

SELF-MADE

“Self-made” success is now an American badge of honor that rewards individualist ambitions while it hammers against community obligations. Yet, four centuries ago, our foundational stories actually disparaged ambitious upstarts as dangerous and selfish threats to a healthy society. In Pamela Walker Laird’s fascinating history of why and how storytellers forged this American myth, she reveals how the goals for self-improvement evolved from serving the community to supporting individualist dreams of wealth and esteem. Simplistic stories of self-made success and failure emerged that disregarded people’s advantages and disadvantages and fostered inequality. Fortunately, *Self-Made* also recovers long-standing, alternative traditions of self-improvement to serve the common good. These challenges to the myth have offered inspiration, often coming, surprisingly, from Americans associated with self-made success, such as Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglass, and Horatio Alger. Here are real stories that show that no one lives – no one succeeds or fails – in a vacuum.

Pamela Walker Laird is Professor Emerita of History at the University of Colorado Denver. Her publications include *Pull: Networking and Success Since Benjamin Franklin*, which won the Hagley Prize; and *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing*.

PAMELA WALKER LAIRD

Self-Made

*The Stories That Forged
an American Myth*



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For Frank
Again & Always

Mr. Bluff: Whatever I have accomplished, I owe it to myself.

Mr. Wise: How delightful it must be to feel so clear of debt.

Column filler in the *Los Angeles Times*

March 29, 1925

Reprinted from the *Kansas City Star*

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Preface

The US presidential elections of 2016, 2020, and 2024 put into stark relief two increasingly divergent approaches to what people and communities owe each other. That's because the four candidates – Donald J. Trump, on the one hand, and Hillary Rodham Clinton, Joe Biden, and Kamala Harris on the other – represent those two approaches, along with the hopes and fears that their stories evoke.

Self-Made: The Stories That Forged an American Myth offers a four-century perspective on those two approaches and their centrality to American history. It recovers narratives told within eternal competitions for the cultural authority that, in turn, supports political authority. We can look through these narrative lenses to see how people made sense of their world and their places in it, how they judged themselves and others, and how they built alliances. As in electoral campaigns, storytellers continuously try to frame the ways we value individuals and communities and the ambitions that they hold.

In the spotlight of 2024, we see in Trump someone who inherited vast wealth in both financial and social capital, but who came to national prominence with claims of self-made success. As a youth, he attended Norman Vincent Peale's church of positive thinking and individualist prosperity. The stories he heard there reinforced those he learned from other advocates of self-seeking, namely that criticism inhibits self-confidence and that concerns about community can only impede success.

In contrast, each of his presidential opponents *did* rise to national prominence from modest roots, yet none claimed to be self-made. All grew up in settings that prioritized self-improvement to serve a common good; all spent their entire professional lives in public service. Their ambitions did not exclude material goals, by any means, but they all developed what Harris calls "our sense of responsibility." Clinton's Methodist upbringing taught a social gospel that fosters individuals' work within communities on behalf of others. Biden came from a labor union family and built a strong record as a progressive, inclusive president. During Harris's campaign, we learned of her mother's admonition not to imagine that we "just fell out of a coconut tree," detached from our communities. Harris

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has repeatedly reinforced the insight that “none of us just live in a silo. Everything is in context” (“Remarks by Vice President Harris at Swearing-In Ceremony of Commissioners for the White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Hispanics,” [whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov), May 10, 2023).

In other words, no one is self-made.

Political analysts and historians will be digging into the 2024 election for a very long time. Toward that effort, I offer this backstory about storytellers with widely diverse beliefs about what people and communities owe each other. Over the centuries of Euro-American experiences, parables of self-making initially called for self-improvement to serve faith and community (both defined narrowly, to be sure). But as opportunities for worldly gain proliferated, another genre of storytelling spun off that promoted individualism and advanced the myth of self-made success. Nonetheless, other storylines continue to interpret “self-help” with an emphasis on self-improvement to *help*. All of these diverse, everchanging, and entangled strands of storytelling about our ambitions and values remind us that ideas about self-making have always been contested. The history of those contests can refocus our sense of what we owe each other as well as ourselves.

A Word about Words

Words and phrases, meanings and uses have changed, often profoundly, over the four centuries of stories that this book offers. The surprising creation and evolution of the phrase “self-made” inspired the work, but it wasn’t the only change.

Other words and their uses may be unfamiliar to us now, and at times modernizing them can make them more accessible. For example, the phrase “woman suffrage” sounds odd to us even though it was standard fare when activists rallied for women’s right to vote.

Modernizing words and phrases cannot and should not, however, eliminate what we can now find disturbing. Thus, regarding gender, most of the named actors in this story were male, and often whole categories of actors were almost entirely, if not entirely, male. Therefore, when it aligns with that historical reality, I have used masculine nouns, pronouns, and adjectives rather than give false impressions of diversity.

Regarding other identity words, I have followed the advice within the *Journal of the Early Republic*’s forum “What’s in a Name” regarding historians’ obligations “to consider what we take for granted in our writing, from audiences to contexts to words and language” (*Journal of the Early Republic*, 43, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 149). The storytellers who forged the myth of self-made success represented only a minority of Americans, but I have tried to respect all of the historical actors who were part of this history.

All quotations are identical to what I found in my sources, some of which had already altered original spelling or punctuation. Exceptions follow protocols for adjusting capitalization at the beginning and punctuation at the end of quotes to fit into my sentences. I have also revised the antique tall “s” into the modern “s”: “increafe” into “increase.” All emphases, such as italics, are in the original quotations unless I have indicated otherwise. There may also be unavoidable inconsistencies with original period texts to which I did not have access.