

Finding More Founders

A collection of essays expands our textbook view of the American Revolution.

BY MARY BETH NORTON

HISTORIANS refer to the trend as Founders' Chic: the recent flurry of interest in biographies of the "great white men" of our nation's founding generation. Although George Washington has consistently attracted Americans' attention since Parson Weems's biography appeared in 1800, during the

REVOLUTIONARY FOUNDERS

Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation.

Edited by Alfred F. Young, Gary B. Nash and Ray Raphael.

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last decade published examinations of Washington's contemporaries have multiplied dramatically. Take John Adams. By my rough count, he alone or in conjunction with other men has been the subject of 19 biographical studies and five documentary collections since 2001. Two more books have examined his marriage to Abigail Smith; she herself has warranted two separate biographies. Remarkably, a recent search in the Cornell library catalog for the phrase "founding fathers" in titles of books on American history published since 2001 identified 37 volumes.

"Revolutionary Founders" might seem at first glance to be just another iteration of the genre. But its subtitle — "Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation" — differentiates it from the rest. So too does its introduction. The three editors inform their readers that they hope to correct the image of the Revolution found in most textbooks, an odd goal because one of them, Gary B. Nash, is a lead author of a major textbook. The editors assert bluntly that the gentry who signed the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution "opposed popular democracy and social equality. . . . They did not hold fundamental values that we accept as common currency today." The book's goal, they explain, is to help Americans "grasp the full scope of the American Revolution" by taking "seriously its most progressive participants" and incorporating "them into our national narrative."

Have they succeeded? In large part, yes. In 22 succinct essays, each accompanied by a paragraph of useful bibliographical references, the contributors examine a few familiar people (Abigail Adams again, Thomas Paine), some known primarily to scholars of the period (the African-American clergyman Richard Allen, the soldier and memoirist Joseph Plumb Martin) and some (Robert Coram, who advocated economic equality; Han Yerry

Mary Beth Norton's latest book is "Separated by Their Sex: Women in Public and Private in the Colonial Atlantic World."

Doxtader, an Oneida leader) whose names will be unknown to nearly all readers. Many of the writers have published longer studies of the same people, or books that in some way touch on the figures they discuss. For example, Alan Taylor, the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning "William Cooper's Town," writes about Jedediah Peck, one of Cooper's fellow townsmen, who was notable primarily for advocating free public education in New York State, a goal achieved by legislative action in 1812. (I should mention that I know Nash and his fellow editor, Alfred F. Young, relatively well, and about half the individual authors too. Early American history is a field where scholars tend to be acquainted with one another.)

The essays constitute an eclectic mix. Most of them concentrate on individuals, but nine consider groups linked in various ways. In several instances, terming the subjects "founders" of the United States stretches the definition beyond the breaking point. The black loyalists ably discussed by Cassandra Pybus surely were rebels, but founders of this nation they were not, although they ended up as early settlers in the British colony of Sierra Leone. Likewise, Colin G. Calloway explains that the Cherokee leader

Dragging Canoe opposed the rebellious colonies, moving his followers westward to found the Chickamauga Cherokees, a nation that managed to survive despite forced removal to Oklahoma in the 1830s.

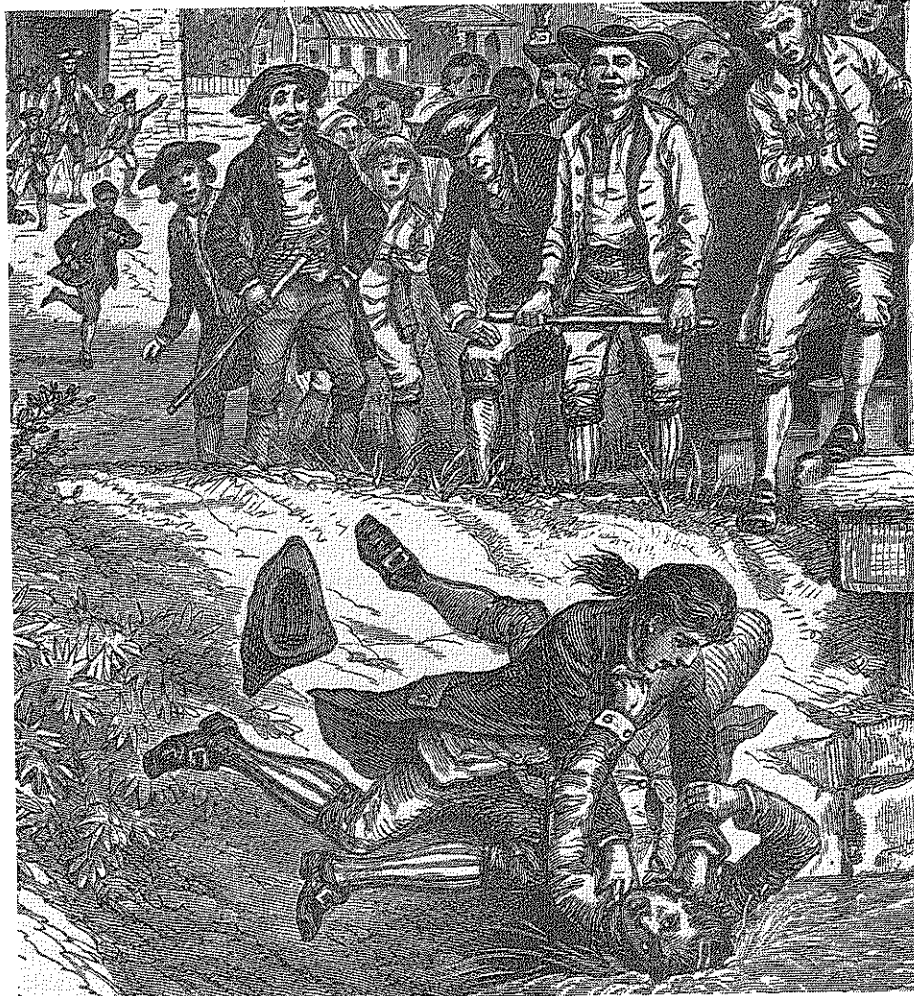
Other subjects seem eccentric, most notably Herman Husband, who envisioned a New Jerusalem that would fill the land west of the Appalachians with a rigidly designed utopian society. Wythe Holt admits that Husband ignored the fact that the land in question was already occupied by native peoples, and observes that he failed to include "women or persons of color" in his otherwise "extraordinarily egalitarian" worldview. Holt insists that Husband still "deserves to be remembered in the first rank of the heroes of American democracy." But a democracy that excludes a majority of the population hardly seems to qualify as an exemplar of the "fundamental" American values to which the editors refer in their initial statement.

The best essays are small gems of exposition, providing both the context and detail necessary to enable readers to recognize the important contributions of these previously underappreciated and largely unknown individuals. Jon Butler demonstrates that devout Virginia Baptists who fought simultaneously for political and

religious freedom laid the groundwork for the language of the First Amendment and thus for our contemporary understanding of the proper relationship of church and state. David Waldstreicher offers an appraisal of the enslaved African-born poet Phillis Wheatley that, as he hopes, "challenges us . . . to broaden our understanding of who successfully engaged in revolutionary politics." Sheila Skemp is more successful than Holt in reaching a balanced assessment of a subject — in her case, Judith Sargent Murray, America's closest contemporary counterpart to the early English feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. Skemp emphasizes that Murray's prescient arguments for women's equality and educational attainment were nonetheless founded on her "very elite sense of entitlement" and that postwar egalitarian demands made her "profoundly uncomfortable." Jeffrey L. Pasley rightly celebrates the newspaper editor Thomas Greenleaf, a man on "John Adams's enemy list," whose opposition to the Federalists in general and to the Sedition Act in particular helped to establish modern legal definitions of freedom of the press.

Questions remain about the message conveyed by some of the essays in this volume. Were all the participants in the local disturbances known as Shays's Rebellion (1786) and the Whiskey Rebellion (1794) by definition more aligned with revolutionary ideals than were the government officials, military officers and revolutionary officers who fought them? Could a true revolutionary support the adoption of the Constitution? In the opinion of most contributors, it seems the answer to the first question is yes, and to the second, no. But all readers might not find such responses so obvious.

In the afterword, Eric Foner observes that "the Revolutionary era emerges in these pages as a time of freewheeling debate, of intense discussion at every level of society of the fundamentals of political and economic life." True, but this book's set of debaters is limited. Consisting primarily of white men and avid revolutionaries, it omits women other than the usual suspects, Wheatley, Murray and Adams. Where are the members of the Ladies Association, the first organization of American female political activists, or the New Jersey women who voted until disfranchised in 1807? And it generally omits the enslaved African-American petitioners and plaintiffs not just slaveholding elites, with the hypocrisy of their claim to be fighting for freedom. (It also omits the loyalists, which may be fair in a book about "founders," except that those who opposed the Revolution often pushed the rebels to clarify and expand their ideas.) In short, "Revolutionary Founders" is one step, but only one, toward a comprehensive account of the nation's origins. □



Whose revolutionary ideals? An incident during Shays's Rebellion.

ENGRAVING FROM HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES (CIRCA 1850)