Introduction

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Whose American Revolution Was It? speaks to the different ways Americans at the time of the Revolution might have answered this question and to the different ways historians in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have interpreted the Revolution for our own time. On one level, the answer to the question in either era might seem quite obvious: Whose American Revolution was it? It was the Americans’, of course, a successful War for Independence from Great Britain. Americans made—and won—their revolution. But no sooner has one said the word “Americans” than other questions immediately come up: Which Americans? Who were the Americans who made the political Revolution of 1776? Who fought to win the War for Independence? And who within America benefited from the results of the Revolution?

The meaning of the American Revolution as both a political and a popular movement has always been a measure of the ways the United States has progressed as a society, particularly in fulfilling its promise in the Declaration of Independence of liberty and equality. Asking “Whose American Revolution was it?” forces us to think about the Revolution in ways that do not offer simple answers but that make for a much more vital and engaging line of inquiry. The question remains contested, and the stakes are still high. Every generation has to come to terms with the Revolution in the context of its own time, looking back to the founding era as a historical touchstone that tells us where we have come from, how far we have come, and perhaps where we still ought to be going. The more we invoke the symbols of the Revolution today, or glorify its famous leaders, the more we need to know it well in its own time, embracing a broad view that encompasses all its inherent contradictions and sometimes unclear outcomes.
Asking “Whose American Revolution was it?” makes some present-day Americans uncomfortable, however. It implies that the Revolution may not have been everybody’s Revolution, that there may have been an underside to it that could undermine, or certainly complicate, the standard narrative that puts the “Founding Fathers” at the head of an all-embracing, consensual movement. Yet that supposed “underside” has hardly been invisible to anyone who reflected on the Revolution. However uncertain average Americans may be about the specific events of the Revolutionary era, they still have a general sense of who was there and of the very significant differences among the people of the era. They know that slavery existed and that some of the most prominent political leaders of the Revolution, such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, were slave owners. They might not grasp the full extent of slavery, that in a population of 2.5 million there were five hundred thousand enslaved African Americans and that tens of thousands fought with the British and several thousand others on the side of the Americans. They also have a sense, perhaps from the iconic image of the statue of the “Minute Man” at Concord—one hand on the plough, the other holding his rifle—that at a time when most of the country was agricultural, most of the white soldiers on the patriot side, some two hundred thousand men, came from farm families and that their way of life was far different from that of the leaders who lived at Mount Vernon or Monticello. So too it is not hard to imagine that John Hancock, whose signature was first and largest on the Declaration of Independence—and who was also the wealthiest merchant in New England—lived a life in Boston that was very different from the craftsmen who built his ships and the sailors who manned them. They also can intuit that women, no matter what their class or race, were not accepted as full citizens after the Revolution and did not even get the vote until the twentieth century. Finally, it is common knowledge that there were Native Americans within the colonies and new nation—actually no less than one hundred thousand Native Americans in the area east of the Mississippi River—who would be displaced and decimated by the expanding nation. Thus, even with a basic knowledge of such differences among Americans at the time, it should not be hard for Americans today to imagine that not everyone experienced the Revolution in the same way. It seems reasonable to ask “Whose American Revolution was it?”

In 1994, a group of historians and educators framed essentially the same question to help teachers and students explore American history in the nation’s classrooms. The committee that developed the National Standards for American History...
for United States History in the Schools asked “how revolutionary the Revolution actually was,” which was another way of asking what the Revolution did to change American society, and for whom? To answer this question, the Standards suggested that students would have to look beyond the familiar focus on the Founding Fathers and would “necessarily . . . have to see the Revolution through different eyes—enslaved and free African Americans, Native Americans, white men and women of different social classes, religions, ideological dispositions, regions and occupations.”1 Gary Nash, a leading historian of the Revolution, was co-chair of the committee that drew on three years of discussion by hundreds of historians, teachers, and educators on all levels, delegated by some thirty national educational organizations. Intended as a guide for middle and high school teachers, the Standards as a whole addressed a problem recognized by a wide political spectrum of people alarmed by the declining state of knowledge of American history. Soon after the report was released, the Standards became the target of a massive right-wing assault, allegedly for giving less attention to George Washington and other great men than to the groups previously left out of the national narrative. After some revision and a decade of classroom application, the current version of the Standards met with wide approval by high school teachers.

That does not mean, however, that the debate over what to teach in American history has disappeared. Indeed, the continuing controversy speaks to a central concern of this book. Some people still feel uneasy in recognizing that not all historians explain the Revolution the same way, and to ask the question posed by this book—Whose American Revolution was it?—means asking whose interpretations of the Revolution are valid. The very notion that teachers might teach different ways of looking at the past raises the hackles of those Americans who say they want only “the facts” about history, assuming that there is some finite, never-changing body of “facts” about a historical event that comes down to us free from interpretation. In 2006, for example, the state legislators of Florida were so riled up by the apparent menace of historical interpretation that they drafted legislation that would have required the history of the United States to “be taught as genuine history and shall not follow the revisionist or post-modernist viewpoints of relative truth.” They passed a law mandating that in the state’s schools “history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed,

1 National Center for History in the Schools, National Standards for United States History (Los Angeles, 1994).
shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, testable, and shall be defined as the creation of a new nation based largely on the universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence.”

Woe, then, to the unfortunate Florida high school teacher who wanted to take the National Standards seriously about looking at the Revolution through different eyes. A few years later, in 2010, the Texas Board of Education turned against the principal author of the Declaration of Independence because, as the New York Times reported, "Jefferson is not well liked among conservatives on the board because he coined the term 'separation between church and state.'” In a 10–5 vote on the required contents of the state’s history textbooks, the board excised Jefferson from a list of writers whose words helped inspire revolutionaries in the late eighteenth century. Thus, the gatekeepers of the state’s history curriculum, who doubtless were outraged by the alleged diminution of the most famous Founders in the National Standards, had little compunction about engaging in their own form of revisionism by banishing a leading figure in the Revolution when it suited their political purposes.

In reality, so-called revisionist history is not new, nor is it by any means the sole creation of the proponents of “postmodernist viewpoints of relative truth,” the so-called relativists. The Council of the American Historical Association pointed out in 2007 that revisionist history “has been practiced for almost a century—since 1913 when Charles Beard published his economic interpretation of the American Constitution.” Revisions “have been applied to the Industrial Revolution, the Revolution, the Civil War, the First and Second World Wars, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Cold War and many other historical issues and problems.” Revisionists, the AHA Council points out, “are for the most part the opposite of relativists. They argue that standard accounts of a given event are incorrect and that new documents or new interpretations of known documents can prove this is true.” Indeed, most historians believe that the business of their profession is to examine previous versions of history found to be wanting, to ask new questions about familiar subjects, and to open up new subjects long neglected.

Sometimes fresh questions arise when new original primary source


materials—the essential “facts,” the building blocks of historical evidence—are discovered. New biographies of the most prominent men of the Revolution, for example, have appeared in such profusion in recent years in good part because the documentary record available to researchers has increased exponentially as a result of the projects assembling and publishing their papers, which began more than half a century ago. (The Massachusetts Historical Society has now published forty-two volumes of the papers of John Adams and his family, and the Library of Congress has made available online over sixty-five thousand documents from George Washington’s papers and twenty-seven thousand from Thomas Jefferson’s—with more to come for all three.) Libraries are also digitizing thousands of other sorts of primary sources formerly found only in the files of a single archive. At the same time, many books, both old and new, now appear on the Internet in their entirety, and scholarly articles are easily searchable in electronic databases. The possibilities of Web-based research have expanded enormously in only a few years, and anyone with a computer can get almost immediate access to materials that used to require time, travel, and sometimes considerable expense to find. The dream of the historian Carl Becker—“Every man his own historian”—is within reach for men, women, and students at all levels.5

But new sources alone are not the only reason for new inquiries. Often the historian’s questions arise from perceived gaps in knowledge: if thousands of slaves fled from their plantations in Virginia in 1775–76 in response to the appeals of British generals, one might ask what the impact was on plantation owners such as Washington and Jefferson who lost numerous slaves. Sometimes questions emerge from the powerful examples set by the recovery of people’s stories that had previously been thought all but lost: Laurel Ulrich’s decoding of the diary kept by Martha Ballard, a midwife, physician, and farm housewife on the Maine frontier for twenty-seven years, from 1785 to 1812, demonstrates “the way the political revolution and social revolution that accompanied it were related.” “By restoring a lost substructure of eighteenth-century life,” Ulrich rightly claims, a diary long dismissed as replete only with trivia “transforms the nature of the evidence upon which much of the history of the period has been written.”6

The list of the reasons for new inquiries could go on and on, because the


6 Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812 (New York, 1990), 27.
everyday reality of the historian’s life as a researcher is that, whatever the subject, large or small, he or she has no alternative but to select from a vast array of facts in an ever-expanding body of evidence. That is what writing or teaching history is all about.

Inevitably, the historian’s life exists within history itself. As the influential English historian Edward Hallett Carr has put it, “The historian, before he begins to write history, is the product of history.” But because truth is relative to the historian—the meaning of relativism, simply put—it does not mean, in Carr’s words, that “one interpretation is as good as another and the facts of history are in principle not amenable to objective interpretation.” One interpretation can be better than another because it takes into account more evidence or is based on source materials not previously available or because the historian may be inspired to greater insight by something in his or her own time. “Great history,” Carr argued, “is written precisely when the historian’s vision of the past is illuminated by insights into the problems of the present.”

Thus, the questions asked by historians are often in response to significant changes in society that push them, as they do other citizens, to rethink parts of the past that have been overlooked, buried, or little appreciated. The effectiveness of the mass movements of the 1960s and 1970s for racial and gender equality contributed to historians’ awareness of movements “from the bottom up” and the role of ordinary people who helped shape such struggles in the past. By the same token, the widespread disillusionment with national political leaders in recent decades contributed to an emphasis on the presumably superior “character” of the leaders of the Revolutionary era in the many new biographies of the famous Founders.

Recognizing the influences of the world scholars live in does not distort our perspective on the past or diminish the validity of historical discoveries. To realize, for instance, that movements for civil rights and women’s rights in our own time helped inspire the recovery of objective facts about African Americans or women in the past does not mean that scholars have skewed the evidence. Nor does it follow that the emphasis on “history from the bottom up” means that the more traditional, top-down way of looking at the Revolution as a political event leading to Independence and the formation of a nation-state is irrelevant. Quite the opposite. There are now new dimensions to political history. “In the last quarter century,”

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as Linda Kerber writes, the research of “a new generation of historians . . . has tended to restore rebellion to histories of the American Revolution, by dealing with the ways in which marginal people—blacks, women, the impoverished—shaped the Revolution and were in turn affected by it.” The Revolution historians know today is less skewed than it was when the focus was on the great men.

While some historians recovering underlying long-range trends have avoided formal political history, others have drawn on social history to broaden our understanding of what we mean by “political.” Recent research has redefined the political. The wave of runaway slaves in Virginia in 1775–76, for example, shaped the political decision of planters in Virginia and in the Continental Congress in Philadelphia to adopt independence as a goal: faced with what the Declaration of Independence called “convulsions” within, they became “forced founders,” supporting the rebellion against Great Britain in the hope of establishing a government that could quell the rebellion in their midst. Even quieter forms of rebellion had a political impact. When Abigail Adams was managing the family farm while her husband, John, was absent for years and calling herself a “farmeriss,” she was implicitly making a political claim for equality—one that she also made more explicitly to her husband in the Continental Congress. We need to see them together—John and Abigail Adams, Washington and Jefferson and their slaves, James Madison and Daniel Shays—as part of a larger political process. Arguably, understanding the presence and potential power of the groups once dismissed as being marginal has brought us much closer to the political world American leaders experienced at the time.

In this spirit, this book approaches historians’ interpretations of the American Revolution from several different angles of vision, beginning at an important point in time—the plea, in 1925, of the historian J. Franklin Jameson, a historian then at the peak of the profession, to “consider the American Revolution as a social movement.” It was a fresh challenge to historians, and it opened, as Jameson presciently suggested, “a field of history deserving further and deeper study.” Those who originated the Revolution, Jameson held, “had no other than a political program and would have considered its work done when political independence of Great Britain had

been secured.” But, he asked, “who can say to the waves of Revolution:
Thus far shall we go and no farther? . . . The stream of Revolution, once
started, could not be confined within narrow banks but spread abroad
upon the land.”

The two essays in this book explore the ways historians have interpreted
the impact of those “forces thus let loose.” The first essay, by Alfred F. Young
and originally published in 1995, was written for a scholarly conference de-
voted to reconsidering the Jameson thesis about the “transforming hand of
revolution,” the conference in itself testimony to the staying power of the
thesis. Surveying the scholarship of the last three quarters of the twentieth
century, it takes the reader through successive schools of interpretation:
the Progressive interpretation more or less dominant to about 1945; the
consensus or counter-Progressive view, sometimes called the ideological
interpretation of the Revolution, which emerged in the 1950s and ’60s to
dominate the field; the “new social history,” which accelerated in the 1970s
and ’80s, devoted to long-range trends in early American society; the “New
Left” history that ran parallel with it, arguing for examining the Revolution
as a whole from the bottom up; and the diverse efforts in the 1980s and
eyear ’90s to synthesize the many strands of what had become very large
bodies of scholarship.

The second essay, by Gregory H. Nobles, picks up where the first leaves
off and deals with scholarship since about 1995. It focuses especially on
how present-day historians interpret the major groups that the no longer
“new” social history has brought onto the stage of the Revolution, groups
long regarded as only bit players or extras: farmers and artisans who made
up the vast majority of white Americans of English and European descent,
African Americans, Native Americans, and women of all social classes. Fo-
cusing on these groups does not mean ignoring the traditional “stars” of
the show, the leading men who have long stood at the center of the stage.
Rather, the emphasis of the second essay is on seeing the whole cast of
characters together as an ensemble production, seeking to appreciate how
the players formerly considered marginal actually helped determine the
outcome of the historical drama.

Recent historians of the social history of the Revolutionary era no longer
frame their questions around Jameson, and he has receded from sight, even
while these scholars pursue his themes. Why, then, organize an account of

10 J. Franklin Jameson, The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement (Princeton,
1926; reprint 1967), 8–9.
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Historians of the Revolution around a question advanced by one scholar so long ago? For several reasons. First, social history has so obviously become a major focus of scholarship of the Revolutionary era, and historians would agree with Gordon Wood’s assessment that Jameson “is the starting point for appreciating the social changes of the revolutionary era.” Second, because so many historians weighed in on Jameson in the twentieth century, he provides an excellent frame of reference to track the successive schools of interpretation. His claim for the significance of social change ran parallel to the arguments of his influential fellow Progressive historians, Carl Becker and Charles Beard. Becker framed the political history of the Revolution as not only a struggle war for “home rule” but as a struggle among Americans “for who shall rule at home,” and Beard offered An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution, portraying the political capstone of the Revolution as a product of a clash of classes and economic interests he saw running through the period. The three were instrumental in directing historians to the “internal” history of the Revolution—as opposed to the “external” one, which focused on the break with Great Britain—and as a consequence focused attention on results as opposed to “causes.”

Third, Jameson’s insights have been remarkably enduring among historians, even while they have subsequently opened up subjects he did not envision. Jameson and his fellow Progressives, for all their insight about internal conflict within American society, did not address the historical significance of the social groups that historians have since moved to the center of the stage: Native Americans, African Americans, and women. Jameson’s emphasis on long-range social change has also challenged historians to think about the Revolution in ways that break through the traditional boundaries for the Revolution, beginning in 1763 and ending in 1789, bracketed by political events. Seeking to assess the significance of the American Revolution as a social movement—or movements, plural, to be more precise—has meant locating the larger cast of historical actors on a much longer chronological continuum, reaching from the colonial period well into the era of the early republic into the 1790s and well beyond. Historians who now write of the “long” Revolution thus implicitly acknowledge Jameson’s approach. Those who take the measure of the Revolution’s success by exploring the success of the various seekers of liberty and equality similarly build on Jameson’s awareness of different outcomes for both the agents and opponents of change. People who might have been on the

same side of the fence when it came to American independence often had dramatically differing notions about how far the ideals of the Declaration might extend, and to whom. Jameson opened up areas of contention that have remained central to the interpretation of the Revolution.

Controversy over interpreting the Revolution can appear in surprising places. Some years ago it stole some scenes in a popular Hollywood movie, *Good Will Hunting*, which won an Academy Award for screenwriting in 1998 for Matt Damon and Ben Affleck. Will Hunting, a twenty-year-old, Irish, working-class guy from South Boston (played by Damon), and Chuckie, his fellow “Southie” (Affleck), are visiting the Bow and Arrow bar in Cambridge, Massachusetts, frequented by Harvard students. Will is a math genius who also reads widely in history but by choice works as a janitor at MIT sweeping floors: he has a class-conscious chip on his shoulder about elite universities. At the bar, Chuckie, a construction worker who, like his friend, never went to college, fakes it to a Harvard history graduate student that he attended a class in early American history at Harvard, and the grad student calls his bluff: “I was just hoping that you could give me some insight into the evolution of the market economy in the Southern colonies,” the grad student says with sneering condescension. “My contention is that prior to the Revolutionary War the economic modalities especially in the Southern colonies could most aptly be characterized as agrarian, pre-capitalist. . .”

Will, springing to the rescue of his cornered buddy, interrupts with a breathless put-down: “Of course that’s your contention. You’re a first-year graduate student. You just got finished readin’ some Marxian historian—Pete Garrison prob’ly. You’re gonna be convinced of that ’til next month, when you get to James Lemon, and then you’re gonna be talking about how the economies of Virginia and Pennsylvania were entrepreneurial and capitalist way back in 1740. That’s gonna last until next year—you’re gonna be in here regurgitating Gordon Wood, talking about, you know, about the pre-Revolutionary utopia and the capital-forming effects of military mobilization.”

The hapless grad student tries a comeback: “Well, as a matter of fact I won’t, because Wood drastically underestimates the impact of . . .” But Will breaks in again, finishing the student’s sentence: “Wood drastically underestimates the impact of social distinctions predicated upon wealth, especially inherited wealth. You got that from Vickers, *Work in Essex County*, page 98, right? Yeah, I read it too. Do you have any thoughts of your own on this matter?” The student backs off , they avoid a fight, and the barroom
debaters part peacefully. Will has impressed a woman student at the bar (played by Minnie Driver), who gives him her phone number and will later become his girlfriend—all things considered, not a bad ending for a scholarly conversation about American history.

In a later scene, Will, who as a condition of a suspended sentence for fighting has been ordered by a judge to spend time with a psychiatrist, again shows off his knowledge of historical interpretations in a confrontation with his therapist, Sean Maguire (played by Robin Williams). Will, looking at Sean’s office walls lined with books, asks if he has read them all. “I did,” Sean replies. Scanning the titles on one shelf and spotting *A History of the United States, Volume 1*, Will blurts out, “If you want to read a real history book, read Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*. That book will knock you on your ass.”

These two scenes establish Will Hunting’s character as a rebel; they also invite viewers to think about why American history might matter to him. Damon, who attended Harvard College before he became a movie star and screenwriter, got his historians right. Three of the scholars named in the barroom dialogue—James Lemon, Daniel Vickers, and Gordon Wood—do indeed exist, and they all figured more or less in a longstanding debate about how capitalist the colonies were and in effect how much inequality there was in early American society—all matters very much relevant to the question of whose Revolution it was. The name of the Marxian historian Will uses is made up, but there are real historians of early America who write from a left perspective. There was certainly a real Howard Zinn, whose *People’s History* has sold more than two million copies; the book challenges the celebratory view of the American past, championing defiant class-conscious movements from below, which might well have caught Will’s sympathies.

But that still begs the question, Why would anyone take the time and trouble to read all this stuff? For the Harvard grad student, the answer is easy: he is an academic historian in training, and devouring the books on his reading list is part of his preparation for entering the profession (or at least for getting through his comprehensive exams). For the psychiatrist, the display of big volumes of serious history on his office bookshelves underscores the breadth of his knowledge. But for Will, a class-conscious Southie who does not aspire to professional status like the others, his engagement with historical debates suggests more interesting answers. It is not just an academic exercise to him, not just a game of memorization or showing off. The differing interpretations of historians matter to him, an
angry young man who thus far in his life has wound up on the wrong side of authority. Knowing that there are differing interpretations of history that challenge the traditional top-down, celebratory narrative helps give him a better perspective on his relationship with the powers that be and his place in society. And perhaps knowing that the interpretations that offer a bottom-up approach emphasizing the role of ordinary people in shaping the course of history makes it possible for someone like Will Hunting to see himself as an actor in a much larger story.

We cannot claim that the discussion of historical interpretations in this book will provide a guide to current historical movies. We hope, though, that this book may be useful for a number of audiences: historians and would-be historians, including grad students at Harvard and elsewhere, who want to get their bearings on the large and growing body of scholarship about the American Revolution; conscientious middle school and high school teachers who have to make decisions about how to squeeze the Revolution into a shrinking American History curriculum that allows less time for the early period; and curators and guides at historic sites and museums who need to establish historical contexts and introduce different interpretations to their visitors; and maybe future screenwriters. We also hope this book may stimulate the appetite of readers who have been brought to the Revolution by the absorbing biographies of the famous men and who sense there may have been other important actors on the scene.

There is no getting around the American Revolution. It will always matter, because it will always define the founding of our national history. For that reason, we will always need to come to terms with the world of the Founders. To do so, however, means expanding our very definition of who were “Founders.” Founders of all sorts played different roles in the American Revolution, and they often differed on how far the Revolution should go and on whose Revolution it would ultimately be. In the end, we hope that this book will inspire readers to think through their own way of looking at the American Revolution.