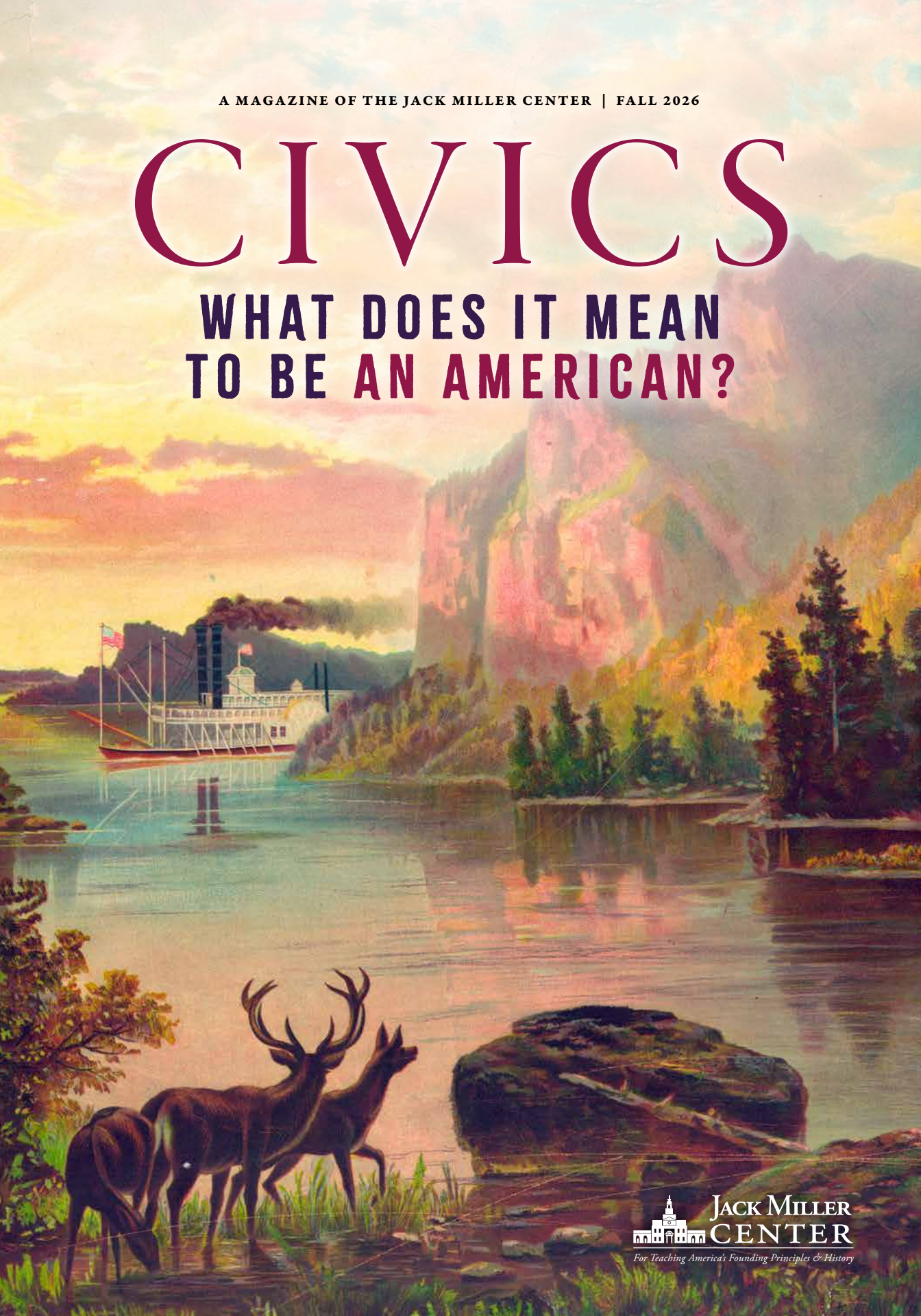


A MAGAZINE OF THE JACK MILLER CENTER | FALL 2026

CIVICS

WHAT DOES IT MEAN
TO BE AN AMERICAN?



JACK MILLER
CENTER

For Teaching America's Founding Principles & History

Special thanks to our partners at Stand Together
for sponsoring this issue of *Civics Magazine*.



The Jack Miller Center is a Philadelphia-based educational nonprofit
committed to solving the national crisis of uninformed citizenship
by teaching America's founding principles and history.

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jackmillercenter.org

COVER IMAGE *An American River Scene*, Krebs Lithography Co., ca. 1880

RIGHT *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, Thomas Hill, ca. 1884.

INSIDE BACK COVER *Grand Eastern Staircase to the House of Representatives Gallery*, ca. 1866.

Images courtesy Artvee

DESIGN BY KAREN SHEETS DE GRACIA ■ karensheets.com



WHY CIVICS?

CIVICS MAGAZINE is a bi-annual publication of the Jack Miller Center; a nonpartisan, educational nonprofit committed to teaching America's founding principles and history. The magazine was born out of the National Summit on Civic Education, our annual gathering for funders, educators, and leaders across the field where we discuss the most pressing issues in civic education.

As our name suggests, we seek to make the case for civics: the study of the rights and duties of citizenship. In fact, “civics” itself is an American term, derived from the Latin word *civicus* meaning “pertaining to citizens”. The term took on a whole new meaning in America, where “We the People” reign and education became essential to sustaining our democratic republic.

To many, civics is a class in primary or secondary school where you learn how a bill becomes a law. Indeed, that's essential. But we believe civics is more than just the basic facts about how our government works—it's learning about how to be good citizens and how to build a society for human flourishing. We believe that's done best by drawing on the traditions of liberal education to bring the American political tradition and Western canon to life, teaching the virtues, values, and skills required for self-government.

It's a conversation that's been happening for thousands of years. We're proud to continue that conversation here, for the benefit of America and her institutions.

To learn more, check us out on Substack at civicsmagazine.substack.com.



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SARAH CROSS & HANS ZEIGER

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be an American? As our nation marked the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, that question was everywhere—and so were the partisan divisions that make it so hard to answer. Yet buried in the discord is a point of agreement: the country needs more civic education.

A recent national poll, conducted by NBC News in partnership with More Perfect, found that 80% of Americans, across the political spectrum, say the country needs more civics education—79% of Republicans, 85% of Democrats, and nearly 75% of independents. Even amid our disagreements, we sense that knowing where we came from is what lets us argue honestly about where we’re headed.

The Jack Miller Center and Stand Together were proud to partner on this issue of Civics Magazine, bringing together some of our most trusted writers to think through what American identity means. The answers are as varied as the country itself: essays on the distinct character of the American Northeast, South, Southwest, and Midwest; on the culture we’ve built together, from literature to comedy to scientific innovation; even a case for why Ray Charles’s “America the Beautiful” deserves to be our second national anthem. We hear from a range of figures, from Alexis de Tocqueville to John Dickinson, and we look honestly at the darker chapters of our history alongside what it means to protect our heritage—celebrating the country’s strengths without looking away from its failures. And we examine what it means to be a constitutional people, united by a shared commitment to the principles and texts of the American founding.

None of these essays converge on a single answer. In fact, that was never the point of civics. Every generation has had to learn its own history well enough to argue with it, and that work doesn't end when the anniversary year does.

How do we invite others into this civic responsibility and turn this moment into a movement? Consider how Americans once responded to a different kind of crisis fifty years ago: a fear that our students were falling behind in science and math. Leaders across education, business, and communities didn't wait for a top-down mandate—they built a movement from the ground up and gave it a name: STEM.

It worked because it felt personal, not imposed: a toolkit for building a good life, not another subject to memorize. Civics education deserves the support to achieve a similar transformation—one that helps every American see the founding principles not as history to recite, but as tools for solving problems, navigating disagreement, and leading.

This issue is a contribution to that project, and the recommitment behind it is the real inheritance of this milestone year.

Civics education deserves the support to achieve a transformation—one that helps every American see the founding principles not as history to recite, but as tools for solving problems, navigating disagreement, and leading.

SARAH CROSS

Senior Vice President
Stand Together



HANS ZEIGER

President
Jack Miller Center



AMERICA AS AN IDEA & INSTITUTION

RIGHT *Liberty in the Form of the Goddess of Youth Giving Support to the Bald Eagle*, based on a painting by Edward Savage, ca. 1800. During the Federal period, America's growing strength and sense of self inspired countless images celebrating the new nation's ideal of liberty, of which this is one example. This popular image depicts the Goddess of Liberty standing, supposedly, on Beacon Hill, with Boston Harbor in the distance, a reference to the recent evacuation of the British fleet from the harbor. As Liberty proffers a cup to the descending eagle, she tramples below her feet both the key to the Bastille, symbolizing the death of the monarchy in France, and the Star of the Order of the Garter of Britain, symbolizing America's freedom from England.

Image and caption courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art



ERIC LIU

AMERICAN IDENTITY IN THREE DIMENSIONS

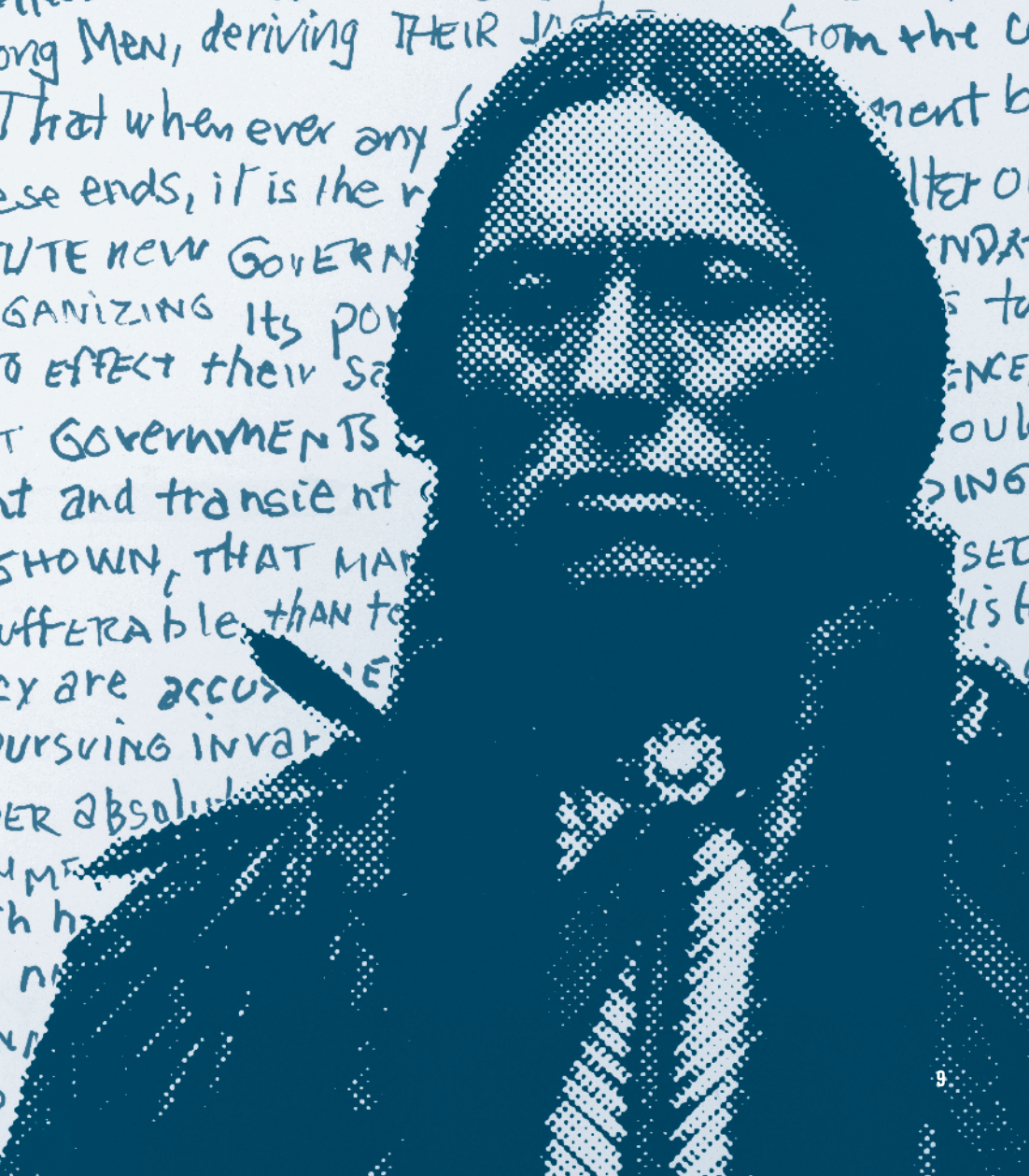
In 1818, John Adams reflected on the meaning of the American Revolution. “The Revolution,” he wrote, “was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people . . . This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people, was the real American Revolution.”

At Citizen University, the organization I lead, our shorthand for Adams’s observation is that *culture precedes structure*. Before there can be any structural change in the body politic—from policy change to revolution—there must first be a shift in civic culture, a sea change in collective temper and norms. In the case of our Revolution, that shift—from subjects to citizens, from faith in a monarch to faith in each other—unfolded over several decades.

RIGHT *Declaration of Independence*, Martin Pedersen, 1970. This poster by graphic designer Martin Pedersen, featuring an anonymous Native American overlaying a handwritten text of the Declaration of Independence, reflects the political landscape of its time. It aligned with the rebirth of Native American activism and the rise of the American Indian Movement, which fought for tribal sovereignty, treaty rights, and national recognition of historical injustices.

Image courtesy Artvee; caption courtesy the Red Road Project

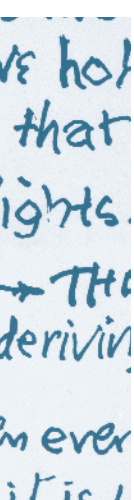
...in the course of human events it becomes necessary
people to dissolve the political bands which have con-
with another and to assume among the powers of the
the separate and equal station to which the laws of
God entitle them. A decent respect to the opinions
requires that they should declare the causes which im-
peration. — We hold these truths to be self-evident,
are created equal, that they are endowed by their
with unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Li-
erty and the pursuit of Happiness — That to secure these rights, Gov-
ments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the con-
sent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes
destructive of these ends, it is the right of the People to alter or to
abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such
principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem
most likely to effect their safety and Happiness. Prudence in this and in
every other case will dictate that Governments long established should not
be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience
hath shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are
bearable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they
are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pur-
suing the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute
domination, it is their duty to throw off such Government, and to in-
stitute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and
organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to
effect their safety and Happiness.



And what was true of those decades before 1776 has been true of the 250 years since. Our revolution, indeed our national purpose, has always been a matter of habit and culture. If it lives still, that is only because we continue to animate it in our everyday choices.

There are three dimensions to those choices: *creed*, *conflict*, and *combination*. America is an idea. America is an argument. And America is a hybrid. Each of these is a way to understand what being American calls us to do.

Let's start with *creed*. You might think, as many Americans do today, that things are profoundly on the wrong track in the United States. That our government has been overreaching in ways that recall the Declaration's bill of particulars against the king. That economic opportunity has been evaporating for two generations. That everyday life has become more inhumane. That there is rot at the foundation of our institutions.



Even the most disappointed and disillusioned among us still have something to cherish. The very source of our disappointment and disillusionment is the American creed itself.

You wouldn't be wrong. Yet even the most disappointed and disillusioned among us still have something to cherish. In fact, the very source of our disappointment and disillusionment is *the American creed* itself.

Our nation was made from a set of ideas including equality, liberty, and self-government.

We are not a blood-and-soil nation with a single authorized form of worship. To say this fact does not disrespect our white Protestant founders; it honors them. For the radicalism of the idea that a nation could declare itself free and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal is still, a quarter millennium later, breathtaking.

Alas, so is the gap between our creed and our deeds. There has always been such a gap in America. Perhaps there always will be. That's not cause for cynicism, though. It's a perpetual invitation to do better.

The ancient Roman Tacitus defined patriotism as "praiseworthy competition with our ancestors." Think Jefferson was a hypocrite? Do better. Think we've gone

off the rails ever since this person or that took office? Do better. Think today's innovators have made our economy warped and our society sick? Do better. The 250th reminds us that true patriotism isn't complacency or complaint. It's closing the creed-deed gap.

We do that best not by gawking at political performers on our screens but by turning to each other, in person, rekindling habits of trust and mutuality and productive disagreement. When we recommit to the local, to place and relationship, we can convert disappointment into hope. Live the creed where you live, and America has a chance.

What it means to be American is to fight forever over what it means to be American. And as they say in tech, this is a feature not a bug.

Of course, living the creed cannot mean following a formula. It is a matter of interpretation—of conflicting interpretations. The ideas of freedom and equality may be self-evident, but they are far from self-executing. They involve and invite fights over their meaning: freedom for whom, from what? Equality in what way, by what means?

Put simply, America is an argument. This is the second dimension of our national identity. What it means to be American is to fight forever over what it means to be American. And as they say in tech, this is a feature not a bug.

Baked into our founding documents and the history of our country is a group of fundamental tensions that set us up for perpetual *conflict*: liberty versus equality, diversity versus unity, strong national government versus local control, race blindness versus race consciousness, individual rights versus mutual responsibilities. Every conflict we face today recapitulates one or more of these fights, from disagreements about building more housing, mandating vaccines, teaching multicultural history, subsidizing struggling industries, policing immigration, taxing the rich.

It's OK to argue about such things. It's important to argue about them. The trouble is that in too many civic arguments today an online style of discourse has infected real-world spaces. That style is historically illiterate, emotionally stunted, detached from lived experience, and more about posing than learning.

We don't need fewer arguments in American life; we need less stupid ones.

People are beginning to realize this now. In 2023, Governor Spencer Cox of Utah, a Republican, joined with Governor Jared Polis of Colorado, a Democrat, to establish the Disagree Better initiative. Other governors and leaders from business, politics, sports, and popular culture have joined them as they've convened events and workshops on having hard conversations without contempt. Before those efforts, in 2017, I helped launch an initiative at the Aspen Institute called the Better Arguments Project. The project laid out five practices that capture some salient insights from the field: take winning off the table, prioritize relationships, pay attention to context, model vulnerability, and make room for transformation.

All these civic renewal projects proceed from a common premise: that trust is contagious. Where there is no trust, disagreement becomes combat; where there is trust, disagreement becomes co-creation. And this brings me to the third dimension of what it means to be American: our history of hybridity and unrelenting co-creation. In a word, *combination*.

One of the great tests of our civic imagination today is whether we will remember that being hybrid rather than pure is what makes America America.

As the son of Chinese immigrants, I believe that no matter how powerful China becomes in the years to come, the United States retains one competitive advantage: America makes Chinese Americans. China does not make American Chinese.

China does not want to make American Chinese. The logic of China's cultural operating system is such that even if you or I became fluent in Mandarin and moved

to Beijing for the rest of our days, we would always be outsiders, guests who are tolerated but not of the body, even I, whose face and hair and skin fit in. We would never have the cultural standing to redefine by our acts and ideas what the Chinese imagine to be Chinese.

**Trust is contagious.
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By contrast, the logic of America's cultural operating system is precisely to mix people, ideas, bloodlines, palates, and mindsets freely

and to enable new hybrids to emerge from the mixing. Hybrids that redefine the way Americanness and American ideals get expressed; hybrids like jazz and the

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THAT
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blues, kimchi burritos, and the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution that show the world what is possible in the recombinant glory of human existence. The logic of our operating system is to *evolve*.

That's our inherent advantage in the United States—if we don't blow it. We risk what makes our country great if we make ourselves smaller morally and materially by imagining ourselves a place made to serve a single race or religion or class. There have been times in American history, very long stretches, when our society has indeed blown it. We may be entering such a time now. But you and I are the authors of what comes next.

The power of our national experiment lies in the belief—the civic faith—that a people descended from every kind of human can form and sustain a union of unlike parts.

There is, of course, another word for combination: *union*. Union isn't uniformity or unanimity. It presumes and requires diversity, of background and viewpoint and modes of sensing and solving. The power of our national experiment lies in the belief—the civic faith—that a people descended from every kind of human can form and sustain a union of unlike parts.

We redeem that faith not by our words but by our works. Live the creed, embrace constructive conflict, create new combinations that show the world what freedom makes possible. That's what it means to be American today. That's what it has always meant.

ERIC LIU is co-founder and CEO of Citizen University and the author, most recently, of *Live Like a Citizen: 8 Ways to Change Your Mindset and Our Country*, from which parts of this essay are adapted.



BILL RIVERS

THE BUILDER AS CITIZEN

INNOVATION AND THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to be an American in terms of innovation, ingenuity, or entrepreneurialism?

The same as being an American in any other sense: to abandon the old world and commit body, mind, and spirit to *America*—to its citizens. To act for their welfare, obey the nation's laws and defend it from enemies; to honor its heritage and history, endure hardship on its behalf, and build for its future success, safety, and prosperity.

Being an American means being *bought in*. Innovation and entrepreneurship are downstream of having skin in the game.

After this, we can describe the American innovator in a number of ways.

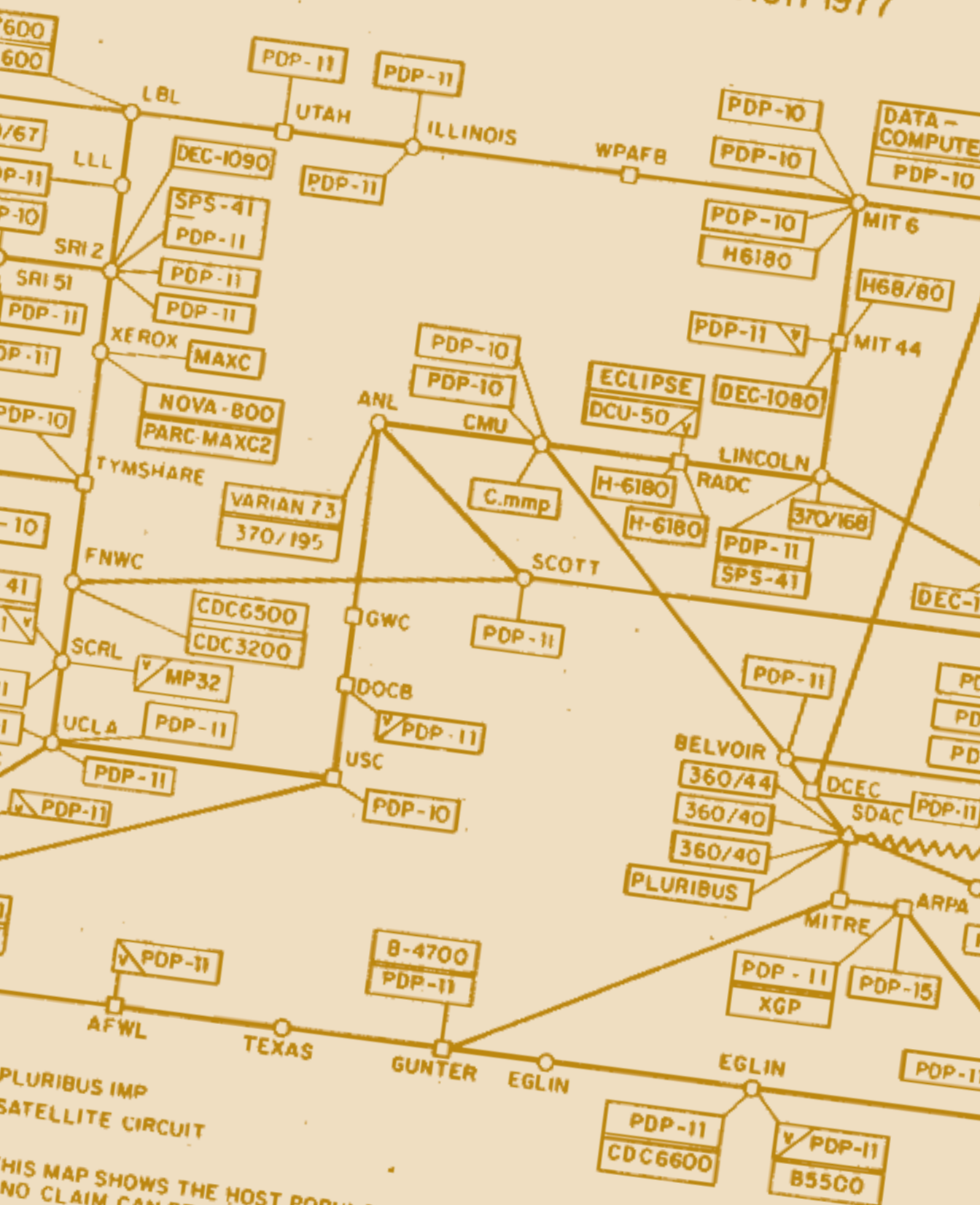
A chief attribute is restlessness. Unsatisfied with what *is*, the celebrated American builder—so frequently caricatured as visionary, eccentric, driven—is often someone who simply cannot let things be as they are.

RIGHT *ARPANET logical map*, ca. 1977. The Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET) was the first wide-area packet-switched network and the direct precursor to the modern internet. Funded by the U.S. Department of Defense, it successfully connected computers across long distances to let researchers share data.

Image courtesy The Computer History Museum and Wikipedia; caption courtesy Wikipedia



ARPANET LOGICAL MAP, MARCH 1977



THIS MAP SHOWS THE HOST POPULATION OF THE NETWORK ACCORDING TO THE
NO CLAIM CAN BE MADE FOR ITS ACCURACY)
S. NOT (NECESSARILY) HOST NAME

The innovator tinkers. Messes around with. Takes a thing apart and spreads the pieces across the floor of the garage after everyone else has gone to bed. The greatest of these exhausting, incredible people ask *why* things are fitted together this way and not another. They seek the purpose behind what is.

This is because these builders have pretty good imaginations: they can form a picture in their minds of what *can be* and, having pictured it, soon convince themselves their picture is what *should be*. They act on these convictions, because they respect themselves. They believe they have something worthwhile to offer. They believe their thing will make the world, or at least their corner of it, better in some significant way. If they didn't, they wouldn't bother—they hate wasting time.

While envisioning the future, the American builder also radically embraces the present, accepting reality while working to change it. This is less remarked upon in the national myths that portray America's great inventors and businesspeople

as dreamers. They are, but they are imminently *practical* dreamers. As the physicist Richard Feynman wrote, "For a successful technology, reality must take precedence . . . for nature cannot be fooled." Elon Musk dreams of taking humanity to Mars, but you better believe he accepts gravity is real.

While envisioning the future, the American builder also radically embraces the present, accepting reality while working to change it. This is less remarked upon in the national myths that portray America's great inventors and businesspeople as dreamers. They are, but they are imminently practical dreamers.

Innovators want to know the rock-bottom truth of a situation. Very often their genius lies in seeing a truth that is hidden or at least overlooked by others. The Wright Brothers famously made a breakthrough in wing design after looking closely at the wings of birds.

Action is the default setting for these Americans. You hear it in their advice to others. "Don't wait for permission, or a degree, or a feeling. Go do it. Get to minimum viable

product as quickly as possible and iterate from there. Forget others' perceptions and opinions. Results are the great equalizer, and then they become the greatest differentiators. Make it great."



The great innovators respect hard-earned insights—especially those taught by failure. They have a healthy regard for expertise, especially in areas where they are not themselves experts, but they maintain equally healthy regard for the limits of expertise. In their minds, no one can be an expert who has not spent time building something.

Speaking of limits: American builders do not reject limits; they reject all the fake limits that *looked* real to other people.

They are helped in this regard by an incredibly strong belief in their own agency. Plenty of people accept reality but never believe they can change it. Entrepreneurial Americans enjoy changing reality, and they are uncommonly optimistic about their abilities here.

Their agency is greatly enhanced by technology—Americans have an intimate relationship with it. When they lack an advantage in a particular area, they either seek or build the tools to gain it.

Americans are the best in the world at figuring it out, and they like to let people know it. Whether their work is done in secret or in the open, “the big reveal” is often highly publicized. A press release, a speech, an op-ed. Titanic figures like Steve Jobs were especially adept at this. Quarterly earnings calls for America’s most innovative companies have become must-see events.

This is partly because, in America, ambition is socially accepted—and celebrated. In America, it is no great sin to *want* to be great—whether for greatness’s sake or for the perks that accompany it, like money, influence, celebrity. All are valid.

But we said earlier the American builder believes he or she has something worthwhile to give . . . give to whom?

The best, the greatest American builders think as *citizens*. They are fully bought into the project *here*, in this land, and they act with the good of Americans in mind, families with children especially. They regard America as their home; this is the place in which they have invested themselves, and America is where they

**American builders
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to other people.**





want their children to go and do likewise. Consequently, the best builders are generational thinkers.

The best builders are generational thinkers.

They know America's respect for the individual and for property has permitted them to reap the rewards of their labor, genius, and risk-taking, but they also know America is more than that. America is its people, with ties to their place.

To be certain, the country's story is replete with great yet terrible builders who ignored the dignity of the American people; villains who, whatever material wonders they worked, inflicted wounds on the national soul that were deep, and sometimes deep enough to undermine the very conditions that enabled their rise in the first place. There is a special blindness that afflicts visionaries such as these.

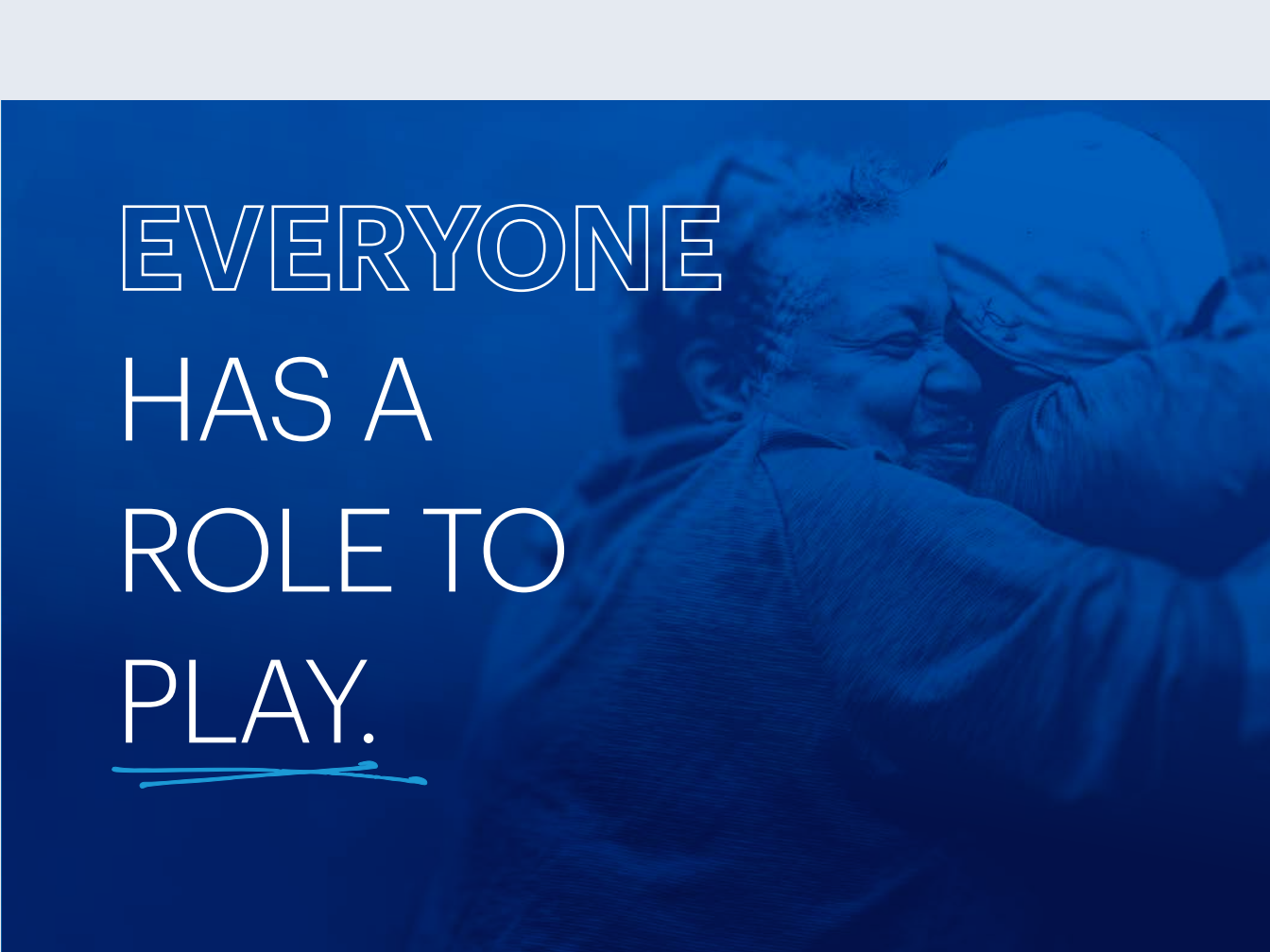
Yet others look through the eyes of faith and find in their fellow Americans the *imago Dei*. They see a people with dignity, independent of their economic power or lack of it. These builders act accordingly, and it is in their hands that America is carried, step by burdensome step, up the stony slope of history, until it is time for them to hand the country lovingly to younger hands.

We can imagine the words that are passed along with it.

Go do it. And make it great.

BILL RIVERS works in the national security technology space. He is the bestselling author of the novel *Last Summer Boys* and a fellow at the Bull Moose Project. Follow him on X at [@riverswrites](#).





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ANDREW DELBANCO

WHAT'S AMERICAN ABOUT AMERICAN LITERATURE?

In this 250th anniversary year it is altogether fitting and proper to celebrate our national scripture, the Declaration of Independence. When the founders signed it, they were committing an act of principled treason, which is why the remark attributed to Benjamin Franklin—“We must, indeed, all hang together or we will, most assuredly, hang separately”—has the ring of truth whether he said it or not.

But there's something else about the Declaration that's not often recognized. Despite its boldness and daring, it was also an inconclusive, incomplete, even diffident piece of writing. It could just as well have been called the Declaration of *Un*-Dependence; or *Not* Dependence; or even *Anti*-Dependence. It was not a manifesto announcing who we would become. It was a statement of who we no longer were—namely, subjects of the British crown.

RIGHT Rockwell Kent's illustration of Captain Ahab in the 1930 Lakeside Press edition of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*. Now considered a cornerstone of American literature, the story of Ahab's obsessive quest to hunt down a whale, published in 1851, was widely ignored and sold poorly during Melville's lifetime. It became more appreciated in the 1920s for its unconventional mixture of a standard adventure story with scientific facts, whale anatomy, encyclopedia entries, and Shakespearean dialogue. It gave future American writers permission to experiment and treat a novel like a creative laboratory.

Image courtesy Wikipedia; caption courtesy Penguin Books



Although the Declaration gave birth to a new nation, its authors, like any new parents, could not foresee the future of their newborn. They could not say what kind of nation the new nation would grow up to be.

Would it have a strong central authority? Or would it be a loose confederation of former colonies? What would its territorial boundaries be? Would the privileges of citizenship be granted by the separate states or by some common government? And, most pressing, despite its soaring assertion that “all men are created equal,” would the new nation continue to tolerate the odious institution of slavery?



Although the Declaration gave birth to a new nation, its authors, like any new parents, could not foresee the future of their newborn. They could not say what kind of nation the new nation would grow up to be.

About that last question, the Declaration was squeamish and silent. The man who chiefly wrote it, Thomas Jefferson, though a slaveowner himself, wanted to gesture toward an answer by accusing the king of waging “cruel war against human nature” in “violating [the] most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people . . . captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither.” But because many of the signers represented colonies—including

Jefferson’s own, Virginia—where slavery was the bedrock of social and economic life, that passage was dropped from the final version. Otherwise, they would not have signed it.

These contentions—the meaning of equality in general, the future of slavery in particular, the right of other aggrieved peoples to secede and found nations of their own, as southern Confederates would attempt to do 85 years later while appealing to the Declaration as their authority for creating an independent slave-based nation—were left to posterity.

The openness and self-contradiction of the Declaration are what make it not merely a political tract but a work of literature, which the great twentieth century critic Lionel Trilling defined as any writing that conveys a sense of the “difficulty, complexity, [and] ambiguity” of human experience.

The Declaration proclaims that all men are created equal, but it does not say how equality can be attained or assured. It says that all men have an inalienable right to pursue happiness, but it does not say what happiness means or how far one may seek it without denying happiness to others. By its eloquence, it articulated the aspiration of a people newly conscious of their nationhood. By its reticence, it conferred upon posterity the obligation to confront these perennial problems into the limitless future.

It took many decades before America possessed an authentic American literature fully capable of grappling with such questions. Our politics may have been radical and new, but our culture remained tame and derivative. As late as the 1850s, our first great poet, Walt Whitman, was lamenting that we still took “the models of our literature . . . from other lands.” His contemporary Herman Melville complained of “literary flunkeyism to England.”

Out of this youthful insolence came writers—Melville and Whitman high among them—whose voices were not prim or decorous but brash and boisterous. They spoke with what Whitman proudly called a “barbaric yawp.” They didn’t write tidy novels about genteel society in which the big question was who would marry whom. Instead, they wrote about a monomaniac sea captain hunting the monstrous whale that had ripped his body apart (*Moby-Dick*); or about a Puritan minister who, following an adulterous affair with a beautiful young woman, brands the letter A, for adulterer, into his own flesh (*The Scarlet Letter* by Melville’s friend Nathaniel Hawthorne); or about a white boy floating southward on a raft with an enslaved black man whom at first he mocks but later comes to love (*Huckleberry Finn*).

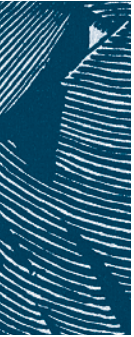
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On the one hand, the new American literature was animated by full-throated patriotism. “The United States themselves,” Whitman declared to a dubious world, “are the greatest poem.” But it was also a literature of candid anger and shame. “We are the chosen people,” Melville liked to boast. But he also acknowledged that the persistence of slavery was “a sin . . . a blot foul as the crater pool



of hell.” Even Hawthorne, a conservative writer relatively untroubled by slavery, remarked that “in this republican country someone is always at the drowning point.” From that remark there’s a straight line to later writers who disclosed that upwardly mobile America has also been a cruel land of downward mobility, as in Theodore Dreiser’s novel *Sister Carrie*, about a man at mid-life whose middle-class life crumbles away.

And then there is the hard truth—forced into the American consciousness by writers from Frederick Douglass to Toni Morrison—that America has been a land of *no* mobility for descendants of those whom Jefferson described as a “distant people” carried here against their will.



The central subject of our literature, starting with the Declaration, has been the burden of freedom.

Our best writers have always been preoccupied with our nation’s contradictions. They celebrated what Hawthorne called America’s “democracy of good feeling” even as they revealed it to be a cauldron of jealousies and hatreds.

Beneath our political order—or disorder—they saw that human beings harbor demons at war with what Abraham Lincoln, who revered the Declaration, called the “better angels of our nature.” Captain Ahab is both hero and monster. Huck Finn is both a cruel child and a generous man. Jay Gatsby is both a serial liar and a faithful lover.

Over the last two centuries, American literature has been advanced by writers from a vast range of origins, including Irish, German, Scandinavian, Italian, African, Jewish, and, more recently, East Asian, South Asian, Native American, Latin American, Middle Eastern, women, men, gay and straight, and by those seeking to re-invent their sexual identity for themselves.

What they all share is the effort to understand what Henry James called “the complex fate” of being an American—by which he meant that, ever since achieving cultural as well as political independence, we have been an unmoored people who live with few guideposts or boundaries, in a world where little is proscribed and almost nothing is prescribed. The central subject of our literature, starting with the Declaration, has been the burden of freedom.

Some 50 years ago, a great American writer, Philip Roth, wrote a novel called *The Professor of Desire*, whose title character ponders what he might say to his students on the first day of class:

I love teaching literature . . . To my mind there is nothing quite like the classroom in all of life. Sometimes when we are in the midst of talking—when one of you, say, has pierced with a single phrase right to the heart of the book at hand, I want to cry out, “Dear friends, cherish this!” . . . I doubt that you know how very affecting it is to hear you speak thoughtfully and in all earnestness about solitude, illness, longing, loss, suffering, delusion, hope, passion, love, terror, corruption, calamity, and death. . . . the unrelenting forces with which in time you will all contend, like it or not.

This is the stuff of literature—the ardors, fears, self-deceptions, and resilient hopes of human experience.

Today, one hears urgent calls for a revival of civic education—the kind of education that prepares young people to participate in our democracy. Reading our founding political documents—not only the Declaration but also the Federalist Papers and Constitution, by which the founders tried to define the nation which the Declaration had left undefined—is essential for such an education.

But if we hope to understand our country with honesty as well as pride, we must ensure that literature, despite the odds stacked against it—the allure of social media, the menace of artificial intelligence, the hostility of those who scorn it for lacking practical worth—remains a core part of civic education.

Literature is the voice of our collective conscience.

ANDREW DELBANCO is Alexander Hamilton Professor of American Studies at Columbia University and President of the Teagle Foundation. These remarks were delivered at the annual Summit on Civic Education hosted at the National Constitution Center by the Jack Miller Center.



PAUL CARRESE

AMERICA AS REAL AND BEAUTIFUL

RAY CHARLES AND CIVIC HOPE

A central virtue in American civics is reflective patriotism, blending love of country with rational discourse about our ideals, and whether we're living up to them. This disposition engenders hope about America, making us aware not just of our failings but also our great goodness. In my 2026 book *Teaching America: Reflective Patriotism in Schools, College, and Culture*, I cite Annette Gordon-Reed, a prominent historian of Thomas Jefferson's relations with his slave Sally Hemings, as a model of civic hope. Gordon-Reed observes in her memoir about growing up in segregated Texas that looking back required "striking the right balance"—to write about a place she loves with a "clear-eyed assessment" of its "strengths and weaknesses." Such love and balance includes the patriotism toward America shown even by those unjustly treated: "Almost from the very beginning of their time in North America, Blacks have shown their deep patriotic attachment to the country they helped to build;" evincing the paradox for slave descendants "of loving a place that was deeply oppressive to their ancestors."

Another prominent descendent of slaves, pianist and singer Ray Charles, shows this balanced and hopeful view in the reflective patriotism infusing his rendition of "America the Beautiful." He first recorded it in 1972 shortly before the bicentennial celebrations of 1976. We should feature it in this America 250 moment commemorating our founding era, now and for the next two decades.

Charles's celebratory version was an outgrowth of the hopefulness-despite-injustice embodied in jazz, which I discuss in *Teaching America* as among America's greatest achievements—

RIGHT Singer Ray Charles in concert, 1983.

Image courtesy Alamy



blending liberty and order, soloist and group, tradition and innovation, and multiple civilizations and genres. Charles and his producer for the 1972 album *A Message from the People*, the jazz trumpeter turned music impresario Quincy Jones, chose to open with the third verse of the Katharine Lee Bates 1911 hymn-poem, to emphasize the beauty of “heroes proved/in liberating strife.” This celebrates the momentous civic reform in the Civil War, which for Union soldiers became a fight to end slavery.

If you haven’t heard Charles’s “America,” or not in a while, treat yourself to this great civic experience. The striking choice of opening emphasizes traditional American virtues of patriotic sacrifice and Christian mercy, made newly inspiring by Ray’s signature blend of gospel music, blues, rhythm & blues, and jazz—often termed soul music.

In giving thanks for Union soldiers in the original poem, Bates echoed Lincoln’s eulogy at Gettysburg for “the brave men . . . who struggled here,” already having “consecrated” the battlefield “far above our poor power to add or detract.” Brother Ray (as he entitled his 1978 autobiography) turns eulogy into civic hope by placing this theme ahead of the widely remembered first verse beginning “O beautiful for spacious skies / for amber waves of grain.”

Charles pulls together the spirit of religion and spirit of jazz to celebrate America, first through gratitude for those who secured the freedom we enjoy. Lincoln and Bates harmonized biblical religion and a political philosophy of liberty and equality to define and celebrate America. Decades later Charles, a black American from Georgia and descendent of slaves, insisted we first give thanks to the mostly white soldiers moved by “mercy” to fight and die for the freedom of black people.

**O beautiful for heroes proved
In liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved
And mercy more than life!**

**America! America!
May God thy gold refine,
Till all success be nobleness,
And every gain divine!**

Brother Ray then sets up his second verse—Bates’s first—by improvising “when I was in school we used to sing it something like this—listen here!” Yet the spirit of jazz inspires other vocal and instrumental improvisations hardly heard in school until then: Declaring his own love for America, that “my God he done shed his Grace on thee,” and how we ought to thank God for doing so—with Charles modeling this last point in exultant shouts.

The blend of gratitude, humility, exuberance, and piety was so powerful and popular that it led to Charles regularly performing it for his final three decades (he died in 2004)—including at the White House, a 1984 presidential nominating convention, the World Series, and in Yankee Stadium after the 9/11 attacks.

The album *A Message from the People* also contains discontent, including the 1968 song *Abraham, Martin, and John* celebrating martyrs of social change—Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy. Charles later described the album as both criticizing America and expressing love, partly for “the spirit of America” that allowed him to work hard and succeed despite his humble origins, blindness, and racism. He noted a “black magazine wrote that I was selling out,” to which he replies: “Ever since I started traveling round the world and seeing other places, I’ve been convinced that what we got—as rotten as part of it might be—is hipper than anything else I’ve noticed out there.” Quincy Jones, who produced and arranged for the singer Frank Sinatra in the 1960s, and would produce and arrange for Michael Jackson in the 1980s, held the same civic hope for America.

Ray Charles’s blend of hope, high standards, and sober appreciation for America is a model of reflective patriotism, and the kind of civic lesson American culture should offer.

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CONNOR M. EWING

CITIZENSHIP & THE COMPLEX CONSTITUTION

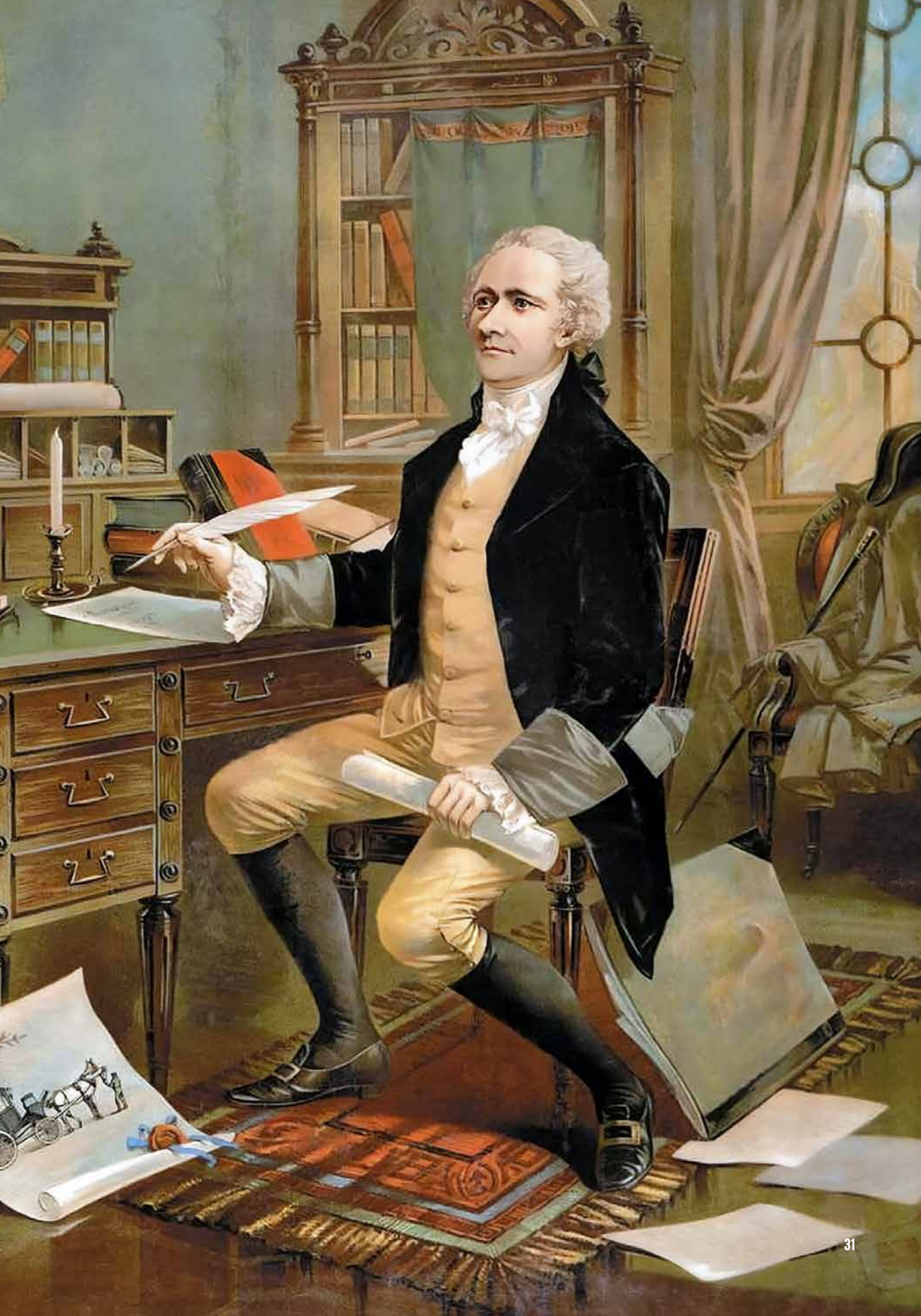
The original U.S. Constitution did not say much about citizenship. What it did say, in the eleven permutations of “Citizen” in the unamended text, came largely by way of either identifying the qualifications for officials to hold office or marking the scope of national jurisdiction. Articles I and II, for example, establish stringent citizenship requirements for holding congressional and presidential office. Five more “Citizens” come in Article III’s elaboration of the judiciary’s purview, and the final instances in the constitutional text crafted in Philadelphia appear in Article IV. There we read that, “The Citizens of each State shall be entitled to all Privileges and Immunities of Citizens in the several States.” For these provisions, citizenship helped establish either the scope of national judicial authority or the applicability of certain constitutional guarantees.

For all that these constitutional provisions did, they did not *define* citizenship. No amount of textual exegesis can determine what, for example, being a citizen entailed; nor can interpretation alone yield the process by which one could become a citizen. Instead, the Constitution assumed the existence and legal status of citizenship, and used it to regulate eligibility for national office, calibrate the

RIGHT *Alexander Hamilton Making the First Draft of the Constitution of the United States, Hamilton Buggy Company, 1787.*

Image courtesy Alamy





scope of national jurisdiction, and begin constructing individuals' relationships with their governments. Underscoring the central role of politics in the ongoing regulation of this status, the Constitution granted to Congress the power, "To establish an uniform Rule of Naturalization."

Of course, the Constitution has changed significantly since its creation in 1787. In fact, as many instances of "Citizen" have been added to the Constitution via amendment as were initially included in it. At least as a textual matter, what this suggests—and what a deeper examination of American history reveals in full—is that the contours of American citizenship have been defined more by constitutional *development* than by original constitutional meaning or practice.

At one level, then, the answer to the question, "What did the Constitution of 1787 say about citizenship?" is, "Not very much." But it would be wrong to stop there. As is often the case, what the Constitution means—its character, import, and significance—cannot be entirely reduced to the literal stipulations or semantic content of its words. The Constitution is neither merely its text nor is it a law like other laws. It is a fundamental law, one meant not only to provide a durable framework for politics but also to facilitate the realization of particular political goods. Among much else, this is how many of those who created the Constitution understood the nature of their handiwork: as a purposive instrument whose meaning would be forged in the future it anticipated.



What kind of citizens are needed for the Constitution to succeed, given its particular structure and purposes? This is a question that resists simple answers.

So rather than attempt to squeeze directive meaning from the text, we might instead ask what political projects and understandings are consistent with the Constitution's purposes. In the context of citizenship, this means asking what kind of citizenship the Constitution contemplates. Put another way, what kind of citizens are needed for the Constitution to succeed, given its particular structure and purposes? This is a question that resists simple answers,

primarily because the Constitution's structures are complex and its purposes impossible to fully reconcile. For one thing, the Constitution inaugurated a federal republic in which political authority would be exercised by two levels of government, state and national. And within the national government it established, the

Constitution again divided authority among governing institutions. This was the “double security . . . to the rights of the people” that Publius famously described in *The Federalist* No. 51. This structure also prompted a potent line of attack by the Constitution’s opponents during the ratification debates, who argued that the proposed system of government was too complex for the average citizen to understand, which would undermine its responsibility to the people. As Patrick Henry, one of the leading Anti-Federalists, put it, “this government is of such an intricate and complicated nature, that no man on this earth can know its real operation.”

Protecting “the rights of the people” was not the only objective of constitutional government.

Furthermore, protecting “the rights of the people” was not the only objective of constitutional government. So too were the establishment of justice, the formation of a “more perfect Union,” the preservation of popular government, the pursuit of social and economic stability, and the maintenance of domestic security. Achieving these things, the Founders knew, would require continuous effort. They are realized over time, with adjustments made amidst changing circumstances through the deliberative politics the Constitution makes possible.

What kind of citizens are needed for such a constitutional order to succeed? To the extent that those citizens are to take an active role in the formation and administration of their government—an unavoidable consequence of the piecemeal democratization of American politics—one central prerequisite is knowledge of how the constitutional system works. The viability of the American constitutional enterprise depends on an informed citizenry, on a popular awareness of how authority is exercised and where responsibility lies amidst considerable complexity.

But knowledge alone—the affirmation of some “American idea”—cannot guarantee constitutional success. Also necessary is some acquaintance with the habits that make the enduring pursuit of constitutional ends possible. The meaning and requirements of justice, the best way to structure the economy, the proper balance between national security and civil liberties—these are matters on which people disagree and about which one may well be mistaken. Successful constitutional politics thus requires that those who claim membership in the polity are not only familiar with the particular objectives of the constitutional order, but also have





The attachments the Constitution presupposes of its citizens are not bonds of blood and soil; nor are they matters of simple ideological assent. They are much more demanding because they are civic bonds, forged in the practices of politics the Constitution has, for nearly two and a half centuries, made possible.

experience in the conversations, disagreements, and debates through which those ends are pursued and balanced.

This, in turn, requires some attachment to the political communities both assumed and inaugurated by the Constitution—a meaningful, lived relationship with the “People” in whose name the Constitution speaks. Indeed, this was the import of the original Constitution’s citizenship requirements. Despite strong disagreements among delegates about how to assess one’s connection to the particularities of American life, the debates at the Constitutional Convention evidence a widespread belief that such a connection was necessary for constitutional success. These debates also reveal the overriding belief that America could make new Americans,

that the attachments required for citizenship and constitutional success could be attained through integration into social, political, and economic life.

The attachments the Constitution presupposes of its citizens are not bonds of blood and soil; nor are they matters of simple ideological assent. They are much more demanding because they are civic bonds, forged in the practices of politics the Constitution has, for nearly two and a half centuries, made possible. While the Constitution the Founders created did not initially say much about citizenship, it nonetheless furnished the institutions and processes by which citizenship has become the indispensable foundation of the nation’s audacious attempt to secure both popular government and the blessings of liberty. Fidelity to that Constitution’s purposes is the first step toward ensuring this remains true.

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DREW KURLOWSKI

STATE CONSTITUTIONS AND AMERICA'S CIVIC TRADITION

THE PROMISE OF THE AMERICAN PREAMBLE

Americans have adopted more than two hundred state constitutions. Louisiana has had eleven, Georgia ten, South Carolina seven. States have ratified upwards of 11,000 amendments. We have rewritten the fundamental charters of our states about every 22 years. While this relatively rapid revision is not too far apart from the rate at which the rest of the world's nations have replaced theirs, it is in stark contrast with the permanence of our federal Constitution. But from our founding to today, despite all the changes in the body of the texts, we altered very little about the words in our preambles.

RIGHT Study for *The Apotheosis of Pennsylvania*, Edwin Austin Abbey, ca. 1902–1911. This mural in the House of Representatives chamber of the Pennsylvania state capitol in Harrisburg is an example of how American states used monumental art to tell a story about themselves. The work depicts Pennsylvania's history, people, ideals, intellectual achievements, and industrial accomplishments. At the center is William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania, in a red robe. He is accompanied by Benjamin Franklin and Robert Morris. Around them Abbey assembled a large cast of important Pennsylvanians from different periods of history.

Image courtesy Artvee







Conspicuously missing from state constitution preambles are the words “white,” “Christian,” “English-speaking,” “native-born,” “male,” or “property-owning.”

What does the study of state constitutions—and especially these preambles—tell us about what it means to be an American? That we are a people who have sat down

hundreds of times to write out who we are and were never willing to finish the phrase “We the people” with a qualification. The machinery that came later expanded and contracted the franchise, it expanded and contracted rights, but the preambles never moved. Our founding sentences refused to foreclose on us, and not for lack of people who wanted to.

Take, for example, the August 1890 Mississippi state constitutional convention which was called to address the topic of suffrage. In the words of the convention’s president, Solomon Calhoun, “We came here to exclude the Negro. Nothing short of this will answer.”

The delegates did it, thoroughly in writing, and affixed their names to the document. The opening sentence of that document, however, simply said:

We the people of Mississippi, in Convention assembled, grateful to Almighty God, and invoking His blessing on our work, do ordain and establish this Constitution.

Twenty-five words that were not exclusionary—just simply the people, and a request that God bless their work.

This juxtaposition is not a peculiarity of Mississippi, or the South, but rather a central feature of American constitutional writing. Conspicuously missing are the words “white,” “Christian,” “English-speaking,” “native-born,” “male,” or “property-owning.” Not in the secession constitutions of 1861, not in the Jim Crow constitutions of the 1890s, not in the 1895 South Carolina preamble which dedicates the document to “the preservation and perpetuation” of liberty. For a short time we see the word “freemen,” but by the twentieth century it vanishes.

The drafters of these documents were not squeamish. They codified the poll tax. They conceived the grandfather clause. They itemized the machinery of

disenfranchisement and exclusion and defended it in speeches. But they never put it in the first sentence. They never restricted the preamble.

Now perhaps we could argue that these framers simply weren't paying attention to the words. Idaho's 1890 preamble is nearly identical to Ohio's of 1851. Forty years, and 2,000 miles, but the text remains unchanged. Rhode Island, New Jersey, and Illinois all use a phrase that thanks God for the liberty that "He hath so long permitted us to enjoy." An open preamble might have simply been the template.

This explanation, however, misunderstands what a template is. Boilerplate is not the opposite of conviction, but rather, it is what conviction looks like once people stop arguing over it and simply start copying it. The openness of America's preambles had become so ordinary that even those constitutional conventions focused on racial exclusion inserted them without any apparent discomfort.

This form is not necessarily commonplace internationally. Hungary's preamble discusses King Saint Stephen and how he made the country part of "Christian Europe." Turkey's discusses the "historical and moral values of Turkishness." A full 25 percent of national constitutions express a national identity in their preambles.

So why does it matter that constitutional exclusion, when it appeared, lived in the text and not the preamble? The gap between the first sentence and the exclusionary text, pages later, is not a hypocrisy; indeed, it is the mechanism of the tradition. Thomas Jefferson wrote that all men were created equal while owning people, but that sentence would become central to the effort to free them. Frederick Douglass argued from our founding documents, not against them. Martin Luther King Jr. called the Declaration a promissory note. And we found ourselves in default of that promise because it was written so openly.

Our ability to appeal to open definitions of 'we the people' is possible because no convention, even the ones convened for the explicit purpose of exclusion, was willing to narrow the definition of the people in its preamble. They disenfranchised, but

Our ability to appeal to open definitions of 'we the people' is possible because no convention, even the ones convened for the explicit purpose of exclusion, was willing to narrow the definition of the people in its preamble.





Figure Study for *The Apotheosis of Pennsylvania*, Edwin Austin Abbey, ca. 1902–1911. Shown here are: John Dickinson (left, holding magnifying glass), founding father and “Penman of the Revolution”; Thomas Paine (center foreground, wearing a red cravat); and David Rittenhouse (top left/center background), renowned American astronomer, inventor, and mathematician.

Image courtesy Artvee

they did not disown, and thus everyone, those with and without the franchise, could point to the first sentence and say ‘I am one of those people.’

Finished texts have a limit. They merely record what a convention adopted, and not what it considered. We cannot authoritatively say whether anyone ever moved to insert “white” into a preamble and lost the vote, or whether it even occurred to them. We would do well to consider the entirety of the negotiations surrounding our governing documents. The work of the [Quill Project](#) does exactly this. Reconstructing the making of these documents helps to shed more light on not only what Americans were willing to agree to, but what they refused, what they never thought to say, and what they could not bring themselves to write.

For all our nation’s failings, the promise of these preambles offers something better and more durable. The sentence left open, left unqualified by those who had every reason to qualify it, used for 250 years by those who were shut out, giving hope and promise to the marginalized, an open door waiting to be walked through.



Figure study of Dr. Benjamin Rush, signer of the Declaration of Independence and pioneering physician, by Edwin Austin Abbey.

Image courtesy Artvee

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LOU PEREZ

COMEDY AS A BLESSING OF LIBERTY

Whenever I'm invited onto a program to talk about politics and comedy—I'm an opinionated comedian after all—my host is bound to bring up court jesters. We're never talking about a court jester's new Netflix special. I've never seen a court jester in real life. I doubt you have either. The only time I went to a Renaissance Faire I expected to catch one in the act, but even there they hadn't booked any. No one cares about jesters, other than to bring them up during conversations about the importance of comedy. To remind people of the days when the court jester was "the only one who was allowed to mock the king."

I never bought that history. I figured there were boundaries jesters were not allowed to cross—some truths even they were not allowed to tell without fear of punishment. I'm sure [Roulandus le Fartere](#) (AKA Roland the Farter) was safe though. Who doesn't love a good fart joke?

But if kings back in the day were anything like today's royals, I bet jesters would keep their most barbed one-liners under their fool's cap. There are still countries

RIGHT *Mark Twain, America's Best Humorist*, Joseph Ferdinand Keppler, 1885. When *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was published in 1885, it triggered immediate outrage. In the Victorian era, comedy was expected to stay in its place as light, harmless entertainment, but Twain used it to mock the foundations of American society.

Image courtesy Artvee





around the world that criminalize insulting their monarchs. (In Thailand, you [can't even make fun of the King's dog](#).) That number grows when you count nations that legally protect their heads of state from being roasted. While prosecutions and punishments vary, one would have to be a brave twenty-first century jester to [insult the King of Bahrain](#) . . . in Bahrain. Or insult the the head of Turkey . . . in Germany. That's right, when it comes to censorship, Germany says, "*Halt mal dein Bier!*" and prosecutes comedians for making fun of *other countries'* rulers!

But I'm not in Bahrain. And I'm not in Germany. I'm in New Jersey. A jester with Wi-Fi, I have neither fear nor bravery when it comes to mocking the king of a country I just found out existed. I'm not afraid to mock Erdoğan or my president either. Hell, I'll even commit "hate speech," which is punishable (yet always undefinable) in countless countries around the world!

In Brazil, comedian [Léo Lins](#) was sentenced to more than eight years in prison on charges of defamation and hate speech. According to *Brazil Reports*, Lins made jokes about "elderly people, Black and Indigenous Brazilians, people with HIV, the LGBTQ+ community, evangelical Christians, Jews, people with disabilities" and pedophilia.

You know, the kind of material you'll hear in the States at an open mic or best-man speech. Were Lins's jokes funny? I don't know. Maybe they sounded better in Portuguese. But as a comedian, I'm imagining the nightmare of having to serve time for my weakest bits.

Lins's case (which is under appeal) is yet another example of countries where comedy can be a criminal offense. In Afghanistan, the Taliban murdered TikTok comedian Nazar Mohammad (stage name: Khasha Zwan). Now I was no fan of Zwan. The guy was a hack—but that was no justification for his murder. In India, [Munawar Faruqui](#) was arrested before a performance, based on a complaint from the son of a local politician claiming to have [overheard him rehearsing material insulting Hindu deities](#). Police later admitted they had no evidence he'd made the jokes. The local superintendent told a reporter Faruqui simply "was 'going to.'" So Faruqui spent almost a month in jail, and three separate courts denied him bail, before the Supreme Court finally intervened—all for material he never got to say in front of an audience. (You'd think Ganesh and the other deities would have a better sense of humor!)

The United States has spoiled me with free-speech protections. As my friend Noam Dworman, the owner of the Comedy Cellar, [posted on X](#), “Our stubborn insistence on free speech makes even minor acts of censorship elsewhere conspicuous. Without our laboratories of democracy and that bulwark against censorship [the First Amendment], the Western world would eventually [seize] up.”

In Canada, Mike Ward has to take his comedy case all the way to the Supreme Court, where “free speech” ekes out a 5–4 victory in the comic’s favor. In the United Kingdom, when they’re not prosecuting a YouTuber in Scotland for teaching his girlfriend’s pug to raise its paw in the Nazi salute—by the way, Nazi pug is much cuter than King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s mutt—police monitor social media for thought crime. Be careful—that bawdy limerick you share on Facebook could get you a visit from [James Bond](#).

But, remarkably, all of the above is legal in the United States. And what has that legality done for us? It’s given us stand-up, improv, and the sitcom—three genuinely American art forms—and let genres that weren’t invented here evolve into something quintessentially American: sketch, film, television, even the meme.

With such powerful art forms and free-speech protections it’s easy to forget that it took us a long time to get here—even with a First Amendment. The United States was barely out of diapers when [Matthew Lyon was jailed under the 1798 Sedition Act](#) after circulating a letter that called President John Adams fit for “a madhouse.” (Not the funniest joke, but, c’mon, Founding Fathers, you just beat the British—Lighten *thee* up!) And it was only 22 years ago that [Lenny Bruce received a posthumous pardon](#) over his obscenity conviction by New York Governor George Pataki, who, I have no doubt, Bruce would have mocked without fear of state censorship had he lived through the Pataki years. Roulandus le Fartere would have had a good time too. Farts were back in style in the new millennium.

All this is to say, the United States is a special venue, where jesters are truly free to “kill” and not be killed.

LOU PEREZ is a comedian, producer, and the author of *That Joke Isn’t Funny Anymore: On the Death and Rebirth of Comedy*. He co-hosts the Happy Hour Econ podcast for the Free to Choose Network.



KEN BURNS

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN AMERICAN?

TELLING THE AMERICAN STORY

For the year and a half before PBS broadcast *The American Revolution* in November 2025, and then throughout the 250th anniversary year itself, I traveled the country talking with Americans of every background about our founding story. The questions varied. People wanted to know what happened in their own towns, which founder mattered most, what the founders might think of us today, and what surprised us most while making the film.

But eventually every conversation found its way to something larger, even if it was harder to articulate. What does it mean to be an American? More fundamentally, how did this idea of *us* come to be?

The answer begins with a remarkable act of imagination.

RIGHT *Infantry—Continental Army*, Henry Alexander Ogden, 1871. The period depicted (1779–1783) represents a crucial turning point. Early in the war, American soldiers wore a mismatched mix of civilian clothes, militia uniforms, and hunting shirts. Ogden's work highlights the formal uniform regulations introduced by General George Washington in 1779, which finally brought a unified, professional look to the American infantry. Henry Alexander Ogden was the premier American illustrator for military history. He served as an official artist for the U.S. Quartermaster General, meaning his depictions were not just artistic interpretations but heavily researched, highly accurate historical records of early American military gear.

Image courtesy Artvee; caption courtesy Library of Congress and Artvee





rgden

When George Washington accepted command of the Continental Army in the summer of 1775, there was no United States. There were thirteen colonies with different economies, different religions, different histories, and often competing interests. Most people identified with the town or colony where they lived, not with a nation that did not yet exist. Yet the Continental Congress charged Washington with the mission of creating an army that would fight not for a king or a parliament across an ocean, but for the proposition that a people could actually govern themselves.

It is difficult to appreciate how radical that idea was. Throughout most of human history, soldiers pledged their allegiance to a monarch, an emperor, a tribe, or a dynasty. The Continental Army represented something different. It asked thousands of ordinary men, many of whom had never traveled beyond their own hometowns, to imagine they were part of something bigger than themselves.

Washington's greatest achievement was not just winning a war. It was persuading thirteen fiercely independent colonies that they shared a common destiny. And when the war ended, he reminded the governors of those now still disparate states that the future depended upon Americans thinking of themselves as a united people.

The work of creating *us*, however, did not end at Yorktown.

Less than a century later, Americans turned their guns upon one another in a conflict that tested whether the nation born with the idea that all men were created equal could survive its own contradictions. Standing on the battlefield a few months after the largest battle fought in North America, at Gettysburg Abraham Lincoln asked the living to dedicate themselves to "a new birth of freedom," recognizing that every generation must renew the promises first made in Philadelphia and defended at Valley Forge. Two and a half years earlier, in his First Inaugural Address, he had appealed to "the mystic chords of memory," stretching "from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land." He understood that what must bind us together is not ancestry, but memory, sacrifice, and a commitment to a common purpose.

That understanding has carried Americans through defining struggles at home and abroad, from world wars to the Civil Rights Movement. Franklin Roosevelt did not describe democracy simply as a form of government; in the midst of global war, he defined it through enduring ideals: freedom of speech, freedom of worship,

and freedom from fear. Dwight Eisenhower, who knew better than most the terrible costs of war, reminded us in his farewell address that only “an alert and knowledgeable citizenry” could preserve liberty and security. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. understood that the American story was never about abandoning our founding ideals but finally honoring them. His dream was of an America more faithful to its oldest promises, expanding the circle of *us* until it truly included everyone.

Washington’s greatest achievement was persuading thirteen fiercely independent colonies that they shared a common destiny.



Across two and a half centuries, the language changed and the challenges differed. Yet the question remains remarkably consistent. Can a nation founded not on ethnicity or even claims to antiquity, but on ideas, continue to persuade each new generation that those ideas are worth preserving?

As I traveled across the country to discuss our film, people would ask about our divisions, and whether a country as divided as ours can survive. The divisions that seem to define our public life today are real. But they have always been real. The United States has never been held together by unanimity. It has endured because generation after generation has answered a larger call, choosing again and again to expand the meaning of that simple, indispensable word: *us*.

Every generation has been asked to decide whether this nation would become a little more inclusive, a little more just, a little more faithful to the ideals that first inspired its creation. That work now belongs to us.

Perhaps that is what it means to be an American. Not that we inherited a perfect country, but that we inherited a pursuit, a possibility, a promise. That promise requires every generation to enlarge the meaning of liberty, deepen the practice of democracy, and widen the embrace of that smallest, but most powerful word in our language: *us*.

KEN BURNS is a filmmaker. His most recent work, *The American Revolution*, premiered in 2025.



AMERICA AS A PEOPLE & CULTURE

RIGHT *Cowboy Dance (mural study, Anson, Texas Post Office)*, Jenne Magafan, 1941. This painting depicts the Texas Cowboys' Christmas Ball, a historic local square-dance tradition held in Anson, Texas, that started in 1885. The artist originally painted a small brown liquor jug near the feet of a musician. Because Anson was a strictly "dry" town where alcohol was prohibited, the detail caused a minor local uproar. Commissioned by the Treasury Section of Fine Arts during the New Deal era, the original mural was altered and the jug was painted over before eventually being restored to view.

Image and caption courtesy the Smithsonian American Art Museum



JANE E. CALVERT

JOHN DICKINSON AND THE FORMATION OF THE AMERICAN IDENTITY

Founder John Dickinson was the first to explain to the colonists what it meant to be an American. In his famous *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* (1767–68), he clarified their unique identity and encouraged them to unite on that basis to resist unjust British taxation. Just as they provided a foundation for the Declaration of Independence, these values still resonate today.

In the 1760s, the idea of a distinct American identity was new for the colonists. Before then, they mostly thought of themselves as Britons;

RIGHT *The Cornell Farm*, Edward Hicks, 1848. Quaker minister and artist Edward Hicks painted this scene at age 69 in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. His friend Cornell had just won several prizes in the county's 1848 Newtown Exhibition, including "best cultivated farm over 100 acres."

Image and caption courtesy National Gallery of Art







In the 1760s, the idea of a distinct American identity was new for the colonists. “American” was a geographical description, not a national one.

“American” was a geographical description, not a national one. But with their fundamental rights in jeopardy, Dickinson encouraged his countrymen to join him in the patriotism he had felt for his native land since he was a young man.

While in London for legal training in his early twenties, 3,500 miles from his native land, Dickinson was homesick. But more than simply missing his parents and the familiar routines of their family farm in lower Pennsylvania, he missed America. From his vantage point in the metropole, he observed in correspondence at the time, “America is to be sure a Wilderness, & yet that Wilderness to Me, is more pleasing than this charming Garden.” He loved everything about it, even what others would consider disadvantages. “Tis Rude,” he admitted, “but it’s innocent. Tis wild—but it’s private. There Life is a Stream pure & unruffled . . . There We enjoy Life . . . And indeed, till I see it again, I shall not be so happy, as I think it possible to be on Earth.” Moreover, he also began to sense that people from that region possessed specific characteristics. As the decadent diversions of London beckoned him and other young Americans to abandon their legal studies, he said, “[We] are resolvd to remember We are **Americans**—to live soberly & prosecute our Business.” For Dickinson, to be American meant to be virtuous.

When he wrote his *Farmer’s Letters* a decade later, his patriotism had only grown. He had spent that time defending the rights of the most vulnerable people in his colony, both in the court room and the legislative chamber; he knew the local laws and the British constitution better than anyone. With Great Britain violating both, Dickinson felt compelled to defend his countrymen. In doing so, he shared more than his legal expertise; he shared his understanding of what makes an American. He urged the colonists to let their “ingenuity, industry, and frugality” lend credibility to their protests. The “cause of liberty” should be defended peacefully with the virtues Americans possessed: “prudence, justice, modesty, bravery, humanity and magnanimity.” He believed Americans “in general are more intelligent than any other people whatever,” including the working people, who may not have time to become educated about their rights. Their “goodness of disposition” inclined them to trust the British government too much. He thus sought to educate even the poor to add their voices to the protests.



Although Dickinson emphasized Americans' positive qualities, he was not naïve or flattering. He also cautioned them about their weaknesses and challenged them to overcome their vices. "Let us equally shun the benumbing stillness of *overweening sloth*," he admonished, "and the feverish activity of that *ill informed zeal*, which busies itself in maintaining *little, mean and narrow* opinions." Rather, he offered a new and radical ideal to which they should aspire: equality. "Let us with a truly wise *generosity* and *charity*," he encouraged, "banish and discourage all *illiberal distinctions*, which may arise from differences in *situation*, forms of *government*, or modes of *religion*." And he provided the first definition of an American: "Let us," he proclaimed, "consider ourselves as MEN—FREEMEN—CHRISTIAN FREEMEN—*separated from the rest of the world*, and *firmly bound together* by the *same rights, interests and dangers*."

This clear pronouncement of what it meant to be American resonated with the colonists so profoundly that they elevated Dickinson to celebrity status, showering him with praise and tokens of gratitude.

To secure American rights, Dickinson advocated peaceful resistance and gradual independence from Britain—but only after they had created their own robust

constitution. On July 1, 1776, for the good of his country, he spoke his conscience against independence, distaining all the popularity he had accrued over the past decade leading the resistance. Of course, Congress decided against him. Dickinson then modeled the purest form of patriotism: he withdrew his objection and threw his entire support behind the cause of independence, leading his Pennsylvania militia battalion to New Jersey to meet the British.

For many more years, Dickinson continued to serve in office and counsel Americans about their national identity and public behavior. During the debates to ratify the 1787 Constitution, he wrote another series of letters signed “Fabius.” Addressing “unpolished but honest-hearted” Americans, he again admonished them to aspire to their best selves. Two main concerns were imprudent choice of leaders and the accumulation of wealth. “Will a virtuous and sensible people chuse villains or fools for their officers?” he asked. He reminded them to maintain “a reasonable, not a distracted will” and to remain “cool” when considering national affairs. Because, he warned, “When frensy seizes the mass, it would be madness to think of their happiness, that is, of their freedom.” Should that happen, “[t]hey will infallibly have a *Philip* or a *Cesar*”—two ancient tyrants—“to bleed them into soberness of mind.”



Penn's Treaty with the Indians, Edward Hicks, ca. 1840–1844. According to legend, in 1682, William Penn met with Lenape chiefs, including Chief Tamanend, under a giant elm tree in Shackamaxon (now part of Philadelphia). Penn fostered unusually fair, peaceful relations with local tribes that kept the peace in early Pennsylvania for decades.

Image and caption courtesy National Gallery of Art



The Grave of William Penn, Edward Hicks, ca. 1847–1848. Although he founded the Pennsylvania Colony, Penn only actually lived in America twice for short periods (1682–1684 and 1699–1701). He returned to England permanently in 1701 to manage financial and legal troubles regarding his colony, and spent his remaining years in Berkshire and Buckinghamshire.

Image courtesy National Gallery of Art; caption courtesy National Park Service

Similarly, seeing the great potential for individual and national wealth, Dickinson addressed the dangers it created. “May *simplicity* be the characteristic feature of [Americans’] manners,” he proclaimed, warning them to avoid both “luxury” and “the thirst of empire.” “May our national character be—an animated moderation, that seeks only its own, and will not be satisfied with less.” Because “[t]he abuse of prosperity, is rebellion against Heaven,” he offered the rule he himself lived by: “we never consult our own happiness more effectually, than when we most endeavour to correspond with the Divine designs, by communicating happiness, as much as we can, to our fellow-creatures.” Dickinson ended by wishing for Americans his eternal desire: “a perpetuity of freedom, virtue, piety, and felicity, to them and their posterity.” His values should speak to us still.

DR. JANE E. CALVERT is Founding Director and Chief Editor of the John Dickinson Writings Project.



SUSAN McWILLIAMS BARNDT

TOCQUEVILLE AND THE TIDAL WAVE OF DEMOCRACY

The ocean must have felt like an omen. On May 11, 1831, the waters off New York harbor were hard to predict. Violent winds were coming up from the south, local diarists such as farmer Nicholas Gesner reported, tearing boat sails and pushing up terrible swells. But nearer to the land, the seas were calm, and the air was warm.

We don't know what Alexis de Tocqueville was thinking when he stepped off a boat and onto the American shore that day. But he was surely taking it all in, trying to sort the mixed signals out. Tocqueville was just 25 years old, but he was determined to figure out what made the United States tick. Like the waters off its coast, the new nation felt powerful but unpredictable.

A child of France who had grown up in the shadow of the Revolution, Tocqueville saw democracy transforming the world.

RIGHT *New York Harbor*, Fitz Henry Lane, 1852.

Image courtesy National Gallery of Art



Democratic principles were like a steamroller, vanquishing kings and annihilating feudalism and changing everything they touched. It felt like God Himself had an agenda to push, and democracy was it.

The United States was the proving ground of all that democratic energy. It was the place where modern democracy was most fully realized. Tocqueville went to America to do more than to see the sights. He went to America to see the future.

We live in the future that Tocqueville imagined. It has been almost two centuries since Tocqueville visited the United States and wrote his epic *Democracy in America*. He died two years before the first shots of the Civil War were fired at Fort Sumter. So much about our country has changed since he saw it. But Tocqueville was thinking ahead of his time, and he has a lot to say to ours.

Back then, Tocqueville saw something about Americans that we can still see today, whether we're in a crowd of people on the streets of Manhattan or in the crowd

at a NASCAR race. Americans like to go fast. We have a lot of energy. Americans are a restless people, Tocqueville said. We move around a lot. We're always looking for the next new thing.

Tocqueville saw democracy transforming the world. Democratic principles were like a steamroller, vanquishing kings and annihilating feudalism and changing everything they touched.

Why? Tocqueville thought the answer was clear. It's democracy. Democracy gives people the sense—the hope—that we can improve our position. In an aristocratic society, your position is fixed. Your family's fate is yours. You have little incentive to

look beyond what you have been given. But in a democratic society, your position is not fixed. You have a lot of incentive to think about who you want to be, not just who your ancestors were. Democracy encourages us to be strivers, to chase our dreams, to imagine that we can be—as generations of American parents have told their children—anything we want to be.

That restlessness has a lot of positive effects in American life. It creates entrepreneurial energy and commercial activity. It encourages a spirit of invention and innovation. It makes us forward-thinking. Americans are hustlers and movers and



shakers. Our population is always churning. We don't have to be stuck in toxic relationships because we're not stuck in aristocratic castes. We are always meeting new people and confronting new ideas, which creates new possibilities.

There are down sides to all that mobility, of course. American life can feel frantic. When everyone is running around and trying to improve themselves, it is easy to feel dissatisfied with what you have. It's easy to feel left behind. It's easy to have FOMO. It's easy to get caught up in status games. A restless nation is often an anxious nation. Plus: If you are always picking up and going somewhere else, you are going to feel unsettled. Meeting new people and encountering new ideas can be exciting, but it can also be exhausting. It can even be scary. When the faces around you are constantly changing, it can be hard to know who to trust. Life in the United States can be *lonely*.

In other words, Tocqueville would not at all have been surprised by a lot of things that mark ordinary life in the United States today: our great medical and technological advances, our diverse range of musical styles and forms, our commercial ascendancy, our celebration of “changemakers” and “disruptors,” our love of automobiles, our self-help industry. He would not have been surprised by house-flipping or doomscrolling or “influencing.” And he would not have been surprised by our high rates of anxiety, loneliness, and social distrust.

For Tocqueville, democracy was like a Pandora's box. Once opened, it was never going to be shut. So his big question became: How do Americans harness all the good energy and potential that comes with democracy, and how can Americans limit democracy's worst effects on our well-being?

Tocqueville's greatest insight is that Americans do best when Americans come together. Tocqueville didn't mean that in some abstract, kumbaya, think-good-thoughts way. He meant that Americans do best when we find opportunities to spend time with our friends and neighbors. Bonus points go to groups that meet regularly: religious congregations, sports leagues, book clubs, unions, sewing circles,

Our population is always churning. We don't have to be stuck in toxic relationships because we're not stuck in aristocratic castes. We are always meeting new people and confronting new ideas, which creates new possibilities.





Charles Alexis Henri Clerel de Tocqueville, Théodore Chassériau, c. 1848. Image courtesy Alamy

and so on. When we hang out—whether it’s on our front lawns or in barbershops or at the dog park—we help to ground each other’s lives. Spending time with each other helps to slow us down. It counteracts the centrifugal forces of the culture. It can help us feel less lonely.

My students often laugh when I tell them the best way to save the republic is to throw a party. But Tocqueville would back me up on that. Cultivating the “arts of association,” he said, is key to American success. We only learn how to live together by spending time together. You can’t get a civic education behind a screen.

Those kinds of associations can also strengthen the power of localities and municipal governments. Tocqueville knew that in a nation as big as the United States, our federal government would often feel distant and disconnected. He saw that

Americans were going to have lots of reason to feel alienated from or hostile to the powers in Washington. But he thought we could counteract that—to some degree—by cultivating powers closer to home. He celebrated jury duty, local newspapers, firefighting societies, and town meetings. Through those smaller-scale institutions, we can truly make ourselves heard and realize the dream of self-governance.

Tocqueville didn't think that realizing the American dream—of being a nation where equality and liberty and justice really do exist for all—was a given.



American political leaders often quote Tocqueville.

In fact, every American president from Eisenhower to Trump has invoked his name. Usually, those quotations make Tocqueville sound like a cheerleader for our country. You'll often hear people attribute to Tocqueville the line that "America is great because Americans are good." He didn't say that. Tocqueville was not a simple flag-waver. He was something much more important. He was someone who saw America's promise but kept his eyes on America's potential for peril.

Tocqueville didn't think that being an American was easy. He didn't think that realizing the American dream—the collective dream, of being a nation where equality and liberty and justice really do exist for all—was a given. He thought hard, for his own time and ours, about how we could realize the better angels of our democratic nature.

Today, it is so easy to feel overwhelmed by the great and impersonal forces of our time, forces that stoke our feelings of disconnection and grievance. Tocqueville saw those coming. But he also saw what we should try to see today: that we can help realize our nation's highest ideals in our everyday actions. Democracy in America, now as then, has its waves and terrors. But we can, if we choose, fight its harsher currents. We can create safe harbors, even when the winds are fierce.

SUSAN McWILLIAMS BARNDT is a professor of government at Claremont McKenna College. She earned her Ph.D. in Politics from Princeton University and is an expert in classical and modern political theory as well as American political thought.



WILL RAHN

BASEBALL SAVED ME

At the 2026 National Summit on Civic Education, our plenary speaker, Peggy Noonan, was asked, “How do you recommend Americans get reacquainted with their country in this 250th year, in a way that goes beyond the documents?”

“I’m going to give you my honest answer,” she said. “You go to a Mets game.”

She’s not alone in that sentiment. In fact, it seems to be a family tradition. We hope you enjoy this wonderful essay by Will Rahn, senior editor and writer at The Free Press, about the American institution that breaks his heart and keeps him going at the same time.

This essay was originally published at The Free Press. Check them out at thefp.com.

YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED that life is rich with tragedies large and small, and it can be hard to tell the difference.

The loss of a job, a bad breakup, a nervous collapse: Where do these fall on the spectrum? Is there any way of knowing? Does it all depend on where they lead; on what comes next?

RIGHT *Baseball Match at Pont-Évêque, René François Xavier Prinnet, 1917.*

This painting depicts soldiers—most likely from the American Expeditionary Forces—playing a game of baseball in Normandy, France.

Image courtesy Artvee; caption courtesy Wikipedia





So goes my thought process as I make the routine mistake of googling my beloved New York Mets. Record: seven wins, 16 losses, the worst in the National League. Last 10 games: zero wins, 10 losses. Payroll: \$370 million, the second-highest in baseball.

My favorite player, Pete Alonso? He's slugging for the Baltimore Orioles now. Big Pete, bullied as a child, a great beauty at the plate, had spent his entire career in the Mets organization and last year set the team's all-time record for most home runs. He was a hero to the fans. But the Mets are the Mets, so they just let him go in free agency without a fight.

Brandon Nimmo, my second-favorite player? The good news is that he's the best hitter on the team. The bad news is the team is the Texas Rangers. The Mets traded him away for Marcus Semien, who is barely hitting at all.



When people ask me why I stick with this misbegotten franchise, I say they were there when I needed them.

This brings me to the real question: Why am I doing this to myself?

Maybe it's because baseball breaks my heart in a way I can handle.

Major League Baseball is undergoing a renaissance. Viewership is up, and while it can't be definitively said that baseball is now more popular than basketball, it's certainly catching up—last year's World Series and the NBA championship both went seven games, but a lot more people turned in to watch the Dodgers beat the Blue Jays. The introduction of pitch clocks, changes to the bases, and other small tweaks to make the game shorter and the play more exciting have been credited for the comeback.

I'd like to offer another explanation, informed by how I fell back in love with baseball.

It's the spring of 2022, and I'm catatonically depressed. It's not the first time I've been in this condition and it won't be the last. For whatever reason, it's just something that happens to me. I'm sprawled out on my mom's couch because I'm sane enough to know I shouldn't be alone.

I see there's a Mets game on and, although I'm not in the habit of following the team I grew up rooting for, I watch it anyway. What else am I doing? Up to the plate steps Alonso. Home run. Then Nimmo gets a hit. Then the pitcher, I don't remember who, strikes out the other side. Shortstop Francisco Lindor is lightning in the infield and raking at the plate. These guys had chemistry. They might not have always liked each other but they trusted each other to be great. You could see it, even tuning in by chance for the first time in years.

There was a game the next day, then the one after that. I watch them both. Each team plays 162 games every season and in 2022 I watched probably 100 of them, right up to their ignominious end in the first round of the postseason. Alonso is a bit goofy looking, with a weak chin and thinning hair and a body people call "unathletic." But to me, he's perfect. Same with Nimmo, a Wyoming boy with searching cowboy eyes. I text my friends Audrey and John, both committed Mets fans. I dated Audrey briefly in high school before she dropped me for John. But now we're all close again and on a group chat to talk about the Mets. Life unfolds in mysterious ways.

The depressive episode came to a close after about a week, and I can't credit all that to the Mets. But years later, when people ask me why I stick with this misbegotten franchise, I say they were there when I needed them.

The fog lifts, everything is suddenly going somewhat well, and I see on Instagram that a pretty girl named Alice has moved to New York for grad school. I knew of her when we both worked in D.C. We'd never met, however, so I politely slid into her DMs, with the athleticism and grace of Lindor stealing second base, and asked her out for a coffee. We were engaged by the end of the year. I proposed on one knee in Grand Central on Christmas night after meeting her train home. This being New York, nobody appeared to notice, save for a janitor who put down his push broom to applaud.

I dragged Alice to a lot of games in the summer of our courtship. I explained the basic rules, but when the scoreboard flashed important-looking statistics—baseball, more than any other sport, loves its stats—I shrugged them off. Batting average for position players, earned-run average for pitchers—these are the only numbers I bother with. I'm not Billy Beane over here. I'm just a guy who likes baseball a whole lot.



Alice loves the opera. Not in a know-it-all purist way but in much the same way I love baseball—with reverence and affection, and an easygoing willingness to leave a little early when you know how it’s going to end.

“I take her to the Mets, she takes me to the Met,” I tell people. It’s never earned an actual laugh, but it’s a good enough line for small talk at work. Opera and baseball have quite a bit in common too, from the high emotional stakes to the funny costumes. The inherent sweetness of how seriously people take something so ultimately silly. Plus, a baseball game is a theatrical production. And playing Don Giovanni is an impressive athletic endurance event.

We live in dangerous times, an era of profound anxiety set to consume us if we don’t look away from it for a moment and mitigate our fears. This is where religious faith and baseball, our most meditative sport, provide an antidote.

There’s also a reason it’s sometimes called the Church of Baseball. This is typically meant derisively, to jab at the way the game never really changes, has a certain piety about itself, and is peaceful compared to the breakneck pace of basketball or the brutality of football. It’s all true. And that’s exactly the point. Baseball today is the same game that Honus Wagner and Ty Cobb played. It’s impossible to compare Johnny Unitas and Tom Brady because so much has changed that they might as well have been playing two different sports. Baseball, meanwhile, invites you—really, requires you—to measure Shohei Ohtani against Babe

Ruth, and to argue endlessly and pointlessly about who’s actually the all-time greatest with your fellow fans.

Here lies the missing part of the story of baseball’s comeback. It’s hard not to read into trends like the resurgent popularity of the national pastime, what with all its respect for tradition, and the spike in conversions to Roman Catholicism. Let’s say Americans are seeking a certain solace in these enduring institutions, these man-made structures that offer us a glimpse of something sublime when we get together and believe. We live in dangerous times, an era of profound anxiety set to consume us if we don’t look away from it for a moment and mitigate our fears. This is where religious faith and baseball, our most meditative sport, provide an antidote.

The pews of a church, the stands of a baseball stadium—these are approved places to feel deeply alongside other people without having to talk to them. We all face in the same direction, every last man a boy reaching out for his father. We bring our own children with us even though they won't know what's going on. We want them to know the cadence of the liturgy and the crack of the bat. We want them to begin to feel the presence of the spirit, a sense of something that will always be there, that always has been. Every believer knows even a toddler can touch the eternal. It's more of a miracle when his wrung-out dishrag of a dad still can too.

The Mets break my heart in a way I can handle.



After googling the Mets this morning, I threw on a baseball cap, lit a cigarette, and shuffled out for a walk. I looked depressed because I am depressed, hangdog Charlie Brown expression and all. “They’ll win tonight,” a man said as he passed me on the sidewalk. It was just a dash of Manhattan kindness, I figured, turning to catch a glimpse of the man’s long brown coat as he ambled away.

It wasn’t until I got back home that I realized I wasn’t wearing the tattered Mets cap I usually wear, but a New York Jets one. And needless to say, the Jets are not playing this late April evening. The Mets will take the field, however, in the first of a nine-game, do-or-die home stand.

Who knows what that was? But the Mets were there when I needed them. They break my heart in a way I can handle. And I’ll be watching them tonight.

WILL RAHN is a senior editor and writer for *The Free Press*. Previously, he was the politics editor for *Yahoo! News* and the Washington bureau chief for *The Daily Beast*.







CATHERINE WADDELL

MOUNT VERNON'S CIVIC EDUCATION

Today, understanding what it means to be an American is at risk. Too often we take for granted what requires hard work to maintain—and taking something for granted obfuscates what can be lost. Therefore, those who do understand what it means have a responsibility to safeguard our history to ensure that all Americans may live according to the values set forth by our founders.

We must practice our history every day, or we will lose it. For me, being an American ultimately means taking responsibility for ensuring that the idea of our free nation, the ideals of our founders, and the practice of our precious history remain foremost in the minds of all Americans.

In 2013, I became the 7th Vice Regent for Illinois for the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union (MVLA), the governing board of George Washington's Mount Vernon. Formed in 1853 by a group of enterprising women whose purpose was to acquire and restore Washington's beloved home, the MVLA raised \$200,000 and bought Mount Vernon from Washington's nephew in 1858 and has owned it without interruption to this day. The MVLA remains a board of women from states across the country and is responsible for the preservation of the estate and teaching the world about the life and legacy of George Washington. It accepts no government funding.

RIGHT *A View of Mount Vernon*, unknown artist, ca. 1792.

Image courtesy National Gallery of Art

The MVLA is my national service. It is through work with my colleagues at Mount Vernon that I practice our history and take responsibility for helping to ensure that all Americans know what it means to be an American, to be free, and to live in a democracy. In a time when fewer than 30% of voting age Americans can name the three branches of government, I realize that much of our way of life is taken for granted, that civics and history are losing their importance in the classroom, and perhaps even worse, that the very notion of democracy is being questioned.

When I was a young girl, I was fortunate to have parents who were very interested in U.S. history. We visited historic sites and ate cherry pie every year on George Washington's birthday. Christmas and birthday presents always included books related to the Revolutionary War or our nation's founding. I was also fortunate to attend an elementary school in which we recited the Pledge of Allegiance everyday and celebrated both Washington's and Lincoln's birthdays. We learned about the branches of government, elections, and voting.

Those were impressionable years that instilled in me a love of country. It felt good and right to be patriotic. I was proud to be an American citizen. I want that experience for all children so that they will adopt a love of country and be inspired to protect our democratic way of life by understanding our founding documents, knowing our history, and exercising their right to vote. I want that for my grandchildren—and for all Americans. Places like Mount Vernon exist, in no small measure, to help provide it.

Understanding what it means to be an American evolves, I have moved from taking my way of life for granted, to working hard to preserve, in the words of George Washington, “the great experiment” that is our democracy and our government: a government of, by, and for the people.

I have been to places where women in public must be escorted by a male relative or husband, in places where women may not dress as they choose, in squares where protests have been bloodily suppressed, and where all citizens must register to travel from one province to another. Not until travel took me to places where these freedoms and others are limited or don't exist, did I truly understand what it means to live in a free country, to be a free citizen, and to enjoy those freedoms. How quickly I stopped taking seemingly basic freedoms for granted. Being an American means being free.

And our freedom is protected by the rule of law under our Constitution. Our founders made sure of this. I was fortunate one time to be in the company of Lady Margaret Thatcher who commented that Americans must not forget that they are the only nation founded on the idea of liberty. We did not inherit a form of government; we fought to create a republic rooted in Enlightenment ideals. Being a modern day American is knowing that you are the intentional consequence of two battles, one of brains and one of blood, each fought in order to break free and to live freely.

Being a modern day American is knowing that you are the intentional consequence of two battles, one of brains and one of blood, each fought in order to break free and to live freely.



At Mount Vernon, we take responsibility for ensuring that George Washington's vision for the new nation is neither taken for granted nor lost. We work hard each day to teach his life and legacy.

Here visitors of all ages can see the mansion in which Washington lived, the beloved farm he left behind to lead the Revolutionary War, the study from which he formed the new government, and the bed in which he died. The Education Center tells both the story of Mount Vernon and the story of Washington himself. The George Washington Presidential Library is a place of scholarship and research. It is home to many of Washington's papers and books, and is a place to which historians turn to study the founding era through books, manuscripts, and rare maps. It deepens the meaning of who we are and are capable of being.

Mount Vernon represents what it means to be an American. At this place, George Washington's imprint upon our nation, who we are and for what we stand, is inescapable. I am humbled by the stories of those who fought with words and bayonets to secure the nation that is ours. I am struck by Washington's perseverance to achieve his vision, and I am inspired to take responsibility for our nation's future.

CATHERINE MARLETTE WADDELL is Mount Vernon Ladies' Association's Vice Regent for Illinois.



ELLIOTT DRAGO

THE ABOLITIONIST FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

**HOW THE ‘PRESIDENT OF THE
UNDERGROUND RAILROAD’
ILLUMINATES OUR FOUNDING PRINCIPLES**

Being an American means being someone who can, through toil and sacrifice, embody freedom, even if for a moment. We have a civic duty to mine and proclaim these moments of freedom from our shared American past. Thankfully, American history offers many opportunities to witness and celebrate how the ideal of freedom continues to form a more perfect union. For example:

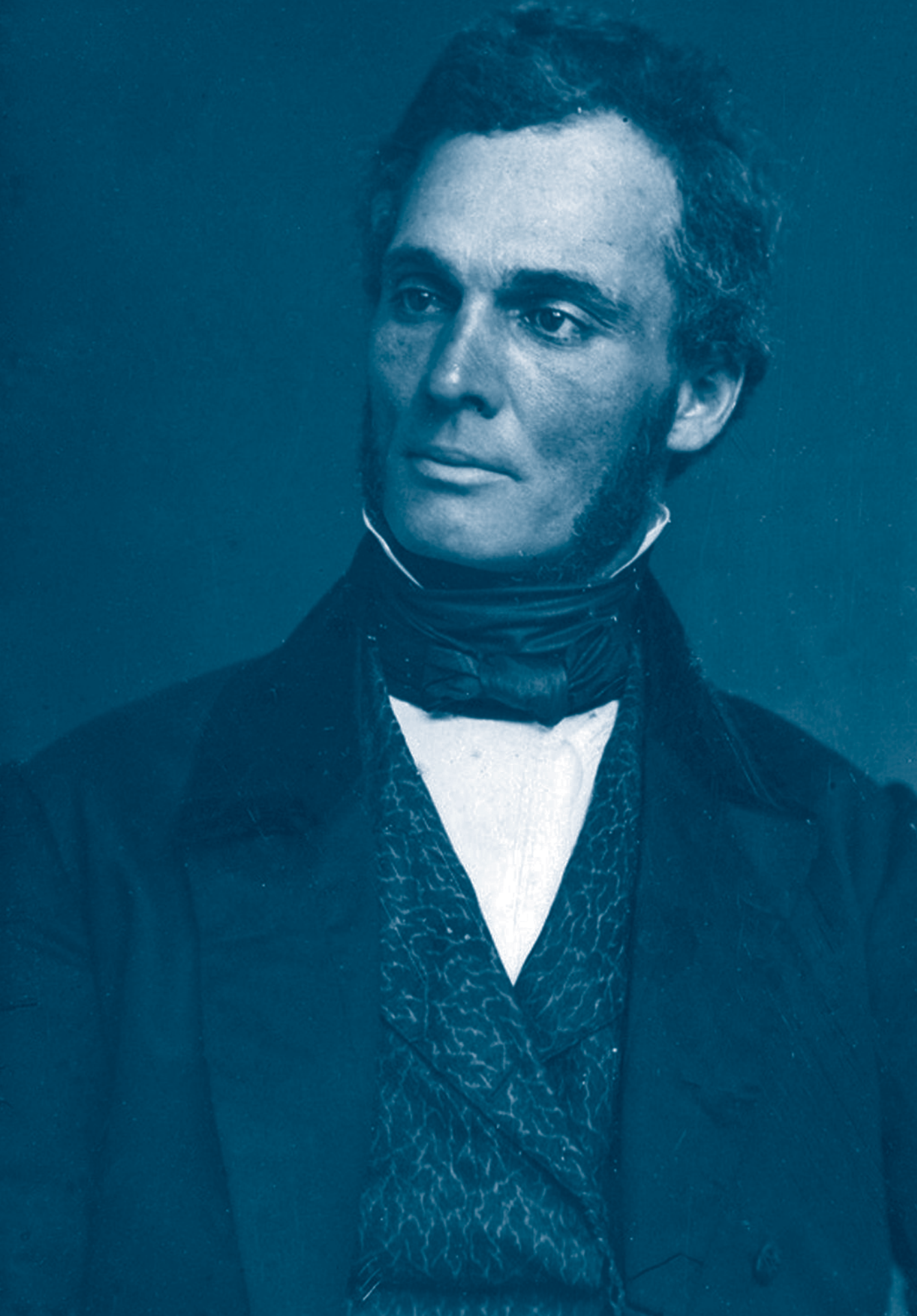
The Founders affixing their signatures to the Declaration of Independence, a bold liberating act that meant risking their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor.

A wartime president gazing somberly across the scarred landscape of a battlefield, reflecting on what it meant for the fallen to give their last true measure of devotion in the name of freedom.

Men and women marching arm in arm, singing songs of liberty while pursuing their civil rights.

RIGHT Robert Purvis, 1810–1898.

Image courtesy Alamy



Americans can use their own history to embody freedom and have many role models to emulate and inspire future generations. One such role model was the abolitionist Robert Purvis.



Freedom is essential to Americans and their story because we have learned, through time, sacrifice, and courage, how we must continually strive to embody freedom.

Robert Purvis was born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1810 to the white Scottish cotton merchant William Purvis and Harriet Judah, a mixed-race free woman whose own mother was kidnapped from Africa as a girl. When Robert was nine, the family relocated to Philadelphia. After his father's untimely death, sixteen-year-old Robert inherited a sizable portion of his estate, which he soon parlayed into real estate investment in Philadelphia.

While most Americans remember Philadelphia as the birthplace of the republic, Philadelphia during Purvis's time seemed more southern than northern. Many of the city's leading families had ties to southern slaveowners, whose cotton crops became textiles in Philadelphia factories. The Democratic party machine of Philadelphia encouraged the workers in these factories, many of whom were poor and uneducated immigrants fresh off the boat from Ireland, to view Black Americans as subhuman or worse, with dire consequences. Egged on by law enforcement, roving gangs of young Irish men and boys took great delight in harassing the Black community. Meanwhile, corrupt local constables and aldermen conspired with southern slaveholders to falsely claim Black Americans as "fugitives" from slavery—or outright kidnap them—sending them to the killing fields of the South.

To combat such atrocities and safeguard the dignity and freedom of Black Americans, Robert Purvis threw himself into several reform-minded causes in the city, the most important of which was the abolitionist movement.

A few critical connections led him to this activism. Purvis felt electrified by a speech delivered by the Quaker abolitionist newspaper editor Benjamin Lundy in 1828, who committed himself to the immediate emancipation of all enslaved people. Additionally, the successful Black Philadelphia sailmaker James Forten served as a mentor and eventual father-in-law to Purvis. Forten's sense of civic

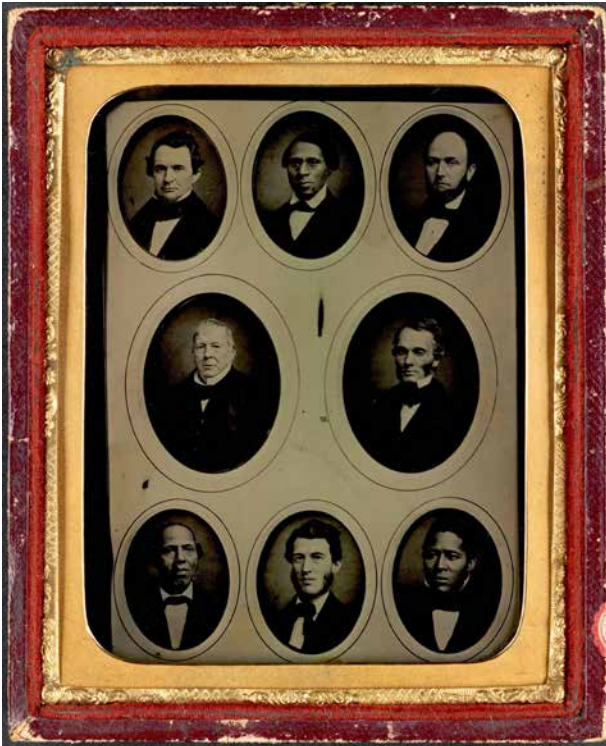
duty impressed Purvis: Forten fought in the American Revolution, helped fund the city's defense during the War of 1812, and spent a significant amount of his wealth benefiting the Black community by supporting cultural institutions, intellectual societies, church renovations, and even protecting runaways that were a constant presence in Philadelphia. These two dedicated, generous men inspired Purvis to build his civic career centered on the founding principle of freedom.

Purvis spoke and wrote publicly to his fellow Americans, decrying colonization efforts to ship Black Americans back to Africa, clamoring for Black education and voting rights, and commenting on political affairs. Purvis was a founding member of the American Anti-Slavery Society and helped organize its inaugural convention in Philadelphia in 1833. Echoing the Declaration of Independence's promises, the attendees drafted a "Declaration of Sentiments," and vowed to do everything in their power to end slavery.

Purvis's role in the abolitionist cause extended beyond words as he aided runaway slaves. In one instance, he galloped across the region to find legal counsel for Basil Dorsey, a Black man accused of being a runaway. Purvis also gathered a large group of Black Americans to attend the trial proceedings and liberate Basil from the slavecatchers if the trial did not turn out favorably.

The case against Dorsey was dismissed, but Purvis's vigilance did not end there: rather than riding home immediately, he personally escorted Dorsey out of the courthouse, where once again the slaveholders attempted to kidnap the man as he mounted Purvis's horse. The quick-thinking Purvis loudly cracked his horsewhip, and Dorsey rode off northward, as the Black crowd exploded with applause. While not all of Purvis's rescues were quite as dramatic, he consistently embodied an American intent on realizing the founding principle of freedom.

Inspired by the Dorsey case and others, Purvis co-founded the Vigilant Association of Philadelphia in 1837. The organization often met at Purvis's home and aided hundreds of Black Americans fleeing from slavery, providing food, shelter, and money as well as the names and addresses of friendly abolitionists. Over time, the Vigilant Association grew to about 1,000 members, becoming a vital hub in the Underground Railroad. In 1842, the association marched down Lombard Street, Philadelphia, holding a flag emblazoned with "Liberty or Death." White



Philadelphia Vigilance Committee, ca. 1854.

This composite features James Miller McKim, Nathaniel W. Depee, Charles Wise, Thomas Garrett, Robert Purvis, Jacob C. White, Passmore Williamson, and William Still.

Image courtesy Alamy

bystanders who observed the parade soon grew restless and attacked the marchers. A three-day race riot ensued, in which white Philadelphians assaulted Black Philadelphians and torched Black homes, businesses, and cultural sites.

As the rioters targeted Purvis's home, he sat on the stairs with a rifle, waiting and hoping that the mob would not break through the door. Fearing for the safety of his family, Purvis moved about 10 miles north of the city to his farmstead in Byberry and burnt all his notes from the Vigilance Association to hide his activities.

Purvis's home in Byberry functioned as another station on the Underground Railroad where Purvis and his family actualized the founding principle of freedom by rescuing Black Americans on the run from southern slaveholders. His work as an Underground Railroad station master continued in the following decades and throughout the Civil War. He urged his fellow Americans to fight for freedom "until slavery goes down so effectually that about it we can have no question or doubt."

The founding principle of freedom never left Purvis's mind. He presided over the 50th anniversary of the founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1883. A living legend, Purvis's name was uttered with reverence: here was a person who belonged in freedom's pantheon alongside Lincoln, Garrison, Douglass, and Tubman. He was, after all, christened by his colleagues as the "President of the Underground Railroad," and personally oversaw the liberation of hundreds of Black Americans who fled slavery.

A living legend, Purvis's name was uttered with reverence: here was a person who belonged in freedom's pantheon alongside Lincoln, Garrison, Douglass, and Tubman.



At the anniversary convention, a platform at the front of the room displayed relics from the hellish era of slavery. Attendees gathered around the wooden objects and pored over each one in turn: a box that once contained a young Black woman fleeing slavery in Baltimore. Crammed "in darkness and peril," she remained in that position for 18 hours as the freight vessel sailed to Philadelphia so that she could be "borne to Freedom;" an auction block from New Orleans, "a silent testimony to the barbarism passed away;" and the table and inkstand, "sacred to liberty," from the original 1833 meeting, upon which Purvis and his fellow abolitionists drafted their Declaration of Sentiments.

These objects embodied how Purvis and his friends succeeded in performing their civic duty to end the war over slavery in the United States. "They were men and women who believed in, and were loyal to, the grand principles of our American Declaration of Independence," Purvis explained. They certainly encountered resistance, but these principles were never defeated. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were made real in the person of Robert Purvis. Through his work as a speaker, writer, reformer, and most importantly, president of the Underground Railroad, he exemplified the highest form of civic duty: the founding principle of freedom.

ELLIOTT DRAGO is the Jack Miller Center's Resident Historian and Manager of Network Engagement for our network of more than 1,400 scholars. He is an expert on the struggles over slavery and freedom during the Early Republic.



AMERICA AS A PLACE

RIGHT *The City of Boston*, Lyman W. Atwater, 1873. This lithograph was based on a drawing by the prominent nineteenth-century artist Charles Parsons and is considered a masterwork of urban cartographic illustration.

Image courtesy Artvee



RACHEL MACKEY

CITIZENS ON AN ADVENTURE

Every year I take the students of [Hudson Institute Political Studies](#) to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. to consider political questions through the medium of art. Looking at the works of Giotto, da Vinci, and Rembrandt, we consider what it means to be a human being. Then, taking in the art of Jacques Louis David, Gilbert Stuart, and Augustus St. Gaudens, we ask what it means to be a citizen.

The answers are easy in the old world—to be a human being is to be a creature of God or of the city; to be a citizen is to fight for Florence, or follow Napoleon. But as we cross the Atlantic the questions are more complicated. As Americans we do not share a God or an ethnic identity. We have not all lived next to each other for hundreds of generations.

RIGHT *Buffalo Trail: The Impending Storm*, Albert Bierstadt, 1869. The artist wrote of this image created after one of his expeditions to the American West: “We find here plenty of buffalo. One morning we saw a noble looking animal crossing the river near us . . . As he came splashing through the water, I felt half inclined to lay down my rifle and take up my sketchbook, but I was so wrapped in admiration and study I could do neither for a few moments.”

Image and caption courtesy National Gallery of Art





The first painting we look at is Albert Bierstadt's *Buffalo Trail: The Impending Storm*. Known for his awesome landscapes that span the Hudson River Valley, the great grass prairies, and the Sierra Nevada, Bierstadt here depicts a line of buffalo coming toward the viewer across grass and creek. The end of the buffalo line disappears into a rising storm. America is a place of exploration, undiscovered landscape, untouched ground—a new nation built by adventures from across the Atlantic. With this definition comes tragedy, or at least, the unknown. The buffalo cannot outlast the storm of civilization. The end of the adventure will come.

Growing up in New Mexico, the vestiges of the frontier, Bierstadt's answer and the problem inherent in it seem especially real to me. My brother and I spent our weekends hiking through almost untouched deserts, swimming in natural waterholes with real rock slides, avoiding rattlesnakes under the red rock ledges.

We could almost imagine that no one had been there before us, that like Lewis and Clark we could write back to civilization—"Look at the wonderful world we have found."

The end of the buffalo line disappears into a rising storm. The buffalo cannot outlast the storm of civilization. The end of the adventure will come.

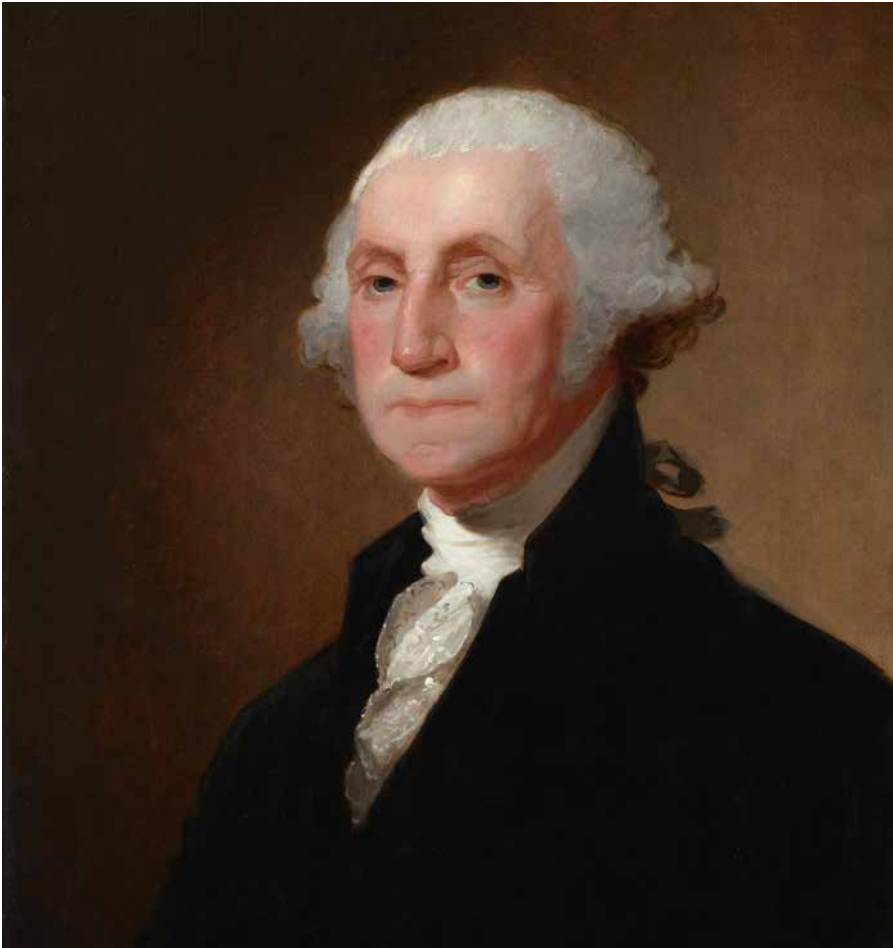
But the tragedy was there too, in the broken beer bottles we came across on the path, the poverty of the state, and the knowledge that our beautiful home would not be the place I would bring up my own children. Civilization had come to New Mexico, and with it the end

of the adventure, at least for the adult world, but it had not brought with it a new answer to the question of American identity.

[Gilbert Stuart's "George Washington"](#) provides an alternative answer. Painted after the death of Washington it depicts Washington after he has resigned the presidency. His clear blue eyes confront his visitor from a somewhat worn face. His dark frock coat reminds us that he is now a private man. He is the Washington who led the Revolutionary War, who was unanimously elected president, but most clearly he is the Washington of the [Farewell Address](#). He seems to be expecting something of us, expecting that we will live up to his standard.

Coming out of the Gallery with the memory of those piercing blue eyes we see the National Mall with its monuments and museums—and the crowds that





George Washington, Gilbert Stuart, ca. 1821. Image courtesy National Gallery of Art

come to view them. If you look at the lines of school children waiting to view the Constitution and Declaration you can see citizens on an adventure—an adventure in keeping with Washington’s expectations.

RACHEL MACKEY is a fellow at Hudson Institute, and the executive director of Hudson Institute Political Studies, which provides exceptional students with an education in the theory and practice of politics. She received her PhD from Boston College.



J. R. GAGE

FLYOVER COUNTRY IS AMERICA IN ITS ESSENCE

IN AMERICA'S POPULAR IMAGINATION, at least, the Great Plains region is flyover country. Folks from the coast seem to think it is all corn, cattle, retrograde politics, and college sports.

Important as those may be, the significance of the Great Plains goes far deeper. Since the Founding itself, the Great Plains has been nothing less than the most quintessentially American part of America.

Beginning in 1776, American idealism has always meant the national self-actualization of the words “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Settling the west and the increase of American wealth and power have all been towards this goal to create what Thomas Jefferson called “an Empire of Liberty.” Pioneers were inspired to build a civilization out of a wilderness. Perhaps no accomplishment represents American desire for conquest more than the taming of what was once referred to as the “Great American Desert.”

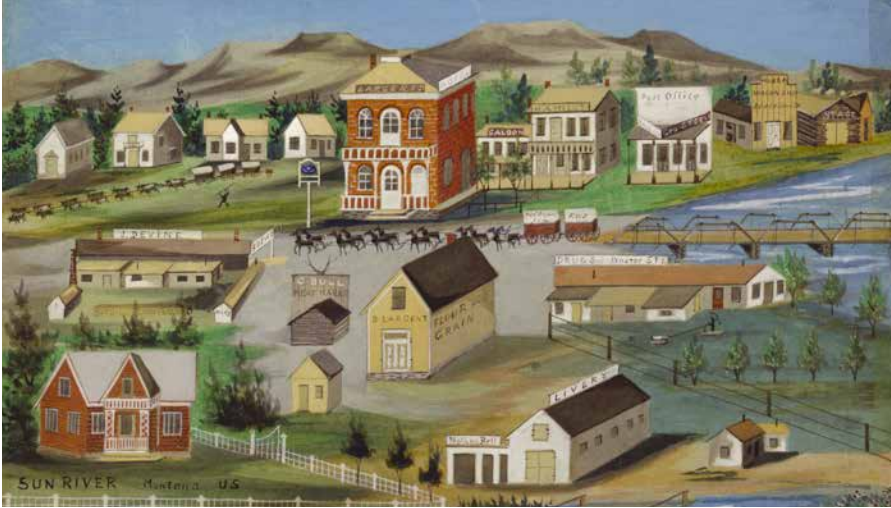
That is why, in thought and action, no part of the country has been more dedicated towards this ideal than the Great Plains. The region is truly American-made, having

RIGHT *Spring Shower, Western Kansas Landscape*, John Steuart Curry, 1931.

Image courtesy Artvee







Sun River, Montana, anonymous, ca. 1885. Image courtesy Artvee

been purchased, settled, and institutionalized after the nation's Independence. On this frontier, brave men and women built up the republic as they intended it, without the baggage of history or the prejudices of the Old World.

That idealism also manifested during the Civil War in the willingness of the states that make up the Great Plains to fight with the Union. In the years following, no region better embodied American optimism, and its culmination could be found in populist figures rising from the west at the turn of the twentieth century such as William Jennings Bryan. The Great Plains also foreshadowed the rise of the twentieth century Civil Rights Movement with the victory of Nebraska native Chief Standing Bear in federal court recognizing the humanity of American Indians.

Other American greats were born, raised, or educated here: Malcolm X, Teddy Roosevelt, Crazy Horse, and Buffalo Bill. Even now as the country ages and many feel its best days are behind it, no region is more loyal to conservative sentiment or the ideals of the Founding.

As the region urbanizes, the Great Plains continues to be defined by its rural roots. In a recent visit to western Nebraska, a Sandhills rancher showed me the spot under a Black Locust tree where homesteaders built the first sod hut on the

land his ancestors have lived on for six generations. Nearby, metal remnants of pioneers' wagons can still be found.

This rural-consciousness extends to the many folks in the region that have abandoned the countryside for suburban living. A writer for *Vanity Fair* wrote in 1932 that "A true Nebraskan feels ill at ease on [Omaha's] steep hills." This suspicion of cities can be found throughout the Great Plains and explains the suburban sprawl that many coastal Americans find off-putting.

The pioneering memory can also be found in the naming of sports teams in the Great Plains—the region's favorite pastime. Nebraska Cornhuskers, North Dakota Fighting Sioux, and the Wyoming Cowboys.

Along with its virtues, the Plains reflect the peculiar simplicity of American culture. Oscar Wilde once said, "America is the only country that went from barbarism to decadence without civilization in between." Outside of the novels of Willa Cather and Laura Ingalls Wilder, the region has produced few great artists. In my home state of Nebraska, public spaces are littered with art that ranges from kitsch to garish.

Neither European aristocratic airs nor refinement have penetrated deeply into the Plains' cities, contrasting with places like New York and Charleston. The people of the region have neither the triumphalist earnestness of the Northerner nor the conquered pessimism of a Southerner. Instead, the Great Plains offers American identity a kind of hopeful balance between permanence and change.

While for many, the Plains will continue to be forgotten as flyover country—maybe as we celebrate America's 250th anniversary, its future and renewal still remains in the West.

The Great Plains offers American identity a hopeful balance between permanence and change.



J. R. GAGE is a political and cultural commentator living in the Midwest and an alumnus of Hillsdale College. He is the executive editor of *The Plains Sentinel*.



DAVID HACIN

BOSTON IS A BRICK CITY

I first heard the declaration “Boston is a red city” almost 40 years ago, sitting in Piper Auditorium as a student at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. The lecturer was a visiting professor named Joan Goody, one of the first women to run a major architectural firm in the Northeast. Even before the colors red and blue had such binary political connotations, I found her statement simplistic, provincial. After all, cities were more complicated than that. The argument felt too prescriptive to me. In an academic setting where we were encouraged to explore radical ideas, Goody’s work felt, well, “commercial,” and I was consoled by other classmates for not having gotten my first choice in the lottery.

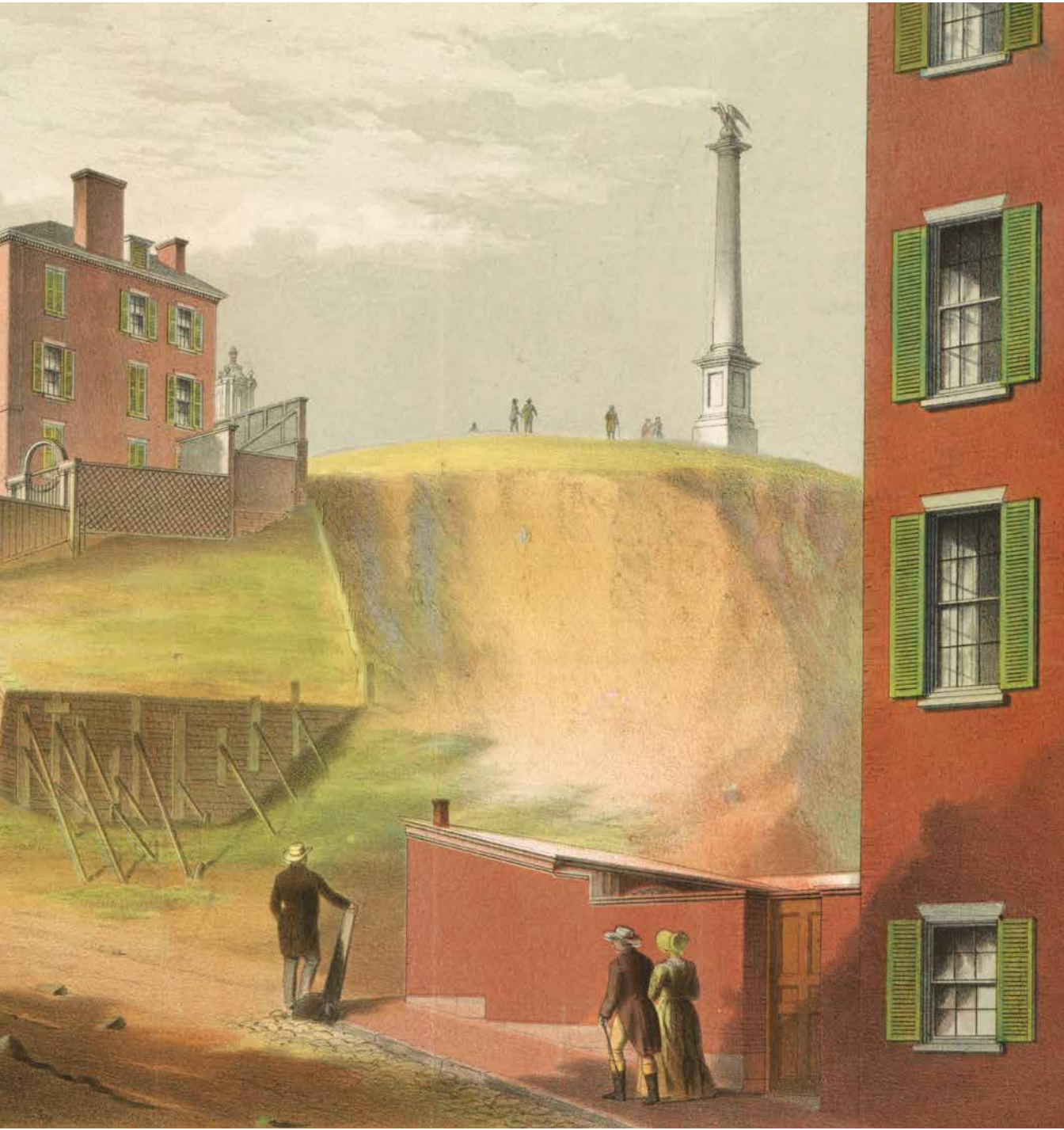
No consolation was needed. It was a great experience.

As I settled into my new city post-graduation, I observed Boston’s most recognizable neighborhoods were indeed made largely of red brick—even the sidewalks. It was beautiful and like almost nowhere else I had seen in America.

LEFT *Beacon Hill, with Mr. Thurston’s house, from Bowdoin St.*, John Rubens Smith, ca. 1810. Between 1807 and 1832, Boston undertook a massive urban engineering feat, cutting Beacon Hill down from an elevation of 138 feet to 80 feet. The land removed was used to fill in the Mill Pond area nearby. This piece documents an intermediate stage of this project. To the right stands the grand mansion of William Thurston (a prominent Boston lawyer), which was famously left stranded in mid-air and ultimately undermined by the heavy digging around its foundation. Smith painted a number of on-site watercolors in the 1810s that were later reproduced as a collection called *Old Boston* by lithographer J.H. Bufford in 1858.

Image courtesy Artvee; caption courtesy Wikipedia and Library of Congress





And weren't many of the cities I had visited (and loved the most) similarly monochromatic? Paris was limestone and patinated copper; Jerusalem was golden hued; the red tile roofs of the Dalmatian coastline and the "old towns" of almost every notable European city were cast or quarried out of local materials that lent themselves to particular details, giving each region a distinctive identity—and color—worth celebrating and preserving.

Boston's local characteristics were not only charming, but common sense suggested to me that this was a more authentic and sustainable way to build than an approach where so much was regularly torn down and replaced with new buildings built of materials that needed to be imported from long distances and had shorter lifes-

pans. While cities need to grow and change in new and exciting ways, I grew skeptical of the need to "make a mark" that ignored the material context or scale of established districts. Our practice, rooted in just these kinds of places, studied the city's built history and followed suit.

Brick first arrived in Boston in the 1700s as ballast in ships from England at a time when there was little else but wood to build with.

Brick first arrived in Boston and other settlements along the East Coast in the 1700s

as ballast in ships from England at a time when there was little else but wood to build with. Masonry's durability, flexibility, transportability, and warm color beneath grey skies were immediately embraced. Soon after, a local industry was born, and bricks were manufactured from the local clay deposits that provided their distinctive red hue. For centuries, red brick became the city's dominant material for everyday construction, but it was also the first choice of architects working on distinctive local landmarks, from Charles Bulfinch's State House to Alvar Aalto's Baker House at MIT. More recent projects by out-of-town architects continue to honor that tradition with inventive solutions.

Today, despite those special projects, downtown Boston and the new Seaport is rapidly becoming a "blue city," overwhelmed by the same steely cobalt reflective glass curtain wall systems that are making every skyline and cityscape look, depressingly, the same. At the neighborhood level, much of Boston's character is being overwhelmed by cheap-looking panelized facades of the kind that have given rise to the term "fast-casual architecture" for its resemblance to drive-throughs and

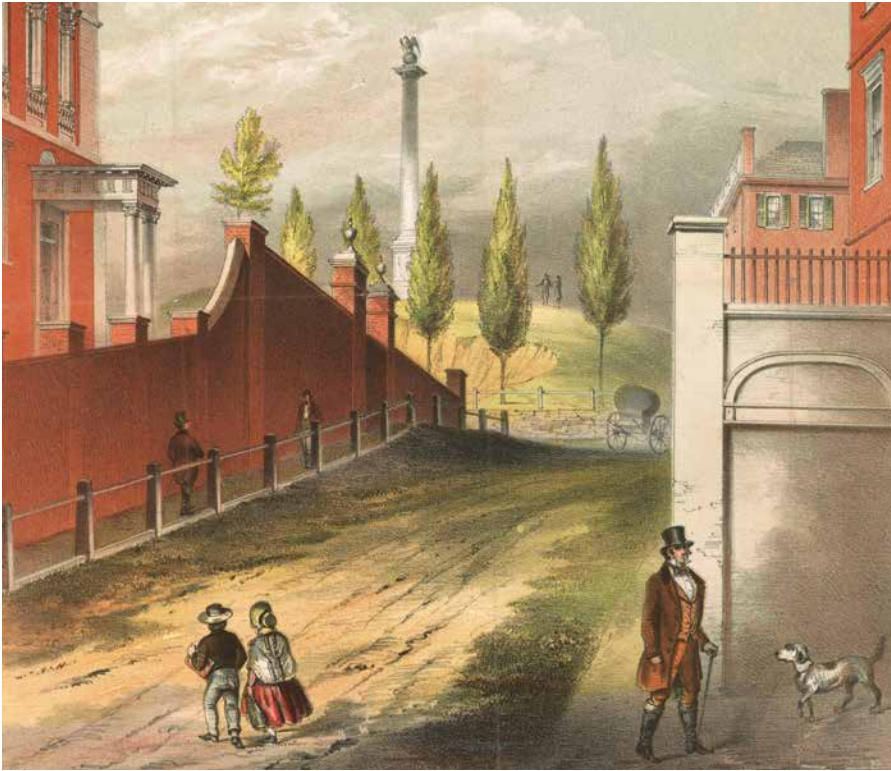




Watercolor by John Rubens Smith, ca. 1810, showing the excavation of Beacon Hill with Charles Bulfinch's State House on the right. Image courtesy Artvee

suburban strip malls. New housing is desperately needed but, in all respects, the price has been steep.

A few years ago, our firm was commissioned to design a new hotel on an open lot at an important gateway intersection leading into Beacon Hill. The project involved the adaptive reuse of an early twentieth century dormitory building that in most cities would have been sacrificed to create a more efficient development site. Adjacent to it, we were to design a new four-story addition. The iconic, heavily regulated neighborhood is the closest thing Boston has to a UNESCO world heritage site, so we thought carefully about what to propose. It was one of the most prominent commissions we had ever been given, and the temptation to create a bold, high-contrast design statement was strong. Instead, we carefully studied the contemporary possibilities of working in brick and other local materials. The new addition, built through the winter, was concealed from view by heavy white tarps of building wrap.



Beacon Hill from Mt. Vernon Street, John Rubens Smith. Image courtesy Artvee

In early spring, I got a call from the general contractor: The tarps were coming down and I should come over right away for the big reveal! Racing over and armed with my iPhone, I stood across the street to take video, when someone in a hard hat rushed across the street to come speak with me.

“What are you taking pictures of?” he asked defensively.

I said I was the architect, here to document the moment. His face brightened, and he thanked me profusely for designing in brick. His company was a locally owned, multigenerational masonry business and, even though the city was booming, there was less for local masons. He was worried for his family and his crews. Our project—with its custom brick shapes and details—showcased their abilities and craftsmanship. More thanks. “Don’t people understand that all this panel s*** will need to be replaced in 20 years? Brick is forever—and it’s Boston.”

I nodded and thanked him as well. I already saw the quality of the brickwork was exceptional. We shook hands vigorously, and he raced back across the street to climb up into the scaffolding. A few weeks later, I went back to take more pictures from the same vantage point. The facades had been cleaned and the sun was out, helping cast sharp shadows on the masonry. This time, another man came up to me, holding his young daughter's hand. "You're the architect, right?" It was my turn to feel defensive. (Here it comes . . .)

Preservation and building locally was an important way of thinking globally.



"My wife and I love it! The brick is so beautiful and different—but it still feels like the Hill. We were so worried when it was tented up in white for so long. After all, you architects like to—" He stopped himself. "Anyway, thank you for fitting in. The neighborhood thanks you, too."

I was genuinely surprised. That had never happened to me before. As they walked away, I thought about the local masons who had built the building. They might even bring their families by to show off their work. And what about that man's daughter? What kind of place would this be when she was my age?

And then I thought back to my professor, who had, in subsequent years, become a colleague and a friend. Architect, civic leader, and ocean sailor, Joan lost a tough battle with cancer in 2009 before the full scope of the threat of rising seas to her "red city" was fully grasped by any of us. But now I see that she had understood quite a bit already. Preservation and building locally was an important way of thinking globally.

A wise woman. Ahead of her time.

DAVID HACIN is the President and Creative Director of Hacin, an interdisciplinary architecture and design firm founded in Boston. He has spent his career collaborating on projects that strengthen ties to communities and their surrounding contexts.

This article was originally published in *Common Edge*.





E. John
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MILES SMITH IV

WHAT MAKES THE SOUTH DIFFERENT

In 2024 *Southern Living*, a popular glossy lifestyle magazine that graces coffee tables across the South (and other parts of the country, as it turns out), ran an article proposing the resurrection of 23 Southern traditions that would make America a better place: “Saying Please and Thank You”, “Cursive”, “Saying Sir and Ma’am”, “hand-written notes”, “Sunday Suppers”, “Holding the Door Open for Others”, “welcoming neighbors”, and so on. What struck me, as a native Southerner living in the Midwest, was how much *Southern Living*’s list did not seem distinctively Southern. It was a list of old-fashioned things, perhaps, but not anything particularly Southern.

The *Southern Living* article, and the fact that the United States 250th birthday falls on a contentious midterm election year, got me thinking about the way in which the South still operates as a sort of socio-political other: it’s a mirror for what mainstream telemedia thinks the country might have been, or should be, or—if race is the topic of the day—was and should not have been.

I grew up in Salisbury, North Carolina. Around forty thousand people live there, 40 miles up I-85 from Charlotte. The town is large enough to have its own identity, and just far enough away from the big city not to be a suburb. It still has southern feeling racial dynamics; the population is split roughly equally between whites and blacks, with a growing Hispanic minority. Salisbury is an old place, as the South

LEFT *Southern Courtship*, Eastman Johnson, 1859.

Image courtesy Artvee



The drafter of the Declaration of Independence, the Great Emancipator and unifier of the nation, the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll, and the man who led the Civil Rights Movement all were southerners.

goes, settled in the 1720s and 1730s. It was incorporated in 1753. It has Revolutionary War history (the Regulator Movement) and Civil War history (Salisbury Prison, the other Andersonville). The latter was one of the reasons the late Tony Horowitz picked it to open his *Confederates in the Attack*. It certainly has foodways that identify as “Southern”: Lexington-style chopped pork BBQ was created 15 miles up the road. And its religion

is more or less evangelical; the largest religious group as of the 2020 census was the United Methodist Church.

And yet for all of the things that make Salisbury “Southern” they are also quintessentially American. Television and mass media more broadly have mitigated regional accents, and the internet has certainly helped homogenize American society. But even without technologies of the twenty-first century, there has always been something essentially American about the South. The drafter of the Declaration of Independence, the Great Emancipator and unifier of the nation, the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll, and the man who led the Civil Rights Movement all were southerners. In 250 years, from “Give Me Liberty to Give Me Death” to Ella Langle, the South’s loves and hatred, its sins and successes, have been America’s loves and hatred, and America’s sins and successes.

New York City-born and North Carolina-reared essayist and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill professor John Shelton Reed once asked of the South: “What is this place? What’s different about it?” Reed’s first question is an unsurprising one; the South is certainly a place, and natives and non-natives know it. But answering the question as to what makes it different is, 250 years after southerners helped make America independent, still hard to answer. That difficulty is, perhaps, the best evidence for an affirmative answer of Reed’s last question: Is it different *anymore*?

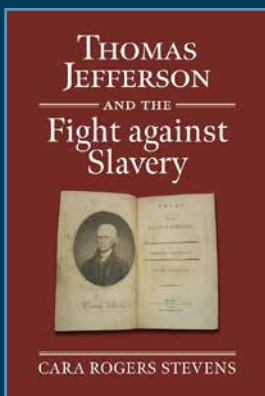
MILES SMITH IV is an assistant professor
of history at Hillsdale College.



MEET THE INAUGURAL WINNER OF THE JACK MILLER CENTER'S REVOLUTIONARY LEGACIES FIRST BOOK PRIZE

CARA ROGERS STEVENS

This year, the Jack Miller Center invited nominations for the Revolutionary Legacies First Book Prize, which honors the most distinguished first book by a new author that significantly enhances our understanding of the American Revolution, the Founding Era, and their enduring legacies.



The inaugural winner is Cara Rogers Stevens, for her excellent *Thomas Jefferson and the Fight against Slavery* (Kansas University, 2024). The title has been widely recognized for its thoughtful examination of what Jefferson did—and did not do—to end slavery and bring equality to America.

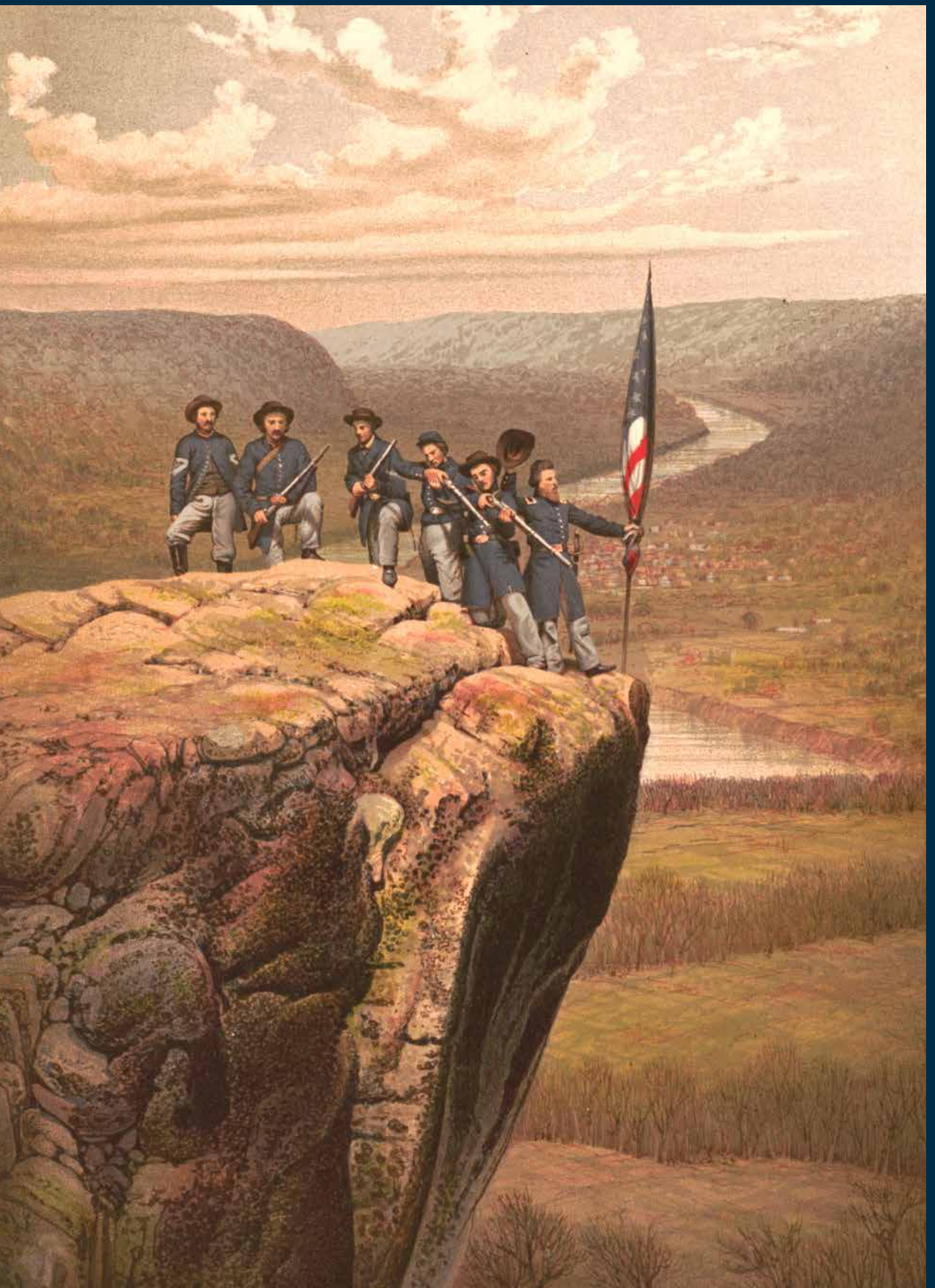
Cara Rogers Stevens is an Associate Professor of History at Ashland University.

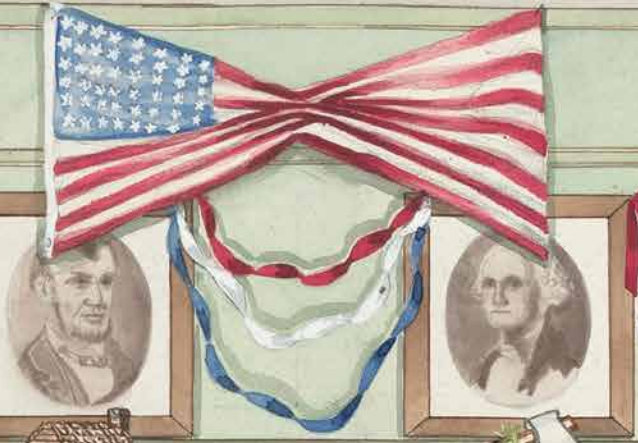
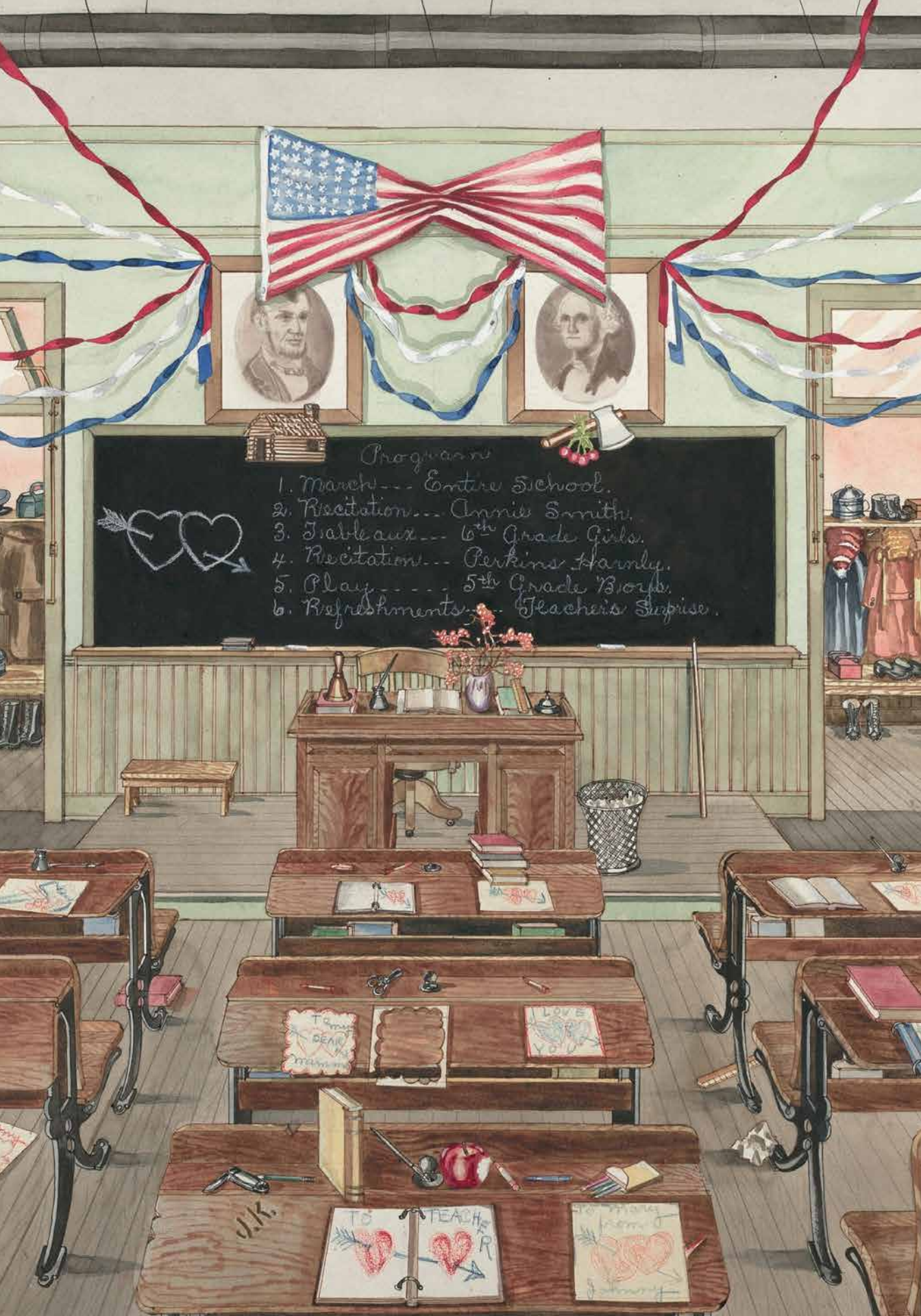
Her research focuses on race and slavery in the Jeffersonian Age, and has been published by the *Journal of Southern History and American Political Thought*. She has also written for the *Journal of the Early Republic*, *Law & Liberty*, and *Civics Magazine*.

LOOKING FORWARD

RIGHT *Union Soldiers at Point Lookout, Tennessee*, James Fuller Queen, ca. 1863–1880. This piece captures a pivotal psychological turning point and a moment of profound triumph for Union forces during the American Civil War—the Chattanooga Campaign and the Union’s hard-fought victory at the Battle of Lookout Mountain (November 24–25, 1863).

Image courtesy Artvee; caption courtesy Library of Congress





Program

1. March --- Entire School.
2. Recitation --- Annie Smith.
3. Tableaux --- 6th Grade Girls.
4. Recitation --- Perkins Harnly.
5. Play --- 5th Grade Boys.
6. Refreshments --- Teacher's Surprise.





COLLEEN SHOGAN

THE NEXT AMERICAN CIVIC MOVEMENT

DEMOCRACY IS NOT SELF-EXECUTING. This is a lesson I have come to appreciate after spending much of my career studying and serving American governing institutions.

Our separated powers and federal system of government have preserved liberty for almost 250 years. But even the best-structured constitutional design cannot govern on its own. Institutions aren't autonomous; they don't make decisions. People, not parchment, determine if self-government succeeds. Our Constitution provides the rules, but citizens and elected leaders must supply the judgment and restraint to allow these rules to operate effectively.

Every generation must choose how to exercise power, deal with disagreement, and promote the common good. In the end, the success of a large democratic republic like the United States depends on citizens capable of governing themselves.

That is why the future of civics is among the most important questions facing our country to ensure its continued vitality and longevity. Even though we are

LEFT *Rural School Room, 1900*, Perkins Harnly, ca. 1935.

Image courtesy National Gallery of Art

routinely inundated by controversies that threaten democracy, our current civics crisis is not likely to appear “above the fold” as a major newspaper headline. Nevertheless, a recent NBC News poll sponsored by More Perfect found that 80 percent of Americans believe the United States places too little emphasis on teaching about civics and democracy in schools. That is precisely why a community of nonprofit, academic, and community leaders must collectively solve this problem.

For too long, we’ve thought about civics narrowly. It’s treated as another academic subject in a long list of curriculum requirements. A few lessons on the Constitution and a memorized list of names, places, and dates have been accepted as sufficient. It is not.

The purpose of civics is not only to explain how government works. We must also prepare citizens for the responsibilities of living in a democratic republic. In a world increasingly infiltrated by extremist ideology and false information, we need Americans to develop skills such as the ability to evaluate sources, engage in active listening, and collaborate.

Make no mistake: knowledge of our constitutional system matters. And so do habits that can’t be instilled by a textbook, such as integrity, responsibility, courage, resilience, curiosity, self-restraint, and toleration. These qualities were important centuries ago when the founders drafted the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Right now, they are more important than ever. Virtues such as these govern *how* citizens use their knowledge and skills, especially when laws and institutions cannot compel laudable behavior.

For too long, we’ve thought about civics narrowly. It’s treated as another academic subject in a long list of curriculum requirements.

2026 provides us with a moment to rethink civics education. We have marked our nation’s 250th anniversary and now we must turn our attention to the immediate future. Our approach to civics should not simply demand more knowledge or political engagement. Instead, we need to focus on cultivating citizens who can sustain a free society. That requires character. It requires historical context. And it requires practical skills—listening well, deliberating honestly,



solving problems collaboratively. Together, these prepare young people for the lifelong responsibility of self-government.

Teachers will play an indispensable and outsized role in this movement, but we cannot place the entire burden of this renaissance on their shoulders. Families must do their part. Libraries and museums preserve our shared memory and play a critical role. Volunteer associations and religious communities likewise reinforce the virtues necessary for a strong democratic society. Philanthropy also must step up to the plate and provide resources for worthy programs and initiatives.

We have allowed polarization to dominate and consume previously non-political aspects of American life, including civics.

This movement should not adopt a particular political ideology or policy outcome. For too long, we have allowed polarization to dominate and consume previously non-political aspects of American life, including civics. One side focuses on civic action, while the other emphasizes civic knowledge. Should schools focus on patriotism or a critique of past decisions? Protest or *The Federalist*? These are false choices.

Instead, the movement we need to build asks students to learn about our extraordinary achievements while also forming reasoned opinions of our shortcomings. It requires informed judgment before demanding action. We don't need a better politics from civics; it's much more basic than that. We need self-governing citizens. This is a problem that both liberals and conservatives should be able to work on together. If we do this correctly, a more respectful political environment will emerge.

In addition to focusing on knowledge, virtue, and skills as a tripartite strategy for the future of civics, it matters how we deliver these resources. The next civic movement should be the most innovative in American history. Emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence and immersive simulations, give us that opportunity.

Imagine students engaged in conversations with our founders and other important historical figures, debating decisions, questioning choices, and testing arguments. I





Window Alcove, Perkins Harnly, ca. 1935–1942. Image courtesy Artvee

read about the 1787 Constitutional Convention as a high school student, but what if I could have participated in a simulated version of it? Technology, like artificial intelligence, won't replace teachers, librarians, community leaders, or other knowledge navigators. But it will make studying civics more personalized and engaging than ever before.

Technology, like artificial intelligence, won't replace teachers, librarians, community leaders, or other knowledge navigators. But it will make studying civics more personalized and engaging than ever before.

While vital to the health of a democracy, civics isn't confined to preparation for voting. It is preparation for life in a free society. The principles contained in the Declaration, including universal equality and the existence of certain unalienable rights, can only be secured by engaged citizens. That is why the Constitution begins with the phrase *We the People*.

With 250 years behind us, we have proven that self-government is possible. The next 250 years will depend on whether we prepare citizens capable of sustaining and strengthening it.

DR. COLLEEN J. SHOGAN is a Senior Fellow in Civics Education at Stand Together and a Senior Advisor at More Perfect. She served as the 11th Archivist of the United States.





A FREE SOCIETY DOESN'T HAPPEN BY ACCIDENT.

It depends on people who know who they are, understand the stories and ideas that shaped their country, and are ready to put both to work to build meaningful lives, stronger communities, and a better future for all.

That's the promise of civics reimagined. The best civics education does more than teach students about their country. It helps them discover and chart their place in building it.

It treats character, knowledge, and practical skills as interconnected pieces. Future generations learn the promise of the American Experiment alongside the

LEFT Student Fellows studying on the steps of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial.

Image courtesy Bill of Rights Institute



habits that can sustain and refine it: curiosity, responsibility, courage, and the willingness to step up and work together.

The good news? This isn't just an idea. Across the country, educators, creatives, entrepreneurs, and nonprofit leaders are already building new ways for students to understand and practice citizenship.

Meet a few of the innovators who are doing just that.

AMERICAN EXCHANGE PROJECT

Imagine if every high school senior spent a week in a part of the country they'd never otherwise see, and another week hosting students from across America in their own hometowns. That's the idea behind American Exchange Project.

Students from Boston visit ranch country in Wyoming. Teenagers from Mississippi spend time with families in Seattle. They stay with host families, take part in local life, and build friendships with people whose lives and perspectives may be very different from their own.

Along the way, they experience adventure with a purpose, build meaningful connections, develop a renewed sense of hometown pride, and gain a deeper appreciation for

the people and communities that make up our country. By replacing assumptions with relationships, American Exchange Project is helping to forge a more connected America. That's civics with dirt on its boots.

BILL OF RIGHTS INSTITUTE

The Bill of Rights Institute (BRI) prepares teachers and students to engage thoughtfully with American history, civics, and the practice of self-government. For more than two decades, BRI has developed trusted classroom resources, professional learning, student programs, and innovative experiences that make complex civic ideas engaging, relevant, and practical. Its partnership with Wonder Project on the summer blockbuster "Young Washington" is one example of that work, pairing a feature film with classroom-ready resources that invite students to explore how George Washington's early failures shaped his judgment, resilience, and sense of responsibility. Across its work, BRI helps young people develop the knowledge, judgment, and civic virtues needed to participate thoughtfully in civic life.

CIVICS UNPLUGGED

Many students hear a lot about the world they're inheriting. Civics Unplugged challenges them to

start shaping it now. Through fellowships, mentorship, and hands-on projects, students learn how to collaborate, solve problems, and build solutions to real problems facing their communities. They're equipping the next generation of civic innovators—including many from the rural communities that are too often left out—to turn founding principles into actionable solutions in their own backyards.

LIBERTAS

A folding table isn't the first place you'd expect to find a civics lesson. But you'll find that and more at Libertas Network's Kids Markets program. You'll see children ages 5–17 selling candles, cookies, jewelry, birdhouses, and a hundred other ideas that they dreamed up themselves. Kids build businesses, pitch customers, handle setbacks, and discover that strong communities are built by people who create value for others. The lesson lasts long after the market closes: Our communities thrive when people believe they can build something that matters.

REEL GENIUS

Imagine a platform that makes civics come alive—using evidence-based learning techniques, AI, and unforgettable clips from some of



the most iconic movies ever made. That's Reel Genius, an innovative edtech startup that's harnessing the power of cinematic storytelling to revolutionize civic education. Led by entertainment industry leader and serial entrepreneur Veronica Grazer. The platform uses films, stories, and visuals to spark kids' imaginations and connect them to America's founding principles. The free resources that Reel Genius is building for educators harness cutting-edge pedagogy, AI chat functions, and iconic Hollywood film clips. Think of it as a Netflix for civics education.



Stand Together is an American philanthropic community and 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Arlington, Virginia, that helps America's boldest changemakers tackle the root causes of our country's biggest problems. StandTogether.org



BRINGING THE CONVERSATION TO CAMPUS

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN AMERICAN?

Across the country, a new generation is being asked to wrestle with the question. This school year, the Jack Miller Center is supporting 62 campus programs, giving students the chance to explore the American identity through reading groups, symposiums, fellowships, and lectures focused on the Declaration of Independence.

This work sits at the heart of our mission—to teach America's founding principles and history—bringing these ideas to life on campus through direct engagement with leading scholars.

ABOVE *Class Day, at Harvard University*, Winslow Homer, 1858.

Image courtesy Artvee

CONSTITUTION DAY PROGRAMS

Our Constitution Day programs celebrate the anniversary of the document's signing with engaging programs aimed at improving constitutional literacy for students, campus faculty and staff, and the greater public.

ASSUMPTION UNIVERSITY

Topic: ["The Making of the American Mind: The Story of our Declaration of Independence"](#)

Speaker: Matthew Spalding (Hillsdale College)

AZUSA PACIFIC UNIVERSITY

Topic: ["Faith and Freedom: A Constitution Day Celebration of America's Semiquincentennial"](#)

Speakers: Susan McWilliams Barndt (Pomona College) and David Weeks (Azusa Pacific University)

BELMONT ABBEY COLLEGE

Topic: "The Declaration of Independence and the Rule of Law"

Speaker: Michael Zuckert (University of Notre Dame)

CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

Topic: ["Freedom of Thought and the Struggle to End Slavery"](#)

Speaker: Keith Whittington (Yale University)

CHRISTOPHER NEWPORT UNIVERSITY

Topic: ["Constitution Day Debate: Is the Constitution Color Blind?"](#)

Speakers: Joshua Dunn (University of Tennessee, Knoxville) and Derek W. Black (University of South Carolina)

CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE

Topic: ["'Unalienable' Rights at the American Founding"](#)

Speaker: Jud Campbell (Stanford University Law School)

COVENANT COLLEGE

Topic: ["Reformation Legacies in the Constitution"](#)

Speakers: Nicholas Barden (Georgetown University) and Matthew Young (Elon University)

EAST TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

Topic: "Rhetoric without Flattery: Frederick Douglass' Democratic Statesmanship"

Speaker: Sebastian Graham (Purdue University)

ELON UNIVERSITY

Topic: ["The Declaration of Independence and the American Political Imagination"](#)

Speaker: Sarah Gustafson (Catholic University of America)





EMORY UNIVERSITY

Topic: [“Native Nations and Assimilation in Jefferson’s Lost Constitution of 1804”](#)

Speaker: Jeremy Bailey
(University of Florida)

GREAT HEARTS AMERICA

Events and Topics:

Anthem Preparatory Academy:
“The Declaration of Independence:
The Soul of America’s Constitutional
Republic” with Evan M. Lowe
(Arizona State University);

Glendale Preparatory Academy:
“The Political Faith of Salmon P.
Chase” with Tyler Thomas (Arizona
State University);

Scottsdale Preparatory Academy:
Civics Day with Sean Beienburg
(Arizona State University);

Veritas Preparatory Academy:
“From Idea into Law’: The
Declaration of Independence and the
Articles of Confederation” with Aaron
Kushner (Arizona State University)

HUDSON INSTITUTE

Event: Constitution Day Reception

Speaker: Diana Schaub (Loyola
University Maryland)

JACKSONVILLE STATE UNIVERSITY

Topic: [“How Best to Cultivate
the Constitution in 2026? –
Civic Centers or Not?”](#)

Speakers: Catherine Borck
(University of Texas) and Anthony
Ives (Denison University)

LEE UNIVERSITY

Event: [2026 Constitution Day
Quiz Bowl](#) and Lecture for
High School Students

LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

Topic: [“Native Nations, the
Louisiana Purchase, and Jefferson’s
Lost Constitution of 1804”](#)

Speaker: Jeremy Bailey
(University of Florida)

MIAMI DADE COLLEGE

Topic: [“Who Defines Our
Constitutional Freedoms?”](#)

Speaker: Caroline Mala Corbin
(University of Miami School of Law)

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Topic: [“Thomas Jefferson and the
Declaration for Posterity”](#)

Speaker: Jeremy Bailey
(University of Florida)

OGLETHORPE UNIVERSITY

Topic: “The Jewish Roots of
American Liberty”

Speaker: Wilfred M. McClay
(Hillsdale College)

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Topic: ["The Future of the Religion Clauses at the Supreme Court"](#)

Speaker: Stephanie Barclay
(Georgetown Law School)

PURDUE UNIVERSITY

Topic: ["America's Institutions 250 Years After the Declaration"](#)

Speaker: Richard Pildes (New York University School of Law)

SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

Topic: ["The \(Un\)Written Constitution"](#)

Speaker: George Thomas
(Claremont McKenna College)

SUNY GENESEO

Topic: The Constitution's relation to liberal and civic education

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

Topic: ["The Declaration as Foundation for the Constitution"](#)

Speaker: Steven Skultety
(University of Mississippi)

UNIVERSITY OF MAINE

Topic: ["Stop Calling America An Experiment"](#)

Speaker: Gregory Collins
(Yale University)

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Speaker: Benjamin Kleinerman
(Baylor University)

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

Topic: ["The Constitution: Great Books and Self Government"](#)

Speaker: Shilo Brooks (George W. Bush Presidential Center)

UNIVERSITY OF PIKEVILLE

Topic and speakers pending

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

Topic: "What does the U.S. Constitution ask of citizens in a pluralistic society?"

Speakers: Danielle Allen (Harvard University) and Lee Strang (The Ohio State University)

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Topic: ["I Too, Sing America: The Black Affirmation of American Independence"](#)

Speaker: Lucas Morel (Washington and Lee University)

UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO

Topic: ["The Constitution and the Crisis Presidency"](#)

Speaker: Benjamin Kleinerman
(Baylor University)



UNIVERSITY OF WEST FLORIDA

Topic: [“Is There No Virtue Among Us?: Interest, Ambition, and the Common Good in the Framers’ Constitutional Design”](#) & [“Federalists or Anti-Federalists: The Verdict After 250 Years”](#)

Speakers: Paul DeHart (Texas State University) & James Hankins (University of Florida)

UNIVERSITY OF WEST GEORGIA

Topic: [“The Peaceful Transition of Power: George Washington and the Unwritten Constitution”](#)

Speaker: Craig Bruce Smith (National Defense University)

URSINUS COLLEGE

Topic: [“Sure, It’s a Republic, Not a Democracy—But What Does That Mean?”](#)

Speaker: David Lay Williams (DePaul University)

VILLANOVA UNIVERSITY

Topic: The Declaration of Independence as a founding document

XAVIER UNIVERSITY

Event: [“The Western End of the American Revolution”](#)

Speaker: Alan Taylor (University of Virginia)

YORK COLLEGE CUNY

Topic: [“America’s Conflicting Constitutional Visions: The Quest for Common Ground”](#)

Speaker: Rogers Smith (University of Pennsylvania)

PARTNER PROGRAMS

Our partner programs are tailored, ongoing collaborations that meet the specific needs of individual scholars and campuses to build community and sustain deep discussion of America’s founding throughout the academic year.

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

[Center for American Civics](#)

BELMONT ABBEY COLLEGE

[The Honors College](#)

BENEDICTINE COLLEGE

[Center for Constitutional Liberty](#)

BOSTON COLLEGE

[John Marshall Project](#)

BOWDOIN COLLEGE

“For the Common Good: Bowdoin’s America 250 Declaration Dialogues”

CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

[Carroll Forum on Citizenship and Public Life](#)





CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE

[Open Academy](#)

EASTERN CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

[Center for Connecticut Studies](#)

INDIANA WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

[Division of Social Sciences](#)

INSTITUTE OF WORLD POLITICS

[Civic Thought and
Statecraft Fellowship](#)

JACKSONVILLE STATE UNIVERSITY

[Center for Leadership and
American Principles](#)

LEE UNIVERSITY

[Center for Responsible Citizenship](#)

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

[LeFrak Forum](#)

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

[Salmon P. Chase Center for
Civics, Culture, and Society](#)

PURDUE UNIVERSITY

[Program on American Institutional
Renewal \(PAIR\) and Cornerstone
Institute for Civic Thought](#)

SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

[American Revolution and
Constitution History Project](#)

SETON HILL UNIVERSITY

[Declaration of Independence
Fellowship](#)

SUNY GENESEO

[Forum on Constitutionalism
and Democracy](#)

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA, ANCHORAGE

[Union League of Anchorage](#)

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

[American Founding Group](#)

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

[Lyceum Initiative in the
Honors College](#)

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

[Penn Initiative for the
Study of Markets](#)

UNIVERSITY OF PIKEVILLE

[Appalachian Civic Fellowship](#)

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

[Center for American Civic
Leadership and Public Discourse](#)

UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO

[Institute of American Constitutional
Thought and Leadership](#)

U.S. MILITARY ACADEMY AT WEST POINT

[American Foundations](#)

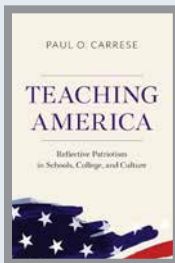
XAVIER UNIVERSITY

[“American Faiths in 1776”](#)



GOOD READS

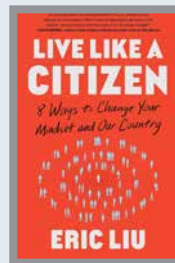
WRITTEN BY OUR CONTRIBUTORS



TEACHING AMERICA

REFLECTIVE PATRIOTISM
IN SCHOOLS, COLLEGE,
AND CULTURE

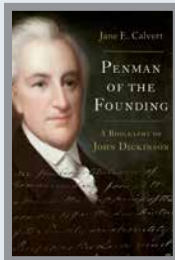
Paul O. Carrese



LIVE LIKE A CITIZEN

8 WAYS TO CHANGE
YOUR MINDSET AND
OUR COUNTRY

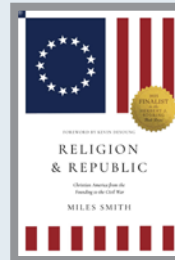
Eric Liu



PENMAN OF THE FOUNDING

A BIOGRAPHY OF
JOHN DICKINSON

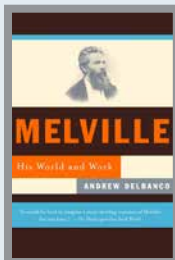
Jane E. Calvert



RELIGION AND REPUBLIC

CHRISTIAN AMERICA
FROM THE FOUNDING TO
THE CIVIL WAR

Miles Smith



MELVILLE

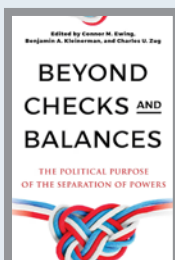
HIS WORLD AND WORK

Andrew Delbanco



THE AMERICAN ROAD TRIP AND AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

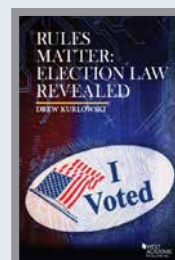
Susan McWilliams Barndt



BEYOND CHECKS AND BALANCES

THE POLITICAL PURPOSE
OF THE SEPARATION OF
POWERS

Connor Ewing, Editor



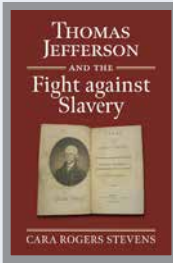
RULES MATTER

ELECTION LAW
REVEALED
HIGHER EDUCATION
COURSEBOOK

Drew Kurlowski

GOOD READS CONTINUED

RECOMMENDED BY OUR CONTRIBUTORS



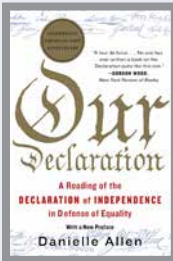
THOMAS JEFFERSON AND THE FIGHT AGAINST SLAVERY

Cara Rogers Stevens



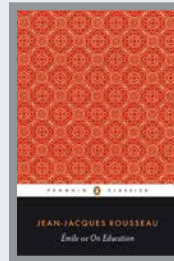
RADICAL CHIC AND MAU-MAUING THE FLAK CATCHERS

Tom Wolfe



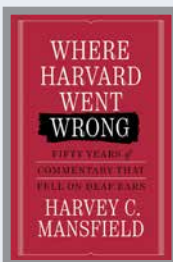
OUR DECLARATION A READING OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE IN DEFENSE OF EQUALITY

Danielle Allen



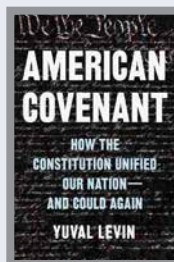
ÉMILE, OR ON EDUCATION

Jean-Jacques Rousseau



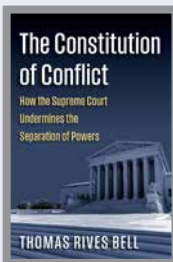
WHERE HARVARD WENT WRONG FIFTY YEARS OF COMMENTARY THAT FELL ON DEAF EARS

Harvey C. Mansfield



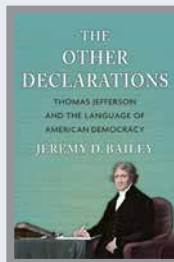
AMERICAN COVENANT HOW THE CONSTITUTION UNIFIED OUR NATION—AND COULD AGAIN

Yuval Levin



THE CONSTITUTION OF CONFLICT HOW THE SUPREME COURT UNDERMINES THE SEPARATION OF POWERS

Thomas Bell



THE OTHER DECLARATIONS THOMAS JEFFERSON AND THE LANGUAGE OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Jeremy D. Bailey



THAT JOKE ISN'T FUNNY ANYMORE

ON THE DEATH AND
REBIRTH OF COMEDY

Lou Perez



LAST SUMMER BOYS

A NOVEL

Bill Rivers

GOOD WATCHES



THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

A STORY 250 YEARS
IN THE MAKING

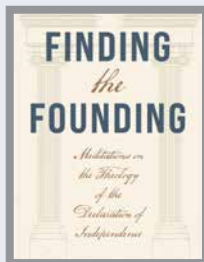
Ken Burns,
Sarah Botstein,
and David Schmidt



YOUNG WASHINGTON

Jon Erwin

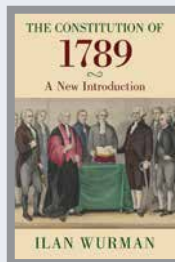
JMC STAFF PICKS



FINDING THE FOUNDING

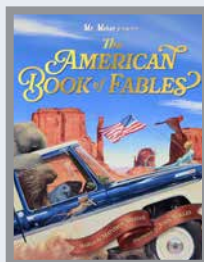
MEDITATIONS ON THE
THEOLOGY OF THE
DECLARATION OF
INDEPENDENCE

Casey Spinks



THE CONSTITUTION OF 1789

Ilan Wurman



THE AMERICAN BOOK OF FABLES

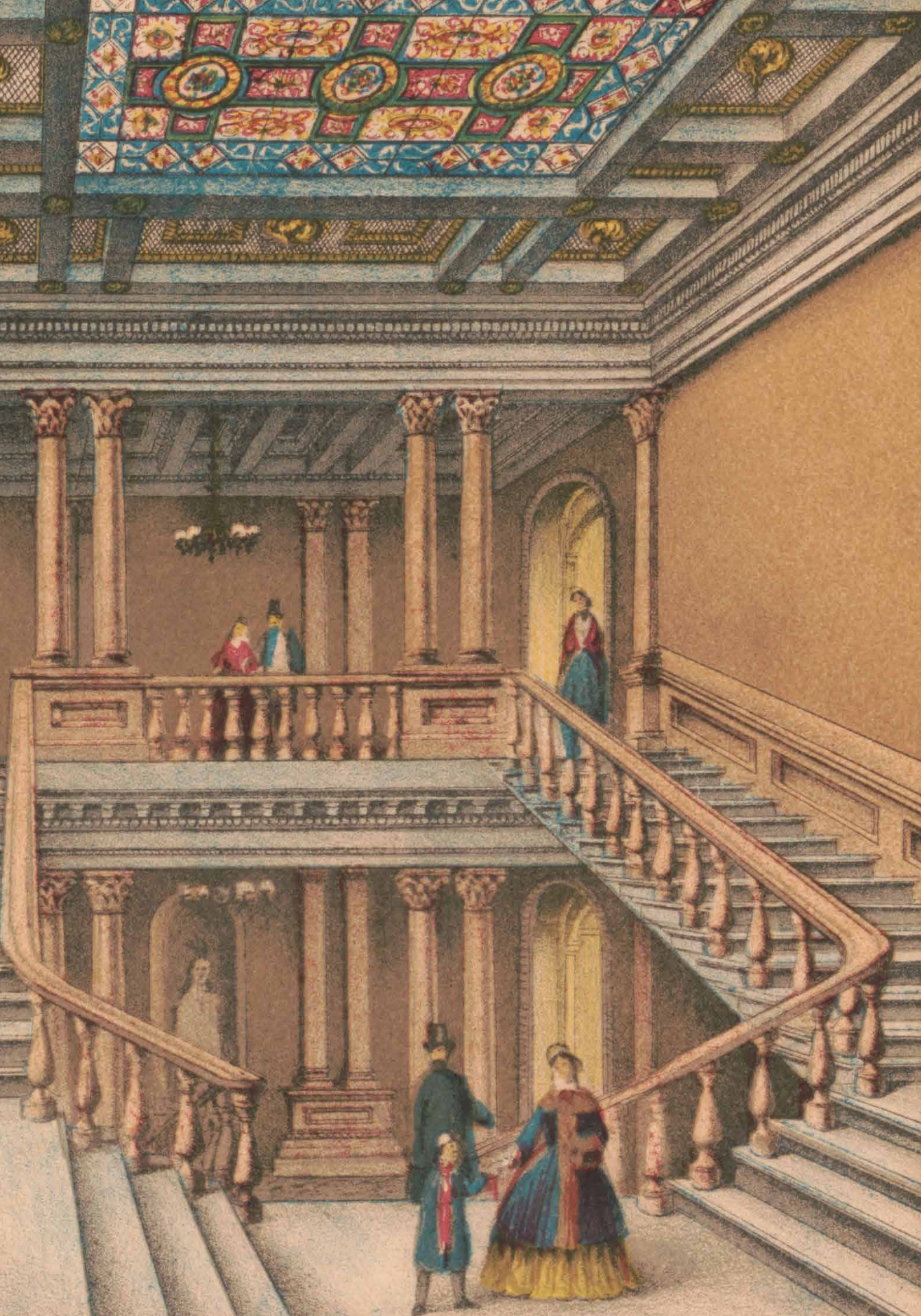
Matthew Mehan,
illustrated by
John Folley



THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND

A ROAD TRIP THROUGH
U.S. HISTORY

Beverly Gage



ABOUT THE JACK MILLER CENTER

The Jack Miller Center is a Philadelphia-based educational nonprofit committed to advancing civic education grounded in America's founding principles and history. We believe such an education affirms the dignity of all people as the basis for human equality, liberty, and self-government and is the linchpin for citizenship and civic life in America.

To achieve this, our nation's educators must be well versed in the core texts, ideas, and history we hold in common as Americans. By building a vast network of dedicated scholars, we can transform civics at all levels. And by drawing on the best traditions of liberal education, we can equip educators and students with the basis to navigate the many challenges facing modern education.

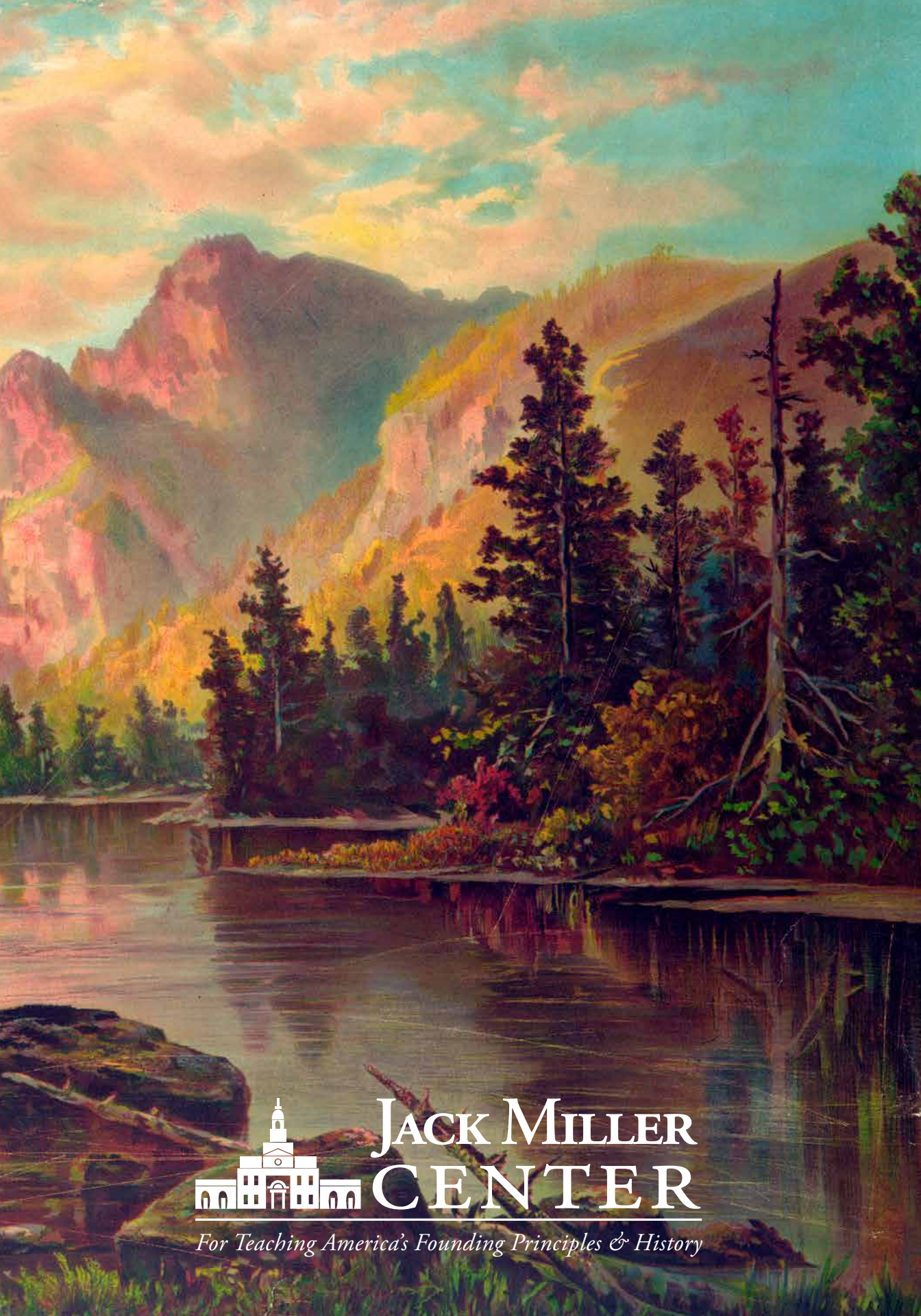
Our project began in 2004 when Chicago philanthropist Jack Miller convened 50 leading professors and higher education experts to discuss the dire state of civics in America's universities and what could be done about it. Since then, we have grown into a nationwide coalition of scholars, K-12 teachers, philanthropists, and civic leaders who are passionate about advancing civic education in America.

Our work centers on four priorities:

- **University Faculty Pipeline:** Grow and empower a national network of scholars and academic leaders dedicated to education in America's founding principles and history.
- **K-12 Teacher Education:** Create nationwide access to innovative content-based training and graduate education for K-12 civics and history teachers, led by experienced scholars.
- **Community College Educators:** Build advanced professional development programs for community college faculty, focused on course design and the use of primary sources.
- **A Nationwide Movement for Civic Literacy:** Engage leaders, educators, and funders in growing the movement through the National Summit on Civic Education, partnerships with civics organizations, the Civics Magazine, the JMC National Civics Council, and more.



Learn more at jackmillercenter.org



JACK MILLER CENTER

For Teaching America's Founding Principles & History