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Philosophy, Religion & Intellectual History

Subtopic
Intellectual History

What America's Founders Learned from Antiquity

Course Guidebook

Caroline Winterer, PhD

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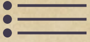

1

Antiquity Erupts in 18th-Century America

In politics, education, art, urban design, and even teacups, Americans of the founding era surrounded themselves with classical antiquity. These revolutionaries looked to republics that were 2,000 years old and 3,000 miles away to understand and make sense of their own tumultuous times. But why? This course will unravel the mystery. You'll see how classical antiquity shaped every aspect of the revolutionary and founding eras—from the excitement of bold new ideas in art and literature to the reverence for tried-and-true models from Greece and Rome; from the hope for a new land of freedom to the reality of enslavement for millions of people; and from the greatest fears of tyranny, decline, and fall to the highest hopes for a truly representative government by the people and for the people.

Uncovering the Ancients

One morning in the early fall of 79 AD, Romans in Pompeii and Herculaneum were going about their business. Suddenly the ground shook, and a tall column of smoke blotted out the sun. Everyone in Pompeii and Herculaneum turned their heads toward the giant volcano looming just a few miles away—Mount Vesuvius. Just after noon, it exploded, and ash and pumice were pumped miles into the atmosphere. Within minutes, the deadly shower rained down on Pompeii. Most residents died instantly from a heat so intense that it baked their lungs and cracked their teeth. Some of the ash and pumice was heavy and dense enough that it flowed along the ground. This hellish river buried Herculaneum in nearly 70 feet of ooze. Most people were simply vaporized by the heat, and the rest were entombed in what soon became solid rock.

The lost cities buried at the foot of Mount Vesuvius lay mostly silent for the next 1,700 years. And then, in the 1700s, picks and trowels smashed through the rock at Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Pompeii was the easiest to dig up since it was buried in pumice, which was light and soft. Soon a whole city frozen in time came into view. Bodies lay in the cobbled streets, just where they had fallen. The corpses had rotted away long ago, but an empty hole remained—a natural cast into which plaster could be poured to restore the shape of the bodies that had expired in agony. Hacking away with spades and picks, the workers also revealed Roman houses, filled with cooking pots and beds. In Herculaneum, the harder rock there had preserved papyrus, a kind of paper made of reeds.

Pompeii and Herculaneum had preserved something that no one in the 18th century had ever seen before: the actual people of the ancient world. These uncovered towns made the classical world actually seem real. And Rome was not just for the high and mighty. Pompeii showed that the empire's provincial cities were also places of farmers, blacksmiths, midwives, soldiers, and slaves. Ordinary people in Europe and America now began to imagine that they could also be Greeks and Romans—and that the lessons of Rome and Greece might be for them, too.

Many of America's revolutionaries also saw that the classical world was not just a dead civilization to be admired and emulated. These ancient societies were also the springboard for something new—a modern nation founded on ideals that the ancients had never dared to imagine. These ideals concerned human equality, individual self-determination, and representative democracy.

Surpassing the Ancients

Today people take for granted that republics and democracies are durable forms of government. Many nations worldwide are governed by their citizens, and in the United States, Americans now have direct experience of more than 200 years of republican government.

But in the 18th century, people had almost no examples of successful, long-lasting republics. In fact, history told them that republics tended to be swallowed up by powerful monarchies. The founding fathers lacked direct experience of successful government by the people and for the people. Therefore they depended on ancient Greece and Rome to build the new nation. Those societies gave the founders enough material to create a science of politics that would help them build a new republic.

But the American founders went much further than the ancients. In the Declaration of Independence, they imagined that all men were created equal—an idea any Greek or Roman would have found strange and wrong. Likewise, the US Constitution drew its authority from the people alone and not from aristocrats or kings. This notion would also have seemed utterly foreign and strange to anyone living in ancient Greece or Rome. But as James Madison said in *Federalist*, no. 14, the American people had not "suffered a blind veneration for antiquity, for custom, or for names, to overrule the suggestions of their own good sense, the knowledge of their own situation, and the lessons of their own experience."

Ancient Societies and the Enslaved

Revolutionary America and ancient Rome were both slave societies, with roughly a third of the population in bondage. Thomas Jefferson and many of the other American founders were inspired and repelled by the practice of slavery in the ancient world. They thought it had freed the best thinkers to rule, but they also worried about the contradictions of slavery in a land of liberty and equality.

On Jefferson's plantation, he and his family lived in a house that his many slaves had helped to build—Monticello, a villa designed to imitate the architecture of the ancient Romans. Some of these slaves had classical names. One was Minerva, a 12-year-old girl named for the Roman goddess of wisdom and war. Ironically the South's forced illiteracy laws made it illegal for her to learn to read lest she get ideas about liberty, revolution, and human rights. In an age that said all people were created equal, Minerva showed the hard limits of this ideal.

So Greco-Roman slavery also shaped the experience of the enslaved people of America. They lived in and around mansions made to look like Greek and Roman temples, and many of them had classical names like Scipio, Venus, and Cato. Understandably they had complicated attitudes toward Greece and Rome: Should they look to these ancient societies as the source of their bondage or their freedom?

Something New

The American Revolution intersected with classical ideas and symbols to make something new out of something old everywhere. In the 1770s and 1780s, Greece and Rome symbolized republican government rather than the hubris of empire.

People strolling around New York City during the American Revolution walked down Queen Street, Hanover Street, Duke Street, and King George Street. The arteries of the city were reminders that a British king was in charge, even 3,000 miles across the Atlantic Ocean. In 1754, one of those British kings, George II, founded a college in New York called King's College. The college shut down amid the chaos of the revolution. When it reopened 8 years later, a whole new world had arrived. The British were gone, and King's College was renamed Columbia College.

Columbia was an invented Roman goddess cobbled together from the name of Christopher Columbus. In fact, she popped up everywhere in the US after 1783, announcing the political ideals of the new republic. Rivers, mountains, and even the new federal city in northern Virginia were named Columbia—the invented American symbol that looked backward to Roman iconography and forward to a future that was radically different from the classical world. With her white robes and American flag, Columbia stood for a new blend of ancient republican government with modern ideas of representation and equality.

A Classical Education

How did the founders know so much about the classical world? The answer lies in their classical education. For the first 250 years of American history, the most successful people were ministers, lawyers, merchants, and statesmen. In an age before television, radio, and social media, they relied completely on the power of their pens and their voices, and they needed models of eloquence, reason, and authority to persuade, motivate, and govern. The Greeks and Romans had such examples in spades because their societies also relied on persuasive speech and writing.

Therefore, a classical education dominated American colleges from the founding of Harvard in 1636 to the end of the Civil War. Such an education directly prepared graduates for the most lucrative, powerful, and prestigious careers.

Six-year-old boys would start with simple things, such as *Aesop's Fables* in Latin, before working through many Latin texts and Roman histories until they graduated from college. As boys got older, they would start tackling Greek, with its different alphabet and complicated syntax. Until the early 1800s, the Greek many American students learned was Koine—or common—Greek, which was spoken around the time Jesus lived. This Greek was used in the New Testament. Many boys became ministers, so they needed to read the New Testament in the original language. A lot of boys also learned Hebrew to read the Old Testament. So a classical education in America was often a religious education, too.

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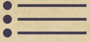

2

A Republic of Farmers: America and Early Rome

In the American revolutionary period, the classical world came alive. Ancient Greece and Rome were far away in time and place—but now they became relevant for Americans' very survival as a people. This lecture focuses on the years leading up to the American Revolution, when colonial Americans found inspiration in the Roman republic and used it to frame their identity vis-à-vis Great Britain. Until the Civil War, American popular opinion was roughly divided between those who wanted to keep the nation as a simple republic of farmers in the image of the Roman republic and those who favored commercial and urban expansion in the vein of the Roman Empire.

The Roman Republic and Colonial America

In 509 BC, the Romans overthrew the last king to rule Rome. Thereafter, Rome was ruled by a combination of three powers: two elected consuls, a senate made up of aristocrats, and popular assemblies. Rome was a republic because its government represented the combined makeup of its people and their views. After a period of stability and growth, the republic was wracked by civil wars during the 1st century BC, which culminated in the transition to the Roman Empire in 27 BC. The American revolutionaries idealized this early, republican period in Rome's history.

Approximately 90% of the population of colonial America worked directly on a farm. The colonies produced wheat, tobacco, corn, sugar, trees, indigo, silk, and other desirable products to fuel British manufacturing and keep Britain ahead of France and Spain in the race to dominate the world.

In the 18th century, mercantilism worked as follows: The mother country—for example, Britain—established a far-away colony in a fertile or mineral-rich region. The colony benefited the mother country by supplying it with raw materials, and the mother country benefited the colony by supplying it with manufactured goods made from those raw materials. The key to mercantilist imperialism was that the colonies had to buy from the mother country. Buying from another empire was called smuggling and was illegal.

So colonies were in a subordinate position to the mother country. But London saw itself as a benefactor, defending the colonies from attack by other empires. In fact, the 18th century is the age of the first truly world wars, in which many European battles were fought in distant colonial theaters, such as China, India, and North America.

One of the first reasons colonial Americans loved the Roman republic is that they thought farming had led to Rome's spectacular rise and success during its early centuries of growth and that their own farming would lead to the growth and wealth of Britain's empire. One huge influence on American thinking was the Roman statesman, soldier, and farmer Cato the Elder, born in 234 BC. In his treatise *De agricultura*, which dates from about 160 BC,

Cato said that "it is from the farming class that the bravest men and the sturdiest soldiers come."

Colonists also loved to cite the Roman statesman Cicero, who lived in the 1st century BC. Cicero also elevated farming to the best of all Roman occupations in his treatise titled *On Duties*. Farming is fine for slaves and servants, he said. But for a free man, farming is essential. With his own source of income, the farmer has both independence of body and independence of mind. Thus free from dependence on others, the farmer can think about the larger matters of governing Rome. Cicero thought that farmers' independence of mind contributed to their "civic virtue"—that is, their capacity to put the needs of the Roman republic before their own private needs. The agrarian Roman republic gave Americans a particular identity in relationship to Great Britain. Americans told themselves that they—the farmers of America—were the true backbone of British prosperity.

Classical Republicanism

Inspired by their reading of Cato, Cicero, and other Romans, colonial Americans elevated farming from agriculture to a whole political ideology called classical republicanism. Translated from a private virtue into a public virtue, farming helped to uphold the republic itself—at least in the minds of the American revolutionaries.

The yeoman farmer was the hero of classical republicanism. He was a male farmer who owned his own land, whether a half-acre or a thousand acres. The yeoman farmer was heroic because he had a quality Americans deeply admired—independence. By independence, Americans meant two things. First, the yeoman farmer was economically independent and self-sufficient. Second, his economic independence safeguarded his intellectual and political independence. Because he owned his own land, no one could force him to do anything. And since he could beat his metal plow into a metal sword in his own smithy, the yeoman farmer also became the ideal soldier of a republic. He didn't need to be paid or coerced to fight because he saw that land was worth fighting for. Americans thought the yeoman farmer embodied the essential quality of civic virtue: thinking of your country first and yourself second.

So Americans of the revolutionary era crafted an ideology that linked farms to the political ideal of civic virtue on which the Roman republic was thought to rest. But republics are the most fragile political formation. In a monarchy, ultimate authority flows from a king or queen; in a republic, power sits with the people. Republics rest on the people's willingness to put the interests of the republic ahead of their own private desires.

But 18th-century Americans lived in an age of monarchies. The few republics in history—like the city-states of ancient Greece—had pretty much all met a disastrous end. None had lasted very long, and most had ended when a more powerful monarchy had conquered them. The Roman republic was the great exception to this dismal history. This republic not only lasted for about 500 years but also expanded during that time to conquer all of the Italian peninsula, Greece, Spain, North Africa, and Egypt.

Americans gave a lot of credit for this early success to Rome's farmers, whose civic virtue upheld the republic. This Roman republican civic virtue became extremely relevant when British policy toward the American colonies suddenly shifted in 1763. After about 150 years of essentially leaving them alone, Parliament began to impose a series of new taxes on the Americans to raise revenue for the larger British Empire.

Taxation without Representation

For 150 years, the local colonial legislatures, called the assemblies, had taxed American colonists to fund local matters, like paying for the local militia. These assemblies were made up of locally elected men, so the colonists were accustomed to taxation "with representation." However, in 1763, taxes were being imposed from the outside—that is, by Parliament, to which the colonists did not send representatives—for purposes that were not directly related to local colonial matters. Instead, the new taxes were about running the British Empire.

During the previous decade, a giant war had broken out between Britain and its archenemy, France. One of the major theaters of the so-called Seven Years' War was in North America. When the British finally won in 1763 and sent France packing from the continent, they were left with a huge new chunk of land—and a staggering amount of debt, which they were now asking the Americans to help pay. Soon Parliament imposed a parade of new taxes, such as the Sugar Tax of 1764 and the Townshend duties of 1767.

Of course, the American colonies benefited from Britain's removal of France from North America. This victory would help the colonists to move westward across the Appalachians, into territories formerly claimed by France and still dominated by Native peoples. However, many colonists also began to worry that the British were flexing their muscle in new and bigger ways. The Seven Years' War had ended in 1763, but the recently crowned King George III and Parliament wanted to raise money to keep a standing army in America. The force was intended to maintain the peace with the Natives, but Americans thought a standing army among the king's own people sounded like a fox in the henhouse. And the colonies had to help pay for this without being consulted, which was taxation without representation.

Objection

In the middle of the 1760s, a new form of American political language emerged. Colonists reached into their Roman history and pulled out a very selective reading of the Roman republic to tell London that the Americans were virtuous farmers helping to hold up the British Empire on their shoulders.

The first big outcry came from a surprising source—a wealthy Philadelphia lawyer named John Dickinson. Born in 1732, Dickinson was a farmer in the sense that he owned great slave plantations inherited from his father, but the Townshend duties of 1767 pushed him to action. These new taxes on luxury items like paint, tea, glass, and lead were the latest attempt by Parliament to raise the desperately needed cash to fund the growing British Empire. Americans were ready to push back, but no one was more eloquent in their objections—or more Roman—than the quiet and classically educated Dickinson.

In 1767, he published his *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania, to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies* in newspapers and then as a book. They were read and celebrated throughout the colonies. "Beloved Countrymen," he stated in the first letter, "I am a Farmer settled … near the banks of the river Delaware. … My farm is small; my servants are few, and good; I have a little money at interest; I wish for no more; … and with a contented grateful mind, I am completing the number of days allotted to me by divine goodness."

Of course, his farm was not small, and Dickinson himself was a lawyer. But Americans listened to this man who said he was a farmer because they thought farmers had civic virtue. Dickinson proceeded to tell them that the Townshend duties violated the colonies' rights and liberties to taxation only with their consent. He described America as a special place of farms and fields rather than corrupting commerce and big cities like London. Each of Dickinson's letters ended with a Latin quotation to the effect that Americans should buck up. "Nil desperandum!" he wrote, quoting the Roman poet Horace's *Odes*. The simple virtues of Rome's republic would save America from British oppression.

Dickinson was certainly not advocating independence in 1767. He was loyal to his king and thought Americans would be better off staying in the empire. But he was the first American to sound the alarm about rights by associating Britain's new taxes with the end of Rome's agrarian republic of virtuous farmers and the rise of a corrupt emperor—in this case, King George III.

NOTHING WAS THOUGHT OF BUT THIS TAXATION,
AND THE EASIEST METHOD OF LIQUIDATION.

T-A-X

'TWAS ENOUGH TO VEX
THE SOULS OF THE MEN OF BOSTON TOWN,
TO READ THIS UNDER THE SEAL OF THE CROWN.

THEY WERE LOYAL SUBJECTS OF GEORGE THE THIRD;
SO THEY BELIEVED AND SO THEY AVERRED,
BUT THIS BRISTLING, OFFENSIVE PLACARD SET
ON THE WALLS, WAS WORSE THAN A BAYONET,

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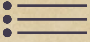

3

The Dangers of Empire: Rome and Britain

Colonial Americans identified with the agrarian values of the Roman republic, which comprised the first 500 years or so of Roman history. And in the revolutionary era, the colonists began to worry that their farms and the rustic values they cherished were under threat, just as Rome's had been at the end of the republican period. As you'll explore in this lecture, they suddenly decided that Great Britain, the mother country, had begun to bear an alarming resemblance to the tyrannical Roman Empire.

The Rise of Tyranny

Americans in the revolutionary era would have understood the Roman Empire as beginning in 27 BC and ending in 476 AD, when Rome finally fell to barbarian invaders. In 27 BC, Octavian, the nephew of the slain Julius Caesar, established himself as emperor of Rome. His new title was Caesar Augustus. During Emperor Augustus's long reign and in the centuries afterward, power in Rome shifted away from the two representative bodies of the Senate and the popular assemblies that had dominated in the period of the Roman republic. Instead, the power became concentrated in the hands of the emperor. Roman emperors gained the ability to introduce and veto laws and to command the army. With few checks on the emperor's power, corruption greased the wheels of Roman government.

In 1763, Britain's new taxation policy had just been launched after the British victory against the French in the Seven Years' War. The taxes would help the British pay for the increasingly costly empire they were running. With Parliament imposing one tax after another, colonial Americans thought they

READING THE STAMP ACT IN KING STREET: OPPOSITE THE STATE HOUSE.

saw a conspiracy to tax them without representing them, which gradually eroded their trust in the mother country. The Stamp Act of 1765 was repealed in a storm of colonial protest. By 1768, colonists were publishing angry diatribes against the taxes, using the persona of the simple Roman farmer to accuse Britain of being an evil empire.

The British Parliament thought these new taxes were the logical answer to help Britain pay for the growing costs of running a globe-spanning empire. But to Americans, whose local interests were not represented in the Parliament that was 3,000 miles away, this new taxation scheme seemed to be taxation without representation—that is, tyranny. In the late 1760s and early 1770s, colonists began to focus on the twilight years of the Roman republic in the last century BC, when tyranny had corroded the Roman republic and resulted in a corrupt empire.

What had brought down the virtuous agrarian republic of farmer-soldiers who had thought of Rome first and their own desires second? What had caused the rise of tyrannical, power-hungry emperors intent on ruling Rome autocratically? Americans dissected the republic to see what had caused it to grow sick and then die. They used the contrast between the Roman republic and the Roman Empire to make sense of their confusing world.

Several books focused American fears in this direction, including *Cato's Letters*—a series of short essays published in London newspapers by two Englishmen named John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. The essays were published in the early 1720s, long before any problems in the American colonies, and weren't about America at all. Trenchard and Gordon had looked at British politics and thought they spied corruption of all kinds. They adopted the pen name of Cato the Younger, the implacable foe of the tyrannical Julius Caesar, and wrote the essays as though they were letters sent by him.

In the 144 essays, the authors condemned practices they deemed incompatible with political liberty, such as standing armies, censorship, and the manipulation of government by flatterers and wealthy interests for their own ends. They sounded a warning cry for how corruption can lead to tyranny. And 50 years after the first publication, the essays were dusted off by American colonists and used to show that corruption was back.

Britain as the Roman Empire

Cato's Letters set up an equation that the colonists quickly memorized—power and liberty were natural opposites. Power was naturally aggressive, always wanting to gobble up liberty and metastasize into tyranny. So liberty always had to be vigilant against power.

Americans began to call any British policies and people they didn't like a Roman emperor. They referenced only the worst emperors—Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero. And though Julius Caesar wasn't technically an emperor but a power-hungry autocrat, they threw him in for good measure. The colonists' job was made easier by their familiarity with *Lives of the Caesars* by Suetonius, who'd lived in the early years of the Roman Empire. His famous book provided biographies of the first 12 emperors of Rome.

For starters, there was the gloomy Tiberius, the second emperor, who reigned from 14 to 37 AD. He abused the Romans by planting informers among them. In *The Rights of the Colonies Examined* of 1764, Rhode Island governor Stephen Hopkins compared the increasing number of vice-admiralty court trials for Americans as worthy of the reign of Tiberius. These courts had no juries and were usually used for naval matters. However, their jurisdiction increased in the 1760s and 1770s as the British tried to exert more control over colonial trade. Without local juries of their peers, colonists were convicted at high rates.

The third Roman emperor, Caligula, reigned from 37 to 41 AD. During his brief reign, he expanded the personal power of the emperor. His reign became synonymous with cruelty, sadism, extravagance, and sexual perversion. In 1767, John Adams compared the hated royal governor of Massachusetts, Francis Bernard, to Caligula. In 1768, on Bernard's watch, 4,000 British troops were stationed in Boston, a city of only about 15,000 people. This kind of brutal rule helped build the broad base of opposition in the colonies that eventually turned a critical mass of American colonists against the mother country.

And then there was Nero, who reigned from 54 to 68 AD. Suetonius says Nero deliberately set the great fire of Rome—which lasted a week and destroyed much of the city—to clear the way for his own building projects. Nero also murdered his teacher, the philosopher Seneca, and his own mother. Samuel Adams used the example of Nero to oppose the Stamp Act in 1765. "The stamp act was like the sword that Nero wished for" to chop off the head of the Roman people, he said.

By 1774, when Parliament passed the so-called Intolerable Acts, colonial America was ablaze with comparisons of Britain to a corrupt Roman Empire. The acts had been designed specifically to punish Boston, which was identified by the British as the nerve center of colonial resistance. The British closed the port of Boston and put the city under military rule. Britain's aggression united the colonies against Parliament.

Common Sense

Up to this point, colonial anger was focused on the British Parliament rather than the king. From their cradles, the colonists had learned to revere their monarch as a kind father figure. Americans believed that his authority had been given by the grace of God. So it was natural for them to accuse Parliament of tyranny but to carefully avoid casting blame on their sovereign. The king was supposed to be their last protector, and the colonists continued to write him pleading letters, even as Parliament cracked down further. In 1776, the Declaratory Act gave Parliament authority over the colonies "in all cases whatsoever." Americans saw it as a Parliamentary overreach, but they still revered their British king.

In January 1776, a recent English immigrant named Thomas Paine published a short and fiery pamphlet called *Common Sense*. The pamphlet showed Americans what they couldn't see for themselves and helped them made the final leap from resistance to revolution. Paine's work took aim at the king

himself. Mocking all monarchy as a long line of idiots stretching from ancient Greece and Rome until now, he called George III "the principle ruffian of some restless gang."

Now colonial anger expanded from Parliament to the king himself. Americans saw that their own king had turned his army and navy on his own people. George III was a particularly dangerous kind of despot—a tyrannical Roman emperor. Paine's *Common Sense* encouraged Americans to see the king as an heir to Roman imperial corruption. Exposing George III as a "royal brute" with no divine authority, the pamphlet prompted the colonists to throw off not just the Parliament but also the king in July 1776 with the Declaration of Independence. Overnight the 13 colonies became 13 independent states united as one independent nation. Americans were no longer governed by a king or a Parliament. They were governed by the people.

In the destructive 8-year war that followed, Americans continued to imagine that George III was a Roman tyrant. This idea helped to keep up morale in a war that cost 25,000 American lives on the battlefield alone. In 1782, as the war was finally coming to a close, the American poet Philip Freneau showed that the fear of the Roman emperor's tyranny still stalked the land. "O Nero!" he wrote to the king. "The blood of thousands calls aloud for vengeance on your guilty head."

In 1783, the American Revolutionary War ended with the signing of the peace treaty with Britain. The United States of America now took its place among the nations of the earth. Americans had fought a long war to defend ideals of liberty and independence inspired partly by the Roman republic.

Now Americans were their own self-governed nation. They wanted to compete on the international stage of large commercial empires governed by powerful monarchs. Could they remain a nation of simple farmers? Or would they, too, have to become a mighty empire, bristling with armies and bustling commercial megacities? This dichotomy split the United States in the first 50 years of nationhood and, in some senses, still haunts Americans today.

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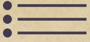

4

Are We Rome? America's Conflicted Identity

As you'll see in this lecture, the ink was barely dry on the US Constitution when Americans were already struggling over a fundamental question: Should the new United States be a nation of simple farmers in the image of the Roman republic, or should it be a commercial, urbanizing, and aggressively expansionist power in the image of the Roman Empire? This question has haunted Americans from the founding era until today—especially in moments of national crisis and anxiety.

Alexander Hamilton

In 1789, Alexander Hamilton was one of the first Americans to chart a bold vision of the United States as a Roman Empire. Born out of wedlock on the British Caribbean island of Nevis around 1755, Hamilton lacked the status and connections that came with noble birth. But he still managed to rise to the pinnacle of American politics and society by the time he was in his mid-thirties.

When he was 17, Hamilton sailed to the North American mainland. He enrolled for a year at the Elizabethtown Academy in New Jersey, where he learned Greek and Latin. In 1773, he was accepted at King's College in New York City. He dropped out at age 20 and formed his personal militia unit. He soon became George Washington's right-hand man during the battles of the American Revolution.

ALEXANDER HAMILTON

Huddled with the Continental Army at Valley Forge during the long winter of 1777 to 1778, Hamilton found inspiration and comfort in the Greek philosopher and biographer Plutarch. The philosopher had lived from around 46 to 119 AD. His book *Parallel Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* was famous for its series of 23 comparative biographies, in which Plutarch would compare one Greek and one Roman military leader and statesman to provide models of behavior.

Hamilton was ambitious for himself and for America. He saw himself as a founder and lawgiver for the young nation. By the time the war of independence had ended, Hamilton had become convinced of the folly of the Articles of Confederation. This first national government of the United States had been extremely weak, lacking the power to tax the states and resulting in economic chaos. He also feared that the United States, which were hardly united at all, would be easy pickings for the more powerful monarchies of Europe.

These worries are why Hamilton played such an active role at the 1786 meeting called in Annapolis, Maryland, to begin revising the Articles of Confederation. This meeting culminated in the Constitutional Convention of 1787, which framed a new blueprint for the US government. Under the influence of strong centralizers like Hamilton, the US Constitution lodged far more power in the federal government than the Articles of Confederation had.

Federalists versus Anti-Federalists

The empowerment of the executive reflects Hamilton's suspicion of the people's gullibility. The American people needed strong leaders to represent their interests, but not everyone wanted a strong central government. A group now known as the Anti-Federalists preferred the loosely confederated, agrarian nation they remembered under the Articles of Confederation. They took to the newspapers, where Americans signing as Brutus wrote many essays opposing the ratification of the new federal Constitution. Others writing as Cincinnatus opposed new measures like a standing army.

To prevent the Anti-Federalists from sinking the new US Constitution, Hamilton joined forces with James Madison and John Jay to publish essays supporting the new, strong federal government. Writing in newspapers in 1787 and 1788 under the collective pen name Publius, the three authors eventually published their work as a single text titled *The Federalist*. Today many people call this work *The Federalist Papers*. Hamilton wrote 55 of the 85 essays. In *Federalists* no. 34, 70, and 75, he used positive and negative examples from Roman history to argue for a powerful central government with the power to tax and an energetic executive.

In the early 1790s, when the new Constitution had been ratified and Hamilton had become the nation's first secretary of the treasury, he wrote another influential blueprint for the new nation—one that focused on economics. He presented his *Report on Manufactures* to Congress in 1791. Hamilton lobbied for a central bank and hoped to encourage manufacturing through tariffs to protect infant industries. Such thinking was radical for America at this time.

Many Americans thought farmers were God's chosen people, toiling in their fields for the good of the whole, while city-dwellers were parasites living off the farmers' hard labor. But Hamilton turned tradition on its head: Perhaps farmers were actually lazier than artisans since their fields lay fallow for half the year while a blacksmith had to work year-round. To compete with their big, powerful rivals, Americans would need an industrial economy, cities, and a strong central government. Only then could the infant nation flourish like the Roman Empire.

Republic Becomes Empire

The First Party System that began in the 1790s pitted Democratic-Republicans against Federalists. The former favored a nation of farmers like the republic of Rome, while the latter wanted a centralized, urbanized, industrialized, military powerhouse like the Roman Empire. The third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, bought a huge tract of land from cash-strapped French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte in 1803. The so-called Louisiana Purchase—more than 800,000 square miles of land west of the Mississippi River—doubled the size of the United States overnight.

As a Democratic-Republican, Jefferson's dream was to keep the United States a nation of farmers, just like the early period of the Roman republic he loved so much. By expanding in space, America would never develop into a land choked with big, crime-ridden cities like ancient Rome during the imperial era. Jefferson wanted to maintain the ideals of civic virtue that he saw in the earliest days of the American republic in the 1780s.

As the decades passed, the republic versus empire split began to map squarely onto the contest between the slaveholding, rural South and the industrializing, urban North. Many among the White planter slaveholding elite of the American South thought they were preserving the agrarian values of the Roman republic by supporting a weak central government and very strong states. Later on, Confederates saw themselves as the guardians of the virtuous Roman republic of simple farmers, threatened by the Julius Caesar of the industrialized and powerful North. And after the South's defeat in the Civil War of 1865, the emerging Lost Cause of the Confederacy stated that Southerners had fought not to preserve slavery but to safeguard a noble culture of honor and chivalry threatened by the North's profit-mongering factories and cities.

Meanwhile, the industrializing North of the post-Civil War era saw itself as a rising Roman Empire, with large cities and a thriving commercial class. In the half century after the war, giant cities like Chicago arose, and railroads crisscrossed the nation. Factories created a new class of capitalist millionaires, such as J. P. Morgan and Andrew Carnegie, while capitalism also reduced millions to wretched poverty. Mark Twain called this the Gilded Age—a shiny gold outside hiding a rotten core.

The Gilded Age In the United States launched the nation into the world. Beginning with the Spanish-American War of 1898, Americans built a new empire outside of North America, stretching into the Atlantic and the Pacific. They lunged after Cuba, the Philippines, Hawaii, Guam, and beyond. Filled with optimism about their own role in the world, Americans began to identify with the Roman Empire far more than the Roman republic. In the 20th century, American cities began to show off the architecture and engineering of this new empire. Architects designed grand boulevards lined with massive white buildings announcing the United States as a world power second only to Rome—or perhaps even better. Washington DC, which rose from the swamps a century before in the style of the Roman republic, was gutted and transformed in the vein of the Roman Empire.

Climate Change and Rome

And so Americans have marched forward to the present day, measuring their own national fears and dreams by the yardstick of ancient Rome. But is the United States a virtuous republic of simple farming values, or is it an empire of cities, armies, and commerce? Rome has also given America a narrative of rise and fall. Is the United States rising or falling?

A new vision of ancient Rome has appeared on the horizon recently—a civilization beset by climate change. Could the kinds of problems that climate change brings, such as floods and fires, have also shaped the past in dramatic ways? Historians of the Roman climate are looking for slower, longer-term evidence that natural changes in climate could have shaped Rome's fate. They're using new scientific evidence, including core samples of rocks and ice, tree rings, and data about river floods.

Rome was built during an unusually stable period of warm and wet weather called the Roman Climate Optimum. The ancient Romans benefited from just the kind of weather that crops love. Lots of rain, warmth, and stability equaled lots of grain for a hungry empire. And lots of grain supported the sprawling Roman economy, which in turn propped up the political order.

But by the 6th century AD, volcanic eruptions triggered a miniature ice age that lasted around 150 years. The cold snap didn't directly cause the fall of the Roman Empire in the west, but it may have amplified the stresses already underway. Barbarian invasions, an overstretched Roman army, and an outbreak of bubonic plague were just some of the tribulations of the 6th and 5th centuries AD. The colder climate that shriveled the grain supply could have been the final blow that caused the fall of Rome.

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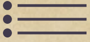

5

American Ambivalence toward Ancient Greece

In this lecture, you'll explore how the founders thought about ancient Greece during the American Revolution. Though they liked the idea of a republic without a king, they were very wary of direct democracy such as the ancient Athenians had. You'll see how they wrestled with this distinction between republican and democratic government during the founding era, often using the contrast between republican Rome and democratic Athens to frame their debates. But you'll also discover how American doubts about Greece softened over time—and how ancient Athens came to be seen as the root of a new idea called Western civilization.

The Homeric Question

In the 18th century, nearly everything Americans knew about Greece came from books. And the term "ancient Greece" wouldn't have called to mind a single place and time for the founders. In fact, they thought about several eras and places, each with its own lessons.

The first time period in ancient Greece that revolutionary Americans admired was the Greece of Homer, the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Americans believed that Homer had lived around the 8th century BC, and they saw him as the foundation of a noble Greek literary tradition. American boys read both of his epics in school and college in the ancient Greek language, and even people without access to such education could learn about Homer's stories from various English and French versions.

Homer was interesting to 18th-century Americans for another reason, too. Around this time, a revolution occurred in the way people thought about the poet. Until the late 1700s, everyone had assumed that he was an actual person who had written down his two epics. But a group of scholars in Germany was now suggesting that those epics had originally been recited or sung out loud in what were essentially preliterate societies. Perhaps the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were just scraps of ancient songs later written down by obscure people. So was Homer a person who had actually existed and composed those epics? This issue was called the Homeric question.

The founding fathers worried about the Homeric question because it made them doubt the authority of all texts written down by human beings. This thinking clearly affected their views of the US Constitution. James Madison, who had a major hand in writing the document, was one of the first to point out that it was just a human construction. He said that because the US Constitution was written by humans in the imperfect and vague medium of language, its meaning would always be somewhat unclear.

This scenario is a reminder that revolutionary-era Americans looked to the classical world for examples of how to think about certain problems that all human beings run into. In this case, the Homeric question gave them tools for thinking about a universal problem—that everyone interprets texts differently.

Americans and Greek City-States

The American founders found little to admire in the classical period of Greek history, around the 6th and 5th centuries BC. The classical city-states like Athens, Thebes, and Sparta constantly fought each other, and their failure to form a united confederacy made them so weak that they were finally conquered by the Romans in the 1st century BC. This major takeaway of the founders was one reason why classical Greek texts weren't taught much in American colleges during the 18th century. When students did learn about Greek history, it was usually in the form of lessons about how city-states like Athens had been democratic and therefore unstable.

The founders applied their dim view of most Greek city-states to the Articles of Confederation. The Articles formed the first national government of the United States, which operated during the Revolutionary War and shortly

after. Under the Articles, the nation had a weak central government and very powerful states. Critics like James Madison compared the weakness of the Articles to the weakness of the Greek leagues of city-states, which had culminated in Roman conquest. The founders formed the US Constitution in part from fears of the inherent weakness of confederacies and the chaos of democracy. Thus, the Constitution gives much more power to the central government. The document also filters out popular rule by implementing various safeguards, such as the Electoral College, reflecting the 18th-century fear of Athenian-style democracy.

Despite their low view of ancient Athens, Americans did admire certain Athenian figures. The texts they read drew attention to military success rather than democratic politics. For example, Americans loved the Athenian historian and general Thucydides. His *History of the Peloponnesian War*—which was about the 27-year war between Sparta and Athens from 431 to 401 BC—sat on every founder's bookshelf.

And given their admiration of Greek military history, Americans unsurprisingly loved Sparta. This city-state became the dominant land power in Greece, and the archrival to Athens, by the 6th century BC. Americans learned about Sparta mostly from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. The city-state's highly regimented society encouraged military proficiency at all costs. Boys—and even some girls—were educated to be physically fit and mentally tough, and Spartans idealized the soldier who fought well and said little. Their military discipline helped them to defeat the mighty Persian Army and then the rival Greek Athenians in the Peloponnesian War. The founders admired this discipline, which they hoped would help their own soldiers to defeat the British.

The Glorification of Athens

During the founding era, various factors combined to give Greece a backseat to ancient Rome—the democratic polity of Athens, the weakness of the confederacies, Americans' distrust of major branches of Greek philosophy like Platonism, and the fact that the territory of Greece itself was almost totally off limits due to Ottoman rule. But 50 years after independence, Americans' views of ancient Greece suddenly began to change for the better.

This new enthusiasm for Greece—called philhellenism—had everything to do with changes in American society. Voting had expanded to include all adult White men, regardless of property ownership. In the 18th century, the right to vote had been confined to people who owned property. However, as the territory of the United States kept expanding westward, more White American men began working without necessarily holding property. By the time Andrew Jackson became president in 1829, people were talking about the "age of the common man" or the "age of democracy."

The War of Greek Independence in the 1820s added to this urgency about democracy. Americans watched as the modern Greeks finally threw off the long rule of the Ottoman Turks. The Greek Revolution mirrored their own revolution against British tyranny half a century earlier. They imagined that the democratic values of ancient Greece would somehow be restored in the modern period. Europeans also became excited about Greek democracy, and the modern era of Greek archaeology began with excavations of cities like Athens. Popular images of famous temples and statues circulated widely. The sight of the crumbling remains of a past glory was inspiring and cautionary: Could this happen in America?

In the mid-1800s, all of these events prompted Americans to turn to ancient Greece—especially Athens—for ideals of democratic government. Now ancient Athens seemed like a thriving center for democracy and the arts. This new view that Athenian democracy had led to beautiful art calmed American fears that their democratic society was chaotic and uncultured. While Rome had been a grand empire, only ancient Greece had had the cultural glory that naturally stemmed from democracy. If the United States could be like Athens, it could also have a great democracy and great art. Americans began to idolize everything about the ancient city-state.

The shift in thinking also introduced changes in American education. Colleges established fraternities and sororities with Greek names such as Phi Beta Kappa. Schools stopped teaching the common Greek of the Bible that had dominated curriculums in the 17th and 18th centuries and began teaching the Greek of 5th-century Athens—so-called classical Greek. Instead of being used to teach ministers for a Puritan society, the ancient Greek language was now being used to train the American people for a democracy.

Depending on where they lived in the United States, Americans used ancient Athens for different purposes. Southern slaveholders utilized the city-state to justify slaveholding. They liked to quote Aristotle's *Politics*, which stated that each society has "natural slaves"—people who are inferior by nature and so deserve to be enslaved. They also looked to ancient Sparta, which controlled vast territories around it through a slave system called helotry. The Spartans had told themselves that helots benefited from this system since Sparta's soldiers defended the land the helots worked on. Similarly American planters said that Southern slaves must benefit from their enslavement. By contrast, Northerners used the example of Athens to talk about the virtues of a free society that opposed slavery. They thought they saw the birth of political and personal freedom in the ancient city-state.

Western Civilization

By the late 19th century, Americans' new infatuation with ancient Greece as the cradle of democracy culminated in a novel college course sequence on so-called Western civilization. Today many Americans think that Western civilization has always existed. But the idea really came into its own in the

20th century when Americans and Europeans were creating and managing enormous and ethnically diverse empires. They became interested in seeing themselves as common recipients of a unique cultural heritage that distinguished them from the rest of the world.

According to this view, Western civilization began with a noble race of ancient Greeks, who invented much that was beautiful and true and free. The Greeks then passed the torch to the more pragmatic Romans, who codified and stabilized Greek learning before handing it off to the medieval Europeans. The latter then handed the torch to modern Europeans and Americans.

In 1930, as the dark clouds of fascism gathered over Europe, this modern view of the importance of Greek civilization was captured by an American educator named Edith Hamilton in her best-selling book *The Greek Way*. The title says it all—there was a distinct people ("the Greeks," by which Hamilton meant the classical Athenians) who shared one culture (a "way"). The Greek way was the cradle of the West and modern America: "None of the great civilizations that preceded them and surrounded them served them as model. With them something completely new came into the world. They were the first Westerners; the spirit of the West, the modern spirit, is a Greek discovery and the place of the Greeks is in the modern world."

During World War II and the Cold War, this us-versus-them view helped Americans to imagine that their society was fundamentally different from that of the Axis states or Soviet Russia. Free America was like Athens. Centrally controlled Russia was like Sparta.

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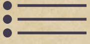

6

The Founders on Carthage and Germania

Outside the borders of ancient Greece and Rome, millions of people lived within the territories now called Europe and the Middle East who were neither Roman nor Greek nor even Egyptian. The American founders were aware of this fact and understood that the Greeks and Romans were just two pieces of a larger puzzle. In this lecture, you'll focus on two places that were especially important to the American revolutionary generation—the ancient city of Carthage in North Africa and a region the Romans called Germania. Americans knew of both through ancient sources, from Aristotle and Polybius to Tacitus and Caesar. Reading between the lines of these texts, the founders saw lessons and warnings for their own time.

The Phoenicians and Carthage

Carthage was a mighty walled city in North Africa in what is now modern-day Tunis. The city was founded around 800 BC as a colony of the Phoenicians, who were the great seafaring traders and merchants of the ancient Mediterranean. They were famous for exporting cypress logs, wine, glass, and a prized purple dye, and they were the first to construct the Mediterranean basin as an economically cohesive unit.

Around 800 BC, the Phoenicians established a seaside colony in the center of North Africa, where they could have easy access to ships sailing west and east. Within a few hundred years, Carthage had become an empire in its own right, with far-flung colonies all over the Mediterranean.

Carthage had two gigantic harbors, one for trade and another for warships. And the gleaming marble city itself had theaters, temples, a marketplace, beautiful mosaics, and 22 miles of encircling brick walls. The Carthaginian empire was one of sea trade, and its people focused on building fast, maneuverable ships and establishing new cities on coastlines. They wanted to control the seas, coastlines, and far-away colonies so that they could trade commercial goods with the world.

For hundreds of years, the Carthaginians successfully founded colonies, taxed them, and used them as bases for trade. They also had a secret weapon for any land engagements they pursued—war elephants. Egged on by a rider and plied with alcohol, the war elephants terrified horses, broke through orderly columns of soldiers, and trampled enemy infantry underfoot like ants.

Carthage became so wealthy and powerful that it posed a military threat to Rome itself. For hundreds of years, Rome and Carthage fought an existential battle to the death for dominance in the Mediterranean. Centuries later, American revolutionaries looked at Carthage as an example of a breakaway colony that eventually established its own empire and became even bigger, better, and more famous than the mother country.

Rome's Defeat of Carthage

The ancient Carthaginians' archenemy was Rome. By about 200 BC, Rome controlled all of the Italian peninsula, plus the nearby islands of Sicily, Corsica, and Sardinia. But one major obstacle stood in the way—Carthage and its ships, traders, colonies, and war elephants. Moreover, Rome viewed the Carthaginians as a moral threat. The Romans saw themselves as disciplined warriors and hard-working farmers, and they scorned Carthaginians as traffickers in luxury goods, baubles, and trinkets that people didn't really need. The Roman republic could only stand if its citizens denied themselves luxuries and fought for Rome.

The venerable Roman statesman Cato the Elder visited Carthage after the Second Punic War and was stunned to see its strong military presence, overflowing markets, and proud people. He returned to Rome determined to destroy its Mediterranean rival. Cato's fellow senators were shocked to hear him say that Carthage was only 3 days' sail from Rome. And then he uttered three words that people still remember today—"delenda est Carthago." Carthage must be destroyed.

In the Third—and last—Punic War, Rome finally triumphed. In 146 BC, after 3 years of siege outside the walls of Carthage, the Roman army entered the city, slaughtered the Carthaginian people, sold the survivors into slavery, and burned everything to the ground. To this day, almost nothing from the Carthaginians themselves survives.

The great struggle between Rome and Carthage was so terrifying, awesome, and cataclysmic that it rang down through the ages—all the way to the 18th century. As Great Britain, France, and Spain created blue-water empires with trading colonies around the globe, they recalled Carthage, the great sea empire of trade. The British thought of themselves as a modern version of that ancient trading powerhouse, with the Americans as their docile and helpful colonies, enriching them with trade. Colonies weren't established for the sake of war and conquest. They were there for commerce, and commerce made a nation cultured, sophisticated, and civilized—at least that's what the British told themselves about their colonies for a long time.

Delenda est Carthago

As the relationship between Britain and its American colonies broke down by 1774, the conversation shifted. Now the British said they were the mighty Romans. The Americans were their archenemy, Carthage—and that meant utter annihilation. The American colonists were disturbed to learn that Cato the Elder's famous words, "Carthage must be destroyed," were actually uttered in Parliament on March 23, 1774, to urge the British to attack Boston in the wake of the infamous Boston Tea Party.

The colonists responded immediately. "The Town of Boston has been resembled to Carthage," declared the *Boston Gazette and Country Journal* in August 1774, "and threatened with the same Fate by a Member of Parliament: The Execution of the Sentence is already begun." And Britain did pursue a Punic War-like plan in North America. The nation concentrated on the cities of Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and Charleston, occupying each in turn, just as Rome had sailed into Carthage.

After the Revolutionary War, Americans likened themselves to Carthage to craft the US Constitution. Carthage's government had been very much like Rome's, with two elected magistrates, a senate, and a people's assembly. The founders thought this setup was just the kind of balanced government that created great stability. In *Federalist*, no. 63, James Madison described his admiration for the balancing effects of the Senate of Carthage, an "anchor" against the "temporary errors and delusions" of the people. The ghost of ancient Carthage lives on in the structure of the US Senate itself.

Germania

Between 58 and 50 BC, Julius Caesar tried to conquer Gaul, a large region that encompassed much of western Europe. While there, he encountered some of the Germanic tribes to the east, across the Rhine River. Various Roman emperors afterward tried to conquer Germania, but a massive Roman defeat at the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest in 9 AD made that goal unlikely.

The Germanic tribes remained a constant threat to the Roman Empire for centuries. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote about these northern peoples in his book *Germania* around 98 AD. He stated that they live scattered in woods and meadows. The tribes were warlike, had a semi-egalitarian form of government, and went as families and clans into battle. The first British colonists arriving in North America inspected *Germania* carefully to understand the American Indians. Tacitus was useful for understanding all peoples they considered to be primitive or "barbaric." The colonists applied the term *tribe*—from the Latin word *tribus*—to describe the Native Americans partly because they were familiar with the word from Roman writers. The term referred to an administrative designation for a voting unit, but the colonists used it to describe people they considered uncivilized.

Interestingly Tacitus had used the Germanic tribes as a moral lesson for the Romans. He was concerned that Roman values were declining from the sturdy principles of the soldiers and farmers of the early republic. Now Romans were wallowing in luxury and thinking of their own needs instead of Rome's needs. Look at the Germanic tribes, he said—though they are primitive children of the forest, they live far more virtuously than you do. Similarly American colonists used Native American ways of life to criticize corrupt and luxurious British ways of life.

But the ancient Germanic tribes became most useful to the American colonists during the revolutionary era. They seized on a particular reading of this part of ancient history to criticize the British monarchy. Their version of history was as follows: By around the 5th century AD, some of the Germanic tribes—a people known as the Saxons—migrated to England. Interacting with the indigenous peoples of that island, the new group became known as the Anglo-Saxons. The Anglo-Saxons soon dominated the southern part of England, and the people lived as free men and women in small villages and towns, ruled by kings such as Alfred the Great.

According to the American revolutionaries, this time in English history had seen appropriate amounts of power sharing between the king and the people he governed. But in 1066, William the Conqueror invaded England from western France and crushed the Anglo-Saxons and their allies. Then he imposed not only the French language but also feudal rule over the Anglo-Saxons. He insisted that all land was ultimately held by the king, and he confiscated the lands of any rebels who resisted the Norman Conquest, giving those lands to his followers. In colonial America, after the Stamp Act of 1765 was passed by Parliament, an outraged John Adams declared that the British had regressed to feudalism. He said feudalism was the beginning of a despotic line of kings that had clearly culminated in the reign of George III, whose government passed tyrannical legislation like the aforementioned act.

Magna Carta

Thankfully, according to the colonists, some nobles had reclaimed some of their ancestral Anglo-Saxon rights with the writing of Magna Carta in 1215. This document spelled out the rights retained by a group of barons against

the unpopular king John of England, including protection from illegal imprisonment and the right to a swift trial. In the years leading up to the revolution, Americans cited Magna Carta constantly as the source of some of their rights and liberties against the tyrannical British government.

In his 1774 publication *A Summary View of the Rights of British America,* Thomas Jefferson wrote a scathing history to set the king straight on Germanic, Anglo-Saxon, and Norman history. He said that the American colonists had as much right to North American land as their "Saxon ancestors" did to the island of Britain when they left Germania and settled in England.

The Americans were trying to show that they weren't inventing something new by saying "no taxation without representation." They were simply reclaiming their rightful Anglo-Saxon heritage. And by declaring independence in 1776, they were doing the most Anglo-Saxon thing of all—asserting their rights against a tyrannical king.

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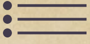


7

The Lure of Ancient Egypt for a New America

The American fascination with ancient Egypt began in the first moments of Puritan settlement in the 1600s and has continued to the present day. The United States has many towns with ancient Egyptian names, like Memphis, Tennessee. Las Vegas has a replica of an Egyptian pyramid. And, of course, the Washington Monument is a giant Egyptian obelisk looming over the capital city of Washington DC. But why are Americans fascinated by this ancient civilization? In this lecture, you'll look at the classical Egypt that Americans encountered through Greek and Roman authors and investigate why there's a pyramid on the dollar bill. Then you'll examine the 19th-century cultural movement called Egyptomania, which inspired both proslavery and antislavery activists to look to ancient Egypt as a guide in the debate over modern slavery.

The Puritans as Israelites

According to the biblical book of Exodus, the Israelites lived in Egypt for generations, but they became so numerous that the pharaoh feared they would eventually turn on the Egyptians. As such, he gradually forced the Israelites into slavery. Led by Moses, they escaped and traveled to Mount Sinai, where God made a covenant with them—in exchange for receiving the promised land of milk and honey, they must worship no other gods.

When the Puritans fled from England in the early 1600s, they saw themselves as reenacting the Israelites' flight from ancient Egypt. The king of England, Charles I, was a new pharaoh bent on enslaving them. The Puritans, along with other Protestant dissenters, rejected the Anglican religion of the British monarchy. They believed that its break with Catholicism during the Protestant Reformation had been incomplete—too many barriers remained between themselves and their God. The Puritans wanted to form their own congregations guided by ministers they themselves had chosen, and they wanted to interpret the Bible in their own way. For these views, which threatened the monarchy, the Puritans were harshly persecuted in England.

John Winthrop, one of the first leaders of the Puritan exodus to America, quoted Moses in a speech telling his shipmates that they were to build a city on a hill—an example to others. They were like the Israelites fleeing Egypt, and now they had arrived in the promised land. To help promote Protestantism in the New World, the Puritans immediately established schools and colleges, such as Harvard, which was founded in 1636. These schools promised a classical education, meaning that American boys who attended indirectly learned a lot about ancient Egypt through Roman and Greek eyes.

The most important text was from Herodotus, an ancient Greek historian who lived in the 5th century BC. He traveled to Egypt around 454 BC and called the nation "the gift of the Nile" since the river watered the banks and made civilization possible in the hot desert. As he sailed down the Nile, he remarked that Egypt was more wondrous than any land because one could find the origins of the gods and the civilization of Greece itself there. From Herodotus, American students learned that even though Egypt might be the source of some of the glories of Greece and Rome, it was also alien and mysterious.

The Rise of Egyptian Symbols

Ancient Egypt's mystery took on new relevance a century after the first Puritans arrived. In colonial America, skilled craftspeople carved settlements from the forests and supplied the infrastructure of colonial America. Soon they formed societies like the medieval guilds to protect their crafts and celebrate their skills. Groups like the Freemasons created secret rituals to distinguish insiders from outsiders—and what could be more mysterious than ancient Egypt, home of the hieroglyphs?

After the American Revolution, the image of Egyptian pyramids seemed like a great symbol of America's popular rule since the bottom of the pyramids consisted of a wide base. In speeches favoring ratification, defenders of the US Constitution said things like, "May this building rise like a pyramid upon the broad basis of the people!" The metaphor was also meant to suggest that rule by the people was very solid, like a pyramid.

Americans also borrowed other Egyptian symbols to bolster the idea that their nation could last for thousands of years. Obelisks began to pop up everywhere in the United States. They featured in family graveyards as symbols of eternal life after death. The most famous Egyptian obelisk in America is the Washington Monument that rises above the National Mall in Washington DC. Construction began in the 1840s to commemorate the death of George Washington in 1799.

Revolutionary Ancient Egypt

The French Revolution showed how revolutionary ancient Egypt could become—too revolutionary for Americans, as it turned out. This revolution began in 1789 with an effort to reform the monarchy of King Louis XVI and Queen Marie-Antoinette. But by 1793, radical factions such as the Jacobins had taken over. They wanted the people to be in charge, with no kings, nobles, or church. With their guillotine, they beheaded dissenters and, eventually, their own monarchs. They declared that reason would be the religion of the state.

To advertise their revolution, the French radicals turned not just to ancient Greek and Roman mythology but also to ancient Egypt. This primordial ancient civilization could be the anchor of a new kind of political and religious authority for a secular, kingless France. The radicals declared that the ancient Egyptians had worshiped an original, pure sun god and that later civilizations—such as the Christian cult that emerged under Rome—had corrupted this Egyptian rule of Nature (with a capital *N*). Only a return to the natural religion of ancient Egypt would save France and help the French build a new society that would transform the world.

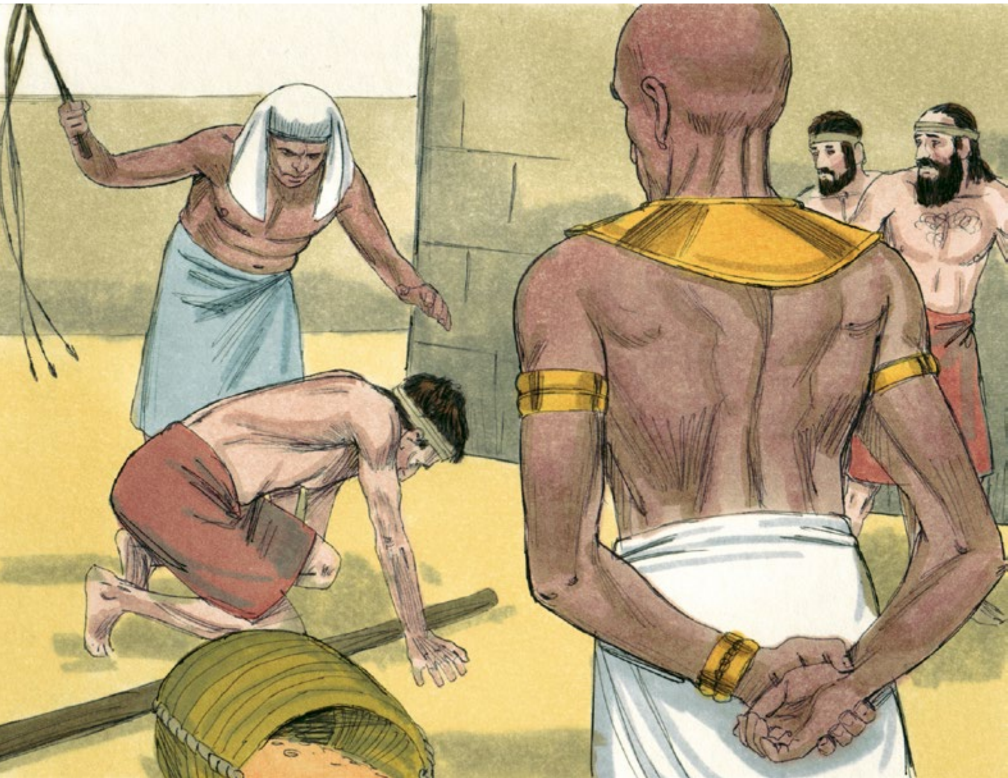
Thomas Paine was one of the only Americans to adopt the French view of ancient Egypt as a revolutionary platform, which made him unpopular in the United States. But Americans still remained curious about ancient Egypt, even if they didn't embrace its symbolism as radically as the French.

The real Egyptian drama came with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798. The French emperor was trying to win a new source of wealth for France and to block British access to the Red Sea. One of the scholars that accompanied him to Egypt found a strange slab in the town of Rosetta. Upon closer inspection, they saw that it had three different languages on it: Egyptian hieroglyphs, demotic script (a form of Egyptian written out in letters), and ancient Greek letters. Here was the Rosetta Stone. Scholars could read the Greek and demotic script, so they could work backward from the known languages to the unknown hieroglyphs. Building on the work of the English scholar Thomas Young, a brilliant young French linguist named Jean-François Champollion decoded the mysterious hieroglyphs in 1822.

This information came to the United States through magnificent new books about the wonders of ancient Egypt. Now Americans could read about the cutting-edge discoveries relating to the pyramids and the hieroglyphs. A swashbuckling French visitor to America named Constantin-François de Chasseboeuf, count de Volney, published a book called *Les Ruines* in 1791. The text was translated into English by Thomas Jefferson in 1796. *Les Ruines* taught Americans that the ruins of civilization contained lessons for modern people who dared to listen. The remains of ancient Egypt showed what happened to the megalomania of despots in the past, like the pharaohs. They had built giant pyramids—but look at those great monuments now.

Debating Slavery

As slavery expanded across the United States from 1790 to 1861, ancient Egypt was also used to justify and critique its practice. To planters who supported slavery, the existence of Black slaves in ancient Egypt justified African slavery in the modern era. These plantation owners said Black Africans were suited to slavery by their very nature. And many said that the rich soil of the Cotton Kingdom made the South the Egypt of the Confederacy, supplying the rest of the world with vital agricultural products.



These proslavery supporters also started using human skull measurements to make their case. Napoleon's invasion of Egypt had led to the opening of many tombs, and human skulls from ancient Egypt flooded the international antiquities market. Americans who examined these skulls said that some of them were obviously from Black or White people and that the Black people's skulls were smaller. The most famous book to make this argument was Samuel George Morton's 1844 *Crania Aegyptiaca*, whose title means "the skulls of Egypt." Dr. Morton—a physician living in Philadelphia—measured numerous ancient Egyptian skulls and divided them into the smallest and largest. He said that some of the smallest were from Black Egyptians, who must have been slaves. Modern science has discredited Morton's book, but it convinced many American planters of the hereditary inferiority of Black people.

Abolitionists took the opposite view. They pointed to the glories of ancient Egypt and the civilization's influences on Greek and Roman culture as proof that Black people were not racially inferior to White people. They argued that the ancient civilizations of Africa were the achievement of the Black race, so it followed that Black people were not inferior by nature to White people.

Egyptomania

As these debates were raging across America, cities and towns were filling with ancient Egyptian architecture and objects. Americans also began to make furniture that looked Egyptian and to build houses and public buildings in an Egyptian style.

The Egyptomania craze lasted from about 1800 to 1920. People could get almost anything they wanted in an ancient Egyptian style. And New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, which was founded in 1870, made one of its first internationally famous collections from Egyptian antiquities just after it opened.

America's attraction to ancient Egypt grew even more intense in the 20th century. The discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb in the 1920s by British archaeologist Howard Carter reignited everyone's fascination with Egypt. In 1963, Hollywood produced the movie *Cleopatra* starring Elizabeth Taylor,

who still pops into people's minds as the image of what the famous queen looked like. And, of course, thousands of American tourists descend on the famous pyramids of Giza each year.

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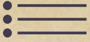

8

George Washington: The American Cincinnatus

George Washington's life illustrates how classicism became a language of citizenship and military honor in the United States. For many Americans, he was a blank canvas onto whom they projected their hopes for the new nation. In turn, Washington himself was skillful at shaping such hopes. In this lecture, you'll see how young Washington used ancient Greek and especially ancient Roman history and literature to shape his own path from planter to general to president. The Roman farmer and soldier Cincinnatus and the Roman soldier Fabius made Washington into the public face of the classical military and civic ideals of the new United States.

Washington's Early Life

George Washington was born in 1732. Unlike some of the other Virginians of his day, like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, young Washington did not receive a formal classical education, and he never traveled to Europe. Instead, he cobbled together an education of reading and writing in English. He studied penmanship carefully and read books on good manners. He also learned surveying and mathematics, skills that were useful for planters who wanted to expand their domains westward. But Washington never learned the secret codes of an 18th-century gentleman—the Latin mottos, the Greek quotations uttered with a sly wink, the references to famous events in classical history that he knew very little about.

Washington was a practical person, though. He bought books on Roman history, literature, and philosophy, all heavily weighted toward what was useful for a man in public life. The Stoic philosophers Epictetus and Seneca would teach him about self-control. Roman history gave examples of the rise and fall of republics. Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars* showed what not to do when you're in charge, and the speeches of Quintilian and Cicero taught him eloquence.

Washington eventually married Martha Custis, a wealthy widow, and in 1775, he was called to serve as commander in chief of the newly assembled Continental Army. This event catapulted him onto a new classical stage. Patriotic Americans looked to him as the Roman republican hero who would save them from the tyrant George III.

Fabius, Cincinnatus, and Washington

During the Second Punic War that pitted Rome against Carthage in the 3rd century BC, the Roman general Fabius strategically refused to fight the Carthaginian general Hannibal in pitched battle. Instead, he fought a war of attrition, wearing the enemy down over time with tactics like cutting supply lines. After the disastrous American defeat at the pitched Battle of Long Island in August 1776, Washington was advised to imitate Fabius. The Continental Army was badly outmanned by the larger and more experienced British Army. French Brigadier General Louis Duportail suggested that Washington should find a good defensive position and then defend it, refusing to be swayed by non-soldiers who criticized this strategy as a form of inaction. As a general later reminded Washington when the Americans were holed up at Valley Forge, Fabius won the Second Punic War, not Hannibal.

Washington would look to another classical figure in peacetime. At the end of the American Revolution, it was time to disband the Continental Army—this was Washington's Cincinnatus moment. The Roman statesman and military leader Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus lived around the 5th century BC. According to the legend told by Livy, Cincinnatus worked his own small farm. When a sudden invasion imperiled Rome, he rose to action and eventually assumed control of the state. But after Rome's rapid victory, he immediately relinquished power and headed back to his farm. Cincinnatus embodied the ability to lead without wanting power, and he became an example of what the ancient Romans and revolutionary Americans called civic virtue.

To Americans, the moment that transformed Washington into Cincinnatus came when he voluntarily resigned his command of the Continental Army on December 23, 1783. This resignation was significant for establishing civilian limits on military authority. Washington ended his resignation speech with a reminder that he was no Julius Caesar, lunging at power: “Having now finished the work assigned me, I retire from the great theatre of action.”

Washington went home to Mount Vernon, but his soldiers weren’t done with him yet. The hereditary society for Revolutionary War veterans became the Society of the Cincinnati in 1783, and the members elected Washington as the society’s first president. Their motto reflected the ethic of selfless service Cincinnatus was believed to represent: *Omnia reliquit servare rempublicam* (He relinquished everything to save the Republic).

Washington’s renunciation of power in 1783 only made him more powerful. Even in retirement, he was constantly besieged by visitors at Mount Vernon, which was in fact being transformed into a Roman stage for the American Cincinnatus.

Mount Vernon

In the early 1770s, Washington began to shape Mount Vernon into the classical mansion that Americans recognize today. The triangular feature above the door that faces the plantation is a pediment copied from Greco-Roman temples. The portico on the river-facing side—now called the piazza—is a kind of porch with columns that also featured in Greco-Roman architecture. The house looks like it’s made of white marble, but it is actually wood siding cut to look like white stone blocks, as in ancient Rome or Greece.

The interior decoration of Mount Vernon continues the classical theme. Many public rooms feature classical ornaments of rosettes and curling vines in plaster. A marble mantle shows farmers at the plow, as though tilling an ancient Roman wheatfield. The wood lining of the interior doorways is nailed on to look like classical columns, with a triangular pediment above the door. The discovery of Pompeii in the 18th century had shown Americans that ancient Romans loved bright colors, and at Mount Vernon, vivid paint schemes like acid green and ocean blue reflect the classical English fashions.

A lot of this design work was done by skilled enslaved craftspeople. Over the course of Washington's life, at least 577 slaves lived and worked at Mount Vernon's five farms. Quite a few were given classical names like Bacchus, Caesar, Cupid, Hector, Jupiter, and Lucretia. This naming practice was common among the planters of the American South, who wanted to create a whole virtual reality of ancient Rome and Greece.

Washington's Reluctance

Washington's quiet life at Mount Vernon ended when he was unanimously elected president of the Constitutional Convention in 1787. Two years later, he was elected first president of the United States. In April 1789, he set off to New York City, the first national capital. He was 57 years old.

The road was long and exhausting—8 days of public honors, parades, dinners, and toasts, as though he were being crowned a Roman emperor. Washington realized the danger that lay ahead in his presidency. He had to sail carefully between chief executive and king—American president and Roman emperor. Memories of George III and tyranny were still fresh. So publicly renouncing power—that is, being Cincinnatus—became Washington's signature move. He would constantly remind the nation that he served reluctantly and that this was the model for executives in a new republic by the people and for the people.

As Washington's fame continued to spread, sculptors and painters clamored to create images of him as a classical hero. In 1784, the Virginia State Legislature voted to honor Washington with a full-length statue. They charged Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, who were both still in France, to find the right person for the job. Jefferson immediately seized on the French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon, and preparations were made for him to come to America.

Houdon and his retinue stayed at Mount Vernon for 2 weeks. Washington was clear that he wanted only modern clothes for the statue—nothing in "servile adherence to the garb of antiquity." But while the military uniform of the final statue was modern, the pose was all Cincinnatus.

The statue depicts Washington leaning on fasces, the bundle of rods that symbolized authority in ancient Rome. The fasces contains 13 rods, symbolizing the unity of the states in the new union. At Washington's back is a plow, the well-known symbol of Cincinnatus, who returned from leadership in wartime to his peaceful farm. And although he wears his military uniform, the president holds a cane in his right hand, as a civilian would.

On the evening of December 14, 1799, Washington died of a throat infection at Mount Vernon. His body was carried downstairs and laid out, and 4 days later, it was placed in the family tomb on the plantation. The president's death prompted new questions. How should the nation honor him? Too little pomp and he couldn't serve as a model to Americans; too much pomp and he would seem to be a king—or a Roman emperor. And should Americans honor him in life or in death? Statues that showed him as a living man risked looking dated as styles changed. Or should he be shown in a more abstract way, standing not for a person but for timeless ideals of military and civic duty?

That latter spirit was at the heart of the Washington Monument. Today, as Americans walk down the National Mall in Washington DC, they can't miss the giant white obelisk standing opposite the White House. But why an ancient Egyptian obelisk when everything else in Washington's eponymous city is Greek temples and Roman columns? Perhaps the monument succeeds precisely because it doesn't show an image of the late president. The obelisk represents an idea of Washington—that it was not the man but his example of service to the republic that might live on for new generations of Americans.

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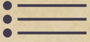

9

John Adams: The American Cicero

In 43 BC, Rome's most famous lawyer and orator, Cicero, was on the run. He had just been declared an enemy of the state. The Roman republic had been ruled for centuries by the Senate and the people of Rome, but it was now falling into the grasp of a single man. In eloquent speeches, Cicero had denounced conspirators like Catiline who plotted to overthrow the republic. But his enemies had finally caught up with him. They cut off his head and hands and nailed them in the Roman Forum. The Roman republic had lost one of its greatest defenders. Nearly 2,000 years later, the burgeoning American republic found its own defender—its modern Cicero—in a man named John Adams, as you'll see in this lecture.

Introducing Adams

John Adams was born on a Massachusetts farm in 1735. His family was not wealthy, and he got into Harvard by the skin of his teeth. At university, Adams spent 4 years drinking up Thucydides, Plato, Tacitus, Sallust, and, of course, Cicero. His father had wanted him to train for the ministry, but Adams felt drawn toward politics and law.

Among all the ancients Adams read as a young man, he especially identified with the Roman lawyer, statesman, and orator Cicero. He also admired Cicero's rival, the historian Sallust. The latter's musings on the moral decline of Rome in his era shaped the way Adams thought about the possible moral decline of his own time. Cicero and Sallust were dutiful—but also combative and self-righteous, just like Adams. Thanks to his diary and autobiography, scholars know that Adams saw himself as an embattled defender of noble causes, surrounded by enemies lunging at power, just like Cicero and the last defenders of the Roman republic. He spoke his mind even when it lost him allies. People didn't naturally like Adams, but they did often grudgingly admire him.

After Harvard and a brief and miserable stint as a schoolteacher, Adams returned to his birthplace of Braintree, Massachusetts, and struggled to build his law practice. He read everything he could get his hands on, from modern legal tracts to Roman law. Like his hero Cicero, Adams saw law as the bedrock of good government. Lawyers were the watchdogs of society in the modern period as in the ancient period of Cicero, who had defended the Roman republic against despots.

Adams rose to prominence in the 1760s and 1770s as colonial opposition to British taxation policies heated up. People often say that the American Revolution was a revolution of lawyers since so many of the arguments were about law and governance. Adams took this one step further with his knowledge of not only the British common law by which the colonies abided but also Roman law. His readings had also made him an expert in the long history of Europe, from the ancient world to the present, which would help frame the colonial objections to British imperial policies.

JOHN ADAMS,

SECOND PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES.

From the Original Series painted by Stuart
for the Messrs. Doggett of Boston

The Power of the Pen

In 1765, Adams published one of the major colonial objections to the Stamp Act, which had been passed earlier that year. The act was one of the first new measures imposed by Parliament to tax the colonists directly and without the consent of the lower houses of the colonial legislatures. The tax's purpose was to raise revenue for Britain in the wake of the ruinously expensive French and Indian War, fought in North America between 1754 and 1763. The stamp tax raised money by putting an embossed stamp on all paper, from playing cards to land deeds. The British would send prestamped paper to America so that anyone buying paper would need to pay the tax. The purpose was to spread the burden of taxation broadly and evenly so that no one group bore a disproportionate tax burden.

Viewed from London, this seemed like a great idea. Viewed from America, the new stamp tax seemed like a conspiracy to create tyranny. In the fall of 1765, shiploads of stamped paper headed across the Atlantic to American ports. Colonists were waiting with protest banners and bonfires. From Charleston in the South to Boston in the North, colonists mobbed the streets, tarred and feathered tax collectors, and even burned down an official's house in Boston.

Why all the fuss? The stamp tax had been approved in Parliament but not in the colonial legislatures. This situation was taxation without representation—tyranny. John Adams had found his moment. No one anywhere near Boston could have failed to see the colonial outcry, but this opposition needed a lawyer to give it a solid base. After all, most Americans at this time were happy members of the British Empire. They enjoyed the advantages it brought them, including military protection by the most powerful army and navy in the world. Do not be seduced by these luxuries, said Adams.

As the rioting surged, he published *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, which explained why the sacred cause of liberty hung in the balance with the stamp tax. By canon and feudal law, Adams meant the church and royal practices that had grown in medieval Europe in the 1,300 years between the classical era and the rediscovery of classical learning in the Renaissance. In those centuries of domination by church law and king-centered feudalism, the natural rights and liberties of common people—discovered long ago by the

Greeks and Romans—had been lost. The people of Europe had been enslaved to arbitrary royal decrees and superstitious priests. Lawyers like Adams had to break the chains of the canon and feudal law.

Over the next decade, up to 1776, Adams developed the argument that Parliament was trampling on the colonists' natural rights by taxing them without representation. He published essay after essay in the newspapers, making a name for himself in the American colonies. Time and again, he used his knowledge of Greek and Roman history to warn Americans that Britain was acting tyrannically, like the emperors of Rome who had spelled the end of the republic.

By 1775, Adams was using the invented Latin pen name Novanglus (New England) to argue that Parliament lacked the authority not just to tax the colonies but also to legislate for them in any way. The colonists' duty was to oppose Parliamentary tyranny: "They"—the popular leaders of the colonial resistance—"begin by reminding the people of the elevated rank they hold in the universe as men; that all men by nature are equal; that kings are but the ministers of the people; that their authority is delegated to them by the people for their good, and they have a right to resume it, and place it in other hands, or keep it themselves, whenever it is made use of to oppress them." Adams called these the revolution principles of Cicero, Aristotle, and Livy.

Thoughts on Government

Adams's short pamphlet *Thoughts on Government* came in April 1776, as British troops massed on Lexington and Concord, about 12 miles west from Boston. Fighting between the colonists and the British had already broken out for a year. But what were Americans fighting for exactly? Adams helped to answer this question by going back to the Greeks and Romans. Aristotle had said that the purpose of government was human happiness—that governments should be the means by which human beings flourish. Clearly British policies were not creating happiness and human flourishing in the American colonies. Instead, the king himself had ordered military rule of the city of Boston and closed its thriving port.

Adams's pamphlet went on to state that ancient and modern history alike showed that the only good government was a republic. In a republic, the balance of power among different elements of government prevented power from concentrating in the hands of any one person. This was important, Adams explained, because "all men would be tyrants if they could." The only check on humans' innate desire for power was to divide power among different parts of government. That way, each part would check the other parts. This idea was one of the central axioms of classical political theory, as Adams had read in Aristotle and Polybius.

As a further check on power, Adams urged that the legislature be divided into two, with an elected upper and lower house. This structure is called a bicameral or two-house legislature. Some people were pushing for an elected unicameral or one-house legislature as a more democratic way to represent the people. They remembered that the upper house of Parliament had been the hereditary House of Lords, full of landed aristocrats. But in Adams's view, a one-house legislature would soon lead to the degeneration of popular rule into mob rule. Legislators might make arbitrary laws or vote themselves to serve in perpetuity. An upper house would represent the stabler interests in society, said Adams. A two-house legislature offered more security. The upper and lower houses would be set against one another and check each other's power.

An Illustrious Political Career

Later Adams once again put his classical knowledge to use as the principal author of the Massachusetts constitution, which was adopted in 1780. The document's preamble—which influenced that of the future US Constitution—talked about the purpose of government in terms set down by Aristotle thousands of years earlier. A government was meant "to secure the existence of the body politic, to protect it, and to furnish the individuals who compose it with the power of enjoying in safety and tranquillity their natural rights, and the blessings of life." The Massachusetts constitution also provided for the separation of powers that Adams had recommended in his *Thoughts on Government*.

By 1777, Adams was in Europe to negotiate the treaties that would secure the American cause. His 11 years in European cities and courts showed him the benefits and flaws of royal and aristocratic societies. He met kings and queens in person, including George III, but he remained a republican to the core.

He arrived to London in 1783, as the American peace treaty with Britain was signed. He was still there as his colleagues in the United States wrote the US Constitution, but he was with them in spirit. He defended the idea of bicameral legislatures from European criticism in a three-volume book called *The Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*. Turning to Greek and Roman history, he argued that republics could be stable and long-lasting if properly constructed. The message was clear—the new United States could survive.

The book was Adams's final act as a political theorist deeply rooted in Greek and Roman history. Now, at age 53, he felt called to public service for the new nation he had helped to create. He would be vice president and then president, serving his republic in the sphere of action rather than scholarship. He retired from public life in 1801, after the election that put his rival Thomas Jefferson in the White House. Adams died on July 4, 1826, the same day as the 50-year mark of the founding of the republic.

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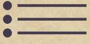

10

Thomas Jefferson's Total World of Classicism

In the spring of 1787, Thomas Jefferson stood in front of a small Roman temple in the ancient French city of Nîmes. Working with the French architect Charles-Louis Clérisseau, Jefferson shipped a stucco replica of the temple to his colleagues in Richmond, Virginia—it would be a model for the new state capitol building. The Richmond capitol building became the first public structure in the new United States to be designed on the exact model of ancient Rome. In this lecture, you'll look at Jefferson's world of classicism, which was shaped by a childhood love for the classics. The inspirations he took from the Greco-Roman world followed him throughout his career as a statesman and political thinker. This classicism would manifest with equal power in his vision of a new Rome at his farm in Monticello and even in death.

Jefferson's Early Life

Thomas Jefferson was born in 1743 on the Shadwell Plantation in the colony of Virginia during the reign of King George II of Great Britain. When he was 16, he entered the College of William and Mary. The curriculum of colonial American colleges was totally uniform—everyone learned Latin, Greek, classical history, some mathematics, and moral philosophy.

Above all, Jefferson learned to admire the republican period of ancient Rome. According to his favorite historians—Tacitus, Livy, and Sallust—this early period was the moment when simple farmers grew grain on their own plots of land, thinking of their country and not of themselves. They owned their own land and thus could not be influenced. They were independent. But Jefferson learned to be less enthusiastic about ancient Greece. Though rich in literature and philosophy, Greece set an unseemly political example—too much democracy in Athens; too much military rule in Sparta.

Jefferson's young mind also absorbed something else: architecture. The symmetrical brick façade and big-paned windows of his college were popular in the reigns of English monarchs of the colonial era. But Jefferson eventually came to see this style as a visible symbol of monarchy and tyranny. After the American Revolution, he would take a giant eraser to the visual field of colonial America to create the independent United States of America. "Roman genius and taste," as he called it, would be his nails and lumber for the job.

Jefferson's real classical education began after college when he apprenticed to the lawyer George Wythe, who was famous for his knowledge of Greece and Rome. By the 1770s, Jefferson's political career had launched. In addition to his law practice, he served in the Virginia House of Burgesses. From this position, he responded to the growing tensions with Britain with an eye on both the present and the past.

Jefferson and the Revolution

Jefferson's *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*—which he wrote in 1774 for Virginia's delegates to the First Continental Congress—drew on the ancient Roman and Anglo-Saxon past to refute Parliament's rights to govern the North American colonies. In the ancient form of a petition to the king, the document quoted Cicero to the effect that the supreme magistrate was the servant of the people. But the king and Parliament were unmoved.

The result was the Declaration of Independence of 1776. The document was authored by a five-person committee, and Jefferson shaped the prose. The declaration said nothing explicitly about ancient Rome, but Jefferson invoked the Roman idea that the world contained a fundamental natural law that the best human laws should reflect.

By 1781—the dramatic final year of active American combat against the British—Jefferson was governor of Virginia. He fled from place to place as British armies burned and pillaged their way through his state's tobacco fields and towns. Desperate Virginians pondered their options.

Statesman Richard Henry Lee urged the installation of an ancient Roman-style dictator during this emergency, stating that "both antient and modern times furnish precedents to justify this procedure." Dictators in ancient Rome had full military powers for use in emergencies. However, the dictator could only act within his intended sphere of authority, and he had to resign the dictatorship once the assigned task had been accomplished or after 6 months. For all his admiration of Rome, Jefferson did not agree. He countered that not everything that was done in Rome needed to be done in Virginia. Thanks to help from French forces, the Americans finally defeated the British at Yorktown in the fall of 1781.

Less than a year later, Jefferson's wife, Martha, died a few months after the birth of her last child. Jefferson collapsed into grief, but soon an opportunity for distraction came. He would join the other two ministers already in Paris—Ben Franklin and John Adams—as US minister plenipotentiary to France. In 1784, the 41-year-old widower sailed for Paris.

A Changed Man

Diplomatically Jefferson's 5 years in France were a disappointment, but the man who sailed home 5 years later was a new person, changed inside out by France. Rome came alive everywhere in modern France, from the crumbling aqueducts and amphitheaters to the cobbled roads and mossy walls.

Jefferson also encountered a new style in France—Neoclassicism. Modern engineers were updating Roman and Greek shapes for modern uses. French Neoclassicism was not Roman architecture for the people. The style came from the top. Whichever King Louis sat on the throne in the 18th century, they announced their global ambitions by imitating the imperial splendor of Rome. Five years in the absolutist France of Louis XVI taught Jefferson that the gilded Neoclassicism of France was not for America.

In France, Jefferson also sharpened his criticism of organized religion. He always considered himself a Christian but opposed what he called the corruptions of Christianity. He was in search of a code of ethics for the Enlightenment's Age of Reason. Religion should be an ethical system based on reason and observation of the natural world, with no more emotion or "abracadabra," as he put it. He wanted to strip down Christianity to "the precepts of Jesus himself." Jefferson combined his less-is-more Christianity with classical Stoicism. Stoics such as the ancient Greek philosophers Epictetus and Epicurus taught calm acceptance in the face of calamity and a kind of happiness for this world rather than a longing for the next one.

Monticello

In September 1789, Jefferson sailed home from France to a changed America. The US Constitution had been written and ratified. The republic was now 13 years old, but would the experiment in government by the people and for the people last? Jefferson wasn't so sure. Monarchists seemed to lurk around every corner, and people like Alexander Hamilton wanted a powerful central government. With more commerce, more cities, and more industry, Jefferson saw his vision of an agrarian republic slipping away. This conflict in vision would split the new United States into the First Party System of the 1790s.

Federalists like Hamilton and George Washington pushed for a powerful, commercial nation. Democratic-Republicans like Jefferson and James Madison pushed for an agrarian utopia of Roman farmers.

Back on his own farm at Monticello, Jefferson saw a chance to model his agrarian vision in brick and lumber. France had opened his eyes to a new vision of Neoclassicism as a visual and tactile world. And so work began on Monticello 2.0. The renovations sunk Jefferson into enormous debt, which ran against the ideal of independence he idealized in the simple farmers of republican Rome. As visitors threatened to overrun this house, Jefferson retreated to a smaller plantation called Poplar Forest, where he began to build another small house in 1806.

Skilled slaves constructed the Roman columns and classical friezes that helped Jefferson to imagine that he was a Roman farmer reborn in modern America. They were the coerced partners of American classicism, working in its shadows but essential to its success. Over the course of his life, Jefferson owned about 600 enslaved people. Greece and Rome—like America before the Civil War—were slave societies. But Jefferson convinced himself that the slaves of ancient Rome were White and therefore superior to the Black enslaved people of the United States.

President Jefferson

Jefferson assumed the presidency of the United States in 1801. After 12 years of Federalists in office, he could finally make America into a new Rome full of virtuous farmers. This idea was the reason for the Louisiana Purchase, the signature achievement of Jefferson's 8 years in office. In 1803, the United States bought 828,000 square miles from Napoleon for a mere $15 million.

Jefferson had doubled the size of the nation overnight. He thought that if farmers filled the region, they would prevent America from developing into a senile and corrupt monarchy, as so much of Europe had. The nation would be a giant Roman republic, reinvented for the modern world. Jefferson called the Louisiana Purchase his "empire of liberty"—even though it relied on the slave labor of Africans and the decimation or assimilation of Native Americans.

THOMAS JEFFERSON

After he stepped down from the presidency in 1809, Jefferson worked on establishing the University of Virginia, which opened its doors in 1825. The campus reimagined Rome for the modern nation. The library at the center was modeled on the Roman Pantheon, complete with a dome and an oculus to let in sunlight.

By this point, Jefferson was tired. He was more than 80 years old, and the America he had done so much to build seemed to be slipping further away from him. The population was surging, the cities were growing, and the Virginia planter aristocracy was in decline. Jefferson died on July 4, 1826—exactly 50 years after he had helped his nation to declare independence and create a new order for the ages.

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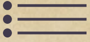


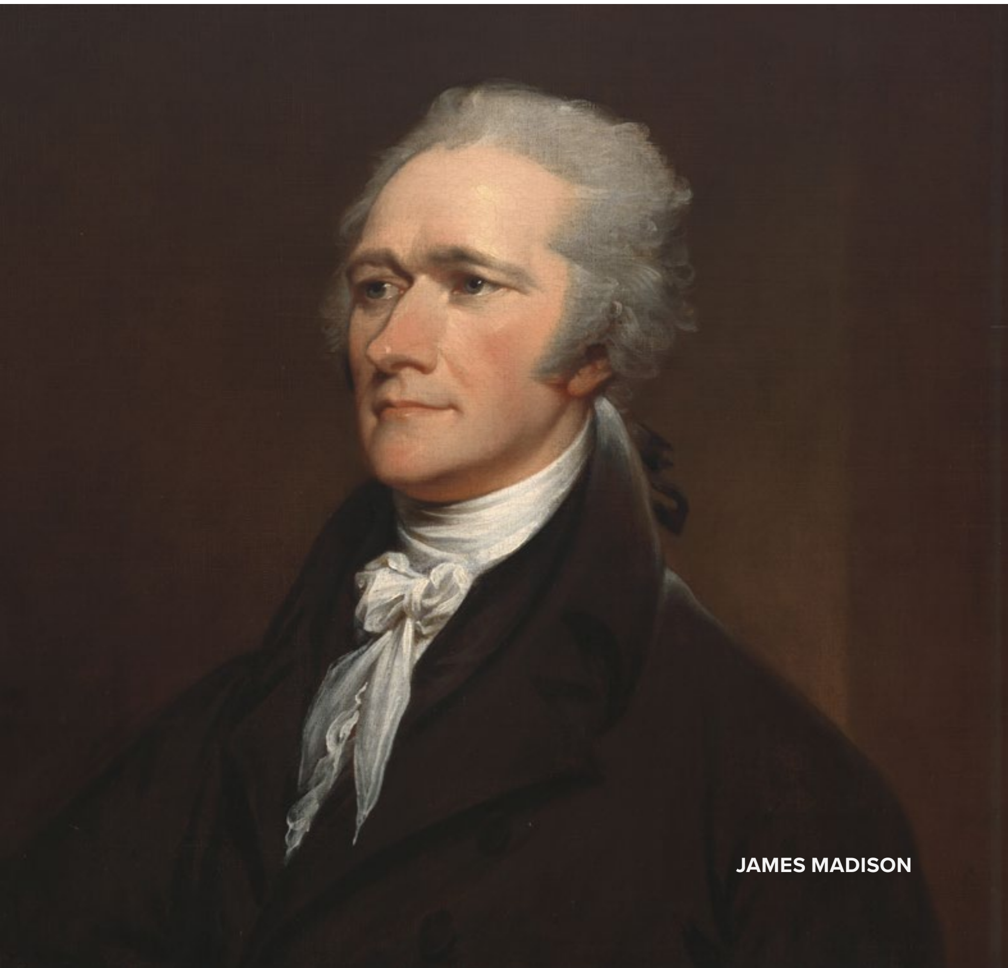
11

James Madison's Classical Vision of Government

James Madison is known as the father of the US Constitution, the blueprint for the new federal government drafted in 1787 and ratified soon after. His ideas were deeply rooted in the ancient classical republics of Greece and Rome. In this lecture, you'll see how his government service in the late colonial period and the Revolutionary War shaped how he thought about the republics of Greece and Rome. Madison had an Enlightenment faith that he could learn how to guide events in the present by looking at the past. To create a framework for his new government, he started from scratch—while leaning heavily on the creative political thinkers of the ancient world. And in 1787, he helped to create something the Greeks and Romans had never imagined: a large swath of territory governed by a republic composed of the people acting through their elected representatives.

Young Madison

James Madison was born in 1751 and was decades younger than many of the other founders. Like all young people, he was formed in some basic ways by what he saw around him—and he saw political, military, and social turmoil. He was only 25 years old when his country seceded from another one in a bloody rebellion, and this experience fundamentally shaped his outlook on the US Constitution.



JAMES MADISON

Madison grew up on his father's wealthy plantation in northern Virginia; the wealth the plantation's slaves produced ensured that he lived with a certain amount of grandeur. Around 1762, a teenage Madison set off for some proper classical schooling. He plowed through the Romans: Virgil, Horace, Justinian I, Caesar, Tacitus, Lucretius, and Eutropius. Then he made his way through the Greeks: Phaedrus, Plutarch, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Plato.

As Madison was heading to Princeton in 1769, Americans were heading toward the revolution. Active and sometimes violent resistance to British imperial taxation policies rocked the colonies. In 1767, Americans had rejected the notorious Townshend duties that had taxed so many of the nice things in life—including paint, lead, glass, and tea. John Dickinson had published his *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania, to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies* to oppose the despised duties. He quoted classical maxims in Latin to the effect that the Romans themselves would have opposed these taxes as a threat to their agrarian republic.

Letters from a Farmer helped to unite and galvanize colonial opinion against British taxation policies. And indeed, apart from the tea tax, Parliament responded to this colonial backlash by repealing the Townshend Acts. Dickinson's pamphlet showed Madison that by the power of the pen—dipped into the words of ancient Roman farmers and orators—someone could move mountains or even cause the repeal of legislation passed by the mighty British Parliament itself.

At Princeton, Madison continued his classical studies and also fell under the influence of the university's brilliant new Scottish president, John Witherspoon. The latter brought with him the latest ideas from the Scottish Enlightenment, which tried to braid together faith and reason. He also promoted Scottish common sense realism. Witherspoon taught his students that they could know the natural world because it was real. Similarly they could know the political world because it was also real and governed by laws they could know. Politics was a science. Witherspoon helped to shape Madison's view that the histories of Greece and Rome applied directly to the modern political world as part of this new "political science."

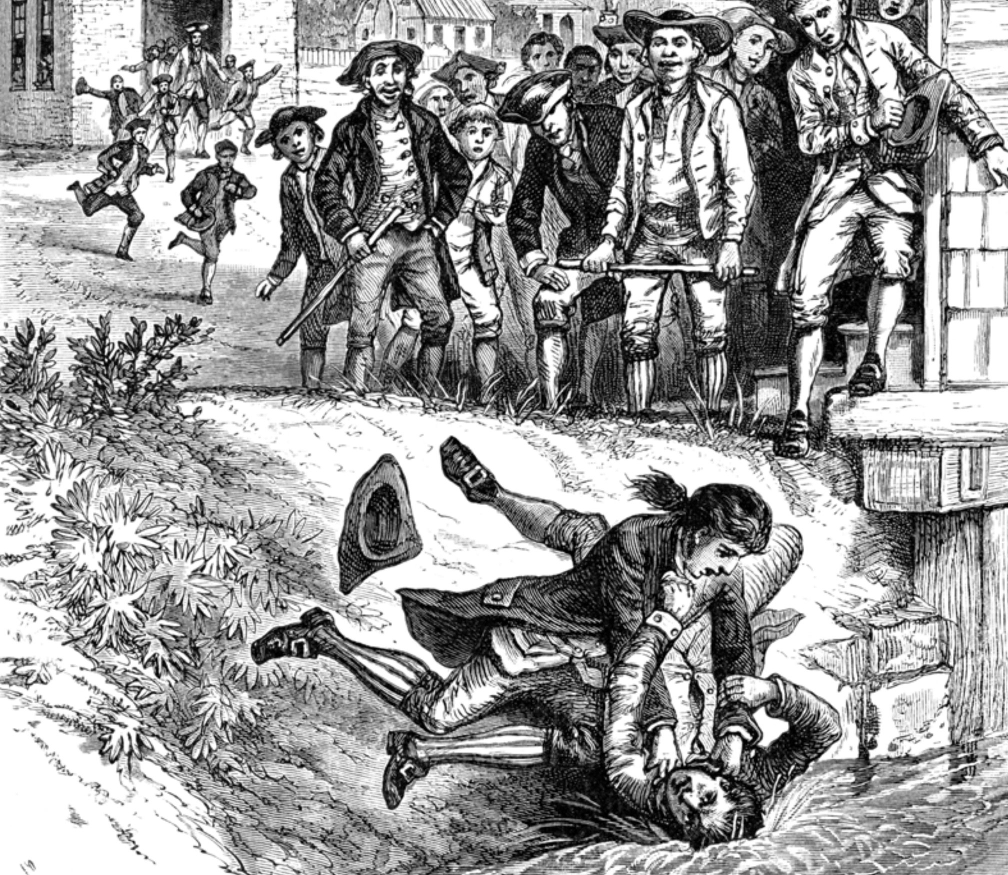
The Problems of Confederations

Madison left Princeton in 1772. The disputes that would lead to the American Revolution were now at full throttle. The Boston Massacre had passed, and the Boston Tea Party would happen the next year. In Virginia, the loyalist governor Lord Dunmore would soon offer freedom to any Virginia slave who joined the British cause against the patriots. Princeton itself would become a battleground of the American Revolution.

Madison served in the Virginia House of Delegates, and at age 29, he became the youngest member of the Continental Congress during the Revolutionary War. From these positions, he clearly saw the problems that afflicted the first national government of the United States, called the Articles of Confederation. This government was in operation during the difficult war years and could hardly have been less effective. Americans hated King George III so deeply that a general fear of tyrannical central government had set in. Therefore the Articles of Confederation provided very little in the way of executive power. Each state was strong and independent. The central government had only a one-house legislature and lacked the power to tax the states.

By the end of the war in 1783, many Americans had become convinced that the Articles of Confederation were not working as a national government. Chaos reigned, and Madison worried that this unrest threatened the survival of the fragile new nation. Domestic turmoil was illustrated by uprisings like Shays's Rebellion in Massachusetts, where an armed mob of farmers attacked the new state capitol in Springfield. The thought that powerful foreign nations would attack the United States was just as scary. Britain might gobble its former colonies right back up, and France and Spain lurked nearby with their territories in the Caribbean and South America.

So 10 years after the Declaration of Independence, some Americans knew they had to start over. The states were operating largely independently, and some had even erected their own tariffs and created separate currencies. A meeting in Annapolis, Maryland, was called in September 1786 to fix the problems with the Articles of Confederation, but only a handful of representatives from five states bothered to show up. Therefore they couldn't come to any binding decisions. Then a delegate from New York—a man



SHAYS'S REBELLION

named Alexander Hamilton—put his hand up and spoke. They should meet in Philadelphia the next year "to render the constitution of the Federal Government adequate to the exigencies of the Union," as he put it.

Madison had taken the Annapolis Convention idea seriously, and he'd spent the spring of 1786 reading about confederations, or political units made of smaller ones. Such units—like the Articles of Confederation—were inherently unstable. Their one advantage was that they formed larger political and military units to defend against big powers. The ancient Greek city-states had done this on several occasions to defend themselves against powerful empires like the Persians or the Romans. But confederations were also fragile. If the smaller states that made up a confederacy could not get along, the whole thing would fall apart—and they would be conquered by a more powerful enemy.

Madison was especially interested in ancient Greek confederacies, so he put several of them under a microscope to determine what worked and what didn't. He found the Lycian Confederacy to be the most interesting. Ancient Lycia was an example of how a representative government could have proportional weights. In other words, not every member of a confederation had to be equal. Some members might have a larger population, while others might contribute more funds to the common pot of defense. Madison thought the Lycian Confederacy was a great idea for the United States, which had very unequal states. Some were huge and populous, whereas others were tiny.

Ancient Lycia and the US Constitution

In the summer of 1787, Madison and other delegates assembled in Philadelphia to revise the Articles of Confederation and create the US Constitution. At this time, Madison pushed the Lycian Confederacy. But a representative of the small state of Connecticut was also at the convention. That representative—Oliver Ellsworth—thought all states should have an equal number of votes, no matter their size or population. Madison pulled Lycia out of a hat to counter this idea. He said different members of a federation could still come together in ways that reflected their particular strengths. Not all parts had to be the same.

This contention eventually led to the creation of a bicameral legislature in the US Congress. The upper house, the Senate, would do as Ellsworth wanted. Each state would be represented equally with two senators. This setup was great for small states. But the lower house, the House of Representatives, would do as Madison recommended and as the example of the ancient Lycian Confederacy suggested. This house would represent states based on their total population—a big win for large states like Virginia and for the slaveowners whose human chattel swelled their populations.

Immediately after the creation of the US Constitution, ancient Lycia came up again in *The Federalist Papers*, which were written by Madison, Hamilton, and John Jay under the classical pseudonym Publius. Federalists wanted to gain support for the US Constitution so that it would defeat the Articles of

Confederation and strengthen the new central government. In *Federalist*, no. 45, Madison raised the Lycian Confederacy to show that the danger the US faced was from the federal government being too weak and getting eaten alive by aggressive states. Lycia's own confederacy never "degenerated" into "one consolidated government."

Cautionary Tales

Madison learned about another Greek example from Plutarch—the Amphictyonic League. The word *amphictyony* means "league of neighbors." This mainland Greek confederation was made of 12 tribes and centered on a religious shrine. But Madison was interested in how the tribes organized their politics. Member states sent two kinds of deputies to a general council that met twice a year and functioned like a mutual aid society for its members. For example, a member couldn't destroy another city in the league or cut off its water supply. Although this confederacy was pretty useful, Madison thought it didn't have sufficient executive power and that the strong members had a tendency to bully the weaker, smaller ones.

In the end, all the ancient Greek confederacies failed. Madison discussed this topic at length in *Federalist*, no. 18, which is basically a long list of the Greek confederacies that were conquered by a strong and unified actor, such as the Romans. "A victorious and powerful ally is but another name for a master," Madison wrote of the conquered confederacies while thinking of modern threats like France and Great Britain. Though powerful allies, they might be ready and waiting to reconquer the North American colonies they'd lost over the 18th century.

Madison took another cautionary example from ancient Greek history that still defines the United States today. The reigning wisdom in the 18th century was that only small republics could succeed; the public good was more obvious in such a republic. Madison emphatically disagreed. In *Federalist*, no. 10, he said that the American republic would succeed by not imitating the small republics of ancient Greece. In fact, the bigger the territory, the larger the number of interests, and the less likely a majority interest would form to trample on the rights of other citizens.

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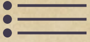

12

Benjamin Franklin's Practical Uses for Antiquity

Many people think that Benjamin Franklin was against classical education, too busy discovering electricity to bother with useless topics like Greek. But as you'll see in this lecture, such a viewpoint gets Franklin wrong. He wanted practical classicism: Greek and Latin not for frivolous showing off but for helping people. Unlike some other founders who used Greece and Rome as a guide to good government, the working-class Franklin saw classicism as a guide to good living.

Humble Beginnings

Benjamin Franklin was not born into a wealthy family, and he was able to attend the Boston Latin School for only a year. He would never go to any college—though he collected many honorary degrees—and he would never read Greek or Latin. His formal schooling ended when he was 10 years old. But that year at the Boston Latin School shaped the way he looked at the classics and classical education for the rest of his life.

With his schooling ended, Franklin apprenticed as a printer with his older brother James, whose newspaper was called the *New-England Courant*. The printing trade taught Franklin to see one of the many small indignities that made American colonists feel like second-class citizens in the British Empire. As so many schoolboys learned ancient Greek, there was a big market for Greek textbooks. And for that, printers needed Greek letters, which could quickly bankrupt a printer: They would need 48 new symbols—uppercase and lowercase—plus all the diacritical marks or accents that Greek uses. Unsurprisingly Greek typefaces were almost impossible to get in colonial America, so most Greek textbooks had to be imported from London or the European continent. How insulting for a printer to have so much trouble getting their hands on the basic tools of the trade that could earn them a handsome profit!

By the time he was 17, Franklin was miserable working in his brother's shop. He ran away to Philadelphia, where he apprenticed to another printer. In Philadelphia, the Enlightenment put down its deepest roots in America. All kinds of learning—not just theology but also science and literature—could find a foothold. This was a gold mine for Franklin, and within a few years, he had joined up with a partner to publish his own newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. The gazette would become one of the leading newspapers of America.

In 1744, Franklin got the opportunity to print one of the first American editions of an essay by the Roman orator Cicero—*De senectute*, his famous thoughts on old age. The commission came from the Philadelphia Quaker James Logan, who was perhaps the most famous classical scholar in America. Logan possessed a library of more than 3,000 books and had the leisure to do things like translating Greek and Latin works into English. Franklin's edition of Cicero's *De senectute* was the first classical translation made by an American and printed in America. This version of the essay was a luxury product and was even advertised for sale in England and Europe.

Practical Classicism

By the time he was 42, Franklin had earned enough money from his printing business to retire. He was now what people at that time called a gentleman—a man who did not have to dirty his hands for a living. In retirement, he turned to civic works to help the city that had helped him.

Franklin proposed a new school in 1749, which eventually became the University of Pennsylvania. Any boy who wanted to learn Greek, Latin, or modern languages would not be refused. But unlike every other college in America, the classics were not required. Franklin thought that the students should also learn a lot of other things. This school would include lessons in penmanship, drawing, English grammar and style, public speaking, history (with an emphasis on politics), geography, chronology, morality, and natural history. The idea was not to get rid of the classics but to give students choices depending on their abilities and interests and to adapt the curriculum to the needs of the current era.

Along with Logan and others, Franklin also founded the Library Company of Philadelphia. This organization was one of America's first lending libraries at a time when most libraries were owned by private individuals who had a lot of money to spare. Franklin believed that people should be able to share knowledge. He wanted to make Philadelphia "the Athens of America," as he wrote to one possible patron.

Despite his growing fame, Franklin was constantly reminded that high-class and elite scholarship was a world of Latin and Greek—languages he did not know. For example, when he began his electrical experiments because he had leisure time, many of the great European books on the topic were difficult for him because they were written in Latin. And Franklin once opened his mail to find a Latin-language letter from the Dutch city of Leiden, the electricity capital of the world; he had to ask friends for translations. So when it came time to discuss his own experiments with electricity, including the famous kite experiment, he wrote about them in English. Franklin's letters on electricity, which were published as a book by his London patron in the early 1750s, made him famous in Europe. The Latin world of scholarship started to disappear about 50 years later, to be replaced by English as the international language of scholarship.

Franklin in France

Franklin was a practical man, but he still had a religious side. He had been raised in Puritan Boston, but his view was that a person's belief should improve their conduct in this life. And when he looked to the classical world of Greece and Rome, he was as impressed by the actions of Jesus as by the moral actions of the Greeks and Romans who were not Christians, such as Socrates. In his famous to-do list of virtuous actions that people should practice every day, he advised that everybody should "imitate Socrates and Jesus," both of whom practiced the virtue of humility.

Socrates inspired Franklin in other ways as well. From reading Xenophon—one of the philosopher's students—Franklin learned that Socrates had used a particular method of teaching called the Socratic method. In this approach, the way to get enemies on your side was to adopt the pose of "humble enquirer

and doubter." Instead of fighting with them head on, you would keep asking questions until they eventually saw the error of their own reasoning and came around to your side. Franklin's Socratic humility served him well during his decade in France as one of America's first diplomats. His job was to secure a political and commercial alliance with the absolute monarchy that would bankroll the American Revolution.

Franklin arrived in France in December 1776, a mere 4 months after drafting and then signing the Declaration of Independence. His lodgings in Paris were grand and reflected the elite classicism of the French aristocracy. But Franklin was a master of being what others needed him to be, and his country needed him to appear like a simple man from the backwoods of America.

During his golden Paris years, he adopted the famous beaver skin cap to cover his stringy hair. Until that point, he'd worn a wig, as any gentleman would. The French needed a dream of what the simple virtues of republican Rome could bring to their corrupt and luxurious monarchy. Franklin quickly became an emblem of republican virtue among the French.

A Changing Classical Landscape

When Franklin returned to America in 1785, he came back to a changed land. Even the English language was different—a young man named Noah Webster would soon publish a dictionary to mark off American English from British English with words like *canoe* and *skunk*. French had elbowed Latin aside as the international language of learning, and opposition to all forms of classical language was growing. These circumstances were part of a bigger question that is still asked today: What kind of education makes people into the best citizens for a republic?

Most people staked out a middle ground. They did not object to the utility of teaching Greek and Latin to boys going into law, ministry, medicine, or government since these languages would always be useful. But the languages themselves seemed increasingly outdated in a modernizing society. They were often badly taught, and they took so long to learn. And did railroad builders really need to learn Greek and Latin? This conversation was about class, democracy, and the purpose of education.

By this time, though, Franklin had passed from the stage. He died in Philadelphia in 1790. Nearly 30 years later, the American painter Benjamin West depicted Franklin in Roman apotheosis—in the act of becoming a god. In the painting, a toga-draped Franklin uses his kite to draw lightning from the heavens with the help of some cherubic lab assistants. The image captures the great scientist and experimenter everyone knows today, but it's also a reminder of the Franklin people tend to forget: the practical classicist, putting ancient languages to modern use.

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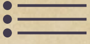

13

Revolutionary Lessons from Roman Histories

Lacking their own literary traditions, the ancient Romans drew on Greek examples to craft the histories of their republic, but they made a crucial adaptation that really spoke to revolutionary-era Americans. Primarily the Romans believed that the history of Rome taught moral lessons. By linking the present with the past, history would shed light on the current state of society. In this lecture, you'll look at how the American founders immersed themselves in their favorite Roman historians—Livy, Sallust, and Tacitus. All three explained how Rome had come to be what it was and where dangers to its survival lay. And all three also lived in the tumultuous period between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD, when the old Roman republic transitioned into the new Roman Empire. Livy, Sallust, and Tacitus handed the American revolutionaries a framework for interpreting their own riotous times.

Political Paranoia

In the 1960s, the historian Richard Hofstadter said that Americans have always had a "paranoid style" of politics—that is, a political culture of "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy." Conspiracy theories are attractive because they make complicated things simple through totalizing explanations. They claim to explain all reality. If a fact doesn't fit, believers either discard it or make it fit. In the decade before the Declaration of Independence, conspiracy theories helped Americans to account for events that were otherwise incomprehensible and unpredictable. Why had Britain suddenly changed its taxation regime in 1763 without consulting the colonial legislatures? Why did King George III and Parliament send troops to fire upon their own colonists? The king was supposed to take care of them, not kill them.

Many colonists thought that a conspiracy must be brewing in the halls of power in London to deprive Americans of their liberties through taxation without representation. So out came the Roman historians to help Americans make sense of confusion. In 1775, as the clouds of war gathered, John Adams told everyone that he thought Livy contained what he called revolution principles. According to Livy, when someone is conspiring to deprive people of their liberties, it's time for revolution—at least that was Adams's particular interpretation.

Clearly Roman historians shaped the American paranoid style of politics. But who were these historians, and what did the founders find so compelling about their works?

Livy

Livy was born in the cloudy northern Italian city of Patavium around 59 BC. Rome was on the offensive throughout Europe, with Julius Caesar about to attack transalpine Gaul to the north. Livy was destined to live in interesting times, and he died in 17 AD, after the republic had become the empire.

The historian spent around 40 years writing a grand history of Rome called *Ab urbe condita*, which translates roughly as *From the Founding of the City*. He began at the legendary establishment of Rome in the 8th century BC,

when Aeneas arrived on its shores. Then he linked that ancient history all the way through to his own time—that is, the reign of the first Roman emperor, Augustus—at the very end of the 1st century BC. His book explained how the old republic crumbled and an imperial autocracy arose in its place.

This history of Rome gave Americans a ready-made golden age to look back to when their own nation was too young to have its own legendary beginnings. Livy wrote that the solid virtues of farming and soldiering led to Rome's great triumphs—a lesson that many early Americans took to heart. And he stressed the decline of solid Roman morals over the centuries, as the old teachings from the early days were allowed to lapse. The republic was crumbling around Livy during his lifetime, and the best cure was to learn from the history of those early days to restore the old values of Rome.

This idea shaped the way the founders wrote their own narratives of the birth of the United States. Many would write of a former golden age when Americans were virtuous soldier-farmers. But then cities got bigger, people got richer, and no one cared about the old ways. American history is still framed this way today—as a tale of heroic founders, farmers, and soldiers giving way to darker times.

Sallust

Sallust was about a generation older than Livy. He was born north of Rome in 86 BC, and like Livy, he watched the decay of the Roman republic from what had seemed like its glorious early days. But unlike Livy, who steered clear of public life, Sallust threw himself into the tumultuous politics of his era. The American founders admired Sallust for the unparalleled insight he brought to political affairs as an insider and participant. Americans especially loved one of Sallust's historical works, *Catiline's War*, which was written in the late 40s BC. This history focused on the ambitious Roman statesman Catiline's attempts to secure kingship at any cost.

In 63 BC, the charismatic but ruthless aristocrat Catiline was frustrated by his failure to be elected leader of the republic. In response, he tried to topple its elected government. Backed by shady aristocrats and penniless, disaffected Romans, he fled Rome as his minions plotted a coup that involved burning

the city and murdering its leading politicians. The whole plot was unmasked, many conspirators were executed, and Catiline and his legions were crushed in battle. The Roman republic lived to fight another day.

In the last century of the republic, no one cared about the larger good, Sallust said. People only thought of power for themselves. Catiline was a scoundrel, but he was just the embodiment of the corruption of his era. Why was Rome so corrupt? Sallust attributed a lot of the problem to the republic's final destruction of its archenemy Carthage in 146 BC. With no ultra-foe to fight, the Roman nobility and army gorged on luxury and became soft. This moral caution was quite a poisonous cup, but the American founders drank it up. Sallust gave Americans a generic frame to understand republics as fragile political forms, propped up only by the civic virtue of their citizens. When enough people are corrupted, a republic will fall.

The American founders loved to paint their enemies as Catilines—self-serving rogues who endangered the republic itself. Calling someone a Catiline was a way of raising the stakes. Even on the eve of the American Civil War, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner attacked Mississippi Senator David Atchison as a Catiline. The latter had helped to pass the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which allowed for the expansion of slavery into new western states. In Sumner's famous speech called "Crime Against Kansas," which he delivered to a packed Senate in 1856, he accused Atchison of not only expanding slavery but also jeopardizing the republic: "Like Catiline, he stalked into this chamber, reeking with conspiracy."

Tacitus

Tacitus was born around 55 AD. He lived a century after Livy and Sallust, which meant he saw Rome's rise as a new empire ruled by one man alone. He served as a leading senator and was intimately familiar with the court of the gloomy and ruthless emperor Domitian. Tacitus poured this hard-won experience and knowledge of the empire's upper crust into his *Annals* and *Histories*. These works cover a period of about 80 years, from the death of the first emperor, Augustus, to the death of Domitian in 96 AD. Today they remain one of the major sources for the first century of Rome under one-man rule, especially the reigns of the awful emperors Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero.

The American revolutionaries listened closely to Tacitus's tale of bitterness and irony. The historian traced the decline of Rome from the glorious republic to its present gloom under tyrants. The senators were mere puppets of the emperor, and the governing class of Rome was corrupted by the empire's growing wealth and power. Reading Tacitus, Americans saw King George III as a Nero, corrupt beyond redemption.

Unsurprisingly the most Tacitean American history was written by an American very familiar with his writings—Mercy Otis Warren of Massachusetts, who was born on a Cape Cod farm in 1728. She was highly educated by the standards of her time and learned about the histories of Greece and Rome in English. As early as the 1790s, with the American republic barely born, Warren did not like what she saw. The patriotic spirit of 1776 seemed to have evaporated into thin air as a new self-centered generation looked out just for themselves.

In 1805, nearly 30 years after the American Revolution began, Warren published one of the first chronicles of the conflict—*History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*. Like Tacitus, Warren saw the American Revolution as a vast morality play. History was a struggle between arbitrary power and corruption on one side and virtue and integrity on the other. Her book toggled back and forth between Roman history and the American republic, using the lessons of antiquity in service of the present. Villains of the revolution were like devious Caesars and Catilines. And heroes, such as Samuel Adams, were like good Romans in the republican vein—stern and wise, with their thoughts only on the survival of the republic.

Today people don't read a lot of the histories written by American revolutionaries in the style of the ancient Romans. Historical accounts written now look at a much broader group of people than senators, emperors, and soldiers. They don't see history as a big morality play, in which heroes and villains vie to determine the fate of the republic. But immediately after the founding of the United States, Roman historians gave Americans a lens to make sense of the new nation they had created—and they helped to transform British Americans into simply Americans.

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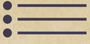

14

Classical Ideas in an Enlightenment Age

The great intellectual movement called the Enlightenment spanned both Europe and the Americas in the 18th century. The Enlightenment consisted of the belief that knowledge and reason would lead to progress and greater human happiness. In this lecture, you'll learn about this movement and how it interacted with the classics. They may seem like separate spheres, but they were intertwined—and the American founders were influenced by both. The Enlightenment view of Greece and Rome that emerged during this time gave Americans a sense that the example of classical antiquity applied to themselves as much as to the Romans: However great your republic or vast your empire, forces were always conspiring to overthrow it.

The Renaissance

The Enlightenment ushered in many innovations, including a new approach to ancient Greece and Rome. The Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries had already revived interest in this classical world. Scholars of the Renaissance were interested in getting access to original writings from Greece and Rome that would help them in thinking about government and human society somewhat separately from the Catholic Church.

Petrarch—a northern Italian scholar who lived in the 14th century—was an important early figure during the Renaissance. In his travels through Europe, Petrarch rediscovered some letters written by Cicero. This finding helped launch the Renaissance by giving access to the original Latin and the original ideas of the Romans as opposed to the Latin and the ideas of the Catholic Church. Petrarch is credited with inventing the modern idea of the Middle Ages or Dark Ages. He thought that the time between classical antiquity and his own moment was one of darkness, dominated by the religious dogmas of the Catholic Church. He hoped to recover ideas about politics, science, art, ethics, law, and literature that existed before Christianity.

Petrarch was followed by many important Renaissance figures who turned to ancient Greece and Rome for examples, using manuscripts in original Greek and Latin. Collectively they are called humanists. While remaining Christian, they tried to emphasize the role of human beings and human affairs as opposed to the world beyond.

The Enlightenment

Scholars of the Enlightenment built on the Renaissance recovery of classical antiquity. They also tried to find original Greek and Latin sources. But Enlightenment scholars added four new emphases—universality, reason, utility, and progress.

Universality was an Enlightenment belief that all civilizations adhered to universal laws of human nature and human society. Scientists such as Isaac Newton had said that physical laws rather than miracles made the universe work. Now philosophers such as David Hume applied this idea to humans and societies. In a controversial essay, Hume wrote that God had set up the world and its physical and societal laws at the beginning of time and had since receded into the background to watch things unfold. Enlightenment writers of Greek and Roman history applied this view to the men and women living in the classical world: They were living under the same set of universal laws that had always been in place. They were just like everyone else, and people could productively study them for that reason.

A new faith in human reason was another Enlightenment idea: Reason was what distinguished humans from the animals. In 1784, defining Enlightenment as "man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity," the Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that people should stop relying unthinkingly on authority and received wisdom. Instead they should have the courage to use their own reason. The English philosopher John Locke highly influenced the American founders' thinking about human reason. In his 1690 book *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke said that humans are born with minds that are blank slates—*tabula rasa* in Latin. As such, people only get ideas from the physical world around them, so they have to learn carefully from their surroundings, including by studying the great civilizations of Greece and Rome.

This leads to another new emphasis in Enlightenment approaches to Greece and Rome—their utility in the here and now. Because all human nature was the same and society obeyed universal laws, modern people could study Greece and Rome to see what to do and what not to do. What could 18th-century Americans and Europeans learn from the rise, decline, and fall of these civilizations? If they learned these lessons well, could they even improve on classical civilizations?

A belief in improvement was the final characteristic of Enlightenment approaches to Greece and Rome. Scholars thought that the world was both rational and essentially good. They believed that people had the potential to improve themselves and their environment and to make the world a better place. In other words, the Enlightenment invented the modern idea of progress, which stood in contrast to two older views of history. One was the biblical story of the Fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, which said that all of human history was the story of human struggle against an inherently sinful nature. Humans could only be improved through redemption by God. The second view of history came from the Greek and Roman idea of cyclical history. The ancients believed that human history moved through cycles of rise and fall, always repeating a general pattern.

In the Enlightenment story of progress, humans—equipped with reason—would make a world that kept improving over time. This radical idea had significant effects for European and American interpretations of history in the 18th century. In the Renaissance, people had wanted to imitate Greece and Rome. Now people dared to imagine that they could surpass those ancient societies.

Montesquieu

Two major 18th-century historians of Rome exemplified the Enlightenment approach. The first was the French philosopher and nobleman Montesquieu, who lived from 1689 to 1755. The second was the English historian Edward Gibbon, who lived from 1737 to 1794. Both men wrote famous and influential histories of ancient Rome. They lived in rapidly expanding empires, and only the Romans provided a relevant example for how to grow and maintain such power.

Montesquieu's empire was France. He was raised in a wealthy, noble family in the winemaking region of Bordeaux. He traveled around Europe and did a lot of business selling his family's wine barrels in the city of Bordeaux, where they were loaded onto ships and sent to France's lucrative slave colonies in the Caribbean. In the late 1720s, Montesquieu went to live in London for 2 years. He was used to the authoritarian monarchy of Louis XIV and XV, absolutists whose censorship laws quashed all public debate. But in London, Montesquieu saw a huge city abuzz with political debate. The English mocked their kings and politicians with little fear of damaging repercussions.

What was it about the British government in the 1720s that gave the people so much more liberty than the French government? Montesquieu found part of the answer in England's recent history. After its Glorious Revolution of 1689, Britain had been declared a constitutional monarchy, and the king was placed under some restraints by Parliament. The end of royal absolutism in England had arrived. This contrast in monarchies spurred Montesquieu to dedicate himself to understanding the roots of all human societies and governments. If human nature was fundamentally the same everywhere and at all times, external factors rather than particular individuals must account for changes in human government over time.

Montesquieu's 1748 book *The Spirit of Laws* gave the American framers general principles for how they could form lasting governments. For example, he said that all governments needed to be adapted to the particular climate in which people lived. Those who lived in hot climates would want despotism since they would be too tired from the heat to rebel against a tyrant. Those who lived in cooler climates would want liberty because they wouldn't mind agitating themselves for political freedom. Montesquieu also said that governments should not just be handed down from above by God. Rather laws should be adapted to the spirit of the people.

The Americans' uniform rejection of monarchy might be suggestive of another major point about government that the founders took from Montesquieu—that each kind of government had a so-called animating principle. Montesquieu said that the three kinds of government in human history were republics, monarchies, and tyrannies. Republics were based on citizens' civic virtue, monarchies were based on honor, and tyrannies were based on fear. The American founders consulted Montesquieu when they decided that their republic needed to be based on civic virtue, just like Rome in the early days of its republic.

The founders' final takeaway from Montesquieu was the idea of separation of powers. The French historian said that the safest kind of political authority—the one that produced the most liberty—should be divided among executive, judiciary, and legislative. The idea here was to stop the universal human trait of lust for power. In 1787, the framers of the US Constitution borrowed heavily from this concept and created a government organized around separation of powers that could control human ambition by pitting each branch against the other.

Edward Gibbon

If the American founders learned how to structure their government from Montesquieu's classicism, they discovered how to prevent the government's collapse from Edward Gibbon. The historian was born in 1737, nearly 50 years after Montesquieu. His family's wealth allowed him to tour Europe when he was in his twenties. Gibbon stopped in Rome, where he had a life-changing experience when he saw barefoot Catholic priests singing vespers

in the Roman ruins. He thought religion—particularly Christianity—had caused the decline of ancient Rome. Modern Italy was an impoverished collection of minor states that were just pale shadows of the republic's former glory.

Gibbon decided that his great life goal was to explain Rome's decline and fall. He launched his history when Rome was at its height in the 1st century AD. According to Gibbon, Christianity had caused the destruction of Rome by making the Roman people, especially the soldiers, more interested in the afterlife than in glory on earth. Other contributing factors included barbarism, the decline of civic virtue, and the rise of a standing army.

His book *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* taught the American founders that they always needed to be watchful for signs that their own republic was declining into empire and then into the Dark Ages that had swallowed Europe for 1,000 years. They were haunted by the historian's view that the fall of Rome was inevitable.

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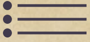

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Classicism and the Christianity of the Founders

Christianity and classicism were the two most important intellectual projects of the American founders. Many believed in the Christian God but simultaneously drew on the wisdom and knowledge of the classical world, even though many Greeks and Romans were considered to be pagans or heathens. In this lecture, you'll see how Americans combined religious and classical traditions—from the educational philosophies of Yale president and Puritan minister Ezra Stiles to the Epicureanism of Thomas Jefferson.

The Christian Tree and Classical Soil

In the revolutionary era, most American Christians were Protestants, and all the founders believed in God. But while the United States was founded by people who believed in the major tenets of Christianity, they were explicitly not creating a theocracy—a nation in which a government rules on behalf of God or a god. Even so, Christianity was very much a living influence during the revolutionary period, in dialogue with classicism.

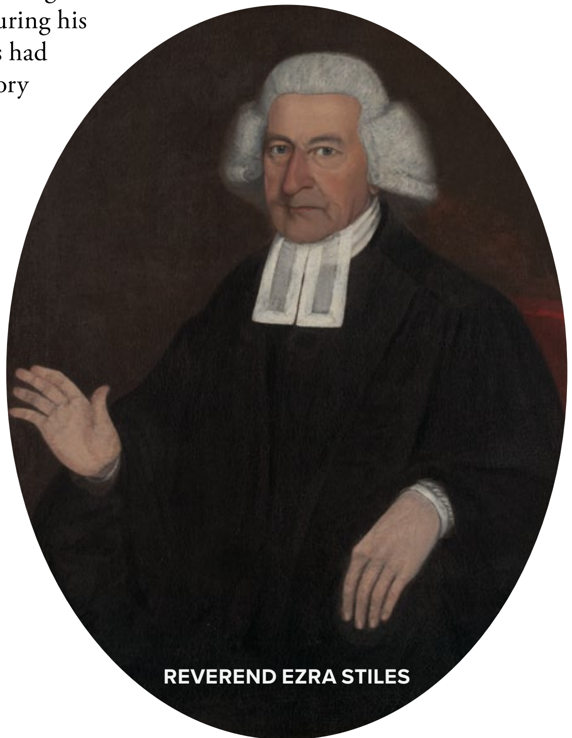
The metaphor of a tree is helpful here. Christianity is a tree with lots of branches and leaves that represent the many denominations and sects. The roots of that tree reach down into the polytheistic societies of the classical Greeks and Romans. That is, the Christian tree draws nourishment from the classical soil. Christianity emerged in the polytheistic Roman Empire in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, and some of the major Christian doctrines closely resemble polytheistic Roman and Greek precedents.

In the first 4 centuries AD, texts such as the writings of church fathers—like St. Augustine of Hippo—laid down some of Christianity's central doctrines. These Greek and Latin writings about Christianity combined with the major Hebrew-language texts of Judaism to form the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The Old Testament is in Hebrew, and the New Testament is in Greek. For this reason, the so-called classical education of the American founders was simultaneously biblical and classical. Hebrew, Greek, and Latin were an ordinary part of that education because these languages taught them about Christianity and the classical world from which it emerged. Both traditions were taught in light of one another rather than in opposition.

Even so, Christians had a problem with the polytheism of the classical Greeks and Romans. They invented terms like *pagan*, *heathen*, and *profane* to describe people who believed in many gods—terms they later applied to other non-Christians, including the Native Americans. The solution to this problem was called preparationism. Students in 18th-century America were told that polytheistic thinkers like Plato and Socrates had prepared the world for the revelation of Christian truths by thinking through important questions, such as the nature of the good.

Classicism and Christianity remained linked after America's independence in 1776. Although Americans identified their new political order with the republics of classical antiquity, most revolutionaries did not aspire to rid the land of Christianity. Protestant ministers were a central part of the revolt against Britain. They preached what they called "the sacred cause of liberty," and some even took up arms against the British. By the end of the American Revolution, Protestantism was intact in the United States—even as Americans imagined themselves to be a new Rome or Greece.

Reverend Ezra Stiles was among the leading Puritan ministers in America during the 18th century. He was the opposite of the fire-and-brimstone personality that some people associate with Puritans. In fact, he was open to a lot of the new thinking of the Enlightenment. He became Yale's president during the American Revolution, and during his term, all Yale undergraduates had to read a certain ancient history textbook that once again united both Christianity and classicism—*Ancient History*. The book was published in the 1730s by the French scholar Charles Rollin, who belonged to a controversial Catholic sect called the Jansenists. The Jansenism movement emphasized the inherent depravity of all humans and the necessity of divine grace for salvation.



REVEREND EZRA STILES

In *Ancient History*, Rollin constantly reminded his young readers of the works of the Christian God in history. So even though his book about ancient Greece and Rome was mostly about so-called pagans who worshiped many gods, Rollin served up a version of paganism that was safe for Puritans and other Protestant denominations. He aligned events in Greco-Roman history with biblical prophecies from the book of Daniel. In other words, the classical world was subordinate to the study of the Bible—classical history was framed within a biblical story.

Reforming Christianity

Stiles and Rollin showed one way that the classical and Christian world could be rolled together into a single package. Other Americans took a different path. They were Christians but had some problems with modern Christianity, so they turned to the world of classical antiquity as a way to reform their religion.

To start, they thought Christianity had been corrupted over the centuries by conniving priests grasping at power and wealth. They also thought some Christian doctrines were basically absurd. Consider the doctrine of predestination: Puritans and Calvinists taught the idea that God had decided everybody's fate at the beginning of time—whether you were saved or damned was decided in advance. This doctrine was hard to swallow, especially for people influenced by the new Enlightenment idea of human-directed progress. If they were damned from the beginning, how could they also improve themselves and their world? The contradictions became more than some Americans could manage, and they turned to classical philosophy to find solutions. They became especially interested in two ancient classical philosophical systems called Epicureanism and Stoicism.

The late 4th century BC saw the rise of Epicureanism in Greece, based in part on the teachings of the Greek philosopher Epicurus. Epicureans offered a philosophy for the material world of things they could see and feel rather than the metaphysical world of things they couldn't see or feel. They said that God or gods were not involved in everyday life and that the highest good was to seek modest pleasures through tranquility and the absence of bodily pain. Epicureanism was known best through the writing of the later

Roman philosopher Lucretius, who spread the ideas in Latin to a much wider audience. Americans also picked up on some Epicurean doctrines through Virgil and Horace (whose mantra "carpe diem," or "seize the day," captures Epicurean philosophy).

The philosophy of Stoicism also arose in Greece in the 4th century BC. The philosopher Zeno is often credited as its founder. The Stoics held that the practice of virtue was the principal means to achieve human flourishing and happiness. Stoicism taught the development of self-control as a means of overcoming destructive emotions. This philosophy was known through several texts, especially the works of the Roman philosopher Seneca, the Greek philosopher Epictetus, and the Roman emperor and general Marcus Aurelius.

The classical world seemed pure to the American founders who took issue with some Christian doctrines they found damaging or illogical. They found an ethical system in these ancient philosophies that—to some extent—offered a supplement or alternative to Christian doctrines they found absurd or even destructive. For example, Thomas Jefferson admired Jesus and Socrates equally and rejected the Puritan doctrine of innate depravity. He was the American founder most influenced by Epicureanism, and he whittled the philosophy down to the following key points: The purpose of life was happiness. The foundation of happiness was virtue. What made something virtuous was its usefulness. Keep busy. Avoid pain.

Radical Paine

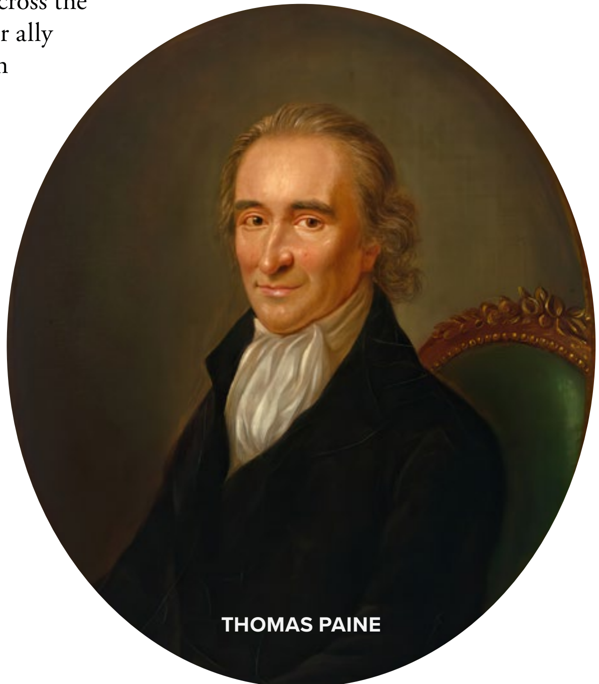
Thomas Paine was among the Americans most disillusioned with traditional Christianity, although he believed in God until his dying day. Paine was born in England and began life at the very bottom of society. Although this humble beginning limited him in some ways, it also gave him the capacity to speak to the common person in plain English. That ability shaped the rest of his life—and also the course of American history.

On the advice of Benjamin Franklin, who was living in London, Paine migrated to Philadelphia on the eve of the American Revolution. He saw what no American could see at that time—that the moment for reconciliation with Britain had passed. His anonymous pamphlet *Common Sense* exploded on

the scene in January 1776. Short, punchy, and easy to read, *Common Sense* told Americans that they should just break with England. And so they did in July 1776.

Clearly Paine was not afraid to break with tradition. He turned to the early history of the Bible to show why the problems with monarchy were as old as the Old Testament. Everything had been great with the people of Israel until the ancient Hebrews got the idea of installing a monarch. After that, Paine said, everything went downhill. Now the king of England was just "the principal ruffian of some restless gang," not some God-given ruler that Americans should simply accept. These kinds of arguments made Paine the darling of America during the revolution.

But Paine became more radical over time. By the 1790s, he was in France just as that country was exploding into a far more radical revolution than America ever had. The French even chopped off the heads of their king and queen, Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette. Americans watched from across the Atlantic as this great former ally of the American Revolution descended into anarchy and atheism. While they worried that the winds of French anti-Christianity would infect the United States, Paine saw the French Revolution as an opportunity to rid the world of destructive dogmas like the cabal of church officials who lined their own pockets in the name of God.



THOMAS PAINE

In 1794, he published *The Age of Reason*, in which he painted Christianity as mythology. He wrote that the religion was invented from the pagan worship of the sun and moon like all ancient myths. But over time, Christianity had been corrupted by scheming priests intent on grabbing power and wealth for themselves. Now the religion was "an engine of power," serving only "the purpose of [political] despotism." The American public was horrified by Paine's latest work—he had used Greece and Rome to undermine the very foundations of Christianity rather than to reform it.

But by 1870, the solid synthesis of Christianity and classicism had faded away. The rise of biblical scholarship made it possible to study Christianity as part of the larger classical Mediterranean world rather than as a separate divine revelation. By 1900, atheism became a viable intellectual attitude among some Americans. So studying either the classical world or the biblical world was no longer something special; these traditions were just part of global history. Even 20th-century Americans who remained committed to religion were increasingly able to separate their secular work lives from their religious commitments.

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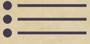


16

The Ancient Roots of the US Constitution

After the American Revolution was over and the British had been defeated, Americans created their own government, which they laid out in the US Constitution. But for all that it was new, this document had deep roots in the political thought of the ancient Greeks and Romans. In this lecture, you'll look at some of the ways in which classical political thinkers—especially Aristotle and Polybius—shaped the US Constitution. The influence of antiquity was not always direct, though. You'll also look at the French philosopher Montesquieu, who made crucial revisions to classical political philosophy. Those revisions helped inspire the American framers when they sat down in Philadelphia to compose the US Constitution.

The US Constitution

What's actually new, modern, and revolutionary about the US Constitution? First, it's written. For most of history, constitutions were not written down; they were simply a messy accumulation of a set of rules that created, structured, and defined the limits of a government's power or authority. The written US Constitution was a product of the Enlightenment, when people feared the secret conspiracies of governments and vowed to create documents that showed exactly how things should work.

Second, the US Constitution lodges ultimate authority in one thing alone: "The People." The preamble says, "We the People of the United States … do ordain and establish this Constitution." This idea is called popular sovereignty. According to this doctrine, government is created by the will of the people and sustained by their continued consent; there is no monarchical or aristocratic element represented here. At the time the US Constitution was created, other governments lodged some authority in the people but also in other sectors of society, such as the monarchy and the aristocracy.

Mixed Government

The writers of the US Constitution drew on the classical world in powerful ways. Take the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who lived in the 4th century BC. The American framers were most interested in his idea of mixed government, which they read about in his tract called *Politics*. Aristotle helped to group the various kinds of constitutions—or governments—that existed in both theory and reality. He said that a government may consist of one or more of the following types: rule by the one, rule by the few, or rule by the multitude. Rule by the one is called monarchy. Rule by the few or the best is called aristocracy. And rule by the multitude is called democracy. Mixing the three types creates stability. Just as a tripod is stable because it has three legs, a government or constitution is stable because the three elements in the polis—the monarchical, the aristocratic, and the multitude—all have some representation in government.

Aristotle also showed what happened when the constitution or government became unbalanced. If the monarchical element became too powerful, the polis degenerated into tyranny. If the aristocratic element became too powerful, the polis degenerated into oligarchy, that is, rule of the few but not necessarily the best. If the multitude became too powerful, the polis degenerated into mobocracy, meaning rule by a mob. So one useful takeaway for the American founders was that six possible constitutional forms existed—monarchy and its degenerated form of tyranny; aristocracy and its degenerated form of oligarchy; and democracy and its degenerated form of mobocracy.

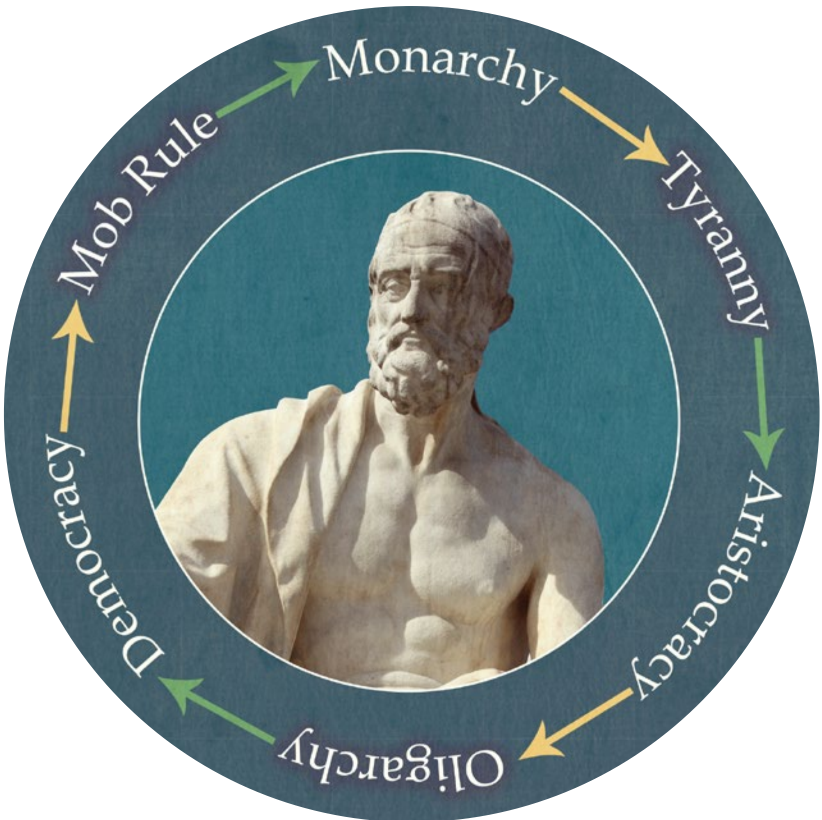
But mixed government did not presume equality—in fact, it assumed great inequality among people. In the classical world, people believed that some were simply better than others. Therefore the ancients believed government should reflect that natural inequality by mixing those different stations in life into a stable and realistic constitution. This belief in inherent inequality and hierarchy persisted until the 1700s. The idea that people are all created equal was radically new in 1776 and required a new kind of government. Aristotle certainly couldn't have foreseen it, nor could the historian Polybius.

Anacyclosis

Polybius was born around 200 BC in Greece, when his homeland was being conquered by the Romans. His work *The Histories* covers the period 264 to 146 BC, focusing on the calamitous Punic Wars between Rome and its archenemy, Carthage. Polybius had one major question in mind in his history: How did Rome become the dominant power in the Mediterranean?

Polybius discussed the same three forms of government that Aristotle did—monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. Like Aristotle, he said that these three simple constitutions each degenerate over time into their corrupted forms of tyranny, oligarchy, and mob rule. After the first few generations, monarchs would become tyrants because they were born to privilege rather than being chosen because of their excellence. Similarly, born to privilege, the descendants of the original aristocracy would rot into oligarchs. Seeing this rot, the people would rise up and seize power for themselves.

But while the first generation of a democracy might rule well because they remember an era of repression and tyranny, their descendants would fail to cherish those liberties. At some point, some sort of demagogue drawn from the common people would rise up with ambition to power. They would cater to the basest desires of the populace to win their favor, such as by holding gladiatorial combats and doling out cheap bread. Valuing the easy comforts of bread and circuses above the hard fight for liberty, the people would accept the demagogue, and the cycle would begin again.



Polybius used the term *anacyclosis* to describe this endless cycling of the basic forms of government. Yet he said that Rome was temporarily able to escape this decline of anacyclosis because it had a mixed constitution consisting of monarchical, aristocratic, and popular elements. The Roman consuls were the monarchical element; the Senate was the aristocratic element; and the popular assembly was the democratic element. While all three parts of the government were interdependent, each element also worked to some extent against the other. Today people call this checks and balances. Polybius thought that since Rome had this equilibrium, it had escaped anacyclosis—at least for the time being.

Separation of Powers

The 18th-century French theorist Montesquieu was a Polybian protégé, and he exercised a huge influence on the American founders. In typical Enlightenment fashion, he believed that the laws governing human societies were not given by God. Instead, they were created by humans, which meant that laws were fallible and could be remade to be better—again, by humans. This flew directly in the face of what kings at the time were telling people. Monarchs like Louis XIV of France were always insisting that their power ultimately derived from God.

Montesquieu admired the works of Aristotle and Polybius. Like them, he thought government could be categorized into basic types. But for Montesquieu, each kind of government rested on a certain principle or "spirit." Republican governments rested on a spirit of virtue, monarchical governments on a spirit of honor, and despotic governments on a spirit of fear. Different climates around the world created different kinds of people, and each kind of government should be appropriate for the climate and the people.

Montesquieu also believed that the greatest danger to government was the desire for power. But this lust for power was part of human nature, so governments would always have to confront it. His solution was checking one power with another power, like two magnets repelling each other.

In *The Spirit of Laws*, Montesquieu laid out the scheme that attracted the framers of the US Constitution—separation of the legislative, executive, and judicial powers of government to block the tyrannical growth of power in any one of them. He insisted that such separation was the indispensable condition of liberty.

A Unique Form of Government

By the time they sat down to write the US Constitution in 1787, the American founders had a lot of political theory at their fingertips. First, Aristotle, Polybius, and Montesquieu taught them that they could classify governments into various types depending on whether one person, several people, or many people were in charge. Second, these scholars illustrated the causes that led governments to degenerate into tyranny, oligarchy, and mobocracy. Third, they suggested some ways to avoid that decline and fall. Mixed government and checks and balances thwarted the innate human desire to grab power by setting the people and the parts of government against one another.

In a revolutionary twist, however, the United States no longer had monarchy or aristocracy. The American founders had shifted from having a mixed government of the three orders of society—monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—to having a government of one order of society, the people. They then divided this one order of society into the legislative, executive, and judiciary branches of government, but all three branches consisted only of the people. America had separation of powers, just as Montesquieu advised, but without the different orders of society.

Consider an example from one of the branches of the US government: the Senate. The Senate was the voice for the aristocracy in Rome, and this idea was reimagined for the United States. Americans knew they wanted an upper house to their legislature. Under the Articles of Confederation, they'd only had a single-house legislature, which they believed contributed to the ineffectiveness of that government. But why have an upper house if both houses represented just the people? James Madison offered a new justification: The Senate would act as a check on the power of the lower house, the House of Representatives.

In the original formulation of the US Constitution, senators were not directly elected. Rather they were chosen by each state legislature. This more indirect election process was one way the US Senate checked the power of the House of Representatives. The move to eliminate the aristocratic hold on the upper house ceded unprecedented power to the popular vote by allowing the people a say in shaping the state legislatures that would choose their senatorial representatives. All of the senators and representatives were ultimately elected by the people. Everybody was equal.

As John Adams said, the real American Revolution was a revolution in the hearts and minds of the American people. Americans threw off the ancient idea of monarchy and aristocracy that some people—by virtue of their birth—deserved to rule. Instead they adopted the novel philosophy that all humans are created equal and that governments must rise up from that basic fact of nature. By doing so, they closed the door on the ancient world of government and walked into a new world.

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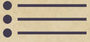


17

How the *Aeneid* Became America's Founding Myth

A mighty city burned to ashes. A 7-year voyage on the high seas. A tragic love story. A duel to the death. A mighty empire born. These ideas form the plot of the *Aeneid*, an epic poem composed by the Roman poet Virgil between 30 and 19 BC. In this lecture, you'll look at the epic's enormous influence on the American founders, who needed to invent a tale about the formation of their country. The *Aeneid* was an obvious choice for America's first national story since so many people had either heard of it or even knew it by heart. The poem gave Americans meaty and relevant themes to chew on: What does it mean to be exiled from your homeland? How does a dutiful family member and citizen behave? How does someone found a new nation?

The *Aeneid* and America

Virgil was born in 70 BC about 300 miles north of the capital city of Rome. This northern region was known as Cisalpine Gaul, and it was not incorporated into Italy until 42 BC. So Virgil was coming to Roman culture as an outsider, able to see the ways of the Romans with fresh eyes. He also lived during the death throes of the Roman republic and the birth of the Roman Empire. Revolutionary-era Americans were also living through a time of crisis and uncertainty, so they saw a mirror of their own struggles in ancient Rome's civil wars.

The *Aeneid* was particularly relevant. Virgil wrote it over 11 years at the dawn of the Roman Empire. The poem is a sweeping epic in 12 books that begins in the era of the Trojan War, around the 12th or 13th century BC. The hero is the warrior Aeneas, one of the Trojans fighting against the Greek invasion of their fortress city. He's the son of the goddess Venus and the Trojan prince Anchises, so he's half divine and half royal. He fights longer and harder than a mere mortal or commoner, and his actions have epic meanings.

When Troy finally goes up in flames, Aeneas flees with his small family and sails westward in the Mediterranean with other Trojan refugees. Many adventures ensue as they make their way toward the Italian peninsula. They eventually land in a place called Latium. After conquering the leader of the Latians, Aeneas marries the Latian princess, Lavinia. Their descendants then multiply and give birth to Romulus and Remus, who eventually found Rome.

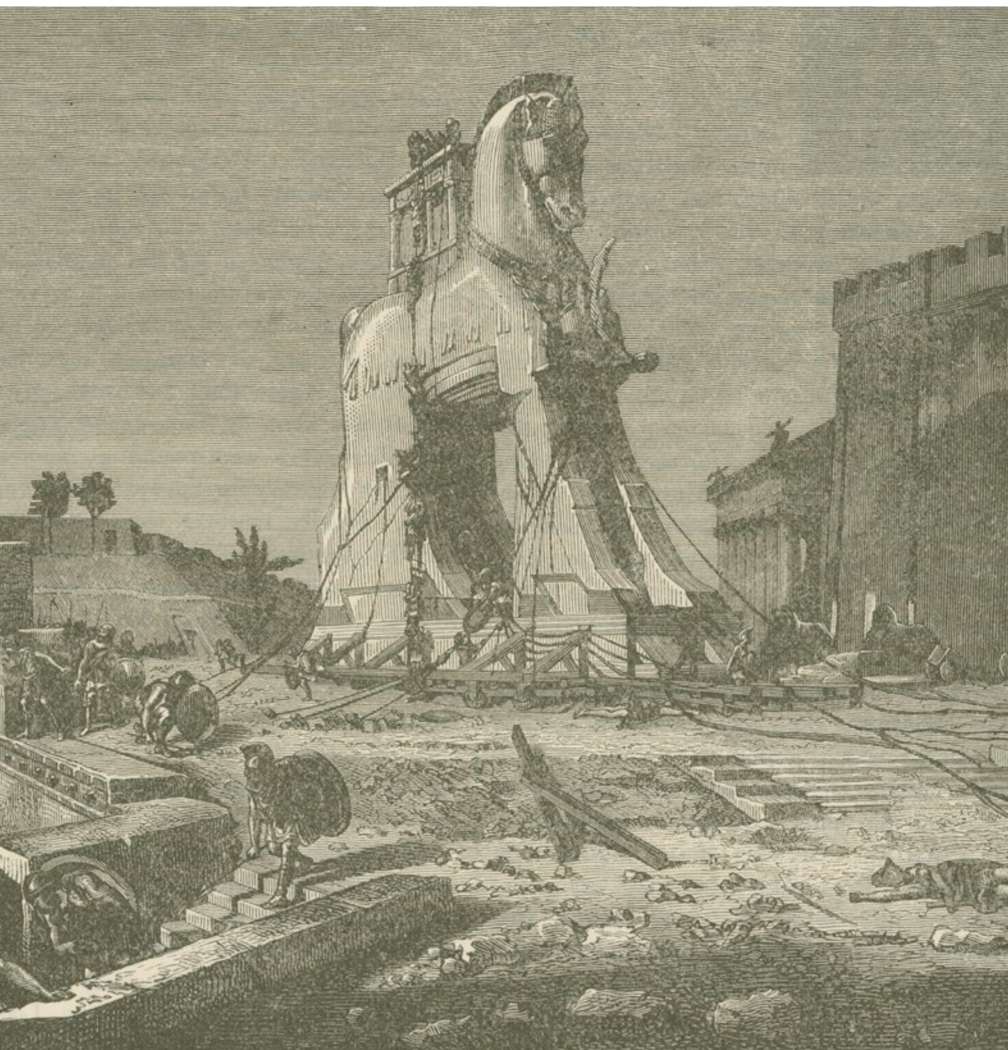
The first half of the *Aeneid* echoes Homer's *Odyssey*. Just like Odysseus, Aeneas sets sail westward from Troy on an adventurous journey around the Mediterranean. But unlike Odysseus, Aeneas has no home to return to. He has to make his own home, which he does by founding the ancestral line to Rome. For the American founders, this western movement was important. Like Aeneas, they had sailed westward to found new colonies, a new nation, and then a new empire. They called this westward movement the *translatio imperii* (transfer of rule). American revolutionaries interpreted this phrase to mean that they were fated always to move westward. The term legitimated a succession of rulers, connecting them to noble ancestors like Aeneas, founder of Rome. By the middle of the 19th century, Americans called this westward progress Manifest Destiny—literally meaning that God's plan for them was to continue conquering lands to the west.

The second half of the *Aeneid* reads more like Homer's *Iliad*, as Aeneas battles the Latin peoples of the Italian peninsula to found the Roman people. In this way, Virgil linked the Romans to the great epic literature of Greece. This action told the Romans, "You are the inheritors of the brilliant art and culture of the Greeks." So Americans adopted Virgil's *Aeneid* as a national story because it linked them first to Rome and then to Greece. The *Aeneid* invented a novel cultural genealogy for a new people who had just cut themselves off from their own roots. The epic poem also gave Americans a more useful founding story than the Genesis story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The latter tale had a crucial problem—its depressing narrative was of a primal act of sin that led to the fall of humankind. By contrast, the *Aeneid* told a story of rise and progress.

Relevant Themes

Among the stories from the *Aeneid*, revolutionary-era Americans had some favorites, including the exciting story of the Trojan horse. In the story, Troy has been under siege by the Greeks for 10 long years. Everybody is getting sick and tired of war, so the Greeks devise a crafty plan: To breach the defensive walls of Troy, they build a giant wooden horse and hide Greek soldiers inside. The Greeks then offer the horse as a "gift" to the Trojans. A Trojan man named Laocoön says, "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts." Not only do the Trojans not listen to poor Laocoön, but the goddess Minerva—who is on the side of the Greeks—also sends two giant snakes from the sea to devour the man and his two sons.

Amid the battles of the American Revolution, Americans repeatedly referred to the legend of the Trojan horse. Many French soldiers and diplomats had arrived in America to assist the colonists in their battle against Britain, but Americans wondered whether the French could be trusted. Were they offering a Trojan horse by allying with the Americans and supplying the revolutionaries with warships, arms, and generals? Perhaps they were just smuggling a big war machine into North America to take it over.



Another theme that the founders loved in the *Aeneid* was civic duty. They thought Aeneas embodied what the Romans called pietas. The term referred to respect and duty toward the gods, country, and family. In a republic like the Americans were founding, the whole political fabric hung on the citizens' civic virtue. People had to think of the republic first and themselves second. But Americans needed models for this since they had been living under a monarchy for the previous 150 years. Aeneas is like a superman of pietas: He flees from burning Troy while carrying his aged father on his back and holding his little son's hand. Americans loved this image of 3 generations of males clinging together; their survival assured a genealogical connection to the future founding of Rome. To Americans, George Washington was a modern-day Aeneas, and Washington agreed.

The other kind of pietas that the *Aeneid* modeled was duty to country over romantic love and sexual desire. Aeneas triumphs again in Virgil's story by extricating himself from his torrid love affair with Dido, Queen of Carthage. Aeneas and his men are blown off course by a storm that dumps them at Carthage, a colony of the great seafaring state of Phoenicia. Queen Dido greets them, and she and Aeneas promptly fall in love. Aeneas wants to stay with her in Carthage forever, but if he stays, Rome will never be founded. So the messenger god Mercury promptly arrives to send Aeneas on his way. "There is my love, there my country!" Aeneas explains to Dido, pointing first in her direction and then in the opposite direction of Carthage—toward what would become Rome. To the American founders, this phrase expressed an ideal of patriotic devotion that would triumph even over romantic love.

In Carthage, Dido is heartbroken. She curses Aeneas, foreshadowing the later Punic Wars between Carthage and Rome that end with the annihilation of her city. By the time Virgil wrote the *Aeneid*, Carthage had been conquered by the Romans, so Roman readers would have nodded with understanding at Dido's role in the epic. Americans certainly did. As the new Rome, they had to constantly be on guard against commercial enemies like Great Britain—which they often called Carthage.

The Burden of Empire

The *Aeneid* was practically a how-to manual on how to build an empire. The founders knew that Virgil had written his epic poem at the dawn of the Roman Empire, which would expand to its maximum size within the next 150 years. America, too, began to expand into an empire from the moment the US Constitution was ratified in 1789. From 13 states huddled along the Atlantic, the United States marched westward across the North American continent, reaching all the way to the Pacific.

But Americans have always been ambivalent about their empire, and they get some of this from the Romans themselves. From the American revolutionary era until the end of the 19th century, the US government was engaged in a series of extremely deadly wars with the Native American tribes in Florida, the South, and the West. These so-called Indian Wars were praised by some Americans but condemned by others, who opposed this violence and inhumanity. Virgil's *Aeneid* gave some famous advice: Aeneas descends temporarily into the underworld to meet his dead father, Anchises, who has a vision that unfolds the glorious destiny of Aeneas and Rome. Anchises tells his son that Rome will be great and prosper. The descendants of Aeneas will conquer the world. But he also says, "You, Roman, be sure to rule the world …, to crown peace with justice, to spare the vanquished and to crush the proud."

This meant that although Rome's destiny was to build a large empire, the republic should consider that with great power comes great responsibility. The authority of Rome was not a right but a burden that required constant self-sacrifice. Americans also worried about the ethics of empire building, but the allure of empire won out. In the final decades of the 19th century, the United States abandoned its century-long commitment to isolationism. The nation became a new kind of empire, extending beyond the North American continent to Cuba, Hawaii, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. Americans wanted to exploit new markets, but many also genuinely believed in their cultural and racial superiority over others. They had a higher mission—the burden of empire was to civilize the world.

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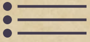

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How American Women Used the Classical World

Women in the revolutionary era began to use the classical world to fight a double war—a war for political independence from British rule and a war against the laws and customs that barred women from public life and many of the rights enjoyed by men. As you'll see in this lecture, American women began to publish histories of Greece and Rome that were also criticisms of their own society. They also wrote plays, poems, and pamphlets about ancient Rome, adopted classical pen names, and even posed for paintings and sculptures as Greek and Roman women.

Revolutionary Women's (Lack of) Rights

In the revolutionary era, rights for women were similar to what they had been for women in ancient Rome. Even free, wealthy American women could not vote, hold public office, or publish their own writing. Divorce was almost impossible, and women risked losing custody of their children if they attempted it.

Married women were governed by laws of coverture, which "covered" them with their husband's legal and economic identity. In the eyes of the law, a married couple became one person—the husband. So a married woman could not keep her own wages, sue or be sued, get an education against her husband's wishes, or have authority over her children. She could vote only if her husband was unable to, in which case she became a "deputy husband." That is, she voted as his agent, not as herself.

Classical education was also mostly off limits to women before the American Revolution. Learning the classical languages was considered a male puberty rite because the classics were thought to be good training for male-dominated professions such as law, ministry, and medicine. And classical history was thought to teach boys valuable lessons in military valor, territorial conquest, and shrewd leadership. Civic virtue was thought to be something appropriate for men but not women.

A lot of the classical history that 18th-century Americans read reinforced these views about a sharp divide between the sexes. Boys and men read about how ancient Roman and Greek public life was closed to women. And in 18th-century America, not much had changed. Public life in the form of holding political office or working in a learned profession like law or medicine was still closed to women, as was the classical education that would have prepared them for it.

Roman Matrons

The American Revolution offered women an opportunity to challenge restrictive laws and social practices. Their husbands were adopting Roman identities like Cincinnatus and Cicero to challenge British authority. American women became what they called Roman matrons to challenge British and male authority. In antiquity, Roman matrons were wives who upheld the Roman republic by being stoic, supporting their husbands, and fighting for liberty.

Just as American men had classical heroes like Brutus, American women had some favorite Roman matrons. The most famous was a well-educated widow named Cornelia. She had lived in the 2nd century BC in Rome and was the daughter of the famous Roman general Scipio Africanus, who led Rome's forces against the Carthaginian general Hannibal.

American women loved to tell a legend that had grown around Cornelia. In this story, a wealthy woman came to visit the matron and her three children. The visitor held up a box of jewels for everyone to admire, but Cornelia pointed to her two sons, whom she was carefully teaching to read and write, and said, "These are my jewels." She showed that she cared only for the literacy that would help her children to become good citizens of the Roman republic. Her sons—Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus—later went on to great fame as the Gracchi, reforming the agricultural policies of Rome.

American women made many images of Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi. They embroidered samplers, drew pictures, and even named many little girls after her. Importantly Cornelia only indirectly participated in Roman politics. She didn't go to the ballot box or lead an army into battle—she educated her sons to do so instead. Cornelia was an example of a woman who could participate in important political matters even with few political rights.

Another favorite Roman matron was Portia. She was the wife of the senator Brutus, who assassinated Julius Caesar while apparently shouting, "Thus always to tyrants!" Plutarch's *Life of Brutus* described Portia as a devoted wife who wouldn't divulge political secrets even under great duress. She also didn't mind when Brutus was gone all the time dealing with political matters.

Abigail Adams faced a similar situation during the American Revolution. Her husband, John Adams, left her alone with their children for many years while he tended to the national drama.

These were hard years for the Adams family, so who should come to mind but Portia? The first time Abigail signed a letter to John as Portia was May 4, 1775. The British had been chased into Boston from Lexington and Concord by the new Continental Army, headed by George Washington. John had just left their nearby farm to ride his sturdy horse to Philadelphia, where the First Continental Congress would soon gather to debate whether Americans would declare independence from Britain. Each day brought hungry and tired American soldiers to Abigail's front door, looking for food or a floor to sleep on. Refugees from Boston also streamed in, fleeing the smallpox epidemic raging through the city. Abigail rose before dawn to dash off a letter to John. She told him the news and signed the letter with "Yours, Portia."

PORTIA

More Portia letters followed, signaling her wifely helpmeet. But in March 1776, a letter from Abigail took John Adams by surprise. He was in Philadelphia, composing what would become the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," the document said. Signing Portia, Abigail made the case to her husband for a broader equality that included women. John shot back, saying, "I cannot but laugh." Even after the revolution, men retained absolute power over their wives. So as a first political identity for American women, Portia met some success as a way to claim equal rights but left a lot to be desired for achieving full political equality between men and women.

The Spartan Mother and Columbia

Various women also turned to Roman matrons during the revolution to get their hands dirty in the cause. Just like Abigail Adams, Laura Collins Wolcott of Litchfield, Connecticut, had been left alone with her four children in 1776 while her husband was away in Philadelphia. In a letter, Oliver Wolcott told her to be like the Roman matrons of antiquity. Later Laura helped the Continental Army by making 4,250 lead cartridges from melted down pieces of the Roman equestrian statue of George III that had been torn down in New York City in June 1776.

American women's wartime heroism did not lack for classical precedent. They often drew inspiration from the so-called Spartan mother, who was more of a legendary figure than a real person. Spartan soldiers' ferocity and courage in battle were legendary. Revolutionary-era Americans deeply admired Spartan men's selfless patriotism, renunciation of luxury, and celebrated bravery. Their secret weapon? The Spartan mother. She was the woman who would send her son off to war with the command that he return either carrying his shield or dead upon it—in other words, she valued courage in battle over all else, including the life of her son.

Yet for all these Roman matrons and Spartan mothers serving the cause, the American Revolution left American women with almost no more political rights than before. The US Constitution said nothing about women specifically. And the only women visible in public life were statues of classical female icons, like the invented goddess that symbolized America—Columbia.

COLUMBIA CALLS
ENLIST NOW FOR U.S. ARMY
NEAREST RECRUITING STATION
COLUMBIA CALLS
DEDICATED TO THE PEOPLE OF THE UNITED STATES
Awake! ye men from dreams of Peace--
Nor sleep when danger's near.
But fling Old Glory to the breeze--
There are no cowards here!
Our fathers fought; like heroes died.
For years their blood they gave
That honor, home and Peace be ours:
Awake! Thy country save!
Our flag for honor ever stands
To lift the weak, to lead the free.
America, our blessed land
Is calling, calling thee.
From North to South: from Sea to Sea.
I hear the answering cry;
"Thy sons forever shall be free
For thee will live and die!"
Then fling Old Glory to the main
Beneath her stars enroll.
For cowardice shall never stain
The glory of her folds.
The Stars and Stripes shall lead us on
A mighty host for right--
That Peace shall reign forevermore
And war from Earth take flight.
Frances Adams Halsted
Designed by FRANCES ADAMS HALSTED
Painted by V. ADERENTE

The goddess was now on the names of new cities, like the federal district that would house the national capitol. Ironically Columbia stood for a new political formation that mostly excluded flesh-and-blood women from participation in voting and other rights of citizenship.

Transforming Education

As American women saw the language of rights and liberties being used around them, they began to change what they could. The greatest transformation occurred in education. After the revolution, new schools called female academies opened around the nation. They served girls between the ages of roughly 13 and 17. These academies did something radical—many taught girls about Greek and Roman history, and some even taught Greek and Latin. For the first time, America was moving toward the kind of coeducation present today, in which many schools and all subjects are open to both men and women.

In the post-revolutionary era, people thought Greek and Latin were the most useful elements of education. They fitted students for public life, where they had to give speeches, think about wise public policy, and understand how ancient republics could help modern republics succeed. So learning Greek and Latin prepared young women to participate in the republic. In light of this shift, American women began to reinterpret Greek and Roman history. They said that classical societies improved when women were educated.

In 1821, reformer Emma Willard founded New York's Troy Female Seminary, which became the most revolutionary female academy. Over the next 50 years, the seminary welcomed more than 12,000 women, creating the first national coalition of women joined by a single experience. The school was also the first in the nation to provide women with an education comparable to what men received at colleges. The curriculum included not only classical history but also Latin and Greek language, just like the boys had. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a famous graduate of this school. She later lobbied for women's right to vote, and she partly credited her sense of her right to speak in public to her education in Greek.

Expanded educational opportunities also led women to publish their writing. Until the late 18th century, some American women learned to read and write, but they were discouraged from publishing with a printer. “Going public” was seen as masculine. After the American Revolution, a few women began to publish with printers so that their writing could be widely circulated and easily reprinted. They also adopted the pen names of Roman and Greek women to adopt the same kind of classical public persona that men did. For example, in the 1790s, the Boston writer Judith Sargent Murray adopted the female pen name Constantia to publish some of the first essays lobbying for women’s rights. She used examples like the women of Sparta to say that American women could be just as patriotic as men.

Today women have the right to vote and many other rights that they didn’t have in the revolutionary era. The pioneering women of classicism helped to open this path.

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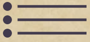

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How Greece and Rome Shaped American Slavery

By the early 1800s, every American state still had slavery. In this lecture, you'll see how American slaveholders viewed Greco-Roman slavery in relation to their own modern practice of enslavement. You'll also learn how enslaved people before the Civil War and free Black people after the Civil War used classicism to resist enslavement and to push for the universal equality promised by the Declaration of Independence. The history of slavery and classical antiquity is often a difficult one. Slave masters used their knowledge of Greece and Rome to justify the exploitation of millions of human beings, but the classical world also gave Black people a language of liberation.

The Institution of Slavery

The 20th-century classical scholar Moses Finley stated that all societies are either “slave societies” or “societies with slaves.” Slave societies are those in which the economic and political elite depend primarily on slave labor. By contrast, societies with slaves may have slaves, but the economy and political structure do not depend primarily on slavery for their maintenance. Finley said that ancient Greece and Rome were slave societies. Much of their political, economic, and legal structure was shaped by the presence of large numbers of slaves.

Using Finley’s criteria, the United States was also a slave society before the Civil War. The economic and political elite depended primarily on slave labor for their wealth and political and social status, especially in the South. By the era of the American Revolution, about 560,000 slaves lived in the United States. By 1861—the first year of the Civil War—there were 4 million slaves in the country.

This massive institution required a legal framework to prop it up. Numerous laws called the slave codes controlled what slaves could and could not do. For example, in many states, teaching slaves to read and write was illegal since literacy might encourage them to revolt or run away. But exceptions to this can tell scholars about the importance of the classical world in America at this time—even in the lives of enslaved people.

The most famous case is that of Phillis Wheatley, an enslaved woman who lived in Boston, Massachusetts, in the era of the American Revolution. As a little girl, she was forcibly brought to America from the western coast of Africa. After a miserable voyage across the Atlantic, she arrived at Boston in July 1761. She was purchased by John Wheatley, a wealthy merchant who gave her to his wife Susannah as a gift. He named her after the ship that brought her—*Phillis*.

Very unusually for that time, John Wheatley allowed Phillis not only to read and write in English but also to get a classical education. She learned Greek and Latin from the family’s tutor and began writing poems that made

her famous in both America and England. She read Virgil, Homer, and Horace and used many classical references in her poems. In one, she writes about the Roman African playwright Terence, who was also enslaved. Phillis was saying that both classical and modern slaves were capable of great art. They were human beings full of creativity and inspiration—not objects to be bought and sold.

PHILLIS WHEATLEY

Classical Names

Many people are familiar with the physical punishment and other forceful tactics used by masters to control enslaved people. But White planters in the United States also controlled enslaved people psychologically. For example, scholars believe that about 20% of American slaves had classical names like Caesar, Venus, Cato, Hercules, Scipio, Minerva, Daphne, and Nero. Why?

Quite a bit of evidence shows that slave owners often gave these names to their slaves to strip them of their African identities and demonstrate who held the power. A new and unfamiliar name added to the disorientation of being ripped from their homeland and transported across the Atlantic. Planters also gave slaves classical names to enhance their own self-image. If a White planter had received the kind of classical education that many elite boys received, he would think of his slaves as part of his plantation's total classical landscape. He would imagine himself living in ancient Rome or Greece, just like the classical heroes he admired.

Slaves with classical names could also be an inside joke among classically educated White masters. The slaves would probably not know what their names meant, so the joke was at their expense. Obviously this did not always work. The leader of one of the largest slave revolts in American history was named Cato. He led the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina in 1739, in which 25 Whites and 35 to 50 Africans lost their lives.

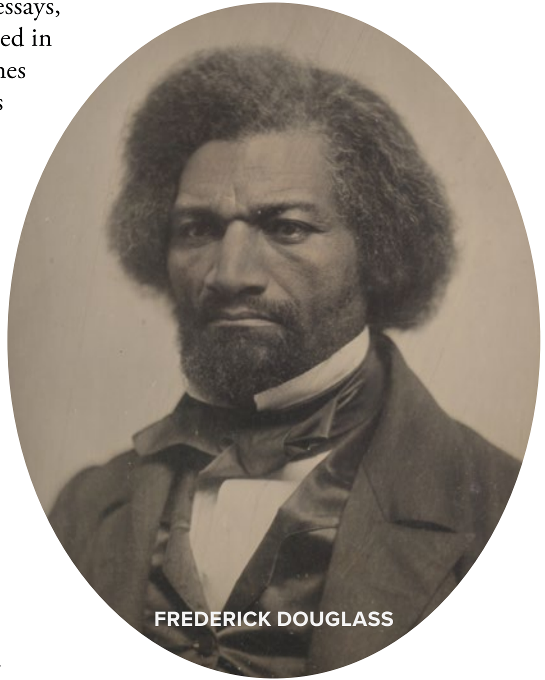
Finally classical slave names were a way to say that enslaved people were not fully human. Ships, dogs, cows, horses, and other working animals were also given such names at this time. And in many states, slave law dictated that enslaved people could be treated as objects—they could be bought, sold, traded, willed, or put into a dowry. Classical slave names helped create that world of ultimate power for a few at the expense of powerlessness for many.

Turning to the Ancients

By the 1830s, the United States had begun to fracture because of slavery, with opposition growing in the North and support entrenched in the South. The Southern economy depended on slave labor; export crops like cotton were a major source of wealth. In defense of slavery, White planters in the South began to make what is called the proslavery argument. They said that slavery was a positive good in the United States; without slavery, the republic would fall. Many proslavery Southerners cited the Greek philosopher Aristotle. In *Politics*, he had said that every society had certain people who should be enslaved so that the master would be free to perform valuable tasks, such as wise governance.

In response, abolitionists in the North also turned to the classical world—but they argued that liberty rather than slavery had helped the Greeks and Romans to build good government. One prominent statesman named George Bancroft said that slavery was one of the major causes of the fall of the Roman Empire. He argued that slavery demeaned the labor of farmers by allowing a few rich people to own huge tracts of land while reducing everyone else to degraded labor.

Some of the loudest voices protesting slavery were those of Black people, such as Frederick Douglass, who was born into slavery in 1818 in Maryland. When he was 7 or 8, he was taken to Baltimore by a new master. His master's wife, Sophia Auld, broke the law by teaching him to read. One of the books he read was *The Columbian Orator*, a popular collection of essays, speeches, and dialogues published in 1797. The book included speeches attributed to the Roman orators Cato and Cicero and taught its American readers that words could change the world. In "Dialogue between a Master and Slave," the slave tells the master he wants liberty, not kindness.


FREDERICK DOUGLASS

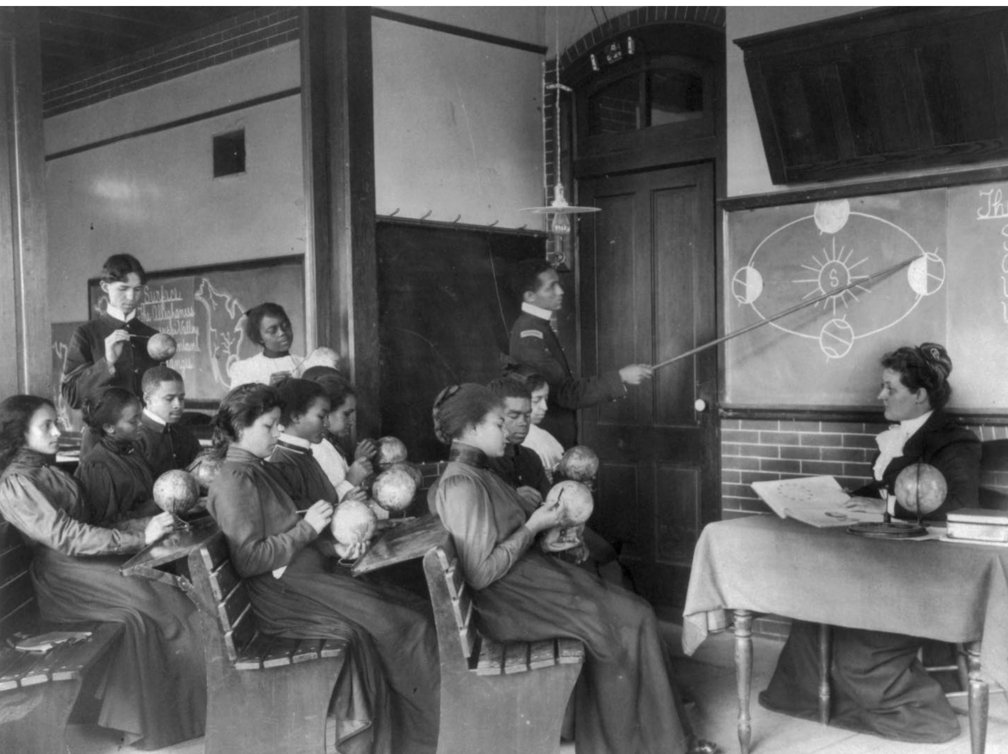
In 1838, Douglass escaped slavery and went on to become one of the most influential abolitionists in the United States. His thundering and moving speeches—shaped in part by the examples of Cicero and Cato—made him one of the most powerful spokespeople for emancipation.

Classical Scholarship for Freedom

After 1865, the end of the Civil War left the nation in tatters, but it liberated 4 million human beings. Black people immediately began to use the classical world to create new lives for themselves. Some started with names. For example, one man who had been freed from slavery took the surname Cato.

His father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were descendants of the Cato who led the Stono Rebellion of South Carolina. The name was a sign of a history of rebellion against servitude. And the fact that he took Cato as a surname rather than a first name was significant; as a way to deny their claims to family life and ancestral heritage, many slaves were not given surnames. So he was now Mr. Cato, not just Cato—he created a family genealogy for himself as a symbol of his freedom.

After the Civil War, free Black people also worked hard to obtain the classical education that had been denied to them before 1865. They recognized that knowing about ancient Greece and Rome was not only about information but also about cultural cachet. For centuries, elite Whites had used this education to show their wealth and privilege. Black colleges and universities were founded after the Civil War to provide a classical education for freed African Americans.



Some Black people now even became classical scholars. William Sanders Scarborough, who was born into slavery in Georgia, is often considered the first Black classical scholar in the United States. He went on to become president of Wilberforce University in Ohio and published a widely used textbook on the ancient Greek language. But even a distinguished scholar and president like Scarborough still experienced racism. In 1909, when he had just become the president of Wilberforce, he was prohibited from attending the professional meeting of classical scholars in Baltimore, Maryland. The hotel refused to serve dinner if he were present. The paper that he was due to read at the conference was read by someone else.

This kind of prejudicial treatment led Black leaders to use their knowledge of classical antiquity to argue for civil rights. One such leader was the American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois. He was the first African American to earn a PhD from Harvard, and until his death in 1963, he was one of the most influential civil rights leaders in the United States. Du Bois said that Black people should receive a liberal arts education that included the classics, just as White people did. He wanted to use this classical education to develop a leadership elite of Black people who would use higher education to effect social change.

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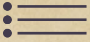

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Native Americans and the Classical World

When Christopher Columbus docked on a Caribbean island in 1492, he opened an era of both discovery and destruction. Over the next few centuries, the millions of peoples living in the Americas and Europe came to know each other amid massive destruction. Wars and epidemics devastated Native peoples throughout the New World. But amid the upheaval, a long era of cultural mixing also began. In many ways, art, literature, and religion became a synthesis of European and Native American elements. In this lecture, you'll look at how part of this cultural synthesis and mixing was shaped by classicism. To start, you'll see how Europeans used the frame of Greco-Roman antiquity to comprehend the peoples of the New World after 1492. Then you'll explore how Native Americans themselves interacted with the classical tradition.

New World, Old Tricks

For Europeans in the New World, classical philosophy, art, mythology, and literature became old guides for understanding new things. The first images of the Americas to circulate in Europe showed American Indians as Greek and Roman statues. A Dutch engraver named Theodor de Bry published a book in the 1500s in which the Native peoples of Brazil adopted classical poses and clothing. He showed them as young, muscular, and mostly nude. The near nakedness implied that they were primitive but also fundamentally good, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before the Fall.

After 1492, the visual shorthand for America—in maps, charts, books, and coins—became an Indian, often dressed in a toga-like costume with a feathered headdress. Paintings in the grand historical style also began to depict Indians as classical statues. After the United States achieved independence in 1776, White Americans began to represent their new nation with an image of an Native princess. They combined the classical figure of Minerva or Athena with a white-robed woman wearing a feathered headdress. The Indian princess appeared on US coins in the middle of the 19th century, posed in classical profile.

Female Indian, habited as the Minerva of Peru.

Europeans got many of their ideas of savagery and barbarity from classical texts. The Greeks and Romans had a long written record of encountering foreign peoples. They were often very contemptuous of these peoples,

calling them savages and barbarians. The Greeks and Romans thought their own urbanized, literate societies were far superior to the nomadic, illiterate, hunter-gatherer societies they encountered beyond their borders. Europeans found the works of the Roman historian Tacitus especially useful for thinking about the American Indians as savages. His book *Germania*, written around 98 AD, described the Romans' attempt to conquer the nomadic Germanic tribes of Northern Europe. He often portrayed the tribes as more primitive than they actually were to hold up a mirror to the corruptions he saw in Roman society.

Europeans in the Americas imagined themselves as Romans encountering the allegedly primitive Germanic people and used this imagery to shed light on the positive and negative aspects of their own European ways. They gave the Latin word *tribus*—tribe—to the Native Americans. In ancient Rome, the tribe was one of the political divisions of the Roman people. But Europeans used the term to describe the Indians as a barbaric clan-based society distinct from the urbanized empire of modern Europe.

The Noble Savage

Europeans also applied another classical idea—the so-called noble savage—to understand Native Americans. The noble savage was an idealized concept of the innately good "natural" person uncorrupted by civilization. In this view, Europeans saw Indians as inferior and uncivilized but also as representing the best of human nature. This idea allowed Europeans to say that Native peoples were beneath them but also to critique things about European society they didn't like.

John Locke was the most influential exponent of the noble savage idea for the American founders. In his *Second Treatise of Government*, which was published in 1690, he expressed that every society everywhere had its origins in a nomadic life like that of the American Indians. Locke had never been to America, but he'd read reports about the Natives and gleaned the idea that their hunting and gathering way of life was an essentially benign primitive social state that he called the "state of nature." In Locke's idea, everyone used to live like this, governed only by the laws of nature. Eventually some people decided to form a contract of government to protect their rights to property. But at any time, they had the right to dissolve that contract if it stopped protecting their property rights. They would then return to the state of nature.

The American founders turned to Locke's idea when they wrote the Declaration of Independence. King George III had stopped protecting their property rights by taxing them without representation, so they said it was fine to break the contract of government with Britain. They were merely returning to the state of nature, and they could write a new contract that suited them better.

The Language of Eden

In addition to art and political theory, European colonizers in America also used classical language to understand the American Indians. Because of the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, they believed all human languages were descended from the original language that God gave to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Therefore Europeans thought they could show that the many languages spoken by the American Indians were descended from Latin, Greek, or Hebrew. They hoped to trace these languages back to the first language of Eden—which must be the language of God.

Thomas Jefferson was very excited about this project. He thought language offered one key to unlocking the mystery of Native American origins, so he collected the vocabularies of more than 22 Native languages based on a 280-word list of standard English terms. He sent these to military officials and travelers all over North America. The idea was to collect the words for common ideas like "dog" and then to see which ones might be related to European languages like Latin and which ones were related to Asian languages like Chinese.

Jefferson concluded that the Indians must be descended from the ancient Carthaginians. As the Carthaginians were a seafaring people, some must have sailed across the Atlantic and built the great cities of Central and South America, including Tenochtitlán. The Carthaginian script had eventually turned into the mysterious script the Maya and Aztec peoples used. Of course, modern archaeologists have refuted this theory extensively.

Harvard

Native Americans' exposure to classical learning came primarily through schooling. As soon as the English colonists arrived in North America, they established schools and universities. They depicted the Indians as not just needing European help but asking for it. Harvard College—founded in 1636—was the first university. The college's purpose was to train Puritan ministers to preach to congregations in the New World and to convert the thousands of Native people in Massachusetts to Puritanism. The colonists believed that the "heathen" Indians were a threat to the worldwide spread of Christianity.

In the Puritan view of the world, the best way to convert people was to teach them to read the Bible, as this would help them gain direct access to God. If the English colonists could convert the American Indians to Protestantism, the Natives would help to win the religious war against Catholic France and Spain, which surrounded the British colonies in North America to the north, south, and west. Moreover the English would help expel the devil from the lives of the Indians.

In 1655, the colonists built the Harvard Indian College to begin the conversion process. This institution had the same curriculum as the rest of Harvard—Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, among some other disciplines. The college capped a growing number of Indian primary schools scattered around New England, where young Native boys and girls learned to read and write in English and the classical languages. The goal was to send graduates back into the tribes to convert all other Indians to Christianity and drive the devil out of the New World. But in 1693, the Indian College closed because it attracted so few students. After its closure, a handful of Native students enrolled at the regular Harvard College.

Benjamin Larnell was one of the last Native Americans to attend Harvard for many years. He was born around 1694 in a praying Indian town near Taunton, Massachusetts. The so-called praying towns were villages in which the English urged Natives to abandon their nomadic ways, settle down to farm like the English, and worship the Christian God. The towns formed physical barriers between the eastern regions occupied by the English and the western regions dominated by Native peoples.

Larnell's intelligence caught the eye of an English Puritan minister, who taught the boy to read the Bible so that he could become a minister to his people. The minister trained him in Latin grammar. Then Larnell attended the Boston Latin School, where he wrote verse in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. When he was about 15 or 16, he prepared a poem in Latin called "The Fox and the Weasel" for the entrance exam to Harvard. His poem was a version of the kind of moralizing tale he'd learned from *Aesop's Fables*.

The message of Larnell's poem is easy to spot—people are happier when they are poor since they are not anxious about material possessions. The Indians had lived happily for a long time before the English had introduced their materialistic society; perhaps Larnell longed for this earlier world. Regardless he was admitted to Harvard, and a special fund paid his tuition as he continued with his Greek, Latin, and Hebrew studies. But Larnell suddenly fell sick and died in 1714 at the age of 20. He was the fifth and last Native American student to attend Harvard in the colonial era.

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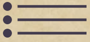

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The Classical City in America

America's political revolution of 1776 was also an architectural and urban design revolution. After throwing off the British king, Americans wanted a new national face that encouraged republican government by the people. And for America's cities, that new image would be the face of ancient Rome and Greece. A sea of red brick transformed into an ocean of white limestone and marble; crooked streets became straight to express the classical ideal of order, regularity, and rationalism. Some people hoped that these new cities would help to create civic-minded republicans. In this lecture, you'll look at two American cities. First, you'll examine Boston, an old metropolis that received a classical facelift after the revolution. Second, you'll learn about Washington DC, which was the first city in the world to be built from the ground up in the image of ancient Rome.

Bulfinch's Boston

The term *neoclassical* wasn't used to describe art and architecture until about 100 years after the American Revolution. However, the word helps to distinguish the 18th-century versions of classical structures from the truly ancient versions themselves. Neoclassicism was a transatlantic style, and Americans grabbed parts of it for the specific project of US republican government.

Boston was already old when the American Revolution came in 1776. A long lead-up of growing violence and anger in the city itself had already spilled over in various demonstrations, such as the Boston Tea Party of 1773. And the year-long siege of Boston, in which the British occupied the city, led to enormous suffering all around, including a devastating smallpox epidemic. The city desperately needed a fresh face after the revolution. Enter a young man named Charles Bulfinch. His transformation of Boston in less than 30 years was so great that the city became known as Bulfinch's Boston.

Bulfinch was born in 1763 and raised in Boston. The year of his birth marked the end of the French and Indian War. Britain had gone deeply into debt, and the new taxation policy the crown launched to get the American colonists to help pay for some of the costs of running a growing empire led to the first acts of resistance that culminated in the American Revolution 14 years later. Young Bulfinch watched as his city became a nest of colonial resistance and the target of Britain's growing anger.

After graduating from Harvard, Bulfinch went on a grand tour of Europe from 1785 to 1788. In Italy, he fell in love with the work of Italian Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio, who designed classical-style buildings for the rich that made them feel like ancient Roman senators. Bulfinch returned to America in 1788 and spent the next 2 decades making Boston into a neoclassical city. His biggest triumph was the Massachusetts State House on Beacon Hill. The building is a mixture of red brick and white classical columns, a pediment, and a big dome. The plain lines and lack of ornamentation mark it as neoclassical, exemplifying the ideals of reason and simplicity that each citizen of a republic needs to uphold their government.

Bulfinch also tried to organize the old city of Boston, which was built in the 1600s when the cluttered, disorderly city planning of the Middle Ages prevailed in Europe. He transformed its cramped wooden buildings and dark maze of cobbled streets into a rational grid of open streets and green spaces. He turned the Boston Common into a public park, imposed a grid plan on the Boston Neck and South Boston, and improved drains and lighting. By 1830, Boston would have been close to unrecognizable by its early Puritan inhabitants.

Bulfinch is often regarded as one of America's first professional architects. None of the buildings in colonial America had been designed by a professional architect. Instead people had looked at architecture books from England and copied them. Bulfinch was something new—someone supported by public funds and charged with planning and creating a city that reflected its people's spirit. Boston now called itself the Athens of America and stood for a new kind of city. What had once been a refuge for religious dissenters bent on showing the world how to live a model Christian life had become a city of merchants, commerce, education, and secular culture.

Creating Washington DC

Boston was an old city transformed into a new one by neoclassicism, but Washington DC was a completely new neoclassical city in America. Construction of the capital began in the 1790s in a swamp in Virginia and Maryland. Americans thought of it as their new Rome. Because Washington DC is a totally artificial city—in the sense that it was planned from the ground up—scholars can see clearly how neoclassicism inspired American city builders in the decades after the American Revolution.

Washington DC was officially founded on July 16, 1790. Throughout the Revolutionary War, Congress had been moving around like a traveling circus. But where to settle down? Northerners and Southerners fought fiercely, seeing that proximity to the new federal city would be an advantage. Eventually the Residence Act of 1790 established the capital on the banks of the Potomac. The act decreed that the new federal district should encompass no more than 10 square miles on each side in territories ceded by the states of Virginia and Maryland. A square boundary was marked out, rising north from the

branching Potomac River. Planners were hired, government money was spent, and delays piled on delays. But by 1800, the Congress and the president could move into their new quarters.

A French painter named Pierre Charles L'Enfant created the overall plan for the city. He had come to America and proved his mettle serving as a military engineer on the American side in the Revolutionary War. Upon entering George Washington's trusted orbit, he designed the classical badge for the new Society of the Cincinnati, the hereditary society of American Revolutionary War veterans formed in 1783. The badge depicted the Roman hero Cincinnatus. This is why a French man seemed to be the logical person to design the face of the US government.

L'Enfant did much more than create buildings and roads—he built the brick-and-mortar expression of the republican ideals of civic duty. On the city's grid street plan, diagonal streets cut through straight streets. The intersections create public squares and parks between them. The wide streets suggest that people are welcome there. They can walk through them, see each other in them, meet in them, and march in them. The architecture of the city affirms that the people are in charge.

The Congress and the White House

Two key buildings form the heart of Washington DC. The biggest one is the US Congress, seen as the major voice of the people. Instead of putting the executive leader's home at the highest point—as in a European monarchy—L'Enfant put it on a hill with a sweeping view of the Potomac. He described the hill as "a pedestal awaiting a monument." Diagonal streets radiate outward from Capitol Hill, showing that the legislature reigns supreme as the voice of the people. You can see the building, and you can see from it—legislators have to pay attention to the people they represent.

The Congress building is like a giant monument to American neoclassicism in its grandest form. William Thornton won the design competition for the building and conceived of the central rotunda to recall the Pantheon in Rome. Thomas Jefferson insisted that the building itself be called the Capitol, like the Capitoline hill in Rome. The US Capitol houses the Senate and the House of Representatives. Showing that they are equal, they both stand in matching wings of the building, on either side of the dome.

The presidential mansion was finished by 1800, and President John Adams was the first occupant. The plan by Irish architect James Hoban shows that the house has the whole neoclassical package—symmetry, a portico, and columns. The structure was built largely by enslaved and free Black people working alongside White wage laborers. Like nearly all neoclassical buildings, the mansion was whitewashed to make it look like it came straight from ancient Rome. However, the building probably wasn't called the White House until 1811.

Neo-neoclassicism

This first wave of neoclassicism stretched from the last decades of the 18th century to the middle of the 19th century, but classicism gets reinvented all the time. By the late 19th century, the US was an empire with global ambitions. The so-called City Beautiful movement changed classical ideals again to reflect these greater goals. The idea was to give American cities the monumental grandeur that was associated with ancient Rome during the imperial era. A lot of new midwestern cities like Chicago and Detroit went in this direction since they grew the most during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They used classical architecture to appear as though they had always been there—and that they were as important as ancient Rome itself.

Around 1900, Americans also hoped to use classical city plans to reform cities, eliminate poverty, and create functional citizens amid the waves of immigration from Europe and Asia. The classical grid plan seemed like a way to bring order, dignity, and harmony to cities that were growing too fast. They hoped the poor would leave tenements and adopt orderly work habits. The National Mall was built around this time to clear away Washington DC's notorious slums as part of the McMillan Plan of 1902. The plan updated the neoclassicism of the previous century—neo-neoclassicism. The presence of straight, wide, open boulevards was supposed to be good for public health. People would breathe in fresh air along with the idea that they formed a unified whole.

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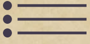

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America's Classical Homes and Gardens

Neoclassicism wasn't just an urban architectural movement—it was also a style that decorated everyday life and flourished inside American homes and gardens. In this lecture, you'll meet some of the women and men who defined high neoclassical style in the United States during the period roughly between 1800 and 1830. You'll see how neoclassicism was not only style but substance, with Greek and Roman shapes telegraphing republican ideals of farming, simplicity, virtue, and patriotism.

Introducing Neoclassicism

On the night of August 24, 1814, the British captured Washington DC. They burned the public buildings, including the White House, which now looked like a ruin from ancient Rome. The British had destroyed not just the political capital of America but also the capital of American neoclassical design.

The First Lady of the United States, Dolley Madison, had used neoclassical décor and dress to help define the new position of a republican mistress of state. She saw that the new republican government involved a change in social relations and behavior. That is, she and her husband, President James Madison, had to act like citizens of a republic for all to see. They had to be dignified but not regal, simple but not boring. And Dolley had to execute this high-wire act.

One of the first things she did was to make the White House an exciting place to see and be seen. The Madison administration had to get the balance between royal formality and republican informality right—and Dolley did just that. Her informal evening parties of both men and women at the White House were so popular that they were known as squeezes because the crowds got squeezed together. Neoclassical style helped Dolley to find the perfect balance between the opulence appropriate for the chief executive and the simplicity expected of an agrarian republic.

This new style of neoclassicism was imported to the United States from England and France after members of the American diplomatic corps returned from their duties there. Traveling through the palaces and great houses of Europe, they saw how the classical ideals of Rome and Greece had been translated into glittering interiors. Now Americans had to adapt this opulent style for republican needs. They were assisted by the fact that the Industrial Revolution allowed neoclassical furniture, tableware, and clothing to be more easily reproduced in mass numbers. Beginning in the late 1700s, factories around Europe and North America began to create ancient-looking objects with a combination of traditional handcrafting and modern looms, kilns, and saws that were powered by coal and steam.

Neoclassicism was the first international style of design of the modern industrial age. In England, Josiah Wedgwood opened a factory to manufacture the pottery he called Etruria after the Etruscans, who preceded the Romans in Italy. Wedgwood pottery emblazoned ancient motifs, such as cupids and garlands, onto implements for the modern age that Greeks and Romans would never have made, including teacups and coffeepots. This neoclassical flexibility put old styles to new purposes.

Putting ancient shapes on teacups and even factory smokestacks was one way to make the frightening new features of industrialization seem less alarming. The same went for America's new republican government. Popular sovereignty was new and mostly untried after 2,000 years of monarchy, so cloaking the idea in familiar and admired Greco-Roman shapes made it seem respectable. And just as these shapes and motifs populated the public and commercial space, they began to fill American homes.

Neoclassical Design

Neoclassical interior decoration had a few distinctive features, such as unity of design. From carpet to ceiling, the whole interior was supposed to be part of a single idea—that people were enjoying modern comforts like coffee and sugar while imagining that they were a Roman senator or Greek goddess. In fact, the term *interior decoration* was coined around 1800 to talk about the total vision of neoclassicism.

The idea of total neoclassical design was invented by a Dutch and British interior designer named Thomas Hope in his 1807 book titled *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration*. He showed readers how they could adopt all kinds of ancient motifs—from Medusa heads to cupids—in any interior space.

Several pieces of furniture stood out in neoclassical design. One was the sofa. Around 1800, the idea that someone would have a piece of furniture they could lie down on, in public view, was very new. Neoclassical sofas had a curved back and scrolled armrests. They were intentionally soft, with velvet or silk upholstery that was usually red or ochre in color, like the sofas Americans saw on wall paintings from Pompeii. Dolley herself ordered several sofas in 1809 when she began to redecorate the White House with the famous architect Benjamin Latrobe.

Sofas were generally installed in two places. One was in the formal living space, where both men and women would be received. The second was in the so-called drawing room, where only female guests were received. For the first time ever in American history, the neoclassical sofa made it acceptable to recline in a public place. In some ways, this piece of furniture was perfect for a republic, as it allowed for a more informal self-presentation.

The klismos chair was another typical piece of neoclassical furniture. These chairs were also seen in ancient wall paintings and vases from Pompeii and Herculaneum. Their most distinctive feature was a curved backrest. The chair allowed people to recline just a little as they sat, and many wealthy American women had their portrait painted in a klismos chair.

Neoclassical interior decoration also included an obsession with light. At that time, only candles provided light, and fire was an ever-present threat. Americans invented three solutions to cut down on the number of open flames they needed to create the bright rooms associated with the Mediterranean sun of Greece and Rome. One solution involved the shape of the room itself. After 1800, octagons became popular for either individual rooms or whole houses because their eight walls allowed for more windows. In an age of incurable respiratory infections, such as tuberculosis, the many windows were also considered healthy because they allowed for better air circulation.

The light from these windows would be enhanced by something else typical of neoclassical interior decoration—lots of mirrors. These mirrors were often shaped like ovals and rectangles and decorated with columns, eagles, and other classical ornaments. They helped reflect light around the room. But the mirrors were also a metaphor for why Greek and Roman history was so valuable for forming citizens of the US republic. John Adams likened the experience of sitting in a boudoir with mirrors on all sides to the act of reading Greek history. That is, like a room full of mirrors, Greek history offered guidance for modern people.

Finally the inside of a neoclassical house was liberally splashed with the color yellow. Europeans and Americans became fascinated by yellow in the 18th century as they encountered faraway societies where the color was popular, such as India. Yellow was also found on the walls of Pompeii's houses, and its brightness helped to alleviate the darkness of candlelit rooms. In 1809, Dolley and Latrobe filled the White House with yellow objects.

Neoclassical Clothing

In the early 19th century, neoclassicism's total style also changed the way people dressed. From about 1800 to 1830, American men gave up the formal powdered wigs of the last 200 years for a short, swept-forward style that made them look like Roman statesmen. They were also clean-shaven, like the marble busts of Roman senators. As for clothing, the idea was to suggest neoclassicism without actually wearing a full-on costume like a Roman toga. Men got rid of their aristocratic knee breeches, silk stockings, long coats, and the lace tumbling from collars and sleeves. Instead they advertised republican simplicity with simpler cuts and less lace. Long pants that covered the full leg and short, simple overcoats paved the way for the modern men's suit people know today.

But neoclassical style pulled out all the stops in women's dress. From 1800 to 1830, fashionable elite women around the Atlantic wore a sheer white cotton, linen, or silk column of fabric. These dresses looked like Roman togas but were called Grecian robes. They replaced the frilly, formal styles of the previous century, which had pinched women's waists with corsets and trapped them in enormous, stiff skirts. The new Grecian style was an American

revolution in women's mobility—now they could move around freely. Unsurprisingly this free-flowing garment caused a lot of controversy. Some opponents said the dresses were too revealing and loose. By 1830, corsets were back, and hoopskirts and giant bonnets limited women's mobility and sight.

Regarding their hair, fashionable women also opted for a Roman style. They wore it short, in ringlets, like they saw in classical statues. Throwing away the enormous wigs and hats of the earlier era, they added just a light crown, turban, or even some ostrich feathers to complete the look. Dolley's First Lady portrait shows her wearing this style.

DOLLEY MADISON

Neoclassical Gardens

A neoclassical house also needed a neoclassical garden. Such gardens underscored the association of Roman virtue with farming and included round Roman temples, shady grottoes, and classical statuary. Americans copied famous gardens in England, like those at Stowe and Twickenham. The first American garden to be modeled on an English neoclassical garden was Gray's Garden in Philadelphia in 1786. After the ratification of the US Constitution, the garden owners built a classical temple with 13 columns representing the union of the 13 states.

Over time, America's infatuation with neoclassical homes and gardens faded. By the end of the Civil War, wealthy Americans had turned to new ideals as the nation moved from the time of the agrarian republic into the era of Gilded Age fortunes built on railroads, coal mines, and global imperialism. In place of the stark and intentional simplicity of neoclassicism—which was supposed to reflect the simple virtues of the Roman republican farmer—Gilded Age plutocrats adopted a more-is-more style to show off their new wealth. More curlicues, more lace, more velvet, more ferns, more dark wood, more everything!

Today people call this Victorian style. Like Queen Victoria of England, Americans looked back to the Middle Ages of kings and knights—an age of monarchy where everyone knew their place and no workers rose up in labor unions to challenge their betters. Within 100 years of their revolution in favor of simple republican government, Americans had once again turned to the architecture and interior design of monarchy.

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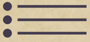

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Classical Strokes in American Painting

The classical moment in American painting lasted only from about 1770 to 1840, when the ideals of Greece and Rome had their greatest grip on US culture. In portraits and landscape paintings, American artists invented an image for the nation as a new Rome or Greece. They dug up classical themes alongside famous battles and characters in classical history and literature and used these features in modern paintings. By the end of this lecture, you'll be able to decode many of these classical elements.

The Classical Painting Era

Classical painting in the United States began roughly with the American Revolution. In early America, such paintings always had a message, and the message was usually political. The focus was on a small set of themes, especially how to be a good citizen in a republic.

The classical subjects in American painting also helped Americans to put their political concerns on a broader canvas as their first foreign policy message. In 1776, the United States was still militarily weak compared to Britain, Spain, Prussia, and France, and the military situation wasn't much better by the time the US Constitution was ratified in 1789. Americans had to communicate power in other ways. As a form of soft power, classical paintings were an attempt to convince Europeans that America wasn't a colonial backwater anymore. The new nation was as great and grand as Greece and Rome had been.

Clean lines and crisp shapes telegraphed the ideal of simplicity that Americans associated with the farmers and soldiers of Rome. This new classical painting style symbolized the simple and virtuous way of life that would help the new American republic to last as long as the ancient Roman one.

In the 18th century, a hierarchy ranked paintings by theme. History painting was at the top because it was thought to provide examples of private and public virtue. The hierarchy continued, from portraits and landscapes to animals and still lifes. Animals and still lifes were at the bottom because they were thought to just copy particular things rather than point to timeless lessons.

Benjamin West, John Singleton Copley, Gilbert Stuart, and Thomas Cole were four of the most important American classical painters. They earned international fame for painting in the new classical style, and their artwork showed the ideals of civic virtue, simplicity, and self-sacrifice that Americans associated with ancient Greece and Rome. They also illustrated the ongoing fears Americans had about the disasters and weaknesses that could lead to the fall of their new republic.

Benjamin West

West was born to a modest Pennsylvania family in 1738. He was a precocious painter from a very young age, and by the time he was 18, he had been sent to Philadelphia to study painting. West made his first classically themed painting—*The Death of Socrates*—when he was only 18. He copied it straight from Charles Rollin's famous *Ancient History*, which was read by every schoolchild in colonial America. In the painting, Socrates is in jail, about to drink a chalice of poisonous hemlock after being charged with corrupting the youth of Athens. As one of the first paintings in colonial America on a classical subject, *The Death of Socrates* is important for showing the rising influence of classical antiquity on both political life and the arts.

By 1760, when he was only 22, West's talents had been recognized as unusual for the American colonies. Sponsored by a wealthy colonist, he traveled to Italy, where he visited classical ruins and also met some of the most celebrated painters of the day. These artists, who included Anton Raphael Mengs, Gavin Hamilton, and Angelika Kauffman, painted famous people and events from the ancient world to telegraph new ideals of society and government that were coming to the forefront of European politics. West was inspired by the ideals he saw in their paintings—stoic self-control, self-sacrifice for the republic, and patriotic duty.

BENJAMIN WEST

West's 1768 painting *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus* (below) illustrates some of the methods he learned in Italy. The painting shows a dramatic episode from Roman history, drawn from Tacitus. The year is 19 AD, and in the Roman naval port of Brundisium, crowds gather to watch a sorrowful widow named Agrippina slowly walk ashore. She carries the ashes of her young husband, the general Germanicus. To the Roman people, Germanicus had been the ideal Roman, famous for subduing the Germanic tribes to the north and avenging the humiliating Roman defeat at the Battle of the Teutoborg Forest. In the painting, Agrippina displays the Roman republic virtue of stoic courage as she walks forward to confront the tyrannical and unpopular Emperor Tiberius. He embodied all the vices of the Roman Empire and was widely believed to have arranged for Germanicus's murder by poisoning.

The painting's clean lines and clear colors are deliberate. West wanted his human figures to look like classical statues, as if made of marble. The point was to use classical themes to instruct modern people in heroism, selflessness, and stoic suffering.

John Singleton Copley

Copley was born in 1738 and raised in Boston. He had formal training in painting and became famous for his lifelike portraits of wealthy colonists. In 1774, he made his way to the European continent to visit the ruins of classical antiquity. While he was in Italy, Copley was sought out by Ralph Izard and Alice DeLancey Izard, who were wealthy merchants from Charleston, South Carolina. The Izards traveled together with Copley to Pompeii and Herculaneum and then south to the ancient Greek ruins at Paestum.

Back in Rome, Copley painted an extraordinary portrait of the Izards in 1775. This painting is perhaps the only portrait of revolutionary Americans on the grand tour, which was a precursor to the modern age of mass tourism in Europe. Dressed in clothing from their own era, Ralph and Alice Izard are seated in front of a menagerie of classical items: the ruins of the Roman Colosseum, a Greek vase, a column, and a Roman sculpture group.

JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY

This portrait was also one of the first classical paintings by an American that showed off the painter's or the sitter's archaeological knowledge. The Izards are shown in an imaginary space created to display their connoisseurship, fine taste, and wealth. They are so cultured that they are depicted trying their hand at drawing the sculpture group behind them—a painting within a painting.

Gilbert Stuart

GILBERT STUART

Stuart was born in Rhode Island in 1755. He studied portraiture in England under Benjamin West and went on to make more than 1,000 colonial portraits that include some of the most famous sitters of the era, including John Adams and Dolley Madison. Stuart was bad with money, so he eventually sought out a job that he thought would earn him the most returns—a painting of George Washington. In the end, he made several Washington portraits, and the revenue he earned from the sale of reproductions kept him afloat.

Stuart's 1796 portrait of George Washington—painted the year before he stepped down as president of the United States—is the most famous of all. In the painting, the father of America stands in a room full of important documents. His bewigged head is so famous that a version of it now appears on the dollar bill.

But what's classical about this portrait? In addition to being posed as a Roman orator with his right arm outstretched, Washington is dressed in simple black civilian clothing. He is Cincinnatus, stepping down from army command instead of becoming a military dictator. A Doric column behind him suggests the ancient Greek simplicity appropriate to a farmer. The exposed table leg at the front of the painting is a Roman fasces that illustrates the unity of the 13 states. The table leg is topped by a Roman eagle. The *aquila*—as the eagle image was called in Latin—was carried by the Roman legions and symbolized the courage and strength of Zeus.

Thomas Cole

Born in England in 1801, Cole was not a member of the revolutionary generation, but he captured the hopes and fears of the new Rome—the American republic—better than anyone else of his time. He didn't emigrate to the US until 1818, so he could see what Americans themselves couldn't.

Cole illustrated his observations in a series of five paintings he made in the 1830s, just as the American republic had passed the half-century mark. The US now stretched far to the west. But while economic and technological developments like railroads provided hope to many, other developments gave Americans cause to worry. Slavery was expanding. Urbanization was swelling American cities with waves of poor immigrants, and Native peoples were being pushed off their land into reservations. Factories were filling cities with black smoke. Most worrisome of all for some Americans, a new commercial

THOMAS COLE

spirit of materialism was afflicting US society. People seemed to be forgetting the solid virtues of the Roman republic. Where was the United States headed? Toward relentless rise or toward a humiliating fall, just like the Roman Empire?

Cole projected those ideas onto five canvases that form a series called *The Course of Empire*. These landscape paintings move through time but stay in the same place, like a time-lapse sequence. A mountain with a rock perched on top is in the background of all of them. Importantly viewers don't know whether they are in a real place. Are they in ancient Rome or modern America? The paintings provide just enough of both that viewers are encouraged to make comparisons between the ancient rise and fall of the Roman republic and the modern rise and possible fall of the United States.

In the first painting, the subjects are in what Cole called the savage state. A skin-clad hunter chases after a deer, showing that this is a hunter-gatherer society. The teepees at the right show that Cole though this was how the American Indians still lived. The second painting moves into the pastoral state, where the wild forest has been tamed into a park. Mount Olympus seems to have appeared in the background. This was Thomas Jefferson's vision for the United States during his administration in the early 19th century. He made the Louisiana Purchase to prevent the urbanization and industrialization of the United States by allowing it to expand in space.

The third canvas depicts a city so crowded with gold-covered buildings, people, and ships that viewers can hardly see the mountain and rock in the background. An imperial triumph crosses the bridge at the front. In the fourth canvas, soldiers are attacking the city. But are they foreign attackers, or is this a civil uprising? Has the weakness caused by excessive luxury made this city so weak that it can't repel internal or external attackers?

The final canvas shows ruins in a swamp. There are no people, but a mother bird lays eggs on the crumbling column at left. Perhaps a new Rome can rise from the ruins of the old. Viewers take note, Cole seemed to say—republics rise and expand with the civic virtue of their citizens, but too much commerce and materialism pave the way for decline and fall.

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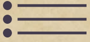

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The Afterlives of Antiquity in America

In 1776, a new nation emerged from 13 colonies huddled along the Atlantic seaboard of North America. Surrounded by powerful empires and uncertain of what a new, kingless republican government should look like, Americans looked backward to figure out how to move forward. They knew that history had very few models for successful, long-lasting republics, but 2,000 years before, two especially spectacular examples glimmered. Although ancient Greece and Rome will never loom as large in American life as they did in the founding era, the story of classicism in the United States continues even now. In this lecture, you'll trace this more modern story as part of the "afterlives" of classicism in the nation.

The Decline of Classicism

In the decades after the Civil War, a whole new world opened to Americans. The fabric of the nation changed dramatically as 4 million slaves were liberated in 1865. With the right to vote now extended to all adult men, had democracy taken root in the United States?

During the American Revolution, the founders were wary of democracy. They looked to the Roman republic as a model in part to prevent mere commoners from having too much participation in government, which they thought should be under the wise guidance of educated elites. But after the Civil War, fears of mob rule declined, and confidence in direct democratic participation grew. Ancient Greek democracy rose up as an example of a free, individualist, democratic society.

Americans were still eager to prove to Europeans that they weren't country bumpkins. And with its democracy, architecture, statuary, and great playwrights, ancient Athens seemed to offer a perfect model for a modern American democracy. Yet despite this new celebration of ancient Greece, an overall great decline of classicism began in the United States in the late 19th century. This decline was most obvious in American higher education. Under pressure to prepare students for a modern world, universities and colleges began to fill the curriculum with courses in biology, chemistry, psychology, sociology, modern languages, and more. These new disciplines crowded out the Greek and Latin courses that had dominated American college education for the previous 250 years. What good were Latin and Greek when citizens needed to lay down railroad tracks, drill for oil, fight plagues, and build car engines?

Western Civilization

Just as medieval Europe was built from the ashes of the Roman Empire, a new course replaced the old Greek and Latin curriculum—"Western civilization." This idea started as an attempt to salvage something of the ancients while saying something inspiring about a modern and rapidly changing America.

The story went like this: Long ago, the ancient Egyptians and Phoenicians had established cities and writing, the earliest glimmerings of civilization. The torch quickly passed to the small city-states of 5th-century BC Greece, where the noble idea of democracy was born. Glorious art and architecture also sprouted—the fitting face for this political inspiration that put power in the hands of the ordinary people rather than in the hands of a single king. Western civilization was born, and so began the great journey to the present day.

Professors all over the United States told students how the Greeks then passed the torch of civilization to Rome. The latter's grandeur expressed itself in military conquest, architectural splendor, and legal and constitutional innovation. But with the fall of Rome at the hands of barbarians in 476 AD, the candle of Western civilization dwindled. During the Middle Ages, Europe fractured into warring micro-kingdoms. Minds closed as Catholicism overtook the continent. A few monks, though, preserved the crumbling remains of Greco-Roman civilization, copying their words onto parchment for safekeeping.

The candle brightened again around 1350, as the republics of Renaissance Italy rediscovered the "glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome" (as stated by Edgar Allan Poe). Michelangelo, Machiavelli, and Leonardo da Vinci pulled Europe out of its backward medievalism and pointed the way forward to a classical revival that sparked innovations in the arts, politics, and science. This era was followed by the rise of Europe's blue-water trading empires, the colonization of the Americas, and the triumph of modern Europe and the United States. Europe and the US were the modern inheritors of Western civilization, preserving the best of antiquity and building on its triumphs.

In the first 60 or 70 years of the 20th century, so many Americans took this new course that Western civilization started to seem like an objective reality. The idea of a coherent Western civilization was meant to give Americans a sense of identity, progress, and pride and keep the classical world alive.

The Western civilization course continues to thrive in one form or another in some colleges and universities. However, today's students are looking to a more diverse America. They see influences coming from everywhere—East Asia, South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East—and they want to see those

important dynamics reflected in the college curriculum. Some universities have started offering a world civilization course that emphasizes the diversity of cultures across the globe. Others have abandoned the idea of a required common course altogether.

Classical Appropriation

As college curricula changed, so did classicism's place in politics. The end of World War II brought about another line of concern about the role of the classical world in modern life. People all over Europe and America were disturbed by the role ancient Greece and Rome had played in the ethnic nationalism that led to the rise of the Nazis in Germany and the Fascists in Italy in the 1930s.

The Nazis imagined themselves as heirs to an idealized civilization inherited from ancient Greece and transferred to Germany. Greece was the origin of the superior Aryan or Nordic White race, they said. They used their pseudo-Greek ideology to justify the ethnic cleansing of millions of people who might pollute this race. The Fascists in Italy did something similar with the ancient Romans. Under the dictator Benito Mussolini, they styled themselves as modern-day heirs of Roman grandeur. Hoping to create a new Roman Empire, Mussolini conquered Ethiopia and filled Rome with neoclassical architecture like the giant complex originally called the Foro Mussolini.

Young people who were born in the shadow of the ethnic cleansing projects of the 20th century naturally wondered about the pros and cons of drawing a straight line from any ancient society to a modern one. The Nazi and Fascist appropriations of classical symbols were part of the reason for the decline of the Western civilization idea.

Freudian Psychology

Even as classicism was falling out of the heart of American education, it was being given new life in other ways. Perhaps the most important is Freudian psychology. Sigmund Freud was an Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis; his ideas became popular in America in the early 20th century.

Freud was fascinated by archaeology. He thought that the human mind is like an archaeological dig—that is, the mind is made of layers that represent different ways of thinking. At the top is the conscious mind, filled with everything people are aware of. The next layer down is the preconscious mind, where ideas wait to be summoned into awareness. The very bottom layer is the unconscious. Freud's revolutionary idea was to say that people are driven mostly by their unconscious mind. Traumatic memories and disturbing thoughts are safely buried in the unconscious, where they can't hurt the conscious mind. But Freud said that they nonetheless influence people.

The role of psychoanalysis is to dredge up those repressed ideas, which usually stem from childhood, according to Freud. A child isn't equipped to manage certain overwhelming and disturbing events and thus buries them deep in the ground of their mind. The psychiatrist is like an archaeologist, digging through the patient's mind to uncover those events and show how they made the patient behave in certain ways.

Freud gave people a classical language for talking about these ideas. For example, people throw around his idea of the Oedipus complex, which comes from the Greek mythological figure Oedipus, who unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother. The psychoanalytic idea of the Oedipus complex refers to a very young child's unconscious feelings of desire for the parent of the opposite sex and their rivalry with the same-sex parent.

Classical Research

Finally the classics in America are being kept alive by tiny classics departments that still teach Greek, Latin, and classical history. Many fascinating revolutions have occurred in the way scholars now study the classical world.

Modern researchers have unparalleled access to the actual, physical sites of Greco-Roman societies. None of the American founders ever visited Rome, let alone Greece, and that lack of access limited their vision of classical antiquity. Now, thanks to new excavations, topics that the founders could only grasp at through a few texts have been restored to much greater clarity and understanding. Take ancient slavery. The founders knew that the Greeks and Romans had slaves, and some Americans used that knowledge to justify

holding slaves themselves. But today, with the discovery of new artifacts and texts, scholars now know—or think they know—that slavery in the ancient world was not based on race. By 1800, slavery in the United States almost exclusively enslaved Black people brought on ships from Africa and their offspring. However, in the ancient world, the important factor was not skin color but whether someone had been part of a captured population.

Modern classical scholars are also looking into other areas that the American founders never could have accessed. For instance, diving into an ancient shipwreck, researchers discovered the amazing Antikythera mechanism—a metal astronomical object that some have called an early analog computer. The device certainly would have intrigued the ever-inventive Benjamin Franklin.

ANTIKYTHERA MECHANISM

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