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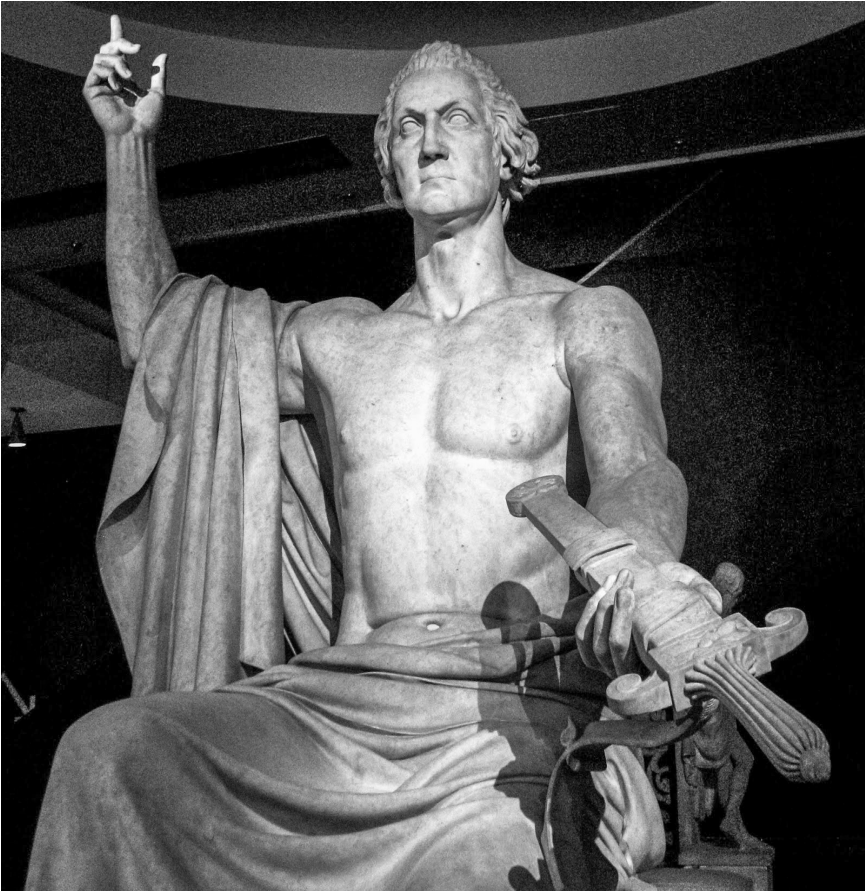
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### **The Monumental Washington**

As the style of this statue by Boston sculptor Horatio Greenough (1805–1852) makes clear, George Washington figured prominently in the search by early American thinkers for classical analogies—and justifications—for republican political organization. Greenough's sculpture is based on an ancient statue of Zeus.

# Classicism for the Masses?

## The Social Dimensions of Revolutionary Boston's Popular Imagination

JONATHON DEREK AWTRY



**Abstract:** *Scholars of the American Revolution have addressed a social bond between elites and non-elites through analyses of such unifying factors as ideology, religion, and economics. Yet these accounts have overlooked the degree to which classicism and the literary public sphere shaped debates around colonial relations with Great Britain and, after the Revolution, helped forge an American identity. Newspapers provided ordinary folk in Boston access to, and thus participation in, a rhetorical fight between patriot and loyalist writers—both of whom utilized the classical tradition—to explain to their readers the nature of their contemporary world. Whig leaders, who clamored for revolution, recognized that they must provide substantive reasons for ordinary folk to risk their lives and fortunes in such an endeavor. Classicism, and the promise of republican citizenship, created solidarity amongst patriots. Scholars have noted that as the deteriorating relationship between Great Britain and her American colonies became a matter of contentious debate, classicism provided Bostonians a familiar language with which to understand their revolution and to imagine a republic of equal citizens. Print culture provided writers an arena to contest the meanings of antiquity. After the war, the social*

*bond became tenuous, as elites questioned non-elites' capacity for virtuous citizenship. Borrowing again from antiquity, writers pointed to a classical education as a social linchpin that would instill civic virtue in republican citizens.*

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A crowd gathered at Boston's Old South Church in March 1772 to commemorate the second anniversary of the Boston Massacre. Standing in the shivering cold, four thousand souls listened intently as Joseph Warren (1741-1775), a Harvard-educated physician who later died at Bunker Hill, delivered a classically inspired oration. Three years later, Warren delivered a second commemoration oration supposedly clad in a Ciceronian toga. He compared the British Empire with ancient Rome, warning his audience that a "free constitution . . . raised ancient Rome . . . to . . . happiness and glory," but "when this decayed, her magistrates lost their reverence for justice and the laws, and degenerated into tyrants and oppressors."<sup>1</sup> According to Warren, the British Empire, like Rome, stood on the brink of such decay. Both sides of the political divide—Whigs and Tories—compared Warren's performances to the well-known classical figures Cicero and Demosthenes.<sup>2</sup>

Warren's orations demonstrate that American elites imagined their experiences through the lenses of antiquity.<sup>3</sup> Scholars, however, have overlooked the possibility that revolutionary Boston's reading public grappled with classical allusions, and have, therefore, under-valued their social function. Although the commemoration orations, overwhelmingly classical in form and substance (twelve of thirteen orations had classical motifs), represented an alternative source of power (Boston's elite Whig leadership), the spectacles became symbolic of popular participation in revolutionary events. A diverse crowd witnessed Warren's oratory, including patriots (Samuel Adams), loyalists (Thomas Hutchinson), British soldiers, elites, commoners, and even rural and urban folk.<sup>4</sup> These communal ceremonies, uninterrupted until after the war, forged a collective memory of past events, such as the death and suffering of Americans at the hands of British leadership. That Warren literally dressed in a toga and figuratively couched his language in classical terms reveals that classicism provided him

legitimacy in the minds of his popular audience. Revealingly, Bostonians later remembered Warren by comparing him to ancient heroes who willingly forfeited their lives for the public good.<sup>5</sup>

It was from such shared classical imaginings that Bostonians created a social bond. Scholars have explored this social bond through analyses of unifying factors such as ideology, religion, and economics.<sup>6</sup> Yet Warren's example suggests that classicism, too, was an essential component for social cohesion during a turbulent historical moment. Revolutionary leaders recognized that they must provide substantive reasons for ordinary folk to risk their lives and fortunes fighting against Great Britain. Classical rhetoric—and the promise of republican citizenship—created solidarity amongst patriots. Meanwhile, Whig ideology excluded Tories who were forced to flee or remain silent.<sup>7</sup>

The spoken word, however, was not solely responsible for the solidarity and dissemination of classical ideas beyond Boston's elite social circles. An astute Bostonian wrote in 1784, "Printing . . . brings into day the ancient wisdom of the first ages."<sup>8</sup> Echoing this observation, another Bostonian wrote, "Philosophy, once preserved among a chosen few . . . has now diffused its influence on the mean as well as the great . . . the merchant and the manufacturer, as well as the contemplative professor," for printed materials "are circulated . . . amongst the lowest ranks of the community."<sup>9</sup> Scholars



### *The Boston-Gazette and Country Journal, 1775*

The press was instrumental in broadly disseminating the classical ideas animating discussion about the form of government in post-Revolutionary America.

have rightly acknowledged that by the eighteenth century print culture was central to the dissemination of knowledge to all ranks of Anglo-American society, informing the community of important discourses—political, cultural, and otherwise.<sup>10</sup>

In the years before the revolution, newspapers provided ordinary folk in Boston access to, and thus participation in, a rhetorical fight between patriot and loyalist writers—both of whom utilized the classical tradition to explain to their readers the nature of their contemporary world. As the deteriorating relationship between Great Britain and her American colonies became a matter of contentious debate, classicism provided Bostonians with a familiar language through which to understand their revolution and to imagine a republic of equal citizens.<sup>11</sup> Print culture provided writers an arena to contest the meanings of antiquity; such vitriolic rhetoric on the eve of Lexington and Concord served to frame and justify the American mindset for revolution. After the war, this social bond grew more tenuous, as elites began to question



**Joseph Warren (1741–1775)**



### *Death of Julius Caesar, c. 1798*

The use of classical language, history, and images was a significant feature of the effort of a young nation to view its revolution and contemplate a republic based on civic equality. *Death of Julius Caesar* was created by the Italian painter Vincenzo Camuccini.

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non-elites' capacity for virtuous citizenship. Borrowing again from antiquity, writers pointed to a classical education as a social linchpin that would instill civic virtue into republican citizens.

The extent to which classicism inspired what was written in Boston—thus classical influence—is difficult to determine. It is, therefore, more productive to ask: what do writers, by couching their rhetoric in classical terms, reveal about their own motives for discourse and, more importantly, about their audiences' uses of that rhetoric? Although most articles were probably penned by elites, the use of classical language by the intelligentsia suggests that ordinary people also imagined their experiences through the literal and

metaphorical lenses of classical antiquity, thereby reflecting a social bond made possible by the literary public sphere.<sup>12</sup>

### 1763-1776: THE SOCIAL BOND FORGED

In the years before 1776, Bostonians compared British leaders to classical heroes, arguing that the British government must live up to the standards established by these illustrious men who opposed tyranny and corruption in government. Bostonians turned to Roman republicans, namely Cato and Cicero, as exemplars for Englishmen to emulate. According to Plutarch, Cato the Younger was a Roman statesman and philosopher known for his oratorical prowess and moral integrity. Cato opposed Julius Caesar's usurpation of power, and eventually committed suicide in defense of his republicanism.

According to Plutarch and Sallust, Cicero, a Roman statesman and Consul, thwarted the Catilinarian Conspiracy to murder the aristocratic Senate and seize power for the poor. Found guilty at trial, Catiline and his co-conspirators were sentenced to death for treason. As a result, Cicero emerged as the foremost orator in Rome. Later, his fierce opposition to Mark Antony in the years that followed Caesar's death led to his own demise.

The Bostonian popular appeal to Cato and Cicero, however, is best understood by the fact that both men fought for, and eventually died defending, their republican idealism. Bostonians, therefore, found in the lives of both men a meaningful correlation to their own defense of liberty against British tyranny.<sup>13</sup> Bostonians reacted to the Stamp Act of 1765, for example, with a string of classically inspired invectives that called on Parliament to live up to the virtues of the Roman Republic. Invoking Cato and Cicero for support, they argued that Parliament had reduced the colonies to the status of "slaves" and that what had once been the virtuous republic of Britain had given way to a decadent, corrupt empire like that of Caligula or Nero.<sup>14</sup>

The literary public sphere provided a forum for writers to contest various interpretations of ancient history and its relevance to modern readers' situations. As distributors prepared to place stamps on goods in 1765, a Bostonian appeared under the classical pseudonym "Cato," directing missives against those he believed had committed treason against Boston. "Cato" wrote, "For one of our Fellow Slaves, who equally shares in our Pains, to rise up and beg the favour of inflicting them, is intolerable."<sup>15</sup> In response, a separate "Cato" argued that his pseudonymous counterpart's "influence on the people . . . [must] be instantly dispelled" to restore Boston's "public peace and tranquility."<sup>16</sup> One "Cato" condemned the Stamp Act while the other

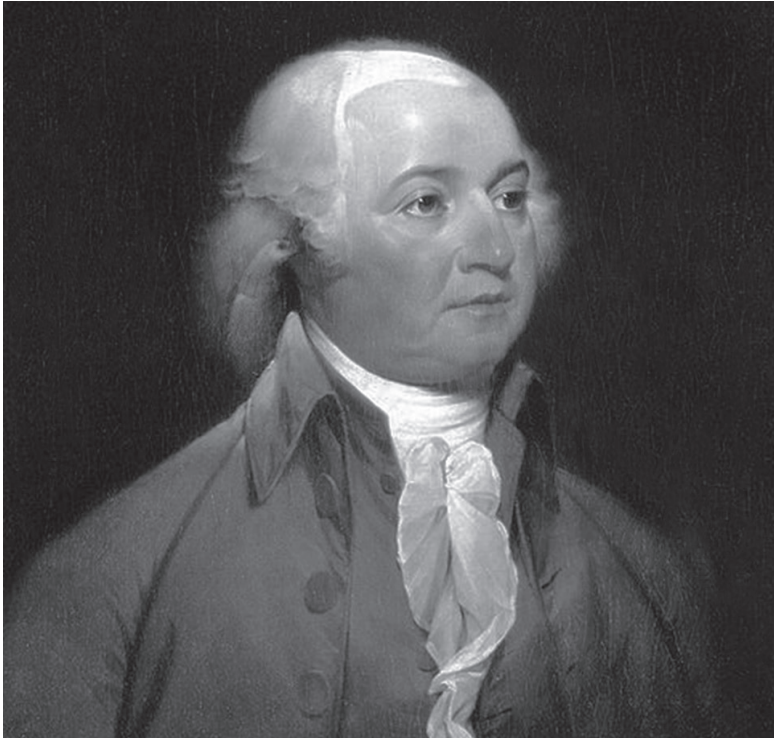


defended it. Both writers utilized the same pseudonym, however, hoping to illustrate to the community that they, like the historical Cato, were liberty's defenders. Despite writers' use of Cato's name to establish credibility with their popular audience, Cato's legacy remained a matter of contention in Boston. "Messalina Corvinus," for example, dubbed Cato a coward for killing himself instead of helping to preserve the Roman Republic.<sup>17</sup> Even the well-respected James Otis (1725-1783) agreed, "Cato was a coward."<sup>18</sup> Unlike Cato, Bostonians, these writers contended, must die defending themselves against all encroachments on their freedoms.

From 1770 to 1773, writers used classical rhetoric for radical purposes, a process by which the reading public became increasingly aware of the British threat to their liberties.<sup>19</sup> Polemicists increasingly compared and contrasted British leaders with ancient anti-models unworthy for Englishmen to emulate. The last resort for redress of their grievances was King George III (1738-1820). After he ignored their entreaties, however, Bostonians likened him to the tyrants of imperial Rome. "Nero fiddled," a Bostonian mused, "whilst Rome was burning." Like Nero (accused of setting fire to Rome, then playing his fiddle while the city burned), George had done nothing to redress the colonists' legitimate concerns and seemed bent on their "destruction."<sup>20</sup>

That classicism became a trope for understanding the deteriorating relationship between Great Britain and its American colonies is illustrated by loyalists' responses. "If you are at all acquainted with the history of the person, to whom you have thus compared your sovereign," a loyalist wrote, "I think you owe it to the public to explain in what act of his life he can be said to bear a resemblance to that execrable Tyrant."<sup>21</sup> Two months later came a retort: "it was not [my] intention to falsify an historical fact." Therefore, I hope "it will be admitted as recompense . . . that Nero did not fiddle whilst Rome was burning."<sup>22</sup> In a humorous semantic move, the writer maintained his stance against his king, still insisting that Nero had set fire to Rome but admitting that Nero possibly had not fiddled while he watched.

Additionally, patriots adopted as classical pseudonyms the names of such tyrant-slayers as Brutus and Cassius, the leading assassins of Caesar. "Cassius" warned George, "beware the ides of March [sic]," the day Caesar was assassinated.<sup>23</sup> The Romans saw this as an auspicious day in their calendar, and "Cassius" deliberately meant to remind his king of the previous tyrant's fate. "Brutus," for his part, declared that the "king has reserved to himself an absolute despotic power"; thus, the people must "retrench the power of the crown," otherwise "the English parliament will . . . be reduced to the same . . . contemptible condition with the Roman senate, in the time of Caligula, when that tyrannical . . . emperor proposed making his horse a consul."<sup>24</sup>



**John Adams (1735–1826)**

“Brutus” and “Cassius” reflected Boston’s frustration toward their king, and provided readers with a classical imagination to attack him.<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, as patriots colored their king in shades of classical tyrants, loyalists defended him.<sup>26</sup> “The great humanity of the King,” one wrote, “in bearing . . . so much unmerited abuse” was proof of his goodwill.<sup>27</sup> Loyalists began their own rhetorical campaign in earnest, blaming patriots for Boston’s recent turmoil. “To such Patriots as this,” another noted, “we owe the stationing of the King’s Ships and Troops among us.”<sup>28</sup>

Revealingly, loyalists, like their patriot counterparts, utilized classical antecedents to illustrate and justify their arguments and emphasize the reasons Bostonians should reconcile their differences with England. Loyalists pointed out that patriots were “presently loud for war, be it ever so unreasonable, ever so ruinous.”<sup>29</sup> By the end of 1772, loyalists became more aggressive in condemning Whigs. A writer signed “X” likened patriots to the faction that

destroyed Caesar, who they interpreted as a legitimate leader assassinated “by the ingratitude and perfidy of Brutus and Cassius.”<sup>30</sup> Whereas Whig patriots lauded the assassins’ actions, Tory loyalists condemned them. If patriots continued inciting rebellion against their king, the British Empire, like Rome, would devolve into civil wars, “X” presciently concluded. With that last point in mind, Whigs increasingly referred to the potential for war and a nation of their own, abandoning the belief that the British Empire might be reformed in Rome’s image.<sup>31</sup>

In the popular press, just months before military conflict, two writers—a Tory and a Whig—engaged in a rhetorical fight that betrayed the social bond between patriot elites and non-elites. “Massachusettsensis”—Daniel Leonard (1740-1829), a prominent Boston lawyer and loyalist—claimed that the patriots’ radical rhetoric against their sovereign had pushed Boston to the brink of civil war.<sup>32</sup> Leonard argued that, historically, Boston enjoyed the leadership of experienced government officials because “the bulk of the people, are generally but little versed in matters of state.” Yet Bostonians had recently fallen under the influence of amateurish Whig leadership. Conceding that no government is conducted without flaws, the Whigs’ revolutionary tone had persuaded Bostonians that “their rulers are tyrants, and the whole government a system of oppression.” When such persuasive tactics by elites gain the loyalty of non-elites, Leonard wrote plaintively, “the people are led to sacrifice real liberty to licentiousness, which gradually ripens into rebellion and civil war.” “The people,” he thundered, “are thus made the dupes of . . . ambition,” because “if they conquer, their own army is often turned upon them, to subjugate them to a more tyrannical government than that they rebelled against.” As a result, Leonard concluded, “the people . . . are sure to be the losers in the end,” for ancient “history is replete with instances of this kind.” As Caesar crossed the Rubicon River and marched on Rome (effectively ending republicanism), for example, Cassius sided against Caesar, while Lucius (probably an apocryphal character) cast his lot with Caesar. Deemed an enemy of the state, Cassius was murdered by Caesar’s henchmen.<sup>33</sup>

Readers were to draw a contemporary lesson: Bostonians were being forced to choose allegiance between patriots’ radical pleas for separation and loyalists’ moderate voice for reconciliation. Leonard feared commoners’ ability to rule themselves because of the propensity for frequent “mobs and riots” among the lower classes, whose “riots were not . . . spontaneous risings of the populace, but the result of the deliberations . . . of the whigs [sic].”<sup>34</sup> Recognizing a bond between the masses and Whig leaders, Leonard concluded, “A democracy or republic” is a form of “despotism.” As such, the

corrosive effects and the disingenuous nature of Whigs' democratic rhetoric, he reasoned, threatened the stability of the British Empire. If the classical past could be an indication for the patriots' fate—like Cassius, who sided against Caesar—certain death awaited them.<sup>35</sup>

Responding to Leonard's conciliatory rhetoric, John Adams (1735-1826), writing as "Novanglus," retorted ironically that his opponent, a man of "ambition and avarice," was badly mistaken in attempting to persuade Bostonians to reject the patriots' demands for separation. Although Leonard correctly noted that patriot rhetoric had shaped Boston's revolutionary thinking, Adams reasoned that it sanctioned Whig leadership in the people's minds and sustained their positive popular image and acceptance. Patriots had not duped the masses, but had purposefully persuaded their audience by utilizing "constant appeals to a sensible and virtuous people," for Whigs' objectives depended "on [the masses] good will, and cannot be pursued . . . without their concurrence." Adams defended Boston arguing that its people were not licentious but instead virtuous and well-informed. Far from being unable to self-govern, Adams argued, Bostonians had learned the civic virtues necessary for self-determination. Patriots were thus "struggling . . . against the encroachments of the Tories on their country" and had rather "die fighting against it." Adams also couched his language in classical themes, pointing out examples when tyrants enslaved their subjects. "Philip and Alexander are examples of this in Greece," Adams wrote, along with "Caesar in Rome."<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting that Leonard interpreted Caesar's actions in a positive light, while Adams did so negatively.

To underscore the contested nature of the debate, Leonard sardonically wrote:

[A]ll men by nature are equal . . . kings are but the ministers of the people . . . their authority is delegated to them by the people . . . 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 . . . These are what are called revolution principles. They are the principles of Aristotle and Plato, of Livy and Cicero.<sup>37</sup>

With more than a tinge of satire, Leonard's rhetoric shows that he understood that sovereignty must be shared by the British Parliament and king. Leonard's interpretation was arguably traditional, deeply rooted in antiquity, and later, reformulated in England's seventeenth century conflicts—the English Civil War (1642-1651) and Glorious Revolution (1688)—which placed sovereignty in the collective hands of the king and Parliament. In

this way, “virtual representation” protected American interests. That the English redefined the nature of sovereignty a mere century before American hostilities commenced surely emboldened American Whig leaders to again reexamine the concept.<sup>38</sup>

With this in mind, Adams quoted Leonard’s statement, though interpreting it in a far different fashion. Adams believed that sovereignty was rooted in the American populace—not in the British Parliament or king. Adams’ reinterpretation of sovereignty illustrates the radical ideas of Whig leaders. For most radical patriots, reconciliation was no longer an option. Adams rejected “virtual representation,” insisting upon “direct representation” through domestic institutions as the only means to ensure American liberty. As we have seen, Great Britain ignored these pleas. Adams and his compatriots thus moved beyond compromise with Great Britain, insisting that only colonial or state assemblies were the legitimate harbingers of Americans’ sovereignty.

Leonard used his statement to demonstrate the disruptive forces of disseminators of discontent, like Adams, who he believed sowed the seeds of sedition that directly culminated in licentiousness and usurpation of British authority. Conversely, Adams used it to point out that both Parliament and the king had, like Alexander and Caesar before them, usurped the people’s sovereignty. Leonard concluded that those actions placed patriots’ lives at risk. Adams, on the other hand, concluded that patriots would not be losers if they sided against Great Britain, because “If they die, they cannot be said to lose, for death is better than slavery.”<sup>39</sup>

This newspaper debate between these two Harvard graduates was indicative of the rhetorical fight within the larger literary public sphere to interpret the meanings of ancient history for their colonial audience in the years before 1776. Adams’ missives reflect a strong social bond between patriot elites and non-elites, for he defended the honor and authority of ordinary folk from loyalists’ denigrations. Patriots stamped out dissension by interpreting classical history in such a manner that ensured most commoners’ participation in revolution by the spring of 1775. Therefore, by the signing of the Declaration of Independence the following year, most Bostonians had embraced “revolution principles.”<sup>40</sup>

Meanwhile, Leonard experienced firsthand the limitations of revolutionary language. Whigs violated Leonard’s natural rights, confiscating his property and forcing him to leave Boston with the British in 1776.<sup>41</sup> Leonard wrote, “so many respectable persons have been abused,” and forced to flee from their homes, families, and businesses. Loyalists thereafter abstained from the public forum, because patriots intimidated and terrorized them into silence

or outright murdered them. Leonard asked Bostonians if these actions were “consistent with that liberty you profess?”<sup>42</sup> Such discourse, however, did not halt the tide of solidarity for separation, any more than it did the injustices against those who stood in the way of revolution.

### 1776–1789: THE SOCIAL BOND FRAYED

To be sure, Americans ultimately won independence and nationhood, which led the intelligentsia to ponder what it meant to be a republican citizen. To make sense of this notion, writers in their search for self-identification continued to draw from antiquity, whose exemplars helped define social relationships, as well as civic ones. While classicism, before 1776, offered readers several ancient precedents to help them make sense of revolutionary events, after 1776 classical history provided them with the social models and anti-models necessary to cultivate republican citizens wise enough to withstand liberal capitalism’s vices and luxuries, a culture burgeoning at that time. A classical education became important to inculcate the youth with the civic virtues necessary to ensure that American republicanism endured for posterity. Classicism, therefore, remained a substantive trope in sustaining a social bond between elites and non-elites. Unfortunately, it did not long endure, for many commoners were disenfranchised in the years after the war.

In this classical context, Bostonians wrote about social inequalities within their new republic. “I would by no means exclude men of property from the confidence of the people,” “A Watchman” warned, “But . . . they derive no right to power from their wealth,” for Bostonians must not allow “a minority of rich men . . . to govern the majority of virtuous freeholders.”<sup>43</sup> Comparing Socrates with Alexander the Great, another writer concluded that Socrates, a wise man of poverty and introspection, was virtuous and worthy of American emulation, whereas Alexander, a superficial man of wealth and power, was not.<sup>44</sup> Republican Rome once again offered useful social lessons. Historically, patricians (or elites) had monopolized political power, which led to conflict with plebeians (or commoners). Romans created the office of Tribune to calm social strife and to share power between them but eventually “cast the balance in favour of the people,” as the plebeian majority took advantage of the patrician minority. As a result, on two occasions, a group of Roman Senators rushed “armed into the forum” to murder the popular Tribunes Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, whose plans for land redistribution earned the brothers the loyalty of plebeians and the ire of patricians.<sup>45</sup> The net result of such social conflict led to the demise of the republic, a fact that underscored the need for Boston to balance power between elites and commoners.<sup>46</sup>

In the 1780s, there was a popular reaction against the formation of the Society of the Cincinnati, a hereditary order developed to commemorate the officers of the Revolutionary War. George Washington at first sanctioned the organization, but when he learned that it created popular outrage, the American hero distanced himself from it. A Bostonian claimed it would “strip . . . the middling and lower classes, of every influence.” Indeed, it might become “an hereditary peerage; a nobility to them and their male issue.”<sup>47</sup> Echoing this assessment, another Bostonian wrote that “the Romans had learned” that hereditary orders were “enemies to the popular equality of a republic,” ultimately allowing military commanders to “split the state into divisions, and like Caesar . . . raise themselves to despotism.”<sup>48</sup> Bostonians also attacked official titles for political office and social distinction, for they argued that such titles as “Honourable and Esquire” undermined American republicanism.<sup>49</sup> As a republic, many believed Americans must not grant “hereditary honours and titles of nobility,” or the “right of Primogeniture.”<sup>50</sup> Their rhetoric reflects the very real possibility that social distinctions and inequalities in Boston might lead to faction and tyranny.

Luxury and wealth were corrupting forces, according to ancient philosophers, thus Bostonians exalted moderation, a classical ideal they deemed necessary to cultivate republican citizens. One writer concluded, “When Rome was poor, Rome was virtuous . . . when Rome became rich . . . riches engendered luxury, and luxury introduced Civil Tension.”<sup>51</sup> Another essay, too, echoed the lessons of Greece’s moderation, pointing to Plato’s *Republic* and its argument for the elimination of property. “Plato, who to secure the happiness of a republic, would not have it established either on the sea . . . or on the banks of large rivers,” for commerce corrupted society.<sup>52</sup>

To ensure that citizens learned proper republican values, public education became a social linchpin because “those who have had a bad education . . . violate the . . . laws; whereas those who have been well educated . . . readily submit to proper regulations.”<sup>53</sup> Concurrently, “In a free republic [the principles] of a democracy require that . . . political wisdom and virtue be diffused through the mass of the people.”<sup>54</sup> “A.T.” pointed out that, from the classics, the youth might learn “principles of piety, virtue, benevolence, moderation, and fortitude.” After all, “Numberless are the examples we have recorded in history,” such as Lucius Junius Brutus who “beheld the execution of his sons . . . when the safety of Rome demanded it.”<sup>55</sup> In 509 BCE, Brutus led the forces that expelled the last Roman king, Tarquin Superbus, and established the republic. He learned that two of his sons were involved in a plot to restore the king and ordered them executed

for their treason. Such unselfish acts defined a social consciousness that privileged the public good over private interest.<sup>56</sup>

“Censor” claimed that public education sustained republican society. Ancient history demonstrated the ramifications for republics that neglected to educate its people.<sup>57</sup> During the Second Punic War (218-201 BCE) between Carthage and Rome, Carthaginians—“unprincipled and ignorant of the interests of their country”—exiled their extraordinary general, Hannibal, resulting in Rome’s victory. Similarly, during the Persian Wars (499-449 BCE) between Athens and the Persian Empire, Athens had neglected “the education of the Athenian youths.” As a result, “Aristides, one of their ablest Generals . . . [was] banished by Ostracism,” allowing “Pericles to . . . engage his . . . countrymen in the Peloponnesian war [sic], which led . . . to the . . . ruin of Athens.” The Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE) between Athens and Sparta, according to Thucydides, ended with the destruction of the Athenian Navy, and particularly its influence in the Greek World. Thucydides argued that Pericles’s hubris destroyed Athenian hegemony. Finally, Rome’s lack of education led to “jealousies . . . between the patricians and the plebeians . . . until the senate [sic] under Pompey, and the people under Caesar brought the long quarrel to an issue that proved the destruction of both.”<sup>58</sup> For “Censor,” a classical education maintained social concord and ensured that the republican experiment endured.

Antiquity provided Bostonians with social anti-models as well. The Spartans, for example, whipped “all the children,” tearing “to pieces . . . the bodies of these innocent victims.” The lashings were so severe the children likely died. Additionally, newborns that appeared “delicate and of a weak constitution . . . [were] unmercifully condemned to perish.” Akin to these moral transgressions, Spartan men shared wives, the net result of which “was but the natural consequence of the bad education they received.”<sup>59</sup> To illustrate the importance of positive ancient exemplars for Bostonians, Sparta, despite its immoral private social values, provided an example of public virtue, namely patriotism worthy of emulation. According to Thucydides, at the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE, “Leonidas with a few men . . . fell . . . with three hundred Spartans.”<sup>60</sup>

During the 1780s, Boston’s newspapers served as an arena for writers to discuss women’s responsibility to the new American republic. Although women were largely precluded from the public sphere, mothers were responsible for educating their children, the next generation of republican citizens.<sup>61</sup> One writer claimed, “a woman . . . improved by virtuous and refined education” contributed “to public good.” According to Tacitus, the education of Rome’s children was a mother’s responsibility: “In that manner





### **The American Exemplar**

Writers in Boston seized on the figure of George Washington as a model of “disinterested patriotism” and restraint in the use of republican power. Artistic renderings, however, may have drawn the classical parallels between Washington and the ancients less modestly.

the Gracchi, educated by Cornelia their mother; Augustus, by Attia his mother, appeared in public with untainted minds.”<sup>62</sup> An educated woman, then, instilled a republican ethos into her children, thereby perpetuating a republican nation for generations to come.

Like women, Boston’s newspapers addressed the ambivalent role of slaves in a republican society. An extraordinary article provided a radical solution to America’s “peculiar institution.” What might the slave’s mind “be raised to, were it rightly cultivated?” the author asked his audience.<sup>63</sup> Slavery might be destroyed, the writer suggested, if both slave and slaveholder received a classical education. In light of the fact that Massachusetts had abolished slavery in 1780, the writer challenged the existence of slavery throughout the nation, viewing it as antithetical to a republican ethos.

Following the Revolutionary War, Bostonians addressed how to re-assimilate soldiers into society. A Bostonian reminded returning veterans, “Alexander possessed all the knowledge of Aristotle, and carried the Iliad constantly with him . . . Hannibal was a man of letters . . . [and] Caesar was his own historian.”<sup>64</sup> These men from the ancient past afforded American soldiers an example of learning, an important requirement for being readmitted into society. To be sure, a classical education was central to the first generation of Americans, including youths, women, slaves, and soldiers—all of whom were responsible for teaching republican, indeed classical, values to the next generation.

By pointing to meaningful correlations between George Washington and classical heroes, other writers colored contemporary heroes in classical shades. A Bostonian wrote of Washington, “Let not the name of Brutus . . . be remembered, whilst that of WASHINGTON is to be found in the annals of America.” Washington became an exemplar, because “his disinterested patriotism and . . . virtues, command universal veneration.”<sup>65</sup> Another writer remarked, “A Hannibal could cross the Alps . . . a Scipio could defend Rome . . . and a Caesar could conquer . . . but it was reserved to a Washington alone . . . to save a country.” All Americans “are inspired by his example and labour [sic] to imitate his virtues.”<sup>66</sup> Echoing this exaltation of Washington, an admirer pointed out that following his victory over Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, Washington was “not equaled by the Macedonian Madman [Alexander], or . . . the Roman Fabius [Maximus].”<sup>67</sup>

On the other hand, classicism was a matter of contention during the 1780s. Bostonian writers, for example, pointed to the demagoguery and despotism of Alexander and Caesar, warning their community of the dangers of emulating such violent men.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, Bostonians compared Washington to Fabius Maximus, the Roman general nicknamed “Cunctator”

(delayer) for his unconventional guerilla tactics during the Second Punic War. Fabius fought a series of small skirmishes, rather than full-scale battles, which exploited Hannibal's long supply lines from Carthage to Italy, a tactic that led to the destruction of Hannibal's army by starvation and desertion. Washington employed similar tactics (dubbed "Fabian Strategy" by military historians) against English armies; the hero, therefore, garnered the moniker, "American Fabius."<sup>69</sup>

Writers also imagined Washington as a modern Cincinnatus, who learned, while plowing his fields, that Rome (at war with a rival tribe in Italy) had declared him dictator. Cincinnatus laid down his plow and proceeded to lead Rome to victory. Thereafter, rather than usurping power from the republic, Cincinnatus handed power back to the Roman people, and returned to his fields. Noting the similarity, an author wrote, "this American Cincinnatus" returned "again to the plough" following his victory at Yorktown.<sup>70</sup> Washington had thus, like their ancient hero Cincinnatus, put the public good before his own interests.

References to classical heroes made the impact and contributions of Washington meaningful. Therefore, Washington remained the paramount exemplar in Boston's popular imagination throughout the 1780s, representing an ideal form of civic virtue.<sup>71</sup> To concerned American audiences, Washington offered a reassuring vision of national unity. By comparing Washington to classical heroes, writers provided a fragmented and increasingly insecure society with their own iconic hero.

Writers in the 1780s expressed a distinct indictment of democracy's limitations. Although certainly republican in nature, an antidemocratic animus was also a part of Boston's classical imagination. After independence, elites pointed out the hazards of allowing uneducated citizens to participate in their republican experiment. Beyond the exclusion of women and slaves, for example, Bostonians were concerned with extending citizenship to the less affluent and uneducated masses, raising questions of utility, education, and propriety. Ancient history had shown Boston's intelligentsia that an uneducated and volatile populace potentially led to moral corruption. Moreover, a lack of education in antiquity led to the ultimate usurpation of political power by demagogues, such as Pericles, Caesar, and the Gracchi brothers, who took advantage of the whimsical, oftentimes capricious nature of uneducated folk. Many Bostonians feared that the uneducated might vote out of office the most prudent leaders—as Athens did to Aristides or Carthage to Hannibal—leading, like their ancient exemplars, to a collapse of republicanism. Boston's writers, however, remained optimistic for their young republic's future, suggesting that a classical education might remedy

the inevitable limitations of liberal democracy.<sup>72</sup>

Although at times superficial, classicism provided Boston's reading public with an imagination necessary to reconcile a paradox, one with which republicans still grapple. How does republican society reconcile the individual with the community? Classicism provided examples of social cohesion predicated upon civic virtue, which required that individualism remain peripheral to the body politic. To be an American in revolutionary Boston was to submit one's private interests to the public good. This ethos drew from the cross-cultural models and anti-models afforded by classical history. Furthermore, Bostonians were well aware of the potential moral pitfalls and corruption of a commercial republic. If the histories of Greece and Rome could be any indication, these writers reasoned, moral abominations and an uneducated populace could potentially enslave, or worse, destroy the republic.

## CONCLUSION

Historians have largely ignored the social dimensions of classical antiquity in revolutionary Boston, concluding that ordinary folk were, at worst, unaware of classical history, or were, at best, superficially aware of it.<sup>73</sup> Bernard Bailyn has even referred to the classical tradition as nothing more than "intellectual window dressing," a mere tool for elites to establish credibility in their peers' eyes.<sup>74</sup> Let us return to Joseph Warren's commemorative oration in 1775, presented at this paper's outset, which allows us to complicate such assumptions. Delivered to a diverse crowd of four thousand people, Warren's figurative classical language and literal toga demonstrates that classicism resonated with more people than historians have admitted. Following Warren's oration, for example, Samuel Adams raised the crowd's emotions by asking for a volunteer to deliver the next year's oration to remember "the bloody massacre of the 5th of March 1770." Warren's classical motifs had conditioned the crowd to respond to Adams's vitriolic statement with pandemonium. Here, manifestly, is yet another spectacle that exemplifies a symbiotic discourse—or social bond—between elite patriot orators and their audiences. That the printed word increasingly displaced the spoken one suggests that the literary public sphere promulgated this classical imagination to a much larger audience.<sup>75</sup>

Indeed, Bostonians' social uses of classicism changed over time. A formative period for classicism (1760s and 1770s) emphasized inclusion for patriot elites and non-elites who embraced Whig ideology, while intentionally



**Crucible of Public Opinion**

Boston's newspapers were the most important means for the city's literate public to stay informed. Shown is *The Boston Gazette and Country Journal* from February 20, 1775.

excluding loyalists of all social classes. A reactionary period ensued in the aftermath of war, as elites questioned commoners' capacity for republican citizenship. The social bond weakened because elites feared the licentiousness of the masses. Yet a reinterpretation of classical history solved an important social dilemma: the need for an antidote to the excesses of democracy and its inherent social discord. However, classical education and the promise of republican citizenship never materialized for most common folk—further severing the social bond between the classes. Meanwhile, non-elites were

disfranchised in most states, and remained so well into the nineteenth century.

Newspapers disseminated knowledge, news, and informed opinion to Boston's reading public—including those who sat and listened in taverns and coffeehouses.<sup>76</sup> Lawrence Leder noted, "If we wish to understand popular attitudes, as differentiated from the views of the elite, we must turn to what the people read." "The high . . . literacy in the colonies, coupled with the wide circulation of the newspapers, leads to the conclusion that the press must have been a potent force in focusing and defining eighteenth-century attitudes."<sup>77</sup> Print culture is, therefore, enormously important, not only because it is a reflection of popular thinking but also because the literary public sphere functioned as a vehicle to forge a social bond; indeed, it provided solidarity to patriots across class lines.

Carl J. Richard characterized the antebellum decades as a "golden age" of classicism in America. For the first time, Richard argued, the classics penetrated the psyche of non-elites.<sup>78</sup> As we have seen, however, classicism made revolutionary events meaningful to more people long before the nineteenth century. On the other hand, the social bond it helped to create did not long endure. In light of recent scholarship, it might come as no surprise to find newspapers laden with classicism.<sup>79</sup> While perhaps unsurprising, a crucial reason for the appeal of classicism to Boston audiences at that time was that it raised issues and took positions that were of relevance to newspaper readers. The printed word helped to expound a classical imagination that calmed dissension and united Boston's social classes in common purpose and understanding; it reflected the shared expectations, popular attitudes, values, and behavior of revolutionary Bostonians. A classical imagination thus sustained a shared sense of community rooted in common cultural mores. Put succinctly, classicism and the literary public sphere helped forge an American identity. It was, then, not solely classicism for the elites, but also classicism for the masses.

HJM

## Notes

1. *Orations Delivered at the Request of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston to Commemorate the Evening of the Fifth of March, 1770; When a Number of Citizens*

were Killed by a Party of British Troops, Quartered among Them in a Time of Peace (Boston: Peter Edes, 1785), 18-19.

2. *Rivington's Gazette*, March 16, 1775; Eran Shalev, *Rome Reborn on Western Shores: Historical Imagination and the Creation of the American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 114-32, 140-41.

3. For review of historiography, see John W. Eadie, *Classical Traditions in Early America* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1976); Jonathon Derek Awtrey's book review of Thomas Jefferson, the Classical World, and Early America in *Journal of American Studies* 46 (November 2012), 1096-98.

4. The terms "elite" and "commoner" are used in a social sense here—not necessarily an economic one. An elite is a highly educated professional (e.g. lawyer or physician), with social and cultural prestige that afforded them political currency.

5. Sandra Gustafson, *Eloquence is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (UNC Press, 2000), xxiv, 16; *Pennsylvania Packet*, July 3, 1775; Richard Forthingham, *Life and Times of Joseph Warren* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 1865), 427, 536-41; Shalev, *Rome Reborn*, 258.

6. Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1969); Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army & American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1979); T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

7. Shalev, *Rome Reborn*, 114-32, 140-41; Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 5-109.

8. *Massachusetts Centinel*, June 12, 1784.

9. *Massachusetts Gazette*, December 19, 1785.

10. For print culture and public sphere, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1989); Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); John L. Brooke, "Consent, Civil Society, and the Public Sphere in the Age of Revolution and the Early American Republic," in Jeffery Pasley, et al. eds., *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004), 207-50.

11. Shalev, *Rome Reborn*, 151-187.

12. It is difficult to ascertain with certainty the identities of most writers, because of the prevalent use of pseudonyms.

13. For Cato and Cicero, see Carl J. Richard, *Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 40-1, 57-69, 84-86, 92-94; Stephen Botein, "Cicero as Role Model for Early American Lawyers: A Case Study in Classical "Influence," *Classical Journal* 73 (1978), 313-15, 321; Fredric M. Litto, "Addison's Cato in the Colonies," *William and Mary Quarterly* 23 (1966), 431.

14. *Boston Gazette*, May 01, 1769; *Massachusetts Spy*, June 06, 1771, August 15, 1771.
15. *Boston News-Letter*, August 22, 1765; *Boston Post-Boy*, September 09, 1765.
16. *Boston Evening-Post*, June 09, 1766.
17. *Boston Chronicle*, February 15, 1768.
18. *Boston Gazette*, May 13, 1765; *Boston Gazette*, May 12, 1788; *American Herald*, June 19, 1788.
19. Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765–1776* (New York: 1972), 198-270.
20. *Boston Evening-Post*, May 21, 1770.
21. Ibid.
22. *Boston Post-Boy*, July 30, 1770.
23. *Boston Evening-Post*, April 03, 1769.
24. *Boston Post-Boy*, November 20, 1769; *Boston Evening-Post*, May 07, 1770; *Boston Gazette*, February 11, 1771; *Massachusetts Spy*, April 19, 1771.
25. *Boston Post-Boy*, November 25, 1771; *Massachusetts Spy*, April 25, 1771, September 26, 1771, January 30, 1772, March 19, 1772; *Boston Evening-Post*, February 24, 1772; *Massachusetts Spy*, August 16, 1770, August 20, 1772; Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 198-227.
26. For other examples, see *Massachusetts Spy*, September 05, 1771, October 31, 1771; *Boston Post-Boy*, March 25, 1771; *Boston Gazette*, August 05, 1771, September 16, 1771, December 16, 1771, December 23, 1771; *Massachusetts Spy*, May 02, 1771, May 23, 1771; *Boston Evening-Post*, May 27, 1771; *Massachusetts Spy*, June 13, 1771, June 27, 1771, July 11, 1771, August 01, 1771, September 05, 1771, December 26, 1771, July 23, 1772, August 06, 1772.
27. *Boston Post-Boy*, September 03, 1770.
28. *Boston News-Letter*, December 24, 1772.
29. *Censor*, March 14, 1772.
30. *Boston News-Letter*, December 24, 1772; *Boston Post-Boy*, August 08, 1774, October 17, 1774; Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 228-270.
31. *Boston Gazette*, January 10, 1774; *Boston Gazette*, February 21, 1774, November 01, 1773, February 21, 1774; *Massachusetts Spy*, January 05, March 17, 1775; *Boston Post-Boy*, January 16, 1775.
32. Merrill Jensen, *Tracts of the American Revolution, 1763-1776* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003), lix.
33. *Boston Post-Boy*, December 19, 1774.
34. *Boston Post-Boy*, February 6, 1775.
35. *Boston Post-Boy*, January 16, 1775, January 23, 1775, February 13, 1775, February 20, 1775, March 6, 1775; *Massachusetts Spy*, March 2, 1775.
36. *Boston Gazette*, January 23, 1775.
37. Ibid.
38. Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: Norton, 1988).



39. *Ibid.*; *Boston Gazette*, February 13, 1775, February 20, 1775.
40. *Rivington's Gazette*, January 26, 1775.
41. Jensen, *Tracts of American Revolution*, lix-lxii.
42. *Rivington's Gazette*, January 26, 1775.
43. *Continental Journal*, July 18, 1776.
44. *American Herald*, June 28, 1784; *Independent Ledger*, January 09, 1786.
45. *Independent Chronicle*, February 09, 1786.
46. *American Herald*, December 10, 1787; *Independent Ledger*, January 09, 1786.
47. *Independent Chronicle*, January 29, 1784.
48. *Independent Chronicle*, February 05, 1784.
49. *American Herald*, March 27, 1788; *Boston Gazette*, April 7, 1788, April 21, 1788, April 28, 1788; *Herald of Freedom*, August 21, 1789, August 25, 1789; *Independent Chronicle*, April 2, 1789.
50. *Independent Ledger*, February 14, 1785; *Continental Journal*, March 31, 1785; *American Herald*, September 04, 1786; *Independent Chronicle*, May 11, 1786; *Boston Gazette*, September 29, 1788; *Massachusetts Centinel*, December 26, 1789.
51. *American Herald*, July 04, 1785.
52. *Independent Ledger*, February 06, 1786.
53. *Continental Journal*, March 31, 1785; *American Herald*, September 04, 1786; *Independent Ledger*, November 18, 1782. For classical education, see Richard M. Gummere, "Some Classical Sidelights in Colonial Education," *Classical Journal* 55 (1959), 223-232; Louis B. Wright, "Humanistic Education and the Democratic State," *Southern Atlantic Quarterly* 42 (1943), 142-153; Caroline Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).
54. *Independent Chronicle*, December 01, 1785; *Continental Journal*, December 06, 1781; *Boston Evening-Post*, January 19, 1782; *Massachusetts Centinel*, August 04, 1784; *Independent Ledger*, December 22, 1783.
55. *Continental Journal*, June 03, 1784; *Independent Ledger*, July 05, 1784.
56. *Boston Evening-Post*, December 01, 1781; *American Herald*, June 11, 1787; *Boston Gazette*, May 4, 1789.
57. *Boston Evening-Post*, December 01, 1781. Interestingly, a Censor in ancient Rome regulated education to instill public morality and virtue in youth.
58. *Independent Chronicle*, December 01, 1785.
59. *Independent Ledger*, February 25, 1782.
60. *Independent Ledger*, November 18, 1782; *Massachusetts Centinel*, April 9, 1788, April 16, 1788; *Massachusetts Centinel*, October 11, 1788, April 11, 1789.
61. Caroline Winterer, "Victorian Antigone: Classicism and Women's Education in America, 1840-1900," *American Quarterly* 53 (March 2001), 70-93. For "republican motherhood," see Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (Vintage, 1997); Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press,

- 1997); Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence* (Vintage, 2006).
62. *Continental Journal*, June 14, 1781; *Massachusetts Centinel*, February 25, 1789.
63. *Massachusetts Centinel*, September 22, 1784.
64. *Independent Ledger*, February 12, 1781.
65. *Independent Chronicle*, March 20, 1777.
66. *Continental Journal*, March 12, 1778.
67. *Boston Evening-Post*, June 29, 1782.
68. *Boston Evening-Post*, December 15, 1781; *Independent Ledger*, November 04, 1782; *American Herald*, March 29, 1784, April 05, 1784; *Boston Gazette*, July 21, 1788.
69. *Massachusetts Centinel*, November 20, 1784, December 01, 1784, February 14, 1787, November 10, 1787, November 21, 1787, March 22, 1788, January 21, 1789, July 25, 1789; *Independent Chronicle*, July 26, 1787, January 22, 1789; *Herald of Freedom*, April 24, 1789; *Independent Ledger*, February 13, 1786; *Continental Journal*, March 23, 1786.
70. *Continental Journal*, April 14, 1785.
71. *Independent Ledger*, January 03, 1785; *American Herald*, February 14, 1785; *Continental Journal*, February 16, 1786.
72. Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Athens on Trial: The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
73. The scholarship on the classical tradition in early America is extensive, but for examples, see Gilbert Chinard, "Thomas Jefferson as a Classical Scholar," *American Scholar* 1 (1932), 135; Richard Gummere, *The American Colonial Mind and the Classical Tradition: Essays in Comparative Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963); Meyer Reinhold, *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman Heritage in the United States* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984); Richard, *Founders and the Classics*; Shalev, *Rome Reborn*; Winterer, *Culture of Classicism*; idem, *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750-1900* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007). Scholars began to question the centrality of classicism in American thinking beginning in 1943, see Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1943); Clinton Rossiter, *Seedtime of the Republic: The Origin of the American Tradition of Political Liberty* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1953).
74. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 23.
75. Although the exact nature of Warren's oration is disputed, Shalev concludes that Boston's cultural milieu was conducive to such a classical performance. Shalev, *Rome Reborn*, 125-30, quote on page 259; James McLachlan, "Classical Names, American Identities: Some Notes on College Students and the Classical Traditions in the 1770s," in *Classical Traditions*, ed. Eadie, 83-4.
76. Charles E. Clark, "Boston and the Nurturing of Newspapers: Dimensions of the Cradle, 1690-1741," *The New England Quarterly* 64 (1991), 243; David Conroy, *In*

*Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1995); Susan V. Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

77. Lawrence H. Leder, "The Role of Newspapers in Early America: 'In Defense of their Own Liberty,'" *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 30 (1966), 1; Robert A. Ferguson, *The American Enlightenment, 1750-1820* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 86. Ferguson argued that "although accurate figures for the period are not available, approximations suggest that 85 percent of all adult males in New England" could read.

78. Carl J. Richard, *The Golden Age of the Classics in America: Greece, Rome, and the Antebellum United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

79. For recent scholarship, see Shalev, *Rome Reborn*; Winterer, *Mirror of Antiquity*.