

“Banished to the woods of America”:
Reimagining the Colonial Past in the Early Republic
(revised)

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“History culture” in eighteenth-century America underwent significant changes after the Revolution in both scope and focus. This can be seen in the increase in the number of historical works written and published in America in the early republic, the importance of history to the rise of American letters, namely poetry, drama, and fiction, and the institutionalization of history culture in the form of the first American historical societies. Furthermore, there was a general shift in focus from the seventeenth-century British past before the Revolution to the American colonial past after the Revolution. This expansion and significant shift in focus laid the foundation for a genuinely American history culture as opposed to a colonial history culture, but one in which the history of the colonial period would play an important and often uncredited role.

Most broadly speaking, “history culture” refers to the ways in which a society relates to and uses its own past to order the present. More specifically, it refers to the sum of ideas and assumptions about history generally, references, representations, and uses of the past as part of constructed historical memories, and the individuals, communities, and institutions through which historical knowledge and literature are produced, propagated, and preserved. I would argue that it is worth thinking about it holistically as a coherent cultural sphere because it was

based on shared assumptions and beliefs about history, both general and specific, and because, to a large extent, it relied on cultural production, namely texts that are widely circulated.

There is a large body of secondary literature on “historical culture” in early modern Britain.¹ The same does not exist in an early American context, be it during the colonial period or the early republic. A number of works touch on aspects of it but few have approached it holistically.² There has been a good deal of work, however, on the specific histories and

¹ For a small sample of an incredibly vast and rich literature on the development of British historical writing and conceptions of history, see Daniel Woolf, *The Social Circulation of the Past: English Historical Culture, 1500-1730* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); *The Uses of History in Early Modern England*, ed. Paulina Kewes (San Marino: Huntington Library, 2006); Mark Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Daniel R. Woolf, *Reading History in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); *The Idea of History in Early Stuart England: Erudition, Ideology, and the “Light of Truth” from the Accession of James I to the Civil War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990). For works specifically on the importance of memories of the seventeenth century in eighteenth-century British politics, see Kathleen Wilson, "A Dissident Legacy: Eighteenth Century Popular Politics and the Glorious Revolution," in *Liberty Secured? Britain Before and After 1688*, ed. J. R. Jones (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1992), 299–334; Gerald M. Straka, "Sixteen Eighty-eight as the Year One: Eighteenth-Century Attitudes Towards the Glorious Revolution," in *The Modernity of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Louis Tonko Milic (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1971), 143–167; H. T. Dickinson, "The Eighteenth-Century Debate on the ‘Glorious Revolution’," *History* 61, no. 2012 (1976): 28–45; H. T. Dickinson, "The Eighteenth-Century Debate on the Sovereignty of Parliament," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 26 (1976), 189-210.

² For some works dealing with history and/or memory in the Revolution and early republic besides those mentioned specifically in the next few paragraphs, see Alfred F. Young, “George Robert Twelve Hewes (1742-1840): A Boston Shoemaker and the Memory of the American Revolution.” *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series* 38, no. 4 (1981): 562–623; Alfred F. Young, “Tar and Feathers and the Ghost of Oliver Cromwell: English Plebeian Culture and American Radicalism,” in *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 144-78; Trevor H. Colbourn, *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965); Rutherford E. Delmage, “The American Idea of Progress, 1750-1800,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 91, no. 4 (1947): 307–314; Stow Persons, “The Cyclical Theory of History in Eighteenth Century America,” *American Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1954): 1–18; François Furstenberg, *In the Name of the Father: Washington's Legacy, Slavery, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006); Brendan McConville, *The King's Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Eran Shalev, *Rome Reborn on Western Shores: Historical Imagination and the Creation of the American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009); Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967).

historians of the early republic, particularly David Ramsay and Jeremy Belknap. “Pre-republican synthesis” historians argued that these works of history were providential in their understanding of the Revolution and created with the primary intent of educating the public so they would be better equipped to “maintain their rights.”³

More recent works, however, have generally understood these histories and historians within two historiographical contexts: nationalism and republicanism. In the wake of the Revolution, they have argued, histories of the Revolution served the primary purpose of forging a new nationalism or American identity, often defined in republican terms. Through interpretations of the Revolution that stressed the virtue of the patriots (and the corruptness of the British), historians like David Ramsay sought to “define an identity, culture, political ideology, and institutions within the framework of an American nation.”⁴ Lester Cohen has argued that these “revolutionary histories” produced a new “American historical language” of “virtue, simplicity, and freedom and their antitheses, corruption, degeneracy, and servility.”⁵ In a diverse and geographically immense new nation, they have argued that these historical works formed a

³ William Raymond Smith, *History as Argument: Three Patriot Historians of the American Revolution* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966), 43, 44. Previous work earlier in the century went through a period of discounting these historians for the widespread practice in their works of copying (or “plagiarizing”) from other works, especially the *Annual Register*.

⁴ Arthur H. Shaffer, *To be an American: David Ramsay and the Making of the American Consciousness* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 3, 105.

⁵ Lester H. Cohen, *The Revolutionary Histories: Contemporary Narratives of the American Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 175.

crucial part of the “quest for a national historical identity” and “common nationality.”⁶ Indeed, Cohen has argued that this quest represented nothing less than a “historical revolution” in late-eighteenth-century America.⁷

Yet, this perspective fails to recognize the importance of colonial history itself to the historical writing of the early republic and, hence, to the project of nation-building. Before one could even begin to embark on the “quest” for a new national identity, the Revolution had to be justified, even vindicated. Many people—historians, antiquarians, poets, playwrights, and novelists—helped create an unprecedented amount of historically derived works available to the public and contributed to the cause of justification and vindication, primarily by a collective reimagining of the colonial period to fit with the world that had come after it. No longer were Americans’ primary historical reference points to be located in the seventeenth-century British past, as they had been during the colonial period; now, the focus of American history culture would shift to the colonial period and its relationship to the Revolution. In essence, this process of reimagining the colonial past helped lay the foundation on which the project of nation-building could proceed and contributed to a transition from a “colonial history

⁶ Arthur H. Shaffer, *The Politics of History: Writing the History of the American Revolution, 1783-1815* (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1975), 42-44; Lawrence J. Friedman and Arthur H Shaffer. “David Ramsay and the Quest for an American Historical Identity,” *Southern Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (July 1976): 351–371. More recently, Peter Messer has stressed even further the relationship between these histories and republican ideology, arguing that historical writing shaped republican ideology and, in those histories, one can find the meshing of American provincial identity and republican ideology. So, while the vast majority of the recent literature on history and the early republic have been forward-looking in stressing the contemporary project of nation-building, Messer’s work, as well as that of Karen O’Brien, has tried to make connections between Ramsay’s histories and intellectual developments dating back to the colonial period, especially the Scottish Enlightenment.

⁷ Cohen, *The Revolutionary Histories*, 15, 48. That phrase being a direct reference to a seminal work on early modern England historiography. See Fussner, *The Historical Revolution: English Historical Writing and Thought, 1580-1640* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1962).

culture” to a more genuinely American history culture that was significantly different from the former in both scope and focus.

So what made colonial history culture before the Revolution “colonial?” Two aspects are key to understanding history culture in the colonial period: scope and focus. The scope of history culture in the colonial period was pervasive, yet circumscribed. Historical knowledge or information was primarily transmitted to colonial elites from Britain through the book trade and through access to liberal education and institutions of higher learning. However, non-elites also had access to historical information, through newspapers, in which historical topics were discussed (often in the context of contemporary political or religious conflicts) and in which historical works were sometimes excerpted. They had access to historical information through sermons, both published and unpublished, and almanacs. Yet colonists' consumption of and exposure to historical knowledge was hardly relegated to print. Historical information was also accessed through historical iconography within imperial symbolism and informed the rhythms of colonial life by forming the basis for a number of the many imperial and traditional holidays in the Anglophone calendar. At the same time, political and religious groups used historical memories—i.e., specific, instrumental interpretations of the past—to shape both group and imperial identities. Indeed, in the decidedly political and religious conflicts of the period, competing historical memories of the British past acted as a lens through which colonists refracted their contemporary experiences and thereby understood their contemporary political and religious conflicts.

Knowledge of the British past, particularly the seventeenth century circulated well beyond books through the more popular media mentioned above. Indeed, the historical memories

of those events—often drawn from these histories of England written by Britons—played a fundamental role in shaping group and imperial identities in the eighteenth-century colonies. Indeed, much as the ways in which we understand the American Revolution today inform our sense of what it means to be an American, for the colonists, the way they understood the Glorious Revolution and its settlement as well as the Civil Wars—formed largely through the adoption of competing historical interpretations from England itself—shaped how they viewed themselves and their sense of imperial identity.⁸ And the vast majority of histories of individual colonies produced by native colonists in the eighteenth century before the Revolution shared a primary goal of stressing their respective colonies’ value to and similarity with the mother country and, hence, the empire. This political and cultural dependence on the past of the mother country and the predominance of British historical interpretations in shaping imperial identity created a largely colonial history culture.

The transformation from a colonial to an American history culture can be seen in at least two trends: the expansive growth and depth of history culture and its change in focus from

⁸ Jack P. Greene's work has shown the ways in which colonial identity developed throughout the eighteenth century, especially in reference to the colonial past. More recently, he has argued that imperial identity was largely structured by the combination of an idealized notion of “English liberty” and a broader conception of the British Empire as a cohesive whole. This paper alludes to other aspects of my work, which argue that, in the latter, Greene’s focus on ideas has downplayed one of the important ways in which those ideas were transmitted on the ground, i.e., through the adoption and use of historical memories of the British past. That is to argue, there was no single understanding of “English liberty” in the colonies. Different groups had different definitions of that idea (and others) that arose from the ways in which they understood the events and developments of the recent British past and helped create a more complex tapestry of imperial identity. And, I would argue, one of the ways in which we can recover those complexities of imperial identity is to examine how different groups adopted and used different historical memories of the seventeenth-century British past in constructing their own group identities and the conflicts that arose between them. See Jack P. Greene, “Empire and Identity From the Glorious Revolution to the American Revolution,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume II: the Eighteenth Century*, eds. P. J. Marshall, Alaine Low, and Wm. Roger Louis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 208-29. It should also be noted that recent work on the Middle Colonies, particularly Pennsylvania, has explored the intersection of ethnic, local, and imperial identities.

seventeenth-century Britain to the colonial period. The growth of history culture in the former colonies after the Revolution was primarily facilitated by a corresponding growth in printing and publishing. Even rough statistics from the North American Imprints Program make it clear that prints in the colonies began a steady increase in the 1740s through the early 1770s and then exploded in the immediate postwar decades with domestic production of prints effectively doubling between 1770 and 1790.⁹ Similarly, access to books expanded in the period as the number of social libraries grew dramatically as well. Indeed, in the decade between 1786 and 1795, no less than 85 new social libraries were founded in Connecticut alone.¹⁰ In addition to the growth in traditional mediums of the transmission of historical information, historical references also could now be found in genres of works that were not primarily historical, e.g., children's textbooks and new national geographies, and in the emergence of American historical fiction. And, whereas history had always been deemed crucial to the education of elite young men, an expanding sense of female civic responsibilities increased the importance of history in the education of women.¹¹ However, these quantitative changes helped lay a foundation for significant qualitative changes, primarily a fundamental shift in perspective from the British to

⁹ *A History of the Book in America, Volume 1: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, eds. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 506.

¹⁰ Jesse H. Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library: The Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 69, esp. table 4. I am currently in the process of doing some statistical sampling of the holdings of these libraries to determine the proportion devoted to historical topics. Unfortunately, borrowers' records for many of these libraries are no longer extant.

¹¹ See "Letters to a young lady. By the rev. John Bennet," *The American Museum, or, Universal Magazine* 10, no. 3 (September 1791): 145-6. For the culmination of this development, see Mary Lyon, *Mount Holyoke Female Seminary* (South Hadley, Mass.: M. Lyon, 1835), 9. For an example of this shift in fiction, see Susanna Rowson, *Reuben and Rachel; or, Tales of Old Times* (Boston: Printed by Manning & Loring, 1798), iii. Rowson wrote the novel with a "fervent wish to awaken in the minds of my young readers, a curiosity that might lead them to the attentive perusal of history in general, but more especially the history of their native country."

the colonial historical past, that is often overlooked.¹²

An undated, previously unidentified manuscript recently found in the John Jay papers at the New-York Historical Society exemplifies this trend. The manuscript was a relatively early draft of the first six chapters of David Ramsay's *History of the American Revolution*.¹³ He begins the first draft chapter recounting the long history of the European settlement of North America. Following that, he spends a number of pages detailing "the disputes which agitated the British nation when the Colonies were settling."¹⁴ As he went from manuscript to publication in the next few years, however, Ramsay made a number of structural changes that reflect a change in the perception of the relative importance between the history of seventeenth-century Britain and that of the American colonial period. By the time the volume was first published in 1789, he had shortened his account of the imperial struggles that led to the discovery and initial settlement of the Americas. He also deleted the vast majority of his discussion of seventeenth-century British history. In its place, he included short soliloquies focused on each of the individual mainland colonies designed to stress what he saw as the fundamental differences between them and the

¹² Shaffer, *The Politics of History*, 87-102. Shaffer focuses on the ways in which the treatment of the colonial period in revolutionary histories drew on Englishness and ignored the diversity of the colonies. Furthermore, he argues that the revolutionary historians primarily offered an "environmentalist" interpretation of the colonial period. Also see Lawrence H. Leder, "Introduction," in *The Colonial Legacy, Volume II: Some Eighteenth-Century Commentators*, ed. Lawrence H. Leder (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 2-3.

¹³ I found this manuscript in the John Jay Papers, the catalogue record of which noted only the existence of a manuscript entitled "History of the American Revolution found among the papers of Gov. William Livingston." Textual and handwriting analysis allowed me to identify it as an early draft of the first six chapters of David Ramsay's *History of the American Revolution*. The date is unclear but it would almost certainly be somewhere between 1783 and 1788.

¹⁴ David Ramsay, "History of the American Revolution," Mss, John Jay Papers, Folder 1, microfilm, Roll 1, New-York Historical Society, New York, NY. (Hereafter Ramsay MSS, NYHS). The lines quoted in this paper from the manuscript do not appear in the printed edition.

mother country. He also went to great lengths to read mid-eighteenth-century developments back into the earliest decades of settlement, e.g., arguing that colonists since the beginning had “considered subjection to acts of a British parliament, in which they had no representation, as a grievance.”¹⁵

Ramsay’s twin desires to make these connections between settlement ideals and revolutionary ideology and to shed the importance of the British past for that of the colonial past are perhaps most evident in the following quote about the earliest settlers:

[The colonies] were settled with the yeomanry. Their inhabitants, unaccustomed to that distinction of ranks, which the policy of Europe has established, were strongly impressed with an opinion, that all men are by nature equal. They could not easily be persuaded that their grants of land, or their civil rights, flowed from the munificence of Princes. Many of them had never heard of Magna Charta, and those who knew the circumstances of the remarkable period of English history, when that was obtained, did not rest their claims to liberty and property on the transactions of that important day. [. . .] The political creed of an American Colonist was short but substantial. He believed that God made all mankind originally equal : That he endowed them with the rights of life, property, and as much liberty as was consistent with the rights of others. That . . . impressed with sentiments of this kind, they grew up, from their earliest infancy, with that confidence which is well calculated to inspire a love for liberty, and a prepossession in favour of independence.¹⁶

While, before the Revolution, many of the native-born colonial historians had stressed the integration and value of the colonies to the empire, Ramsay, above all, was at pains to show that, actually, the colonies had always been effectively independent of the mother country and there had always been great and obvious divisions and conflict between the two. In his revised and published first chapter, he argued,

The inhabitants of the colonies from the beginning, especially in New-England, enjoyed a

¹⁵ David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution, Vol. I* (Philadelphia: Printed and Sold by R. Aitken & Son, 1789), 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

government, which was but little short of being independent. . . . They had not only the image but the substance of the English Constitution. . . . They had in effect the sole direction of their internal government.

Indeed, Ramsay went so far as to say the “colonies in the new world had advanced nearly to the magnitude of a nation.”¹⁷

Here and above, Ramsay is effectively reimagining the relationship between the colonies and the mother country, from one that had been largely cooperative and productive to one that was either largely meaningless or antagonistic. He also did the same with the relationship between *colonists* and the mother country, arguing their “attachment to their sovereign” was already “diminished in the first emigrants to America” and “still farther diminished, in their descendants.”¹⁸ One can see the lengths to which he goes to argue that the colonists felt no real kinship with the mother country in this passage from the manuscript, saying that “when the American Revolution commenced . . . affection for the mother Country . . . scarcely had any existence.”¹⁹ “The bulk of the [colonists],” he wrote, “knew but little of the mother Country having only heard of her as a Kingdom at a great distance the Inhabitants of which had in the preceding century persecuted and banished their forefathers to the woods of America.”²⁰ Arguing that the colonies had always been independent and that, from the earliest settlement, they had both subscribed to revolutionary ideology and had little to no feelings of mutuality with the mother country allowed Ramsay to justify and explain the Revolution in both political and

¹⁷ Ibid., 34.

¹⁸ Ibid., 28.

¹⁹ Ramsay MSS, NYHS.

²⁰ Ramsay, *History of the American Revolution*, 29.

cultural terms, and, in a sense, to give it an air of inevitability.²¹

How to treat the colonial period was not an incidental question to historians of the early republic. They understood that how you portrayed the colonial period, particularly the relationship between the colonies and the mother country would shape the character of the narrative of the Revolution that followed it. In a 1782 letter to historian Jeremy Belknap, Ebenezer Hazard, a collector of historical colonial manuscripts, wrote, “British emissaries, even from Queen Anne’s time, have diligently propagated an idea that the Colonies were disaffected to the royal government and thirsted after independence; and I think it is a duty incumbent on every American historian to use his endeavors to wipe off so unjust an aspersion.”²² By the end of the decade, however, we have Ramsay making the exact opposite case in his *History of the Revolution*, i.e., the Revolution was the product of a long-standing disaffection with the mother country.

In the decades immediately following the Revolution, historical cultural production went well beyond dedicated works of history, infusing and laying a foundation for the emergence of American letters. While the war was still going on, Americans began producing and consuming a

²¹ Ramsay was a strong supporter of the Constitution and his history of the Revolution was being written during the ratification debates. There is more work to be done in thinking about this portrayal of the Revolution as not arising from immediate, local political grievances (such as those that had recently occurred in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania) but from longstanding fundamental differences between the colonies and the mother country.

²² Ebenezer Hazard to Jeremy Belknap, April 10, 1782, in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Fifth Series* (Boston: Published by the Society, 1877), 2:124. This is a discussion that went on in the correspondence between a group of historically-minded individuals that coalesced in the 1780s, that included Hazard, Belknap, and Ramsay, Andrew Eliot, William Gordon, Ezra Stiles, Noah Webster, and Jedidiah Morse, among others. These men formed a loose network of men dedicated to collecting and transcribing documents related to the colonial past for preservation and the use of those in the group so inclined as to write history. As authors, they participated in re-conceiving the character and nature of the “historian.”

steady and increasing stream of historically-derived poetry, satire, plays, and, later, novels.²³

While much focus on revolutionary *belles lettres* has, like that on historical works, focused primarily on its nationalistic representations of the Revolution, the colonial period played an increasingly important role.²⁴ It is hardly the case that the vast majority of works produced in this period focused solely or primarily on the Revolution and poetry, plays, and novels played an important part in the reimagining of the colonial period that fostered the nationalist impulse.

This can be seen partly in the rising use of the personification of America as “Columbia.” Essayists, poets, and dramatists used the term to root the nation in a deep, mythological past but, in its allusion to Columbus, also sought to create meaningful connections between the present and the colonial past, particularly by going back to the very beginnings of the settlement of the New World. Use of the term in poetry and drama became common in the 1770s and 1780s partly in an effort to distinguish the colonies (and new states) from the mother country and its own

²³ On drama in this period, see Jeffrey H. Richards, *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Jared Brown, *The Theatre in America During the Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Heather S. Nathans, *Early American Theatre From the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: the Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). On nationalist poetry, see Christopher Grasso, *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), esp. ch. 6.

²⁴ New histories of the individual colonies were being produced in the decades after the war almost as fast as histories of the Revolution itself, including multiple histories of New-England and individual volumes on the colonial history of Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Vermont, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and South Carolina, in addition to transcolonial collections of documents like Hazard’s *Historical Collections* and Daniel Gookin’s *Historical Collections of the Indians in New-England* (1792).

personification in “Britannia.”²⁵ But it was not only used to distinguish between the current state of their postwar relations. In addition to its neoclassicism, the poetic and dramatic use of the personification—most famously in Joel Barlow’s poems *The Vision of Columbus* (1787) and *Columbiad* (1807)—shows the importance of creating a shared sense of the colonial past and its interrelationship with the progressive visions of the American future. This importance was subsequently reflected in its increasing use as both symbol and name, including on paper money and in the naming of towns, cities, rivers, newspapers, magazines, and the renaming of King’s College in New York, among many other examples.²⁶

This shift in focus from the British past to the colonial past was institutionalized in the founding of the nation’s first historical societies in the decades following the war.²⁷ In New

²⁵ Perhaps the most famous early use of the personification can be found in Phyllis Wheatley’s poem, “His Excellency, George Washington,” in which she draws out distinctions between the colonies and the mother country before independence: “Fix’d are the eyes of nations on the scales / For in their hopes Columbia’s arm prevails. / Anon Britannia droops the pensive head, / While round increase the rising hills of dead. / Ah! Cruel blindness to Columbia’s state! / Lament thy thirst of boundless power too late.” See Thomas J. Steele, S. J., “The Figure of Columbia: Phyllis Wheatley plus George Washington,” *The New England Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (1981): 264-6. For a few other examples of the use of the personification and term in postwar poetry, song, and drama devoted to the colonial period and the war, see Jabez Peck, *Columbia and Britannia* (New-London, 1787); Benjamin Young Prime, *Columbia’s Glory, or British Pride Humbled; A Poem on the American Revolution* (New-York, 1791); Joseph Hopkinson, “Hail Columbia” (1798); Richard Snowden, *The Columbiad* (Philadelphia, 1795); David Humphreys, *The Glory of America* (Philadelphia, 1783); Timothy Dwight, *The Conquest of Canaan* (Hartford, 1785); *America, or a Poem on the Settlement of the British Colonies* (New Haven, 1780).

²⁶ [Timothy Dwight], “An Essay on American Genius,” *New-Haven Gazette, and the Connecticut Magazine*, February 1, 1787. In this essay, Timothy Dwight drew heavily for his argument on the unprecedented production boom by native-born Americans of historical works, “the first historical painters of the age,” and poetry, specifically Barlow’s “Visions of Columbus.” Dwight praised the poem for its focus on the “discovery” and “settlement” of the colonies, which were, he wrote, “highly interesting to the citizens of this country” and evidence of America’s cultural growth.

²⁷ On historical societies before the Civil War, see Leslie Whittaker Dunlap, *American Historical Societies, 1790-1860* (Madison: Cantwell Pub., 1944). For more recent unpublished work, see Alea Henle, “Preserving the Past, Making History: Historical Societies in the Early United States,” PhD diss., University of Connecticut, 2012. Keith Tony Beutler, “The Memory Revolution in America and Memory of the American Revolution, 1790-1840,” PhD diss., Washington University, 2005.

England, Jeremy Belknap initiated the idea and process that would result in the creation of the nation's first such institution, the Massachusetts Historical Society. Belknap, and his network of fellow antiquaries and historians named above (many of whom were in their 30s and 40s), had been collecting and transcribing documents from the colonial period on their travels and through their local connections for almost two decades by the time the Society was established in 1791. His correspondence with these men is filled with tales of manuscript and primary source recoveries (via transcription) throughout the colonies.²⁸ “Encouraged by the honorable example of the Massachusetts Society,” the New-York Historical Society was founded in 1804 at the instigation of John Pintard, who had corresponded with Belknap in the 1780s about creating a national historical society.²⁹ Later, in 1812, the American Antiquarian Society was established in Worcester, Massachusetts with the notion that preserving the colonial past—or “American Antiquities”—was “paying a debt we owe to our forefathers.”³⁰

The initial intentions of these societies was to preserve and promote the new nation's colonial past. In the Massachusetts Historical Society's published “Introductory Address” to the public in 1792, it began by saying, “Among the singular advantages which are enjoyed by the people of the United States, none is more conspicuous than the facility of tracing the origin and

²⁸ For printed collections of Belknap's correspondence, especially with Ebenezer Hazard, see volumes II and III of the *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Fifth Series*, and volume IV of the Sixth Series.

²⁹ Constitution of the New-York Historical Society, printed in *The New-York Herald*, February 13, 1805. Pamela Spence Richards, *Scholars and Gentlemen: The Library of the New-York Historical Society, 1804-1982* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1984), 3-6.

³⁰ *An Account of the American Antiquarian Society, incorporated, October 24th, 1812* (Boston: Published by Isaiah Thomas, Jun., 1813), 4.

progress of our several plantations.”³¹ Its very first publication of documents that had been collected by its members was in *The American Apollo*, a short-lived magazine published by Belknap’s eldest son, in 1792. Those documents focused on “the expedition to Cape Breton in 1745” because it “displayed the enterprising spirit of New-England, and though it enabled Britain to purchase a peace; yet it excited her envy and jealousy against the colonies, by whose exertions it was acquired.”³² These early historical societies, while formed, in part, to promote patriotic and/or nationalist sentiment, were likewise established to preserve the colonial past, and that underlying that impulse was a sense of the connections between the new states and their individual and collective colonial pasts.

This argument about the relationship between history culture in the early republic and the colonial past serves to highlight one of the major themes of the conference, namely that of “continuities.” History culture was not native to the early republic nor was it a product of the Revolution. In recent decades, as our field has become more focused on the early republic, there has been a tendency to think of the Revolution as Year One, and to think of many developments in the early republic as “new” while ignoring important continuities with the past does a serious disservice to the importance of the colonial period and fails to capture the real complexity of the early republic. In the decades immediately following the war, and in conjunction with the rise of access to and production of prints and the unprecedented political situation in which the former

³¹ “Introductory Address from the Historical Society. To the Public.,” *The American Apollo*, January 6, 1792.

³² Ibid. It is in this same issue that the Cape Breton documents were first published. *The American Apollo* was conceived of and served as the first venue for the publication of the Society’s collections. Louis Leonard Tucker, *Clio’s Consort: Jeremy Belknap and the Founding of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (Boston: Published by the Society, 1990), 122-9.

colonists found themselves, history culture played an important role in the project of trying to foster a sense of national identity because it not only told the story of the recent Revolution but helped create and consolidate a sense of a shared past that went further back than 1776 or even 1765. Therefore, the beginning developments of a national identity in the early republic was based not only on the vision of an American future, but also the memory of a shared colonial past.