

## **Founders: The People Who Brought You a Nation**

**Ray Raphael**

### **Introduction**

We know them well: George Washington, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams. Collectively, they were *the* Founders, a small cadre of very special individuals who bequeathed us a nation.

That's not how people at the time saw it, however. They recognized a host of personages, rarely mentioned today, as indispensable to the task at hand—revolution and nation building. All patriots knew, for instance, that a wealthy merchant named Robert Morris offered his personal credit to save the embryonic nation from financial ruin. Some called him “The Great Man,” others “The Dictator,” but nobody disputed the awesome power and influence of “The Financier,” whose “reign” lasted for three years as the Revolutionary War drew to a close.

More in the spirit of those tumultuous times, common farmers, artisans, and laborers were fully aware of their own collective participation and sacrifice, their defeats and triumphs. The body of the people, as they were called at the time, acted “out of doors” or “out of chambers,” gathering by liberty poles and liberty trees in the open air, or within taverns and meeting houses, to oppose British authority and push for self-governance. The new nation would bear the robust genetic imprint of this grand multitude.

Today, few Americans know of Robert Morris or appreciate the revolutionary impact of the body of the people. The reality of our nation's founding, wide and encompassing as it was happening, has narrowed in the decades and centuries since. Through successive filtrations of the historical record, actual events have been simplified, and truth diminished.

Can we now call back a distant time, to view it more fully and accurately? Can we embrace a wider array of Revolutionary actors, views, and visions?

Historians who have tried to do this in recent years have run into a problem: with so many actors, scenes, and perspectives, the story grows too big. That in part is why popular history writers have returned once again to the limited cast of recognizable

figures, who touch us on a personal level. Fortuitously, since *the* Founders were inveterate writers, historians can mine and re-mine their letters, diaries, and political tracts, fashioning them into cohesive stories with wide audience appeal. The plot remains direct and clear, the stars familiar and attractive.

But history based on this select crew, if left to stand on its own, has a serious shortcoming. The basic principle of the American Revolution was that government should be firmly rooted in the will of the people; four score and seven years later, Abraham Lincoln gave poetic voice to this message by boasting that our original patriots had established a nation “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” When we say our nation was created by a mere handful of Founding Fathers, we lose a key component of this democratic trinity. “Of the people, for the people, but by a few wise men” doesn’t have the same ring.

So whom should we feature: the great men we know, or the many others we do not?

The answer is both.

This book focuses on the lives of seven individuals drawn from a representative sampling of Revolutionary Americans. The traditional Founding Fathers are not the only ones capable of providing narrative direction, and because they come from a narrow stratum of society with a restricted range of life experiences, they should not be our only selections. That’s why I venture to more varied echelons as well. There, by consulting the original historical records, I find fresh individuals who can be tracked through the entire period of our founding. These people also affected events of the times, and because we have not heard much from them before, they produce unexpected twists and turns in the dramatic action. Appearing together and complementing each other, they encompass the full sweep of the Founding Era. Along with a sampling of their better-known contemporaries, whom I have not neglected, they shape an authentic, engaging, and coherent drama.

My first lead character, George Washington, will be familiar, but others might not. Readers will also meet:

\*Joseph Plumb Martin, a private in Washington’s army, who chronicled his wartime experiences with heart and wit.

\*Mercy Otis Warren, the most political woman of the Revolutionary generation and author of one of the earliest American histories.

\*Robert Morris, undoubtedly the most powerful civilian in Revolutionary America, but strangely neglected today.

\*Timothy Bigelow, a small-town blacksmith who helped engineer the first overthrow of British authority, the year *before* Lexington and Concord.

\*The conservative Henry Laurens, South Carolina's most unlikely rebel and Britain's most improbable prisoner.

\*Thomas Young, a country doctor turned peripatetic revolutionary, who fomented rebellion in seven states.

Directing the story, such characters expand it. While ensuring the tale's cohesion, they confirm its rich diversity.

If particular individuals focus our narrative, so do specific scenes. A sequence of live dramas occurring in set locations at definite times grounds this history. In these pages readers will travel from the Ohio backcountry in 1754 to Philadelphia's Independence Hall in 1787, with stops along the way in the streets of Boston, plantation mansions and slave quarters in South Carolina, and a host of towns, taverns, and battlefields throughout the land.

Step-by-step, the narrative moves forward along a chronological line that starts with the first hints of patriotic unrest, when British colonists in North America sensed that something was wrong but did not yet dream of creating a separate nation. From there it proceeds through the declaring of independence, the war that was fought to preserve it, and the establishment of a nation based on a firm and lasting Constitution. By proceeding in a linear fashion, I try to recreate each moment as it appeared to contemporary revolutionaries, who had no cognizance of what the future would bring. And by following the course of events over several decades, I hope to reveal that our nation was created not in a single epiphany, but through an extended and collaborative process that involved an entire generation of American patriots.

Without limiting its breadth and extent, I also contain this vital story by focusing on five key themes, central to both the founding of our nation and the way we think of America today.

1. *Popular sovereignty.* From the Revolution's inception, one core tenet of the eighteenth century Enlightenment was uppermost in the minds of American patriots: all government must be rooted in the will of the people. They embraced this belief fervently and on a grand scale. If their aim was to root government in a collective entity—the people—the Revolution itself reflected that aim. At each and every turn it was a people's affair. The Revolutionary generation founded a nation on the ideal of popular sovereignty, without any vestige of monarchical power or aristocratic privilege, and this was certainly its supreme achievement.

2. *Inclusion and exclusion.* Though popular sovereignty was the people's battle cry, questions of access to power remained. How far did popular sovereignty extend? Who was included and who was not? Should the power derived from sovereignty be distributed widely, or were certain inequalities inevitable and perhaps even desirable? Although nearly all Americans embraced the general notion that governmental authority resided in "the people," this basic premise was interpreted in numerous and competing ways. Outsiders wanted in but were often denied. In the evolving order, internal struggles between groups and individuals assumed new significance.

3. *Exchanges of power.* During the Revolutionary Era, power traveled both up and down social and political hierarchies, from inside chambers to the population at large, and from the people outside to the men within. Sometimes the so-called leaders led, as we commonly assume, but at other times they received their directives from the people and had little choice but to follow. Our two most sacred documents demonstrate these opposite trajectories in the political process. The Declaration of Independence resulted from an immense outpouring of popular sentiment, as commoners drove their representatives forward. The Constitution, on the other hand, was conceived in secret behind closed doors, and then sold to the people.

4. *Constraining authority.* As they cast off British rule, patriots resisted the undue concentration of military, economic, or political power. In their minds, standing armies, monopolistic corporations, and intrusive governments interfered with the people's right to self government, and they deliberately instituted various check and balances in their new governments (both state and national) to guard against it. Today, in a nation that boasts the largest concentration of military, economic, and political power in the world,

and perhaps in history, this component of our national heritage appears anachronistic, but perhaps, for that very reason, we should highlight the fears that weighed so heavily upon the founders.

5. *Expansion.* American patriots, in forming a new nation, looked west as well as east. Even as they defied British control, they struggled to extend their own control over the vast American interior. Victory in the Revolutionary War doubled the area claimed by the United States, while Native Americans lost more land in the Revolution than in any other war. The desire to move west was a major cause of the Revolution and moving west a major result. In the emerging American ethos, expansion was often linked to popular sovereignty. Because they possessed the most progressive form of government, many Americans felt they had a right and even a duty to spread it. Like the fundamental belief in popular rule and the struggles over inclusion and access to power, expansion of American influence has been a major component of our national experience from the outset.

These, in brief, are the characters, settings, and themes. This history, like all high drama, abounds with grand purpose, stalwart effort, and human foibles. The lead characters evolve as our country does, and in the end, their spirited stories become our country's chronicle — inclusive and in that sense patriotic, for if the American nation is all about “the people,” our national narrative must be too.