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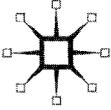
**Creating
an American Culture,
1775–1800**

A Brief History with Documents

Eve Kornfeld

San Diego State University

palgrave



CREATING AN AMERICAN CULTURE, 1775–1800: A BRIEF HISTORY WITH DOCUMENTS by Eve Kornfeld

Library of Congress Control Number: 00-107181

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2001 978-0-312-23702-8

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PALGRAVE, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

First published by PALGRAVE, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010. Companies and representatives throughout the world. PALGRAVE is the new global imprint of St. Martin's Press LLC Scholarly and Reference Division and Palgrave Publishers Ltd. (formerly Macmillan Ltd.).

Manufactured in the United States of America.

6 5 4 3 2 1

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ISBN 978-1-349-63132-2

ISBN 978-1-137-03834-0 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-137-03834-0

TO MY FAMILY

Thomas Backer Simpson
Anna Kornfeld Simpson
Sara Kornfeld Simpson

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Foreword

The Bedford Series in History and Culture is designed so that readers can study the past as historians do.

The historian's first task is finding the evidence. Documents, letters, memoirs, interviews, pictures, movies, novels, or poems can provide facts and clues. Then the historian questions and compares the sources. There is more to do than in a courtroom, for hearsay evidence is welcome, and the historian is usually looking for answers beyond act and motive. Different views of an event may be as important as a single verdict. How a story is told may yield as much information as what it says.

Along the way the historian seeks help from other historians and perhaps from specialists in other disciplines. Finally, it is time to write, to decide on an interpretation and how to arrange the evidence for readers.

Each book in this series contains an important historical document or group of documents, each document a witness from the past and open to interpretation in different ways. The documents are combined with some element of historical narrative—an introduction or a biographical essay, for example—that provides students with an analysis of the primary source material and important background information about the world in which it was produced.

Each book in the series focuses on a specific topic within a specific historical period. Each provides a basis for lively thought and discussion about several aspects of the topic and the historian's role. Each is short enough (and inexpensive enough) to be a reasonable one-week assignment in a college course. Whether as classroom or personal reading, each book in the series provides firsthand experience of the challenge—and fun—of discovering, re-creating, and interpreting the past.

Natalie Zemon Davis
Ernest R. May
David W. Blight

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Preface

Embroiled in the “culture wars” of the early twenty-first century, Americans often assume that conflicts over our national identity and cultural diversity are new. Yet they are as old as our government itself. This volume offers some historical perspective for contemporary debates through an examination of the concerted efforts of American Revolutionary intellectuals to create a virtuous, independent, unified American culture. The founders’ struggle to construct American identity reveals not only their intense desire for national unity but also the instability of national identities and the deep historical roots of American cultural diversity.

Keenly aware of the lack of unity that all but undermined the American Revolution, and convinced that the eyes of the world were on them, American intellectuals sought to overcome more than a century of regional, ethnic, and religious diversity in America. Their attempts to shape American ideas, values, and beliefs through a national culture took many forms. For some, a new, purer, and simpler American language seemed necessary to correct the corruptions and idiosyncrasies of English; for others, a national university and system of public education were prerequisites for a stable, virtuous society and polity. Still others tried to create an American history replete with national myths and heroic images in written or visual form. Waging losing battles against an emerging popular culture and the attractions of alternative cultures left these Revolutionary intellectuals scarred and weary by 1800. Yet their vision of American cultural unity, like the myth they created of Washington’s cherry tree, has never entirely vanished, even in democratic, materialistic, pluralistic, modern America.

This book moves the subject of this quest for cultural unity from the margins to the center of historical inquiry. It invites students of history to pause in the usual rush from the Declaration of Independence through the Revolutionary War to the Constitutional Convention and the political battles of the 1790s. Is there another level to the

story of the founding that this concentration on political events obscures? Should we not wonder why George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and others cared so much about an American language, epic poetry, a national university, or American histories? Should we not try to understand the intellectuals' fear of American popular culture and the attractions of alternative, indigenous cultures?

To address these questions, this book crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries, much as the founders themselves did. If their efforts were multisensory, ours must be multidisciplinary. The interpretation that opens the book introduces and draws on a variety of approaches, methods, and perspectives, including social history, intellectual history, gender analysis, and poststructuralist theory. Its individual chapters can be read separately as coherent units or together to reveal the complexity and interconnectedness of the founders' intellectual project. Most important, the opening narrative attempts to open up the documents that follow to various readings. It invites readers to engage with the intellectuals' vision both sympathetically and critically and to emerge with a deeper understanding of the complicated, contested nature of national identities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has a long history. I first came upon republicanism and Philip Freneau while researching a junior paper and senior thesis at Princeton University. My fascination with the cultural history of the American Revolution led to a doctoral dissertation at Harvard University. Along the way, Dorothy Ross, John Murrin, Eric Foner, Maria DiBattista, Carl Schorske, John Clive, and Donald Fleming offered encouragement, freedom, guidance, and a model of a life of learning that inspires me to this day.

While teaching at Princeton and San Diego State University, my appreciation of American cultural diversity and my interest in poststructuralist theory and gender analysis grew. Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Council of Learned Societies allowed me to frame the Revolutionary intellectual project in a new way. A Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity Award and a sabbatical from SDSU provided support for a return to East Coast archives and time to write.

The responses of editors and readers of the *William and Mary Quarterly*, *Journal of the Early Republic*, *Canadian Review of American Studies*, and *Journal of American Culture* to my emerging interpretations enriched them immeasurably. So did conversations over the years with Mina Carson, William and Aimee Lee Cheek, Elizabeth Colwill, Robert Darnton, Natalie Davis, Cornelia Dayton, Edith Gelles, Douglas Greenberg, Jean Matthews, Michael Pratt, Jon Roberts, Emily and Norman Rosenberg, Francis Stites, and many, many of my students. I am profoundly grateful for the enthusiasm with which Charles Christensen of Bedford/St. Martin's greeted this manuscript and the care with which Joyce Appleby, Carol Berkin, Carl Prince, and Arthur Shaffer reviewed it. Lisa Moorehead and Rebecca Leyden offered the faith, support, and encouragement that come only from friends.

Without Tom Simpson, Anna Kornfeld Simpson, and Sara Kornfeld Simpson, this book might have been finished sooner, but my life would have been much poorer. As Anna regaled her first-grade class with tales of Mommy's book, two-year-old Sara checked my wastebasket daily for "her work" and merrily added her scribbling to mine. Sharing the cares and the joys of raising our children, Tom constantly demonstrated his commitment to my work as well as his own. Together, their appetite for new intellectual adventures is unsurpassed. This book is dedicated to my family, with all my heart.

Eve Kornfeld

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