

## American Nationalisms

America was born in an age of political revolution throughout the Atlantic world, a period when the very definition of “nation” was transforming. Benjamin E. Park traces how Americans imagined novel forms of nationality during the country’s first five decades within the context of European discussions taking place at the same time. Focusing on three case studies – Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina – Park examines the developing practices of nationalism in three specific contexts. He argues for a more elastic connection between nationalism and the nation-state by demonstrating that ideas concerning political and cultural allegiance to a federal body developed in different ways and at different rates throughout the nation. *American Nationalisms* explores how ideas of nationality permeated political disputes, religious revivals, patriotic festivals, slavery debates, and even literature.

Benjamin E. Park currently serves as an assistant professor of history at Sam Houston State University. He received graduate degrees in religion, politics, and history from the Universities of Edinburgh and Cambridge. He has received fellowships from the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston University’s American Political History Institute, and the University of Missouri’s Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy. His publications have appeared in *Journal of the Early Republic*, *Early American Studies*, *Journal of American Studies*, and *American Nineteenth Century History*.

# American Nationalisms

*Imagining Union in the Age of Revolutions,*  
1783–1833

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*For Michael O'Brien, a master of the historian's craft*

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## Prologue

A group of ministers, lawyers, and amateur historians gathered in Boston in 1791 to form the Massachusetts Historical Society. Though political independence had only been declared fifteen years prior and the Treaty of Paris was only eight years old, some citizens of the United States were anxious to solidify the country's identity. One way to accomplish that was through the promulgation of its history. As the city of Boston, and the state of Massachusetts, had played significant roles in the nation's quest for independence, it made sense to form an organization that would track its patriotic tradition. But the state's historical society aimed to be much more than just a repository for local stories and documents. In a circular letter sent to dozens of potential "corresponding members" throughout the nation, the society was envisioned "to collect, preserve, and communicate, materials for a complete history of *this country*" and to account for "all valuable efforts of human ingenuity and industry, from the beginning of its settlement." The circular then requested documents, artifacts, histories, and general support for an institution designed to be a symbol for the nation's collaborative character.<sup>1</sup>

Responses were received from people scattered throughout the, by then, fourteen states in the nation. Letters came in from New York, Pennsylvania, and as far south as Georgia. Every letter was transcribed into the society's letterbook, an artifact meant to physically embody national unity. In a way, the society was a federal project that represented

<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Belknap, "Circular Letter, of the Historical Society," included in the bound volume of the Massachusetts Historical Society Letterbook, 1791–1798, MHS. (Emphasis in original.)

the federal spirit of its age: it was formed only a few years following the ratification of the Constitution. The general sentiment, especially in New England, was moving toward a more centralized location of authority, an increased sense of interdependence between the states, and a prioritization of the national over the local. It made sense, then, that a “state” historical society would reach far outside of its geographic boundaries when establishing its purpose and value.

One of the corresponding members was South Carolinian Henry William de Saussure, the Federalist politician, judge, and the second director of the United States Mint. De Saussure was honored. He immediately offered to donate a number of items including some of “the first gold coins [that] were struck under the authority of the United States.” But he was even more excited about writing an important history that could then be given to the fledging organization: “I have endeavoured to procure [a history] for the Historical Society,” he wrote, “respecting the Culture of Cotton & the declension of Indigo.” South Carolina had recently undergone a transition in labor that catapulted the production of cotton to the center of the state’s economy, and de Saussure believed it held similar potential for the rest of the United States. “The feed,” he wrote, “which is now thrown into heaps, to rot as manure, might be transported in bulk to New England.” De Saussure felt that “the enterprising spirit of New England will doubtless one say avail itself of this article, to open a new road to Commerce.” Most importantly, this connection through the production of cotton would “add a new link to the chain which binds the Union together.”<sup>2</sup>

In retrospect, the symbol of cotton as a link to hold the Union together seems tragically ironic. On the one hand, cotton production did indeed serve as a financial boon to not only American commerce but also an international economy that connected Charleston to London and to Boston. But cotton also, in the end, symbolized the cultural disconnect between Southern states and the rest of America due to its reliance on slave labor. As the nineteenth century progressed, Northerners increasingly viewed cotton as synonymous with slavery, a practice with which they grew increasingly uncomfortable as the decades passed. In 1830, when the

<sup>2</sup> Henry William de Saussure to the Massachusetts Historical Society, January 31, 1799, MHS. For the evolution of cotton production within South Carolina during the period, see Rachel N. Klein, *Unification of a Slave State: The Rise of the Planter Class in the South Carolina Backcountry, 1760–1808* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).



nation faced the crisis of South Carolina threatening to nullify federal laws, Philadelphia printer Mathew Carey identified the “culture of cotton” as the wedge between Southern and Northern states that led directly to the national crisis. In the end, the culture of cotton did not lead to the Union’s “binding,” but rather to its deterioration.<sup>3</sup>

De Saussure’s projection of cotton production, a staple to his state’s culture, as the uniting factor of the broader American nation captures the tension located within the local cultivation of nationalism. Prior to the American Revolution, the primary tether for the thirteen colonies was an allegiance to the British crown. Once that was severed, and once they had vanquished their common tyrannical foe, they were left to construct a new sense of self that justified a shared political allegiance. Yet competing cultural traditions and a fractured print culture posed numerous problems for the production of nationalism in the young republic. This book charts how various individuals reacted to, appropriated from, and cultivated anew ideas of a national culture that transcended local borders and encompassed the entire country. Further, it demonstrates how these actions were rooted in a deeper anxiety found throughout the Atlantic world. By tracking the very impulse to define and deploy diverging visions of national union, one can see many of the catalysts that eventually led to the nation’s disunion.

<sup>3</sup> Mathew Carey, *New Olive Branch: A Solemn Warning on the Banks of the Rubicon*, August 23, 1830, LCP. For cotton production as the center of an international economic market, perpetuation of slave labor, and instigator for national division, see Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2014).

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Portions of this book were presented in different venues, including seminars, lectures, and workshops with the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston University's American Political History Institute, the British Association for American Nineteenth Century History, and Auburn University as well as conferences for the Society for United States Intellectual History, the McNeil Center for Early American Studies, the British Association for American Studies, and the American Historical Association. At these and other events, I benefited from the advice and critiques offered by a number of wonderful friends and scholars, including Edward Blum, Mark Boonshoft, Charles Capper, Tom Cutterham, Simon Finger, Caitlin Fitz, Joanne Freeman, Cassandra Good, Sarah Barringer Gordon, Sam Haselby, Amanda Hendrix-Komoto, Woody Holton, Christopher Jones, Adam Jortner, Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Brenden McConville, Richard Newman, Mark Peterson, Jon Roberts, Sophia Rosenfeld, Bruce Schulman, Matthew Spooner, Jordan Watkins, and Conrad E. Wright. And indicative of today's digital age, I'd like to thank my fellow bloggers at *The Junto: A Group Blog on Early American History* for cultivating new understandings of what can often be staid issues.

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Conklin, Daniel Dominguez, Jay Dow, Brandon Flint, Hunter Hampton, Armin Mattes, Jonathan Root, Jonathan Sperber, Richard Tucker, John Wigger, and Cassandra Yacovazzi. The institute is bound for great things. And I couldn't have asked for a warmer reception than what I've received at Sam Houston State University, which I am proud to call my current home. My fellow faculty, too numerous to mention, have proven to be ideal colleagues. It is an honor to work beside them.

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## Abbreviations

AAS	American Antiquarian Society (Worcester, MA)
APS	American Philosophical Society (Philadelphia, PA)
AC	<i>The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States; with an Appendix, Containing Important State Papers and Public Documents, and All the Laws of a Public Nature</i> , 42 vols. (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1834–1856)
DHRC	<i>The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution</i> . Edited by Merrill Jensen, John P. Kaminski, Gaspare J. Salone. 26 vols. (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1976–present)
HSP	Historical Society of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, PA)
HGOP	Harrison Gray Otis Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA)
JBP	Jeremy Belknap Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA)
LCP	Library Company of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, PA)
LDC	<i>Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774–1789</i> . Edited by Paul H. Smith. 24 vols. (Washington, DC: 1976–1993)
LOC	Library of Congress (Washington, DC)
MHS	Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston, MA)
PHS	Pennsylvania Historical Society (Philadelphia, PA)
SCHA	South Carolina Historical Association (Charleston, SC)
SCL	South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina (Columbia, SC)