
At the end of Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743–1776 (1955), Carl Bridenbaugh declared, “The primary role of the cities in the attaining of American independence was preparatory” (425). In a bold reimagining of Bridenbaugh’s study, Benjamin L. Carp arrives at much the same conclusion, but for reasons very different from Bridenbaugh’s and only after blazing his own unique path through the edifices and urban terrains of mid-eighteenth-century British North America.

Carp’s admiration for Bridenbaugh is readily apparent. He takes both Bridenbaugh’s chronology (1740s–70s) and cities (Boston, New York, Newport, Charleston, and Philadelphia) as his own. But whereas Bridenbaugh explored the social and cultural development of those cities—the “revolt” of his title alluding to the American Enlightenment—Carp focuses concertedly upon political mobilization. More innovatively still, Carp organizes each of his five chapters around distinctive, contested urban spaces: Boston’s waterfront; New York’s taverns; Newport’s places of worship; Charleston’s homes and domestic environments; and Philadelphia’s State House and streets.

In his introduction, Carp provides a narrative and analytical framework for the five urban case studies that follow. He chronicles the rise of British North American seaports as centers of commerce, seats of government, and hubs of communication. Drawing upon the insights of architectural history, Carp convincingly demonstrates that the colonial city’s “buildings, the spaces between them, and the material objects within them” comprised an instrumental “cultural landscape,” which “set the parameters of political mobilization and social change” (13). Carp notes, too, the “shadow landscapes,” in which women, nonwhites both free and enslaved, poor persons, and oppressed religious minorities “challenged the political establishment from the margins” (15). Carp explains that “would-be revolutionaries” were forced to contend with urban pluralism, social unrest, loyalist countermobilization, and the challenge of hinterland communications (13). They succeeded, when they were able, by capitalizing upon “a sense of interdependence: civic consciousness, civic responsibility, and civic power” that prevailed in North America’s largest cities (14).

Carp’s compelling choice of urban spaces makes for a vibrant and engaging read. In peninsular Boston, where no patch of ground lay more than half a mile from the water, a history of violent confrontation between townspeople and agents of royal authority fostered a spirit of solidarity and protest (25). In New York, where for a time in the early 1770s local officials granted liquor licenses at an average of one per day and where the ratio of liquor retailers to adult white men soared to thirteen to one, taverns emerged as the rallying and wrangling sites
of partisan interest (64). In Newport, where Congregationalist, Anglican, and Baptist churches, Quaker and Moravian meetinghouses, and a Jewish synagogue often stood contentiously amongst one another, a "landscape of mutual suspicion created barriers to political mobilization" before the British occupation of December 1776 (121). In Charleston, where fashion no less than fires and hurricanes compelled British North America's wealthiest families to rebuild and refurnish their lavish homes, ostentatious consumption ran afoul of austere boycotts, destabilizing the authority of the planter class. And in Philadelphia, where the Continental Congress assembled within a magnificent State House as the people gathered on its capacious yard, vox populi resounded loud and clear.

Readers familiar with Carp's "Fire of Liberty: Firefighters, Urban Voluntary Culture, and the Revolutionary Movement," William and Mary Quarterly 58 (2001): 781–818, know what fine work Carp makes of city spaces and their many politicized constituencies. His monograph—exciting, vigorous, and original—will sit worthily alongside urban studies such as Bridenbaugh's and Gary Nash's.

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At first glance of this title, one wonders how much more reconsideration the founders need. Most of those treated in R. B. Bernstein's volume—Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Madison, and Hamilton—have received plenty of consideration over the years. But on second look, Bernstein has something quite helpful to offer—a succinct and engaging discussion of the founders that contextualizes them both in their time and ours and shows how their actions and legacies have been interpreted in the popular and scholarly discourse.

He handles his subject in a way that will prove very useful for teaching undergraduates about "doing" history. By introducing them to three divergent, sometimes conflicting, and largely inaccurate perspectives on the founders, he demonstrates that history is more a matter of interpretation than "facts." The first view is the one that students themselves usually hold—the popular perception of the founders as "icons of disinterested statesmanship" (iv). Bernstein immediately contrasts this with a second depiction put forth by many academics, that of the founders as "representatives of a corrupt establishment" (iv). Finally, he discusses the view of the founders as the "sole determiners of what the Constitution means" (v). Bernstein's aim is to synthesize the scholarship of the last forty years that offers a more nuanced interpretation of the men and their world. In a respectful tone, he proposes to "take the founding fathers down from their pedestals without