of corporate power, huge inequality, and lynchings and other racial terrorism. Americans responded by building the Populist Progressive movement.

Today, populists and progressives generally occupy opposing political parties. But as Richard Hofstadter noted in his classic *The Age of Reform*, at the turn of the 20th century Populists and Progressives formed an alliance. The Progressives of that era, then as now, were concentrated in the highly educated neighborhoods of big cities. The Populists, then as now, were concentrated in the smaller towns of the Midwest and the South. But both the Progressives and the Populists wanted to help those who were being ground down by industrialization. Both emphasized moral reform, personal responsibility, and character formation. Both believed in using government to reduce inequality and expand opportunity. Populists and Progressives worked hard to keep rural and urban insurgencies in harmony. Together, they built big things—the antitrust movement, the FDA, the Forest Service, the Federal Reserve.

Populists and Progressives needed each other—and still do. Without populists, progressives can turn into a bunch of affluent, out-of-touch urbanites who have little in common with regular Americans. Without progressives, populists can turn into anti-intellectual, paranoid bigots. The progressive valorizing of cultural diversity is balanced by populists' emphasis on cultural cohesion.

Americans of the Populist Progressive era were struggling to cope with the rise of the Industrial Age; today, we are struggling to cope with the rise of the Information Age. Then as now, we are trying to adapt traditional American ideals to novel circumstances. The wisdom that drove the Populists and Progressives can serve as a useful guide for today. The Populist Progressive movement made social mobility—the American dream—the core of its vision, and it launched a crusade against the concentration of corporate power that was crushing economic and social mobility.

The Progressives and Populists of that era also intuited something that psychological research would validate decades later: If people are to thrive, and to take productive risks, they need secure foundations from which to operate. Populists are good at thinking about how to build a secure container—a stable family, safe neighborhoods, strong national borders, shared moral values. Progressives are good at using government to widen opportunity—expanding educational opportunities, using industrial policy to invest in areas left behind, building housing so that people can move from one place to another. Both populists and progressives have an interest in reforming the institutions that Americans have lost faith in—universities, Congress, corporations, the meritocracy, the Silicon Valley technocracy.

The old Populist Progressive alliance was economically left, socially center right, and hell-bent on reform. A contemporary version of this alliance would likely turn out to be the same. This has the benefit of scrambling outdated 20th-century categories of left and right, and could help promote the notion that we are one nation, culturally cohesive but economically and demographically diverse. It rejects the Trumpian idea that we are sentenced to an endless class or culture war.

The third task, of course, is to actually build the movement around the vision. Social movements are bigger than political parties, and focused on more than just passing bills in Congress. They push for change on civic, cultural, institutional, and legislative fronts all at once. They change the climate of the age.

Successful social movements find ways to build civic power. Authoritarians seek to divide and isolate their opponents to prevent collective action, so the

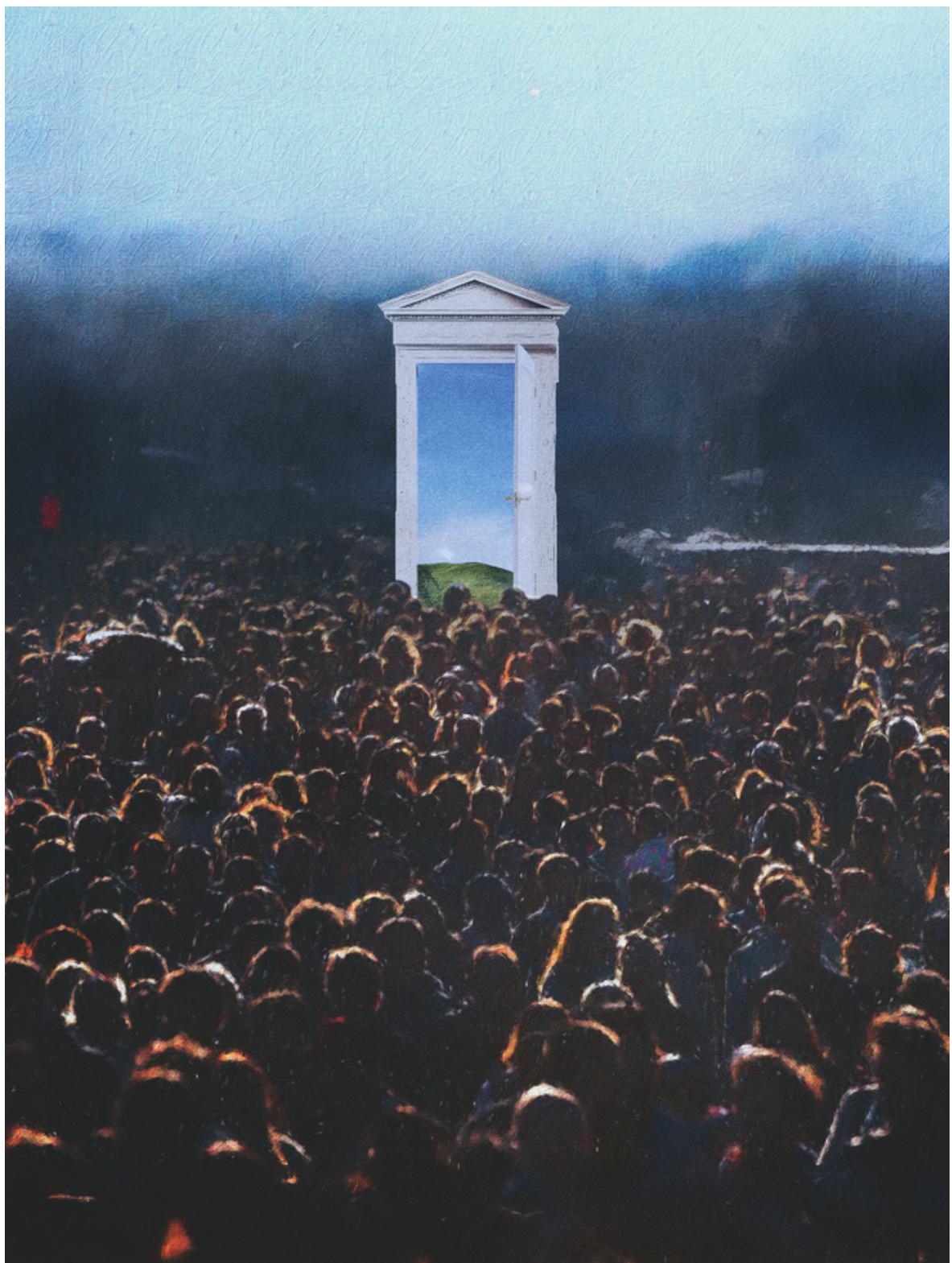
mere act of organizing a coalition creates power. Individuals may be powerless, but groups are not.

Successful movements are microcosms of the society they hope to create. An anti-MAGA movement would have to be a cross-class movement, one that joined members of the educated class with members of the working class, shrinking the social chasms that gave rise to populism in the first place.

Successful movements mobilize the people who already agree with them—but they also focus on persuading those who don’t. Occasionally you’ll hear a Democratic politician say they are going to “fight” for their side. Much of the time, that just means the politician is going to say what their base already believes, only at a higher volume. That’s mostly useless. Large anti-Trump rallies attended exclusively by NPR listeners in blue cities do not impress rural voters.

Successful movements create civic power by increasing social tension. Through marches, bus boycotts, and lunch-counter sit-ins, the civil-rights movement created tension that threw sand in the gears of white supremacy. Saul Alinsky, the influential community organizer, used to argue that power is not what you have; it’s what your opponents think you have. In the 2010s, the Tea Party movement, though small in numbers, ratcheted up the tension on establishment Republicans, convincing them that resisting Tea Party goals would be costly.

A successful anti-MAGA movement must start by winning some achievable, concrete victory—halting this specific attack on democracy or that specific Trump program—and building from there. It must bring people from fear and stasis to hope and momentum.



The principal goal of a social movement is to shift public sentiment, to change what people find admirable and what they find disgraceful. To this

end, people are persuaded less by arguments than by stories. Today, Trump dominates the narrative landscape. During his *Apprentice* days, as the journalist Tina Brown has [pointed out on her Substack](#), he learned that Americans have at most a two-week attention span, so to control the conversation, you need to stage a series of two-week mini-dramas, each with high-stakes confrontations and surprises.

To counter this, an anti-populist social movement must create a competing cascade of mini-dramas. Every day, the Trump administration's statements and actions provide abundant material for such drama. In July, for instance, we learned that the administration was going to incinerate 500 tons of emergency food aid because the administration was too callous and incompetent to distribute it to starving people. An effective social movement would shove that story in everybody's faces repeatedly.

[Read: The Trump administration is about to incinerate 500 tons of emergency food](#)

Successful social movements create heroes. Civil-rights leaders understood that Rosa Parks was the perfect person to build the Montgomery bus boycott around, because she was petite, devout, outwardly mild-mannered, and deeply respected in the community. But social movements also need to create villains. For the American Founders, that was King George III. For the civil-rights movement, they were people like Bull Connor, Orval Faubus, and George Wallace. The final of Alinsky's 13 "[Rules for Radicals](#)" was: Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it. Another (the fifth one) was: Ridicule is man's most potent weapon.

The most effective form of communication for a social movement is action. Actions create events that tell stories. Gene Sharp, a political scientist who studied nonviolent resistance, compiled a list of 198 different actions that social movements can take to raise consciousness, including boycotts, walkouts, strikes, marches, street theater, civil disobedience, and mass petitions. In America today, local groups have already formed to support immigrants, document deportations, and turn each one into a mini-drama.

Will it ever come time for Americans to do what their 1770s predecessors did, and take up arms against a despotic and unjust regime? That's not

realistic or even worth thinking about. Nonviolent uprisings are [twice as likely to succeed as violent ones](#), according to Chenoweth and Stephan's research. Peaceful uprisings earn moral authority for themselves and take it away from the regime. When nonviolent protesters confront the regime, they can come across as brave, self-disciplined, and dignified. When regimes retaliate against nonviolent protesters with fire hoses or rubber bullets or tear gas, they come across as ruthless and malevolent.

Nonviolent protests put authoritarian regimes in a lose-lose situation: Either cede the streets to the protesters, or crack down in ways that weaken your legitimacy. If a movement seeks only to please its own radicals, it fails. If it uses action to change the narrative and persuade the mainstream, it has a good chance of success.

The American spirit was given political expression 250 years ago by the signers of the Declaration. That spirit was perhaps best expressed by Walt Whitman, who wrote that American democracy is “life’s gymnasium,” one that produced “freedom’s athletes.” What Whitman feared was “inertness and fossilism”—the possibility that America would stagnate, or build walls around itself, or walls through the middle of itself that divided the people. He admired energy. “I hail with joy the oceanic, variegated, intense practical energy, the demand for facts, even the business materialism of the current age,” he wrote in *Democratic Vistas*.

We have traveled a long way from Whitman’s hymns of vigor and hope. But the spirit of the country, although perhaps dormant, still lives. Trumpism is ascendant now, but history shows that America cycles through a process of rupture and repair, suffering and reinvention. This process has a familiar sequence. Cultural and intellectual change comes first—a new vision. Social movements come second. Political change comes last.

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I Don't Want to Stop Believing in America's Decency

**I want to feel, as Walt Whitman did, that America and democracy are inextricable. **

by George Packer



To be a patriot in Donald Trump's America is like sitting through a loved one's trial for some gruesome crime. Day after day your shame deepens as the horrifying testimony piles up, until you wonder how you can still care about this person. Shouldn't you just accept that your beloved is beyond

redemption? And yet you keep showing up, exchanging smiles and waves, hoping for some mitigating evidence to emerge—trying to believe in your country’s essential decency.

Patriotism is as various and complex as the feeling of attachment to one’s own family. It can be unconditional and unquestioning, or else move—even die—with the fluctuations in a nation’s moral character. It can flow from a hearth, a grave, a landscape, a bloodline, a shared history, an ethnic or religious identity, a community of like-minded people, a set of ideas. During his travels through the United States in the 1830s, [Alexis de Tocqueville saw American patriotism](#) as different from that of tradition-bound, hierarchical Europe, where an “instinctive, disinterested, and undefinable feeling” connects “the affections of man with his birthplace.” In the young republic, Tocqueville found “a patriotism of reflection”—less a passion than a rational civic pursuit: “It is coeval with the spread of knowledge, it is nurtured by the laws, it grows by the exercise of civil rights, and, in the end, it is confounded with the personal interest of the citizen.”

For Tocqueville, this democratic patriotism depends on a belief in equality, inalienable rights, and the consent of the governed—in effect, on the beliefs and actions found in the Declaration of Independence. But that universal creed can’t exist solely in abstract nouns. To mean anything—to survive at all—it requires the participation of the governed as citizens. The purpose of [Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address](#) was to remind Americans that self-government would not endure without the efforts of patriots on its behalf. When ancestry defines national identity, patriotism requires nothing other than allegiance. But the blood of the Union dead and the soil of the cemetery that Lincoln had come to dedicate bore a larger meaning: the liberty and equality of all human beings. Patriotism was the devotion of Americans to these principles, and to preserving them through self-government.

Following the *Dred Scott* decision in 1857, Stephen A. Douglas [tried to limit the truth that “all men are created equal” to one lineage](#)—the original British colonists and their descendants. His Americanism excluded not just the enslaved but the foreign-born. During the 1858 U.S. Senate campaign in Illinois, Lincoln mocked Douglas for defacing the Declaration and excluding half the country’s citizens—immigrants from other lands, whose connection to the United States came [not through a bloodline but through the founding](#)

itself: “They have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are,” Lincoln said. “That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.”

The words of the Declaration shaped Lincoln’s patriotism and justified his politics. He called Thomas Jefferson “the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.” That truth gave Lincoln the basis for ending slavery and winning the Civil War.

The argument about whether patriotism comes from democratic idealism or American heritage has flared up ever since the founding. The argument doesn’t always fall neatly along the lines of left and right. Until the mid-20th century, much of the Democratic Party was defined by a combination of economic populism and white supremacy. The most important conservative figure of the past century, Ronald Reagan, swore by the Founders’ civic religion.

Almost 250 years after the Declaration, we’re in the midst of another fight over the meaning of being American. This one is particularly dispiriting, because neither side seems capable of mustering a patriotism based in active citizenship. Gallup regularly asks Americans how proud they are of their country. For the past quarter century Republicans have answered “extremely” or “very” proud at a fairly consistent rate of about 90 percent. In the same period Democrats have slipped from the mid-80s to the mid-30s, with the percentages generally rising during Democratic presidencies and falling under Republicans, most dramatically this year with the return of Trump. In June the number was 36 percent for Democrats and 92 percent for Republicans—the largest partisan gap since Gallup began asking the question, in 2001. Republicans remain highly patriotic while their party hollows out America’s democratic institutions and their leader flirts with kingship, as if their love of country has nothing to do with its founding

principles. Democrats have a hard time feeling proud of their country unless one of their own is in office, pursuing their favored policies, as if their patriotism goes no deeper than their politics.

Both types of patriotism described by Tocqueville have led Americans into dead ends. In the age of Trump the instinctive kind accepts authoritarianism, while reflective patriotism creates cynicism, alienation, and civic passivity. Neither produces the citizens that Lincoln, Walt Whitman, John Dewey, Martin Luther King Jr., and other American democrats believed were essential to preserving a free country.

American patriotism is a volatile substance, never able to settle into a quiet, modest love of country. It swings wildly between “All are welcome” and “Beware of dog.” Drain from it the universal principles of equality, freedom, and self-government, and it turns into a snarl. The Republican Party has abandoned Reagan’s city on a hill for the blood-and-soil nationalism of Europe’s old monarchies and new dictatorships—Putin’s Russia, Orbán’s Hungary. [At a rally in Madison Square Garden](#) just before last year’s election, Trump’s chief ideologue, Stephen Miller, expressed an idea in seven words that he might have adapted from the German *Ausländer raus!* (“Foreigners out!”): “America is for Americans and Americans only!” The meaning of *for* is unclear, but the important word in the sentence is *only*.

[Read: Are you a ‘Heritage American’?](#)

Trump’s America is defined by those who belong and those who don’t. Its essential act is exclusion. Back in power, Trump is showing that mere citizenship isn’t enough. The president and his circle determine who the real Americans are, and if they don’t like your origins or your views, they’ll try to take away your constitutional birthright and deport you. Vice President J. D. Vance has become the administration’s chief spokesman for a version of American identity similar to the one that Stephen Douglas championed and Lincoln derided. During [a July speech for the conservative Claremont Institute](#), Vance set out to “redefine the meaning of American citizenship” as stingily as possible. To Vance, the founding creed should be no basis for Americanness. “Identifying America just with agreeing with the principles, let’s say, of the Declaration of Independence” fills the vice president with horror, because it would include those he wants to leave out, and exclude

those he wants to leave in. The billions of people around the world who believe in democracy would suddenly have a right to come here. And the 100 percent Americans—the Proud Boys, [Oath Keepers](#), and [extremist white nationalists](#)—would be stigmatized, even if their ancestors fought in the Civil War.

As it happens, the founding creed doesn't require everyone on the planet who believes in the equality of all human beings to be put on a plane and brought here as candidates for citizenship. But leaving Vance's illogic aside, his purpose is to remove democracy from our national identity and open the way to the authoritarianism that comes with blood-and-soil nationalism. He defines American identity by where your ancestors lie moldering in their grave—an idea that [he first presented in 2024](#), at the Republican National Convention, in a paean to the cemetery in eastern Kentucky where five generations of Vances are buried.

Because his wife's parents come from India, Vance is obliged to allow a carve-out for certain immigrants—but it's conditioned on a gratitude test. According to Vance, Zohran Mamdani, the Democratic candidate for mayor of New York City, failed the test when, after years of apparently ignoring Independence Day, he [released this statement on July 4](#): “America is beautiful, contradictory, unfinished. I am proud of our country even as we constantly strive to make it better.” Vance convicted this anodyne cliché of rank ingratitude. A Ugandan immigrant “dares to insult” the country that gave his family a safe home “on its most sacred day? Who the hell does he think that he is?”

Vance is proposing [a hierarchy of citizenship](#). If you trace your ancestry back to Shiloh or Yorktown, you can ignore the Constitution, embrace the Justice Department as the president's police, pal around with white nationalists, and still call yourself a patriot. But if you just got here, you'd better be grateful and keep to yourself any critical thoughts about America's failure to live up to its own ideals. Patriotism is the right to dress in red, white, and blue and wave the flag on July 4 while defiling its creed.

This shrunken, desiccated corpse of patriotism has its own ancestry. It comes to life when large numbers of aspiring Americans arrive on our shores, and it almost always brings an odor of racial or religious bigotry. In the 1850s, the

nativist and anti-Catholic American Party, also called the Know Nothings, had a brief career in opposition to German, French, and Irish immigration. The wave of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe and China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries finally crashed against legal restrictions from Congress and the extralegal actions of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. Then, following the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which abolished the system of national quotas and bans created in 1924, people from Asia, Africa, and Latin America came here in such numbers that, today, immigrants make up a seventh of the U.S. population, about the same as the historical high in 1890. One result is MAGA.

Ahead of Flag Day in June, Representative Chris Deluzio, a Navy veteran and two-term Democrat from a competitive district in western Pennsylvania, handed out American flags to colleagues and announced the creation of the Democratic Veterans Caucus. He had already helped form a group of anti-corporate House Democrats calling themselves the “New Economic Patriots.” “It ties into our goal of aggressively pushing back every chance we can when someone in the MAGA movement, up to and including Donald Trump, acts as though they have a monopoly on loving this country,” Deluzio told me. “I will take that fight as often as we can.” He added, “We need more of that in our party. I think there is a huge opportunity to contrast the selfishness, the craveness of the MAGA movement and its disconnect from the true love of country.”

The nationalist right’s rejection of the creedal definition of Americanness leaves an opening for Democrats to reclaim patriotism as a core identity. But for decades now, going back to the Vietnam War, many liberal and left-wing Americans have been skeptical of, even hostile to, patriotic symbols and emotions. This aversion has come at a high political cost.

I grew up during the ’60s and ’70s in a household that never raised an American flag—not out of any anti-American feeling, but because it would have sent the wrong message. It would have associated us with the jingoistic party of Nixon and Reagan. It would have meant “America—love it or leave it,” regardless of war and racism. There’s no denying that our reluctance also reflected social snobbery. Waving a flag was something that working- and lower-middle-class Americans did, like repairing their own cars.

The college-educated professionals who began to take over the Democratic Party in the 1970s prided themselves on having a sophisticated grasp of American history. They recoiled from the Republicans' crude, coercive patriotism, which demanded a kind of national idolatry—a celebration of America that was blind to slavery, Native American genocide, Jim Crow, Japanese internment, the Vietnam War. In Republican politics, love of country became a negative force, almost the same thing as hatred of compatriots in the opposition. National symbols such as the flag, the anthem, and the Pledge of Allegiance turned into partisan weapons. In 1988, the performance of patriotism constituted most of George H. W. Bush's presidential campaign and might have cost Michael Dukakis the election.

"The Republicans learned to own the flag and own the symbols," the Georgetown University historian Michael Kazin, who has written numerous books on the American left, told me. At the same time, an influential strain of thought from the '60s anti-war movement became left-wing orthodoxy: the idea of the U.S. as an almost uniquely awful nation, the source of most of humanity's ills—white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, militarism, settler colonialism, environmental destruction. Howard Zinn's immensely popular *A People's History of the United States*, published in 1980, taught several generations of young Americans on the left to see patriotism as an embrace of something evil.

"I wouldn't say the New Left took over the Democratic Party," Kazin said, "but some of the ideas did percolate, and the Trump people are right that the universities moved to the left." The American Studies Association—the principal academic organization devoted to understanding American history and identity—came under the control of a faction so hostile to its own subject matter that in 1998 the organization's president [suggested removing American from the name](#). In 2017, the organization's national council explained that "American studies scholarship teaches us that rubrics of 'law and order', patriotism, and 'traditional values' are discourses of retrenchment. We must illuminate the ways their use criminalizes and stigmatizes struggles for empowerment, self-determination, and dignity." And in 2019, its executive committee [announced](#): "We strive to model forms of solidarity, sustainability, and social justice that foster alternative visions and practices to supplant the rotting empire bent on destruction."

In the past decade, profound pessimism about the American experiment has grown beyond the niche viewpoint of American-studies professors. With the universities came important sectors of the public. The popularization of academic ideology peaked in 2019, when *The New York Times*' "The 1619 Project" declared that U.S. history began with slavery. The notion immediately spread through schools, universities, workplaces. According to the project's creator, Nikole Hannah-Jones, the country's founding principles—the ideas of Jefferson and Lincoln—were specious.

For very different reasons, in recent years the progressive left and the nationalist right have reached the same conclusion: The "abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times," is a mirage, a trap, a lie. It doesn't define us as Americans.

Few politicians say this out loud, or even articulate it to themselves. "Maybe some part of our coalition has become less comfortable with outward displays of love of country," Deluzio said—but lawn flags are uncontroversial in western Pennsylvania. Most Republicans still think that the flag has something to do with democracy. Most Democrats would never release a social-media post on Independence Day like this one from Cori Bush in 2021, when she was representing Missouri's First Congressional District: "When they say that the 4th of July is about American freedom, remember this: the freedom they're referring to is for white people. This land is stolen land and Black people still aren't free." But J. D. Vance and Cori Bush might simply be ahead of their parties, speaking for younger, more skeptical Americans.

For the right, now in power, the abandonment of the American idea is license to build an authoritarian regime. The left, having spent decades proving that the idea is a sham, can hardly protest its dismantling.

In 1998, the philosopher Richard Rorty wrote in *Achieving Our Country*: "Each new generation of students ought to think of American leftism as having a long and glorious history" and to see "the struggle for social justice as central to their country's moral identity." He was referring to the kinds of American reformers who embraced patriotism while urging their country to live up to its creed: the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, the feminist Susan B. Anthony, the poet Walt Whitman, the socialist Eugene V. Debs, the

pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, the labor leader A. Philip Randolph, and finally Martin Luther King. Theirs is the democratic patriotism that Tocqueville saw in America almost 200 years ago, rooted in the revolutionary promise of the Founders and the active work of self-governing citizens to realize it. Rorty urged leftists of his time to remember the “civic religion” of their predecessors, identify with their country, and work toward the fulfillment of its moral vision.

Nearly three decades later, what are the grounds for patriotism? The institutions created at the founding no longer work well. Our elected leaders have sunk to abysmal depths of selfishness, corruption, and cowardice. The words of the Declaration bring tears to your eyes and the taste of ashes to your mouth. “It’s not easy to defend the American ideals, because there’s so much cynicism about how they’ve been used and politicized,” Kazin said. “Young people are much less enamored of the ideals as they understand them, much less willing to be proud of the country. They’ve been tainted by fierce ideological conflict.”

Liberals—the last believers in institutions and incremental reform—cry “Democracy, democracy, democracy!” But when the Supreme Court puts the president above the law, the president uses his office for shakedowns, the White House defenestrates speakers of inconvenient facts, the State Department flirts with dictators while shutting the door on dissidents and refugees, Justice Department lawyers lie to the courts, Congress votes liars onto the bench and pours money into a masked secret police force, and most Americans don’t seem to notice or care, then what good is democracy? The country and its government belong to us, so the most honest response is self-disgust.

But I don’t want to stop believing in my country’s essential decency. I don’t want to conflate America with one president, one party, or both parties. I want to feel, as Whitman did, that America and democracy are inextricable; and, as Dewey did, that democracy makes us agents who can always act to better our country and affirm our self-respect.

Tocqueville wrote: “In the United States it is believed, and with truth, that patriotism is a kind of devotion which is strengthened by ritual observance.” In a democracy, that observance takes the form of participation in public life.

Harder still, it requires a vision of that life with everyone in it. We cannot wish away the other party, the other states, the other faiths, the newest arrivals, the oldest tribes. In his Claremont speech, Vance said one true thing: “Social bonds form among people who have something in common.” A nation—especially this one, with its short memory and incomprehensible diversity—can’t cohere simply as a geographic boundary and a set of laws. It needs a common language and culture—a way of life.

The intersectional multiculturalists of the left think that there is no common American culture, that the notion itself is a form of oppression—there’s only a collection of groups, dominant or subordinate. Vance and the nationalists of the right think that American culture comes from the dirt and the past, “a distinctive place and a distinctive people”—by which they mean a race and a faith that came here long ago, bringing a way of life to which all others must adapt. Both of these views are wrong—unpatriotically wrong.

American culture is as distinct as that of any other nation, but it’s the only one that comes from an idea. That idea is the equality of all human beings; their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; the form of self-government that secures their rights, including the right to change their government if it becomes tyrannical. This idea produced a mass culture famous for loud voices, informal address, innocence and ignorance, generosity and violence, bluntness and cluelessness—a culture of individualists who refuse to accept that anyone is their better, any station fixed for life, any possibility closed to them. It is the easiest culture in the world to join, and if the first generation can’t then the second will. It absorbs, changes, and is changed by each new one, blatant and accessible enough to provide a lingua franca in which they can all understand and be understood. It has no elaborate rules or ancient secret codes. It flattens and simplifies other cultures into music, clothing, food, and words whose vulgarity appalls and seduces the rest of the world. It is stronger than any religious orthodoxy or class rank. What Americans have in common is a way of life made by their creed.

If you still believe this creed matters—if the idea and the culture and institutions that it created still keep you attached to this country—you’re holding on in a hard wind. Around the globe, autocracy is on the march and democracy’s reputation is in decline as its leading light extinguishes itself. In

America, most of your fellow citizens in both parties think democracy has stopped working on their behalf. You have to make the case that all the promised shortcuts to greatness are roads to hell—that there is no path toward a more decent life except through the common effort of free and equal citizens. And you have to keep believing it in the face of their utter folly. The only way to be a patriot is to work together with those fools, your fellow Americans, to stop this growing tyranny so that we have a chance to redeem ourselves.

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