American National Identity, 1750-1790: Samples from the Popular Press

"THE PUBLISHER OF A NEWSPAPER," noted the *Boston Gazette* in 1790, "is highly responsible to God and his country, for the sentiments which he propagates among the body of a people."[1] Although the writer acknowledged no similar responsibility to historians, we can nevertheless use the "sentiments propagated" to reconstruct the attitudes of those who wrote and read them. In particular, the newspapers of the American colonies and nation can help us to trace the development of early American national identity.

When did Americans begin to think of themselves as a united and unique nation? Most scholars have pointed to the eighteenth century. To be sure, no one has suggested that Americans before the late nineteenth century were "nationalists" in the traditional sense of the word.[2] Many historians, however, have spoken of the birth of American national consciousness, the degree to which Americans overcame colonial and state loyalties to imagine themselves as a single people, and of national identity, the set of characteristics this people believed themselves to have.

Historians have not spoken with one voice on the subject; rather, they have played tug-of-war with the birthday of national community, pulling it back and forth across the eighteenth century. One group of scholars has noted a rudimentary "consciousness of national self-

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[1] Reprint from *Western Star*, in *Boston Gazette*, Nov. 15, 1790.

[2] The word "nationalism" has nevertheless been used throughout to describe, particularly in 1790, patriotism with a distinctive national focus. While in an exact sense this may be inappropriate, in a broader sense it is not. But in no sense is it meant to equate the national feeling of the 1790s with nineteenth-century nationalism.

hood" which jumped across even the earliest colonial borders. For this school, the American Revolution represents the triumph of nationalism, the final catharsis enabling the colonists to shed their British skin and emerge as a new American people.[3] Others date the event later, looking to the country's first war, or to the long prologue of political confrontation which preceded it, as the crucible of American identity.[4] Finally, several writers hold that the war secured only American independence, not American identity. As Esmond Wright concluded in 1961, "There were in a sense thirteen revolutions rather than a single 'national' movement. For there was no 'nation' as yet."[5] For these last scholars, national sentiment only began with the Revolution.

An examination of the early American popular press can clarify this issue. Press opinion can serve, for the historian, as a convenient proxy for public opinion. The American press in the 1700s was not a perfect mirror of popular thought: primitive journalistic ethics, propagandizing editors, and commercial competition for a small readership and smaller profits did not make for disinterested reporting.[6] But if we can carefully and critically sift through their pages, the

[3] Max Savelle, *Seeds of Liberty: The Genesis of the American Mind* (New York, 1948), 581. See also Carl Lotus Becker, *Beginnings of the American People* (Boston, 1915); Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York, 1958); Albert Harkness, Jr., "Americanism and Jenkins' Ear," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 37 (1950), 61-90; Richard L. Merritt, *Symbols of American Community, 1735-1775* (New Haven, 1966); and Michael Zuckerman, "The Fabrication of Identity in Early America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 34 (1977), 183-214.

[4] See Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-1776* (New York, 1955); Edmund S. Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Chicago, 1956); and Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill, 1979).

[5] Esmond Wright, *Fabric of Freedom, 1763-1800* (New York, 1961), 20. See also Jack P. Greene, "Search for Identity: An Interpretation of the Meaning of Selected Patterns of Social Response in Eighteenth-Century America," *Journal of Social History* 3 (1969-1970), 189-220; Edward Frank Humphrey, *Nationalism and Religion in America, 1774-1789* (Boston, 1924); Kenneth C. Wheare, "Federalism and the Making of Nations," in Arthur W. Macmahon, ed., *Federalism, Mature and Emergent* (Garden City, 1955), 28-43.

[6] For a review of eighteenth-century journalistic practices, see Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain, 1764-1776* (New York, 1958). In one sense, editorial activism is a *justification* for examining press opinion in a study such as this. If newspapermen saw their role as opinion makers, we should listen carefully to what they said.

papers are a rich source of evidence about contemporary sentiment. News and opinion pieces explicitly address many issues of relevance to a study of national identity. The wording of advertisements, the relative prominence of national news, or a pundit's choice of pseudonym all can shed a more diffuse light on the same issues.[7] By searching for clues in different papers at different times, we can monitor the growth of national consciousness during the eighteenth century. The argument of this essay is based upon a politically mixed assortment of newspapers from Boston, Philadelphia, and Virginia in each of four periods: 1750-1751, 1770, 1785, and 1790.[8] Material

[7] The sources cannot always be held accountable for their own content. What with advertisements, shipping notices, government documents, the occasional moral or literary essay, and a smattering of international news culled from private letters or other papers, there was not much space left to fill at the editor's discretion. Moreover, independent variables such as weather or the timing of legislative sessions determined the character of the coverage: occasionally, "Southern Mails" were "not arrived at this Publication." *Boston Gazette*, Feb. 14, 1785. When examining the papers for evidence of national feeling, we must therefore be cautious about the standards by which we judge them.

[8] The newspapers used are: *Boston Gazette* (Boston: 1785, 1790), *Boston News-Letter* (Boston: 1750, 1770), *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia: 1750, 1770, 1785, 1790), Hunter's *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg: 1751), Purdie and Dixon's *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg: 1770), *Virginia Journal* (Alexandria: 1785), and *Virginia Independent Chronicle* (Richmond: 1790). Problems of survival and availability of colonial newspapers made perfect symmetry, as well as complete sampling, unattainable. Thus, Philadelphia and Boston papers of 1750 have been compared with Virginia papers of 1751, and papers from three Virginia towns—Williamsburg, Alexandria, and Richmond—have been used. I have tried to identify the papers' political biases whenever possible. For 1770, this is a relatively straightforward matter. The *Pennsylvania Gazette* aggressively promoted the Whig line, the *Virginia Gazette* was generally pro-patriot, but did not always "enjoy the Whigs' complete confidence," and the *Boston News-Letter* would later lean to the Tory position. On these classifications, see Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence*, 118, 79, and 94. For the later years, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* was Federalist, both in the ratification struggle and the later party battles. William Frank Steirer, "Philadelphia Newspapers: Years of Revolution and Transition, 1764-1794" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1972), 152; Donald Henderson Stewart, "Jeffersonian Journalism: Newspaper Propaganda and the Development of the Democratic-Republican Party, 1789-1801" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1951), 1185. The *Boston Gazette* "leaned" to opposing the Constitution and was later a strongly Democratic-Republican paper. Samuel Bannister Harding, *The Contest over the Ratification of the Federal Constitution in the State of Massachusetts* (New York, 1896), 175; and Stewart, "Jeffersonian Journalism," 1171. The *Virginia Independent Chronicle* was an important Antifederalist organ. Jackson Turner Main, *The Antifederalists: Critics of the Constitution, 1781-1788* (Chapel Hill, 1961), 295.

Throughout my article and in the citations, I have used the standard titles, as in (in most cases) Clarence S. Brigham, *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820* (2

from several early American magazines in 1785 and 1790 also has been incorporated.[9] This mix, corrected for the biases of place and politics, is a representative sample of the press in four distinct stages of American political development in the eighteenth century.

This is a series of snapshots, not a moving picture, and it may miss important events in the thirty-six years of newsprint from 1750-1790 that are *not* analyzed. Without all the film, it is difficult to understand how one frame leads to the next. But the basic storyline comes through clearly: American national identity is a more recent development than most historians have thought. A vibrant American identity and national consciousness did not emerge until 1790. The Constitution succeeded where the colonial experience, the Revolution, and nationhood itself had failed.

In April 1785 the *Boston Gazette* carried an advertisement for John Trumbull's *McFingal*, a poem that achieved its humor at the expense of those who had been Tories. The testimonials for *McFingal* noted prominently that "the Reviewers in England" esteemed it a "masterly piece of composition" but mentioned the plaudits of American readers almost parenthetically. Americans in 1785 did not have enough of a sense of national culture to judge even an anti-Tory satire: the thirty-five years from 1750 left no such legacy.[10]

To the colonial newspaper readers of 1750 and 1751, America was a place, not a people. The papers used the term in strictly limited fashion, generally to fix location. The *Pennsylvania Gazette* tagged

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vols., Worcester, 1947). But the actual titles on the papers were usually fuller, and sometimes changed. For example, the *Boston News-Letter* was called, in 1750, *The Boston Weekly News-Letter*, and in 1770, *The Massachusetts Gazette; and the Boston Weekly News-Letter*. The full titles of the others are: *The Virginia Independent Chronicle, and General Advertiser, The Virginia Journal, and Alexandria Advertiser, The Virginia Gazette, The Boston Gazette, and the Country Journal, The Pennsylvania Gazette.*

[9] They are: *The Boston Magazine* (Boston: 1785), *The American Museum, or, Universal Magazine* (Philadelphia: 1790), and *The Columbian Magazine, or Monthly Miscellany* (Philadelphia: 1790), cited throughout as *Columbian Magazine* because of a mid-year change of title (to *The Universal Asylum, and Columbian Magazine*). Politically, the *American Museum* "plainly inclined toward the Federalist party," while the *Columbian Magazine* offended the Federalists on at least one occasion, when it published the proceedings of the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention. Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1850* (New York, 1930), 102 and 96.

[10] *Boston Gazette*, April 18, 1785.

one writer with the cumbersome description "an Inhabitant of one of the Colonies"; "American" would have been briefer but inaccurate. As every page of the papers testifies, the colonists thought of themselves as British. Domestic news was spotty and irregular. When it did appear, it often distinguished a writer's own "Country" from "other Parts of the Continent." European developments, especially those in and concerning England, captured the headlines. Poets roused their muses to celebrate "HIS MAJESTY'S BIRTH-DAY," and merchants hawked "the newest fashions, as are used in London."[11] The colonists' nascent sense of self, like their news and fashions, was an English import. They saw each other as joined, if at all, by the role they played in advancing the British empire in North America—"glorious" work, certainly, but glorious because of "the usefulness of the place to England."[12] These writers were not embryonic American nationalists. They signed themselves as "TRUE BRITON[s]," and we should take them at their word.[13]

Twenty years later they christened themselves "the Americans." In the Revolutionary lexicon, the word "America" now meant a "Country," and even those who "differ now and then about politicks" insisted that they were "very sincere friends to . . . America."[14] The press chronicled the affairs of this new people with vigor. In 1770 the colonists were forever taking their own pulse. Coverage of other colonies expanded and focused mainly on resistance to Britain. Philadelphia readers knew who dressed in homespun in Williamsburg, how the members of the New York City Council voted, and who graduated from "Rhode-Island College."[15] The tenor of the articles changed, too, as the three papers adopted a continental outlook. The *Virginia Gazette* reprinted a Boston notice announcing—with "particular satisfaction"—James Otis's convalescence, for northern and southern colonies were now joined in the "Common Cause" of lib-

[11] *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Dec. 18, 1750; *Boston News-Letter*, Jan. 4, 1750; *Virginia Gazette*, March 7, 1751; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 31, 1750.

[12] This particular quote, although taken from a letter from Halifax, captures a general sense of colonial pride in the British empire. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Feb. 20, 1750.

[13] Ibid., Oct. 11, 1750.

[14] *Boston News-Letter*, April 6, 1770; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Aug. 16, 1770; *Virginia Gazette*, Oct. 4, 1770.

[15] *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Jan. 4, Feb. 8, and Sept. 27, 1770.

erty.[16] By 1770 the papers had developed an impressive sense of national identity and community.

It was, however, one with impressive limitations. Writers emphasized, over and over, that "unity" was the colonists' only armor in the battle against British tyranny. Patriots called for concord with revivalist fervor, urging their brethren to "unite, as one man," and excoriating those guilty of "inglorious Defection from the Interest of their Country."[17] Even the *Boston News-Letter*, later openly Tory, understood and supported the idea of colonial unity.[18] But the call for unity did not imply recognition of a common character; it was a straightforward political response to the threats posed by the "common Enem[ies]" of all the colonists.[19] As such, national unity was a narrowly defined, short-term expedient. The colonial press of 1770 did not perceive much "Americanism" that united the colonies in a fundamental or abiding sense. Advertisements hawked "Choice London Porter," and propagandists defended free elections since, "to an Englishman," they "were as dear as his Life." While "ALL the colonies had the same idea of Liberty," they hardly had the same idea of anything else. As one writer in the *Pennsylvania Packet* would put it several years later, they were "Thirteen Colonies, differing from each other in laws, religion, manners and interests, *united* to oppose the British troops."[20]

The national consciousness of the Revolution was artificial, for it depended on the redcoats as an incentive. When this common threat disappeared, much of the national unity that it had generated disintegrated. Indeed, by 1785 the American press was as parochial as ever. Writers considered their state as their nation, identifying it as the repository of their "*unalienable* rights" and discussing its "national character." They knew themselves as thirteen separate communities, and chided those who did not. Europeans, one pundit wrote, could not "trouble their heads" about individual states: "*They* only know us as the United States, and many of them cannot decide whether

[16] *Virginia Gazette*, June 7, 1770; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 14, 1770.
[17] *Virginia Gazette*, Oct. 25, 1770; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 7, 1770.
[18] See *Boston News-Letter*, March 1, 1770.
[19] *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 10, 1770.
[20] *Boston News-Letter*, July 5, 1770, Jan. 11, 1790, and Feb. 1, 1770; *Pennsylvania Packet* (Philadelphia), Jan. 1, 1776, quoted in Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence*, 235.

the river Delaware runs in Virginia, New-Hampshire or Pennsylvania."[21] Americans, though, knew their state geography well as the unity of 1770 gave way to bitter interstate quarreling. Bostonians blamed their debts on "the neglect of duty in the other states," Philadelphians spoke of the "folly" of driving the "trade of our city to other states," and Virginians argued that theirs was "the favored State of the Thirteen."[22] Writers themselves acknowledged America's lack of national unity in 1785 and fretted over the consequences of such "foolish jealousy." Bostonians writing to John Hancock lamented the "different views and local attachments" that prevented "either concert or decision on many great and national questions."[23]

The way the papers reported the news bears out the contemporary view that the new nation was mired in disunity and localism. The eclectic assortment of anecdotal and literary pieces—which had disappeared during the heady days of the Revolution—returned. Stories were more likely to have a state or international dateline, and coverage of national affairs lapsed. Unlike 1770, newspapers viewed events through a narrow lens. Obituaries elegized those who labored to "promote and see the increase and prosperity of this town in particular, and the State in general." Among the books offered for sale at Edes's print shop in Boston were a *History of England* and an edition of the Constitution of Massachusetts, but no history of the United States. No longer did writers sign their letters "Filius Americani" as in 1770; "MASSASSOIT" was more in tune with the spirit of the times.[24]

When the papers did turn their attention to the national scene they were not encouraged: "A thousand scenes of luckless fate / Already cloud the to't'ring state." At home, America was an "already impoverished nation," and abroad foreign enemies, particularly Britain, were "straining every nerve to ruin us." While there is considerable debate among historians about America's actual state in 1785, the perception of distress was so generally and powerfully expressed

[21] *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Jan. 12, 1785, May 4, 1785, and Jan. 12, 1785.

[22] *Boston Gazette*, Nov. 28, 1785; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, April 6, 1785; *Virginia Journal*, April 21, 1785.

[23] *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 11, 1785; *Boston Magazine*, June 1785, 234.

[24] *Virginia Journal*, March 31, 1785; *Boston Gazette*, July 18, 1785; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Feb. 1, 1770. Massassoit's letter, ironically, was addressed to the "Free Citizens of America" and criticized the importation of British goods. *Boston Gazette*, Jan. 24, 1785.

in contemporary newspapers that it deserves to be taken seriously. Virtually no one was satisfied, or even hopeful. America, one writer said in a memorable phrase, was on the verge of "a precipice into which she was precipitating herself." Indeed, many wondered whether, from one cause or another, the United States might not soon "take a farewell of our Independence."[25]

Preoccupied with these worries, the press had little time for nationalism. To be sure, there were numerous manifestations of national feeling in 1785, but these were not nearly so numerous as they had been fifteen years earlier or would be five years later. Moreover, such sentiments were often undercut by the prevailing localism, insecurity, and pessimism of the times. The report of an Independence Day celebration in New York turned into a diatribe against Tories still living there. A writer musing on the "superior felicity" which the United States enjoyed, particularly in natural resources, asked: "After thus descanting upon the States in general, may we not venture to assert, that of these advantages Massachusetts, as a particular State, enjoys the greatest share?"[26] America was a nation in name but not necessarily in spirit. As a letter reprinted in the *Boston Magazine* noted, nothing "can justly be predicated of the Americans in general," for they were like "a lad" who "cannot be said to have established his habits for life." Coming from such divergent backgrounds, Americans would need to be "a long time together" before their national character would coalesce.[27]

In 1785, that time had not yet arrived. At the end of the long journey from colonies to confederation, the American press's sense of national selfhood was often as amorphous and listless as the words it used to describe the new nation: a "league," the "American states," or "Confederated *America*." Besieged by parochialism, disunion, and pessimism, a patriot on the Fourth of July offered a lame toast to "The land we live in."[28]

[25] *Boston Magazine*, July 1785, 271; *Boston Gazette*, Feb. 28, 1785; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 11, 1785; *Boston Gazette*, Oct. 17, 1785 and Jan. 17, 1785.

[26] *Boston Gazette*, July 18, 1785; *Boston Magazine*, April 1785, 139-40.

[27] *Boston Magazine*, Nov. 1785, 403.

[28] *Virginia Journal*, March 31, 1785; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, April 6, 1785, and Feb. 4, 1785; *Boston Gazette*, July 11, 1785.

"Poet's Corner" in the *Boston Gazette* featured a new poem each issue, tucked in among the advertisements on the back page. In all of 1785, only one of these poems dealt with a national theme. Five years later, the statements in this space were as often political as poetical: ten different works appeared on national subjects and figures.[29] This change in "Poet's Corner" was a literary manifestation of a broader phenomenon in the American press of 1790—the emergence, at long last, of a vigorous and widespread national consciousness.

The press had come up from the parochialism of 1785 and was now obsessed with America, even with the word itself. Anything, it seems, sold better if it was an American something. A song-book publisher sought to ride the rising wave of nationalism to commercial success with an anthology entitled "HARMONIA AMERICANA."[30] He sensed the mood of the day well. In 1790, America was its own favorite subject. The newspapers and magazines embarked on a voyage of discovery, surveying the physical and cultural territory of the new nation with maps, charts, and accounts of American people and places. Domestic coverage expanded as new and unfamiliar datelines punctuated reports from other states. Readers seemed hungry for national news, and the press gladly obliged. The doings of Congress, framed in the *Boston Gazette* with a starred border and the legend "Columbia" in bold type above, took center stage in all the papers. An ad for books on sale at the print shop listed only three items: the Report of the Secretary of the Treasury, the Report of the Secretary of War, and an edition of Gordon's *History of the American Revolution*.[31] Everything seemed to be somehow connected to the affairs of the new nation, and writers debated even the most trivial issues in terms of their national consequences. A reader importuned the *Boston Gazette* to omit news of suicides, in part because such news promoted "a bad idea of our country" abroad.[32]

The press's optimism in 1790, another sharp contrast with 1785, made the increasing sense of national awareness especially powerful.

[29] *Boston Gazette*, Aug. 1, 1785. For the 1790 poems, see ibid., May 10, 17, 31, July 5, Aug. 9, 23, Sept. 6, 13, and Dec. 13, 1790.

[30] *Boston Gazette*, Dec. 20, 1790.

[31] *Virginia Independent Chronicle*, Feb. 24, 1790.

[32] *Boston Gazette*, June 28, 1790.

At home were scenes of "LUXURIANT FERTILITY, of flourishing COMMERCE, and the abodes of SOCIAL HAPPINESS." No longer embarrassed and humiliated, Americans were newly confident of international respect, and would force Europe to "own . . . an equal—whom she wish'd a slave." With such great good fortune it was surely "the height of ingratitude to Heaven, to be . . . complaining." Peace abroad and plenty at home led to frequent predictions of future American glory: "the united states," most writers felt, "cannot fail of becoming a great and prosperous empire." Writers were so sure of their place in the world that a report on the spirit of incipient rebellion in Mexico was headlined, with parental pride, "PROGRESS of the AMERICAN FEVER."[33]

Despite such evidence of an extraordinarily high level of national consciousness in 1790, some contemporaries worried that it was still insufficient, and set about deliberately stoking the fires of nationalism. The thoughts of "The Politician," writing in the *American Museum*, are revealing. Americans, he recognized, "have not been used to think nationally," because they had no institutional or cultural structures to support nationalism. The American heritage "has neither antiquity, nor mystery."[34] Writers and editors attempted to remedy this deficiency by emphasizing the emblems and symbols of the American nation in what seems to have been a deliberate attempt to forge a stronger national consciousness.

The most important emblem was a proud history. Writers paid homage to a mythic and legendary—if recent—American past. Numerous anecdotes hyperbolically detailed the patriotism of the common folk, like that instance of "FEMALE HEROISM" when the "whig ladies" of Charleston refused "to oblige the British officers with their hand in a dance." David Ramsay's history of the American Revolution was serialized in the *Columbian Magazine*, and touted in the papers. Noah Webster was upbraided for his efforts on the same topic when a reviewer found Webster's mere fifty pages to be "too concise" for a "subject of so much importance." The forgetful reader

[33] This was the description on a commemorative column erected on Beacon Hill. *Boston Gazette*, Dec. 6, 1790; *American Museum*, June 1790, Appendix I, 44; *Boston Gazette*, Dec. 27, 1790; *American Museum*, June 1790, 292; *Boston Gazette*, Feb. 15, 1790.

[34] *American Museum*, March 1790, 148, 149.

could keep his "AMERICAN CHRONOLOGY" handy—a list of important dates and events "in any wise relating to America," such as "Tea—342 chests of, belonging to the English East-India Company—destroyed."[35] The repetition of historical themes drove home the clear message that powerful ties stretched from the past to join together the Americans of the present.

Celebrating the history of the masses did not prevent the press from praising famous men as well. Extravagant coverage of American heroes was a second theme of the new nationalism, as the newspapers and magazines of 1790 celebrated a host of national figures. Benjamin Franklin and the rest of that "glorious band of patriots" who served the American nation were immortalized by epic poetry, breathless prose, and instructive anecdote. But among them, one man stood out.[36] "Say, how shall I attempt to sing thy praise?" one poet asked. Most found a way. His name need hardly be spoken: who else could be "THE MAN, whom millions revere, and almost adore?" He was, of course, "The godlike unparallelled, great Washington," and readers simply could not hear enough about the nation's first president and favorite hero. The press recorded all of Washington's comings and goings, even his fishing expeditions, and nervously reported the vicissitudes of his health: "We have the pleasure to inform our readers from good authority, that on yesterday morning, he was much better." This exhaustive coverage satisfied readers who saw in Washington (and the other popular American heroes of 1790) what they wished to see in their nation: he was "equal in dignity, and superior in worth and excellence, to any Sovereign in Europe."[37]

Finally, the press celebrated the yearly ritual of American nationalism, the "great and important event" that had occurred on the fourth of July. Numerous reports, from large towns and small hamlets, dotted the summer newspapers with descriptions of how Independence Day was celebrated everywhere in America. Each of the patriotic thirteen toasts—a practice thankfully since discontinued—was usu-

[35] *Columbian Magazine*, March 1790, 139; Oct. 1790, 254; and Jan. 1790, 7.

[36] *American Museum*, April 1790, 212.

[37] *Columbian Magazine*, Nov. 1790, 337; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Jan. 13. 1790; *Boston Gazette*, Aug. 9, 1790; *Virginia Independent Chronicle*, May 26, 1790; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Feb. 17, 1790.

ally printed. This festival brought forth a paroxysm of national feeling in the press. It was, as one orator noted, "the Sabbath of our freedom!" But the celebration had a more universal meaning that was not lost on commentators. "[I]n the long catalogue of sublunary vicissitudes," the same orator trumpeted, "no parallel can be found, similar to that which we are now called upon to celebrate." To some, an event of such worldwide moment replaced the death of Christ as the anchor for the world's calendar: "Be it remembered that on the nineteenth day of June, in the fourteenth year of the Independence of the United States of America."[38]

The fascination of the press with these emblems of American identity—a mythic history, the lives of national heroes and heroines, and the national ritual of Independence Day—suggests a studied effort on the part of editors and writers to promote nationalism, to manufacture some "antiquity" and "mystery" for the American nation. The emblems of America would bind her citizens to her and teach them of her character. In an address on Independence Day, the Reverend William Rogers made explicit the subtle injunction that often accompanied the tales of American heroes and history: "Impress it, therefore, my fellow citizens, on the hearts of your children."[39]

The faithful apparently heeded Rogers's gospel. Cheered on by the press, nationalism became so great that it could no longer be restricted to politics alone. In economic life, the press doggedly promoted American manufacturing and agriculture. One writer, for example, suggested that the United States appoint a "Farmer General." Even George Washington got into the act, when the winner of a cheese-making competition had a wedge of his prize-winning product sent to the table of the president, who would no doubt derive "great satisfaction" from knowing that "the art of cheese-making in these states has arrived at such perfection."[40] Newspapers published numerous hortatory accounts of economic advances in other states, assuming that the development of industry and agriculture anywhere

[38] *Boston Gazette*, July 12, 1790; *American Museum*, March 1790, 161. This quote appeared in a government copyright notice. *Virginia Independent Chronicle*, June 23, 1790.

[39] *American Museum*, March 1790, 162.

[40] *Virginia Independent Chronicle*, March 31, 1790; *Columbian Magazine*, Feb. 1790, 128.

was of interest to Americans everywhere. The *Boston Gazette* felt that its readers might find it "satisfactory to learn the actual state" of a powder mill in Pennsylvania or of a lead mine in Virginia.[41] The calculated purpose of such items was clear: "Accounts of this nature wear off the diffidence of our citizens."[41]

So it was for everything from architecture to the theater. The ranks of "THE PATRONS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE" swelled.[43] A caveat appeared in the *Virginia Independent Chronicle* warning enthusiasts not to be gulled by a Bible which purported to be printed in America but was "wholly executed in England." This deception was particularly evil, since "many persons already in possession of English Editions, now subscribe purely to encourage the printing of the bible in this Country."[44] Such patriotism affected virtually every field of human endeavor. Benjamin Rush wrote in support of a distinctive education for American women; another correspondent urged Americans to great architectural achievements; and a New York actress suggested that the theater might have a role to play in the spread of American liberty.[45] This was a second Declaration of Independence, every bit as eloquent and noteworthy as that issued at Philadelphia fourteen years earlier. As one writer expressed it, "[a]s a nation, we ought to form some national customs."[46]

This expansive sense of national consciousness stands in stark contrast to 1785. The popular press of 1785 was not devoid of national consciousness; nor was 1790 without plenty of stubborn parochial sentiment. Examples of both can be easily found, but they appear, in the context of a comparison between the two years, to be anachronistic.[47] In the broadest sense, 1785 appears to have been charac-

[41] *Boston Gazette*, April 5, 12, 1790.

[42] *Columbian Magazine*, July 1790, 60.

[43] Ibid., March 1790, 131.

[44] *Virginia Independent Chronicle*, Jan. 27, 1790.

[45] *Columbian Magazine*, April 1790, 209-13; *American Museum*, Oct. 1790, 174-76, and Dec. 1790, Appendix I, 37-38.

[46] *Columbian Magazine*, July 1790, 37.

[47] Indeed, the press of 1785 printed historical anecdotes, celebrated Independence Day, and encouraged American manufactures. But, in addition to the difference in the quantity of such instances during the two years, these indices are misleading if considered only superficially. The calls for economic nationalism in 1785, for example, were usually couched in terms of retaliation against the British, or emphasized deficiencies like the "very imperfect

terized by "local attachments," 1790 by "a patriotism not confined to little limits."[48] The method used here prohibits a quantitative expression of the change, but the evidence suggests that "Poet's Corner" is a telling index. In 1790, "national habits" were "daily forming."[49] Whatever the headlines in the various papers, for the historian, the sudden efflorescence of a powerful national consciousness in 1790—the transformation of "Poet's Corner"—is the year's biggest story.

In 1770, the press spoke of American "unity"; in 1790, the great cry was American "union." Those with a poetic bent celebrated the effects of this sublime word: "*Union!* from thee those wond'rous joys shall flow, / Which bid the heart with genuine rapture glow."[50] More prosaic writers endlessly discussed union, attributed to it all of America's successes, scolded those who would weaken it, suggested ways to strengthen it, and heaped on it all the praise that they felt it deserved. In 1790 "union" meant something more significant than a set of political arrangements. Writers were determined to transform the union that had been established in theory into one "in feeling and in practice." This was not a political bond, but a spiritual one. Every citizen was now a member of the "Great AMERICAN FAMILY."[51] This minor shift of language—from unity to union—represents a major shift of thought.

What accounts for the timing of this change? The most obvious explanation is the Constitution. Simple chronology alone would indicate that the outbreak of national feeling in 1790 was related to the creation of a national government a few years earlier. More convincing than this deterministic proof, however, are the words of newspaper and magazine writers themselves. They credited the Constitution with creating the mood of national confidence in 1790, and

state of AMERICAN Husbandry. . . . " *Pennsylvania Gazette*, April 27, 1785. In 1790 similar calls had a far more patriotic and positive ring, as writers boasted that various American products were "equal in quality to that imported from Europe." *Boston Gazette*, March 22, 1790.

[48] *Boston Magazine*, June 1785, 234; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Jan. 27, 1790.

[49] *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 12, 1790.

[50] *Columbian Magazine*, Jan. 1790, 57.

[51] *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Jan. 27 and June 9, 1790.

predicted that under its influence American arts, manufactures, and agriculture would be carried "to the highest pitch of improvement."[52] They read the document itself as a mandate for national unity: "every informed citizen will [now] consider himself a subject, not of one, but of the United States!" Some writers explicitly associated the spread of nationalism beyond politics with the creation of a national government. One correspondent noted that an American edition of the Bible was highly appropriate at a time when "all descriptions of men are united to promote the political welfare of our country." Another considered a friend's suggestion that "as a new Federal Government was established, it was highly proper that an intire [*sic*] change in the mode of education should take place." Whatever its implications for the mode of education, the Constitution was seen to have made "ancient colonial jurisdictions" irrelevant, both on maps and in hearts.[53]

This interpretation of the Constitution as the engine powering the nationalist drive of 1790 dovetails nicely with the prevailing view of political thought during the period. Historians have looked to the "apotheosis" of the Constitution to account for the political harmony of the early 1790s.[54] But the burst of national spirit was much more than an aftershock of the Federalist political triumph. It was not the reflex boosterism of victorious Federalists, but something more complex. An article encouraging immigration to America counseled certain individuals to stay at home. Those with "no professional pursuits" and "[l]ounger[s] in bookstores," the author advised, "had better end their days in an old country." Another writer, plumping for a national renaissance in architecture, noted that American "customs, tastes, and refinements, are less artificial than those of other countries. . . . Such is our happiness." A third hailed members of the Massachusetts General Court for appearing in homespun, not just because it was of

[52] *Boston Gazette*, Aug. 30, 1790. See also, for example, the letter from an American in London in *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Feb. 22, 1790, which discusses the effect of the Constitution on Europe's view of the United States.

[53] *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Jan. 27, 1790; *Boston Gazette*, Feb. 22 and May 24, 1790; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Jan. 27, 1790.

[54] Lance Banning, "Republican Ideology and the Triumph of the Constitution, 1789-1793," *William and Mary Quarterly* 31 (1974), 168. See also Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, 1969).

American manufacture, but because "[t]he Trimmings are plain, and such as become true Republicans."[55] Such manifestations of national feeling are typical of the clarion calls for economic and cultural independence, or the emphasis on American emblems—they were based on a sense of a unique American character.

It was this basis which gave the nationalism of 1790 power and legitimacy. Jay Fliegelman has written of the trend in eighteenth-century political and familial relations toward more affectional and voluntaristic associations.[56] His analysis is crucial to an understanding of the vitality of the union discussed in 1790. Newspaper writers of 1790 believed that national unity sprang not from arbitrary political agreements, but from unity of "first maxims": the American people "reason[ed] and act[ed] so nearly alike." Writers knew that there were certain "sentiments" and "virtues" which "live in the breast of every American." It is difficult to summarize the image writers had of themselves; it is certainly not difficult to recognize. One clear assumption shines through the pages of newsprint: Americans were an exceptional people. They believed that their nation was unique among nations, and they themselves unique among peoples. They sang a constant counterpoint, identifying the dynamics of European society and showing their opposites in America. In the process, they delineated their own national character.[57]

This character was perceived most clearly in politics, where it was quite obvious that the American system was established "upon [a] different principle" than that of any other nation.[58] The differences only began with government: the governors and the governed were distinctive as well. In every other country, political debate was poisoned by "prejudice and political faction"; in America, speeches heard in Congress were more "candid, sincere and patriotic." In every other

[55] *American Museum*, May 1790, 233. The writer's own tastes in architecture, however, ran toward the classical style. *American Museum*, Oct. 1790, 174; *Boston Gazette*, Jan. 18, 1790.

[56] Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution Against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800* (Cambridge, 1982).

[57] *American Museum*, March 1790, 148; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 9, 1790. As a writer in the *Columbian Magazine* explained, "each nation has a descriptive one [national character] peculiar to itself." *Columbian Magazine*, July 1790, 23.

[58] *Virginia Independent Chronicle*, Jan. 13, 1790.

age, ambition was the driving force in politics; "In America, a nobler critereon has arisen."[59] This was not surprising, since the American people, like their representatives, were a new breed. The populations of "every other country," writers believed, lived under a dark cloud of suspicion and ignorance. But in America, the "minds of the common people" had been "illumine[d]" by education. This "general diffusion of science" was the "true cause of that new series of events" that attended the birth and growth of the American nation.[60]

Not only were Americans better educated, they were differently educated. They were not like those European "dignified literati," whose "pursuits and discoveries . . . terminate in no addition to the real elegancies or conveniencies of living." Theirs was "useful" learning, and it would make America "the envy and admiration of the world." It was a commonplace that because of the American disposition toward useful learning, "Americans excel in almost every branch of handiwork they undertake. A country blacksmith among us will perform with his hammer, what workmen of some other countries would be obliged to execute with the file." The new nation was no less than a "hot-bed for industry and genius in almost every human pursuit."[61]

And these qualities alone would be rewarded. Americans had no need for Europe's rigid social hierarchy; they would climb the ladder of merit. An advertisement for *The American Sailor* addressed the reader: "the AMERICAN SAILOR . . . comes forth unsupported by the Great and Wealthy. . . . [He] is turned adrift on the wide ocean of the world to make his way good by his own merit." In Europe, success was like a "prize in a lottery. But the case is widely different in America."[62] Indeed, the very nature of success was different in America. Manufacturers of luxury goods were advised to seek other markets: "[g]old and silver and other laces, embroidery, jewellery, rich silks and silk velvets, fine cambrics, fine lawns, fine muslins, and articles of that expensive nature, have few wearers here."

[59] *Virginia Independent Chronicle*, Jan. 27, 1790; *American Museum*, Feb. 1790, 163.

[60] *Boston Gazette*, April 5, 1790; *American Museum*, Feb. 1790, 82.

[61] *Boston Gazette*, Nov. 1, 1790; *Columbian Magazine*, Aug. 1790, 79, and Nov. 1790, 349; *American Museum*, May 1790, 237.

[62] *Boston Gazette*, Aug. 23, 1790; *American Museum*, May 1790, 237.

Americans would have prosperity (the editor of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* finished an article with a call for other material demonstrating "THE EXTRAORDINARY CAPACITY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA TO PROMOTE THE COMFORT AND HAPPINESS OF THE HUMAN RACE"), but it would be of a peculiarly American nature. Poets called to the "poor unhappy swains" of Europe, urging them to experience the American difference, where "the same hand, which sows, may reap the field."[63]

To have it otherwise would not be "virtuous," the word that expressed the contrast with Europe most potently.[64] Europe might luxuriate in material wealth, but Americans would earn the moral treasure of virtue. The press paid close attention to what an advertisement for an essay on the seat of the federal government called the "delicate morals, necessary to be observed in infant states."[65] Virtue was the key to the American self-image, and correspondents who examined America's national character gave it a clean bill of health, "notwithstanding the turpitude of the times." "It ought to be remembered," the *Columbian Magazine* pointed out, "that the large towns of America, are not, like those in Europe, seats of flagrant vice." One writer even managed, by comparing the crime statistics for the United States and Britain, to quantify American moral superiority at a factor of ten.[66]

Such were the elements of the American identity promoted in the press of 1790: politics (and politicians) operating on new principles, an educated citizenry ruled by reason, the triumph of useful learning, an honest prosperity, meritocracy, and virtue preserved in an age of depravity. In every respect, Americans made a clean break with all that had gone before. They indeed were exceptional. The profound differences between the European and American conditions were interpreted as evidence of even more profound differences of character: "Let us look at the old world—see famine, war, commotion

[63] *American Museum*, July 1790, 40; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 5, 1790; *American Museum*, June 1790, Appendix I, 38.

[64] The concept of virtue, of course, was central to American identity well before 1790. See Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 65-70.

[65] *Boston Gazette*, March 15, 1790.

[66] *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 31, 1790; *Columbian Magazine*, Oct. 1790, 254, and Sept. 1790, 203.

and destruction pervading a great part of it: Then view our country, and let reason and justice draw the distinction." The best way to remain set apart, most reasoned, was to stay apart. No matter how extensive America's commercial, social, or political intercourse with Europe, writers were determined to protect their nation's character from Europe's morally corrupting touch. They would in all things, as in commerce, live in "a world of our own."[67]

This identity was not Federalist propaganda—far from it. Many of its elements resonated with Antifederalist themes. The primacy of virtue, the passion for useful learning and employment, the exaltation of merit, the rejection of European norms—all were central planks in the Antifederalist platform.[68] The nationalism of 1790—which sought an American culture without dignified literati, American heroes who were virtuous rather than mighty, an American prosperity without silks and velvets, and "a world of our own"—was similar in many respects to what the Antifederalists had asked for in 1787. This may explain the similar level of national consciousness among the newspapers and magazines in 1790, despite their political differences.[69] It also may explain how an unreconstructed Antifederalist could mourn a "consolidation of the Government" while admitting a "Consolidation of the union."[70] For the union of 1790 was based on a vision of a shared national character to which Antifederalists could subscribe.

Understanding this sheds new light on the burst of national feeling in 1790. For three years, Americans had vigorously argued over the Constitution and the direction of the new nation: pressing and fundamental issues were consistently on the front pages of newspapers. There is so much in the national identity of 1790 that echoes the great debate—Federalist and Antifederalist—that this newly

[67] *Boston Gazette*, Dec. 27, 1790; *American Museum*, March 1790, 147.

[68] For an account of these themes and their expression in Antifederalist thought, see Herbert J. Storing, *What the Anti-Federalists Were For* (Chicago, 1981).

[69] Although the *Virginia Independent Chronicle* seemed to lag slightly behind the other papers, in particular by demonstrating a continuing British economic influence, for the most part the national feeling of 1790 crossed geographical and political lines. Even those who criticized the administration often did so in *national* terms—for example, scolding it for a performance which was "derogatory to our national honor. . . ." *Boston Gazette*, July 19, 1790.

[70] *Boston Gazette*, July 19, 1790.

sprouted national sense of self may have owed less to the document *per se* than to the debate that preceded it. In the struggles over the Constitution, Americans were forced to articulate, as they had never done before, the nature of their national community and their dreams for its future. Through this process they apparently came to a consensus about who they were which had previously eluded them. In defining their government, they defined themselves. The measure of their success is that the "Observer" could say to his readers, in 1790, "now we are one people."[71]

Eighteenth-century newspapers represent, at best, the attitudes of a small, literate elite. Although the evidence which survives about circulation figures indicates that papers generally enjoyed significant support, and while the particular papers examined here had longer-than-average lives, we cannot generalize from press to populace without other evidence.[72] Within the literate, elite group of newspaper readers, however, 1790 was a watershed year for the development of American national consciousness and identity. It was but one chapter—albeit a critical one—in a story which had commenced much earlier and would conclude much later. The national consciousness of 1790 was *not* the deeper nationalism of the late nineteenth century: Americans had a schizophrenic concept of citizenship at least until the end of the Civil War.[73] Nor did national consciousness originate in 1790. Many of the elements of American identity in that year had a long pedigree, and would have been familiar even to John Winthrop.

But in the context of 1750-1790, it is the late but spectacular flowering of American national identity that stands out. In the colonial period, writers considered themselves as British, joined to each other (if joined at all) by their common service to the empire. During the

[71] The second half of this quote—a reminder that all Americans "have a right to the same treatment, and all jealousy ought to be done away"—makes it clear that the process of national integration was by no means concluded in 1790. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Jan. 27, 1790.

[72] For some evidence about circulation figures for several Revolutionary era newspapers, see "Appendix A: Newspaper Circulations," in Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence*, 303-4.

[73] James H. Kettner, *The Development of American Citizenship, 1608-1870* (Chapel Hill, 1978), examines the issue from the broadest perspective.

conflict with Britain, there was a sharp surge in national unity, but it was restricted to politics and defined only in response to the specific threat of British tyranny. When the external pressure of the Revolution was gone, the American press of 1785 often found itself—despite moments of national awareness—parochial and without a potent national consciousness. Only 1790 was characterized by a robust sense of national self.

This pattern suggests that the growth of American national identity was not an incremental process which was steadily advanced, in turn, by the colonial experience, the Revolution, and the trials of nationhood. Rather, the Constitution appears to have precipitated the critical phase in the development of early American national consciousness. When this consciousness did appear, it was widely accepted, vigorously promoted, and based on a well-articulated vision of a unique American character. It was truly, like the "Self-Interpreting Folio Family Bible" advertised in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, a "genuine American Edition."[74]

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[74] *Pennsylvania Gazette*, April 21, 1790.