

Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation
ed. by Alfred F. Young, Gary B. Nash, and Ray Raphael
Knopf



In 1754, Ben Franklin's graphic plea urged Americans to unite with the British against the French; 20 years later, internal divisions threatened the outcome of the Revolution.

"middling sorts" helped lead rural Massachusetts dwellers against the British in "so robust a revolution...that Boston's most famous and effective patriots tried to slow it down." Michael A. McDonnell

The founding fathers weren't the only visionaries dreaming of a new order for the New World. They had to fend off, out-argue, marginalize or suppress competing ideas advanced by the hoi polloi about just what liberty—the dangerous new-fangled concept that breathed life and fire into the American Revolution—meant. In these 22 provocative essays, leading historians highlight Revolutionary-era people and movements that textbooks and standard accounts skip. They recast the making of America as a bottom-up, widespread set of developments, where common folk spearheaded changes. Often these activists rallied around more radical positions than most founders held. There were clashes between different sorts of patriots, some of them violent.

Ray Raphael navigates the remarkable twists of 1774, when blacksmith Timothy Bigelow of the

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explains how Virginia on the Revolution's eve nearly erupted in civil war: White tenant farmers in Loudoun County rebelled against the wealthy slaveholders who doubled as patriot leaders over regressive taxes, property and voting rights, military service and equality. And Terry Bouton looks at western Pennsylvania in 1794: The Regulators, a militia seen as the popular vehicle "regulating" government power, revolted in the name of Revolutionary ideals against the Philadelphia establishment's control over taxation and representation. Bouton claims, "The defeat helped confine democracy to forms of political self-expression that did not overtly threaten elite interests." The uprising's true depth and breadth were masked ever after by Alexander Hamilton's derisive title: the Whiskey Rebellion.

More strange turns appear when Jill Lepore revisits firebrand Tom Paine. John Adams wrote, "Without the pen of the author of *Common Sense*, the sword of Washington would have been raised in vain." Paine donated his best-selling pamphlet's profits to buy supplies for the Continental Army, which he served in. But by his death in 1809, his impact on the Revolution had deliberately been erased: The surviving founders repudiated him, and Adams' friend Mercy Otis Warren relegated him to a footnote in the Revolution's official congressional history.

Why? Paine helped foment three revolutions; did hard prison time that debilitated and impoverished him; was physically repellent and a nasty drunk; and was alleged (in tabloid headlines on two continents) to beat his wife. But Lepore argues that his overweening sin was his commonplace Enlightenment view of organized religion: He made the mistake of proselytizing about it to the masses, instead of discussing it with like-minded intellectuals, as other founders did. For this, she declares, "He was destroyed." Six mourners showed up at his funeral. His work was buried in oblivion. Even his bones disappeared.

Revolutionary Founders aims to test the parameters of what we think we know with new and reinterpreted data and fresh theories. It reminds us that understanding history is an open-ended process, and that this is how historians, like scientists, work. Not all these essays unearth pure gold. But they offer challenging, surprising perspectives on the turbulent crosscurrents that shaped our nation's birth.

—Gene Santoro



White is right, and black is beautiful: Polar opposites each ran for the top job.

Only in America Presidential Pretenders

By Donald T. Critchlow and Gene Santoro

■ **Millard Fillmore** by Robert J. Scarry. As president (1850-53), Fillmore became known for doing nothing, so it figures he'd try for a political comeback in 1856 leading a party nicknamed "the Know Nothings." These days, that seems like a ticket to the White House, but it didn't work for him. The Know Nothings, aka the American Party, were anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, antislavery and widely admired: Know Nothing candy, tea and toothpicks appeared. With politics in turmoil—Fillmore's Whig Party had dissolved, the Republican Party was on the rise, the Democrats still dominated—Fillmore won 21.6 percent of the popular vote but carried only Maryland, which ironically was founded as a haven for Catholic immigrants.

■ **The People's Candidate for President, 1872** by George Francis Train. This Train to presidential nowhere, an eccentric railroad magnate and inspiration for Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*, ran on a platform of alcohol temperance, vegetarianism, women's rights and sexual freedom. He was also nearly sent to an insane asylum—perhaps where all presidential candidates belong. A supporter asked, "Is it possible to elect a President who does not drink, smoke, chew, gamble, lie, cheat, steal and never played the demagogue?" He was apparently serious.

■ **Strom: The Complicated Personal and Political Life of Strom Thurmond** by Jack Bass and Marilyn Thompson. In 1948, Thurmond, the States' Rights Party's candidate for president, fought for racial segregation. His 2.4 percent of the popular vote translated into 39 electoral votes from Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina. Thurmond, a powerful senator for 50 years, defended this campaign until his death in 2003 at 100. Then the long-buried twist surfaced: In 1924, 21-year-old Strom fathered a child by his family's 16-year-old black maid. Even for diehards, segregation had limits.

■ **Eldridge Cleaver** by Kathleen Rout. In 1968, the Peace and Freedom Party nominated convicted felon and Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver for president. At his "pre-Erection Day" rally, Cleaver called for an alliance with "Machine Gun Kellys and John Dillingers": Like the National Rifle Association, the Panthers opposed gun control in the name of self-defense. Cleaver later fled the country following a shoot-out with police. In the 1980s, he became a Mormon and conservative Republican. No, he didn't change his name to Mitt Romney.