Introduction

Expand or Die: The Revolution’s New Empire

ALAN TAYLOR

This joint issue of the William and Mary Quarterly and the Journal of the Early Republic asks if we have miscast the American Revolution by treating it either as the culmination of colonial history or as the foundation for the early republic. Does focusing on the coming revolution distort the colonial past to serve a teleology? Or do we a priori assume that the revolution was a watershed between a rather somnolent colonial society and a modernizing republican order? What happens to our histories if instead we plant the revolution in the middle of a longer flow of change: does it appear more or less transformative?

Defining “The American Revolution” becomes more difficult as our discipline waxes more diverse in methods and topics. We read frequent laments over the lack of synthesis in our time of specialization and diversity. Recent academic jeremiads insist that we have neglected the revolution, or at least its political dimensions. One even castigates the young for taking all the wrong approaches rather than following the lead of the oldest of their elders.1

Alan Taylor is the Thomas Jefferson Foundation Chair in American History at the University of Virginia. Thanks to Doug Bradburn of Mount Vernon for hosting a symposium on the articles in this joint issue with such panache—and to the authors for producing such stimulating articles.

In a historiographical article appearing in this issue, however, Michael A. McDonnell and David Waldstreicher document that scholarship on the revolution has not languished. Indeed, it has proliferated during the past two decades. The footnotes to the other articles in this issue also reveal plenty of recent work on the revolution, including its politics. But that scholarship darts in many directions as newer scholars pursue questions unasked a generation ago. Like any important and complex subject, the American Revolution invites inquiry by all sorts of scholars, and they produce widely divergent works. In this joint issue, for example, every author defines differently the geographic bounds, temporal range, human cast, causes, and consequences of the revolution.\(^2\)

Rather than reject novelty and diversity, we should celebrate them for extending what we know about the many peoples caught up in revolution. Those marginalized by former histories now assume centrality as our stories increasingly include Native peoples, the enslaved, women, the poor, Hispanics, and the French as key actors. But we should also welcome efforts at synthesis, which inevitably and delightfully should be multiple and contending. It is futile and sterile to seek scholarly consensus as some sort of holy grail. Variety and debate are more interesting and better for the field.\(^3\)

For all of its topical range, recent scholarship does aggregate into distinct methodological clusters. Popular history usually dwells on military or political heroes and villains, generally from the top tier of society. The military variant focuses on the period of war with the British, 1775–83, while the political emphasis broadens the time frame to begin in 1763.

---


with the imperial crisis and culminate in the crafting and ratification of the Federal Constitution in 1787–88. Academic historians, however, usually park themselves on one temporal side or the other of the war and explore broader changes in behavior, ideas, and discourse by common people as well as elites.⁴

Depending on methodology and time frame, historians afford varying explanatory weight to the revolution. Military historians study the ebb and flow of power through battles and campaigns to find pivotal moments where the ultimate stakes are clear in retrospect: an independent United States. Political historians divide over whether the revolution was a pivotal watershed. Some emphasize continuities, casting the patriots as conservatives defending a mode of colonial governance that had already become republicanized by the relatively egalitarian conditions for free colonists. Other, Progressive, scholars dwell on the inequalitarian structures of colonial society and institutions to argue that the American Revolution enabled common people to reject deference in favor of democratic assertion. But social and cultural historians usually balk at finding much explanatory and transformative power in the revolution. Changes in society, culture, and intellect seem instead to occur at their own pace before, as well as after, the violent rupture of the British Empire in North America.⁵

Most of the articles in this joint issue share a social and cultural sensibility—even those that overtly address politics. Whereas some articles burrow into a close and insightful reading of particular cultural forms, others expand broadly in time and geography, often covering a

---

⁴ For diverse modes of defining and narrating, see Sarah Knott, “Narrating the Age of Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 73 (Jan. 2016), 3–36. For different time frames for social and cultural history, see C. Dallett Hemphill, “Manners and Class in the Revolutionary Era: A Transatlantic Comparison,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (Apr. 2006), 345–72.

century bisected by the revolution while stretching their analysis across
the North American continent or the Atlantic Ocean. Whether operating
on a macro or micro scale, most of the authors implicitly define their
arguments against Gordon S. Wood’s *The Radicalism of the American
Revolution*, which characterized a thoroughly bourgeois revolution as
radical by eighteenth-century standards. In Wood’s version the revolu-
tion transformed American society by promoting and celebrating middle-
class strivers with light complexions and northern state residences. Most
of the authors in this issue regard that change as insufficiently radical,
but most implicitly concede that the revolution offered no other
transformation.6

Dwelling on continuities rather than transformations, the articles cast
doubt on how revolutionary the revolution truly was. Many authors
focus on cultural and social aspects of life, which unfold more steadily
through the generations rather than responding quickly to the shocks of
politics and war. None of the authors deal with military history, and only
Sara T. Damiano focuses on the war years—and she limits her examina-
tion to the home front.

Damiano astutely assesses the correspondence by seven married cou-
ples in which wives ran properties at home while husbands went away
to serve in the patriot forces. The women clung to traditional rhetoric
and roles as their husbands’ business agents, proving resourceful and
versatile under the duress of unprecedented inflation and vagaries in debt
collection. But Damiano balks at finding enduring consequences deriving
from the stresses of war on family relations. She prefers a close attention
to particular cultural technologies of household finance and letter writ-
ing, where continuities prevailed. She emphasizes what the revolution
was not, insisting that “we [must] move beyond bracketing the wartime
years as a brief interlude, a temporary reversal, or an ironic precursor to
the early republic.” If so, what then should we move to?7

6. Wood, *Radicalism*. See also Wood’s reiteration of this argument in Gordon
York, 2009). For critiques, see “Forum: How Revolutionary Was the Revolution?
A Discussion of Gordon S. Wood’s *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*,”
*William and Mary Quarterly* 51 (Oct. 1994), 677–716; John L. Brooke, “Trouble
with Paradox,” review of Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, *William and Mary Quarterly*
67 (July 2010), 549–57.

7. Sara T. Damiano, “Writing Women’s History Through the Revolution:
Family Finances, Letter Writing, and Conceptions of Marriage,” *William and
Nathan Perl-Rosenthal also focuses on cultural activity abstracted from the violence of war. He deftly examines letter writing but expands the story beyond North America to cast the American Revolution as part of a wave of transatlantic revolutions. The variously situated revolutionaries shared stylized modes of corresponding. His approach casts eighteenth-century revolutions as more limited than liberating, since genteel modes of communicating constrained the “possibilities, limits, and modalities of the politics that could be practiced through correspondence.” As in Damiano’s essay, we find the revolution operating within prior cultural forms rather than creating new ones. Indeed, those same social arts also framed the words and actions of the men who ran empires and resisted revolutions. Perl-Rosenthal depicts limited political movements practiced (and resisted) by gentlemen policing the practices of gentility rather than changing them.8

Waldstreicher also offers a close cultural reading of particular texts, in this case published poetry. His evocative essay on Phillis Wheatley challenges the argument, advanced by Bernard Bailyn, that the revolution initiated an irresistible “contagion of liberty” that, in due time, would deliver democracy, free the slaves, and provide civic equality to women. Instead, for Waldstreicher, the revolution delayed liberating changes as slaveholders rejected British interference by declaring American independence. Patriots defended a liberty tied to private property rights, including the ownership of enslaved humans. Led by Thomas Jefferson, the victors ridiculed Wheatley’s appropriation of the classical tradition, which they mocked as beyond her race’s abilities. The patriots justified white racial supremacy by claiming a monopoly on high culture. Waldstreicher concludes with an intriguingly inconclusive sentence: “Even if the story of the American Revolution must be a story of Jefferson’s real and imagined victories, it cannot be an accurate story until it shows how Phillis Wheatley and James Somerset actually chose some key battlegrounds, in verse as in the courtroom, several years before their fellow slaves chose Dunmore’s and Washington’s armies.” Waldstreicher reminds us of the egalitarian challenge posed by Wheatley.


who was the truer revolutionary, but he seems to grant Jefferson the last word in defining a revolution that preserved slavery by asserting racism. 9

Yet the “if” in Waldstreicher’s concluding sentence invites speculation by the reader. Perhaps no one, not even Jefferson, succeeded in defining a contradictory revolution. Later abolitionists recalled Wheatley’s words, example, and classicism to champion freedom and challenge the racial reaction. As I see it, the revolution produced a new dialectic between antislavery and proslavery discourses, both expressed with greater clarity and moral urgency thereafter. Each persuasion became crystallized in contest with the other. But this contest was not the same thing as an irresistible “contagion of liberty” allegedly unleashed by the revolution, for no liberation was assured and none could be achieved without a great struggle of uncertain consequences to our own day. 10

Other articles in the joint issue turn from social norms and cultural production to focus on politics while adopting the longer time frame characteristic of social and cultural approaches. Consequently, their authors usually emphasize continuities rather than rupture and transformation. As they tell it, capitalism was already robust in the colonies and would have continued to unfold with or without the revolution. And the United States appears as just another empire, the natural heir to the British. Most authors also treat as continuous the territorial expansion westward at the expense of Native peoples dispossessed of their land and


of African Americans kept in slavery. Jessica Choppin Roney, for example, finds settler colonialism largely unchanging from the seventeenth into the nineteenth century. 11

Focusing on oceans rather than land, Paul A. Gilje asserts that promoting and defending overseas commerce drove American foreign relations from the colonial era through the revolution and into the nineteenth century. He depicts territorial expansion as a secondary concern for colonial and early republican statesmen prior to 1815. Earlier expansion, including the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, appears incidental to commercial disputes between the United States and foreign powers, particularly France and Britain. 12

Instead we should regard commerce and conquest as intertwined and interdependent. In The Elusive Republic, Drew R. McCoy argues that western expansion multiplied productive farms, expanding an agricultural surplus that needed ever-larger overseas markets most effectively facilitated by an aggressive free-trade policy. American leaders worried that western fertility would sap the morality of settlers, seducing them into indolence, if they lacked the market’s profitable incentives to work hard by raising bumper crops. Industrious labor would develop the civic virtue deemed essential for republican governance. The American Revolution created a republican Union committed simultaneously to breaking down trade barriers overseas and dispossessing Indians. Expanding settlements and swelling trade were two sides of the same coin. 13

Whereas Gilje dwells on overseas commerce as the persistent priority in American politics and diplomacy, Andrew Shankman emphasizes territorial expansion in bringing on the revolution and accelerating social


and political change. In this joint issue heavy on continuities, Shankman offers the primary exception. He casts the revolution as escalating and empowering westward migration and Indian dispossession. Shankman depicts the patriots as better attuned to the interests and desires of their land-grabbing western constituents than British imperialists had been.\(^\text{14}\)

Shankman aside, continuity predominates in this joint issue in part because the articles generally work around rather than through the experiences of revolutionary war. The revolution appears more traumatic and transformative if we pay closer attention to military conflict and its civilian consequences. The long, hard, wrenching war compelled people to change in ways unanticipated in 1775. Attending to the traumas of war can also illuminate the subsequent painful but creative efforts to “settle” the revolution institutionally and on the landscape.

The war devastated the American economy. Roaming armies and frontier raiders uprooted thousands of people and destroyed their farms, plantations, and towns. British warships disrupted the export trade essential to prosperity, and hyperinflation corroded trust in contracts and payments. Economic historians find a 30 percent decline in national income from 1774 to 1790, a drop that two of them characterize as “America’s greatest income slump ever” and an “economic disaster.”\(^\text{15}\)

During the Revolutionary War, Americans experienced more turmoil, bloodshed, and destruction than any other American generation before the Civil War of the 1860s. At least twenty-five thousand Americans died in military service, usually of disease. As a percentage of the population, the mortality exceeded that of every other American conflict save the Civil War. Dorothea Gamsby, a wartime refugee, remembered, “Dismay and terror, wailing and distraction impressed their picture on my memory, never to be effaced.”\(^\text{16}\)

---

\(^{14}\) Shankman, “Toward a Social History of Federalism.”


\(^{16}\) Dorothea Gamsby, quoted in Catherine S. Crary, ed., *The Price of Loyalty: Tory Writings from the Revolutionary Era* (New York, 1973), 49. For work that highlights the destruction and turmoil of the war, see Ronald Hoffman, “The ‘Disaffected’ in the Revolutionary South,” in *The American Revolution*, ed. Alfred
The demands of war rendered the revolution more transformative as patriot leaders had to make concessions to common people. To win a hard-fought, close-run, and long-lasting civil war, patriots had to mobilize and motivate broad public support and extract revenue and supplies on a massive scale—from people who despised coercion and taxation. Indeed, the patriots impressed more supplies, drafted more militiamen into service, demanded more oaths, and confiscated more property from dissidents than ever before in British America. Their states also collected heavier taxes than Parliament had ever dreamed of levying on the colonists. To render the sacrifices more palatable, the patriots advanced a republican system that promised greater respect and political power for common men. The revolution also appealed to religious dissenters, who longed to escape domination and taxation by the religious establishments of the colonial regime. The republican promise of equal opportunity invited common white men to seek more sweeping reforms meant to reduce the power and privileges of genteel leaders. Common voters discarded traditions of deference to demand more from their state governments.17

The war generated massive new public debts for the thirteen states and their Congress. The debt burden threatened to unravel the new states as clashing interest groups sought to shift the burden of taxation onto others. Those conflicts over taxes and debts increased the importance of frontier expansion, compounding the pressure on Native peoples. Unable to fund their debts entirely through taxes, the states and Congress relied on selling frontier lands for revenue. But Indians ably defended those lands, and fighting them threatened to swell the already-crippling state and national debts. Defeats inflicted by Indians also eroded governments’ credibility with settlers, who were tempted to make farms without paying anyone for the land. If deprived of land-sale revenue and the power of managing settlers, eastern polities would wither. In sum, the fertile West beyond the Appalachians could either enrich or unravel the fragile union of states created by the revolution. Benjamin Rush rightly worried, “There is but one path that can lead the United States to destruction; and that is their extent of territory.”

---

Passage over the Appalachian Mountains threatened to alienate settlers from the eastern states. A pessimistic New York congressman regarded “every emigrant to that country from the Atlantic states as forever lost to the Confederacy.” Westerners could ship their crops to market more easily either northeastward via the Great Lakes and Saint Lawrence River to British Quebec or southwestward down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to Spanish New Orleans. Consequently, eastern leaders feared that western settlers soon would reject American rule to seek an association with the British or Spanish Empire. Indeed, Canada’s British governor sent agents to bribe and cultivate leaders in Vermont and Kentucky. Louisiana’s Spanish governors similarly enticed the ambitious men of Tennessee and Kentucky, including the young Andrew Jackson. Frontier leaders sought trade deals and prepared contingency plans for the apparently impending collapse of the republican union. George Washington feared, “The Western settlers . . . stand as it were upon a pivot—the touch of a feather, would turn them any way.”

In her article, Roney demonstrates that frontier secessions also erupted within states as western dissidents sought the crucial power to create and defend private property. Rejecting rule by North Carolina, settlers in present-day Tennessee formed a new state called Franklin in 1784. The leaders of Franklin appealed to the most ambitious settlers, those with some property and a hunger for more. Such settlers coveted secure legal title to their lands to fend off squatters and rival land speculators from beyond their communities. Ambitious men wanted control over county courts to enforce their titles, collect debts, and oust trespassers. Frontier leaders also sought a militia to protect buildings and families from attack by Indians who resented and resisted the settler invasion. An effective state would enhance the prestige of local leaders by providing them with coveted commissions as militia officers and court magistrates. Co-opting local elites with militia and justice commissions and some land grants was a sound investment for a state’s elite, who thereby wielded a powerful engine of patronage. When state elites instead acted with a narrow-minded selfishness to monopolize the benefits of expansion, frontier leaders created their own property-making and militia-organizing polities, as they had done in Vermont on the eve of the revolution.20

North Carolina alienated Franklin’s settlers by cutting them out of the protection, commissions, and land grants generated by western expansion. Eastern legislators treated westerners as subordinates, just as Britain’s rulers had excluded colonial leaders from the fruits of imperial expansion during the 1760s. Unlike British imperialists, however, the North Carolinians responded creatively to the challenge posed by the Franklin secession. During the mid-1780s, the old state offered new courts and commissions and financial support for the western militia.

Meanwhile, Franklin’s leaders struggled to deliver on their promises to protect the common settlers, failing to organize and pay a credible militia. The Franklinites also faltered in seeking the congressional recognition needed to become a new state on a par with the old. Congressmen opposed admitting Franklin to the Union for fear of setting a precedent dangerous to the cohesion of every state. Anxious to retain Kentucky for Virginia, Jefferson worried that “our several states will crumble to atoms by the spirit of establishing every little canton into a separate state.” The original thirteen states framed and managed the Union as a club to preserve their boundaries by discouraging secessionist movements. Deprived of external credibility, the Franklin project faltered. During the late 1780s, North Carolina’s leaders restored their sovereignty over the Tennessee settlements.

The federal government faced a similar challenge north and west of the Ohio. Compelled to compete for settler allegiance, American leaders could not afford to follow the British precedent of keeping a long-term set of dependent colonies in the West. Instead, with the Northwest Ordinances of the 1780s, Congress established temporary territories that eventually would enter the Union as new states equal to the original thirteen. Unlike the British Empire, which had failed to manage western expansion, the American Union protected state sovereignty while integrating new states, thereby building a distinctive empire that empowered common whites but devastated Native peoples.

Eliga Gould also examines the construction of an American polity that could mobilize force and create private property. Such a polity could


achieve a sort of independence only by forcing its way into interdependence with other polities, just as the American states did by forming a union to win a revolutionary war. Noting that lesson, an ambitious adventurer, William Augustus Bowles, sought to help some Muskogean peoples assert their sovereignty in ways more conspicuous to outsiders. By leading the “State of Muskogee,” Bowles meant to create private property, sustain courts, organize military force, and compel diplomatic recognition from external powers: British, Spanish, and American. In sum, he played the Franklin game with Native protagonists, but his scheme troubled the powers that he had to impress. Euro-American empires preferred to treat Natives as backward allies or dependents, the better to manipulate them in war or dispossess them in treaties. Sensing that external distrust, many Muskogeans doubted that Bowles had the clout to help them—and believed he probably would just help himself to their fertile lands. Like the Franklinites, Bowles lacked the credibility to compete with more powerful outsiders.23

Americans were especially loath to recognize Indians who appropriated their state-building methods. The patriots drew a racialized line, delimiting the polities that they would recognize and cooperate with. Gould notes “that the postcolonial nations that appeared in the half century after 1776 entered a world sharply divided by a racial color line.” As Cherokees, Haitians, and Mexicans painfully learned, the leaders of the United States did not respect new nations or states run by people with darker complexions.24

By gaining control over expansion and its rewards, states within the Union achieved power at the expense of other peoples. Freed from the British Empire, states could act more decisively and aggressively than they could as colonies. We often overlook the enhancement of state power because of our preoccupation with a national story focused on


the federal Union. In fact, the development of the Union paralleled the emergence of state power. That emergence increased the states’ potential threat to one another as they clashed over overlapping boundary claims—which had become more valuable as states relied on frontier expansion for revenue and patronage—and those clashes might become wars that would invite interference by foreign powers. Wary of one another, the leaders of the states formed a tighter union through the Federal Constitution of 1787. They acted to protect themselves from frontier secessionists and other empires—but also, and especially, from one another.25

While providing that security, however, the new federal government also generated unintended and dangerous consequences by creating a national politics in which state leaders could aggregate and polarize into sectional blocks. As northern states gradually freed themselves of slaves, the southern states doubled down on plantation agriculture and slave labor. The rival political economies made each region more suspicious of the other. The regions increasingly clashed over fugitive slaves who escaped across the newly significant boundary between slave and free states. A rather innocuous colonial line between Maryland and Pennsylvania surveyed by Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon became the great fault line of the national politics created by the Federal Constitution.26

Expansion under federal leadership conquered immense new territories from Indian nations and from Mexico, exacerbating tensions over the boundary between wage and enslaved labor regimes, both competing to stretch westward across the continent. During the 1850s, regional leaders concluded that they had to win control of the West to avert domination by the rival region. A victorious region could then claim both the revolutionary legacy and the American future determined by seaborne


and territorial expansion. Ultimately, the Civil War erupted over whether a line between the rival regions should extend across the continent or be erased in favor of either northern or southern domination. Northern victory in the Civil War empowered a Union that became more thoroughly imperial and less beholden to the states. During the 1780s, the states had created the original Union for more defensive purposes. The success of the old federal Union in promoting western expansion had led to its unraveling and reinvention during the 1860s.  

In sum, as I read these articles, sometimes against their grain, I find a more transformative American Revolution. The hard war and its difficult aftermath promoted three increasingly interdependent social processes. First, the revolution generated racial distinctions that associated freedom with whiteness. Second, it regularized state formation to balance the interests of older states with frontier elites’ longing for social mobility and secure private property in land and slaves. Third, the revolution accelerated westward expansion to relieve social tensions and reduce taxes in the eastern polities. The patriot victors reaped freedom and prosperity, but that success contained contradictions that would provoke a new civil war, even bloodier and more destructive than the revolution. Although the new nation had regulated the process of state formation to protect states from one another, that union also generated a national politics, which invited regional polarization along a provocative line drawn across maps and minds to distinguish free from slave states. That division threatened the Union because Jefferson had failed to silence the claims for racial justice and equality advanced by Wheatley and Somerset.

27. Shankman, “Toward a Social History of Federalism.” See also the essays in Andrew Shankman, ed., The World of the Revolutionary American Republic: Land, Labor, and the Conflict for a Continent (New York, 2014); as well as Peter J. Kastor, The Nation’s Crucible: The Louisiana Purchase and the Creation of America (New Haven, CT, 2004); Matthew Mason, Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006); John Craig Hammond, Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion in the Early American West (Charlottesville, VA, 2007).