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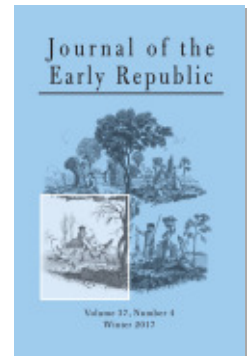
Conclusion: Writing To and From the Revolution

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Conclusion

Writing To and From the Revolution

SERENA R. ZABIN

What a time to be writing this article. In 2017, we are living through our own unlooked-for American Revolution, thanks to an election that revealed an America quite different from what many had thought. From social media to kitchen tables, citizens and noncitizens alike are reflecting on the nature of American democracy, of political participation, and of national identity. The timing could not be better to appreciate a series of thoughtful and trenchant analyses of the significance of the birth of this country.

Readers of the *Journal of the Early Republic* and the *William and Mary Quarterly* know how difficult it is to overstate the enormous role that the American Revolution plays in the American popular imagination. The year 1776; George Washington; battles in Lexington, Concord, and other small towns on the East Coast; and now, of course, Alexander Hamilton all define the United States' birth story to most people who are not professional historians of the period. For the first time in seventeen years, my own course on the American Revolution was oversubscribed. Our students, our neighbors, and our media pundits are all eager to learn about the American Revolution. Given the clear evidence that many in public life do not know enough American history to make good decisions, or at least to keep themselves from embarrassing gaffes, this is a welcome development.

Readers of these journals are also aware that mythic ideas of a heroic

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American struggle against a tyrannical empire dominate most of this popular history. Alan Taylor notes in his introduction to this joint issue that such history tends to focus mostly on the war years. Because this approach sees the American Revolution as a watershed, it tends to generate books that give only one explanation of the revolution's significance: the founding of the American nation. As Jan Ellen Lewis pointed out a few years ago, those kinds of histories are simply "bedtime stories" for Americans who want a comforting narrative of their origins.¹

The articles in this joint issue do not offer such comfort. Rather, they remind us of the angry hostilities and high costs of founding the United States. By no means were these conflicts restricted to the battlefield, nor were the clashes somehow contained in a political system neatly divided between a British imperial state and a nascent American one. Instead, as these articles demonstrate, struggles emerged everywhere: in the imagination, among settlers, in marital relationships, even in poetry. Focusing on these many and varied conflicts means that our telling of the revolution cannot smoothly and confidently progress from justified rebellion to stirring declaration to stabilizing Constitution. Rather, the revolution seems to veer in strange directions, double back on itself, and undermine its own ends. Moreover, as Michael A. McDonnell and David Waldstreicher's thoughtful survey of American Revolution historiography demonstrates, the last several generations of scholarship no longer trace only the convoluted path to the creation of the United States. Instead, scholarly historical writing pays attention to the place of various groups of people, finding "that the experience of the revolution was different, and differently revolutionary, for different people in different times and places."² And it is to these people that I want to turn our attention. The revolution was not a force of nature—a stream, as J. Franklin Jameson once claimed, that overflowed its banks.³ Instead, it was a thoroughly human endeavor made up of individuals—some with

1. Jan Ellen Lewis, "Review of Histories of American Revolution by T. H. Breen and Jack Rakove," *Washington Post*, Aug. 8, 2010, sec. Arts and Living (quotation); Alan Taylor, "Introduction: Expand or Die: The Revolution's New Empire," *William and Mary Quarterly* 74 (Oct. 2017).

2. Michael A. McDonnell and David Waldstreicher, "Revolution in the *Quarterly*? A Historiographical Analysis," *William and Mary Quarterly* 74 (Oct. 2017).

3. J. Franklin Jameson, *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (Princeton, NJ, 1967), 9.

the ability to make extensive choices, some with lives far more circumscribed by forces they could not always discern—who shaped the world both before and after the American Revolution. The collective power of these people created the history that we now attempt to recover.

These articles extend our understanding of the revolution in several directions: over space, through time, and into the self. Yet in every direction, the view is bleak. As Taylor concludes in his introduction, the American Revolution, if it made any difference at all, intensified and accelerated trends toward racial chattel slavery, westward expansion, and state power, all in order to solidify elite control over land and enslaved people.⁴ These articles thus reveal an enormous gap between the popular narrative of democracy's heroic birth and the scholarly account of an imperialist and racist nation's origins.

This chasm between these positive (popular) and negative (scholarly) stories of the American Revolution is not one that we can overlook. Scholars are not in the business of providing comforting nationalistic pabulum for our audience. Slavery, dispossession, and power are intrinsic to our history. And yet the public, and even some scholars, have a hunger to know also the hopeful if often unfulfilled potential of our origins. Is there a way for historians to satisfy that hunger so as not to leave it to journalists and television?

The way forward, I think, lies in reconsidering how we tell the stories of the American Revolution. We can show how real people endured and sometimes shaped the desolate developments pointed to by these articles. Without mythologizing power or condescending to the losers, historians can offer multiple perspectives on an event. Uncomfortable as it may be, we can tell the stories of both winners and losers, especially at those moments when the players themselves may not have realized which side they were on. A dark history can become even more heartrending when told through the individual lives of those who experienced it. And sometimes we can also be reminded of the ripple effects that small personal choices have on future events. In the past, as in the present, our actions matter.

The challenge is to steer a course between the Scylla of bedtime stories and the Charybdis of thick academic analysis. That course can lead us to honest accounts of the past that will satisfy both professionals and

4. Taylor, "Expand or Die."

the public. Real people—with their relationships, feelings, and desires—can be our guides. Founders were people too, of course, and the lived experience of famous individuals humanizes the past. But not-famous people also offer a rich resource for the project of bringing the past to life. The work in these articles maps out a rough terrain over which people stumbled as they tried to live their daily lives.

The importance of an individual's attempts to shape her world emerges most clearly in Waldstreicher's elegant article on Phillis Wheatley. Using her most powerful tool—her poetry—Wheatley tried to intervene in the eighteenth-century movement toward a harsher and more racial form of slavery. The fact that a young enslaved woman pointed out this shift toward modern, race-based slavery in poetry “helped precipitate a cultural and political crisis.” Waldstreicher makes it clear that Wheatley's poetry hit its mark: Thomas Jefferson understood her critique, even if he hated it. The actions of slaves such as Wheatley forced American patriots to consider slavery and construct a defense of it. But the power of poetry could only go so far: Wheatley's critique did not stop or even slow the expansion of racial slavery.⁵

Like poetry, other cultural productions make meaning through both their content and their form. Nathan Perl-Rosenthal analyzes the literary form of letter writing to demonstrate commonalities across time and place and thus reinvigorates the old idea of a geographically broad “age of revolution.” He argues that these social arts of visiting, speech making, and especially letter writing constituted a shared culture, and he demonstrates how even a latecomer to literacy such as Toussaint Louverture could participate in “a common substrate of cultural practices.” Perl-Rosenthal uses this world of letters to imagine an “age of revolution” in which the American Revolution was a single part.⁶

In contrast to Perl-Rosenthal, who sees letter writing as a stabilizing form throughout the eighteenth-century revolutions, Sara T. Damiano argues that commercial letter writing unmoored traditional forms of marriage. Forced to lay out financial issues explicitly in wartime letters, husbands and wives lurched between formal business and emotional

5. David Waldstreicher, “Ancients, Moderns, and Africans: Phillis Wheatley and the Politics of Empire and Slavery in the American Revolution,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 37 (Winter 2017).

6. Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, “Atlantic Cultures and the Age of Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 74 (Oct. 2017).

connection in their writing. Damiano opens up the possibility that these “flexible and negotiated” wartime marriages might have suggested to some men that they too could find advantages in thinking flexibly about their wives’ economic activities in debt collection and expenditures. Not only did the opportunities of wartime produce little change in elite women’s economic power, they may have created even more prospects for men to exploit in a new financial and political era as they remade marriages with the dual strands of affective and economic ties.⁷

In this context the recent work of Laurel Clark Shire is instructive. Shire finds that as the United States expanded its claims to Spanish Florida after the revolution, the government was willing to protect property rights of married women only in the service of expanding white ownership—even by women—of Seminole land.⁸ Thus, even those changes in marriage relationships that appear to be revolutionary turn out to drive the larger racist policy of the federal government. Women’s economic participation in the new nation, in other words, benefited the category of “women” much less than it did the imperialist state.

The creeping shadow of imperialism has become increasingly visible in much of the scholarship on the revolution, as McDonnell and Waldstreicher’s study of the historiography reveals. The authors argue that in a shift of focus from the various and productive inquiries into categories of gender and race, historians in our global and interconnected age have come to prioritize once again the entanglements of empire. Such scholarship, McDonnell and Waldstreicher conclude, suggests that “the colonists’ truly revolutionary act was to break from Europe in order to set up their own, more virulent empire.” Their impressive summary of these multiple strands of historiography helps us see how the research programs of neo-whigs and neo-progressives have converged to demonstrate both the uncertainty of the republic and the colonial nature of the new country.⁹

7. Sara T. Damiano, “Writing Women’s History Through the Revolution: Family Finances, Letter Writing, and Conceptions of Marriage,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 74 (Oct. 2017).

8. Laurel A. Clark, “The Rights of a Florida Wife: Slavery, U.S. Expansion, and Married Women’s Property Law,” *Journal of Women’s History* 22 (Winter 2010), 39–63. See also Laurel Clark Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny: Gender and National Expansion in Florida* (Philadelphia, 2016), esp. ch. 1.

9. McDonnell and Waldstreicher, “Revolution in the *Quarterly*?”

Contemporary concerns with globalization, McDonnell and Waldstreicher note, have made historians leery of talking about “the nation” as if it were a self-evident category. But Eliga Gould’s work reminds us that we ignore the importance of the term at our peril. The eighteenth century, he shows, was captivated by the idea of self-government. Both hucksters such as William Augustus Bowles and more legitimate groups such as the Muskogean wanted to create nations and were interested in national sovereignty. This sovereignty was only meaningful when it was recognized abroad, but the desire for it existed apart from international approval, especially because, as Native American nations discovered, other countries might indeed withhold from them the imprimatur of nationhood. Gould’s most essential insight is that revolutionaries felt pressure to declare independence for the pragmatic purpose of claiming the cloak of political legitimacy. At the same time that they were publicly repudiating their empires, however, they continued to be deeply entangled in imperial models. Revolutionary political structures were not particularly radical. The nations radicals wanted to create needed to be both legitimate and legible to others.¹⁰

Those nations were not merely virtual or imaginary. They depended on physical space as well as political sovereignty. Contested claims to land come to the forefront in the other three articles. Paul A. Gilje’s work, for example, opens up the relationship between commerce and conquest in American diplomacy. He argues that American foreign policy was driven in the beginning by a desire for trade rather than subjugation. Certainly, American diplomats denied the imputation that they were eager to push their nation westward; such early expansion was “incidental” to their purposes, Gilje argues, not intentional. The expansion of slavery and dispossession, then, was an accidental byproduct, not a deliberate goal, of the new nation. Only after the War of 1812, Gilje contends, did land acquisition become a more explicit goal of American diplomacy.¹¹

Jessica Choppin Roney’s rich and complex argument suggests a very different relationship between the U.S. government and expansion. In

10. Eliga Gould, “Independence and Interdependence: The American Revolution and the Problem of Postcolonial Nationhood, circa 1802,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 74 (Oct. 2017).

11. Paul A. Gilje, “Commerce and Conquest in Early American Foreign Relations, 1750–1850,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 37 (Winter 2017).

this story of the trans-Appalachian West, the crucial moment is not 1776, with the Declaration of Independence from Britain, but the 1780s and the several declarations by western settlers of their independence from eastern elites. Like those elites, westerners in the Tennessee Valley were angry with a government over which they had no influence; their goal, however, was not lower taxes but the violent takeover of Indian land. Roney takes seriously a bottom-up view of expansion, one that sees conquest driven not by the federal government or eastern desires but by the wishes of settlers who had already crossed the Appalachians. Gilje's "incidental" expansion was precisely what these white settlers wanted from their government. Roney's emphasis on the settlers' anger and desire, taken in conjunction with Andrew Shankman's article and other recent scholarship, drops intriguing hints about the place of emotion in American politics, both before and after the revolution. Shankman argues that the personal relationships between the state's representatives and its subjects were the only effective way for the government to function. "Affection," Shankman suggests, was essential for the collection of taxes; naked force was impractical. Roney's settlers also sought to connect emotionally with their government and to feel its presence, albeit on their own terms. They wanted it to respond to their demands but not to their actions. In short, white male Tennesseans pressured the federal government and got the state that they wanted, even without really hewing to the Constitution's expectations of state making. Thus, despite their geographic separation from the sources of federal power, these settlers were able to have a surprising impact on the national government. Their ability to sidestep the Constitution highlights the indirect political power of ordinary settlers.¹²

Indirect power as effective government takes center stage in Shankman's article. In both British colonies and American states, government was not a far-off entity that asserted its power over subjects; instead, it required

12. Jessica Choppin Roney, "1776, Viewed from the West," *Journal of the Early Republic* 37 (Winter 2017); Andrew Shankman, "Toward a Social History of Federalism: The State and Capitalism To and From the American Revolution," *Journal of the Early Republic* 37 (Winter 2017); Nicole Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2008). As Eustace shows, in the years preceding the American Revolution both the language and the expectations of emotion came to undergird Americans' political mobilization.

voluntary cooperation between individual governors and individual subjects. Shankman makes the surprisingly novel argument that governmental power was dependent on relationships between people. Shankman refers to his work as a “social history of federalism.”¹³ This wonderfully evocative phrase raises important questions and indicates directions for future scholarship.

What would an even more expansive social history of federalism and nation making look like? In the tradition of social history—which looks at the lived experience of ordinary individuals—the themes and conclusions of many of these articles might come to fuller life. Shankman’s argument hints at some of the possibilities gained by combining an emphasis on lived experiences with a focus on the emotional colors of those political experiences. In her examination of marriages, Damiano in turn points out that one cannot separate the emotional and the economic. I would suggest that the same is true for the emotional and the political. Shankman’s work, like Waldstreicher’s, reminds us that even those who seem relatively powerless—New Hampshire colonists and enslaved female poets—wrought the political world in which they lived. In fact, few people experienced political power as faceless and anonymous. For most, it was mediated through people they knew. But who were these people? We know the governors and political leaders but rarely the people who argued over local and federal policies. The work of historians such as Anne F. Hyde and (in this joint issue) Waldstreicher reminds us that these people were also white women, enslaved women, and even Native women who lived in Indian country but still had extensive trading, familial, and diplomatic relationships with members of the U.S. government.¹⁴

Historians of gender in particular have already begun to explore the ways that relationships, and especially family connections, shaped the political changes detailed by the scholars in this joint issue. Honor

13. Shankman, “Toward a Social History of Federalism.”

14. Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia, 2007); Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011); Anne F. Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families: A History of the North American West, 1800–1860* (Lincoln, NE, 2011); Damiano, “Writing Women’s History Through the Revolution”; Shankman, “Toward a Social History of Federalism”; Waldstreicher, “Ancients, Moderns, and Africans.”

Sachs's book on western expansion is particularly helpful. Like Roney, Sachs finds settlers pressuring the United States to give them power over Indian land. These settlers, however, drew their arguments from their idealized domestic lives, not their idealized political ones. In Kentucky and Tennessee, they argued that Native American men were targeting white women and thus that the United States needed to help male settlers protect their women and their manhood. Roney's settlers' desire for a "responsive" government sprang as much from their own sense of self as American men as from an inchoate vision of the relationship between state and federal governments.¹⁵

The years before, during, and after the revolution created desires and expectations that had an enormous impact on the United States and those who lived within its current or future borders. The insights and perspectives uncovered by all these scholars are essential for understanding eighteenth-century North America, the revolution, and even the origins of the nation. Conflicts between white and Native Americans over land continue, as the recent protest over the Dakota Access Pipeline reminds us. The legacy of American slavery still shapes the American legal system. These articles reveal a good deal about the racial and legal conflicts that lie at the foundations of American history. The challenge, then, is to allow this deep research to enter into a conversation with the work of scholars and writers who produce history for the general public.

The best historical work is always in conversation with others. Each article in this joint issue stands on its own yet was shaped, in part, by the group of people who spent a stimulating day workshopping each other's articles in March 2015. Readers will likewise appreciate each individual article while also enjoying the further benefits of moving from one journal to the other. For example, take Perl-Rosenthal's article on letter writing in the *William and Mary Quarterly* and Waldstreicher's on Wheatley's poetry in the *Journal of the Early Republic*. These two articles inhabit quite different historiographical contexts, but when they are read together the intersections between the imaginative and cultural practices of writing become visible. For Perl-Rosenthal, the form of a letter shapes its power; for Waldstreicher, it is the poem's content that

15. Honor Sachs, *Home Rule: Households, Manhood, and National Expansion on the Eighteenth-Century Kentucky Frontier* (New Haven, CT, 2015); Roney, "1776, Viewed from the West."

gives it force. But for both scholars, an emphasis on the social, political, and cultural contexts of writing makes all the difference in how we understand the significance of their two arguments. These articles in tandem also reveal aspects of a broader story—Perl-Rosenthal emphasizes continuity; Waldstreicher change—that might not be visible from either one alone.¹⁶

The editors hope that similar unexplored connections will lead more historians who write on only one side or the other of the American Revolution to begin thinking and writing across this divide. But in reflecting on these excellent and diverse works of history by sensitive scholars, I have another hope. I would like to see some convergence between the findings of popular and scholarly histories. The problem is a perennial one for scholars of this period. Indeed, in the footnotes near the end of their article, McDonnell and Waldstreicher allude to a conflict between them about the need for historians to acknowledge the popular desire for a story of national founding.¹⁷ Certainly not all historians must write for popular audiences, and no historian ought to pander to them. Without the deep knowledge produced by articles such as these, we have only a shaky foundation for understanding our past. But I do believe that there is also an opportunity for historians to produce public-facing work that falls between specialized research and bedtime story.

There are many possible paths to this sort of scholarship, but two stand out. First, as mentioned earlier, real people need to populate our analytic insights about force, power, and land. Although colorful anecdotes illustrate many of the articles, not many three-dimensional characters animate their arguments. The few that we do meet in these articles—not only Wheatley but also Attakullakulla, Bowles, Mary Colman, and others—only hint at how their lived experience intersected with the political worlds they negotiated. Remedying that problem will expand the depth of our analysis and the reach of our scholarship.

My own research on the Boston Massacre, for example, has uncovered significant connections between Massachusetts civilians and British military personnel during the years (1768–72) when troops were stationed

16. Perl-Rosenthal, “Atlantic Cultures”; Waldstreicher, “Ancients, Moderns, and Africans.”

17. McDonnell and Waldstreicher, “Revolution in the *Quarterly*?”

in Boston. These connections came in many guises, not only between soldiers and the local men alongside whom they worked in Boston but also between the women who traveled with the army and their civilian neighbors. Institutions such as the army, which we have tended to imagine as fundamentally male, turn out to have families, including women and children, at their center. In Boston, as a result of military occupation, there were many more people hidden in plain sight than we might have imagined. Their presence in this story completely shifts our understanding of the shooting from a momentary conflict between strangers to a long-term dispute among neighbors. And that dispute between neighbors can help us, as publishing scholars, create empathy in readers who cannot imagine themselves in the story. Readers of the *Journal of the Early Republic* and the *William and Mary Quarterly* will profit from the abstract and thoughtful pieces of scholarship published here. But their authors' insights should not remain within the confines of our professional guild. Historians do not need to be convinced of the relevance of this history, but other Americans do. I would urge the readers of this work to imagine how to translate it through the lives of ordinary individuals of all races and genders.

A second possible direction leads away from the general reader and toward one who is searching for a usable past. Our current political moment has thrust the U.S. Constitution into popular discourse. Although debates on the Twelfth Amendment (revising the Electoral College) and on Article 1, section 9, which includes the Emoluments Clause, may not last long, the larger questions underlying the origins and intentions of the Constitution will certainly remain. None of the articles here deals directly with the Constitution, but several offer provocative and useful side arguments that, taken together, might lead us toward a new appreciation of the unique role that the document plays in bridging our national past and our political present.

Gould's article on nationhood most explicitly addresses the historical and political context in which Americans framed the Constitution. He reminds us that the result was in part a response to American ideas about British power: "In true postcolonial fashion, the United States was the British Empire's mirror opposite." And it was the Constitution, with the individual states at its center, that structured this postcolonial state. Indeed, one of the goals of the document was to give the United States legitimacy in the eyes of other nations, and Gilje notes that it provided

an increased ability for the United States to make diplomatic trade agreements. In this joint issue's other articles, the Constitution appears primarily in terms of the nation's ability to organize political space. Roney, for example, offers the powerful insight that settlers in the western lands that would become Tennessee successfully ignored the Constitution's check on "settler-based sovereignty" when they bypassed Congress in 1796 to become a state. We rarely think of individuals pushing aside the Constitution while still shaping the nation. Tennessee settlers offer a striking example of American inhabitants influencing the political form of the new republic from outside the Constitution itself.¹⁸

Articles of this sort continue the ongoing project of rethinking the relationship of the Constitution to the American Revolution. Discussions of the Constitution and the revolution continue to revisit whether the former ended or extended the latter—did the Constitution close down the radical possibilities of the American Revolution, or did it make possible the revolution's unfulfilled potential?—but the articles here join other conversations that release us from the straitjacket of that dichotomy and allow us to reconsider the political and cultural work of the U.S. Constitution in its first years. Roney's story of Tennessee, for example, reminds us that in the early republic the Constitution neither exerted the power nor elicited the reverence that we sometimes accord it. A "social history of federalism" reveals the processes by which ordinary people—by their daily practices of labor, marriage, and even play—shaped the Constitution, which we imagine to have shaped the early republic.¹⁹

The organizing theme of this joint issue, "Writing To and From the Revolution," invites us to think broadly about both the foundations and the current manifestations—at once national and global—of the world in which we live. These articles show that the American Revolution was no radical rupture between a colonial past and a republican future. Rather, the revolution clearly laid the foundation for the creation of a neo-imperial United States, and we live today in the long shadow of that history. The appropriation of Indian land, the solidification of white power, and the persistence of patriarchy have stretched from the revolution to the present. It is not a proud story.

18. Gould, "Independence and Interdependence"; Gilje, "Commerce and Conquest"; Roney, "1776, Viewed from the West."

19. Roney, "1776, Viewed from the West"; Shankman, "Toward a Social History of Federalism."

While we reject a heroic history of the revolution, we the people must also recognize the power that the Constitution's preamble grants to our future. Buried in the grim history of the nation's founding are the stories of ordinary individuals who lived their lives within these social and political structures and who sometimes, whether deliberately or unwittingly, reshaped them. "We the people" continues to hold the promise that the inhabitants of the United States, having created a nation out of such dark materials, still have some power to improve it.

The Constitution's benefits and shortcomings only have power when real people exercise their claims to the government that it legitimates. Of course, as Shankman demonstrates in his careful study of political authority, the effort involved in such exercise is far greater than the simple assertion of a claim or right. Individual actors are rarely able to recognize the structural limitations that reduce their ability to make substantive change. Yet attention to individual lives certainly shapes how we see both the past and the present. It is those individual lives that sometimes singly, sometimes collectively, animated the Constitution and the nation it structured. In the case of Tennessee, where no political pressure encouraged compliance with the Constitution's rules on state making, settlers could successfully persuade Congress to ignore them. So too in our own times, in these first months of what may become a new American revolution, knowing how to connect the small actions of individuals to a larger vision of the nation remains vital.²⁰

These articles show us that the struggle to define and confine who "we the people" are was a major facet of the American Revolution. The struggle continues; a truly inclusive democratic republic has never, except in rhetoric, been a part of the American story. Its seeming impossibility may be mirrored by the impossibility of writing a fully inclusive history, one that populates the past with vulnerable, complicated, and contradictory people. But for the sake of the people in both the past and the present, we must try.

20. Shankman, "Toward a Social History of Federalism"; Roney, "1776, Viewed from the West."