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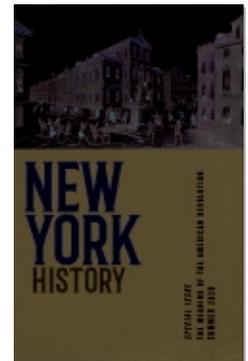
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Citizenship and the Memory of the American Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Political Culture

Michael D. Hatter

The memory of the Revolution is the American origins myth. For many Americans, the idea of a collective historical memory of the Revolution might bring to mind what could be called the “schoolbook narrative.” In this all-too-familiar narrative, the American colonists, motivated by high-minded ideas of liberty and equality, bravely resisted attempts by the power-hungry tyrant King George III to tax them unreasonably by declaring independence. To secure that independence, American farmers took up arms to defend their homes and, directed by exceptionally virtuous leaders, defeated the combined military forces of the largest and most powerful empire since Rome. This narrative is a constructed memory of the Revolution that has roots dating back to the very first histories written of the Revolution by men and women who lived through it and has served ever since to inculcate a sense of national identity and patriotism in the nation’s schoolchildren. For centuries, American schoolchildren have learned a version of this narrative and many have carried it with them throughout their lives. Indeed, historians who currently teach the American Revolution in colleges and universities can feel as though no small part of their work is devoted to complicating this narrative that was ingrained in students at a young age.

Yet, the story of our national collective memory of the American Revolution is not primarily one of the development and perpetuation of this simplistic narrative. Rather, it is a story of construction, contest, and conflict composed of a continuous, many-sided struggle

This article emerged out of a course that I have taught at both The New School and Knox College entitled, “The American Origins Myth: The Memory of the Revolution in History and Culture.” My thanks for supporting the course goes to the department chairs, Julia Ott and Cate Denial, and to the students—especially Syl Egerton, Max Pierce, Amari Mendez, Josh Althoff, Kylie Hoang, and Janie Sutherd—whose interesting and insightful discussions helped shape this article and the larger project of which it is a part. Finally, my thanks to the readers whose reports offered generous suggestions that helped improve the article.

throughout American history between various groups to define the meaning and legacy of the Revolution for their own political and cultural purposes. And while the specific groups and the memories they create have changed over time, the nature of the memory of the Revolution as something that is constructed and contested and its importance in American political culture has not.

Unlike other periods of American history and European history generally, the field of early American history largely missed out on the “memory studies boom” that followed the cultural turn in the 1980s and 1990s. This can be partly attributed to the fact that, at the same time that memory studies were growing, scholarly interest in the American Revolution was waning. The most direct work on the broad topic of the memory of the Revolution is Michael Kammen’s *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination*, published in 1978. Kammen focused on cultural forms such as historical fiction, theater, and art to highlight Americans’ fraught relationship with tradition. He argued that the Revolution was increasingly treated throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century as the national adolescence, or “a totally successful national *rite de passage*.”¹ This was a necessary process for a new nation, but as that nation matured and became more conservative, he argued, its revolutionary history became like so many embarrassing memories of one’s own awkward youth. In this sense, the Revolution appeared to have been something to get through and beyond rather than the more familiar and omnipresent touchstone it has been since the early twentieth century (and continues to be).

Kammen’s portrayal of the memory of the Revolution was defined by consensus. He worked on the book during the Bicentennial and its intellectual approach to cultural history is based, as much of his work was, on a belief in the existence of an “American mind,” or shared forms of national thought and culture. Throughout, he claims small numbers of individual producers of cultural forms as those who “preserved and enhanced the revolutionary tradition” at any given time. When, at the end of the book, he raises the question of whether there has “been no alternative reading of the American Revolution,” Kammen says, “Yes, we have in fact had some half a dozen significant authors who tried to offer dissenting versions. They are too few in number, however, too discontinuous in sequence, and too neglected by their contemporary popular cultures to comprise a nay-saying tradition.”²

Since Kammen’s *A Season of Youth*, however, there has been a substantive engagement by early American historians with questions surrounding memory and the Revolution, particularly regarding the nineteenth century. This scholarship has generally taken three forms. First, the majority of this work has focused on the creation and development of such Revolution-related historical memories as the “Boston Tea Party,” the War for Independence, the Continental Army, the Fourth of July, and the commemoration of the

1. Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 1978), 223.

2. Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, 52–53, 222–23.

Revolution's centennial.³ Other works have explored the creation of historical memories of the Revolution by specific groups, including abolitionists, Confederates, and the Woman's Rights movement.⁴ Finally, there is also some recent scholarship on both the commemoration of revolutionary figures as well as the role of the memory of the Revolution in individuals' politics and thought.⁵ This article combines a synthesis of this recent work on specific

3. On the memory and commemoration of specific events, see Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Leonard I. Sweet, "The Fourth of July and Black Americans in the Nineteenth Century: Northern Leadership Opinion Within the Context of the Black Experience," *Journal of Negro History* 61, no. 3 (1976): 256–75; *The Fourth of July: Political Oratory and Literary Reactions, 1776–1876*, ed. Paul Goetsch and Gerd Hurm (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, 1992); Alex James Criblez, "Parading Patriotism: Independence Day Celebrations in the Urban Midwest, 1826–1876" (PhD diss., Purdue University, 2008); Matthew Dennis, *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days: An American Calendar* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Craig Bruce Smith, "Claiming the Centennial: The American Revolution's Blood and Spirit in Boston, 1870–1876," *Massachusetts Historical Review* 15 (2013): 7–53. On memory of the army and the war, see Sarah Purcell, *Sealed with Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Thomas A. Chambers, *Memories of War: Visiting Battlefields and Bonefields in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012). On the memory of individuals, see François Furstenberg, *In the Name of the Father: Washington's Legacy, Slavery, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007); Mitch Kachun, *First Martyr of Liberty: Crispus Attucks in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); James A. Colaico, *Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). On how historical memories of the colonial and British pasts shaped the Revolution itself, see Michael D. Hattem, *Past and Prologue: Politics and Memory in the American Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

4. Colaico, *Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July*; Ethan J. Kytly and Blain Roberts, *Denmark Vesey's Garden: Slavery and Memory in the Cradle of the Confederacy* (New York: The New Press, 2018), ch. 2; John Hope Franklin, "The North, the South, and the American Revolution," *Journal of American History* 62, no. 1 (1975): 5–23. For recent works on the Revolution in Confederate memory, see Jonathan B. Crider, "De Bow's Revolution: The Memory of the American Revolution in the Sectional Crisis, 1850–1861," *American Nineteenth Century History* 10, no. 3 (2009): 317–32; Anne Sarah Rubin, "Seventy-Six and Sixty-One: Confederates Remember the American Revolution," in *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 85–106; Paul D. H. Quigley, "'That History Is Truly the Life of Nations': History and Southern Nationalism in Antebellum South Carolina," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 106, no. 1 (2005): 7–33; Jonathan B. Crider, "The Memory of the American Revolution in the Politics of the Civil War" (MA thesis, Texas Tech University, 2008). For works on the gendered nature of the memory of the Revolution, see Emily Lewis Butterfield, "'The Patriot Blood of Our Fathers Runs Through Our Veins!': Revolutionary Heritage Rhetoric and the American Woman's Rights Movement, 1848–1890" (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2016), 2; Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998).

5. On the memory and thought of individuals, see François Furstenberg, *In the Name of the Father: Washington's Legacy, Slavery, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007); Mitch Kachun, *First Martyr of Liberty: Crispus Attucks in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); John McKee Barr, *Loathing Lincoln: An American Tradition from the Civil War to the Present* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2014); Colaico, *Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July*; Francis D. Cogliano, *Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008). For an older, classic work in this vein, see Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1960).

topics as well as my own primary source readings to identify important connections that they share and suggest how those connections can help us to reconsider the history of the memory of the Revolution more generally. In doing so, it argues that the memory of the Revolution was an important part of political culture in the nineteenth century; that it was defined primarily by conflict rather than consensus; and that it was shaped in response to conflicts over the roles of race, gender, and class in culturally defining citizenship and justifying political exclusion throughout the nineteenth century.⁶

Collective memory is created in the shadow cast by history. Anthony Kemp has argued that “the idea of history is one of the most fundamental determinants of social imagination.”⁷ In political terms, historical memories are typically created to fill a need for the “shared sentiments, symbols, and social explanations necessary for an integrative national identity.”⁸ Historical memories created to serve this purpose do not rely on accuracy for their legitimacy or usefulness. As Keya Ganguly has written, “The stories people tell about their pasts have more to do with the continuing shoring up of self-understanding than with historical ‘truths.’”⁹ Almost since the beginning of the nation, how Americans have defined what it means to be American has depended heavily on how they have defined the legacy and meaning of the Revolution. But just as the people of the United States have never shared one national identity, they also have never shared a single memory of the Revolution. Throughout American history, many groups, often in direct conflict, have sought to define the legacy and meaning of the Revolution in ways that would legitimize their claims to political power and win broader assent to their ideas, including their definitions of what it means to be American.

The constant conflict expressed in the construction of competing historical memories of the American Revolution is due, in no small part, to its historical malleability, which can be attributed to a number of reasons. First, the Revolution itself is seemingly contradictory

6. In recent years, there has been a large and growing amount of work on questions of citizenship in the nineteenth century as it related to specific groups’ inclusion or, more commonly, exclusion from the polity, including African Americans, women, Indigenous Peoples, and immigrants. On citizenship in early America broadly, see Carrie Hyde, *Civic Longing: The Speculative Origins of U.S. Citizenship* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); William J. Novak, “The Legal Transformation of Citizenship in Nineteenth-Century America,” in *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History*, ed. Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 85–119; James Kettner, *The Development of American Citizenship, 1608–1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978). Hyde’s work offers an important focus on the process of culturally defining citizenship while Kettner’s work remains an important foundation for understanding the legal process of defining the status of citizen and its historical background.

7. Anthony Kemp, *The Estrangement of the Past: A Study in the Origins of Modern Historical Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 106.

8. Joyce Appleby, Margaret C. Jacob, and Lynn Hunt. *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 94.

9. Keya Ganguly, “Migrant Identities: Personal Memory and the Construction of Selfhood,” *Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (1992): 29–30.

in a number of ways. It was an unprecedented republican revolution driven partly by colonists' conservative desire to preserve their British rights. Most obviously, it was a revolution built on a rhetoric of liberty generated, in part, by men whose fortunes and ability to declare and fight for independence were dependent on generations of slavery. One might expect it to be less malleable than earlier historical events because it was such a relatively well-documented event. However, its central documents also contribute to this malleability. The Revolution produced two critical documents: the Declaration of Independence, with its radical ideals about equality and the right of resistance; and the Constitution, which was partly brought about by a conservative reaction against the popular democratic spirit that independence had unleashed. A revolution so often defined in such binaries—conservative/radical, liberty/slavery, republican/democratic, Declaration/Constitution—has meant that it has been possible for individuals and groups of very different persuasions to see themselves in the Revolution.

Such a Revolution has proven ideal for memory construction by an American society that has also been driven by often seemingly bipolar divisions. Americans have throughout their history been largely divided politically in such a way thanks to the persistence of the two-party system. Similarly, Americans' sense of regional division has often been delineated along either a North-South or East-West axis. In the nineteenth century, the United States was defined socially and economically by the fact that it simultaneously contained both free and slave societies and economies. While in reality these divisions, just like the Revolution, have been more complex than simple binaries, in popular perception and rhetoric they have often been treated as such. As a result, the Revolution has served as an obvious and important tool to those attempting to address the need to bridge this bipolar nature of American life. At the same time, it has also served as an equally obvious and important tool to those attempting to burn those bridges down and more firmly entrench existing divisions. The Revolution, as a foundation for memory construction, has almost always been equally suited both tasks.

The crafting of a historical memory of the Revolution began almost immediately upon its conclusion as one part of the process of creating a national history for a nation that was only a decade old. The revolutionary generation themselves sought to define the meaning and legacy of the Revolution for subsequent generations. Many of the first historians and antiquarians of the new republic were cultural nationalists and the creation of a national history was part of the even broader project of creating a shared national identity that could distinguish Americans from Britons and transcend the differences and antagonisms between the often-divided states. The narrative they created has lived on to the present day having set the chronological and geographic terms for thinking and talking about "American history," some of which are only now being challenged by scholars. It is easy in hindsight to think that a national history that included the colonial histories of the thirteen original colonies combined with the recent history of the Revolution was a *fait accompli*.

But that was not the case. Collective choices were made by the revolutionary generation's historians, antiquarians, and those engaged in historical cultural production that shaped the terms on which Americans for centuries would think about and define the very idea of American history.¹⁰

But even within the revolutionary generation there was no overarching consensus. The period between 1783 and 1812 saw the publication of many dozens of histories of the United States, the Revolution, and individual histories of the states. For the Revolution specifically, this generation produced both patriot and loyalist histories of the traumatic event. Also, while the cultural nationalists who produced the first national historical narrative were largely Federalists, anti-federalists too contributed their own perspective on the recent past, one which focused on the more recent past of the imperial crisis and Revolution and the corruptible nature of arbitrary power. Yet, partly because of their suspicion of the consolidation of the states under a powerful federal government, anti-federalists did not produce a competing *national* historical narrative that went beyond the recent Revolution to include the colonial past, as cultural nationalists did. As a result, the first national historical narrative created by the cultural nationalists in the decades after the war set the foundation on which subsequent national historical memories would be built.

Direct partisan political conflict in the memory of the Revolution began in the early nineteenth century, primarily with the publication of Mercy Otis Warren's Republican *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*, and John Marshall's decidedly Federalist *Life of Washington*, which was effectively a history of the Revolution.¹¹ By being strong supporters of the new federal government, the cultural nationalists of the 1780s and 1790s were Federalists by default but they were not party hacks. They wrote their histories for the nation, not specific parties, though it may be telling that many of them became Republicans after 1800. The election of 1800 and the first transfer of power between parties temporarily increased political partisanship to a fever pitch and not long after the memory of the Revolution would become politicized in a partisan way that would remain constant thereafter.

Party politics, however, was not the only way in which the memory of the Revolution was contested in the nineteenth century. Indeed, it often served as a means for other issues, particularly the definition of citizenship, rather than the ends. Perhaps the most popular work on memory and the Revolution—and the first to directly address the theme of conflict within it—is Alfred F. Young's *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* (1999). Focusing on Boston, Young recovered the history of George Robert Twelves Hughes, a shoemaker who participated in the Boston Tea Party and, late in life, enjoyed a modest measure of fame for having done so. Taking a neo-progressive approach to the topic of memory construction in

10. Hattem, *Past and Prologue*, chs. 4–6.

11. Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*, 3 vol. (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1805); John Marshall, *The Life of Washington*, 4 vol. (Philadelphia: C.P. Wayne, 1804–1807).

early nineteenth-century Boston, Young argued that class-driven conflicts and goals shaped the ways in which the Revolution was commemorated in early national Boston.

In the decades following the war, Boston elites sought to “tam[e] the memory of the Revolution.” In 1783, they discontinued public rituals that commemorated such popular actions as the Boston Massacre and the Boston Tea Party and replaced them with a Fourth of July celebration. Outside of Massachusetts, the Fourth of July had been publicly celebrated since 1776, often with a full day of festivities followed by an oration organized by the majority political party.¹² But few other places had the symbolic revolutionary history of Boston and, until they were all consolidated into one Fourth of July celebration, its common citizens took great joy in commemorating the popular actions through which they had helped bring about the conflict that led to independence. For elites, however, the popular and revolutionary nature of the Revolution itself and its popular commemorations needed to be checked lest they should inspire the citizens of Boston to repeat its example against the city and state governments. The new Fourth of July celebrations were intended to be staid, conservative affairs that could teach the often rowdy “class of Young Men and Apprentices ... [to] more sensibly feel and understand the occasion of this yearly festival.”¹³ As Young notes, by 1806, their efforts were not entirely successful and led some to call for the Fourth of July to be turned into a work holiday, thereby precluding the participation of the city’s working class. In the years between 1783 and 1820, Boston’s largely conservative elites “marshalled public fervor in a controlled respectable fashion” and commenced what Young described as “a process of willful forgetting” of the popular nature of the Revolution in Boston that would last until the late nineteenth century.¹⁴

This same period saw the rise of what might be termed “the cult of the individual” in revolutionary memory. Sarah Purcell has shown the importance of the Revolutionary War as a means for Americans “to work through their feelings about a whole host of political, ideological, and social issues.”¹⁵ This focus on the war helped promote the lionization of war heroes. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the first biographies of revolutionary leaders began to be published. The most infamous of these was Mason Locke Weems’s multiple biographies of George Washington. Weems was a former clergyman who moved into bookselling before then becoming an author himself. François Furstenberg has argued that Weems “personified the marriage of evangelical piety, republicanism, and commonsense moral philosophy that would become so central to nineteenth-century

12. Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth*; Criblez, “Parading Patriotism”; Dennis, *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days*, ch. 1. For a less recent work, see Howard H. Martin, “The Fourth of July Oration,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 44, no. 4 (1958): 393–401. For a collection of orations, see Goetsch and Hurm, *The Fourth of July*.

13. *Boston Gazette*, July 3, 1806; Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth*, 112–13.

14. Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth*, 33; Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, 112.

15. Purcell, *Sealed with Blood*, 10.

American intellectual life.”¹⁶ In his works, Weems combined the pious fervor of the Second Great Awakening and the new nation’s need for a national identity to become, in Furstenberg’s words, “an evangelist of nationalism.” Shortly after Washington’s death in 1799 shook the new republic, Weems offered an account of the first president’s life from which originated a number of apocryphal stories that would become myths and remain an important part of the legacies of both Washington and the Revolution, including the famous cherry tree story and the story of Washington praying alone in the woods at Valley Forge.

Over two decades later, the contemporaneous deaths of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson on the very day of the semicentennial, July 4, 1826, appeared to many not only as some kind of providential acknowledgment of the Revolution but also as a validation of the “Great Man” and hero-worship aspects of the cult of the individual in popular memory. This tendency of Americans to define and remember our national past through the lives of a few great individuals has remained a core feature of our collective memory of the Revolution, most clearly expressed in recent times in the success of seemingly countless “Founders Chic” biographies of revolutionary leaders. The rise of the cult of individualism as a distinct part of the historical development of the memory of the Revolution sought to create elite figureheads for an emerging middle class while also implicitly downplaying the broader collective efforts that brought about and won the war, including the kind of violent lower and working-class contributions that elite Bostonians found so distasteful and disruptive.

By the 1820s, however, political and social developments converged to open space in which common citizens could begin to re-stake their claims to the memory of the Revolution and, by extension, their place within the current polity, beginning with a patriotic swell following the War of 1812. In 1818, Congress passed the first pension act for Revolutionary War soldiers. Initially targeted to veterans who had become destitute, subsequent laws broadened eligibility. One of the requirements for petitioning for a pension was a written account of one’s service. Tens of thousands of applications were submitted in the 1820s and 1830s.¹⁷ Revolutionary War veterans came back into the public consciousness because of this legislation and process. One of the veterans to apply for a pension was Joseph Plumb Martin, who later anonymously published the most complete account of a soldier’s experience as *A Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dangers and Sufferings of a Revolutionary Soldier* in 1830. While it received little notice at the time, James Kirby Martin notes that Martin’s narrative, which foregrounded the lack of congressional and popular support for the army, “openly assaulted the rapidly forming public memory of the Revolution as a time of universal public virtue.”¹⁸

16. Furstenberg, *In the Name of the Father*, 107.

17. Records Relating to Revolutionary War Pension Applicants, 1806–1832, The National Archives, Washington, D.C.

18. Joseph Plumb Martin, *Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dangers and Sufferings of a Revolutionary Soldier* (Malden: Wiley and Sons, 2013), xiv, xviii.

Similarly, as Al Young has recounted, the visit in 1824–25 of the Marquis de Lafayette, on the eve of the semicentennial, brought the revolutionary veterans back into public view in a prominent way.¹⁹ Lafayette arrived in New York in the fall of 1824 with the goal of seeing the nation he had helped achieve independence one last time in his old age. After arriving at New York, he traveled throughout New England before proceeding to Philadelphia and then on to Virginia where he visited Mount Vernon and Monticello. He spent the early months of 1825 touring throughout the southern states; the spring and summer were spent touring the western territories. Throughout this extended tour, Lafayette was repeatedly feted with public festivities. As Laura Auricchio has argued, “In celebrating Lafayette, Americans were celebrating their own past.”²⁰ And such celebrations created space for aging veterans to insert themselves into the public narratives. They flocked to local festivities upon his arrival and Lafayette made a point of acknowledging them publicly and spending time with them. Because his visit was such a widely reported public phenomenon, it too contributed to bringing the revolutionary veterans back into the public consciousness.²¹

This process culminated in the early 1860s when, with the Civil War raging, Rev. E. B. Hillard sought out the few remaining veterans he could find. His popular book, *The Last Men of the Revolution* (1864) recounted the memories shared with him by six veterans, all of whom claimed to be at least 100 years old. The volume was dramatically accompanied by six plates of daguerreotype portraits, one of each man. Hillard wrote his book because “every American desires to know all that can be known of the surviving soldiers of the Revolution,” partly because “the present is the last generation that will be connected by living link with the great period in which our national independence was achieved.” After that and forevermore, “the American Revolution will be known among men by the silent record of history alone.”²² Hillard hoped his book would serve as a salve by reminding Americans, North and South, of the common heritage they shared. Through the insistent telling of their stories and their desire for recognition, revolutionary veterans caused their own “discovery,” as Young has put it, and reclaimed their place in the memory of the Revolution at a time when the last living soldiers to have served in the Continental Army were dying off.

In addition to issues of class earlier in the century, race played a critical role in mid-nineteenth-century political conflicts and the competing memories of the Revolution they generated. The “discovery of the veterans” in the 1820s was driven, in Boston, partly by

19. On the tour, see Laura Auricchio, *The Marquis: Lafayette Reconsidered* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 288–303; Sarah Vowell, *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015).

20. Auricchio, *The Marquis*, 298.

21. On the media coverage of Lafayette’s visit, see Jonathan W. Wilson, “Lafayette’s Return: An Early American Media Event,” *Readex Report* 10, no. 4 (November 2015). <https://www.readex.com/readex-report/lafayettes-return-early-american-media-event>

22. Rev. E. B. Hillard, *The Last Men of the Revolution* (Hartford, 1864), 3, 4. For a recent examination of the lives of these individuals, see Don N. Hagist, *The Revolution’s Last Men: The Soldiers Behind the Photographs* (Yardley, PA: Westholme, 2015).

the growth of labor organizations, but also by another key group: abolitionists.²³ This was spearheaded partly by the pious fervor of a young printer and antislavery orator, William Lloyd Garrison, who began publishing the influential abolitionist weekly newspaper, *The Liberator*, in Boston in 1831. Despite its relatively small circulation, *The Liberator* reached and inspired an audience of a variety of individuals, black and white, committed to ending slavery in the United States. The memory of the Revolution was a significant and visible part of the abolitionist arguments and antislavery rhetoric of *The Liberator* from its very first issue and of the abolitionist movement generally. Within its pages and beyond, the abolitionist movement created their own memory of the Revolution, which formed an important part of their efforts to persuade the rest of the American people to join them.

Garrison famously began his first issue, published January 1, 1831, by announcing that he had chosen Boston as the home of his newspaper partly because New Englanders seemed the most receptive to his message, but also because of its place in the legacy of the Revolution he would draw on so frequently. “I determined, at every hazard,” he wrote, “to lift up the standard of emancipation in the eyes of the nation, *within sight of Bunker Hill and in the birth place of liberty.*” He continued, “Assenting to the ‘self-evident truth’ maintained in the American Declaration of Independence, ‘that all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable right—among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,’ I shall strenuously contend for the immediate enfranchisement of our slave population.”²⁴ For Garrison and many of his fellow abolitionists, the meaning, and hence the memory, of the Revolution was defined not by stories of heroes or even ordinary soldiers but by its ideas, particularly as expressed in the Declaration.²⁵

As the growth in antislavery print and public speaking tours grew in the 1840s, so too did an abolitionist memory of the Revolution that argued the Declaration of Independence made no distinction between black and white men and that the founders had no intention to exclude slaves and free blacks from the rhetoric of equality. To understand, then, why the Revolution did not end slavery, the fault was to be found in the Constitution, which, to many abolitionists, represented a counterrevolution. In the 1830s, some abolitionists cited the Constitution as, if not an antislavery document like the Declaration, at least not a pro-slavery document. As one writer in 1834 argued, “This Constitution is to be interpreted in accordance with the Declaration of Independence. Neither the word *slave*, nor *slavery*, nor *white*, nor *black*, nor *color*, is found in the Constitution of the United States. Our Constitution does not, therefore, make us a slaveholding nation.... The people will *interpret* the Constitution, making their own Declaration of Independence the key or standard of

23. For recent revisions of the history of abolitionism, see Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

24. William Lloyd Garrison, “To the Public,” *The Liberator*, January 1, 1831.

25. *The Liberator*, March 1, 1834.

interpretation.”²⁶ Such arguments sought to reclaim the Constitution from Southern slaveowners and politicians who increasingly wrapped part of their immediate defense of slavery in the Constitution.

This view, however, was an outlier as Garrison and his followers believed the Constitution to be a slaveowners’ document. To them, it represented a betrayal of “the spirit of seventy-six,” that is, the original principles of the Revolution as embodied in the Declaration and evidenced in the Northwest Ordinance, which was passed by the Confederation Congress in 1787 to exclude slavery in those territories and established a precedent for the federal government’s ability to legislate against slavery. Garrison and others called for the free states to secede to protect the republic’s original principles in the Declaration being corrupted by the Constitution. In 1840, James Madison’s notes on the Constitutional Convention were published for the first time and included the debates over slavery.²⁷ Wendell Phillips compiled the debates on slavery in the federal and state conventions in his 1844 book, *The Constitution: A Pro-Slavery Compact*, arguing they showed “our fathers [had] bartered honesty for gain, and became partners with tyrants, that they might share in the profits of tyranny.”²⁸ If the Constitution had been the product of compromise, abolitionists argued, it was not a heroic act of compromise, but one in which Northern states had capitulated to the Southern slave states. His introductory remarks concluded with the Garrisonian slogan, “No Union with Slaveholders!” Most dramatically, Garrison spoke on July 4, 1854, at the Grove in Framingham, Massachusetts following the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and, more recently, the seizure in Boston by federal forces of Anthony Burns, an escaped slave.²⁹ Garrison began by holding up a copy of the Fugitive Slave Act and setting it on fire as the crowd cheered. He then concluded by holding up a copy of the Constitution, which he declared “a covenant with Death, an agreement with Hell” before also setting it aflame. On October 23, 1857, the entire front page of *The Liberator* was given over to quotes from the founders purportedly supporting the Garrisonian view of the Constitution.³⁰

Perhaps Garrison’s biggest contribution to the cause of abolition was the platform he initially gave to Frederick Douglass, a highly literate escaped slave from Maryland who quickly became the movement’s most compelling orator. Douglass had quickly adopted the Garrisonian perspective on the Constitution as a “a pro-slavery instrument.”³¹ However, by 1851, Douglass had moved to Rochester, New York and split from Garrison and his wing

26. “View of Slavery.—No. 4,” *The Liberator*, March 1, 1834.

27. On the notes’ road to publication, see Mary Sarah Bilder, *Madison’s Hand: Revising the Constitutional Convention* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 223–40.

28. Wendell Phillips, *The Constitution: A Pro-Slavery Compact* (New-York: American Anti-slavery Society, 1844), 6.

29. “No Slavery! Fourth of July!” broadside, Worcester: Earle & Drew, 1854, Massachusetts Historical Society.

30. *The Liberator*, October 23, 1857.

31. Frederick Douglass to C. H. Chase in *The North Star*, February 9, 1849.

of the abolitionist movement. In this period, according to James A. Colaico in his *Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July*, Douglass “emerged as a formidable interpreter of the nation’s founding documents.”³² In his most famous oration, delivered on July 5, 1852 in Rochester, Douglass addressed the celebration of American independence and the memory of the Revolution directly. He did so in the traditional form of an American jeremiad, decrying the declension in American society since the Revolution.³³ He began the speech with a lengthy, eloquent, and praiseful recounting of the origins of the Revolution. “Fellow Citizens,” he declared, “I am not wanting in respect for the fathers of this republic. The signers of the Declaration of Independence were brave men.” Douglass analogized the abolitionist movement with the patriot cause in the 1770s by recalling that those who supported independence “were accounted in their day plotters of mischief, agitators and rebels, dangerous men.” However, “to side with the right against the wrong, with the weak against the strong, and with the oppressed against the oppressor! here lies the merit, and the one which, of all others, seems unfashionable in our day.”³⁴

Having declared an admiration for the revolutionary generation and their achievement, Douglass turned his focus to the present with a prescient statement showing his understanding of the power of historical memory in that moment: “We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future.” After referring to the Declaration of Independence as “the ringbolt to the chain of your nation’s destiny,” Douglass asked his audience, “What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? and am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us?” He continued, “The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common.—The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.”³⁵

Douglass castigated not the founding generation but the current generation of Americans who would have the temerity to celebrate an independence that was not shared in common. “To the American slave,” he declared:

your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your

32. Colaico, *Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July*, 3.

33. Colaico, *Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July*, 46–47.

34. Frederick Douglass, *Oration, delivered in Corinthian Hall, Rochester, by Frederick Douglass, July 5th, 1852* (Rochester: Lee, Mann & Co.), 10, 6–7.

35. Douglass, *Oration*, 13, 14, 15.

denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.

At the end of the speech, Douglass turned to the Constitution. “I differ,” he said, “from those who charge this baseness on the framers of the Constitution of the United States. It is a slander upon their memory, at least, so I believe.... In that instrument I hold there is neither warrant, license, nor sanction of the hateful thing; but interpreted, as it ought to be interpreted, the Constitution is a glorious liberty document.”³⁶ This public debate about the nature of the Constitution’s relationship to slavery, had by abolitionists in the 1840s and 1850s, is still being had by historians in the public sphere today.³⁷

The significance of Douglass’s speech, which remained relatively obscure until its revival in the 1960s and 1970s, lies not just in his condemnation of white Americans’ hypocrisy and the shift in his perspective on the Constitution and the split with Garrison it symbolized. The importance of the speech actually goes beyond its immediate context of antislavery politics and the coming of the Civil War. In this oration, Douglass offers a coherent memory of the Revolution not just as a discrete historical event but as an ongoing process, a vision of a Revolution whose memory was crucial to the actual realization of its ideals. Failure to commit to the pursuit of the principles embedded in the memory of the Revolution and to fully realize the vision promised by its rhetoric effectively rendered the historical event itself meaningless and stood as the greatest possible insult to the Revolution, its memory, and the revolutionary generation itself. In other words, by arguing that the long-term success of the Revolution itself was dependent on the development of its memory, Douglass blurred the line between history and memory while simultaneously highlighting their interconnectedness.

Debates over the meaning and legacy of the Revolution, as embodied by its two principal documents, were also at the heart of the Supreme Court decision and dissenting opinion in the 1857 case of *Dred Scott v. Sanford*. Chief Justice Roger Taney and Justice Benjamin Curtis, who authored the dissenting opinion, reached back to the history of the Revolution and the late eighteenth century to make their respective cases. To determine whether Scott, a slave who had sued for his freedom after being brought by his owner into a free state, had legal standing to pursue such an action, Taney argued it was necessary “to

36. Douglass, *Oration*, 20, 36.

37. Nicholas Guyatt, “How Proslavery was the Constitution?” *The New York Review of Books*, June 6, 2019; Sean Wilentz and James Oakes, “No Property in Man: An Exchange,” *The New York Review of Books*, June 27, 2019; Sean Wilentz, *No Property in Man: Slavery and Antislavery at the Nation’s Founding* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019); David Waldstreicher, *Slavery’s Constitution: From Revolution to Ratification* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009).

determine who were citizens of the several States when the Constitution was adopted.” He continued, “In the opinion of the court, the legislation and histories of the times, and the language used in the Declaration of Independence, show, that neither the class of persons who had been imported as slaves, nor their descendants, whether they had become free or not, were then acknowledged as a part of the people, nor intended to be included in the general words used in that memorable instrument.” In other words, Scott was not a citizen and therefore had no legal standing in federal court. In response, Justice Curtis noted that there were free blacks who were considered citizens of individual states at the time of the Constitution’s ratification. Like abolitionists, Curtis, too, drew on the Northwest Ordinance as evidence of the founders’ intention. Ultimately, Curtis declared, “And my opinion is, that, under the Constitution of the United States, every free person born on the soil of a State, who is a citizen of that State by force of its Constitution or laws, is also a citizen of the United States....” The debate between Supreme Court justices, as between abolitionists and proslavery proponents, turned on the question of whether the legacy of the Revolution, and therefore citizenship, belonged solely to white Americans.

The Constitution and the Declaration were central to the politics of both slavery and antislavery in the mid-nineteenth century. If one believed that the institution of slavery was embedded in the Constitution, it would enjoy both a historical and legal sanction that would make its abolition seem near impossible. Conversely, if the Constitution was not an inherently proslavery document, abolition could not only be possible but could be justified by it. Southerners clearly believed the former and, as a result, they created a memory of the Revolution that privileged the Constitution over the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration, while it might have rhetorical appeal to many northerners, was nevertheless not a legally binding document; it was the Constitution that actually brought the nation into existence. Meanwhile, most abolitionists shared a constructed memory in which the Constitution was a betrayal of the Revolution, not its triumphant culmination. These were not the only conflicting aspects of the Northern and Southern memories of the Revolution. Historians such as John Hope Franklin and others have explored some of the specifics of the differences, including debates over the degree of Southerners’ contribution during the war.³⁸ Nevertheless, the political conflict over slavery drew directly on the malleability of the memory of a Revolution that had produced two very different founding documents in both their nature and purpose.

In the era prior to the Civil War, we can see other ways in which the politics of class, sectionalism, gender, and race intersected with the memory of the Revolution. First, the origins of the house museum movement that gave rise to the Mount Vernon Ladies Association began in the 1850s and was enmeshed in the sectional and gendered politics of the period. In the opening chapter of her book, *Domesticating History*, Patricia West skillfully

38. Franklin, “The North, the South, and the American Revolution”; “The South and the Union, Part II,” *DeBow’s Review* 18, no. 3 (March 1, 1855): 290–91.

draws out the federal, state, sectional, and gendered politics that factored into the efforts to establish Mount Vernon as a house museum.³⁹ In the decades following Washington's death, the home and property had fallen into disrepair as his descendants were not financially equipped to maintain it. Part of the reason for this disrepair, some local Virginian elites claimed, was a lack of oversight of the many less-than-reputable visitors to the property. The establishment of the home as a museum, they argued, could offer a way to reform the behavior of the especially lower-class, unruly visitors.⁴⁰

John Augustine Washington, the great grand-nephew of the first president who owned the property, had repeatedly and unsuccessfully sought to get the federal government to purchase Mount Vernon. The cause was taken up by Louisa Bird Cunningham, who described herself as "a Southern matron." She began trying to raise the funds to purchase Mount Vernon by targeting her fellow Southern women, appealing to both their patriotism and their identity as Southerners. Since the men running the federal government lacked the moral virtue to act to save Mount Vernon, if Southern women did not take it upon themselves the property would either be destroyed by unruly visitors or, worse, it might be bought by Northerners. "Ladies of the South!" Cunningham wrote, "Can you stand with closed souls and purses . . . , suffer Mount Vernon, with all its sacred associations, to become . . . the seat of manufacturers and manufactories? Noise and smoke, and the busy hum of men, destroying all sanctity and repose around the tomb of your own world of wonder! . . . Never! Forbid it, shades of the dead!"⁴¹ In Cunningham's rhetoric, Mount Vernon stood as a symbol of the South being encroached upon by the immorality and rapacious greed of the North and of the South's contribution to the Revolutionary War, which had been minimized in a number of books and articles by Northerners in the decades before the Civil War. The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association (MVLA) was established in 1853.

The MVLA, however, was racing against the clock from the start. The goal was to raise part of the funds needed so they could be donated to the state of Virginia, which would then contribute some matching funds and purchase the property before John Washington was forced to sell it himself to either a Northerner or a foreigner. To raise the necessary funds, however, ultimately required the compromise of accepting the support of Northern women who sought to contribute. In 1854, Cunningham changed her position declaring, "We neither desire nor intend sectionality. We feel none towards those whose patriotism knows no North, South, East, or West."⁴² The practicality of achieving success in the endeavor forced Cunningham and the Southern female movement she had created to abandon the idea of Mount Vernon as a decidedly Southern institution. West also recounts how the splintering of the Democratic Party throughout the South in the early 1850s following

39. West, *Domesticating History*, ch. 1.

40. West, *Domesticating History*, 3–4.

41. Qtd. in West, *Domesticating History*, 4.

42. Qtd. in West, *Domesticating History* 10.

the Kansas-Nebraska Act complicated efforts to secure the support of the Virginia state government.⁴³ Forced to navigate the delicate and seemingly constantly shifting political landscape, the MVLA eventually gave up on the plan of having the state purchase the land and instead sought to raise enough funds for the association to purchase it outright. In 1858, Washington signed an agreement to sell to the MVLA. The final payment was made in late 1859 and the MVLA took control of Mount Vernon on February 22, 1860. Washington's centrality to the memory of the Revolution had, prior to the 1850s, largely transcended sectional divides. For many Americans who had grown up reading Weems's biographies Washington was the embodiment of the Revolution. As with the Declaration and the Constitution, how one understood Washington went a long way toward defining how they understood the Revolution. And while many historic sites in urban areas like Boston and New York had also been ravaged by time and progress, Cunningham understood that the preservation and control of Mount Vernon offered an opportunity to shape the popular memory of the Revolution, which she believed could then be used not just to instill patriotism but actually reform Americans' behavior.

Around the same time that the female-led MVLA was seeking to save Mount Vernon, a number of books were published in the North that sought to introduce new characters into the story and memory of the Revolution. Elizabeth Ellet was born in New York, the daughter of a Continental Army officer. She published a number of books in the 1830s and 1840s and, after splitting from her husband, became part of New York literary circles. Ellet was building on the momentum of the early woman's rights movement, which "appealed to their audiences ... by connecting their cause with the texts, figureheads, and actions of the Revolution." As Emily Lewis Butterfield has argued, "activists' invocations of the founding were inseparably connected" to the early woman's rights movement. She was also working in the wake of the Seneca Falls Convention and its "Declaration of Sentiments," which directly adopted the language and rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence for the movement and declared, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal."⁴⁴ Ellet began the work on what would become *The Women of the American Revolution* sometime in 1846. The first volume of the two-volume work appeared in 1848 and offered forty-six profiles of women, some the wives of prominent revolutionary figures, ranging in length from more than twenty pages to less than a full page. It quickly went through multiple editions in the next few years.

In her preface, Ellet noted some of the challenges—which would also be faced by the first generation of women's historians over a century later—writing, "Inasmuch as political history says but little—and that vaguely and incidentally—of the Women who bore their part in the Revolution, the materials for a work treating of them and their actions and

43. West, *Domesticating History*, 18–25.

44. Butterfield, "The Patriot Blood of Our Fathers Runs Through Our Veins," 2.

sufferings, must be derived in great part from private sources.” Noting the importance of the Revolution, she began her introduction: “All Americans are accustomed to view with interest and admiration the events of the Revolution. Its scenes are vivid in their memory, and its prominent actors are regarded with the deepest veneration.” Very much a Romanticist, Ellet argued that attention should be paid to the “sentiment” of the “mass of the people” who contributed to the effort. The achievements of the men had their origins in those who had prepared them for such times. “Patriotic mothers nursed the infancy of freedom,” she declared. “Their counsels and their prayers mingled with the deliberations that resulted in a nation’s assertion of its independence.” “It is almost impossible,” she continued, “to appreciate the vast influence of women’s patriotism upon the destinies of the infant republic.” While also acknowledging that women “willingly shared inevitable dangers and privations” during the war, Ellet’s view of women’s role in the Revolution was not just one that occurred alongside the male role but one that also preceded it, thereby attributing to women the very sense of independence that sparked resistance and the emotion that drove men to fight for it.⁴⁵ Historian Carol Berkin has noted that Ellet’s work “was not a call for women’s political equality,” but it was a call for less inequality in the realm of the collective memory of the Revolution.⁴⁶

Similarly, in the course of the 1840s, the black abolitionist William C. Nell began researching both the life of Crispus Attucks, the famous first casualty of the Boston Massacre, and the military contribution of African-American soldiers in the Revolutionary War. As Mitch Kachun has shown in his book, *First Martyr of Liberty: Crispus Attucks in American Memory*, Attucks, by turns historically referred to as a “slave,” “Indian,” and “mulatto,” was a largely unknown figure until the 1840s.⁴⁷ However, over the course of the following decades, Attucks’s memory became an important part of abolitionist rhetoric and of African Americans’ “arguments for citizenship rights and racial justice.”⁴⁸ The “Declaration of Sentiments of the Colored Citizens of Boston on the Fugitive Slave Bill” of 1850 pointed out that “the first martyr in the attack on residents was a colored man, Crispus Attucks by name, who fell in State street on the 5th of March, 1770.” A few years later, when Anthony Burns was escorted out of Boston by federal troops enforcing the Fugitive Slave Act, one abolitionist noted ruefully that it had occurred “over the spot where on the 5th of March, 1770, fell the first victim in the Boston Massacre—where the Negro blood of Christopher [*sic*] Attucks stained the ground.” Nell also fought unsuccessfully to have a monument erected in Boston to commemorate Attucks’s role in the coming of the Revolution. Nevertheless, as Kachun has shown, the consistent rhetorical use of Attucks by abolitionists and African Americans

45. Elizabeth F. Ellett, *The Women of the American Revolution*, 2 vol. (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1848), 1: ix–x, 13–14, 15, 14.

46. Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America’s Independence* (New York: Knopf, 2005), xiii.

47. Kachun, *First Martyr of Liberty*, 39–41.

48. Kachun, *First Martyr of Liberty*, 51.

in the 1850s reflected the success of Nell's efforts in promoting the memory of Attucks as an African American who had been the first colonist to die in the fight for liberty and independence, thereby staking a historical claim to both for his descendants.

In 1852, Nell published *Services of Colored Americans in the Wars of 1776 and 1812* quickly followed by *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* in 1855, which began with the story of Attucks. As with Southerners highlighting their contribution to the Revolutionary War to defend their claims to the memory of the Revolution, Nell's work in uncovering and publicizing the contribution of African Americans served the same purpose. He sought to give historical ammunition to the abolitionist movement and to African Americans claiming the rights of citizenship promised in the Declaration of Independence by asserting their own claims to a place in the memory of the Revolution. Nell's work contributed to an abolitionist memory of the Revolution that prioritized the Declaration of Independence and a sense of inclusiveness that made it distinct from the broader popular memory of the Revolution in the North in the antebellum period. Michael Kammen has argued that the popular cultural memory of the Revolution in this period was increasingly defined by a conservatism that appreciated the Revolution but saw it as the rowdy adolescence of a now maturing society. Abolitionists, however, saw nothing to be ashamed of in the nation's revolutionary youth. Indeed, like Douglass, they believed it was the revolutionary nature of the Revolution that should live on in its descendants lest the ideals of the Revolution fail to be realized.

For Abraham Lincoln, as for the abolitionists, the memory of the Revolution was a "civil religion" central to understanding contemporary politics and the center of that memory was the Declaration of Independence. In a speech at Independence Hall in Philadelphia in February 1861, Lincoln famously claimed, "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence."⁴⁹ In a speech at Lewiston, Illinois in 1858 just prior to his debates with Stephen Douglas, he said, "Now, my countrymen, if you have been taught doctrines in conflict with the great landmarks of the Declaration of Independence, if you have listened to suggestions which would take away from its grandeur and mutilate the fair symmetry of its proportions; if you have been inclined to believe that all men are not created equal in those inalienable rights enumerated in our charter of liberty, let me entreat you to come back. Return to the fountain whose waters spring close by the blood of the revolution."⁵⁰ In these debates for the Illinois Senate seat in 1858, Lincoln, according to Eric Foner, offered "a civic nationalism grounded in the ideals of the Declaration of Independence," which he referred to as an "electric cord" that "links the hearts of patriots" in contrast with "Sen. Douglas's racialized definition of

49. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, 5 vol. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4: 240.

50. Basler, *Collected Works*, 1: 547.

American nationhood,” which required the effective repudiation of the universality of the Declaration and its ideals.⁵¹

Lincoln, like Douglas, saw the Constitution as part of the legacy of the Declaration but interpreted it differently. In his famous Cooper Union speech of 1860, he said, “An inspection of the Constitution will show that the right of property in a slave is not “distinctly and expressly affirmed” in it. Much like Justice Curtis, he then dove deep into the history of the revolutionary era, tracing the subsequent congressional votes on legislation limiting slavery, to argue that “the framers” of the Constitution fully believed it within the authority of the federal government to limit slavery’s expansion into new territories. Many historians have remarked upon this importance of the Revolution in Lincoln’s Republican rhetoric and politics. Less attention, however, had been paid to Confederate memory of the Revolution until recently.

In the decades prior to secession, southern slave owners sought to promote the South’s contribution to the revolutionary cause and regularly reminded their compatriots of how many of the most prominent revolutionaries, including four of the first five presidents, were from the South.⁵² These most important founders, they pointed out, had been slaveowners and continued to be after the establishment of the federal government. Southerners surely “had no doubts” that if forced to choose between the North and South, “the Founders would be with them.”⁵³ As Jonathan B. Crider has argued, Southern media, particularly the popular periodical *DeBow’s Review*, often “join[ed] contemporary political struggles with [the] valiant sacrifices of men in Revolutionary times.”⁵⁴ In the 1850s especially, the Southern memory of the Revolution also prioritized the Constitution as the founding document of the United States. Having stacked up such constitutional victories for the protection and expansion of slavery as the Compromise of 1850’s Fugitive Slave Act and the Dred Scott decision, Southerners had cause to feel that the Constitution was protecting their right to property in slaves that they believed it enshrined.

The transition from Southerners in the 1850s to Confederates in the 1860s, however, required a significant shift in their memory of the Revolution. As secession neared, many Southerners began to argue more broadly that the Constitution had never been intended to create a perpetual union. Instead, they claimed it was a compact from which, the founders understood, the parties could withdraw at any time. Such an argument offered a drastic recharacterization of the founding. Following Lincoln’s election in 1860 and into the secession crisis of 1861, prominent Southerners, such as DeBow, Jefferson Davis, and others, used the memory of the Revolution as a means of justifying secession, analogizing

51. Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 103.

52. Edmund Ruffin, “Consequences of Abolition Agitation,” *DeBow’s Review* 23, no. 3 (September 1857): 267.

53. Rubin, “Seventy-Six and Sixty-One,” 91.

54. Crider, “De Bow’s Revolution,” 321.

the Southern resistance to the North with the founders' fight against the tyranny of Great Britain.⁵⁵ In late 1860, multiple Southern congressmen even drew on the Declaration's idea of the right "to alter or to abolish" a government on the floor of the House and Senate.⁵⁶ Moreover, "Southern leaders argued that southern states embodied what the Founding Fathers had envisioned the United States to be and that northern states had radically altered that vision."⁵⁷ But once secession had been achieved, the Confederacy needed a new identity and the old memory of the Revolution would no longer suffice.

In the wake of secession, De Bow, with others following his lead, began offering a reinterpretation of the Revolution not as the glorious origins of a now-corrupted nation, but as a fundamentally flawed endeavor doomed from the start and without which the South would have been better off.⁵⁸ The Revolution had tried to join "two systems of civilization" or "two distinct peoples" with "two separate nationalities." Both the Federalists and Republicans had tried to "reconcile these two peoples, the former by striving to raise the nation up to the Constitution, the latter by bringing the Constitution down to the level of the popular will—but both failing, signally failing, to achieve an impossible result."⁵⁹ In other words, the Constitution, which had not been intended to be anything more than a temporary compact, had been even further corrupted by the rise of democracy that followed it. Thanks to his perceived role in the progress of democracy, Thomas Jefferson, formerly a Southern hero of the Revolution, was now a "fanatical political monomaniac" and the "putative father of all the calamities that are now being visited upon the nation." His Declaration was now no longer just a nonlegal document of little practical importance, but "an instrument more properly expressive of the passionate and delirious ravings of a Parisian mob, than the calm, dignified, and deliberate utterance of a nation."⁶⁰ Washington, Adams, and Hamilton, they argued, had failed in their attempts to limit "democratic principles," which upon Jefferson's election began a tyranny of the majority that could only end in secession. DeBow claimed that the still admirable founders like Washington "had not a firm conviction in the durability of the government [the Constitution] had created." The Constitution had never been up to the task of protecting property from the tyrannical majority. The fact that "a political party, denying that *persons* are *property*, and by force of numbers preparing to found upon that dogma a permanent tyranny" would achieve such ends "under regular, *constitutional* forms" plainly showed the Constitution's inherent flaws.

55. Crider, "De Bow's Revolution," 325–26.

56. See Jabez Curry, *The Perils and Duty of the South* (Washington, D.C.: Lemuel Towers, 1860); Judah Benjamin, *Speech of Hon. J. P. Benjamin, of Louisiana, on the right of secession. Delivered in the Senate of the United States, Dec. 31, 1860* (Washington, D.C.: Lemuel Towers, 1861).

57. Benjamin, *Speech of Hon J. P. Benjamin*, 325, 324.

58. Such arguments have been revived recently in such opinion pieces as Dylan Matthews, "3 Reasons the American Revolution was a Mistake," *Vox*, July 3, 2019. <https://www.vox.com/2015/7/2/8884885/american-revolution-mistake>

59. "National Characteristics—The Issues of the Day," *DeBow's Review* 5, no. 1 (Jan. 1861): 44–46.

60. "The Past and Present," *DeBow's Review* 5, no. 2 (Feb. 1861): 189.

Therefore, DeBow argued, “The new government had the seeds of death planted in its constitution.”

The new Confederate Constitution would use the Constitution as a model for what not to do, though rhetorically they shared many similarities. In his infamous Cornerstone Speech, Alexander Stephens, vice-president of the new Confederate States of America, conceded that the founders had not been decidedly proslavery after all. He argued that their beliefs that slavery was “wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically . . . rested upon the assumption of the equality of races.” As a result, he rejected the legacy of the Revolution by declaring that the founders and the ideas on which the Revolution was based “were fundamentally wrong.” So concerned were they with not giving any credence to the Declaration’s idea of equality that they did not often draw on its other more useful idea regarding the right of resistance. In 1862, Edward Pollard began his *Southern History of the War* by describing the idea that the “Union of the States was destined to be perpetual” as a “natal delusion.”⁶¹ For decades, Southerners had argued that the founders had been proud slaveowners who created a Constitution designed to protect the institution. After secession, the Constitution became properly understood to them as a “poisoned chalice.”⁶² Secession and the need for a new national identity provoked a new memory of the Revolution that transformed it from a story about birth into a story about death, while also transforming the founders from diehard expansionists to, effectively, abolitionists. The Revolution and the founders were no longer to be venerated so much as chastised and corrected.

Following emancipation and the end of the Civil War, Southerners had to reconstruct a new Southern memory of the Revolution to account for their new circumstances. The split from the Revolution had been so sudden and necessary that rebuilding the relationship between the South and the Revolution would be a long process. In much of the South, celebrations of the Fourth of July did not resume immediately upon the war’s conclusion—at least not for white Southerners. African Americans, however, adopted the holiday with enthusiasm and revelry.⁶³ In postwar Charleston, the Fourth of July was one of the major public celebrations for the African-American community along with Emancipation Day. Thousands of African Americans flocked from well outside the city to watch black military regiments march and engage in ring dances. As Ethan Kytle and Blain Roberts note, in Reconstruction-era Charleston, the processions were “a practical reminder of the military force that kept at bay the white paramilitary groups, including the Ku Klux Klan and hundreds of rifle and sabre clubs, hoping to end Republican rule in the South.” The ring dances, they point out, resembled the ring shout performed by slaves as a form of “mocking the formal manners and customs of the planter class.” Even though their relationship to the holiday was ambiguous in the years immediately after the war, white Charlestonians deeply

61. Edward Pollard, *Southern History of the War: The First Year of the War* (Richmond: West & Johnston, 1862), 11–12.

62. Pollard, *Southern History of the War*, 196.

63. See Sweet, “The Fourth of July and Black Americans in the Nineteenth Century.”

resented black appropriation of the holiday, lamenting that the Fourth of July had become “a [n****r] day.”⁶⁴ Southern Democrats would eventually reclaim the South along with the Fourth of July and they would return to their previous memories of Washington—and even Jefferson in due time—as exemplars of the glory of the Old South and its revolutionary heritage.⁶⁵

But postwar conflicts over the memory of the Revolution were not limited to the South. With the end of Reconstruction came the centennial of independence in 1876, in which all of the conflicts over class, gender, and race and their relationship to citizenship figured prominently in the “cradle of the Revolution,” Boston.⁶⁶ In the years of the war and Reconstruction, the abolitionist commemoration of the Boston Massacre as “Crispus Attucks’ Day” had diminished relative to the years before the war. But in the mid-1870s, with the centennial looming and preparations being made for publicly commemorating it, Attucks’s memory underwent a revival of sorts. And, again, it played a visible role in African-American Bostonians’ claims to full citizenship in both the town and nation. However, in decidedly conservative Brahmin Boston, the memory of Attucks and the Boston Massacre were hardly the parts of the Revolution they sought to privilege in the celebrations they were largely responsible for organizing. At the same time, female suffragist groups also sought to have a role to play in the anniversary by analogizing themselves with the colonists and the current federal government with George III. The elite Women’s Centennial Executive Committee responded to the suffragists with “resentment and hostility.”

The centennial also exacerbated issues created by the city’s increasing ethnic diversity. The city’s growing Irish immigrant community, too, sought to stake their own claim to the memory of the Revolution. As Craig Bruce Smith has argued, “For the Yankees, being American meant being the sole descendants of the Revolution; convinced of their blood status, they wanted to guard against anyone whom they deemed unworthy encroaching on this exclusive domain.” While for the Irish, as well as African Americans and women, being American “meant adopting the Revolution’s ideals of freedom and equality.”⁶⁷ The idea of the Revolution as defined by ideals and one’s claim to its legacy as defined by their assent was being tested by the centennial in “the cradle of liberty.” The Boston Brahmin aristocracy was losing its hold on the city, both politically and socially, and they sought to use the centennial and the memory of the Revolution as a means of stemming the political and social changes they so feared. But African Americans, women, and the Irish also used the centennial as a means to assert their own claims to enjoy full citizenship as justified by their own memories of the Revolution, which were very much in line with that enunciated decades before by abolitionists, and Frederick Douglass particularly.

64. Kytte and Roberts, *Denmark Vesey’s Garden*, ch. 2.

65. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, 162–226.

66. Smith, “Claiming the Centennial.”

67. Smith, “Claiming the Centennial,” 8.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the memory of the Revolution was repeatedly invoked by both new groups of immigrants and a new generation of suffragists. In the 1930s and 1940s, when the Communist Party of the United States of America sought to move beyond their largely foreign-born membership, they tried to appeal to native-born Americans by naming their flagship educational institution the Jefferson School of Social Science. They also declared that “communism is twentieth-century Americanism” and sought to highlight the more radical elements of what they had previously dismissed as a bourgeois revolution. In 1939, when Germany sought to secure popular American support for Nazi policies, the German American Bund held a large parade on the Upper East Side of Manhattan filled with marching bands and lots of American flags. They also held a rally downtown in the old Madison Square Garden attended by 20,000 people who, before anything else, could not help but notice the stage’s backdrop: a nearly forty-foot portrait of George Washington flanked on each side by the Nazi party symbol. Of course, as the Cold War heated up in the 1950s, the Revolution played a key role in defining Americanism as the alternative to Soviet communism, in which it was praised as the origins of American capitalism. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the Civil Rights and other social movements drawing on the memory of the Revolution while academic historians began a still-continuing process of incorporating women, African Americans, and Native Americans into the history of the Revolution, much as Ellet and Nell had in the 1850s. The Bicentennial raised questions among the African-American community over whether they should celebrate the anniversary or not and the memory of Crispus Attucks was once again brought to bear.⁶⁸ In other words, political, cultural, and social conflict continued to be shaped by contested memories of the Revolution throughout the twentieth century, as well to the present day.

This article has taken a broad sweep over the nineteenth century and some of its most familiar political conflicts to suggest the prevalence of not just references to the Revolution but coherent efforts to redefine the Revolution in popular memory. It has suggested that the memory of the Revolution served as an important tool in American political culture to help forge and then spread group identities. Furthermore, it has also suggested that this cultural process of constructing new memories of the Revolution has been a consistent tool in the broader political struggles informed by issues of class, race, and gender over the definition of American citizenship.

Each generation of Americans has to reinterpret the Revolution for itself, and within each generation, as we have seen, a multitude of groups and interests will interpret it in different ways. It is a near-constant feature of an American political culture that has often been defined in many ways by change. The memory of the Revolution has been malleable

68. Dr. Joseph H. Jackson, Vernon E. Jordan, Jr., and Lerone Bennett, Jr., “Should Blacks Celebrate the Bicentennial,” *Ebony* (August 1976): 34–42; Benjamin Quarles, “A Group Portrait,” *Ebony* (August 1976): 44–58.

for all the reasons noted above and, as a result, Americans have always been able to find the best and worst of themselves reflected in the Revolution. Those reflections provide the foundation for the process of memory construction. In the twenty-first century, perhaps the defining feature of the Revolution in a good portion of the public's memory of the event is the glaring hypocrisy of elite white males rousing the public to action with a rhetoric of liberty and equality while also owning fellow human beings. Indeed, it may be the case that, in the twenty-first century, the importance of the memory of the Revolution both to social movements and in general is diminishing relative to the past. That would be a significant development in the history of the memory of the Revolution. Only time will tell if that is the case. Nevertheless, it is clear that as we near the sescentennial of independence, Americans continue to redefine the Revolution and reconsider what it means to them and to the society they live in and the society they want to live in. Recognizing and understanding how the memory of the Revolution has been contested throughout our history adds meaningful and necessary context as we reckon with our own multiple and competing understandings of the American origins myth.