

Revolution Lost?

Vast Early America, National History, and the American Revolution

Michael D. Hattem

IS there still a meaningful place for the American Revolution and the nation-state it created within a field increasingly defined intellectually and institutionally by the “Vast Early America” paradigm? Having emerged as a savvy form of social media branding, that paradigm has become early Americanists’ continental and hemispheric contribution to the long-standing historiographical trend toward transnational and global history.¹ In addition to decentering the nation-state from the narrative of early American history, it has also promoted a way of making that history, including the revolution, more diverse and inclusive. Such claims undergird one of the central implied values of Vast Early America as being separate from and inherently more relevant to our contemporary world and society than traditional national history. The most recent revolutionary scholarship, however, both belies concerns about the revolution being lost and displays a decided relevance to our world and society. Assessing these new developments in revolutionary historiography allows us to consider what is gained when it is put into conversation with Vast Early America.

Over the last five years, a plethora of work—almost all of it in the authors’ first books—has emerged to offer new analyses and begin to change the questions we ask about the revolution. Many in this cohort of historians began their graduate training in the years around the economic crash of 2007. Their work—now being published as the sescentennial of independence looms on the horizon—can be defined by a few distinct themes and the intersections between them: cultural power, institution building, and state formation. Most importantly, this new scholarship on the revolution is as directly relevant to

Michael D. Hattem is the associate director of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute.

¹ Karin Wulf, “Vast Early America: Three Simple Words for a Complex Reality,” *Humanities* 40, no. 1 (Winter 2019), <https://www.neh.gov/article/vast-early-america>. For Wulf’s first use of the hashtag on Twitter, in 2016, see Wulf (@kawulf), “Where is ‘Early America’? Where does it begin? End? Thoughts on #VastEarlyAmerica. . . .” Twitter, Jan. 5, 2016, 7:16 a.m., <https://twitter.com/kawulf/status/684347849203564546>.

William and Mary Quarterly, 3d ser., 78, no. 2, April 2021
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5309/willmaryquar.78.2.0269>

and decidedly a product of contemporary social, political, economic, and cultural contexts as that of Vast Early America.

Recent works on the revolution have explored a variety of expressions of cultural power and are illuminating the historical context of prominent themes in today's world—such as issues of race, capitalism, education, the media, and more—in ways revolutionary scholarship has not done for more than a generation.² Though scholarship on the political and cultural history of the revolution over the last two decades has been primarily concerned with its consequences in the early republic, more recent scholarship is drawing a picture in which culture actually played an important role in shaping the revolution itself, not just its consequences. In so doing, these works are pushing through a door toward a cultural history of the revolution first opened by the influential works of T. H. Breen, Nicole Eustace, Benjamin H. Irvin, Sarah Knott, and Brendan McConville in the decade prior to 2015. As a result, current historians are opening up new avenues of inquiry into the revolution, a topic that has been perceived as so historiographically stagnant for such a long time that three national conferences were held in the last decade with the explicit goal of attempting to revive it.³

Similarly, this generation of historians, who came of age professionally in the post-9/11 world and have continued their work through Donald Trump's presidency, have watched those events and their aftermath have dramatic impacts on U.S. national institutions, clearly revealing the malleable and tenuous nature of American institutional life in the twenty-first

² For example, see Zara Anishanslin, *Portrait of a Woman in Silk: Hidden Histories of the British Atlantic World* (New Haven, Conn., 2016); Amanda B. Moniz, *From Empire to Humanity: The American Revolution and the Origins of Humanitarianism* (New York, 2016); Robert G. Parkinson, *The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution* (Williamsburg, Va., and Chapel Hill, N.C., 2016); Tom Cutterham, *Gentlemen Revolutionaries: Power and Justice in the New American Republic* (Princeton, N.J., 2017); Jennifer Van Horn, *The Power of Objects in Eighteenth-Century British America* (Williamsburg, Va., and Chapel Hill, N.C., 2017); Craig Bruce Smith, *American Honor: The Creation of the Nation's Ideals during the Revolutionary Era* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2018); Rachel B. Herrmann, *No Useless Mouth: Waging War and Fighting Hunger in the American Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2019); Mark Boonshoft, *Aristocratic Education and the Making of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2020); Michael D. Hattem, *Past and Prologue: Politics and Memory in the American Revolution* (New Haven, Conn., 2020); Daniel R. Mandell, *The Lost Tradition of Economic Equality in America, 1600–1870* (Baltimore, 2020), chaps. 3–4.

³ T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York, 2004); Brendan McConville, *The King's Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688–1776* (Williamsburg, Va., and Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006); Nicole Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Williamsburg, Va., and Chapel Hill, N.C., 2008); Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Williamsburg, Va., and Chapel Hill, N.C., 2009); Benjamin H. Irvin, *Clothed in Robes of Sovereignty: The Continental Congress and the People Out of Doors* (New York, 2014). The three national conferences were “The American Revolution Reborn: New Perspectives for the Twenty-First Century,” hosted by the McNeil Center for Early American Studies and the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, May 30–June 1, 2013; “So Sudden an Alteration: The Causes, Course, and Consequences of the American Revolution,” hosted by the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Apr. 9–11, 2015; and “The American Revolution: People and Power,” hosted by the Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif., May 15–16, 2015.

century. These historians are exploring the cultural role and political ramifications of institutions and institution building in and around the American Revolution, focusing on topics such as the origins and development of the presidential cabinet; customhouses and the relationship between merchants and the state; the role of associationism and institution building in shaping political mobilization during the imperial crisis in Philadelphia; and the networks that fostered media production and information dissemination in a time of high partisanship, upheaval, and uncertainty.⁴ This work, in part, is building off a previous generation of early national political historians' interest in early national and antebellum voluntary associations but extends that interest both topically and temporally to include more formal institutions in the earlier revolutionary and late colonial periods.

In addition, as recent events have highlighted the degree to which municipal police departments have become militarized and as society deals with issues of surveillance and hyper-incarceration, contemporary revolutionary historians are exploring topics such as the role of military occupation in everyday life as well as the impact of prisoners of war, naval impressment, and the emergence of the carceral state in shaping the revolution and the nation it brought into being.⁵ This recent scholarship engages relevant questions about how individuals and communities interact with, shape, and are shaped by institutions and the process of building them, including the influence of gendered, racial, and class dynamics on the nation's earliest institutions and the cultural development of institutional authority. In the process, this work is showing how political, governmental, cultural, military, and economic institutions were defined and molded by a wide variety of revolutionary-era Americans.

Likewise, a focus on state formation is equally timely and intersects with each of the topics previously mentioned. Debates over economic forms are currently taking a more prominent part in U.S. political culture and rhetoric than at any time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, with a self-described socialist mounting multiple serious challenges for a major political party's nomination on a platform that included dramatically increasing universal government services. Meanwhile, a number of recent works are challenging the old chestnut that the revolution was fought for "limited government" by exploring what revolutionary Americans actually expected of government

⁴ Lindsay M. Chervinsky, *The Cabinet: George Washington and the Creation of an American Institution* (Cambridge, Mass., 2020); Jessica Choppin Roney, *Governed by a Spirit of Opposition: The Origins of American Political Practice in Colonial Philadelphia* (Baltimore, 2014); Gautham Rao, *National Duties: Custom Houses and the Making of the American State* (Chicago, 2016); Joseph M. Adelman, *Revolutionary Networks: The Business and Politics of Printing the News, 1763–1789* (Baltimore, 2019).

⁵ Jen Manion, *Liberty's Prisoners: Carceral Culture in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2015); Aaron Sullivan, *The Disaffected: Britain's Occupation of Philadelphia during the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 2019); Donald F. Johnson, *Occupied America: British Military Rule and the Experience of Revolution* (Philadelphia, 2020); T. Cole Jones, *Captives of Liberty: Prisoners of War and the Politics of Vengeance in the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 2020); Serena Zabin, *The Boston Massacre: A Family History* (Boston, 2020).

rather than focusing on what they believed it should not do.⁶ The role of military and political mobilization in state formation has also been the subject of a number of recent books.⁷ As the nation-state and citizens' connections to it face both globalizing and localizing pressures, new scholarship on the revolution is addressing those issues and the questions they raise in ways that are meaningful for both historiography and society.

This new scholarship—almost entirely by junior scholars in their first books—contrasts with the first few, most prominent works attempting to apply the Vast Early America perspective via a continental lens directly to the revolution, which have been written largely by senior historians for trade presses.⁸ Such work highlights a fundamental contradiction in one of the key ways in which the significance of Vast Early America is expressed by some of its proponents, who argue historically that borderlands should be an integral part of U.S. national history but, at the same time, frame the approach of Vast Early America historiographically as the more relevant alternative to the outmoded and endangered species of national and political history.

Yet one of the defining features of this recent revolutionary scholarship, beyond its contemporary relevance, is that almost all of it is fundamentally political and national history. But it is a political history informed by decades of scholarship on the topics of race, gender, and class in early America, and it is a national history informed by decades of scholarship seeking to contextualize early America in the broader world. These scholars present a political history that understands “politics” as being about contests for and struggles over power broadly defined and a national history without nationalist intention. As a result, their books offer a political and national history both by and about more than just elite white men, and more potentially integrative with the approach and goals of Vast Early America than the national and political history of earlier generations.

The primary historiographical significance of this recent scholarship on the American Revolution may be found in the degree to which it appears to be escaping the paradigmatic chains that shackled scholarly interest in the revolution for decades after the inevitable ruts that followed the ideological and neo-progressive approaches. It has been able to do this because it is not beholden to the predominant paradigms in revolutionary historiography from the twentieth century, such as the ideological, constitutional, or economic interpretations. As a result, this recent scholarship on the revolution is not primarily concerned with addressing the reductionist binaries centered around

⁶ Steve Pincus, *The Heart of the Declaration: The Founders' Case for an Activist Government* (New Haven, Conn., 2016); Justin du Rivage, *Revolution against Empire: Taxes, Politics, and the Origins of American Independence* (New Haven, Conn., 2017); Christopher R. Pearl, *Conceived in Crisis: The Revolutionary Creation of an American State* (Charlottesville, Va., 2020).

⁷ Kenneth Owen, *Political Community in Revolutionary Pennsylvania, 1774–1800* (New York, 2018); Lindsay Schakenbach Regele, *Manufacturing Advantage: War, the State, and the Origins of American Industry, 1776–1848* (Baltimore, 2019).

⁸ Claudio Saunt, *West of the Revolution: An Uncommon History of 1776* (New York, 2014); Kathleen DuVal, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution* (New York, 2015); Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750–1804* (New York, 2016).

the nebulous notion of “meaning” that were the historiographical product of the Cold War but have long ceased to be productive for generating new scholarship, binaries such as radical/conservative, continuity/rupture, and conflict/consensus. It contains no essentializing impulse, no pretense toward an all-encompassing or overarching interpretation. Instead, it seeks to build on—rather than replace—previous paradigms. Indeed, the common thread tying much of this scholarship together is an interest in how the revolution worked.

ONE POTENTIALLY FRUITFUL MEANS of integrating Vast Early America directly into the analysis and not just the narrative of the American Revolution may be to draw from and build on this recent revolutionary historiography. For example, historians of Vast Early America might explore how specific forms of cultural power on the Eastern Seaboard were transmitted to and transformed at the frontier and in the borderlands (and vice versa) during the revolutionary era specifically; how the process of institution building occurred outside of the original states, with a focus on those areas’ and peoples’ relationships and negotiations with eastern institutions; and how the process of state formation played out on the ground beyond the formal boundaries of the state. To be sure, many of these topics have been or are being explored in the colonial, early national, and antebellum periods, but they have received much less attention in the revolutionary era. Those pursuing such topics in the future will have the benefit of recent revolutionary scholarship to inform their work. Similarly, as more Vast Early America works on the revolution appear, it is incumbent upon revolutionary historians to integrate them into future scholarship on the revolution. Such reciprocity is not only beneficial but necessary in such a large, rich, and multivalent field as early American history.

Another potentially promising direction may be seen in historians viewing the early national and antebellum United States as an empire.⁹ Defining the early national United States as an empire should involve reckoning with the revolutionary origins of nineteenth-century American imperialism. A number of writers and orators referred to the new republic as an empire as early as the late 1770s. In a 1778 Fourth of July oration, for example, David Ramsay claimed the revolution had “laid the foundations of a new empire,” and he praised “the ardor of a new people rising to empire and renown” who sought “to assume our independent station among the empires of the world.”¹⁰ There have been no systematic studies of early national Americans’ use of such a term and, hence, the variety of ways in which they defined it, but such works may provide a starting point or a rhetorical key for understanding the origins and earliest development of the imperial United States of the mid-nineteenth century. Such an approach may also illuminate the origins

⁹ This perspective on the early United States can be seen in “Making a Republic Imperial,” Program in Early American Economy and Society conference, Library Company of Philadelphia, Mar. 28–29, 2019. Also see Christopher Grasso and Karin Wulf, “Nothing Says ‘Democracy’ like a Visit from the Queen: Reflections on Empire and Nation in Early American Histories,” *Journal of American History* 95, no. 3 (December 2008): 764–81.

¹⁰ David Ramsay, *An Oration on the Advantages of American Independence*. . . . (Charleston, 1778), 20 (“foundations”), 17 (“ardor”), 13 (“independent station”), 16.

of one of the most fundamental contradictions of political culture in the early republic and of American historiography since: the coexistence and codependence of a rhetoric of anticolonialism inherited from the revolution and the reality of a national politics of imperialism aimed at, among other things, continuing settler colonialism apace.

JOHANN N. NEEM HAS RECENTLY ARGUED that there is an increasing “epistemological gap” between the paradigms of Vast Early America and national history, which he suggests are becoming “two distinct, coherent, and incompatible fields of historiography.”¹¹ Part of the reason these two fields of Vast Early America and national history seem so “incompatible” is because proponents sometimes frame Vast Early America as the antithesis of national history, while many proponents of national history see Vast Early America as an inherent rebuke of their own work. It is not uncommon for those working within new historiographical paradigms to essentialize their perspectives as a means of distinguishing their work and its value from the older, entrenched paradigms they seek to challenge. At the same time, it is not uncommon for proponents of those entrenched paradigms to either dismiss or devalue new perspectives. This, however, need not be the case.

American history is messy and unable to be contained within any zero-sum framework without losing much of the complexity that makes it interesting. To understand it in all its complexity requires both transcending subsequent geographic borders and reckoning with the nation-state. Vast Early America and national history should be seen less as irreconcilable opposites and more as equal and necessary historiographical partners in crafting a narrative—good and bad—that speaks to issues of contemporary relevance while also capturing the full complexity of the ebbs and flows of the nation’s history and peoples.

Mark Peterson recently wrote, “If we are really going to rethink America, we need to go to the archives with questions generated by our current predicament and find new direction there.”¹² Vast Early America is succeeding at doing that for early American history in the colonial, early national, and antebellum periods, and recent scholarship in national history is doing the same for the revolution. Therefore, allowing the time and space for both methodological and analytic reciprocity between these two historiographies holds out the promise of making current scholarship on the revolution—vast or otherwise—even more relevant to the nation and the contemporary world in which it finds itself. Integrating the two, rather than treating them as mutually and irreconcilably antagonistic, offers the chance of creating a truly vast national history with the potential to reach an even broader audience than either could achieve on its own.

¹¹ Johann N. Neem, “From Polity to Exchange: The Fate of Democracy in the Changing Fields of Early American Historiography,” *Modern Intellectual History* 17, no. 3 (September 2020): 867–88 (quotations, 869).

¹² Mark Peterson, “Unschooling the Revolution,” review of *Rethinking America: From Empire to Republic*, by John Murrin, *Journal of the Early Republic* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 117–23 (quotation, 123).