In 1747, Dr. Alexander Hamilton met with fifteen members of his Tuesday Club at an Annapolis, Maryland, tavern. After enjoying some wine and rum punch, the genteel group set off on their “first grand anniversary procession” through Annapolis’s streets. Resplendent in “badges and Ribbons” to distinguish themselves “from the common RascalIon herd of men,” Dr. Hamilton and his club members found that “persons of all Ranks and degrees” crowded to watch their well-planned pageantry. This was exactly what Dr. Hamilton wanted. Having grown up in Scotland, received his education throughout the British Isles and Europe, and recently traveled North America’s eastern seaboard, Dr. Hamilton (not to be confused with the first U.S. secretary of the treasury) believed that because “the number of the wise is but small, and that of the foolish and Simple very great, so there is an absolute necessity for the use of these magnificent trappings and Embellishments . . . to keep the great Leviathan of Civil Society under proper discipline and order.” Though Dr. Hamilton realized that a “perfectly well regulated Society” was beyond reason, he—like so many other elitist British American colonists—relied on self-dictated notions of “Civil Society” to maintain “proper discipline and order” in their ongoing quest to “regulate [British America’s] motions in such a manner, as that the frantic animal may not destroy itself.”

If only it were this simple. While Dr. Hamilton’s Tuesday Club did in fact exist in Annapolis, Maryland, at midcentury, their parade probably
never happened. *The History of the Tuesday Club*, in which Dr. Hamilton recorded the account of their parade was a fictional narrative of the club’s proceedings in which Dr. Hamilton satirized the vices and disorders that constantly plagued his whimsical club, as well as society at large. At one point, the men’s fondness of luxury almost threw them into “Civil Combustions” so drastic as to destroy the club’s very foundations, and in another instance the tavern club purchased so many “expensive Liquors” that their funds grew light. Though most likely fictitious, the Tuesday Club’s 1747 parade reveals colonial gentlemen’s deep-seated anxieties about the proper maintenance—and realization—of British American civil society. If elitist men could plot such societal order on the page, many wondered, why not in the developing arena of colonial cities?²

*Inn Civility* uses the urban tavern—the most numerous, popular, and accessible of all British American public spaces—to investigate North Americans’ struggles to cultivate a civil society from the early eighteenth century to the end of the American Revolution.³ Such an analysis, this book argues, demonstrates the messy, often contradictory nature of British American society building and how colonists’ efforts to emulate their British homeland ultimately impelled the creation of an American republic. In so striving to realize a monarchical society based on mercurial tenets of civility, order, and liberty, colonists inadvertently created a political society that the founders would rely on for their visions of a republican America. This is not to argue that independence was inevitable; rather, a fuller understanding of America’s (unexpected) independence demands a deep analysis of midcentury colonists’ societal dreams and, importantly, anxieties.

Societal fantasies, confusions, and disappointments were hardly unique to the Revolutionary Era. In fact, conflicts over social order and imperial control originated in a time that many colonists (and historians since) liked to think of as a “golden age” of colonial American stability, success, and hope.⁴ The birth of republican American civil society, in short, was as much wedded to its monarchical past as the dreams of a republican future. Most of America’s founders, after all, had spent their lives striving to comprehend, if not create, a British-style civil society in North America. These same men were forced to repackage many of their midcentury societal goals to fit American notions of republicanism, which were not as different from colonial American ideals of civil society as many colonists would have liked to think. Just as they had during North America’s monarchical period, republican leaders remained wedded to fantasies of a civil society where they maintained order over
the masses and continued to be disappointed when such fantasies proved empty and contradictory. Old habits die hard.\textsuperscript{5}

As key microcosms of eighteenth-century life, urban taverns especially allow us to follow North Americans’ struggles at creating a civil society. In one sense, the diverse array of licensed urban taverns served as pedestrian parts of white colonists’ everyday lives by providing routine services like food, drink, camaraderie, and lodging for a vast swath of society. Urban taverns thus acted as important societal filters: as the main customers, white men represented the bulk of those deemed worthy of civil society. They expected supposed inferiors like unfree whites, enslaved blacks, Native Americans, and women, meanwhile, to remain in either servile roles or simply stay out of the tavern altogether, thus maintaining a sense of societal harmony and order.\textsuperscript{6} Yet white men’s efforts at physical and symbolic demarcation in the tavern space proved fragile. Not only had “uncivil” peoples long fostered a thriving network of unlicensed drinking spaces, but most tavern keepers sought to serve as many customers as possible, thereby upholding a diverse—and socially confusing—public sector. The fallout of the American Revolution only heightened such disorder, as urban taverns descended into war-torn dissipation and their rural counterparts emerged as bastions of republican militancy. As revolutionaries relied on altered ideologies of civility, order, and liberty to support their nascent ideas of republicanism, taverns became sounding boards for the past, present, and future of North American civil society. Taverns, then, represent ideal locations in which to study the artificial boundaries and liminal spaces between civil and uncivil society.

The Shallow Roots of American Civil Society

Although certain colonials attempted to replicate their European brethren’s notions of civil society as closely as possible, the reality of life in North America—particularly its distance from the mother country, lack of landed gentry, larger number of unfree and non-British peoples, agricultural identity, and smaller cities—necessitated local variances. Where European thinkers generally leaned on historical precedent and law in their philosophies of civil society, colonists harnessed the commercial success and growing public sector of their cities to build their own social capital and, in turn, curb what they considered a disintegrating social order.\textsuperscript{7} Yet the confusing reality of urban society often outstripped gentlemen’s civil pipe dreams. Though elitist colonists liked to
represent themselves as powerful leaders of an ever-improving society, their day-to-day interactions with each other and their social inferiors demonstrated that the British Empire was not neatly split into civil and uncivil peoples, nor were gentlemen above the “rude” behavior that they so often associated with ordinary colonists. The American Revolutionary Period only compounded elitist colonists’ flawed perceptions of European-style civil society as nascent ideologies of republicanism clashed and overlapped with midcentury notions of civility.\(^8\)

British American colonists linked their understandings of civil society with their ardent assertions of a “civilizing process.” From the moment Englishmen invaded North America, they contended that they brought with them measures of improvement. “Savage” Native American customs were destined to be replaced by “civilized” European traditions of urban growth, agricultural development, and global trade. Englishmen also asserted their mastery over the surrounding “wilderness” through massive, slave-driven cash cropping and military measures. Although the seventeenth century brought a surge of famine, death, and warfare to British settlers, by the mid-eighteenth century colonists believed that they had finally gained a foothold in North America. Their cities multiplied by the decade, farms stretched into the backcountry, enslaved African laborers piled off boats by the scores, and competing empires trickled away. While civil society might have been only a dream for their seventeenth-century forebears, a growing number of eighteenth-century colonists trusted that their recent success would bring a new level of civilization and order to North America.\(^9\)

This expansion had noticeable effects on the commercial importance of colonial North America and, in turn, the living conditions of ordinary and wealthy colonists alike. The economist Alice Hanson Jones argued that British American colonists enjoyed a standard of living during the mid-eighteenth century that was “probably the highest achieved for the great bulk of the population in any country up to that time.” The historians John McCusker and Russell Menard echoed Jones’s sentiments, contending that midcentury colonists “were better off not only than their predecessors in the colonies or than most of their contemporaries elsewhere in the world but also than their descendants were to be again for some time to come.” Although the Caribbean colonies outstripped British North America in economic importance for the British Empire, mainland colonists considered themselves leaders in contentment and reputation.\(^10\) The colonist Thomas Jones referred to the midcentury period as “the Golden Age of New York,” and another urbanite exclaimed
in 1764, “We think ourselves at present the happiest people . . . of any people under the sun, and really are so.”

Such assertions of a “golden age” of colonial America and the happiness of its peoples were firmly intertwined with British Americans’ zealous devotion to mercurial notions of British liberty. Broadly defined according to equally vague ideals of an English constitution that limited the power of the monarchy in addition to promising the rule of law, self-representation, and access to private property, liberty remained central in British Americans’ understanding of the British Empire and where they fit into this globalizing entity. British liberty also afforded colonists a sense of superiority over their imperial rivals such as France and Spain, which they considered lesser because of their absolute monarchs. Notions of British liberty necessarily impelled colonists’ quest for a British American civil society, and vice versa. It is no coincidence that colonists lauded New Jersey governor Francis Bernard for his “accurate Knowledge . . . of the Constitution, just Sense of Liberty, and the common Rights of Mankind” when he arrived in North America in 1758.

By midcentury, many colonists liked to think of themselves in a “golden age” of civil society with all the liberties that this hopeful vision offered.

Reflections on this alleged golden age, notably, in terms of political, economic, and demographic development, extended beyond British North America. Philosophers across western Europe also grappled with how best to order their societies in the face of recent expansion. An ideal of societal progress based on tenets of urbanity and law that stretched back to ancient Greece and Rome, civil society struck the English philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke as especially useful in bringing order to the disorder engendered by rampant commercialism, urbanization, exploration, and revolution. Ideas of order and disorder had long retained a central place in English society. Medieval Englishmen based their society on strict notions of hierarchy, as did the first Englishmen who attempted to colonize North America. Eighteenth-century English thinkers cultivated such maxims for their own purposes, insisting that a true civil society would exist independent from church and state, therefore completing, in Locke’s words, the “perfect freedom” and the “rights and privileges [enjoyed by men under] the law of nature.” Eighteenth-century Scottish philosophers, including Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, and Francis Hutcheson, fleshed out their English colleagues’ contentions by asserting that civil society was, in essence, a successful commercial society internally constituted of strict notions of order, interdependence, and a thriving public sphere.
Continental philosophers also adapted ideologies of civil society to their locales. In Germany, Immanuel Kant struggled over the connection between the emergence of a civil society as detached from the state and how a free thinker might exist and thrive in this society while also respecting mankind’s inherent rights. French thinkers joined Kant—Du Marsais argued that French philosophes considered the “order and rules [of] civil society . . . a divinity on earth,” while Jaucourt used notions of civility and order to distinguish natural and absolute equality. Although all men were born naturally equal, Jaucourt asserted, they did “not know how to remain so,” for “different ranks, grades, honors, distinctions, prerogatives, subordinations . . . must prevail in all governments.” Diderot and Rousseau also championed the importance of difference and order for a successful civil society. Diderot believed the “maintenance of society [demanded] that men establish among themselves an order of subordination,” and Rousseau asserted that only by adopting a “social contract” where everyone was willing to forgo their personal gain for the betterment of the larger community could a true civil society ever thrive. The Italian Borghese family, finally, warned those who entered their seventeenth-century pleasure garden, “If anyone willfully and deliberately, with evil intentions, breaks the golden rules of civility, let him beware, lest the rather irate estate manager break the token of friendship on him.” Ultimately, while thinkers throughout Europe had different conceptions of how to achieve a civil society, they agreed that it would be one based on notions of difference, order, and control.

Certain would-be gentlemen struggled to adapt British and European paradigms to their colonial locality. Although some especially wealthy and powerful men also pursued a British American civil society, most colonial gentlemen were not elite in the European sense: as men who worked with their hands and did not come from money, they were more akin to the “middling sorts” or “middle classes” of western European society. “Continuously remaking themselves” and working within different social, economic, and political spheres, these self-employed landholders, skilled artisans, manufacturers, physicians, preachers, and teachers would not have equaled European elites in terms of prestige or title. What they did share, however, was an insecurity regarding notions of civility and order, which they buttressed with dreams of achieving “polite” identities and, in turn, helping to realize a North American civil society. Such men were thus elitist more than elite: they viewed themselves as gentlemen leaders destined to direct America into
a bright future, even if their European counterparts looked down on them as little more than colonial upstarts who had to work with their hands for a living.\footnote{19}

For example, Dr. Alexander Hamilton, introduced earlier, was a Scottish-born physician whose scant opportunities in Edinburgh forced him to emigrate to Annapolis, Maryland, to pursue his trade. Hamilton’s laborious occupation would not have provided him much prestige in a metropolis like London, or even in smaller British cities like Edinburgh or Bristol. Yet Dr. Hamilton, along with other aspiring gentlemen in North America, utilized voluntary societies, public institutions, material goods, and sociable opportunities available in the colonial city to obtain “social capital” and assert themselves as masculine leaders of a distinctly British American civil society. In many ways, elitist colonists were bigger fish in a much smaller pond than they probably could have ever been in European cities.\footnote{20}

Self-professions of gentility and social superiority were key to American gentlemen’s civil crusade. According to Samuel Johnson’s 1755 Dictionary of the English Language, a civil identity necessitated the ability to demonstrate one’s “politeness, complaisance[,] . . . elegance of behaviour,” and “freedom from barbarity.” Rather than simply rely on conspicuous consumption of expensive goods and services, elitist colonists like Dr. Hamilton worked hard to obtain social capital beyond material wealth—specifically, by cultivating an identity based on societal power, advanced education and sociability, and the capacity to contain one’s own primal urges, which they believed created boundaries between themselves and their more vulgar urban compatriots. For self-professed leaders, the accumulation of social capital was imperative to the stability and success of a British American civil society. This minority populace of North America sought to control the majority of economic, political, religious, and social operations.\footnote{21}

Despite gentlemen’s attempts to denigrate those they considered their social inferiors, ordinary colonists are imperative for understanding the formation of a British American civil society, both because of their concrete utility in supporting colonial America’s day-to-day operations and because of the anxieties that they caused elitist men. The social hierarchy of North America’s white population seemed to blur by the day, becoming more horizontally than vertically oriented. This social reorganization opened new opportunities for many ordinary white men. Broadly termed the “lower sorts,” “lower classes,” “plebeians,” or “laboring people” by historians and contemporaries alike, these mariners,
journeymen, lesser artisans, servants, and wage laborers utilized many of the same consumer, social, and labor networks as their supposed superiors to carve out their own future in British America. Accounting for most of the white population in British North America, ordinary men and women did not own as much land or property per capita as their social superiors, but their influence nevertheless increased through sheer numbers, in addition to their necessity for the colonies’ economic expansion.22

Such social confusion worried many self-professed gentlemen. Elitist colonists were especially concerned by the lower classes’ alarming disregard for Old World traditions of deference. Acts of defiance ranged from the mundane to the extreme: disapproving preachers experienced disdain from their social inferiors; constables struggled to maintain power over colonists who thought laws “good for nothing,” and roving gentlemen like Dr. Hamilton found that they had to “submit to the discipline” of their “inferiors” in taverns. Thus while scholars continue to argue over the role of deference in colonial American society, colonists like Dr. Hamilton had made up their minds on the subject: deference existed, but it did not yet endure to the degree they wished.23 Many colonial leaders believed that the controversial rhetoric of midcentury transatlantic religious revivals only further inspired such behavior, since celebrity preachers such as George Whitefield and Johnathan Edwards urged colonial American Protestants to think beyond the staid traditions of the Anglican Church. One citizen damned Whitefield and his followers’ “monstrous” message as “strongly tinctured with impertinence and disrespect toward their superiors in that they are perpetually endeavoring to level all ranks and do away with all distinctions.”24

Even long-reliable methods of criminal punishment seemed to grow stale. Having caught a man named Watt counterfeiting money in 1733, Philadelphia magistrates ordered that he be “whipt, pilloried and cropt” in the city’s public market. Leaders also encouraged onlookers to throw debris and snowballs at Watt, which they hoped would further humiliate the villain while also creating a common bond of hatred against anti-deferential acts like counterfeiting. Unfortunately, Watt “behaved so as to touch the Compassion of the Mob, and they did not fling at him (as was expected) neither Snow-balls nor any Thing else.” Elitist colonists grew more anxious every time ordinary colonists thumbed their noses at leaders’ expectations of deference.25

As the historian David Shields has contended, colonists’ notions of civility enabled otherwise disparate peoples to “bridge distinctions . . .
[and] make common cause with them.” In theory, Shields was right, as gentlemen repeatedly asserted the need for harmony and order among the diverse peoples of North America in their professions of civil society. Yet such an ideal was much easier to debate in small communities of “belles lettres” than to realize on the hardscrabble streets of the city or at the raucous table of a tavern. Philosophies of British American civil society did not develop from a preexisting harmony of accord but rather out of an intense anxiety among a growing sector of the urban populace. These self-styled leaders worried that if they rose as the “Representative[s]” for their local populace, they might be “guilty of the highest public crime that can be thought of in civil society”: allowing the uncivil masses to steer the fate of North America.\textsuperscript{26}

Benjamin Franklin used the example of an urban fire to expound on Old World tenets of social stability and deference.\textsuperscript{27} Franklin contended that during a 1733 Philadelphia inferno he witnessed “active Men of different Ages, Professions and Titles; who, as of one Mind and Rank, apply themselves with Vigilance and Resolution, according to their Abilities,” to conquer the conflagration. Housekeepers, local leaders, and itinerants alike threw themselves into the “flaming Shingles” to save the home and its occupants: “They do it not for the Sake of Reward or Money or Fame. . . . But they have a Reward in themselves, and they love one another.” Franklin could only conclude, “Here are brave Men, Men of Spirit and Humanity, good Citizens, or Neighbours, capable and worthy of civil Society.” Here, then, was gentlemen’s dream of a British American civil society. Men would come together “as of one Mind and Rank” but would still divide themselves “according to their Abilities.” Those “chiefest in Authority” would maintain their social superiority in their ability to “direct” their inferiors, who with “Courage, Industry, and Goodness” demonstrated their worthiness. Harmony and order coexisted in extreme efficiency. Everyone knew their place, and they embraced it.\textsuperscript{28}

Similar aspirations resonated throughout colonial American cities. Franklin—a man who, like Dr. Hamilton, worked with his hands and clawed his way up the social ladder through genteel sociability—continued his reflections on civil society in 1735, asserting that a British American civil society “has no other Master here besides the Consent of the Plurality, or the Will of one or more whom the Plurality has appointed to act for the Good of the whole body.” An anonymous writer to the Boston Evening Post in 1760 similarly contended, “It is a truth acknowledged by all who have examined into the constitution of civil society, that the strength and vigour of the whole, depends on the union and harmony
of the particular constituent parts.” For these men, the heart of a British American civil society was contingent on “union and harmony.” They believed that a small group of men should “act for the Good of the whole body.” Such assertions mirrored Dr. Hamilton’s assertion of the need to maintain “proper discipline and order” over the masses just as they recalled Franklin’s 1733 claim that the “chiefest in Authority” should “direct” the operations of the fire crew. Ultimately, these contentions revealed growing anxiety among self-styled leaders of colonial society. Elitist men worried that if not properly regulated, the increasing number of ordinary and unfree peoples—the “great Leviathan of Civil Society”—would destroy America’s civil society before it could truly blossom. Even more than their counterparts in Europe and Britain, who did not have to contend with vast tracts of “wilderness,” large numbers of “savage” Indians, and a lack of cities, British American gentlemen came to believe that their civil society needed equal measures of harmony and control. Harmony would reign as the “Plurality” accepted their station “according to their Abilities,” which would in turn allow certain men to organize and direct civil society to a successful end.\(^{29}\)

Such professions of a civil society ruled pseudo-democratically by those deemed most “fit” would not have seemed at all foreign to revolutionary Patriots, or America’s founders for that matter. In fact, as *Inn Civility* contends, revolutionary American notions of republicanism, liberty, and civility were in many ways midcentury ideals of British American civil society simply remodeled to fit rebels’ dreams of a New World order. The American Republicanism that Patriots championed, in short, was largely reliant on midcentury elitist colonists’ failed attempts at a British-style civil society. Whether Patriots liked to admit it, the two ideologies remained firmly intertwined.

Asserting one’s vision for civil order in the local newspaper was easy; achieving that vision in the untidy chaos of the real world proved something else entirely. Just as anxiety and discontent distinguished British Americans’ efforts to craft a civil society during the first two-thirds of the eighteenth century, so too did insecurity continue to shape the evolution of American civil society during the tumultuous period of violence and revolution (1765–83). The Stamp Act Crisis of 1765–66 was more than a crisis of commercial policy; for many colonial leaders, it also felt like a crisis of civil society, as tavern goers and publicans from Boston to Charleston joined to formulate riots beyond the control of magistrates, burning leaders’ effigies and threatening their lives and property. Although Parliament repealed the Stamp Act in 1766, the ensuing years
only brought further difficulties for elitist men, as masses of ordinary colonists grew in power and one new tax after another arrived on their shores. The elusive hierarchical and ideological lines that certain middling- and upper-class gentlemen struggled to realize over the past sixty-five years steadily transformed in the face of imperial rupture.

By the time the American Revolution began in 1775, many colonists had recast notions of a British American civil society into what they believed was a more equal and virtuous governing ideology: American republicanism. Yet, like the mercurial ideals of civil society that impelled colonists’ midcentury societal goals, republicanism proved hard to pin down. In fact, American republicanism was not all that different from colonial American civil society. Rebels simply repackaged midcentury ideas of liberty, civility, and order to fit their emerging—and equally mercurial—ideas of democracy, antimonarchism, and militancy. “Unbecoming British” and “becoming America” overlapped more than diverged, and perhaps nowhere was this complicated, contradictory, and fitful process more apparent than the tavern.30

Imperial Pubs and the British American City

The amplification of British American urban centers was imperative for elitist colonists’ efforts to create a civil society. North America’s population expanded at an unprecedented rate in the eighteenth century, growing from just over 250,000 people in 1700 to more than one million souls by 1750. Besides natural population growth, this boom coincided with an influx of immigrants and enslaved laborers on America’s shores. English, Scottish, Irish, German, Dutch, French, Spanish, and African peoples carried with them myriad traditions and worldviews to North America, which affected the continent’s cultural landscape. As mainland cities including Philadelphia, New York City, Boston, Newport, Charleston, Williamsburg, and Annapolis finally caught up to their peers, England’s “country towns,” in sociable amenities, population growth, commercial prosperity, and civic development, urban colonists perceived themselves as especially valuable members of the British Empire.31

British American colonists constantly weighed themselves against competing empires, religions, and supposed “others” in their hopes of “another Great Britain rising in America.” In 1757, one colonist described fellow patriots as those “who have always distinguished ourselves by a Jealousy of our Rights; by our Loyalty; and our Zeal for the common Interest of His Majesty’s Dominions on the Continent.” Seven
years earlier, Benjamin Franklin had sold the fifth edition of *Britain’s Remembrancer* at his Philadelphia print shop. Basically a how-to guide for becoming a good Briton, *Britain’s Remembrancer* provided readers with cultural and political insights. Politically, it offered “Some Hints, shewing what is in the Power of the several Ranks of People, and of every BRITON, to do toward securing the State from all its Enemies.” The volume also took a cultural approach to acting the Briton, investigating “the Character of this Age and Nation,” in addition to a “brief view of the Effects of the Vices which now prevail in the British Dominions.” Franklin assured his colonial customers that the book was “acceptable . . . to the Publick,” as their comrades in England had already purchased over four thousand copies. Eighteenth-century urban colonists now more than ever before could assert their British allegiance through a diverse array of cultural and social actions.  

Although only about 5 percent of colonists lived in North American cities by the mid-eighteenth century, these urban centers were far more influential than their size or proportion of the population suggests. As the historian Gary B. Nash has argued, colonial American cities developed at an astounding rate and represented the “cutting edge” of social change in British North America. For a growing number of British and European thinkers, the city represented the unbridled potential as well as pitfalls of civil society. One midcentury New Yorker, for instance, sent his son to study in New York City “in Hopes of his increasing there in human Urbanity, and genteel Civility,” while the New York City gentleman Cadwallader Colden reveled in “all the publick Intertainments” that the city offered. Such “publick Intertainments,” of course, might offer as many opportunities of vulgarity to a gentleman as they did civilizing experiences. Although prostitution, debauchery, violence, and drunkenness were no doubt widely available in the surrounding agricultural hinterlands, the city crowded these vices into closer proximity than anywhere else in the colonies. The city thus reflected elitist colonists’ coinciding notions of hope and fear: one might embrace such urban opportunities for incivility as much as civility. Colonists’ perceived struggles for civil society became especially apparent within the urban tavern.

Colonial American taverns have received much attention over the past quarter century. Historians generally approach North American taverns as sites where we can follow transformations that ultimately helped spur the American Revolution or as spaces where lines of difference were heightened during the eighteenth century. David Conroy, for instance, used the taverns of colonial Massachusetts to reveal how New Englanders
opposed the authority of their leaders, while Peter Thompson delved into Philadelphia’s eighteenth-century tavern culture to understand how the “interplay of community and society” in the Quaker city unfolded during the Revolution. Benjamin Carp, finally, investigated how New York City’s taverns allowed colonists to combine “drunken disorder as well as orderly mobilization” in the years immediately preceding the American Revolution. Other scholars, including Sharon Salinger and David Shields, took a broader approach—regionally and methodologically—to integrate colonial tavern going into larger social constructions. Salinger surveyed rural and urban taverns in the thirteen colonies to reveal those peoples excluded from tavern going and, in turn, public life, while Shields delved into eighteenth-century gentlemen’s attempts to cultivate an air of exclusivity by interacting with “belles lettres” in urban taverns and coffeehouses in Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston. Ultimately, then, scholars have primarily relied on taverns for their utility in analyzing the lead-up to the American Revolution or as spaces that reveal the inequalities of colonial American society.

*Inn Civility* builds on these works—temporally and geographically—by utilizing urban taverns as critical spaces through which to investigate the inherent contradictions and conflicts of British American societal negotiation from midcentury to the end of the American Revolution. More specifically, this book demonstrates that midcentury tavern goers inadvertently fostered a society that eventually played into American revolutionaries’ emerging notions of republicanism, liberty, and civility. In many ways, eighteenth-century urban taverns—the most numerous and popular public spaces in colonial America—emerged as ideal breeding grounds for early American republicanism, even if many colonists would not have understood them as such. Taverns’ popularity and ubiquity make them the perfect places to track Americans’ evolving sense of self, place, and time.

Urban taverns were dynamic spaces that matched the philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s conception of “an image of a complex of mobilities, a nexus of in and out conduits.” This is not to argue that other “public spheres” should retreat to the fringes of urban society: the booming of sociability that characterized midcentury colonial cities fostered an important web of public spaces, ranging from newly steepled churches to crowded markets and street fairs to genteel academies, libraries, and hospitals. The urban tavern must be comprehended as wholly encompassed by larger networks of urbanization, commercialism, and sociability. Such a framework reveals that societal contestation was not limited to
Conroy’s New England or Thompson’s Philadelphia taverns. Colonists’ efforts to create (or, in some colonists’ minds, destroy) a civil society bled into every facet of their public lives, and the tavern remained a central component of public life for white, urban-dwelling men.

As colonial cities thrived at midcentury, taverns evolved into their most numerous public spaces. One Bostonian reckoned in 1750 that “an Eighth Part of our Houses are either Dram Shops or Taverns.” He was not far off. By the mid-eighteenth century, Philadelphia boasted approximately 120 licensed taverns, New York City about 220, and Boston around 150. To put such a figure in perspective, New York City had one tavern for every 115 people. Farther south, Charleston maintained around 100 licensed taverns for its 4,000 residents. While Williamsburg boasted only 15 taverns by the mid-eighteenth century, this number falls in line with the proportion of licenses to total population in larger cities: one tavern for every 100 to 130 residents. No official record exists for Annapolis’s tavern numbers at midcentury, but it is likely that Annapolis, with just about 1,000 residents by 1750, maintained roughly 8 taverns. At least three new taverns were constructed in Annapolis between 1735 and 1750, indicating a growing demand for these popular spaces as the city’s population and economic power spiked. Of course, such statistics take only licensed taverns into account. Unlicensed taverns proliferated throughout British North America as well, vaulting taverns’ public frequency to dizzying heights.

Beyond numbers, urban taverns’ assorted amenities made them ideal gathering spots for a diverse set of white men. Following their compatriots in England, colonial tavern keepers offered patrons a staggering array of imported goods, ranging from Asian tea and West Indian rum to East Indian spices. Tavern services also broadened, as colonial tavern goers could book passage on ships traversing the Atlantic Ocean or watch as an itinerant English acting troupe performed in a tavern’s main hall. Imperial celebrations such as the king’s birthday, the arrival of a visiting governor, or the anniversary of a British holiday regularly occurred in taverns. Sermons from transatlantic preachers, African slave auctions, cock fights, and public debates over war and taxation echoed between taverns’ walls, and tickets for traveling exhibits and horse races cluttered their bars.

Urban taverns also served as key societal filters. Although one need not be wealthy, well connected, or pious to step into most colonial American taverns, one did need to be a white man to enjoy the full benefits of the urban tavern. Reflecting white males’ repeated efforts to direct
British American society, mainstream urban taverns emerged as masculine spaces where women and “others” were, at least in theory, relegated to the fringes of public society. Despite leaders’ efforts to bar blacks, Native Americans, servants, and women from public life, many still found their way into their own tavern spaces. These supposed societal inferiors opened their own unlicensed taverns where they could interact with whomever they wanted and purchase (often stolen or black market) goods deemed above their station. Although unofficially restricted from the public world of taverns, many women used the tavern trade to extend their roles into imperial and patriarchal networks. Other female tavern workers, however, became further entrenched in the world of domestic servitude as male tavern goers often sexually and verbally accosted them. Diversity hardly bred equality.\(^{42}\)

Urban taverns emerged as central components—both symbolically and physically—of colonial America’s developing metropolitanism. In a more figurative sense, Britons and foreigners came to associate urban centers with a flowering tavern culture. As the Englishman Thomas Walduck jested in the early eighteenth century, “Upon all the new settlements the Spaniards make, the first thing they do is build a church, the first thing ye Dutch do upon a new colony is to build them a fort, but the first thing ye English do, be it in the most remote part of ye world, or amongst the most barbarous Indians, is to set up a tavern or drinking house.” Visitors to the colonies noticed the preponderance of tavern going in British American public life. Upon touring British America in the 1760s, one Frenchman remarked that because “Tavern Keeping is the best business that is Caryed on” in large and small towns alike, “they are well stocked with taverns.” With such a variety of services and customers, urban taverns—arguably more than other public spaces like squares, churches, or markets—forced colonists to reconstitute their sense of an urban or public “center.” Yet the centrality of taverns extended beyond symbolism, for they also served as tangible fulcrums of commerce, trade, and sociability. When John Goodsell of New York announced the sale of his land and homestead in 1759, he hoped that an innkeeper might purchase his holdings because taverns were, in Goodsell’s reckoning, “here much needed.”\(^{43}\)

Not every urban tavern was the same; in fact, diversity remained one of their biggest selling points and a major goal for business-oriented owners. As other historians have posited, different taverns attracted specific facets of society—for example, taverns directed at local dockworkers or ethnic groups and coffeehouses catering to businessmen.\(^{44}\)
They gained reputations for their service and amenities, as well as the character of their owners and workers. Several eighteenth-century tavern keepers designed their businesses to reflect the most up-to-date architectural trends, adding extra stories to their structures with new rooms intended for specific purposes. In certain rooms, exotic mahogany furniture replaced grooved pine, alluring art hung from walls, and books, pamphlets, and newspapers covered tables. Those patrons who considered themselves socially elite and did not wish to rub elbows with their uncivil social inferiors could escape to such rooms, and, eventually, whole taverns, that looked and felt much like their own fine parlors.

Other licensed tavern keepers served a humbler clientele. Their spaces crowded around a pipe-littered great room with basic decoration, services, food, and amenities. The various unlicensed taverns existed in a separate sphere—improvised spaces in back alleys, basements, and backrooms. Some taverns stood as grand edifices on the corner of a bustling market street, while others were hidden in a motley array of businesses and private homes. Others, finally, existed in a more liminal sphere, emerging to serve certain clandestine exchanges just as fast as they receded into relative anonymity. Taverns were wholly engrained in the diverse web of urban public life.

Even appreciating the inherent diversity of urban taverns, these central public spaces provide a unifying lens of analysis. Though factors such as geography (the northern colonies versus the southern colonies, for example), population numbers (larger vs. smaller cities), inhabitants (a slave society vs. a society with slaves), and personal preference had noticeable effects on the way colonists in different areas lived, urban taverns retained consistent purposes, as white men required the same basic things from a tavern: food, drink, lodging, and camaraderie. Accordingly, a licensed tavern in a smaller southern city like Williamsburg, Virginia, would have operated similarly to one in Boston, Massachusetts. Such relative uniformity allows us to concentrate on patterns, networks, and developments that transcended local environments.

The following six chapters analyze urban tavern goers’ complicated struggles to realize a civil society in early America and ultimately reveal how midcentury conceptions of civility drove republican dreams of an independent America. The first two chapters take a double-pronged approach to understanding elitist colonists’ aspirations for how a British American civil society might look and operate. Chapter 1 investigates gentlemen’s attempts to transplant Old World notions of spatial exclusivity, consumer power, and social capital into city taverns and coffeehouses
at midcentury. In their minds, such spaces would allow them to rise above the muck of ordinary colonists and direct British American society into a more civil future.

Chapter 2 follows this line of thought into elitist tavern goers’ cosmopolitan ambitions. Having established a variety of polite drinking spaces, gentlemen hoped to cultivate erudite identities of cosmopolitanism, which they believed would only further their civilizing efforts. Yet, as was so often the case with colonists’ civil aspirations, their cosmopolitan endeavors revealed the inherent contradictions of civil society more than its unbridled potential. Specifically, tavern goers’ allegedly cosmopolitan interactions entrenched their sense of ethnocentrism, hierarchy, and nationalism rather than broadening their worldview.

As chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate, elitist tavern goers’ failures at cosmopolitanism hint at a much broader trend of contradiction and confusion in midcentury British American cities. Gentlemen’s pipe dreams of a well-ordered, well-defined civil society steadily disintegrated in the face of reality. Chapter 3 reveals that while elitist colonists managed to carve out a small niche of exclusive coffeehouses and city taverns in British American cities, most urban taverns opened their doors to anyone with a pocketbook. Their owners, after all, needed to bring as many men into their businesses as they could if they were to stay afloat in such a competitive market. Accordingly, most taverns operated nothing like the exclusive, polite, and regimented coffeehouses of elitist colonists’ dreams. On the contrary, urban taverns—like British American society at large—were generally jumbled environments of social confusion in which men of differing classes and creeds struggled to establish their position in a world defined by indecision.

Yet, as chapter 4 uncovers, mixed-class taverns were only the beginning of the story, for ordinary and unfree peoples also cultivated a healthy network of unlicensed taverns, or “disorderly” houses. And though in theory elitist colonists would never lower themselves to visiting such hives of vice and debauchery, in reality gentlemen were some of the most visible customers of these “uncivil” spaces. In an ongoing balancing act of contradiction and power, supposedly civil men often donned the guise of the rake to frolic in unlicensed taverns and, in turn, assert their influence over their social inferiors while thumbing their noses at genteel modes of behavior. Just as elitist men repeatedly attempted to dictate the parameters of civility through cosmopolitan endeavors like club meetings, literary debates, and consumerism, so too did they violate and reconstruct these civil constraints with little to no repercussions.
Chapters 5 and 6 follow the contradictions and confusions of British American civility into the “revolutionary period”—1765 to 1783—of North America and demonstrate how Patriots relied on such mercurial ideologies to build their own society in North America. Chapter 5 investigates the pitfalls of such societal dissonance through the lens of the Stamp Act Crisis of 1765–66, demonstrating how the growing power of the lower sorts further fractured previous ideals of civility and order. Disorder defined British America’s cities from August 1765 to April 1766, as diverse tavern goers sought to overturn taxes they considered iminical to civil society. As chapter 5 demonstrates, colonists’ interactions in taverns during the Stamp Act Crisis brought the contradictions of civil society into sharp and devastating focus. Tavern keepers, well aware of their spaces’ communal and economic centrality, steadily transformed them to match the tumultuous political atmosphere of British American urban centers after 1765, which further aided in the transformation of midcentury societal aspirations. Thus, while many tavern-going colonists liked to believe that their success in repealing the Stamp Act through a combination of violence and coercion marked a high point of societal order and imperial allegiance, the following ten years forced colonists loyal and rebellious to alter their previous notions of civil society.

Chapter 6 investigates how between 1766 and 1783 colonists commandeered taverns according to their unpredictable visions of civility and liberty, which ultimately helped to restructure midcentury notions of civil society to fit Patriots’ nascent notions of republicanism. Before the Revolutionary War officially broke out in 1775, colonists divided themselves among urban taverns: tavern committees looked to the Stamp Act Crisis as a model for resistance efforts, stalwart Loyalists remained wedded to previous notions of British civility and order, and many in between attempted to navigate the murky parameters of British American societal flux. Although the series of riots, misbehavior, and resistance measures that marked the thirteen colonies between 1765 and 1775 might be termed “relatively minor provincial uprisings” in the context of “a general crisis of imperial rule” that erupted throughout the Atlantic world beginning in 1765, these “tremors” nevertheless proved vital in transforming colonial American society. By 1775, burgeoning notions of republicanism, combined with the disorders of war, had begun to render midcentury British American civil society (at least in name) unpopular. Once bastions of societal experimentation, colonial cities descended into occupied hell holes, and their taverns served as escapes from society more than spaces through which to shape it. Although rural taverns had
been common facets of North American society since the seventeenth century, their fringe location became a benefit rather than a hindrance during the American Revolution, as these rural spaces arose as republicans’ testing grounds for their vision of an American civil society. Amidst such disorder, ordinary colonists established themselves as some of the most violent and influential men in North America. This divide would define America for years to come.

By the close of the American Revolution, the deference that midcentury elitist men so struggled to attain had been set aside, at least temporarily, as the radical rhetoric of revolution forced leaders to repackage many of their core ideologies to fit this nascent form of republican rule. The revolutionary societal environment had allowed radical American Whigs to direct societal development, often through violence and coercion. Such militancy had created hitherto unimaginable levels of partisanship and mistrust in the early republic, as Americans divided themselves along notions of civility and political allegiance. Understanding party politics as a destructive and selfish pursuit that would only destroy the United States of America before it ever truly emerged, those elites who met in Philadelphia to craft the Constitution in 1787 believed that midcentury ideologies of civil society—specifically, order and hierarchy—would help to unify their fractured collection of nascent states. They simply had to adjust these ideas to fit the new brand of American republicanism that had taken aggressive hold in America. This decision would change western society forever.