

Expressions of Nationalism in Bostonian Post-Revolutionary Print Materials

Senior Thesis

by

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I have adhered to the Washington College Honor Code in completing this paper.

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Introduction

I became interested in studying early American nationalism after reading Susanna Rowson's seduction novel, *Charlotte Temple*. Published in America in 1794, the book was the nation's first bestseller. In *Charlotte Temple*, Rowson explores transatlantic themes connected to her own background as a British-American.¹ The author employs caricatures of Britishness and Americanness in the text; these caricatures piqued my curiosity about national identities in opposition in the post-revolutionary period. While reading, I began to wonder to what extent early American literature helped shape—and was shaped by—views of nationalism after America gained its independence from Great Britain.

This question was not easily answerable. Historians and literary scholars alike still struggle to concretely define early American nationalism, a concept that has proven itself to be inherently contradictory and variable. After the Revolutionary War, people's identities were shaped as much by regional differences, community values, and political perspectives as they were shaped by perceived Americanness.² For some, Americanness was defined by Britishness: the former embodying a rejection of the latter.³ To come to a better understanding of the influence nationalist attitudes had on American literature—and vice versa—in the years following the war, it was necessary to consider the role other forms of self-identification played

¹ Melissa J. Homestead and Camryn Hansen, "Susanna Rowson's Transatlantic Career," *Early American Literature* 45, no. 3 (2010): 619-54. Rowson's life and career serves as an intriguing case study on transatlanticism in the post-revolutionary period. In this essay, Homestead and Hansen outline how, in life and in literature, the author navigated between American and British ways of being. Rowson's multivarious identity exemplifies the difficulties scholars face in their pursuit of a complete understanding of early American nationalism.

² Robb K. Haberman, "Provincial Nationalism: Civic Rivalry in Postrevolutionary American Magazines," *Early American Studies* 10, no. 1 (2012): 162-93. Haberman's focal phrase, "provincial nationalism," clarifies that expressions of nationalism in early America were deeply influenced by individual communities' concerns.

³ Kariann Akemi Yokota, *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11.

in the lives of early Americans. The study of nationalism also suffers from imposed idealism.⁴ Postwar authors and modern scholars, intent on depicting America as enviably unified, often fail to address American nationalism's inherently antithetical nature. In celebrating their place in a new nation, people in the post-revolutionary period often embraced local interests. In Massachusetts, for example, revolutionary activities sparked an interest in cultivating a sense of national identity. All the while, local tensions colored how that national identity was formed. Thus, it was essential to contextualize sources and to investigate authors' potential biases when conducting research.

Though American nationalism is a complex and amorphous topic, it is still worth investigating. Developing an understanding of how literature transformed—and was transformed by—nationalism in the early years of the republic will allow scholars to better comprehend the myriad of identities that make up America today and the influence various forms of media have on the construction of those identities. Furthermore, focusing the study of nationalism on the written word reorients investigations into early expressions of national identity around those for whom it was a lived experience. Originating in a period characterized by increased literacy and a growing capacity for publication, early American literature provides key insight into everyday people's attitudes toward their own Americanness.⁵

This survey of primary source materials draws on a range of short-form texts—including sermons and poetry—published between 1776 and 1820.⁶ Centering its focus on Boston, which

⁴ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 3-5.

⁵ Robert A. Gross, "Introduction: An Extensive Republic," in *A History of the Book in America*, ed. Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley, vol. 2, *An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 3-4.

⁶ This paper is anchored in the chronology of the post-revolutionary period in much the same way as Waldstreicher's monograph. 1776 marks the passage of the Lee Resolution, a document which officially declared the Second Continental Congress's assertion that the colonies were independent from Britain. The passage of the

was undeniably a hub of revolutionary activity, printing, and nationalist sentiment, this paper pairs sentence-level breakdowns of primary texts with contextual analyses informed by secondary source material. Contradictions are highlighted in an effort to embrace the paradoxical nature of early American nationalism and to form a less idyllic picture of the subject. While it is unlikely that a wholly national identity existed in America⁷—or that it ever will, for that matter—the fragmentary, fluid nature of people’s understandings of Americanness is, of itself, worthy of note. This paper’s assessment of uncertainty within and differentiation amongst print sources’ espousals of nationalism highlights the importance of literature’s role in shaping and sharing intangible cultural conceptions while also demonstrating scholars’ failures to embrace that same intangibility.

The first section of this essay tracks the evolution of the historiography of post-revolutionary American nationalism. Particular attention is paid to historical conceptions of nationalism as it relates to post-revolutionary print culture. Intertextual connections between secondary sources are identified, as they offer insight into how the project’s overarching argument—that historians should situate American nationalism as a viable, yet paradoxical, intellectual and cultural exchange voiced through writing—will fit into ongoing scholarly conversations.

Then begins the contextualization and critique of post-revolutionary celebrations, and the printed materials that accompanied them, as artifacts of nationalism. The second section of the paper, focusing on Boston in particular, considers how post-revolutionary New Englanders were beginning to view their national past, present, and future. A range of print materials offer useful

Missouri Compromise in 1820 signals the end of the post-revolutionary period. The law ushered the politics of slavery in the limelight, plunging the nation into a new era.

⁷ Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 3.

inroads into this inquiry. The public/private binary and its impact on early American identities is broken down in the third section, which features a comparison between two Bostonian Fourth of July orations and is focused primarily on nationalistic celebrations. The paper's third section focuses on the rejection of Britishness that accompanied the creation of a national sense of Americanness. Acting as a kind of literary collage, the poetry examined in this section encompasses several subjects, experiences, and perspectives. Close examinations of these texts as they relate to historical contexts and scholarly approaches reveal new potential for the study of early American nationalism as it relates to regional identities, print culture, and transatlantic connections.

Chapter I: The Historiography of Early American Nationalism

Section I: Post-Revolutionary Nationalism as Paradoxical

Historian David Waldstreicher opens his 1997 monograph, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820*, with the assertion that “we have misunderstood American nationalism.”⁸ Characterized by abstraction, contradiction, and paradox, the subject is notoriously enigmatic. Historians struggle to concretely define nationalism, neatly pinpoint its origins, or adequately interpret its manifestations. Early scholars ignored the complicating factors intrinsic to the topic, favoring romanticized interpretations founded in exceptionalism. An example of one such scholar is Ernest Renan, one of the earliest critics of nationalism, who first posited nations as ideas in 1882. In a commonly referenced lecture, Renan strips nations of tangibility, reasserting their metaphysicality through an

⁸ Waldstreicher, *Perpetual Fetes*, 3.

explanation of their reliance on public memory.⁹ Renan and his contemporaries felt that American nationalism was wholly unique, and thus “escaped the pathologies of other, bad nationalisms,” like fascism.¹⁰ Renan defined nationalism in a way that connected it invariably to the intellectual pursuits of his age, thus failing to approach post-revolutionary American nationalism from a point of view unencumbered by nineteenth-century influences.¹¹ As Waldstreicher notes, “the particular strategies of early American nationalists derived from a particular moment in world history.”¹² This complication is further teased out by Robert A. Gross in the introduction to *An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*, the second volume of *A History of the Book in America*. Gross agrees that the scholarly perspectives produced by Renan and his contemporaries were heavily influenced by popular modes of thinking, stating that “the mid-nineteenth-century champions of a national literature were as dependent on Old World inspiration as their eighteenth-century forebears had been on Enlightenment models.”¹³ Asynchronous approaches to the subject of nationalism, such as Renan’s, have since proven insupportable.

Modern day historians strive to avoid letting modern conceptions that did not exist in the post-revolutionary period influence their takes on nationalism; likewise, this survey seeks to acknowledge the biases present in secondary source literature and to approach primary source texts impartially. Waldstreicher’s *Perpetual Fetes* and a more recent monograph, *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation* by Kariann Akemi Yokota,

⁹ Ernest Renan, *What is a Nation? and Other Political Writings*, ed. and trans. M. F. N. Giglioli (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). Renan famously likens the nation to a soul.

¹⁰ Waldstreicher, *Perpetual Fetes*, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 5. See also Rupert Wilkinson, *The Pursuit of the American Character* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). The book provides useful insight into the pervasive intellectual trends that shaped nineteenth-century historians’ approaches to the subject of American nationalism.

¹² *Ibid*, 7.

¹³ Gross, “Introduction,” 46.

are examples of recent texts that achieve these goals particularly well. Neither author strips early American nationalism of its complexity in pursuit of their argument. Both embrace the paradoxical nature of nationalism, shying away from making overarching claims that could minimize the messiness of the subject.¹⁴ While Renan spurned “tensions and contradictions,” Waldstreicher and Yokota embraced nonlinearity and ambiguity.¹⁵

It was not easy for historians to abandon black-and-white ways of thinking about American nationalism. In the 1950s, historians like Richard Hofstadter continued to apply Renan’s idealistic perspective to American nationalism, claiming that “America itself was primarily an idea” or “ideology.”¹⁶ Hofstadter’s interpretation suggested that Americans themselves do not have ideologies. More recent scholars are pushing back against his take, insisting that Americans “did indeed have ideologies...the *interaction* of radical and reactionary ideologies with nationalism has been a recurring trend in American history.”¹⁷ One early critic of this limiting definition of nationalism was Benedict Anderson, author of *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Anderson’s book considers nationalism in relation to cultural practices, language, patriotic performances, and race; *Imagined Communities* takes a more nuanced approach to the topic. In his “reorientation” of the subject, Anderson argues that it is fallacious to view nationalism as an anomaly if anomaly is being defined under a

¹⁴ Andrew R. L. Cayton, “We Are All Nationalists, We Are All Localists,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 18, no. 3 (1998): 521-8; Marla R. Miller, “Objects in Geographic and Cultural Space,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (2013): 177-83. In his review, Cayton notes Waldstreicher’s ability to demonstrate how “fragmentation and integration reinforced each other” in the early years of the republic (522). Similarly, Miller’s review touches on Yokota’s focus on “cultural ambivalence,” a term that confronts the reality of early America’s lack of cohesion (179). By characterizing Americans’ quest for nationalism as a “struggle,” Yokota, too, works to disprove the existence of a non-contradictory early American identity (180).

¹⁵ Yokota, *Unbecoming British*, 8.

¹⁶ Waldstreicher, *Perpetual Fetes*, 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 6. Original emphasis.

Marxist lens.¹⁸ Anderson's stance is still somewhat idyllic, as he does believe nationalism to exist as a kind of exception. Nevertheless, he makes useful strides toward addressing the topic's contradictory nature. In reframing nationalism as a set of cultural objects, Anderson acknowledges the impossibility of solidly defining or grounding nationalism in any one theoretical framework.¹⁹

Today's historians are making a final push toward realizing an unidealized picture of American nationalism. Waldstreicher and Yokota—alongside Robert Gross, Mary Kelley, Trish Laughran, and others—are engaging with this historiographical trend in diverse, interrelated ways. Waldstreicher's *Perpetual Fetes* tracks the formation of a cohesive national identity through an examination of the post-revolutionary press and early American celebrations. Waldstreicher confronts mid-nineteenth-century approaches to the subject, claiming that the study of early American nationalism has long been ahistorically isolating and idealistic.²⁰ According to Waldstreicher, scholars ignore the fact that “local, regional, and national identities existed simultaneously, complementing or contesting one another.”²¹ This critique is mirrored in Gross and Kelley's *An Extensive Republic*, which investigates the ways that print culture “heightened both national attachments and sectional resentments.”²² As Waldstreicher, Gross, and Kelley's approaches indicate, it is generally understood amongst twenty- and twenty-first-century scholars that nationalist sentiment was muddled by local, regional, and political concerns in the post-revolutionary period. By redefining nationalism as multilayered, dynamic, and

¹⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Waldstreicher, *Perpetual Fetes*, 5-6. Waldstreicher provides a useful list of sources which, to his mind, move toward a more comprehensive reading of American nationalism, yet still fail to shirk off the influence of idealism.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²² Gross, “Introduction,” 4.

mutable, the authors of these books seek to shed biased idealism entirely in favor of a more measured approach to the topic of American nationalism.

Yokota's *Unbecoming British* complicates the historiography even further by introducing transnational concerns to the equation. Achieving independence was no easy feat. Americans experienced a wrenching divorce from Britain, one that deeply affected their perceptions of the mother country in the years to follow. In the postwar period, Americans attempted to distance themselves from British culture—both material and nonmaterial.²³ Yokota argues that the abandonment of some distinctly British objects, customs, institutions, and mannerisms was a means by which the former colonists cultivated their Americanness. Despite participating in the wide-scale rejection of relics and practices associated with Britishness, Americans also expressed a desire to be recognized and taken seriously by Britain as a nation and as a people.²⁴ The inherent tension between these two simultaneous desires—the desire to foment nationalist attitudes through cultural distancing and the desire to strengthen transnational ties between Britain and America—is the primary focus of *Unbecoming British*.

Clearly, contemporary scholars acknowledge the important role local, regional, and transnational tensions played in the development of early-eighteenth- and late-nineteenth-century nationalism in America. Yet, in spite of the increased visibility scholars now afford these complicating factors, arguments in defense of the existence of a distinct national identity continue to be made. Waldstreicher, for example, explains how early Americans were able to “negotiate their regional differences while celebrating their Americanism.”²⁵ To Waldstreicher’s mind, “practices of nationalism provided for both divisive activity and real consensus.”²⁶ In

²³ Yokota, *Unbecoming British*, 3-18.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 3-18.

²⁵ Waldstreicher, *Perpetual Fetes*, 246.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 14.

writing *Perpetual Fetes*, Waldstreicher operated on the assumption that “Americanism” and “consensus” existed in America, in spite of regional differences. Though most scholars make similar claims in their own work, scholar Trish Loughran rejects them. In *The Republic of Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870*, Loughran argues that no centralized, cohesive form of nationalism existed in the post-revolutionary period.²⁷ Loughran abandons the conception of an “Americanism” and “consensus” that Waldstreicher brings up in his own monograph, instead asserting that local unity is the only form of cohesion that existed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.²⁸

Loughran’s deviation from the historiography—her insistence on a “fragmented” America “dominated by the limits of locale”—creates yet another paradox.²⁹ Historians like Waldstreicher see local, regional, and national post-revolutionary identities as contemporaneous and inextricably interconnected. Loughran, on the other hand, sees “localness” as a singular phenomenon, one that single-handedly “made [nation] founding possible.”³⁰ In this paper, I argue that it is erroneous to isolate nationalism from the process of nation-building in favor of a localist perspective. The prevalence of local tensions and interests does not prove that nationalism was not an important factor in the lives of Massachusettsans and all Americans. It is true that local and regional identities were—and are—an essential component of people’s perceptions of their Americanness. Perceptions of the national character certainly diverged and converged in an endless, nonlinear evolution throughout—and beyond—the post-revolutionary

²⁷ Loughran, *The Republic in Print*, xviii. Loughran is particularly focused on national disunity and the incoherency of post-revolutionary Americanness as they relate to American literary histories and mythologies.

²⁸ *Ibid*, xix. Consensus, in particular, appears here verbatim. Loughran argues that “emblems of early national consensus” are only so in today’s world. Her point relates back to the idea that conceptions of early American nationalism are influenced by modern circumstances: according to Loughran, the actual histories of canonically nationalist texts like Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* or James Madison’s *The Federalist* are incongruent with the (a)histories Americans often associate them with.

²⁹ *Ibid*, xix.

³⁰ *Ibid*, xix-xx.

period. However, none of this is to say that national identities did not exist. My essay places itself in conversation with these historiographically significant works by arguing that localism, though it sometimes conflicted with nationalist ideals, did not overshadow the presence of an American consciousness in the post-revolutionary period.

In the proceeding sections, I make a case for a reading of early American nationalism as shaped by, but not fully materialized as a result of, local difference—all the while fully embracing the antithetical nature of the topic as it is understood by historians today. I do not propose a singular interpretation of post-revolutionary nationalism; instead, I put my working definition of the phenomena of Americanness in conversation with print culture studies and early histories in the hopes of further developing the means by which historians interpret the relationship between literature and national identity as it existed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Section II: Post-Revolutionary Nationalism in Print

For decades, literature was seen as the primary vehicle by which early national identities were formed, disseminated, and mythologized. In his book *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States*, scholar Christopher Looby deconstructs this common belief. Looby notes that, though there is a “widespread American sense of nation fabrication as an intentional act of linguistic creation,” it is misleadingly uncomplicated.³¹ Looby argues that “the figure of the voiced nation...itself represents both an aspiration to intentional unity and a recognition of the fragility, temporality, and intrinsic dissemination of the imagined

³¹ Christopher Looby, *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 4.

nation.”³² Looby rejects singular interpretations of literary and print histories in much the same way that other scholars reject singular interpretations of American nationalism more broadly. Looby’s analysis of texts crucial to the period—such as Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* and Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s *Modern Chivalry*—encourages a line of thinking that embraces the fact that print culture played an intrinsic role in the formation and spread of national identities in the post-revolutionary period—while also confessing that print materials were not solely responsible for originating those identities.³³

Loughran also dismisses the idea that early American print culture was “the central and centralizing agent in the process of American nation formation” as an “ahistorical...postindustrial fantasy” in *The Republic in Print*.³⁴ According to the author, this fantasy—a product of Enlightenment ways of thinking—fails to center human agency and must be abandoned in favor of a more objective view.³⁵ This essay likewise avoids singularity and mythology; I do not propose that printed materials are the only means by which historians can access useful insight into the formation of a national character in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries or that literature alone is responsible for the creation of a distinct sense of Americanness in that period. I align myself with Looby and Loughran, viewing printed materials as both tangible artifacts and conveyances of immaterial philosophical, political, and cultural ideologies that do not exist in a historical vacuum. However, even while deconstructing the myth of the all-importance of print to the formation of the national character, it is necessary to

³² Ibid, 5. Looby draws on Anderson here, transforming his key phrase.

³³ For useful readings of *Autobiography* and *Modern Chivalry* as nationalist texts, see James M. Cox, “Autobiography and America,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 47, no. 2 (1971): 252-77 and Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), ch. 7. Looby’s interpretation of these key texts as they relate to his construction of America as a “voiced nation” is constructed in direct response to Cox and Davidson’s work.

³⁴ Loughran, *The Republic in Print*, xix.

³⁵ Ibid, 37.

recognize early American texts as useful primary sources and good exemplifiers of how national identities existed at the same time that local, regional, and transnational interests persisted in the new nation.

In addition to the oft-repeated claim that America is a nation that originated “in print,” American print culture as it relates to nationalism is a subject that becomes repetitive in its use of primary texts.³⁶ The in-depth close readings that make up *Voicing America* collectively make up a unique argument, but the printed materials Looby draws on are familiar and often privilege the voices of historical figures whose perspectives we have heard before.³⁷ Benjamin Franklin is no stranger, nor is Patrick Henry; these are the writers with which Looby begins and ends his book. *The Republic in Print*, a longer book with a larger scope, suffers somewhat from this same pitfall; George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Paine are referenced with frequency. An entire chapter of the book is devoted to *Common Sense*.³⁸ Though Loughran includes forms of literature other than novels, essays, and political documents, she still leans heavily on canonized works. It is worth noting, though, that Loughran incorporates a range of literary and non-literary material objects into her writing.³⁹ While her use of a play distinguishes her from many chroniclers of early American nationalism in print, her choice—Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast*—can be critiqued in the same way as something like *The Federalist Papers*. Loughran says herself that *The Contrast* is characterized by a “long tenure as a classic piece of nationalist American literature.”⁴⁰ In opposition of this trend, this paper works to return the study

³⁶ Ibid, xviii.

³⁷ For an explanation of the author’s rationale for selecting the primary texts included in the book, see Looby, *Voicing America*, 9.

³⁸ Loughran, *The Republic in Print*, 33-105

³⁹ For an example of Loughran’s use of physical objects, see Ibid, 205-7. *The Republic in Print* lies somewhere between *Voicing America*—which relies almost solely on the contextualization and interpretation of the written word—and *Unbecoming British*—which is almost akin to a museum exhibit in its presentation of material evidence.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 172.

of print culture and early American nationalism to the unsensational everyday by privileging uncanonized texts like newspaper articles, orations, and poetry. The figurations of America and Americanness present in these texts are important because they reflect the perspectives of common people, often as read or heard by other common people.

Chapter II: American Pasts, Presents, and Futures

The Revolutionary War divided communities, congregations, and families. Yet, many colonists were more interested in maintaining the status quo than in supporting outright rebellion, independence, or strict loyalty to the Crown.⁴¹ Postwar print materials reveal that this measured desire to maintain a state of equilibrium did not persist in the years after the war was won. As the new nation took shape, people rejoiced at their victory over the British and celebrated the success of their troops, military leaders, and politicians openly and with increasing frequency. As Waldstreicher puts it in *Perpetual Fetes*: “celebrations were no afterthoughts.”⁴²

While early celebrations of patriotic events and achievements are what made cohesiveness between the colonies—and thus their victory over Britain—possible in the first place, those same celebrations and the printed materials borne from them eventually took on deeply dividing political meanings. According to Waldstreicher, “by the 1790s, [class] resentments would reemerge in festive culture, as nationalist celebrations provided a venue for recasting them as national, partisan political divisions.”⁴³ Considering class differences were not the only cause for contention amongst Americans at the time, it is worth noting that—even in the earliest, most celebratory stage of nation-building—the United States were far from united.

⁴¹ Serena Zabin, *The Boston Massacre: A Family History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020).

⁴² Waldstreicher, *Perpetual Fetes*, 30.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 18.

Nevertheless, nationalist thought was circulating. In New England, a hub of revolutionary sentiment during the war, early postwar nationalist rhetoric and patriotic celebrations were certainly not difficult to come by. Nor were written accounts of both, which “demonstrated the simultaneity of national action and the pervasiveness of national sentiments.”⁴⁴ Publication hubs, like Boston, generated immeasurable quantities of locally accessible, pro-American materials in the postwar period—proving that New Englanders were not only interested in participating in, but in reading about and returning to patriotic celebrations at a later date. The creation of celebratory orations, sermons, and speeches in New England hints that that region of the new nation, at least, desired to perpetuate and disseminate early nationalistic fervor.

Local printing patterns contributed to the pervasiveness of early nationalism in New England and the country more broadly. According to Loughran, “books may have been important to founding not despite but *because* they were local and so importantly limited in both production and circulation.”⁴⁵ While Loughran does believe that print’s influence on nation-building is over-extrapolated, particularly in the case of Paine’s *Common Sense*,⁴⁶ she does not deny the influence printed materials had on their readership. More concentrated distributions allowed texts related to patriotic celebrations to toe the line between the “local and extralocal.”⁴⁷ In “Provincial Nationalism: Civic Rivalry in Postrevolutionary American Magazines,” Robb K. Haberman asserts that “civic pride developed concurrently with intercity rivalry” in the years following the colonies’ break with Britain.⁴⁸ Overlapping and divergent local, regional, and national concerns crept into the realm of publishing. Thus, materials printed in Boston—one of

⁴⁴ Ibid, 34.

⁴⁵ Loughran, *The Republic in Print*, 58.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 36-7.

⁴⁷ Haberman, “Provincial Nationalism,” 164.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 164.

the “nation’s leading urban centers”⁴⁹—can offer unique insight into the extent and limitations of early American nationalism, particularly when the subject of those texts is pro-American celebration.

The post-revolutionary period brings to mind a slew of -isms: republicanism, liberalism, capitalism. Spurred on by these ideologies, America spent its postwar years writing constitutions, pursuing territorial expansion, and celebrating independence in an effort to secure a place of prominence on the global stage. With wartime disruption still fresh in their memories, it is likely that Americans sought the comfort of national legitimacy and stability in the postwar period. The mythologization of the Founding Fathers is one example of how Americans’ desire for peace and solidity, at least to some extent, influenced early constructions of national identity. Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and their peers are canonized and idolized in post-revolutionary—as well as modern—American literature, national celebrations, and public consciousnesses. As Paul Heike explains in *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*, “the term ‘Fathers’ suggests tradition, legitimacy, and paternity and creates an allegory of family and affiliation that affirms the union and the cohesion of the new nation.”⁵⁰ This, and other semi-fictionalized constructions of the nation’s origins, contributed to the growing development of a sense of Americanness in the postwar period.

The 1780s were characterized by “political and economic flux,” particularly in New England.⁵¹ Massachusetts’s state constitution, which was written in large part by Adams and which served as a model for the Constitution of the United States, went into effect in 1780. Soon after, in 1786, Shays’s Rebellion disrupted the region. Led by Revolutionary War veteran Daniel

⁴⁹ Ibid, 164.

⁵⁰ Heike Paul, “American Independence and the Myth of the Founding Fathers,” in *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*, Verlag, 2014, 197–256.

⁵¹ Waldstreicher, *Perpetual Fetes*, 80.

Shays, an armed insurrection of indebted New Englanders protested taxation in Western Massachusetts and Worcester. The scuffle resulted in a number of casualties and injuries. Additionally, it “threaten[ed] the foundations of a regime whose constitution...had been widely hailed as a model of enlightened republicanism.”⁵² Tension no doubt ensued; the incident contradicted characterizations of the new nation as wholly unified and undermined the symbolic power of Massachusetts’s governing document.

Despite the subversive potential of the rebellion, local and regional understandings of Shays’s Rebellion were also mythologized to favor a unified view of America and Massachusetts more specifically. After the rebellion, Shays was seen as a “folk hero” and “an inspiration to a region...mistreat[ed] by ill-informed and unresponsive officials at Boston.”⁵³ According to Gross, portrayals of the “Puritan piety,” and “down-home wit” of the rebellion’s “homespun characters” were distinctly “New Englandy,” calling to mind the 1773 Boston Tea Party and other early revolutionary activities attributed to the region.⁵⁴ By using local ties and historical associations in this way, the press was able to link Shays’s Rebellion to republicanism and other “American” values.

Revolutionary rhetoric solidified the connection between the rebellion and the American Revolution. Isaac Backus’s 1787 address concerning the aftermath of the rebellion, for instance, pointedly identifies the Massachusettsians’ primary goal as a “redress of grievances,” plainly alluding to the Declaration of Independence. Backus goes on to emphasize the importance of adhering to the “constitutional orderly way.” Finally, he encourages New Englanders to “join

⁵² Robert A. Gross, “A Yankee Rebellion? The Regulators, New England, and the New Nation,” *The New England Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (2009): 112.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 113.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 113.

their endeavours with the country,” in a final call for unity.⁵⁵ Shays’s Rebellion was effectively recast as an American Revolution in miniature, reminding people that the nation had a past to be proud of, even in light of its imperfect present.

In later years, New Englanders would go as far as to characterize Shays’s Rebellion as an essential catalyst for the ratification of the United States Constitution. As an 1825 edition of Boston’s *American Traveller* explained, quoting the *Salem Gazette*:

Shays’ Rebellion served to impress upon the public mind a belief of the necessity of a new form of National Government. It may be doubted, whether the present U. States’ Constitution would have been adopted, if that rebellion had not predisposed the minds of the people in favor of an energetic government.⁵⁶

This example further demonstrates how even clear failures of national coherence and cohesiveness were gradually reshaped in print to reflect the sense of Americanness the former colonists were intent on cultivating.

Though it was regionally specific—it stemmed from local contentions with state-level governments, Shays’s Rebellion came to embody a national project of identity formation: the *Salem Gazette* snippet was also reprinted by a number of newspapers outside of New England, including the *Alexandria Gazette* and the *Saratoga Sentinel*.⁵⁷ Evidently, even a violent insurrection could be cast as proof of American greatness in the early years of the republic.

On the national stage, disagreements between Federalists and Anti-Federalists had reached a boiling point by the time Shays’s Rebellion took place. New Englanders were far from

⁵⁵ Isaac Backus, *An address to the inhabitants of New-England, concerning the present bloody controversy therein* (Boston: S. Hall, 1787), 3.

⁵⁶ “From the Salem Gazette. Daniel Shays.” *American Traveller* (Boston), October 28, 1825, *America’s Historical Imprints*.

⁵⁷ See: “Shay’s Insurrection,” *Alexandria Gazette*, January 1, 1833, *America’s Historical Imprints* and “Shay’s Insurrection,” *Saratoga Sentinel*, January 1, 1833, *America’s Historical Imprints*.

the only Americans aware of ideological frictions that could pose a threat to fledgling constructions of nationhood. Early American society was fractal, so when the Constitution was ratified in 1788, the so-called “miracle at Philadelphia” was highly sensationalized. Ratification entered the mythologized American consciousness with startling rapidity and “an American master narrative” began to take shape.⁵⁸

Many myths played a role in the development of national identity in early America, but the Founding Fathers are unique in the fact that their canonization coincided with nation formation (rather than originating from the eras of exploration and colonization).⁵⁹ As Paul explains in “American Independence and the Myth of the Founding Fathers,” Americans writing about the Continental Congress retrospectively often gloss over complexities in favor of a narrative that embodies “cooperation and interdependence,” while then erasing “internal conflicts,” “contingency,” “local and regional...interests,” and “disagreements” that plagued the Constitution writing and ratification processes.⁶⁰ The Founding Fathers were propelled to the forefront of the nation’s mythology in part because they personified greatness and stability at a time when the nation arguably lacked both.

Myths still maintain a flexible sort of relevance in the modern American consciousness. Men like Washington, Jefferson, and Adams are still cast as God-like embodiments of republican virtue. Even after the ratification of the Constitution, the Founding Fathers “didn’t agree on why it was they had come together and what defined them as a people,” yet they remain canonized as a cohesive, collaborative body of politicians.⁶¹ It is essential to deconstruct this idea, since it is

⁵⁸ Paul, “Myth of the Founding Fathers,” 197.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 197.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 198.

⁶¹ Colin Woodard, “The Pitfalls and Promise of America’s Founding Myth,” *Smithsonian Magazine* (Washington, D.C.), February 22, 2021.

not reflective of the true state of American society as it existed in the early years of the republic. As historians like Paul unveil the reality of the nation's mythologization, the role of textual materials in the formation of the nation's identity becomes increasingly clear.

Still, the incongruence of visions of American tranquility and the realities of early nationhood was not totally ignored by the early Americans responsible for creating myths like that of the Founding Fathers. Noah Webster's 1790 *A Collection of Essays and Fugitiv Writings on Moral, Historical, Political, and Literary Subjects*, for instance, outlines and critiques the country's postwar disharmony. Webster, born in 1758, was known for writing a spelling textbook and for his role in the creation of an American dictionary.⁶² On page 82 of the collection, which was published in Boston, Webster offers up "Remarks on the Manners, Government, and Debt of the United States." Here, he argues that the values of republicanism and state of peace the nation was expected to uphold in its early years has not been maintained. Webster writes, "Instead of general tranquillity [*sic*], *one* State has been involved in a civil war, and most of them are torn with factions, which weaken or destroy the energy of government."⁶³ In addition to pointing out the disharmony that characterizes American society, Webster names the written word as the means of criticizing and addressing that disharmony. He explains that:

The rhapsodies of orators, and the publications in gazettes, from the northern to the southern extremity of the United States, concur in deprecating the present state of this country, and communicate the intelligence of our distresses to the whole civilized world.

Nor are newspapers the only heralds of our calamities.⁶⁴

⁶² David Skinner, "Noah Webster, Chronicler of Disease," *Humanities* 42, no. 2 (2021).

⁶³ Noah Webster, *A Collection of Essays and Fugitiv [*sic*] Writings on Moral, Historical, Political, and Literary Subjects* (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1790), Project Gutenberg eBook, 82.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 82.

From newspapers to orations, texts—at least according to Webster—not only shaped the way Americans came to understand their Americanness, but emphasized when reality failed to underscore fledgling definitions of nationhood. While some texts idealized America and its underpinnings, others critiqued its failure to live up to its image.

Webster, like many writers at the time, is greatly concerned with futurity as it relates to the new nation and the republican virtues it was founded on the back of. Though he is critical of the nation's political climate, tendency toward unrest, and dependence on British tastemaking, he still believes that “the revolution of America, whatever may be the present effects, must, on the universal scale of policy, prove fortunate, not only for the parties, but for mankind in general.”⁶⁵ American nationhood is a construct Webster sees as benefiting future Americans moreso; he says that “the period...when this country will realize the happy consequences of her separation, must be remote; probably beyond the lives of the present generation,” emphasizing that Americanness is a quality worth defining and critiquing for the benefit of national and personal longevity.

Richard Price's *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution, and the Means of Making it a Benefit to the World*, printed in London and Boston in 1784, several years before Webster's collection, takes a different approach. Price, a fellow of the Royal Society of London and of the Academy of Arts and Sciences in New England, postulated that the American Revolution signified the start of “a new era in the history of mankind.”⁶⁶ Rather than critiquing the new nation's ability to live up to its purported values, Price elaborates on the momentousness of the occasion of American independence. Framing America's break from Britain as a move beneficial to both nations, Price claims that in addition to “occasioning the establishment in

⁶⁵ Ibid, 84.

⁶⁶ Richard Price, *Observations on the importance of the American Revolution, and the means of making it a benefit to the world* (Boston: Powars and Willis, 1784), *America's Historical Imprints*, 4.

America of forms of government more equitable and more liberal than any that the world has yet known,” the change is likely to bring about new freedoms in other countries, also.

Price was a staunch supporter of republicanism and liberalism. A well-educated man and prolific writer, Price headed the rational dissent movement. Rejecting Christian tenets of original sin and eternal punishment, Price favored a “rationalistic moral edifice” that emphasized “reason and individual conscience.”⁶⁷ That being said, while a reasoned logical path can be traced through his *Observations*, Price’s introduction to the piece is tinged with optimism and oversimplification. While it is true that revolutionaries sought to create “an empire which may be the feat of liberty, science, and virtue,” whether or not they succeeded in creating a nation that would in turn ensure that “these sacred blessings will spread, till they become universal and the time arrives when kings and priests shall have no more power to oppress.”⁶⁸ By building up America’s preeminence in this way, Price contributed to the development of the public’s sense of what it means to be an American. He played into the myth that America can be, and is, a model of virtue and greatness which the rest of the world should look up to—and even feel grateful for.

The attitude can be seen on page 19, where Price discusses liberalism in America. The writer sets the United States up as wholly unique in its adherence to the values of liberalism, arguing that “the governments of the United States are liberal to a degree that is unparalleled.”⁶⁹ In addition to unparalleled, words like “first,” “advanced,” and “established” are used to highlight the nation’s uniqueness and prowess. Price says that “[American states] have the distinguished honour of being the first states under heaven in which forms of government have

⁶⁷ “Richard Price Papers: Background Note,” American Philosophical Society Library, American Philosophical Society, accessed 22 March 2023, <https://search.amphilsoc.org/collections/view?docId=ead/Mss.B.P93-ead.xml#bioghist>.

⁶⁸ Price, *Observations*, 4.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 19.

been established favourable to *universal* liberty.” Placing an emphasis on universal, while meant to underscore the extent to which Americans pursue liberty, invites critique from a modern perspective. The supposedly universal liberty so touted by Price—and so many other Americans, even still today—excluded women and people of color, particularly enslaved people. It is dangerous for historians to fall into the habit of viewing America’s past through an optimistic and overgeneral lens, like Price was wont to do. Breaking down the role written texts had in shaping and perpetuating an ahistorical history of America, and attempting to find moments where authors may have worked to undermine or question that history, are essential steps for historians to take as they strive to better understand early Americans’ sense of their own national identity.

Though he does contribute to the American nation-making myth, Price does go on to critique how America is characterized and run later in the piece. At points, he, like Webster, expresses his frustration that the reality of the new nation seems to contradict the foundations on which it was established. While he does see America as a forerunner on the world stage worth applauding, he recognizes that there is still work to do:

They have been thus distinguished in their *infancy*. What then will they be in a more advanced state; when time and experience...shall have introduced into the new governments, corrections and amendments which will render them still more friendly to liberty?⁷⁰

Here, Price distinguishes between American preeminence and American perfection. While he sees the nation as a global leader when it comes to protecting individual liberties and establishing

⁷⁰ Ibid, 19.

republican governmental structures, he believes that the country will be able to exert even more influence on the global stage and move toward an even more idyllic state in the years to come.

Webster wrote about his concerns related to the present state of American affairs. Price touched on the same, but emphasized the importance of the new nation's future potential. Other writers, meanwhile, were interested in documenting America's past. Approaches to history changed as early Americans "used the present to shape the past and used the past to shape the present."⁷¹ Filtered through the lens of the post-revolutionary era, Claude C. Robin's *New Travels through North-America*, which was published in Boston in 1784, exemplifies how this reciprocal process took place, providing insight into how American print materials connect to the formation of a distinctly American national identity in the post-revolutionary era.

Robin was a chaplain to the French army in America during the Revolutionary War.⁷² He famously witnessed the surrender of British general Lord Charles Cornwallis.⁷³ Letter XIII, toward the end of the collection, demonstrates that the American past was also shaped by overly optimistic, patriotic attitudes. The letter touches on "Advantages arising to America," "The future importance of this country," and "Her various local advantages over Europe." Robin's first-hand experience with the war infuses the piece with some degree of authority, so his views on these topics were bound to impress upon his readers. The fact that he is European also adds more weight to his praise of America and American ways of life, since he is not biased by his own nationality. "If America, in point of foil, bids fair to exceed Europe, what will she not do in

⁷¹Michael D. Hattem. *Past and Prologue: Politics and Memory in the American Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 247.

⁷² William Stetson Merrill, "Catholic Authorship in the American Colonies Before 1784," *The Catholic Historical Review* 3, no. 3 (1917), 316.

⁷³ Claude C. Robin, *New Travels through North-America* (Boston: Powars and Willis, 1784), *America's Historical Imprints*, 70.

her legislation and in her manners?” Robin writes.⁷⁴ His question hints at his belief that America, from the start, was in a position perfect for eventual ascension to international prominence. Those living in the postwar years, looking back at the prewar period, were beginning to characterize it as a time divinely situated for the nation’s creation and future success. Robin drives this point home by elaborating on his comparison: “[Europe’s] medley of customs at once absurd, unjust, and contradictory, the barbarous, complicated systems of feudal laws, ancient legislation, and modern manners, will never be united here under one and the same government.”⁷⁵ As comparisons like these appeared in texts, they created space for ideas of American preeminence to amplify.

Comparisons between European society and American society, particularly accounts of Massachusettsian and Bostonian life, color the earlier portions of Robin’s collection, also. His scope is impressive; the breadth and depth of his research and reflections indicate a serious interest in America’s development from colonies to nation. For instance, in Letter I, Robin commends the superiority of the American armies, describes Bostonian trade, and comments on the state of collegiate education in Massachusetts. He posits America as having established each of these institutions—militaristic, commercial, and educational—in a way that is more conducive to the success and prosperity of both the nation and individuals living in it. According to Robin, the iron mined in “the province of Massachusetts-Bay is...of a quality superior to any other in the world.”⁷⁶ When it comes to colleges, “Europeans have long been convinced of the natural and moral dangers to be apprehended, in acquiring education in large towns,” Robin says. Still, “the Bostonians have advanced farther, they have prevented these dangers.”⁷⁷ In giving these

⁷⁴ Ibid, 71.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 71.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 17.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 17.

examples and by highlighting American excellence in several facets of society, Robin underscores the fact that many postwar writers deemed the colonies—those embodiments of America’s pre-revolutionary past—as hubs of innovation. Even more important, that same tendency toward innovation was posited as a success post-revolutionary Americans could claim as their own and celebrate.

Even so, there are limitations to Robin’s claim of American preeminence. On page 71, he clarifies: “I would not be understood to say, that the civil legislation in the United States of America is actually exempt from all these inconveniences and abuses [that Europe’s governments are subject to].” This note reveals that though America was, to some extent, being enshrined as a protector of liberties and republicanism, it was not seen as invincible. Below the surface of apparent postwar nationalistic fervor, anxieties about the nation’s longevity and potential for failure still reigned. Additionally, this clarification shows that the connection between America and Britain still played a huge part in shaping perceptions of the new nation. America and Americanness as conceptual entities existed in a literary space where they were defined in relation to Britain and Britishness.

The mythologization of America’s past, present, and future in the postwar period was influenced and perpetuated by print materials. Through writing, Americans conceptualized American nationhood and their own Americanness by examining perceived preeminence and postwar peace. Sometimes placing these perceptions in the context of reality, sometimes relying on optimism, Americans worked to shape their own form of nationalism that was at once highly critical and deeply celebratory.

Chapter III: Public and Private Patriotism

Bostonian celebrations of the origins and superiority of American nationhood offer insights into how and why Americanness was defined and mythologized in the postwar era, specifically in that area. Oration transcripts and other printed materials signify that the importance of celebrations was circulated and bolstered by texts. Many texts of this nature were simultaneously intended to be read to a private gathering of citizens and to be published for consumption by a widespread public readership. These overlapping purposes create an opening for the layered realities of postwar nationalistic celebration, and the rhetoric that accompanied it, to be explored.

In an oration delivered to the Massachusetts branch of the Society of Cincinnati on July 4, 1789, Dr. Samuel Whitwell espouses the generational endurance of Americans' patriotic celebrations. The oration does not jump into an outline of the nation's greatness, the military's achievements, or the people's bravery.⁷⁸ Nor does it immediately outline Britain's wrongdoings. Rather than reminiscing on the past, the beginning of Whitwell's oration favors the present. "May the lustre [*sic*] of this day of jubilee—this annual return of commemorating Independence, never be effaced—May distant ages ever remember it," Whitwell writes.⁷⁹ The need to pass the "joy" of patriotic rituals down from parent to "dandling infant," was more pressing on the speaker's mind than was the actual historical truth of how independence came about.⁸⁰

New Englanders were, through patriotic public rituals, constructing an intergenerational myth of American greatness. According to Michael Hattem, author of *Past and Prologue*:

⁷⁸ "Papers of John Adams, volume 5," Adams Papers Digital Edition, Massachusetts Historical Society, accessed 22 March 2023, <https://blog.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/PJA05/pageid/PJA05p149>.

⁷⁹ Samuel Whitwell, *An Oration Delivered to the Society of the Cincinnati in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, July 4, 1789* (Boston: Russell, 1789), *America's Historical Imprints*, 3.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 3.

Politics and Memory in the American Revolution, people were engaged in the “cultural construction of a ‘deep national past,’ built on mythical symbolism, epic renderings of the American past, and the nationalization of the natural history of the continent.”⁸¹ Posterity was an important component of this process. Whitwell’s oration is an excellent example of how nationalist, generational storytelling weighed on the minds of some Bostonians. His speech is littered with references to parents and children, which operate as pointed calls to action or as metaphors for the colonies’ relationship with Britain. Whitwell uses the saying “Rashness in the child, and necessity in the parent” to sum up his feelings about Britain’s treatment of the colonies, noting that it was the mother country’s actions “that roused a spirit of patriotism never before kindled in America.”⁸² It is difficult to determine whether such a notable degree of patriotism was truly felt by Americans, or whether such claims were simply being made by those who wished it to be true. Nevertheless, it is evident that early American perspectives on national identity were shaped through engagement in patriotic celebrations and characterized by an interest in the future and sense of obligation to future generations.

Americans’ interest in celebrating their newly-formed nation and forward-facing motivations should not be conflated with an interest in an accurate or detailed history of the nation’s past. “Painful would be the rehearsal of every occurrence be...that introduced this memorable act of our national creation,” Whitwell writes. “Being the province of the accurate Historian, it will then be as tedious as unnecessary again to repeat them.”⁸³ Many scholars have made note of this “anti-historical” tendency in early American nationalism, and Whitwell’s oration does seem to fit the pattern.⁸⁴ Yet, it cannot be said that the “civic identity transformation

⁸¹ Hattem, *Past and Prologue*, 4.

⁸² Whitwell, *An Oration*, 4.

⁸³ Whitwell, *An Oration*, 5.

⁸⁴ Hattem, *Past and Prologue*, 2.

from British subject to American citizen” occurred in an anti-historical vacuum, either. Though they were simplifying, mythologizing, and transforming the American past to suit their patriotic needs, Americans were not altogether disinterested in that past. As Hattem points out, “America’s pre-revolutionary past did not pass into obscurity after the Revolution.”⁸⁵ Whitwell’s oration strikes this balance by referencing historical events while transforming them with a sense of awe-inspiring unreality. For instance, in reference to the creation and ratification of the Constitution, Whitwell describes a nation “Expiring...Phoenix like, from the ruins of the old.”⁸⁶ This literary strategy supports the idea that Americans legitimized the new nation by blending real histories with rousing storytelling.

Before the themes, symbols, and allegories associated with American nationhood were codified, many texts associated with patriotic celebrations—such as Whitwell’s oration—toggled between pushing away recollections of the nation’s painful beginnings and transforming them into epic tales of republican glory. The public’s ideas about Americanness shaped the printed materials produced at the time. Orations, speeches, and newspaper articles provided a space for national, regional, and individual experimentation with national identity as writers, speakers, and readers considered what their new role as Americans would entail. Whitwell’s speech contains hints of those characteristics that would later dominate literary and historical approaches to the national American character. He displays adoration for George Washington, argues in defense of the Constitution, and demonizes Britain. A tendency to idolize America’s politics and figureheads, as well as anti-British sentiment, would proliferate printed works once people’s stances on nationhood solidified.

⁸⁵ Hattem, *Past and Prologue*, 246.

⁸⁶ Whitwell, *An Oration*, 10-1.

Before the Revolution, “colonists of all ranks had a significant degree of access to historical information through a variety of modes.”⁸⁷ These modes ranged from social and circulating libraries, to newspapers and almanacs. Most of the historical information that the colonists had access to related to England. Still, “regional history cultures did exist to varying degrees, with New England’s perhaps being the most developed.”⁸⁸ Outside of New England, colonists probably knew very little about colonies that weren’t their own. After the war, “more works of history were written and published” than ever before.⁸⁹ Rough sketches of Americanness were solidified as mythologized tales of nation formation were produced more frequently and spread. It is this process that placed print materials in a position to influence and shape early conceptions of a national American identity, reciprocal to how even earlier conceptions of Americanness influenced and shaped print materials.

The Society of Cincinnati, to which this oration is addressed, played an important role in bolstering the influence of pro-American celebrations. A fraternal organization founded in 1783, the society was made up of ex-Continental Army officers and boasted membership in all 13 states.⁹⁰ The printed transcript of Whitwell’s oration makes it seem as though the society’s Fourth of July meetings figured a formal kind of festivity. The speech is measured and formal, despite being somewhat emotive. The “sedateness” of printed accounts like this have led historians to believe that the Cincinnati’s (and others’) patriotic proceedings were “restricted” and “pallid,” according to Waldstreicher.⁹¹ Written works strove to perpetuate the characterization of fraternal groups as respectable and decorous; meanwhile, in all likelihood,

⁸⁷ Hattem, *Past and Prologue*, 47.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 54.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 143.

⁹⁰ “Our Story,” The Society of the Cincinnati, The Society of the Cincinnati, Inc., accessed March 22, 2023, <https://www.societyofthecincinnati.org/our-story-introduction/>.

⁹¹ Waldstreicher, *Perpetual Fetes*, 68-72.

society members celebrating in the streets and in taverns were anything but well-behaved. As Waldstreicher notes, “despite all the toasting, respectable citizens never got drunk, at least not in the published reports.”⁹² Though newspapers and other written accounts filtered events to preserve their image, so-called respectable men celebrated much like commoners.

When celebrating the nation’s independence, order was abandoned in an imperfect subversion of class divisions: “traditional rituals of exchange and deference” were pushed aside as Americans strove to develop a sense of national identity together.⁹³ Still, as Loughran says, “being able to imagine (or even make) a new world does not make that new world legitimate or coherent.”⁹⁴ Though Americans from different class backgrounds celebrated nationhood alongside one another in public venues, and though respectability factored less prominently into people’s engagement with patriotic celebrations, egalitarian principle did not translate wholly into practice. Settling for the virtual representation of all people, many well-to-do Americans contributed to a stratified version of patriotic jubilation.⁹⁵

Nevertheless, another oration, delivered the same exact day as Whitwell’s, indicates that public and private celebrations did not differ too drastically on a basic ideological level. *An Oration Delivered July 4th, 1789, at the Request of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston, in Celebration of Anniversary of American Independence*, written by Samuel Stillman,⁹⁶ was not

⁹² Ibid, 71.

⁹³ Ibid, 71.

⁹⁴ Loughran, *The Republic in Print*, 70.

⁹⁵ Waldstreicher, *Perpetual Fetes*, 72. Waldstrieicher links people’s virtual representation in nationalist merrymaking to Parliament’s virtual representation of its constituents. Virtual representation is, by definition, not actual representation. It’s worth noting then that, despite some evidence that early nationalism was challenging older class structures, celebrations of nationhood were still tinged by a classist elitism.

⁹⁶ “Samuel Stillman, The Duty of Magistrates,” BelcherFoundation.org, Belcher Foundation, accessed March 24, 2023, https://www.belcherfoundation.org/duty_of_magistrates.htm. Samuel Stillman was an “American Revolutionary minister, a trustee of Brown University from 1764-1807, a member of the American Philosophical Society, and (according to editor Frank Moore), ‘a member of the Senate Convention for the formation of the state constitution in 1779.’”

recited before an exclusive society. Rather, requested by the town in a vote, this oration was intended for a broader audience. Even so, it contains themes of posterity, legitimization, and unity. It also blends contending aspects of history making and storytelling together, shaping a unique picture of America's early nationhood.

Stillman, like Whitwell, claims the harsh realities of the war to be too difficult to dwell on, urging for the occasion to be celebrated in a joyful manner, while continuing to reference such hardships in his piece. He characterizes the American soldiers as a deeply under-provisioned, selfless, rag-tag group of men wholly dedicated to the republican cause. Positioning them—not altogether incorrectly—as underdogs, Stillman uses the painful facts of war—bloodshed, loss, deprivation, fear, and chaos—to juxtapose the state of peace and prosperity he perceives the new nation as having entered after the fact.⁹⁷ This portrayal of the Continental Army has the effect of glorifying the American troops and works to canonize the myth of a scrappy, all-American victory, effectively ignoring the possibility of military mismanagement and the reality of French assistance.

Glorification is also extended to George Washington in Stillman's oration. Calling him the "Illustrious Chief," Stillman describes Washington's "solemn silence" as he recollects crossing the Delaware River with his "little, ragged, forlorn army."⁹⁸ Stillman's description of Washington's tearful visage, paired with acknowledgements of his "piety" and "sensibility" combine to form an image of the nation's first president that emphasizes a simultaneous humanity and divinity.⁹⁹ Washington is positioned in Stillman's oration as the arbiter of the

⁹⁷ Samuel Stillman, *An Oration Delivered July 4th, 1789, at the Request of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston, in Celebration of Anniversary of American Independence* (Boston: B. Edes & Son, 1789), *America's Historical Imprints*, 10-12.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 22.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 22.

“happy turn to the affairs of America.”¹⁰⁰ By contributing, like Whitwell, to the myth of the Founding Fathers, Stillman’s oration could both reaffirm and build upon existing caricatures of Washington.

The Declaration of Independence is also glorified by Stillman, mainly as a signifier of America’s legitimacy as a new nation. A paragraph on page 11 sums up Stillman’s views on the document and its role in positioning the United States on the international stage. He writes, “The declaration of Independence at once annihilated the diminutive term *Colonies* as applied to us, raised us to our equal station among the nations of the world, and opened us to a source of great advantages.”¹⁰¹ Stillman uses the Declaration to argue that America is a tangible entity with sway over global affairs. Further, he dismisses the nation’s past ties to Britain as irrelevant, as indicated by the emphasis placed on the word colonies. By rejecting the term, Stillman is able to legitimize America without recognizing its ties to Britain. Renouncing past characterizations of that portion of North America which eventually became the United States cuts the figurative ties between the two nations, highlighting the fledgling nation’s independence.

Finally, Stillman continues to legitimize the new nation by choosing to sketch out a pre-revolutionary portrait dominated by unity. Even in the face of the fact that different people in different colonies felt differently about the Revolutionary War, Stillman insists that the colonists were united in their desire to fight for and create a new republican nation. He writes, “the repeated attempts of Great-Britain to raise a revenue out of our pockets without our consent...spread an alarm from New-Hampshire to Georgia,” an overgeneralization which glosses over the diversity of perspectives the colonists had about British taxation, ignoring the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 23.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 11.

prominence of Loyalists in the prewar and wartime periods.¹⁰² His writing, in effect, strips the reality of the war's outset in favor of a more story-like tale of glory. Like Whitwell, Stillman oscillated between writing history and telling fictionalized tales for the purposes of stoking nationalistic fervor.

These two orations, delivered in the same city, on the same day, in the same year, demonstrate how printed texts, whether initially presented to private groups or to large public crowds, were shaped by early nationalist ideas which transcended social stratifications, at least to some extent. Shaped by these ideas, these texts in turn shaped their audience. Eventually disseminated far and wide, printed oration transcriptions, for instance, drove home the importance of nationalist celebrations and engaged with (oft-mythologized) conceptualizations of American preeminence and legitimacy.

Chapter IV: Anti-Britishness as Americanness

In the early years of the United States, poems about America and Americanness were situated in relation to understandings of Great Britain and Britishness. Yokota writes:

Caught between their history and their aspirations, elite Americans wanted to possess 'Britishness' (and the cultural cachet that accompanied it) while simultaneously distancing themselves from their dependence on Great Britain.¹⁰³

Here, yet another paradoxical element of early American nationalism is revealed. Furthermore, the unignorable fact of class distinctions—those who were more wealthy were those who could (and had the time to) read and discuss still-forming ideas about nationalism—is highlighted by Yokota's use of the word elite. Despite the complexities that underlie the idea of anti-British

¹⁰² Ibid, 10.

¹⁰³ Yokota, *Unbecoming British*, 238.

Americanness, it is a useful theme to consider. Its implications, particularly when it comes to the deconstruction of American mythologies, like ahistorical narratives that idolize the Founding Fathers or prioritize the work and thoughts of a limited group of historical players, are worth examining. For example, according to Yokota “the story of unbecoming in the early American republic provides a counternarrative to the country’s optimistic and confident projections about its future as a world power.”¹⁰⁴ Unpacking instances where Americanness, particularly freedom as it relates to Americanness, are framed outright or subtly as rejections of or improvements on Britishness, is a useful way of digging deeper into people’s perspectives on realities of the nation’s founding, particularly the ways in which those realities did not live up to the mythologies writers and readers had begun subscribing to.

Many of the texts already referenced use explanations of Britain’s shortcomings to better elaborate on the United States’ greatness. In *Observations*, Price focuses on the mother country’s economy, alliances, and politics. He argues that Britain is poorly organized, suggesting that its practices in these three areas will contribute to its inability to compete with or last longer than America. In a nearly 90-page text, he finds only one aspect of British society to commend: “I rejoice that on this occasion I can recommend to them the example of my own country.—In *Britain a Negro* becomes a *freeman* the moment he sets foot on *British* ground.”¹⁰⁵ His one praise of Britain is a weighty one, which contradicts his descriptions of America and Americans as being without competition the whole world over. Still, his references to “degeneracy,” “dread,” and “catastrophe” in reference to Britain’s future makes the link between anti-British and pro-American clear.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 239.

¹⁰⁵ Price, *Observations*, 69.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 60, 63, 66.

Webster, in *Fugitiv Writings*, highlights Britain's many "misfortunes," thus amplifying America's successes,¹⁰⁷ but he engages with anti-British discourse in an even more notable way. Not only does he disparage the country in preparing to praise America, he also acknowledges the hypocrisy of doing so while still emulating cultural elements of Britishness on the day-to-day. He calls out his fellow Americans who do such things, writing:

To know and embrace every change made in Great Britain, whether right or wrong, is the extent of [leading Americans'] inquiries, and the height of their ambition. It is to this deference we may ascribe the long catalogue of errors in pronunciation and of false idioms which disfigure the language of our mighty fine speakers. And should this imitation continue, we shall be hurried down the stream of corruption, with older nations, and our language, with theirs, be lost in an ocean of perpetual changes.¹⁰⁸

Essentially, Webster engaged in anti-British discourse, but did not endorse the simultaneity of individuals engaging in this discourse also maintaining an interest in British taste, which Yokota describes in her book. This is worth noting because it demonstrates that contradictions that cropped up in the process of creating a national identity were, at times, acknowledged and pushed against. Evidently, Americans did not always ignore the irreconcilability of anti-Britishness sentiment and globalist interests in favor of the fledgling nationalist project.

In addition to including outright rejections of Britishness in their work, some writers engaged with anti-British/pro-American ideas more subtly. Writing about freedom was one way that this was achieved. One author who wrote about Americanness as an embodiment of freedoms unimaginable to Britons was Paul Allen, a newspaper editor and prolific early

¹⁰⁷ Webster, *Fugitiv [sic] Writings*, 158.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 97.

American historian.¹⁰⁹ Though Allen wrote extensively on the topics of the American Revolution and Meriwether Lewis and William Clark’s famous expedition, he also published a book of poetry in 1801. This volume, titled *Original Poems, Serious and Entertaining*, consists of nearly 60 poems on a variety of topics. Most illuminating of these many short verses are Allen’s poems “Ode for the Fourth of July” and “Poem for the Happiness of America,” both of which tackle the themes of freedom. These two poems demonstrate how literary constructions of national identity were increasingly shaped by themes and symbols codified in the postwar period.

In “Ode for the Fourth of July,” Allen uses several strategies to depict America as a nation worthy of praise. Allen describes America—personified as Columbia—as an “enlighten’d” figure worthy of standing before “th’ Almighty’s throne” all within the first few stanzas.¹¹⁰ Firstly, Allen includes the female personification of America, which was used to characterize the nation as a goddess-like figure as early as 1776 in poems by Phillis Wheatley Peters. Columbia is associated with glory and otherworldly perfection, which Allen emphasizes by depicting a version of Columbia that stands before God’s counsel. In the poem, God entrusts Columbia with “the sacred tree” and tasks her to “preserve it fair,” which any reader would have recognized as a formidable task.¹¹¹ Additionally, Allen’s use of the word “enlighten’d” harkens back to the Enlightenment, an intellectual movement linked closely to the Revolution. The Enlightenment inspired much of the Revolution’s freedom-related rhetoric. Allen references freedom explicitly throughout the poem. God says to Columbia that “the world shall now be free” and she later “drops her chains.”¹¹² Allen also makes mention of forces opposing slavery,

¹⁰⁹ Samuel Kettell, *Specimens of American Poetry, with Critical and Biographical Notices, in Three Volumes* (Boston: S.G. Goodrich & Co., 1829), Bartleby.com eBook, February 2010.

¹¹⁰ Paul Allen, “Ode for the Fourth of July,” (Salem: Joshua Cushing, 1801), 19.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 19.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 19-20.

saying that “tyrants beheld the sight / and shrank with wild affright.”¹¹³ These lines build up America as a nation revered by God and characterized by its freedoms while simultaneously tearing down other nations—presumably Great Britain—for their lack of such qualities. Allen then concludes this poem with a call for America’s preservation. He writes, “O may this fabric stand, / And may its name expand, / Till Nature dies.”¹¹⁴ This excerpt ties together the diction and personification strategies Allen employs throughout the piece, urging for America’s continuation as a praise-worthy and freedom-centered nation. With a final nod to “Washington’s bright flame,” Allen imbues the brief poem with recognizable concepts that serve to consolidate his readers’ understandings of America and encourage them to take pride in their country. Allusions to Britain and personifications of America as a deity became foundational symbols to the project of American nationalism. In engaging with anti-British and pro-American discourse, writers unified their readers under a common interpretation of the new nation’s place in the world.

Another of Allen’s poems, “Poem for the Happiness of America,” pursues the same goals using quite similar techniques. Once again, Allen personifies America as Columbia. This near-mythical entity “stands, and frowns away...rage, / and shines, the glory of the present age” in the poem’s first stanza.¹¹⁵ Allen emphasizes her strength, determination, and ability to end strife as other nations fall victim to war and disarray. Once more, the poet compares America to other, seemingly dissimilar, nations in order for his words to have greater effect. Freedom is also personified in the poem, as is George Washington glorified. “Behold the Saviour of his Country stand! / Great George WASHINGTON” Allen proclaims, “Freedom hails thee as her chosen

¹¹³ Ibid, 20.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 21.

¹¹⁵ Allen, “Poem for the Happiness of America,” (Salem: Joshua Cushing, 1801), 1.

son.”¹¹⁶ Allen continues to rely on recognizable figures, like Washington, and widely-used personifications, like Columbia and Freedom, to shape the image of America and its people that he is trying to get across to his readers. Also, much like “Ode to the Fourth of July,” “Poem for the Happiness of America” is concerned with the theme of freedom as it relates to God. Allen describes how “shouting seraphs sign’d that great decree / In heav’n’s high court, ‘Columbia shall be free.’”¹¹⁷ The poet, once again, boldly links America’s freedom to God’s favorable influence. In this second poem, Allen constructs an identity for his country that, though multifaceted, would have been recognizable too and digestible for his readers.

Allen’s poetry is a useful source because it reveals what themes, values, interests, and concerns American writers were exploring in their work post-Revolution. It also demonstrates that readers were consuming nationalized imagery through literature. However, Allen’s poetry collection is a source to be considered carefully, because it was “published according to Act of Congress.”¹¹⁸ It is possible that the attitudes expressed by Allen are not representative of most people’s, but rather of the government’s. Furthermore, it must be noted that Allen published his poems in 1801, when he was rather young. Allen was born the same year that the Revolution began, and so his opinions of America and its split from Britain in the years following the war may be generationally skewed.

Allen’s poems are examples of American exceptionalism. The poets, positioning America as superior and Americans as people who can do no wrong, feed into a biased nationalistic narrative that fails to address the complications inherent to nation-building. Still, explicating Allen’s poems “Ode to the Fourth of July” and “Poem for the Happiness of America” reveals the

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 2.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 3.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, i.

strategies he employed to characterize America as a solid, recognizable, and laudable entity. Connecting these techniques—which include personification and the use of Revolutionary-era diction—to his readers’ broader associations and understandings allows us to better understand how early American nationalism was developed and perpetuated by writers like Allen and gives insight into how Americans saw themselves and the world around them, particularly in the context of their newfound freedom. These poems represent only a small fraction of Allen’s nationally-centered work—he authored three different odes to Independence Day, in fact—and therefore only begin to offer insight into a much broader literary and historic trend.

At the same time that poets like Allen were celebrating the nation’s independence, reminiscing on its wartime successes, and developing nationalistic themes and symbols, others were critiquing the nation’s supposedly unmatched dedication to liberty. Phillis Wheatley Peters, born in West Africa, was an enslaved person who was captured and taken to Boston at the age of seven. She was taught to read and write by Susanna Wheatley, the wife of the man who purchased her in 1761. Despite her status as an enslaved person, Peters became popular after an elegy she wrote for Reverend George Whitefield was published as a broadside and pamphlet in Boston in 1770.¹¹⁹ Peters’ poems often critique those aspects of Americanness that other writers were so quick to celebrate.

Specifically, Peters’ poems discuss liberty as it relates to the physical, social, and economic freedoms denied to enslaved people like herself. Peters’ informal education put her in an unusual position; she was able to voice the reality of her struggles in writing in a public way at a time when most enslaved people would not have even been able to do so, even privately in a

¹¹⁹ “Phillis Wheatley,” Poetry Foundation, accessed 22 March 2023, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/phillis-wheatley#tab-poems>.

diary or journal. Like Allen, Peters examines the theme of freedom, but links it to national identity in a way shaped by her vastly different life experiences.

In her poem “To the Earl of Dartmouth,” for example, Peters discusses several manifestations of freedom in early America as she perceives them. First, Peters likens freedom to the sun. As a personified, “smiling” freedom emits a comforting “genial ray” over the land, New Englanders are bathed in a sense of serenity.¹²⁰ Peters contrasts the light brought by freedom as “she shines supreme” with the darkness of the “caves of night” described at the end of the first stanza.¹²¹ The poet’s use of contrast is also evident in her reference to “silken reins” and an “iron chain.”¹²² While Peters characterizes freedom as a gentle, guiding force that encourages movement (much like a horse’s reins), she likens a lack of freedom to imprisonment. The positive connotation of words such as “happy,” “blissful,” “grateful,” “splendors,” only magnifies the poet’s point that freedom releases people from suffering and spreads joy.¹²³ Peters’ use of radiant imagery, contrast, and uplifting diction effectively portrays freedom as an intangible force. Like the sun’s warmth, freedom is felt rather than seen; in the beginning of the poem, Peters contemplates freedom conceptually.

Later in the poem, however, Peters’ considerations of freedom transition from conceptual to actual. As Peters draws on her personal experience as a dislocated African enslaved in America, freedom becomes a matter of physical autonomy. Peters initiates this transition with the image of the iron chain, which is reminiscent of the physical restraint she and other African slaves would have suffered as they crossed the Middle Passage. Then, in the third stanza, Peters

¹²⁰ Peters, Phillis Wheatley, “To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth,” Poetry Foundation, accessed 22 March 2023, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47706/to-the-right-honorable-william-earl-of-dartmouth>, 1, 3.

¹²¹ Ibid 10, 14.

¹²² Ibid, 8, 14.

¹²³ Ibid 1, 4, 6, 13.

recalls her life in Africa and the freedom she enjoyed there. As she describes being abducted from her homeland and thrust into slavery, Peters makes an association between one's physical location and their degree of freedom.

The italics used throughout the poem solidify the connection between location and freedom. While "*America*" and "*Tyranny*" are granted joint emphasis in the second stanza, "*Freedom*" and "*Afric's*" are given the same treatment in the third.¹²⁴ This demonstrates that Peters saw her enslavement in America as the antithesis of her experience in Africa. By drawing on personal experience, Peters grants herself further authority on the subject of freedom. By establishing a correlation between location and freedom, she transitions from grappling with the concept of freedom to considering a specific kind of freedom as it relates to physical autonomy.

Peters' poem links one's ability to move without restraint and one's ability to be in the location of their choosing to freedom. In turn, she links having (and lacking) those forms of freedom to America. This deconstructs the binary of American liberty/British control that anti-British expressions of American nationality often perpetuated. Peters' perspective as an enslaved person offers another angle, one that shows America as a place not so protective of individual liberties as its citizens are wont to think.

In poetry and prose alike, writers examined freedom as it related to post-revolutionary conceptualizations of America and Great Britain. Motivated by overlapping desires to legitimize their new place on the global stage, to memorialize wartime struggles, to justify republican ways of governing, and more, Americans were deeply invested in answering questions related to nationhood and national identity. The examples used here demonstrate that some people felt strongly about denunciations of Britishness. Others felt more inclined to celebrate America's

¹²⁴ Ibid, 15, 18, 21, 25.

greatness (with an emphasis on freedom), merely implying Britain's faults. Yet others argued that some lives were just as restrained as they had been under British rule and completely rejected portrayals of Americanness as characterized by liberty. As Looby argues, texts "expose the intimate association between the revolutionary founding of the United States and acts of voice" in a "multiplicity of ways."¹²⁵ Still, while a variety of perspectives and approaches can be found in the printed materials of the period, all demonstrate that conversations about what America was, and what it meant to be American, were occurring with frequency. Perhaps, even, a frequency that indicates anxiety: "the image of the nation...was in the early United States more often a measure of a fearful sense of its foundationless instability than of its primordial rootedness," according to Looby.¹²⁶ Seemingly, Americans were just as divided on the issue of national identity as they were on the issue of independence at the war's outset.

Conclusion

In the postwar period, celebrations inspired patriotic feeling and led people to consider the character of the new nation they were intent on commemorating. Americans communicated fledgling understandings of their Americanness in print; print materials then solidified those understandings as communities consumed and internalized written accounts of the nation's mythical histories, republican principles, and indomitable leaders. Soon after the revolution, America was seen as a deified hub of republicanism, defined in opposition to Britain.

The uncertainty of the postwar period weighed heavily on the minds of the former colonists. Americans wondered if the new nation would last. On top of that, they were concerned

¹²⁵ Looby, *Voicing America*, 3.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 6.

about global perceptions of its legitimacy. Local tensions seemed poised to threaten the cohesion of the country. All this led people to contemplate America and Americanness in writing.

Orations, sermons, books, and poetry all contributed to the development of personal and communal forms of nationalism in the post-revolutionary period—particularly in Boston, where writers, printers, and readers abounded. While it is not possible to determine whether ideas about America and Americanness were initially developed through writing or if publishing was simply a means of spreading and building on pre-existing notions, the reciprocity between early forms of nationalism and the new nation's flourishing literary scene cannot be denied. In exploring the connections between Bostonian feelings about national identity and manifestations of those feelings in print materials, historians can begin to develop a more complete and complex understanding of nationalism's inherent contradictions and nuances as they developed in that area, notable in its pre-war and wartime influence on the rest of the colonies.

Furthermore, by deconstructing the mythologies that continue to characterize modern understandings of the nation's past, scholars can come to more historical conclusions about what nationalistic celebrations and texts might have meant for people from different backgrounds. Ignoring social and racial tensions in favor of a glorified tale of American glory is a habit Americans in the past, as I have shown, fell into, and we would do well not to do the same. After all, the Founding Fathers were just men, and America is just one imperfect nation among many.

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