

“Their history as a part of ours”:
Some Thoughts on British Historical Memory in Colonial America,
1750-1776

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the role of colonists' adoption of competing historical memories of seventeenth-century Britain in shaping colonial political culture in the early-to-mid eighteenth century and the imperial crisis, which followed. It also suggests how using historical memory as an analytical category may offer insights into colonists' imperial identity, the changing nature of political and cultural authority in the period, and the dynamics within the colonies' religious culture of competitive Protestantism.

Early Americanists and historians of early modern Britain have long acknowledged the importance accorded history and historical writing and thinking in the eighteenth century.¹

However, colonial historians have tended to focus on the importance of classical history, particularly that of the Roman Republic, to elite beneficiaries of classical liberal education.² But

¹ For the purposes of this paper, “historical memory” is defined as a constructed interpretation of historical events used primarily, though not exclusively, for purposes of establishing group identities and understanding and ordering the present.

² For works on classicism in early America, see Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); Eran Shalev, *Rome Reborn on Western Shores: Historical Imagination and the Creation of the American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009); Caroline Winterer, “Model Empire, Lost City: Ancient Carthage and the Science of Politics in Revolutionary America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series* 67, no. 1 (2010): 3–30. Caroline Winterer, “From Royal to Republican: The Classical Image in Early America,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2010): 1264–1290; Richard M. Gummere, “The Heritage of the Classics in Colonial North America: An Essay on the Greco-Roman Tradition,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 99, no. 2 (1955): 68–78; Richard M. Gummere, *The American Colonial Mind and the Classical Tradition: Essays in Comparative Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963); Robert Middlekauf, “A Persistent Tradition: The Classical Curriculum in Eighteenth-Century New England,” *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series* 18, no. 1 (1961): 54–67; Meyer Reinhold and John Eadie, “Research on the Classical Influences on Early America,” *The Classical World* 67, no. 1 (1973): 1–3; Charles F. Mullett, “Classical Influences on the American Revolution,” *The Classical Journal* 35, no. 2 (1939): 92–104.

I would argue that colonial Americans, of all classes, had a more immediate and significant relationship with the history of seventeenth-century Britain—or, their British historical memory—particularly its most defining events, the Civil Wars and their aftermath and the Revolution of 1688-89.

In the colonial context, memory of these events has been largely taken for granted by historians.³ Even during the 1980s and 1990s, when historical memory studies became quite fashionable, the importance of colonists' British historical memory escaped historians. As early Americanists, we have tended to assume that the British colonists' adoption of British historical memory was simply a given, a cultural *fait accompli* unworthy of direct inquiry into either cause or process.⁴ However, despite the obvious colonial relationship, I would argue that the nature of how this occurred and, more importantly, how it played out is much more complex and more significant than both colonial and revolutionary historians have previously assumed.

Colonists' historical memory of seventeenth-century Britain played an important role in

³ In terms of the historical interpretation of these events in Britain itself and its effects on eighteenth-century British political culture, there is a paucity rather than complete dearth of studies. 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; F. K. Donnelly, "Levellerism in Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 20, no. 2 (1988): 261–269;

⁴ Jack P. Greene, "Search for Identity: An Interpretation of the Meaning of Selected Patterns of Social Response in Eighteenth-Century America," *Journal of Social History* 3, no. 3 (1969): 205. However, from a methodological perspective, colonists' adoption of British historical memory is quite unique. Memory studies have largely focused on traumatic events and the immediate generations with ties to those events, most commonly, the Holocaust. Yet, most colonists had no direct attachment to these events from which they were removed by three thousand miles and up to a full century or more.

shaping and structuring both late-colonial political culture and the rhetoric of resistance to Britain in the decade before independence. From the 1720s through the 1750s, historical memory of seventeenth-century Britain acted as a lens through which colonists refracted their own contemporary political experience, political conflicts, and political culture, in general. That is to say, they saw themselves as actors in another act in the long play of British political drama. The shaping of historical memory itself was a contested process between different groups with various interpretations (or historical memories) that was played out in a number of internal, colonial political conflicts. But, beginning with the onset of the imperial crisis, colonists—particularly rebels—developed a new relationship with that history, a more active relationship in which they began not only to interpret events through historical memories adopted from Britain but to try to shape events by actively forging a new historical memory better suited to their rhetorical resistance to Britain in the 1760s and 1770s.

Indeed, colonists' historical memory was so fundamental to colonial political culture that it also played an important role in shaping part of the foundation of colonists' imperial identity, i.e., how colonists viewed the empire and, especially, their role in it. Interpretations of the events of 1688-89 and the revolutionary settlement that followed formed no small part of the core of Britons' understanding of what it meant to be British and, for colonists, what it meant to be imperial subjects.⁵ In the colonial context, historical memory was contested between groups with different historical interpretations or understandings of those events. Hence, a better

⁵ The “revolutionary settlement” generally refers to four legislative acts that followed the Glorious Revolution and the goals of the revolution that they sought to institutionalize. These are: the Bill of Rights (1689) limited the royal prerogative and established Parliamentary sovereignty, the Mutiny Act (1689), the Act of Toleration (1689) which allowed free worship for non-Anglican Protestants, and the Act of Settlement (1701) which secured Protestant succession to the Crown. Some historians also include the Act of Union (1707) which created “Great Britain” as a political entity.

understanding of the role and importance of those historical memories should afford us a better understanding not just of colonial and pre-revolutionary political culture but also of colonists' imperial identity.

Looking at the ways in which historical memory was contested in the late-colonial period and how it changed during the onset of the conflict with Britain can also provide a window into the contested nature of authority in colonial society. Markers like wealth, social status, or political position were symbols that buttressed authority; they were not that from which authority itself derived. Rather, authority derived from perception, primarily that of those who are submitting to authority. This means that authority was much more tenable than the factors above, making it more vulnerable than the symbols themselves. Therefore, the importance of historical memory and the stakes over which it was contested derive, in part, from the tenuousness of social, religious, and political authority in the mid-eighteenth century colonies.

Though avoiding both generalizations and binaries is of course preferable, for the purposes of this paper, I will allow myself a bit of latitude in terms of the relationship between historical memory and religion. To wit, many Anglicans tended toward a more Tory historical memory (or interpretation) and, likewise, dissenters toward a more Whig historical memory. Broadly speaking, Whigs and Tories tended to stress different aspects of the Civil Wars, the Glorious Revolution, and the revolutionary settlement. Whig interpretations generally saw Charles I and James II as absolutists out to destroy the liberties of their subjects and, in the process, the British Constitution and were therefore wholly deserving of their respective fates. They particularly celebrated the establishment of Parliament's legislative sovereignty and saw the Revolution as having secured the British Constitution, which had come under sustained threat

from the Stuart monarchs. Tory historians, on the other hand, had a more complicated relationship with the history of the seventeenth century. The Civil War and the Revolution itself had both undercut Tory commitments to hierarchy, deference, and passive obedience. Nevertheless, it was politically impractical for them to not voice support for the Revolution. They did so by stressing different aspects than Whigs. They celebrated the saving of the Church of England from the popery of the Stuarts. They also praised the Revolution as a triumph of English moderation and order and praised the settlement for preventing any recurrence of the disorder of the seventeenth century, particularly that caused by dissenters during the Civil Wars. High-Church Anglican Tories were especially conflicted, ruing many of the effects of the settlement on the Church, particularly the Act of Toleration (1689), which broke the Church of England's religious institutional monopoly by legitimizing Protestant dissent, and the subsequent rise of latitudinarians to prominent places in the Church of England hierarchy. Both groups' relationship to the upheaval of the 1640s and 1650s including the Civil Wars, regicide, and Commonwealth was cautious in nature with both being troubled by the disorder. Tory historians saw the Puritans as republicans out to destroy the government and the Church of England while Whigs acknowledged the right of resistance exercised in the period but were troubled by the unenlightened enthusiasm of the period.

This, of course, is not meant as a blanket statement and it is not even meant to imply that the majorities of each group did as described. However, this dualism does seem particularly clear in the colonies among those of each groups that participated in contested discourses in the public sphere of the 1740s to the Revolution. This is especially so in the Middle Colonies, which had both the most denominational diversity and the most clergy with a thoroughly politicized

approach to religious institutional development, particularly Anglicans. A small group, composed largely of the first native-born generation of Anglican clergy, developed a distinct “imperial Anglicanism,” which viewed the Church of England as fundamental to the success of the empire and which was largely derived from their own High-Church interpretation of England’s revolutionary settlement. Therefore, looking at this group and the ways in which its own historical interpretation shaped its behavior provides a point at which the questions regarding imperial identity and the nature of authority in colonial America meet.

First, I shall start by giving a brief example of how historical memory informed colonial political culture and conflict by looking at the controversy over the chartering of King’s College in New York City in the early 1750s between these imperial Anglicans and a few young members of the dissenting intelligentsia. I will then give an example of how the nature of historical memory changed during the imperial crisis by looking briefly at two examples of the use of history in the rhetoric of resistance. I will finish by asking how the analytical category of historical memory might give historians a new perspective from which to explore imperial identity, authority, and religious conflict in the late colonial period, as well as the ways in which they are interrelated.

Anglophone Historical Memory and Political Culture in Colonial America

Before going further, I would just like to make a few points about the nature of Anglophone history and historical writing in the eighteenth century. English historical writing enjoyed a boon in the very early seventeenth century thanks in large part to the rise of

antiquaries, or men dedicated to collecting (mostly, local) historical documents.⁶ The nature of the antiquarian enterprise translated itself into the historical writing, which was wholly narrative and primarily concerned with cataloguing facts and documents. It lacked analysis because its interpretive scheme was defined by a millennial teleology and the workings of providence. Therefore, historical change was viewed as occurring through the actions of individuals with providential “connections,” i.e., kings and princes. By the end of the seventeenth century, however, British historical writing had undergone its own revolution quickly followed by an explosion of popular interest in the early eighteenth century. The three defining features of English Renaissance historiography had changed. Interpretation replaced cataloguing, which along with a more analytical approach brought about a greater focus on long-term causation. These changes could not have occurred without Augustan historians’ adoption of a more secular notion of causality and progress than their seventeenth-century counterparts.⁷ By the early eighteenth century, the concept of history had undergone a radical shift that made it both less impenetrable and more immediate since the concept of history as progressive made it, by definition, necessary and fundamental to the present.

⁶ The term “historical writing” here is used broadly. History could be found in almost all seventeenth-century English literary forms, particularly novels, plays, and poetry. For a small sample of an incredibly vast and rich literature on the development of British historical writing and conceptions of history, see *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); Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Frank Smith Fussner, *The Historical Revolution: English Historical Writing and Thought, 1580-1640* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1962).

⁷ Laird Okie, *Augustan Historical Writing: Histories of England in the English Enlightenment* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1991), 68.

Despite the cultural turn's historical memory boom in the 1980s and 1990s, the only direct, full-length study of the role of British history in colonial/revolutionary America was H. Trevor Colbourn's *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (1965).⁸ In this old-school type of intellectual history, Colbourn goes through personal and college library catalogs to see what the founders were reading and then attributes the intellectual foundations for the American Revolution to their consumption of Whiggish historical writing and arguments. In addition to its focus on elites and its simplistic notion of intellectual transference, its truly fatal flaw is its disregard of competing historical interpretations in colonial politics. Among recent works, Brendan McConville's *The King's Three Faces: The Rise & Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776* (2007) comes closest to addressing the issue of historical memory in colonial America.⁹ However, in his effort to stress colonists' connections to the monarch, he, too, elides the role of opposing interpretations in colonial political conflict, offering, in effect, a "consensus" model of colonial historical memory.

Colbourn's type of detailed bibliographic study also actually obscures the broader effects of historical interpretations. Nevertheless, transmission remains problematic. I would argue that historical interpretations were diffused into the broader culture in a myriad of ways. For example, an artisan in New York City need not have read Clarendon or Raypin-Thoyras (or even have known who they were) to have been exposed to or have become familiar with either the

⁸ H. Trevor Colbourn, *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965). The most recent work on "historical imagination" is Shalev, *Rome Reborn on Western Shores*, which focuses on classical history in the early republic.

⁹ Brendan McConville, *The King's Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

history of the Civil War and Glorious Revolution or their Tory and Whig interpretations. Almanacs—the most popular type of book in colonial America after the Bible—both included and excluded the anniversaries of major political events in their calendars.¹⁰ As we shall see, colonists would have heard arguments derived directly from seventeenth-century British political discourse either explicitly or implicitly in sermons, and read things informed by them as factional political conflict became more public *via* print in the middle of the century. Therefore, though the actual reading of historical works may have been largely limited to elites, from them varied historical interpretations entered into the political discourse.¹¹ Conflict between these varying interpretations and the ways in which colonists used them to make sense of contemporary events were a defining feature of late-colonial political culture that has been largely ignored by historians of early American politics.

Historical Memory and Political Culture in 1750s New York City

Historical understanding was integral to colonists' self-understanding (in its broadest sense). With the advent of a progressive conception of history, colonists understood the present to be the product of historical events; particularly, they understood *their* present to have been the product of the Glorious Revolution. The English nation (and, by extension, the British empire) had been saved from tyranny and popery, as represented by Charles I and James II, and the English Constitution and its safekeepers, Parliament, had eventually been restored to their

¹⁰ For just one example, John Tulley's popular Almanac in Boston included the "murder" of Charles I in its timeline from 1688, but by 1691 any mention of Charles I had been removed from the timeline entirely.

¹¹ I realize this is still a top-down model of cultural transmission but in the case of historical memory in the eighteenth century, I do not, as of yet, see a way of getting around it.

rightful place thanks to William of Orange in 1688. Indeed, 1688 became what one historian as described as "Year One," with more adventurous Whigs being willing to dabble in references to the regicide of Charles I, the violence of which offended the moderate Whig sensibilities of Augustan Britain. Expressions—verbal, printed, or symbolic—of this narrative could be found regularly in everything from sermons to public toasts, from newspapers and pamphlets to almanacs with calendars marking historical events, from public celebrations like Pope's Day to portraits of William III hanging in colonial courtrooms and other royal government buildings. It provided a structural and linear way of understanding their present and therefore was pervasive in late colonial political discourse.

One example of this is in the unusually vehement discourse surrounding the conflict over the chartering of King's College in New York City. Historians have largely interpreted the conflict as part of New York's highly factional politics, i.e., between the largely Anglican and mercantilist De Lancey faction and the mostly dissenting land-owning Livingston faction.¹² However, the vehemence of neither the conflict itself nor the discourse can be explained by factional politics alone. Thanks to the paucity of college-educated men, the Church's establishment in four southern counties, and its counting the majority of political officeholders among its membership, the Anglicans, particularly the clergy, enjoyed a political and cultural

¹² For examples of the factional interpretation, see Patricia U. Bonomi, *A Factious People: Politics and Society in Colonial New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971); Roger J. Champagne, "Family Politics versus Constitutional Principles: The New York Assembly Elections of 1768 and 1769," *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series* 20, no. 1 (1963): 57–79; Mary Lou Lustig, *Privilege and Prerogative: New York's Provincial Elite, 1710-1776* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995).

hegemony in New York City unlike Anglicans anywhere else in British North America.¹³ For most of the first half of the eighteenth century, their cultural hegemony faced no serious challenge. However, that changed in the late 1740s, as two groups with opposing political and cultural ideologies—founded upon different historical memories of the seventeenth century—clashed.

In the 1740s and 1750s a new generation of Anglican clergy—including the first generation of native-born clergy—rose to prominence in and around New York City. Led by Samuel Johnson of Connecticut, the colonies' leading Anglican intellectual, this new generation subscribed to a decidedly High-Church brand of political ecclesiology, or “imperial Anglicanism.” Politically, they believed the Church to be inextricably linked with Britain's national identity and fundamental to both the stability of government and society and to the success of the empire.¹⁴ They derived this conception of the imperial role of the Church and its clergy from their seventeenth-century roots in Tory ideology, which instilled in them belief in a rigid social hierarchy fueled by deference and secured by passive obedience to one's superiors, both in Church and state. These beliefs—as well as their isolation from the mother Church, a grandiose vision of the Church's standing in England, and a siege mentality due to the fact that

¹³ Joyce D. Goodfriend, *Before the Melting Pot: Society and Culture in Colonial New York City, 1664-1730* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 6; Donald F. M. Gerardi, “The American Doctor Johnson,” PhD diss., Columbia University, 258. Gerardi agreed that the Anglican clergy enjoyed “a traditional superintendency of city culture.”

¹⁴ On the fundamentality of imperial thought in the early development of the Anglican Church in the colonies, see William Gibson, *The Church of England 1688-1832: Unity and Accord* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 2. Gibson wrote, “National identity in eighteenth-century England was also indivisible from Anglicanism: government was a religious construct and Anglicanism was welded into the structure of the establishment.” Also, see James Bell, *The Imperial Origins of the King's Church in Early America, 1607-1783* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 3-57. For the best broad survey of Anglicanism in British North America, see John Frederick Woolverton, *Colonial Anglicanism in North America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984).

they only made up 10% of the colony's population—led them to begin asserting themselves and trying to take full advantage of the Church's limited establishment in the 1740s and 1750s, which alienated dissenters.

This alienation was given voice by three young, Presbyterian lawyers—William Livingston, William Smith, Jr., and John Morin Scott—known as “the triumvirate.” The triumvirate were men of the Augustan Enlightenment whose conceptions about their own political culture and that of empire as a whole were informed by a Whiggish historical memory of 1688 and the revolutionary settlement. They were latitudinarians and Real Whigs who inherited their suspicion of anti-papist-informed anticlericalism and religious enthusiasm from Trenchard and Gordon.¹⁵ They developed their literary taste through Addison, Steele, Shaftesbury, Milton, and Pope. Politically, they were Lockeans who believed in the social contract and the right to resist when broken, as happened in the 1640s and 1680s. The city had failed to keep pace with either Boston or Philadelphia in terms of cultural development and the triumvirate believed that to be due in large part to the unenlightened nature of Anglican cultural hegemony (as well as the merchant culture of its direct constituency).

The conflict between the two groups began even before any concrete proposals for the chartering of a college were made and in the rhetoric surrounding the conflict we can see how important their respective historical memories were to their understanding of the conflict. In late 1748, the informal weekly meetings of the triumvirate and its circle grew into a philosophical

¹⁵ Historians of colonial politics have viewed the triumvirate as exemplars of radical Whiggism in the colonies, but this is a very narrow reading that misses the broader contexts and subtleties of their thought and writings. For examples of this, see Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics* (New York: Vintage, 1968), 128, 114; Joseph J. Ellis, *The New England Mind in Transition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 284.

and literary club, the “Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge,” along the model of Benjamin Franklin’s *Junto*. The group met weekly in a private apartment. New York City had a club culture but clubs usually met in public houses and were more concerned with drinking than philosophical or literary discussion. Wild rumors began to swirl about this private club and the clergy took notice.¹⁶ In February of 1749, Livingston published an essay in the *New-York Weekly Journal* to dispel the rumors and announce the group’s intentions. “It was Learning,” Livingston wrote, “that . . . now distinguishes the true Gentleman” rather than the “vanity of Birth and Titles.” Hence, the club’s dozen or so members—“the Litterati of all Ranks”—included “a Mechanick,” a “Register,” and “a Clerk.” Their broader goal was to “improve the Taste, and Knowledge, to Reform, and Correct, the manners of the Inhabitants of this Town.” Livingston followed this with a devastating critique of the city’s cultural deficiencies under Anglican leadership.¹⁷

The Anglican clergy responded in the city prints in kind.¹⁸ They were aghast at the “boundless insolence” of this “Whig Club,” with their “scholastic Dialect” and “Licentious Pens.” Each of these phrases are revealing of the Anglican clergy’s perception and its historical perspective. The club was perhaps the first attempt to create a public sphere in New York City

¹⁶ *New-York Weekly Journal*, February 13, 1749. Livingston recounted some of the rumors surrounding the club: “Some call it the *Libertine Club* . . . others, conjecture that the Members of it, are a sort of speculative *Free Masons*, from the profound Secrecy, with which they assemble themselves . . . some again, maliciously suppose, they *Conventicle* themselves, to concert Schemes, detrimental to the Government.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *New-York Weekly Journal*, March 20, April 3, 1749.

through civil society rather than simply print.¹⁹ That is, it created a space detached from the political and religious establishments dedicated to engaging in secular, rational-critical discourse. The mere act of doing so was viewed as "insolent," or disrespectful to the city's standing power structure, with their inter-class ethos particularly threatening. Hence, the clergy, whose responses at this time were written primarily by James Wetmore and Thomas Bradbury Chandler, reasserted their position as the gatekeepers of knowledge and hierarchy, preventing the anarchy or "licentiousness" that would follow should ordinary people think and speak critically of those above them in the social and political power structure. In this context, "Whig club" carried connotations of conspiracy, chaos, and revolution. They were accused of drinking toasts to "the immortal memory of Oliver Cromwell," after which, "plans [were] laid, schemes devised, and resolutions formed . . . of pulling down the Church, ruining the Constitution, or heaving the whole province into confusion."²⁰ We can see here how the Anglicans' Tory historical memory framed their understanding of the conflict and shaped their rhetoric, particularly the Revolution of 1688, in which a small group of Whigs arranged for the invasion of William of Orange while Tories largely remained loyal to James II, who had abdicated and fled the country.

In 1752, the triumvirate established the first non-newspaper periodical in the colonies, *The Independent Reflector*.²¹ The *Reflector* was dedicated to political and cultural criticism. It

¹⁹ On "rational-critical debate" and the "public sphere," see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Boston: The MIT Press, 1991), 27-9, 43-58.

²⁰ Thomas Jones, "History of New York during the revolutionary war and of the leading events in the other colonies at that period, Vol. I." in *Collections of the New-York Historical Society* 1 (1879), 6.

²¹ For an edited collection of the periodical, see William Livingston and others, *The Independent Reflector, or Weekly Essays on Sundry Important Subjects More particularly adapted to the Province of New-York*, ed. Milton M. Klein (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963).

had a strong anticlerical tone and attacked the High Church and establishment pretensions of the Anglican clergy with rhetoric straight out of seventeenth-century British politics. For Livingston, these activist Anglican clergy were purveyors of “Priestcraft” who sought to “enfeeble or bind [the people] in the Fetters of Credulity,” which was “the only Method to obtain the great End aim’d at by many Divines and Politicians, to wit, an universal and absolute Dominion over the Minds of Men.”²² After the Anglican clergy denounced a small group of Moravians, a German pietist sect, in New Jersey from the pulpit, Livingston criticized them for acting like “little popes” who attacked other sects “for believing in Christ, without worshipping the Clergy.”²³ Livingston was mixing Puritan critiques of Laudian reform in the 1630s with Low-Church and Whig critiques of High-Church Tories from the 1680s, rounded out with Augustan Enlightenment ideals natural religion, rationalism, and, especially, toleration.

This type of critique continued when the issue of a proposed college arose. Anglicans wanted the college chartered by the King so they would retain control. The triumvirate wanted the college chartered by the Assembly thereby retaining popular control. They responded in the *Reflector* voicing the fears of many dissenters when they argued that one denomination controlling the college would “kindle the Jealousy of the Rest” and “prove a Nursery of Animosity, Dissention, and Disorder.” “I am convinced,” William Smith, Jr. wrote in the *Reflector*, “that under the Management of any particular Persuasion, it will necessarily prove destructive to the civil and religious Rights of the People. And should any future House of Representatives become generally infected with the Maxims of the College, nothing less can be

²² [William Livingston], “Of Credulity,” *The Independent Reflector*, no. XLVII, October 18, 1753.

²³ [William Livingston], “A Vindication of the Moravians, against the Aspersions of their Enemies,” *The Independent Reflector*, no. VI, January 4, 1753.

expected than an Establishment of one Denomination above all others.”²⁴ For months, the two sides went back and forth in the *Reflector*; the city’s newspapers, and in an explosion of pamphlet literature unseen before in the city. The Anglicans even went so far as to start their own weekly journal to rival the *Reflector* entitled *John Englishman, In Defence of the English Constitution*. Eventually, the college was chartered by the King but enough public outcry had been raised by the triumvirate that the Anglican leadership were forced to recoil from its original plans and make a number of significant concessions regarding the College including liturgy agreeable to all Protestants, allowance for students to attend other churches, and non-Anglican representation on the Board of Trustees.

The culture and identity of the city’s High-Church Anglican clergy, and, by extension, its lay elite, was rooted in the conservative reactionism of seventeenth-century royalism and toryism and founded upon the necessities of hierarchy, deference, and passive obedience for an orderly society.²⁵ To the High-Church imperial Anglican clergy, any challenge to this culture, no matter how well reasoned, was, by definition, an inducement to the disorder and infidelity that plagued England during the 1640s and 1650s. Alternatively, Livingston’s world-view, founded on Britain’s Whig Enlightenment, led him to be wary of the political tyranny of the 1680s and, especially, the religious tyranny of Charles I and his Anglican Archbishop Laud in the 1630s. For Livingston and company, the Anglicans were cynical, pessimistic, and dangerously anachronistic holdovers of the *ancien regimes* of Charles I and James II. To the Anglicans, Livingston and

²⁴ [William Smith, Jr.], “A Continuation of the Same Subject,” *The Independent Reflector*, no. XVIII, March 29, 1753.

²⁵ Donald F. M. Gerardi, “The King’s College Controversy (1753-1756) and the Ideological Roots of Toryism in New York,” *Perspectives in American History* XI (1977-1978): 179, 181.

company appeared to be atheistic, libertine, republican Levellers bent on destroying the British Constitution as well as all religion. Of Livingston, one Anglican clergyman wrote, “For was there ever a greater political Enthusiast than himself, since the Days of Cromwell.”²⁶ Historians have reacted to this kind of use of seventeenth-century rhetoric and terminology in a very casual manner, often implicitly assuming that it relates to contemporary British political usage.

However, the examples above hint at how historically loaded the use of terms and references like “Whig,” “Tory,” “republican,” “Leveller,” “Jacobite,” “Cromwell,” and “Priestcraft,” was. Their centrality to the political discourse in 1750s New York City reveals that both sides viewed each other and the conflict in general through an historical lens that helped them order and, therefore, understand their own political culture. This not only shaped the public discourse but, in this case, also heightened the tensions, rhetoric, and perceived stakes of the conflict.²⁷

Historical Memory and the Rhetoric of Resistance

As we move into the imperial crisis, the nature of historical memory begins to change. The conflict between colonists and Parliament and the constitutional issues that it raised had a profound effect upon the use of history in the colonies. As we saw in 1750s New York City, historical memory had acted as a lens through which colonists ordered, understood, and interpreted their contemporary political conflicts. However, during the imperial crisis, colonists

²⁶ *New-York Mercury*, June 11, 1753; *New-York Gazette*, February 19, 1753.

²⁷ *New-York Mercury*, June 11, 1753; *New-York Gazette*, February 19, 1753.

began treating history in a more active, utilitarian manner, by constructing new historical memories in the service of their rhetoric of resistance.²⁸

Whereas throughout the century, colonists had almost universally praised the revolutionary settlement (though some more than others and for different reasons), this began to be problematic in the 1760s. After all, the most fundamental aspect of the Glorious Revolution and the subsequent settlement—along with securing a perpetual Protestant monarchy—was that of Parliamentary supremacy. Henceforth, Parliament shared sovereignty with the Crown with the former recognized as the supreme lawmaker for England, and shortly thereafter, Britain. In the 1760s, however, when Parliament began to directly legislate for the colonies, colonists began to rethink the settlement and its relation to the empire.

During their resistance to the Stamp Act, colonists reached back to arguments derived from the ship money controversy of the 1630s, in which, being denied financial support from Parliament, Charles I sought to secure his own support by levying an old tax on port cities originally designed to support the navy and the protection of the ports. However, Charles I overstepped his bounds when he declared that ship money would be collected from all counties regardless of whether they had a port. Parliamentary opponents argued that taxes were a gift bestowed upon the Crown by the people through their representatives and therefore with their consent. To be taxed without consent was to violate the sanctity of private property. The Americans turned a seventeenth-century debate that had ultimately ended with regicide into their own revolutionary rallying cry of “No Taxation without Representation.” But, because the source of this constitutional transgression was not the Crown but Parliament, the rhetoric of resistance,

²⁸ McConville writes that during the imperial crisis, “manipulation of imperial history and symbols became more pronounced.” McConville, *The King's Three Faces*, 249-50.

as it would be throughout the imperial crisis, was built on colonists' need to deny Parliamentary jurisdiction over the colonies. They began by denying Parliament's right to tax the colonies to raise revenue as opposed to regulating imperial trade. But, when, in 1767, following the repeal of the Stamp Act, Parliament sought to impose duties on various imports rather than a direct tax, the old argument was no longer sufficient. To deny the validity of the Townshend Duties would require colonists to go a step further.

Excluding oneself from all Parliamentary legislation required the wholesale denial of Parliamentary jurisdiction. But how could one deny legislative jurisdiction to a body which enjoyed legislative supremacy? To do so, colonists began to argue that the colonies were wholly outside the jurisdiction of Parliament. Instead, they argued that they had, since their inception, been ruled by royal prerogative. This is known as "dominion theory."²⁹ That they crafted a new argument to deny Parliamentary sovereignty is less important, for our purposes, than the way in which they did it. Rather than looking through the history at the present as we saw in 1750s New York City, resistance rhetoricians were now looking through the present back to the history.

In a recent article in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Eric Nelson notes the irony: "The administration contended for the right of parliament, while the Americans talked of their belonging to the crown. Their language therefore was that of Toryism." Colonists were, he wrote, "in most cases only too happy to emphasize the Stuart pedigree of their new commitments and to reconsider the legacy of the two English revolutions accordingly." This led to "an extraordinary

²⁹ For one example, see [James Wilson], *Considerations on the Nature and the Extent of the Legislative Authority of the British Parliament* (Philadelphia: Printed and Sold by William and Thomas Bradford, 1774).

revision of the patriot historical imagination."³⁰ Rather than the standard narrative of the nature of resistance becoming progressively republican, Nelson argues that it went from moderate Whiggism to “zealous” Toryism (or “patriot royalism” as Nelson calls it) *then* to a more radical Whig republicanism. The problem with this interpretation is that it proposes an exceedingly unlikely roller-coaster-like ideological shift over a period of little more than half a decade. This is because it takes the colonists’ resistance arguments wholly at their word rather than recognizing them for what they were, i.e., part of a larger rhetoric of resistance, the primary purpose of which was to deny parliamentary jurisdiction over the colonies. Therein lies their historical creativity.

Colonists did not look back to the history of the seventeenth century in search of some form of historical truth. They looked to it to find whatever would lend itself to their current rhetorical predicament. Arguments for the colonies’ being ruled by royal prerogative rather than Parliament had originated with the Stuarts in the mid-seventeenth century. The Whig interpretation of the seventeenth century saw the rejection of the Stuarts’ claims to rule by royal prerogative as the central conflict behind both the Civil Wars and the Glorious Revolution. However, the colonists now sought to rhetorically embrace the Stuarts and rule by royal prerogative in an effort to bolster the validity of their anti-Parliament position.³¹ That the position

³⁰ Eric Nelson, “Patriot Royalism: The Stuart Monarchy in American Political Thought, 1769–75,” *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series* 68, no. 4 (2011): 536, 542.

³¹ McConville argues that a revival and reclaiming of the Stuarts in the colonies began in the 1730s in service of his argument for the prevalence of “royalism” throughout the late colonial period. He argues that this served the Hanoverians, very distant Stuart relatives whose claim to the throne seemed tenuous in its early days, by recasting them as part of a legitimate, unbroken line of succession. However, where McConville sees consensus, I see conflict. What began arising in the 1730s was not widespread, positive sentiments about the Stuart line, but rather an alternative historical memory in opposition to the prevalent, positive historical memory concerning the Glorious Revolution.

contradicted their admission from just a few years earlier that Parliament had legislative sovereignty over the colonies in all matters except taxes confused the British (as well as contemporary historians) but mattered not to the colonists. This is not to say that colonists were ideological opportunists; they believed firmly in representative taxation, but if achieving that goal required significant rhetorical gymnastics, so be it.

From the late 1760s, having rhetorically submitted themselves to the royal prerogative, the colonists' drew on an old English tradition of dissent. To absolve the king of blame, they charged that he had been deceived by his ill-designing advisors, in this case, the Ministry and Parliament. Parliamentary opposition to Charles I had initially argued the same regarding his council. We begin to see a rhetorical shift in 1774 with Thomas Jefferson's *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* in which he first calls on King George III to exercise his "negative power" over Parliament's offending legislation. However, Jefferson goes on to criticize the King directly for decisions made by him under his prerogative, particularly the dissolution of the Virginia House of Burgesses. Throughout, Jefferson references historical events and persons including the Norman Conquest, Richard II, and the Stuarts.

Perhaps the most utilitarian use of history in the entire rhetoric of resistance can be found in Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776). Whereas Jefferson had opened the King up to criticism, Paine took it further by not just dismissing King George III but monarchy itself. His argument against monarchy and hereditary succession is essentially a radical history lesson for common colonists, including the biblical adoption of "Heathen" monarchy by the Jews, the Norman Conquest, the Wars of the Roses, and the Civil Wars. Most interestingly, Paine avoids discussing the Glorious Revolution and its settlement by name. Paradoxically, that is because in

order to achieve the ultra-Whiggish goal of saving the colonies from the tyranny of George III and of monarchy itself, he needs to effectively destroy the mainstream Whig interpretation of 1688 that had been so fundamental to colonial political culture and colonial identity throughout the first two-thirds of the eighteenth century. Colonists' relationship to and use of their British historical memory changed significantly during the upheaval of the imperial crisis, and fundamental to those changes were the rhetorical demands of resistance.

Historical Memory and Imperial Identity, Authority, and Religious Conflict

In this final section, I shall speculate briefly on how a closer look at historical memory in British North American political culture might also give us new insights into colonists' imperial identity, changes in the concept of authority, and religious conflict from the 1730s to the onset of the Revolution.

Identity in colonial America is not an ignored category of inquiry in the historiography but it has not produced a cohesive literature. Rather, those who seek to understand the contours of the scholarly debate on identity are forced to discern implications for it from works primarily concerned with other topics. Also, to some extent, the separate notions of character and identity have often become blurred.³² Another common problem in trying to get at colonial identity is the American Revolution itself. For historians of political culture, the colonial period ceased to be of primary interest decades ago, in part, I suspect, because the Revolution acts as a sort-of

³² For example, this can be seen in the republicanism/liberalism historiographic debate. If the dominant ideology was republicanism, it implies that the colonial character (or identity) was predominantly communitarian; if it was liberalism, then predominantly individualistic.

historiographic black hole.³³ Identity studies of the eighteenth century that touch on the colonial period at all are often forward-looking, with the primary goal of defining the “new” national American identity that emerged out of the revolutionary period. This assumption of utter newness allows scholars to focus on the result of the transformation without fully accounting for the starting point. Often we are told that prior to the Revolution, colonists thought of themselves as “Englishmen” or “Britons.” But what exactly did that *mean*? What were the assumptions (particularly, historical assumptions) that lay behind that? What were the differences between these concepts in Britain and in the colonies or between different colonial regions?

Perhaps no historian of colonial America has thought or written more deeply about colonial identity than Jack P. Greene.³⁴ In *Pursuits of Happiness*, Greene argued that as the eighteenth century wore on, the colonies were becoming more homogenous in terms of culture and identity, which allows for the use of broad generalizations. In his most recent work on the subject, Greene defines “imperial identity” as the identification of “the attributes that distinguish the people of one nation or empire from another.”³⁵ For him, the primary attribute which colonists perceived as defining themselves in relation to the rest of the world was “liberty,”

³³ McConville describes this problematic as the “neoliberal perception” of the colonial period “as a long prologue to the revolutionary crisis.” McConville, *The King’s Three Faces*, 3.

³⁴ For a few of his important works on colonial identity, 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*, ed. P. J. Marshall (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 208–229; *Peripheries and Center: Constitutional Development in the Extended Politics of the British Empire and the United States, 1607-1788* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986); *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); “Search for Identity: An Interpretation of the Meaning of Selected Patterns of Social Response in Eighteenth-Century America,” *Journal of Social History* 3, no. 3 (1969): 189–220.

³⁵ Greene, “Empire and Identity,” 208.

particularly as embodied in the “English system of law and government.” There were other factors for Greene, including “Protestantism, social openness, intellectual and scientific achievement, and a prosperity based upon trade,” but these were all made possible because of the liberty both native and colonial Britons enjoyed. Arguments for “Anglicization” reinforce this libertarian interpretation of colonial imperial identity. From John Murrin to, more recently, Brendan McConville, this reading of colonial culture argues that colonists not only saw themselves as Britons but increasingly so as their affinity for English society and culture grew throughout the eighteenth century. Even arguments that stress the provinciality of colonial culture developed metropolitan declension narratives in which a number of Greene’s factors, particularly liberty, were viewed as superior in the provinces of North America (and Scotland) due to the corruption and stagnation of the metropol.³⁶

To turn the perspective around, one can look at recent work on British national identity. Though it is two decades old, Linda Colley’s *Britons* remains the foundational work on the subject and one from which Greene’s most recent work draws heavily. For Colley, the foundations in the emergence of a truly British identity were Protestantism, war, and trade. British identity was relational in that the British defined themselves in relation to the great Catholic Other, France. This process of definition was spurred by almost constant wars with France throughout the eighteenth century.

While one would very hard-pressed to deny the centrality of Protestantism to either British national or imperial identity, the diversity of the colonies—both ethnic and religious—

³⁶ Ned C. Landsman, “The Provinces and the Empire: Scotland, the American Colonies and the Development of British Provincial Identity,” in *An Imperial State at War: Britain From 1689 to 1815*, ed. Lawrence Stone (London: Routledge, 1994), 263.

complicates matters when considering the latter. To speak of Protestantism in an umbrella-like manner (or in terms of a Catholic Other) is externally oriented and therefore ignores the complexities of colonial religious culture and the very real divisions within it. The competitive Protestantism that existed in the colonies, particularly in the Middle Colonies, had no British parallel because of the establishment of the Church of England. And as I suggested in the introduction and in the section on New York City, competing historical interpretations of the seventeenth century were often interrelated with denominational conflict in the colonies.

The imperial Anglicanism that developed in the Middle Colonies in the middle third of the eighteenth century is a prime example. These clergy believed that what could keep the increasingly sprawling British empire in North America together was to establish the Church of England there. The colonies had diverged from the mother country in terms of politics, governance, and social structure. Imposing episcopacy on the colonies could mitigate those divergences, which imperial Anglicans found so troubling. This, of course, was never a realistic possibility and as dissent in the 1760s grew, they made a desperate last attempt at bringing a Bishop to the colonies resulting in the Bishop controversy. What is important is that their own historical memory of the disorder of the Civil Wars and their alienation and displacement following the Glorious Revolution served as a foundation from which they drew their conceptions of their imperial identity and their contemporary political culture, which can be seen in their conflict with the triumvirate. Furthermore, they were operating under the assumption that what they thought was necessary for England was also necessary for the empire. However, this ignored the messy nature of the colonies' demographics, politics, and religious life. Similarly,

historians who would transfer the British national identity into the colonies and call it “imperial” identity are essentially making the same mistake.

In terms of authority, the standard narrative has been that authority and hierarchy underwent slow but significant change from the early eighteenth century into the early nineteenth century. Historians have stressed the power of patriarchy and deference in ordering social and familial relationships in colonial America. However, as the century wore on, their power steadily diminished as Americans grew more individualistic and ambitious (and democratic, according to some) until the onset of the American Revolution accelerated the process. And their declension is seen as a necessary precursor to the formation of American national identity in the early republic. Factors which have been attributed to their decline include demographics, increased mobility (both social and geographic), commerce, consumer culture, the Great Awakening, and increased popular political participation during the imperial crisis. The problem with all but the latter two are that they either take on an air of determinism or get shrouded in claims of latency. Unlike those, the Great Awakening and the imperial crisis, provide us with singular discrete moments that we can recognize and analyze. Yet, though both arguments enjoyed historiographical success for a time, both have been displaced without anything else put in their stead. Indeed, regardless of which factor is stressed, the use of patriarchy or, especially, deference as defining the nature of authority in colonial America only furthers the static and unsatisfying cultural consensus model against which this paper has argued. Thinking through historical memory’s role in political and social conflicts in the late colonial period, however, may afford us a way to see different types of authority being challenged in a number of events over a broader stretch of both time and place,

thereby giving us perhaps a better conceptual handle on the actual process of change rather than simply the result.³⁷

Conclusion

Historical memory in the colonies, like Protestantism itself, has to be understood in the context of contest. Just as it is an oversimplification to speak of a single historical memory, it is equally so to speak of a single imperial identity. New York City in the 1750s encapsulates this contestation. There, opposing historical memories that helped define differing imperial identities undergirded conflict between imperial Anglicans and dissenting intelligentsia over cultural authority and religious authority. In the colonial period, groups adopted historical memories that were already constructed in British political culture and historical writing to which their own political and religious persuasions predisposed them. During the imperial crisis, they began to construct new historical memories that would justify the various arguments that made up the rhetoric of resistance. In terms of understanding imperial identity, the changing nature of authority, and religious conflict, historical memory as an analytical category of inquiry offers a

³⁷ For the most synthetic account of the decline of patriarchy and hierarchy, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1991). Though the concept of deference in colonial society and politics emerged in the historiography separately from republicanism, historians of the latter greatly expanded upon the theme. See J. R. Pole, *Political Representation in England and the Origins of the American Republic* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 37-9. For more recent assessments of the historiographical status of "deference" as a useful category of analysis, see the special issue of *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 3, no. 2, "Deference in Early America: The Life and/or Death of a Historiographical Concept" (2005). For its English and classical contexts, see J. G. A. Pocock, "The Classical Theory of Deference," *American Historical Review* 81, no. 3 (1976): 516-523. The literature on patriarchy lacks any direct synthesis but something approaching that can be found in Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 3-109; *Founding Mothers & Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 96-137.

new way of thinking about all three and also allows us to see how all three were, to varying degrees, interrelated. This is not to argue that historical memory is some kind of historiographical holy grail; it is simply to suggest that it may offer new ways of thinking about problems in the historiography of colonial America that—due in part to the fashionability of the early republic for the last two decades—have remained unexplored in the recent literature on early America.