

Resurrecting Ancient America: The Use of Antiquity in Eighteenth-Century American Culture and the Founding of the Modern Republic

On June 21, 1788 the Constitution of the United States of American was adopted after a long fight for ratification. The modern republic founded on western shores looked strikingly similar to its ancient counterparts, yet promised to surpass them as the leader of civilization and inheritor of the *translatio imperii*, the movement of civilization. These similarities arose because classical antiquity was a major source of inspiration for the new government. The political elite used Greek and Roman antiquity to ignite political sentiments in favor of adopting the Constitution. Constitutional support grew with the distribution of newspaper articles written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, known as the *Federalist Papers*¹; these articles were strongly influenced by classical texts and precepts. The elites utilized the ancient texts to connect with average Americans as knowledge of antiquity was well-established in eighteenth-century American society. Forms of print, coupled with high literacy rates, worked to disseminate classical knowledge throughout colonial America. By the time of ratification, the majority of the population already had basic knowledge of classical antiquity. Therefore, it was this classical culture in America that the elites used in order to form a modern republic and push the ratification of the Constitution.

Thomas Jefferson once stated that “American Farmers are the only farmers who can read Homer.” Although the expression may now seem hyperbolic, Jefferson was, in a way, accurately expressing how educated the average colonist was in the eighteenth-century. By the time of the American Revolution, schooling was uniform and standardized across the majority of the American colonies.² This resulted because of the “substantial increase in private and public schooling after about 1750, as all kinds of schools were being opened across the American provinces.”³ The increase in schooling was coupled with the view that the Classics were “a partner rather than a servant of theology.”⁴ This equalization of the Classics and theology brought about a greater appreciation for antiquity, as it was taught as its own entity and apart from religious studies. Antiquity was becoming its own educational force, which showed in the educational curriculum of colonial public

¹ Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*. Edited by Clinton Rossiter (New York: New American Library, 1961).

² Gummere, Richard M. *The American Colonial Mind and the Classical Tradition*. Cambridge: Harvard UP (1963), 55.

³ Eran Shalev. *Rome Reborn on Western Shores* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 12.

⁴ Gummere, 56.

schools. Public schools focused primarily on reading, writing, arithmetic, and rhetoric. It was in these public schools which were “much less well off” that “even basic reading instruction had a strongly rhetorical flavor”⁵ as they were from Latin primers. It was through the subjects of reading and rhetoric that antiquity first influenced young colonists, as students studied Quintilian’s *Institutio* to learn the art of rhetoric.⁶ Accordingly, schools held “Readings and Recitations” to train youths in the art of speaking. The classically inspired rhetoric emphasized oratory and outward expression. This gave educated colonists the ability to move, sway, and control a crowd, all things that would become essential in shaping the American public’s sentiments towards ratification. The public schooling system would create one of the most well educated peoples in the world. Richard Gummere maintains that “in well settled regions the proportion of those who could read and write was as high as 90 percent: on the frontier it was much lower.”⁷ Nonetheless, on the frontier there were those who could read and spread knowledge, something that would become vital to spreading knowledge of the Constitution. The public education system created a solid foundation of literacy and classically inspired rhetoric as it lay the foundations for a modern culture of antiquity.

While the public education system had traces of classical influence, the schooling of the upper class created an elite group of classical scholars. The elite schooling system mirrored that of the British as both placed a heavy emphasis on classical learning. The classical education produced civil servants for the growing British Empire. That being said, it was only natural that the Americans, who were former British subjects, would replicate the elite schooling system on the new shores. In the elite system, “school rooms [were] dominated by the speaking of Latin and Greek in exercises originally designed by classical rhetoricians.”⁸ By the time of the American Revolution, the Boston Latin School’s curriculum was the standard for any school producing college bound students. At graduation, pupils would have studied “Cicero’s orations, Justinian, the Latin and Greek New Testaments, Isocrates, Homer, Hesiod, Virgil, Horace, Juvenal, and dialogues in Godwin’s *Roman Antiquities*, as well as turning the Psalms into Latin verse.”⁹ This was appropriate knowledge as entrance requirements for colleges demanded a fortitude of classical knowledge. By 1775, there were nine colleges in the colonies: Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, Brown, Rutgers, Dartmouth, and what would become Princeton, University

⁵ Joy Connolly, “Classical Education and the early American Democratic Style”, in *Classics and National Cultures*, ed. Susan A. Stephens and Phiroze Vasunia (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 89.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gummere 62.

⁸ Connolly 83.

⁹ Gummere 57.

of Pennsylvania, and Columbia.¹⁰ They all followed Oxbridge entrance requirements of classical knowledge, with Harvard setting the example in 1655, Yale in 1745, Columbia in 1755, and the rest following shortly.¹¹ In order to apply to Harvard a student had to “understand Tully, Virgil, or any such classical authors, and readily speak or write true Latin in prose and have skill in making Latin verse, and be completely grounded in the Greek language.”¹² Likewise at Columbia, John Jay recounts he had to give a “Rational account of Cicero and three books of the *Aeneid*, and translate the first ten chapters of the Gospel of John into Latin.”¹³ Such entrance requirements are prime examples of how classically trained the elites were at the time of the American Revolution (1765-1783).

While the elite did have a schooling system which helped create classically trained persons, it must be noted that not all of the Founding Fathers were formally educated. Yet this did not stop men from learning of antiquity. As Eran Shalev points out:

[E]ven Americans who were not privileged enough to enjoy the benefit of years of rigid classical studies could still develop formidable knowledge and a sense of familiarity with the world of antiquity. Men such as George Washington and Patrick Henry never learned Latin or Greek. Nonetheless, they and many like them were able to make the classics meaningful to their private and public lives to a remarkable degree.¹⁴

The most famous Founding Father never learned Latin or Greek, yet later was closely tied with antiquity by being hailed as the American Cincinnatus. While every colonist may not have been a classical scholar, the public and elite schooling systems nevertheless created an educated population that was open to spreading and receiving classical antiquity.

By the mid eighteenth-century, the American colonies had a firm educational base upon which knowledge of the classics was easily received. The vehicle that spread the most classical knowledge was print. By coupling a large print culture with high literacy rates, authors quickly disseminated classical knowledge through cities and even frontier regions. This was so effective that antiquity “[could] be found in all circles, high and low, from

¹⁰ Meyer Reinhold, *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman heritage in the United States*. (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1984), 26.

¹¹ Reinhold 27.

¹² Gummere 56.

¹³ Ibid, 57.

¹⁴ Shalev 11.

farmer who notes the weather, or a shopkeeper who wishes to impress his clientele, to the scholar-politician in search of precedents for the founding of a nation.”¹⁵ Through the use of various print mediums during the mid-eighteenth century, antiquity spread through the colonies like wildfire.

Moreover, the almanac was one of the most popular printed forms that spread knowledge of antiquity to all social classes. Frontier farmers as well as plantation owners and those in between read the traditional almanac. Not only did almanacs offer astrological and lunar dates, planting suggestions, and weather predictions, they also offered classical histories and myths; so, for instance, when editors had extra pages to fill they would often turn to histories of the Roman Empire.¹⁶ This could be due to the fact that forty-one out of forty-seven issues before 1687 were edited by Harvard graduates schooled in classical knowledge, a tradition which carried into the 1700s.¹⁷ Favorite page fillers included “Ovid, Cato, Virgil, Cicero, Seneca...the *Astronomica* of Manlius...the fables of Aesop and Publius Syrus.”¹⁸ In the lead-up to the Revolution, the extra pages of almanacs printed by the Ames family from 1725-1775 became filled with classically inspired patriotic propaganda.¹⁹ The widespread use of the almanac ensured that farmers and tradesmen were acting as agents of classical knowledge. Accordingly, Thomas Jefferson’s assertion about American farmers reading Homer was accurate.

Books became increasingly important as primary and secondary sources of classical learning. Reprints of classical texts made up a significant percentage of growing public libraries. Furthermore, a significant portion of the knowledge being spread at the time was through secondary sources, which may not have always included the most accurate translations; nevertheless, the translations acted as strong transmitters of classical knowledge. For example, the eighteenth-century Thomas Gordon’s translations of Tacitus and Sallust became a “best seller” and “were required reading for American libertarians.”²⁰ The spread of classical knowledge was not just for American libertarians, but also for more common folk like John Smith of Burlington, Vermont. He created a collection of books including “English and French translations of Plato, Middleton’s Cicero, Seneca, and Epictetus, Gordon’s Tacitus, Savage’s *Select Collection of Letters of the Ancients*,

¹⁵ Gummere 18.

¹⁶ Ibid. 5.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid. 6.

¹⁹ Ibid. 7.

²⁰ Meyer Reinhold. “Eighteenth-Century American Political Thought,” in *Classical Influences on Western Thought: AD 1650-1870*, ed. RR Bolger (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979), 224.

Dacier's life of Pythagoras, Whiston's *Josephus*, and Kennett's *Antiquities of Rome*.²¹ He also wrote essays in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* under the name Atticus and his work was so well liked that he wrote seventy stories between 1767 and 1770, all of which were laden with heavy classical references.²² This clearly demonstrates the growing culture of antiquity throughout America.

Out of all the different print forms, the newspaper played the largest role in spreading knowledge of antiquity. By 1770, newspapers "provided eager Americans with a new abundance of printed matter, as prints of all kinds became cheaper and more widely available."²³ As newspapers became cheaper to print and buy, production and circulation increased exponentially. The printed matter embodied the biases of the middle and upper classes, something that would help the Constitution because the majority of printers were Federalists and shared these views with the elite.²⁴ It was these views which would influence the public to push for ratification. Series of articles, essays, etc., laden with classical parallels, parables, histories, and allusions often filled newspapers. John Smith's articles in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, for example, would have helped the common colonist learn about antiquity. Likewise, in the *Virginia Gazette* between February and March 1776, readers could find the Earl of Chesterfield's *Letters* which dealt mainly with classical history and mythology.²⁵ From north to south, the classics were filling newspapers and reaching all parts of the colonies. Even on the frontier, classics spread through the use of newspapers coupled with the rhetoric learned in public schools. On the frontier where few could read, the oratory skills learned in school became particularly important as Benjamin Franklin claimed that "were there but one good reader in the neighborhood a public orator might be heard throughout the nation with the same advantages, and have the same effect on his audience, as if they stood within the reach of his voice."²⁶ The orator became important as an agent of classical knowledge which he or she gained through the printed forms reaching the frontier. This would be essential for ratification as the *Federalist Papers* were read on frontiers and inspired voters to cast their ballots in favor of the Constitution.

Indeed, a majority of the colonial populations were familiarized with antiquity created by high literacy and education rates, as well as ubiquitous printed forms. These worked in conjunction with "salons, coffeehouses, literary societies and clubs, theaters,

²¹ Gummere 11.

²² Ibid.

²³ Shalev 12.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid. 18.

²⁶ As quoted in Connolly, 91.

and public orations” to create a culture of antiquity throughout colonial America.²⁷ With antiquity so immersed in colonial culture and education, it would be used as the political base for the Constitution and then in the *Federalist Papers*.

As the Articles of Confederation continued to fail America, the need for a new government became apparent. The colonial elites saw this as their golden opportunity to create a modern republic that hailed from classical antiquity because America saw itself as the successor to the *translatio imperii*. This was the notion that validated the transfer of “political and cultural legitimacy from one civilization to another, passed down from classical antiquity to the dominant forces of Western Europe.”²⁸ The essence of civilization had passed from Greece, to Rome, to Britain, and the American elites believed it now rested on their shores. As William Hooper said in 1774, America would “build an empire upon the ruins of Great Britain.”²⁹ After defeating the British and with the ability to create a new government, America saw itself as the heirs to civilization.

Perhaps it was with the *translatio imperii* in mind that “the young boasted that they were treading upon the Republican ground of Greece and Rome” as they walked into the Constitutional Convention in 1787 with the knowledge of the ancients to back their new government.³⁰ It was to the ancients that the Framers of the Constitution looked for guidance in their endeavors. The Framers were “obliged to study Greece and Rome” because “there were no precedents in English history of a league of states.”³¹ Indeed, the Framers looked at antiquity as their guide so that they could perform political pathology. This was important as it allowed Framers to perform “autopsies on the dead republics with a view to discovering how to retard the process of inevitable decay through proper safeguards for the first modern republic.”³² With a treasure trove of classical examples before them, the Framers explored history in order to create a modern republic which surpassed that of the ancients and continued civilization.

As the framers sought to create a modern republic, they looked back and performed the autopsies on dead republics, taking from them elements which showed promise in the modern era. The Framers turned first to the political writings read in their school years, falling back upon Aristotle, Cicero, and Polybius as their main examples. From Aristotle’s *Politics*, a favoritism towards group governance, democracies, and state partnership was

²⁷ Shalev 13.

²⁸ Ibid. 29.

²⁹ Ibid. 30.

³⁰ Gummere 18.

³¹ Reinhold 231.

³² Ibid.

taken away.³³ From Cicero, the Framers found “a reasonably blended combination of the three forms – kingship, aristocracy, and democracy.”³⁴ And from Polybius the ideals of checks and balances between governmental branches because “any aggressive impulse is sure to be checked” creating “an equilibrium.”³⁵ All of these elements were combined with historical examples as the Framers continued their political pathology.

The Framers looked towards the governmental forms of Rome, Sparta, Athens, and the Greek leagues to act as an historical template for their modern republic. Polybian Rome was a heavy influence on the Constitution. Republican Rome was admired for “its pluralistic culture, its perdurability, flexibility in policy, balanced constitution, agricultural economy, religious toleration, the vaunted purity of its great men, and its Roman virtues (especially patriotism, self-sacrifice, and frugality).”³⁶ But it was from the Greek Leagues that the Framers learned how a federal government should be set up in order to create a strongly united coalition of states. One of the main issues with the Articles of Confederation was that it created a loose agreement between states to unite under a federal government. The states were significantly more powerful than the federal government who was in charge of repaying the war debt. With no way of forcing the states into paying taxes to get rid of the national debt, the fledgling country would not be able to find investors from Europe. Those investors would create much needed capital to get the newfound country on its feet. A stronger federal government was needed but one of the main fears of a strong government was a loss of independence among the states. Framers looked to the Amphictyonic and the Achaean League as examples of how to strike a balance between state and federal sovereignty. James Madison explained how the Amphictyonic League was able to strike a balance between state and federal as the state was allowed to keep certain rights:

The cities composing this league retained their municipal jurisdiction, appointed their own officers, and enjoyed a perfect equality. The senate, in which they were represented, had the sole and executive right of peace and war; of sending and receiving ambassadors; of entering into treaties and alliances; of appointing a chief magistrate or praetor, as he was called, who commanded their armies and who, with the advice and consent of ten of the senators, not

³³ Aristot. *Pol.*, 1288a, 1286a, 1295b, 1252a, 1302a, 1297a. Translated by Gummere.

³⁴ Cic. *Rep.* 2.41 Translated by Gummere.

³⁵ Plb. 6, esp. ch. 18, 11, 2-5, 9-10, 43-51. Translated by Gummere.

³⁶ Reinhold 98.

only administered the government in the recess of the senate, but had a great share in its deliberations, when assembled.³⁷

This is clearly reflected in the Constitution, as states are able to maintain their own jurisdiction within their borders, are all seen as equals, and have the ability to appoint officers of the law on state levels. The US Senate is able to grant treaties, declare and end a war, and enter into alliances. The President, praetor, is Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces and has his Cabinet. These are major parts of the Constitution, directly from classical examples. Once these elements were ingrained in the Constitution, the document needed to be ratified by two-thirds of the thirteen colonies adopting it.

In order to gain support for ratification, the Founding Fathers Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay wrote a series of newspaper articles known as the *Federalist Papers*. These men sought to dispel fears created by the Anti-Federalists in order to gain the public support needed to push eligible voters into ratifying the Constitution. They ingeniously turned towards the widespread newspaper to disseminate articles in favor of ratification in the state of New York. Between 1787 and 1788, eight-five articles appeared not only in New York newspapers, but all across the colonies as they became increasingly popular. While these papers stood out, they were only a few of the many articles being written using the classical pseudonyms recognized by the highly educated population. The usage of classical pseudonyms was common in American newspapers of the eighteenth century. They were especially prevalent during the era of ratification. During the Constitutional debate in Massachusetts, there were twenty-nine writers using classical pseudonyms; twelve were anti-federalist and seventeen were federalist.³⁸ During the same time in New York, there were eleven anti-federalists and fifteen federalist writers using pseudonyms from antiquity.³⁹ Classical pseudonyms were drawn from histories and mythologies for a specific reason.

By signing “Cato” at the bottom of an article, a writer, not matter whether he or she was a farmer, a merchant, a politician, or a housewife, would suddenly assume the connotations of the name. Americans were familiar enough with history to understand the historical reasons for picking the name Publius over Caesar as a pseudonym. The anti-federalists would often attack federalist by addressing them as Caesar.⁴⁰ This represented their fears that the strong federal government created by the Constitution imposed its

³⁷ Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 125.

³⁸ Shalev 170.

³⁹ Ibid. 173.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 170.

tyrannical will on the subjugated states, such as did Caesar, Nero, etc. The anti-federalists wished for the states to maintain their powers and not be burdened by a stronger federal government. The federalists responded in the *Federalist Papers* to these worries by ensuring the people that a balance of state and federal powers was needed to create a more perfect union. Without a stronger union, the country would be “wholly disunited, or only united in partial confederacies, the subdivisions into which they might be thrown would have frequent and violent contests with each other.”⁴¹ This was in reference to the Athenian League whose loose bonds created divisions that outsiders like Philip of Macedonia would eventually use to conquer it. The loose bonds created by the Articles of Confederation would only lead to the destruction of all the Americans had worked for during the Revolution. In the ninth Federalist Paper, classical examples are used to argue for a stronger union. Hamilton writes:

A firm Union will be of the utmost moment to the peace and liberty of the States as a barrier against domestic faction and insurrection. It is impossible to read the history of the petty republics of Greece and Italy without feeling sensations of horror and disgust at the distractions with which they were continually agitated, and at the rapid succession of revolutions by which they were kept in a state of perpetual vibration between the extremes of tyranny and anarchy.⁴²

The classical example would have been understood by the educated public as it would have illustrated the need for a stronger centralized government that would unite divided states in order to prevent the union’s dissolution.

Under a stronger federal government, the states would follow the examples of those in the Amphictyonic League from the mid-seventh century BC. The states, mirroring the cities of old, would retain their “municipal jurisdiction, [appoint] their own officers, and [enjoy] a perfect equality.”⁴³ With this, the *Papers* make the argument that states would maintain their sovereignty while being held in check by the federal government so that one state did not see itself as above another; it would be a union of equals. The states in turn, would hold the federal government back from getting too large and becoming tyrannical.

⁴¹ Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, 54.

⁴² Ibid. 71.

⁴³ Ibid. 125.

All of these reassurances in the *Federalist Papers* came from Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, but to the public they were given from the writer Publius, as the authors used this pseudonym to sign their papers. By using the name of Publius, they invoked the history of Publius Valerius Publicola from the sixth-century BC. Publius represented federalist ideals as he helped overthrow the Roman monarchy and set up the first Republic. Hamilton, Madison, and Jay evoked this historical figure because he would stand out in the minds of the public as a parallel for what had just occurred. These writers successfully created papers where the writer was a modern day Publius who had just overthrown the British and sought to create a new modern republic that needed the support of its people. By using newspapers to spread their ideas under the name Publius, they won the support of a people in order to build a republic which would surpass those of ancient times. Through their use of Publius's name and classical examples of what would happen if the states did not unite, the *Federalist Papers* were able to muster enough support not only in New York, but across the states to ratify the Constitution.

With ratification completed in June 1788, the Constitution came into effect in September of that year. The classical fervor surrounding the document began to change once it was accepted as the law. Towards the end of the ratification period, there was an upswing in criticism about the use of antiquity as inspiration for the Constitution. The validity of ancient republics came in question: could ancient governments and thinkers act as examples for a modern republic, since historically, all those governments failed? The Greece fell to Philip and the Macedonians; Rome was corrupted, taken over by emperors, and then crumbled at the hands of barbarians; and the Greek Leagues fell into discord and disbanded or feel like the rest of Greece to Philip. Critics could legitimately raise the question of whether or not America should be modelling itself after such behavior. Marylander William Vans Murray, a law student in London at the time, was able to encompass all these worries when he wrote:

It is impossible to say that ancient republics were models...the picture of ancient governments, except freedom, could furnish but a slight resemblance to the American democracies.... From such precedents Americans can learn little more than the contagion of enthusiasm. From antiquity they could gain little.⁴⁴

To men such as Vans Murray, who claimed that America could learn little from civilizations which held no weight in modern societies, John Adams would point out

⁴⁴ Reinhold 241.

that “there is one eternal, unchangeable truth – that all men are the same everywhere, and that therefore antiquity is relevant to modern problems.”⁴⁵ When looking back at the ancients for examples, the Founders performed political pathology in order to take theories and elements of republics that would be relevant to the modern era. The Framers understood that in order to create something quite modern, they needed to pay homage to their ancient forefathers by learning from their mistakes. This was due to their conceptions surrounding the *translatio imperii*. As they believed themselves to be the new bearers of society, they inherited the ideals of civilization that came before them; a major part of this was the governments of Greece and Rome. In order to add to the *translatio imperii*, the Founders created a modernized republic which would surpass its ancient counterparts’ contributions to civilization. The *translatio imperii* was always about innovating, updating, and amending the idea of civilization so that humankind would continue to flourish. Greece, Rome, and Britain had set standards; it was time for America to raise them.

The adoption of the Constitution of the United States of America was a long process overflowing with the presence of antiquity. The high literacy rates and the American educational system joined with printed forms to create an intelligent population aware of classical civilizations. The classical education of Americans, especially of the elite, played heavily in the creation of the Constitution. It was to antiquity that the Founders looked for the best examples of governments which, although from ancient times, held theories and examples which could be worked into a modern republic. The *Federalist Papers* further used classical examples to gain support for the Constitution. The use of the newspapers brilliantly ensured that the Federalist opinions would gain traction across the states, even into the frontier regions where the articles could be read aloud. Due to antiquity’s ubiquity in American life and culture, the Founders were able to create a government for the people and by the people which would add to the *translatio imperii* and create a better civilization for the future.

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⁴⁵ Ibid. 242.

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