



RevolutionNJ

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“A Bundle of Silences: Reimagining Interpretive Approaches to the Past”
FAQ and Additional Resources

Interpretive Theme: Revolutionary Ideals

Webinar Title: The Fundamental Ideas and Values of the American Revolution

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FAQ:

Question: Did the majority of New Jersey residents represent more of the “few” or “demos” i.e. “the many” at the start of the American Revolution?

Answer: Everybody living in New Jersey (and indeed every other colony) was part of the demos as it was understood in eighteenth-century British political culture. The structure of the British state created institutional space for the one and the few in the institutions of monarchy and hereditary aristocracy. The one sat on the throne—the king—the many sat in the House of Lords, the upper house of the British Parliament, by the hereditary right of their noble titles. The demos, or the many, were represented in the House of Commons, the elected body that was the lower house of the British Parliament. The colonies all had colonial legislatures and, for the most part, they also only elected the lower houses of their legislatures, while their colonial governors were appointed by the king and those governors appointed their upper houses. That was the structure of New Jersey’s colonial government. But no colonial government had institutional space for hereditary peers and the one and few that presided over the colonies were the same one and few that presided over all Britons, His Majesty the King, and the House of Lords, the upper house of the British Parliament.

In 1776, Americans declared independence from this structure of government and decided not to create what had never physically existed within colonial America, the one and the few in the way British people (including colonial Americans) understood it. But the decision to leave behind the idea of an institutional one and few based on heredity produced all sorts of questions and concerns. If there was only the many, as independent Americans now insisted was the case, did this mean that government should be a simple majority, just one big legislature? Hereditary one and few were now utterly unacceptable. But the concerns that had long justified the one and the few—checking the demos so that liberty did not become anarchy—were very real, and leading American revolutionaries took those concerns very seriously. They took them so seriously that they started a conversation that has never ended and that matters just as much to us today—in a political society of only the many or the demos, can the demos check itself and how does it do so? Virtually all of our constitutional arrangements and civics—separation of powers, an independent judiciary and judicial review, requiring

equal representation of states in the Senate, the Electoral College, etc.—are part of the effort to address the fascinating and complex question of how to organize a political society comprised of only the demos that can prevent the demos from violating the rights of those who are not part of the majority due either to creed, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, political belief etc. How and to what extent can the majority be prevented from doing what it wishes to do in a political society that is solely the demos is perhaps the most important and pressing question we face as a society at the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution.

Question: If the revolution began because colonial gentry thought they were being mistreated by Britain, and only over time (through the experience of the revolutionary war) did ordinary white men come to claim ownership over the “slippery” idea of equality, then why did those ordinary white men fight in the revolution to begin with?

Answer: The majority of ordinary white men did support the demand for independence in 1776. In many ways, their experiences from 1765 through 1775 caused small landowners (who were the majority of ordinary white men) and craftsmen to conclude that many frustrations and tensions they had long felt were due as much to British policies and aggression as to sources inside their own colonies. But thinking like that was a relatively recent—post mid-1760s—development. Beginning in about the 1740s in colonial America, rapidly rising population due to higher birth rates and increased immigration from Britain and Europe produced, really for the first time, land scarcity, a scarcity that intensified between 1740 and 1765. That was one reason for the intensity of wars such as the French and Indian War (1754-1763) and so much movement west toward and even across the Appalachians and out of New England.

Pressure on resources produced rising social stratification and social tensions inside almost all the colonies, and these tensions predated the imperial policies and conflicts that provoked the crisis with the empire after the mid-1760s. Had Britain not begun to tax the colonies and engage in other punitive measures in the decade before Lexington and Concord, it’s likely that internal class conflicts and social tensions inside the colonies would have continued to divide elite gentlemen from ordinary white men. One can see in early imperial conflicts such as the Stamp Act riots of 1765, for example, many ordinary white men using the general anger about the Stamp Act to also strike at wealthy members of their communities, something that gravely concerned wealthy colonists who opposed the Stamp Act just as much as it concerned wealthy colonists who supported it.

But in many ways, beginning with the Stamp Act crisis of 1765-66, British imperial policy makers intervened to provide white men in colonial America a common set of concerns and a common language that appealed across class lines. The Stamp Act taxed the paper contracts and titles that merchants and land speculators needed to conduct their business as well as the marriage licenses the sons of small farmers needed to start their families and produce the labor force to maintain their farms. It even taxed the cards and playing dice laboring men enjoyed at the end of a day’s work in the village tavern. More precisely, when Britain appeared not to respect white male property owners as true Britons, deserving of British liberty such as the protection of property and no taxation without representation, elite gentlemen could agree with ordinary white men that the British state seemed to disrespect them to the point of denying them the natural rights that this same British state claimed to cherish and protect.

Given the growing social and economic cleavages, tensions, and conflicts colonial Americans were producing among themselves, Britain's wholly disruptive intrusion into colonial affairs after 1765 served to temporarily refocus people's concerns and drive together colonial Americans who had been drifting apart.

However, during and after the revolution, while elite gentlemen hoped the revolution would remain simply a battle for home rule—that is a battle to make sure that the newly independent United States was not governed by Britain—ordinary white men wanted to make it a battle about both home rule and who would rule at home. The second battle was a conflict among white men about what sort of society independence would create and to what extent the colonial social order of inequality and wealth stratification among white men would be allowed to survive. The charged, “slippery” language of equality indicted not just British actions but also, for many ordinary white men, the social and economic conditions that colonial gentlemen—now revolutionary leaders—had little interest in challenging. Ordinary white men certainly cared about home rule for its own sake. But they also came to understand in the mid to late 1770s that securing home rule also allowed them much more space to pursue the question of who would rule at home. The fluid and raucous revolutionary situation they were living in encourage their understanding of the connections between issues of home rule and who should rule at home, and so living in and fighting a revolution helped further their consciousness of taking ownership over the American Revolution.

Additional Resources:

Political Thought of the American Revolutionary Era

Paul Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*

Andrew Shankman, *Original Intent: Hamilton, Jefferson, Madison, and the American Founding*

Colleen Sheehan, *James Madison and the Spirit of Republican Self-Government*

Gordon S. Wood, *Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*

Ordinary White Men of the Revolutionary Era

Terry Bouton, *Taming Democracy: The People, The Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution*

Brenden McConville, *These Daring Disturbers of the Peace: The Struggle for Property and Power in Early New Jersey*

Howard Pashman, *Building a Revolutionary State: The Legal Transformation of New York, 1776-1783*

Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution*

Women in the Revolutionary Era

Woody Holton, *Abigail Adams: A Life*

Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*

Marybeth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*

Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic*

African Americans in the Revolutionary Era

Douglas Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America*

Sylvia Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age*

Gary Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution*

Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and their Global Quest for Liberty*