America guided by wisdom An allegorical representation of the United States depicting their independence and prosperity, 1815. Library of Congress.

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The Early Republic

I. Introduction

Thomas Jefferson's electoral victory over John Adams—and the larger victory of the Republicans over the Federalists—was but one of many changes in the early republic. Some, like Jefferson's victory, were accomplished peacefully, and others violently. The wealthy and the powerful, middling and poor whites, Native Americans, free and enslaved African Americans, influential and poor women: all demanded a voice in the new nation that Thomas Paine called an "asylum" for liberty.[1] All would, in their own way, lay claim to the freedom and equality promised, if not fully realized, by the Revolution.

II. Free and Enslaved Black Americans and the Challenge to Slavery

Led by the slave Gabriel, close to one thousand enslaved men planned to end slavery in Virginia by attacking Richmond in late August 1800. Some of the conspirators would set diversionary fires in the city's warehouse district. Others would attack Richmond's white residents, seize weapons, and capture Virginia governor James Monroe. On August 30, two enslaved men revealed the plot to their master, who notified authorities. Faced with bad weather, Gabriel and other leaders postponed the attack until the next night, giving Governor Monroe and the militia time to capture the conspirators. After briefly escaping, Gabriel was seized, tried, and hanged along with twenty-five others. Their executions sent the message that others would be punished if they challenged slavery. Subsequently, the Virginia government increased restrictions on free people of color.

Gabriel's Rebellion, as the plot came to be known, taught Virginia's white residents several lessons. First, it suggested that enslaved blacks were capable of preparing and carrying out a sophisticated and violent revolution—undermining white supremacist assumptions about the inherent intellectual inferiority of blacks. Furthermore, it demonstrated that white efforts to suppress news of other slave revolts—especially the 1791 slave rebellion in Haiti—had failed. Not only did some literate slaves read accounts of the successful attack in Virginia's newspapers, others heard about the rebellion firsthand when slaveholding refugees from Haiti arrived in Virginia with their slaves after July 1793.

The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) inspired free and enslaved black Americans, and terrified white Americans. Port cities in the United States were flooded with news and refugees. Free people of color embraced the revolution, understanding it as a call for full abolition and the rights of citizenship denied in the United States. Over the next several decades, black Americans continually looked to Haiti as an inspiration in their struggle for freedom. For example, in 1829 David Walker, a black abolitionist in Boston, wrote an *Appeal* that called for resistance to slavery and racism. Walker called Haiti the "glory of the blacks and terror of the tyrants" and said that Haitians, "according to their word, are bound to protect and comfort us." Haiti also proved that, given equal opportunities, people of color could achieve as much as whites.[2] In

1826 the third college graduate of color in the United States, John Russwurm, gave a commencement address at Bowdoin College, noting that, "Haytiens have adopted the republican form of government . . . [and] in no country are the rights and privileges of citizens and foreigners more respected, and crimes less frequent."[3] In 1838 the *Colored American*, an early black newspaper, professed that "no one who reads, with an unprejudiced mind, the history of Hayti . . . can doubt the capacity of colored men, nor the propriety of removing all their disabilities."[4] Haiti, and the activism it inspired, sent the message that enslaved and free blacks could not be omitted from conversations about the meaning of liberty and equality. Their words and actions—on plantations, streets, and the printed page—left an indelible mark on early national political culture.

The black activism inspired by Haiti's revolution was so powerful that anxious white leaders scrambled to use the violence of the Haitian revolt to reinforce white supremacy and pro-slavery views by limiting the social and political lives of people of color. White publications mocked black Americans as buffoons, ridiculing calls for abolition and equal rights. The most (in)famous of these, the "Bobalition" broadsides, published in Boston in the 1810s, crudely caricatured African Americans. Widely distributed materials like these became the basis for racist ideas that thrived in the nineteenth century. But such ridicule also implied that black Americans' presence in the political conversation was significant enough to require it. The need to reinforce such an obvious difference between whiteness and blackness implied that the differences might not be so obvious after all.

Henry Moss, a slave in Virginia, became arguably the most famous black man of the day when white spots appeared on his body in 1792, turning him visibly white within three years. As his skin changed, Moss marketed himself as "a great curiosity" in Philadelphia and soon earned enough money to buy his freedom. He met the great scientists of the era—including Samuel Stanhope Smith and Dr. Benjamin Rush—who joyously deemed Moss to be living proof of their theory that "the Black Color (as it is called) of the Negroes is derived from the leprosy."[5] Something, somehow, was "curing" Moss of his blackness. In the whitening body of slave-turned-patriot-turned-curiosity, many Americans fostered ideas of race that would cause major problems in the years ahead.

The first decades of the new American republic coincided with a radical shift in understandings of race. Politically and culturally, Enlightenment thinking fostered beliefs in common humanity, the possibil-

The idea and image of black Haitian revolutionaries sent shock waves throughout white America. That black slaves and freed people might turn violent against whites, so obvious in this image where a black soldier holds up the head of a white soldier, remained a serious fear in the hearts and minds of white Southerners throughout the antebellum period. January Suchodolski, *Battle at San Domingo*, 1845. Wikimedia.

ity of societal progress, the remaking of oneself, and the importance of one's social and ecological environment—a four-pronged revolt against the hierarchies of the Old World. Yet a tension arose due to Enlightenment thinkers' desire to classify and order the natural world. Carolus Linnaeus, Comte de Buffon, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, and others created connections between race and place as they divided the racial "types" of the world according to skin color, cranial measurements, and hair. They claimed that years under the hot sun and tropical climate of Africa darkened the skin and reconfigured the skulls of the African race, whereas the cold northern latitudes of Europe molded and sustained the "Caucasian" race. The environments endowed both races with respective characteristics, which accounted for differences in humankind tracing back to a common ancestry. A universal human nature, therefore,

housed not fundamental differences but rather the "civilized" and the "primitive"—two poles on a scale of social progress.

Informed by European anthropology and republican optimism, Americans confronted their own uniquely problematic racial landscape. In 1787, Samuel Stanhope Smith published his treatise *Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*, which further articulated the theory of racial change and suggested that improving the social environment would tap into the innate equality of humankind and dramatically uplift nonwhite races. The proper society, he and others believed, could gradually "whiten" men the way nature spontaneously chose to whiten Henry Moss. Thomas Jefferson disagreed. While Jefferson thought Native Americans could improve and become "civilized," he declared in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1784) that black people were incapable of mental improvement and that they might even have a separate ancestry—a theory known as polygenesis, or multiple creations. His belief in polygenesis was less to justify slavery—slaveholders universally rejected the theory as antibiblical and thus a threat to their primary instrument of justification, the Bible—and more to justify schemes for a white America, such as the plan to gradually send freed slaves to Africa. Many Americans believed nature had made the white and black races too different to peacefully coexist, and they viewed African colonization as the solution to America's racial problem.

Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* sparked considerable backlash from antislavery and black communities. The celebrated black surveyor Benjamin Banneker, for example, immediately wrote to Jefferson and demanded he "eradicate that train of absurd and false ideas" and instead embrace the belief that we are "all of one flesh" and with "all the same sensations and endowed . . . with the same faculties."[6] Many years later, in his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829), David Walker channeled decades of black protest, simultaneously denouncing the moral rot of slavery and racism while praising the inner strength of the race.

Jefferson had his defenders. White men such as Charles Caldwell and Samuel George Morton hardened Jefferson's skepticism with the "biological" case for blacks and whites not only having separate creations but actually being different species, a position increasingly articulated throughout the antebellum period. Few Americans subscribed wholesale to such theories, but many shared beliefs in white supremacy. As the decades passed, white Americans were forced to acknowledge that if the

black population was indeed whitening, it resulted from interracial sex and not the environment. The sense of inspiration and wonder that followed Henry Moss in the 1790s would have been impossible just a generation later.

III. Jeffersonian Republicanism

Free and enslaved black Americans were not alone in pushing against political hierarchies. Jefferson's election to the presidency in 1800 represented a victory for non-elite white Americans in their bid to assume more direct control over the government. Elites had made no secret of their hostility toward the direct control of government by the people. In both private correspondence and published works, many of the nation's founders argued that pure democracy would lead to anarchy. Massachusetts Federalist Fisher Ames spoke for many of his colleagues when he lamented the dangers that democracy posed because it depended on public opinion, which "shifts with every current of caprice." Jefferson's election, for Federalists like Ames, heralded a slide "down into the mire of a democracy."[7]

Indeed, many political leaders and non-elite citizens believed Jefferson embraced the politics of the masses. "In a government like ours it is the duty of the Chief-magistrate . . . to unite in himself the confidence of the whole people," Jefferson wrote in 1810.[8] Nine years later, looking back on his monumental election, Jefferson again linked his triumph to the political engagement of ordinary citizens: "The revolution of 1800 . . . was as real a revolution in the principles of our government as that of 76 was in it's form," he wrote, "not effected indeed by the sword . . . but by the rational and peaceable instrument of reform, the suffrage [voting] of the people."[9] Jefferson desired to convince Americans, and the world, that a government that answered directly to the people would lead to lasting national union, not anarchic division. He wanted to prove that free people could govern themselves democratically.

Jefferson set out to differentiate his administration from the Federalists. He defined American union by the voluntary bonds of fellow citizens toward one another and toward the government. In contrast, the Federalists supposedly imagined a union defined by expansive state power and public submission to the rule of aristocratic elites. For Jefferson, the American nation drew its "energy" and its strength from the "confidence" of a "reasonable" and "rational" people.

Republican celebrations often credited Jefferson with saving the nation's republican principles. In a move that enraged Federalists, they used the image of George Washington, who had passed away in 1799, linking the republican virtue Washington epitomized to the democratic liberty Jefferson championed. Leaving behind the military pomp of power-obsessed Federalists, Republicans had peacefully elected the scribe of national independence, the philosopher-patriot who had battled tyranny with his pen, not with a sword or a gun.

The celebrations of Jefferson's presidency and the defeat of the Federalists expressed many citizens' willingness to assert greater direct control over the government as citizens. The definition of citizenship was changing. Early American national identity was coded masculine, just as it was coded white and wealthy; yet, since the Revolution, women had repeatedly called for a place in the conversation. Mercy Otis Warren was one of the most noteworthy female contributors to the public ratification debate over the Constitution of 1787 and 1788, but women all over the country were urged to participate in the discussion over the Constitution. "It is the duty of the American ladies, in a particular manner, to interest themselves in the success of the measures that are now pursuing by the Federal Convention for the happiness of America," a Philadelphia essayist announced. "They can retain their rank as rational beings only in a free government. In a monarchy . . . they will be considered as valuable members of a society, only in proportion as they are capable of being mothers for soldiers, who are the pillars of crowned heads."[10] American women were more than mothers to soldiers; they were mothers to liberty.

Historians have used the term *Republican Motherhood* to describe the early American belief that women were essential in nurturing the principles of liberty in the citizenry. Women would pass along important values of independence and virtue to their children, ensuring that each generation cherished the same values of the American Revolution. Because of these ideas, women's actions became politicized. Republican partisans even described women's choice of sexual partner as crucial to the health and well-being of both the party and the nation. "The fair Daughters of America" should "never disgrace themselves by giving their hands in marriage to any but real republicans," a group of New Jersey Republicans asserted. A Philadelphia paper toasted "The fair Daughters of Columbia. May their smiles be the reward of Republicans only."[11] Though unmistakably steeped in the gendered assumptions about female

The artist James Peale painted this portrait of his wife, Mary, and five of their eventual six children. Peale and others represented women as responsible for the health of the republic through their roles as wives as mothers. Historians call this view of women Republican Motherhood. Wikimedia.

sexuality and domesticity that denied women an equal share of the political rights men enjoyed, these statements also conceded the pivotal role women played as active participants in partisan politics.[12]

IV. Jefferson as President

Buttressed by robust public support, Jefferson sought to implement policies that reflected his own political ideology. He worked to reduce taxes and cut the government's budget, believing that this would expand the economic opportunities of free Americans. His cuts included national defense, and Jefferson restricted the regular army to three thousand men. England may have needed taxes and debt to support its military empire, but Jefferson was determined to live in peace—and that belief led him to reduce America's national debt while getting rid of all internal taxes during his first term. In a move that became the crowning achievement of his presidency, Jefferson authorized the acquisition of Louisiana from France in 1803 in what is considered the largest real estate deal in American history. France had ceded Louisiana to Spain in exchange for West Florida after the Seven Years' War decades earlier. Jefferson was concerned about American access to New Orleans, which served as an important port for western farmers. His worries multiplied when the French secretly reacquired Louisiana in 1800. Spain remained in Louisiana for two more years while the

Thomas Jefferson's victory over John Adams in the election of 1800 was celebrated through everyday Americans' material culture, including this victory banner. Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History.

U.S. minister to France, Robert R. Livingston, tried to strike a compromise. Fortunately for the United States, the pressures of war in Europe and the slave insurrection in Haiti forced Napoleon to rethink his vast North American holdings. Rebellious slaves coupled with a yellow fever outbreak in Haiti defeated French forces, stripping Napoleon of his ability to control Haiti (the home of profitable sugar plantations). Deciding to cut his losses, Napoleon offered to sell the entire Louisiana Territory for $15 million—roughly equivalent to $250 million today. Negotiations between Livingston and Napoleon's foreign minister, Talleyrand, succeeded more spectacularly than either Jefferson or Livingston could have imagined.

Jefferson made an inquiry to his cabinet regarding the constitutionality of the Louisiana Purchase, but he believed he was obliged to operate outside the strict limitations of the Constitution if the good of the nation was at stake, as his ultimate responsibility was to the American people. Jefferson felt he should be able to "throw himself on the justice of his country" when he facilitated the interests of the very people he served.[13]

Jefferson's foreign policy, particularly the Embargo Act of 1807, elicited the most outrage from his Federalist critics. As Napoleon Bonaparte's armies moved across Europe, Jefferson wrote to a European friend that he was glad that God had "divided the dry lands of your hemisphere from the dry lands of ours, and said 'here, at least, be there peace.'"[14] Unfortunately, the Atlantic Ocean soon became the site of Jefferson's greatest foreign policy test, as England, France, and Spain refused to respect American ships' neutrality. The greatest offenses came from the British, who resumed the policy of impressment, seizing thousands of American sailors and forcing them to fight for the British navy.

Many Americans called for war when the British attacked the USS *Chesapeake* in 1807. The president, however, decided on a policy of "peaceable coercion" and Congress agreed. Under the Embargo Act of 1807, American ports were closed to all foreign trade in hopes of avoiding war. Jefferson hoped that an embargo would force European nations to respect American neutrality. Historians disagree over the wisdom of peaceable coercion. At first, withholding commerce rather than declaring war appeared to be the ultimate means of nonviolent conflict resolution. In practice, the embargo hurt the U.S. economy. Even Jefferson's personal finances suffered. When Americans resorted to smuggling their goods out of the country, Jefferson expanded governmental powers to try to enforce their compliance, leading some to label him a "tyrant."

Criticism of Jefferson's policies reflected the same rhetoric his supporters had used earlier against Adams and the Federalists. Federalists attacked

The attack of the *Chesapeake* caused such furor in the hearts of Americans that even eighty years after the incident, an artist sketched this drawing of the event. Fred S. Cozzens, *The incident between HMS "Leopard" and USS "Chesapeake" that sparked the Chesapeake-Leopard Affair*, 1897. Wikimedia.

the American Philosophical Society and the study of natural history, believing both to be too saturated with Democratic Republicans. Some Federalists lamented the alleged decline of educational standards for children. Moreover, James Callender published accusations (that were later proven credible by DNA evidence) that Jefferson was involved in a sexual relationship with Sally Hemings, one of his slaves.[15] Callender referred to Jefferson as "our little mulatto president," suggesting that sex with a slave had somehow compromised Jefferson's racial integrity.[16] Callender's accusation joined previous Federalist attacks on Jefferson's racial politics, including a scathing pamphlet written by South Carolinian William Loughton Smith in 1796 that described the principles of Jeffersonian democracy as the beginning of a slippery slope to dangerous racial equality.[17]

Arguments lamenting the democratization of America were far less effective than those that borrowed from democratic language and alleged that Jefferson's actions undermined the sovereignty of the people. When Federalists attacked Jefferson, they often accused him of acting against the interests of the very public he claimed to serve. This tactic represented a pivotal development. As the Federalists scrambled to stay politically relevant, it became apparent that their ideology—rooted in eighteenth-century notions of virtue, paternalistic rule by wealthy elite, and the deference of ordinary citizens to an aristocracy of merit—was no longer tenable. The Federalists' adoption of republican political rhetoric signaled a new political landscape in which both parties embraced the direct involvement of the citizenry. The Republican Party rose to power on the promise to expand voting and promote a more direct link between political leaders and the electorate. The American populace continued to demand more direct access to political power. Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe sought to expand voting through policies that made it easier for Americans to purchase land. Under their leadership, seven new states entered the Union. By 1824, only three states still had rules about how much property someone had to own before he could vote. Never again would the Federalists regain dominance over either Congress or the presidency; the last Federalist to run for president, Rufus King, lost to Monroe in 1816.

V. Native American Power and the United States

The Jeffersonian rhetoric of equality contrasted harshly with the reality of a nation stratified along the lines of gender, class, race, and ethnic-

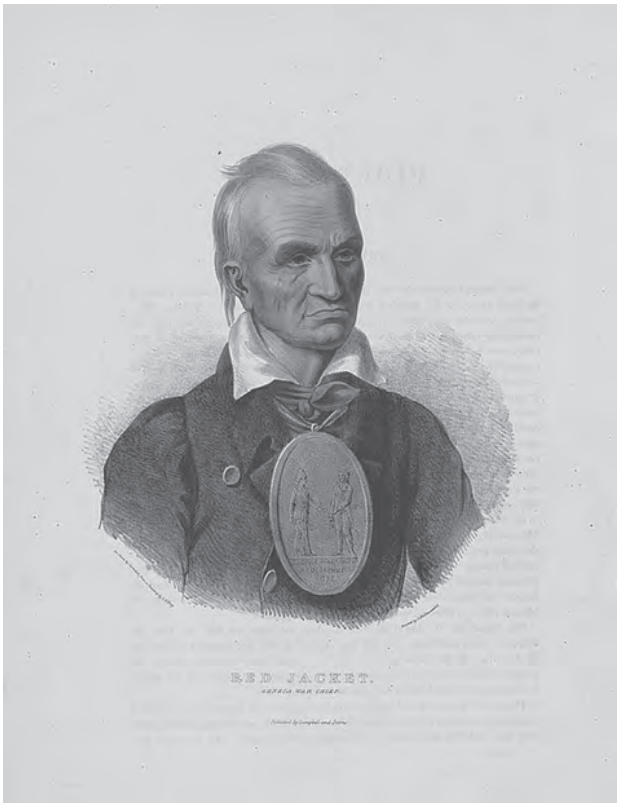
ity. Diplomatic relations between Native Americans and local, state, and national governments offer a dramatic example of the dangers of those inequalities. Prior to the Revolution, many Indian nations had balanced a delicate diplomacy between European empires, which scholars have called the Play-off System.[18] Moreover, in many parts of North America, indigenous peoples dominated social relations.

Americans pushed for more land in all their interactions with Native diplomats and leaders. But boundaries were only one source of tension. Trade, criminal jurisdiction, roads, the sale of liquor, and alliances were also key negotiating points. Despite their role in fighting on both sides, Native American negotiators were not included in the diplomatic negotiations that ended the Revolutionary War. Unsurprisingly, the final document omitted concessions for Native allies. Even as Native peoples proved vital trading partners, scouts, and allies against hostile nations, they were often condemned by white settlers and government officials as "savages." White ridicule of indigenous practices and disregard for indigenous nations' property rights and sovereignty prompted some indigenous peoples to turn away from white practices.

In the wake of the American Revolution, Native American diplomats developed relationships with the United States, maintained or ceased relations with the British Empire (or with Spain in the South), and negotiated their relationship with other Native nations. Formal diplomatic negotiations included Native rituals to reestablish relationships and open communication. Treaty conferences took place in Native towns, at neutral sites in Indian-American borderlands, and in state and federal capitals. While chiefs were politically important, skilled orators, such as Red Jacket, as well as intermediaries, and interpreters also played key roles in negotiations. Native American orators were known for metaphorical language, command of an audience, and compelling voice and gestures.

Throughout the early republic, diplomacy was preferred to war. Violence and warfare carried enormous costs for all parties—in lives, money, trade disruptions, and reputation. Diplomacy allowed parties to air their grievances, negotiate their relationships, and minimize violence. Violent conflicts arose when diplomacy failed.

Native diplomacy testified to the complexity of indigenous cultures and their role in shaping the politics and policy of American communities, states, and the federal government. Yet white attitudes, words, and policies frequently relegated Native peoples to the literal and figurative margins as "ignorant savages." Poor treatment like this inspired hostility



Shown in this portrait as a refined gentleman, Red Jacket proved to be one of the most effective middlemen between Native Americans and U.S. officials. The medal worn around his neck, apparently given to him by George Washington, reflects his position as an intermediary. Campbell & Burns, *Red Jacket. Seneca war chief*, Philadelphia: C. Hullmandel, 1838. Library of Congress.

and calls for pan-Indian alliances from leaders of distinct Native nations, including the Shawnee leader Tecumseh.

Tecumseh and his brother, Tenskwatawa, the Prophet, helped envision an alliance of North America's indigenous populations to halt the encroachments of the United States. They created pan-Indian towns in present-day Indiana, first at Greenville, then at Prophetstown, in defiance of the Treaty of Greenville (1795). Tecumseh traveled to many diverse Indian nations from Canada to Georgia, calling for unification, resistance, and the restoration of sacred power.

Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa's pan-Indian confederacy was the culmination of many movements that swept through indigenous North America during the eighteenth century. An earlier coalition fought in Pontiac's War. Neolin, the Delaware prophet, influenced Pontiac, an Ottawa (Odawa) war chief, with his vision of Native independence, cultural renewal, and religious revitalization. Through Neolin, the Master of Life—the Great Spirit—urged Native peoples to shrug off their dependency on European goods and technologies, reassert their faith in Native spirituality and rituals, and cooperate with one another against