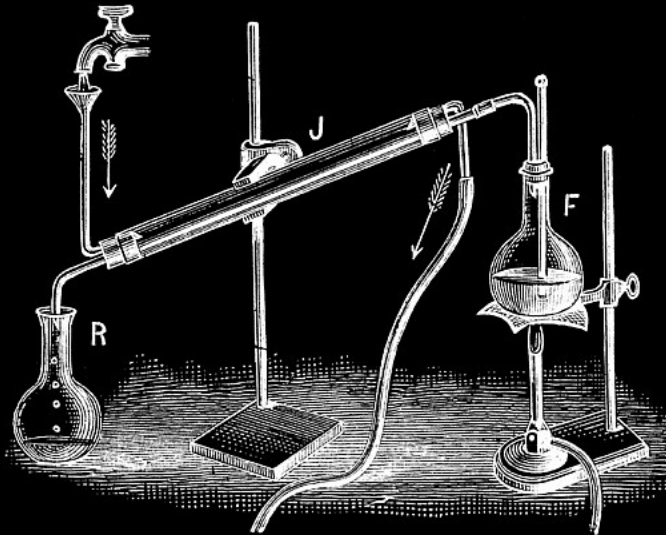


# The American Culture Laboratory



Tim Vermande

- In the wake of the Enlightenment, new ideas about government took hold in the British colonies of North America. Thus, the American revolution was more than a change of government; it overthrew many of the social-cultural assumptions of the day.
- The result was the formation of a new nation based on a combination of ideas that were adapted from all eras of history.
- Creating a new government was not the only goal, however. Those involved also sought to create a climate in which the cultural attributes necessary for the survival of their political experiment would flourish. The new nation became a cultural laboratory.
- One aspect of that culture, religious diversity, flourished so well that it is still a source of wonder across the world, and we will survey it separately, along with the great trial of civil war.

(<http://etc.usf.edu/clipart>)

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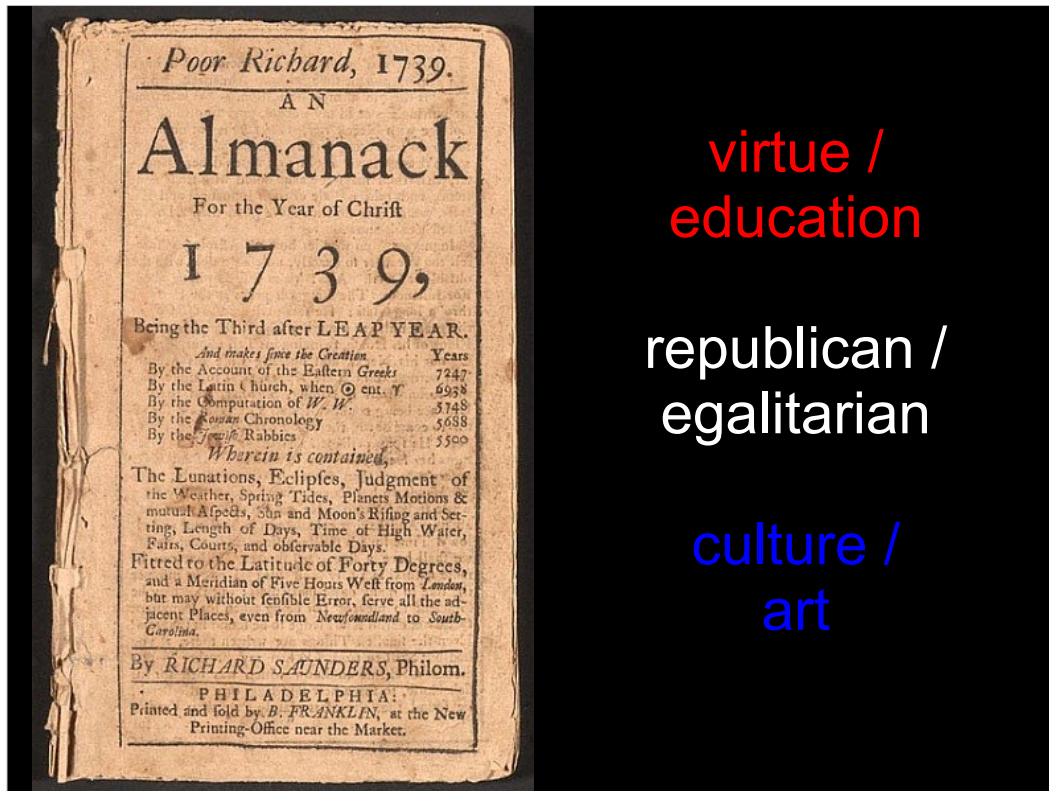
Our style and manner of thinking have undergone a revolution, more extraordinary than the political revolution of the country. We see with other eyes; we hear with other ears; and think with other thoughts, than those we formerly used. We are now really another people, and cannot again go back to ignorance and prejudice. . . . The mind once enlightened cannot again become dark.  
-- Thomas Paine



- Americans recognized this. After the French Revolution, Tom Paine wrote to a French priest about what he thought about the results of the American revolution.
- What makes “us” a “people,” as well as “another people”?
- Here are some examples, based on how American culture was shaped in the early national period.
- This process will give us some insight into culture in general.

(Thomas Paine, *A Letter Addressed to the Abbe Raynal*, London: J. Ridgeway, 1792, reprint, Project Gutenberg)

(Auguste Milliere after William Sharp and George Romney, *Thomas Paine*, 1880, National Gallery, London).



virtue /  
 education

republican /  
 egalitarian

culture /  
 art

- As the colonies became a nation, the new eyes, ears, and thoughts seemed to boil down to three points that distinguished American culture:
- virtue: good character, which included honesty, thrift, work, and concern for the whole, which would keep the nation in balance. Proper development of these qualities required education (remember Locke), which the Constitution liberally supports (schools, copyright, patents, book rate at post office).
- republican: a government of equals before the law (egalitarianism), inherited from classical Rome; as we have seen, people were aware of how fragile such a government was.
- culture as a path to unity. In order to achieve this, writers saw the the need of a distinct American culture with its own artistic styles. But some thought (and still think) that the great masterpieces are all from Europe, and nothing can compare.

(<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/images/bf0053s.jpg>)

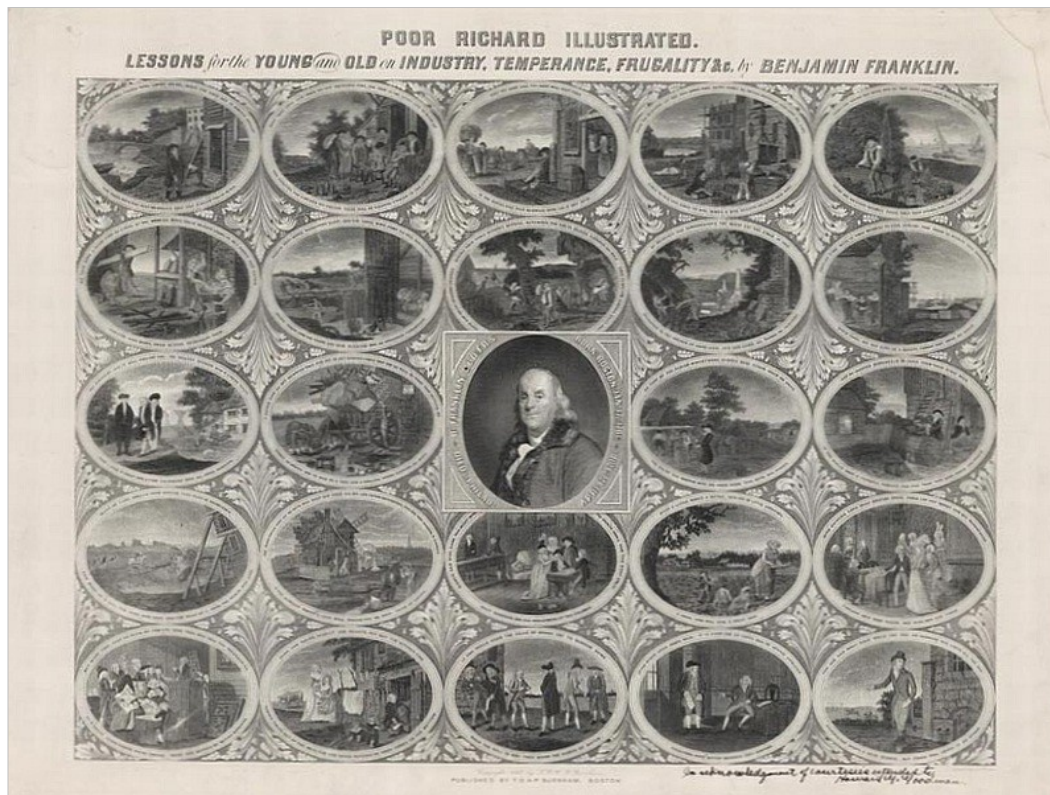


## Benjamin Franklin

1706-1790

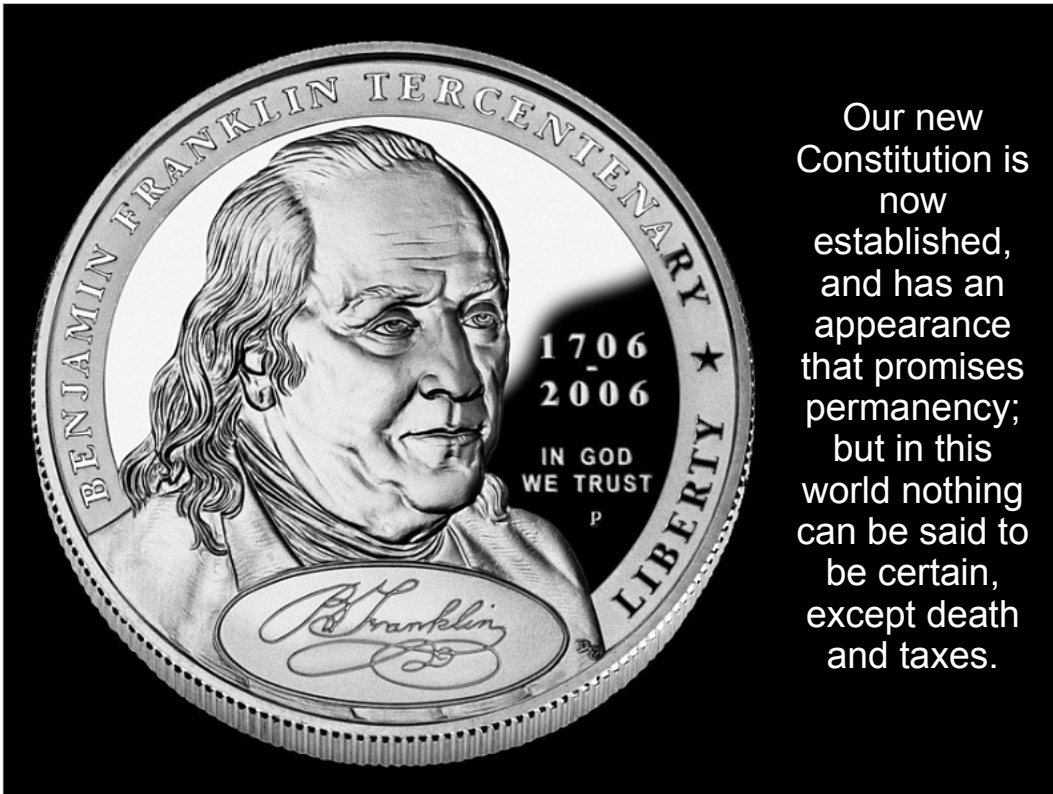
- We simply can't go too far without mentioning Benjamin Franklin, one of the great figures of American history, very much a Renaissance Man, a type that flourished in the new nation:
- one of the people who designed the Great Seal;
- founded Library Company of Philadelphia;
- founded Union Fire Company, first volunteer department, and fire insurance companies;
- negotiated military and financial aid from France for American revolutionaries;
- invented lightning rod, glass harmonica, stove;
- Deist, saw Jesus' teachings as pure but later corrupted by church. *Autobiography* tells how George Whitefield talked him out of his pocket money during a street sermon;
- anti-slavery advocate.
- To me, Franklin is one of the most important American figures, for he reflects all of the diversity and paradox of the nation.

(L. Cooley, *Natural Philosophy for Common and High Schools* 1881)



- Franklin was a printer by trade, best-known for *Poor Richard's Almanac* (1732-1758), but he was also a smart businessman—the “franchised” apprentices upon graduation.
- The almanac is full of advice and witty sayings, which promote hard work and virtue, an idea to which we will return.
- The almanac contained serial stories to ensure that people would buy his product year after year.

([http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/images/at0026a\\_6s.jpg](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/images/at0026a_6s.jpg))



Our new Constitution is now established, and has an appearance that promises permanency; but in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.

- Franklin was also very much aware that the new nation was an experiment.

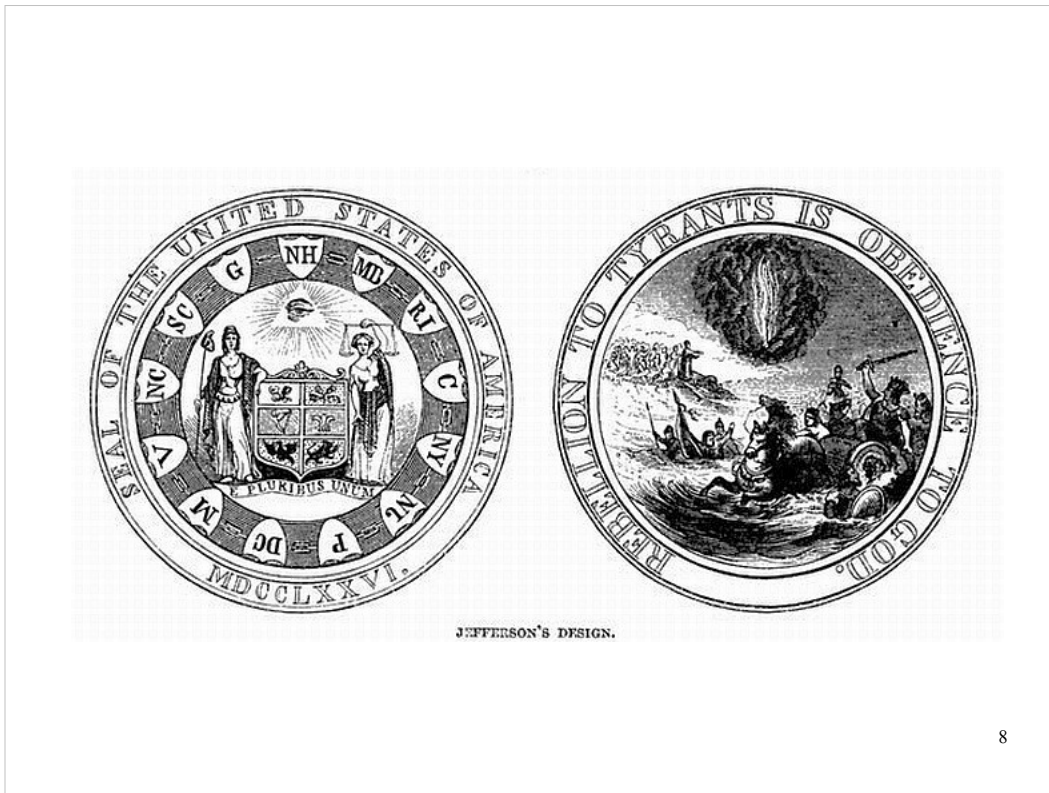
(Franklin to Jean-Baptiste Leroy, 13 November 1789)

(Franklin coin, United States Mint, PD)



- Cultural studies use symbols to refer to shared ideas and create a feeling of belonging to a common group.
- The first national symbol created by the Congress was the Great Seal (it has been updated through the years, this is a modern rendition). It originated with a 1776 commission from the Second Continental Congress to Jefferson, Franklin, and Adams.
- GROUP EXERCISE: what design elements do you see? Take note of the use of “13,” tramping a widely-held superstition.
- *E pluribus unum* (from many, one) has been taken to mean not only a federal union, but a union of people in one goal (NB: 13 letters, stars, leaves, arrows).
- The reverse, by the designers William Barton and Charles Thomson, shows the Eye of Providence atop a 13-row unfinished pyramid, *annuit coeptis* (also 13 letters) (he approves what we begin), *novus ordo seclorum* (a new order of the ages). Both phrases are allusions to ancient Rome: Virgil: *Aeneid* 9.625 and *Eclogue* 4.5.

(US State Department, PD)

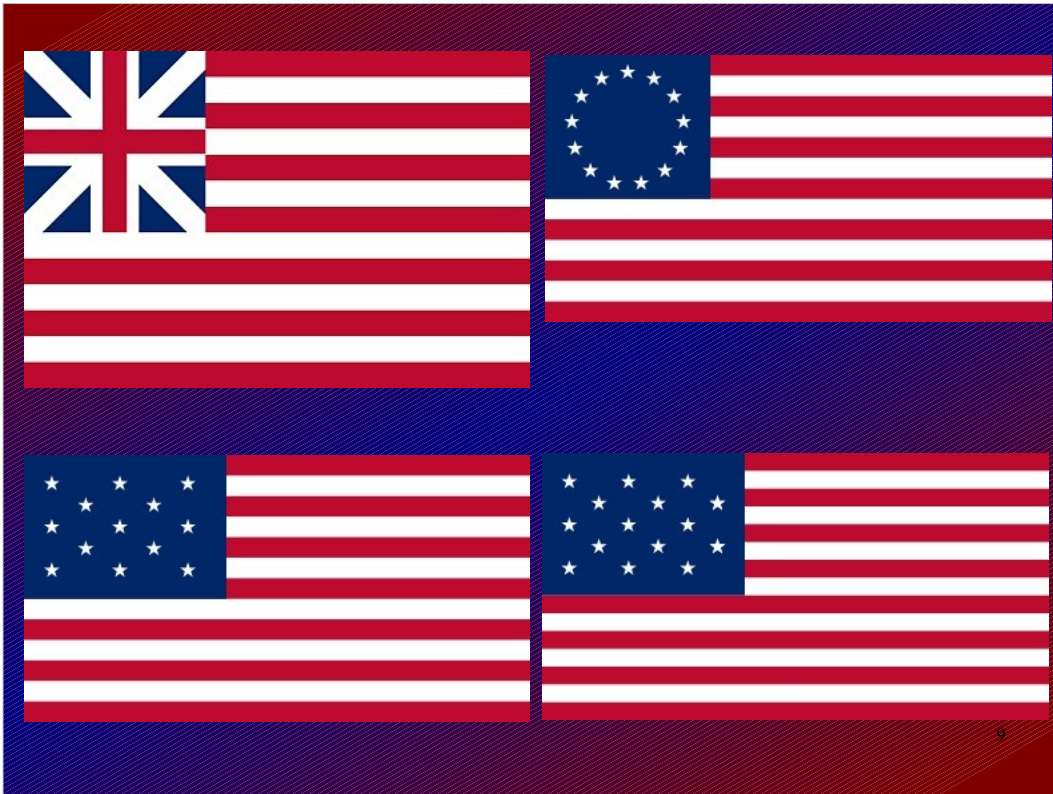


8

- As a “what might have been,” here is Jefferson's original design for the seal, based on a slogan of Benjamin Franklin.
- It was rejected by Congress as too complex.

(<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/images/vc100.jpg>)





- National symbols are an important part of culture and the effort to create unity.
- The first flag commonly associated with the nation was the Grand Union, but it was unofficial. Using the British Union Jack, it was not popular for very long.
- Have you ever received instructions that were vague or didn't fully explain what the client wanted?
- In 1777, the Continental Congress authorized a flag with 13 stripes and 13 stars, but did not specify a design, so the stars were often in a circle (and one flag had a small field of stripes in the center, surrounded by stars).

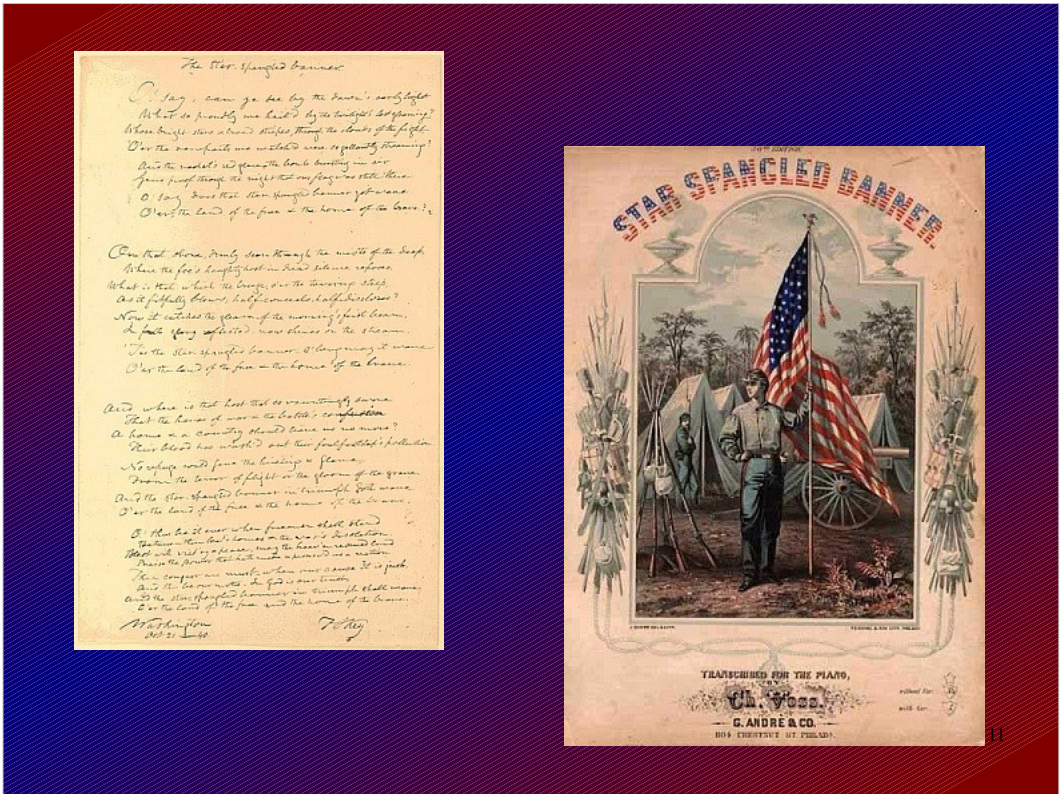
(Grand Union, Yaddah Hoshie, PD; others Jacobulus, PD)

## *Francis Scott Key at Fort McHenry*



- In many nations, the flag is not regarded with the almost-reverence as in the United States. Why? Here's one idea.
- During the war of 1812, Francis Scott Key boarded a British ship off the shore of Fort McHenry to negotiate an exchange of prisoners. While on board, he heard plans to bombard the fort, and was kept overnight.

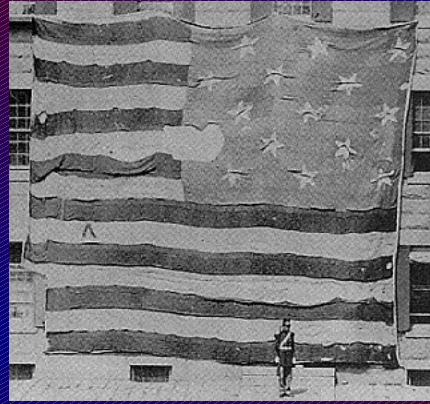
(anon lithograph Bombardment of Ft. McHenry)



- “By the dawn’s early light” he saw that the flag at the fort was still flying, and wrote a poem to the tune of an English drinking song.
- The song was immediately popular, but did not become the national anthem until 1931, replacing the unofficial “Hail Columbia.”

(Osbourne Oldroyd, The Good Old Songs We Used to Sing, 1862, Project Gutenberg 21566)

O! thus be it ever,  
when freemen shall stand  
Between their loved home  
and the war's desolation!  
Blest with victory and peace,  
may the heav'n rescued land  
Praise the Power that hath  
made and preserved us a nation.  
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,  
And this be our motto: 'In God is our trust.'  
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!



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- The war ended in 1815 with no territorial changes, but a vast psychological victory for Americans, as reflected in the 4 stanza.
- This also seems to establish the high standing given the flag in the United States.
- The proposed motto wasn't adopted until the 1950's.
- The flag passed into the possession of the fort commander, who gave away small pieces. It has been restored twice, and is now at the Smithsonian.

(Apparently on display in 1873, <http://www.150.si.edu/images/3flaga.jpg>)

*I pledge allegiance to my Flag  
and the Republic for which it stands  
one nation indivisible,  
with liberty and justice for all.*

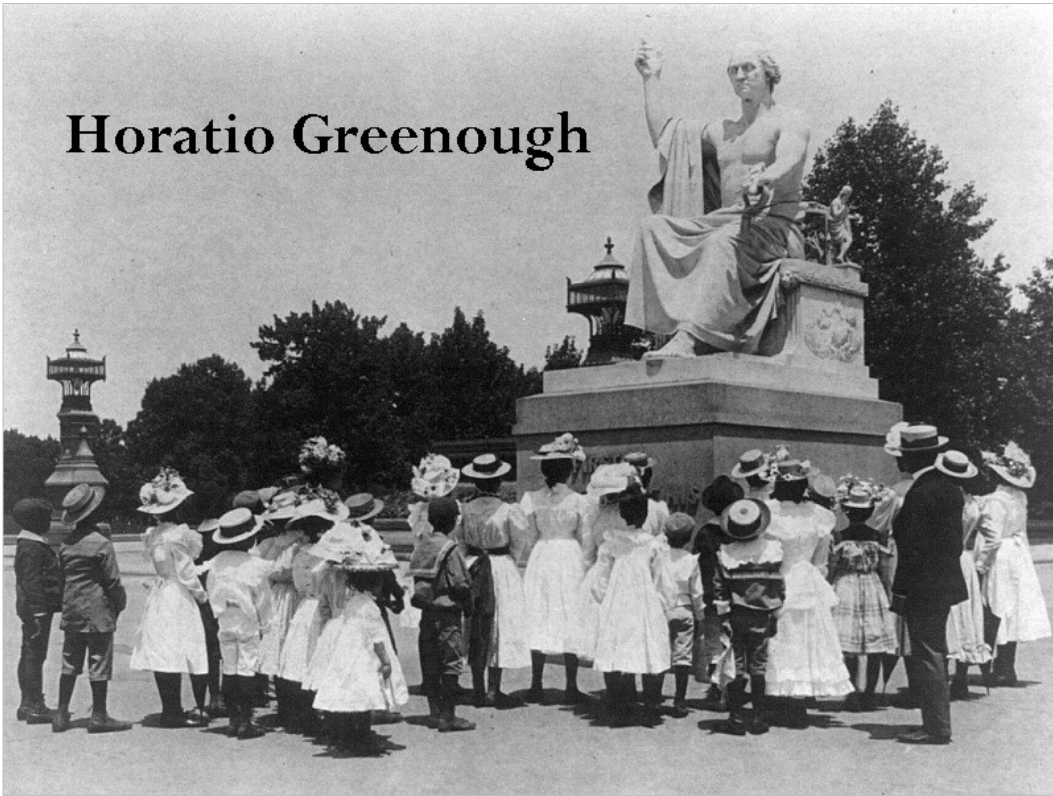


FRANCIS BELLAMY, 1892

- Another related symbol was also long in coming. In 1892, for the 400th anniversary of Columbus's landing, Francis Bellamy wrote this pledge to “my” flag and the “republic for which it stands.”
- Perhaps it's typical of America that Bellamy, a Baptist minister, was selling magazine subscriptions, and placing a flag in a schoolhouse was one premium for subscribing.
- Until 1956, this was the pledge of allegiance.

(Jacobulus, 44-star flag, 4 July 1891-3 July 1896, PD)

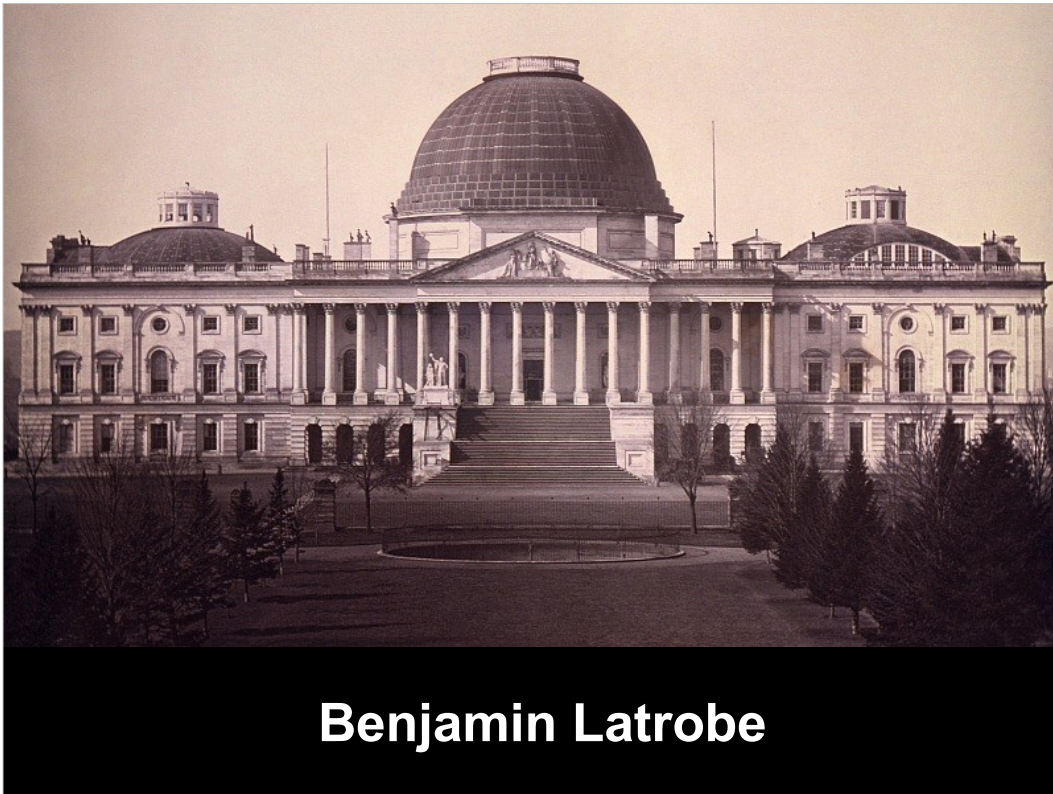
## Horatio Greenough



- As one indication of our cultural ambivalence, in 1833 Congress approved a \$5,000 commission to Horatio Greenough (a Bostonian working in Italy) for a statue of George Washington to be placed in the Capitol Rotunda.
- It was completed in 1841. The 20-ton statue, twice life size shocked viewers: Washington was in a toga on a Roman throne.
- The statue was removed from the Capitol and kept outside until 1908, when it was sent to the Smithsonian.
- In 1821, Canova had likewise done Washington as Caesar. That was controversial, but an Italian wasn't expected to understand.

(Frances B. Johnson, 1899, LC-DIG-ppmsc-04904)

(Charles W. Snell, "A Brief History of the Washington Monument and Grounds, 1783-1978" National Park Service, 1978, 3)



## Benjamin Latrobe

- The statue is based on Classical designs, and the District of Columbia is full of neo-classical buildings, and is laid out in a classical plan.
- Benjamin Latrobe, the superintendent of the Capitol, stressed this to show America as heir of classical and thus republican tradition—and we love it!

(John Plumbe, 1846, LoC cph3g03595)

## Margaret Kemble Gage



- Another dichotomy can be found in painting. This 1771 portrait by Jonathan Copley is of the wife of the British general in charge of the colonial troops, done in a traditional manner.

(Jonathan Copley, Margaret Kemble Gage, 1771, Timkin Gallery)



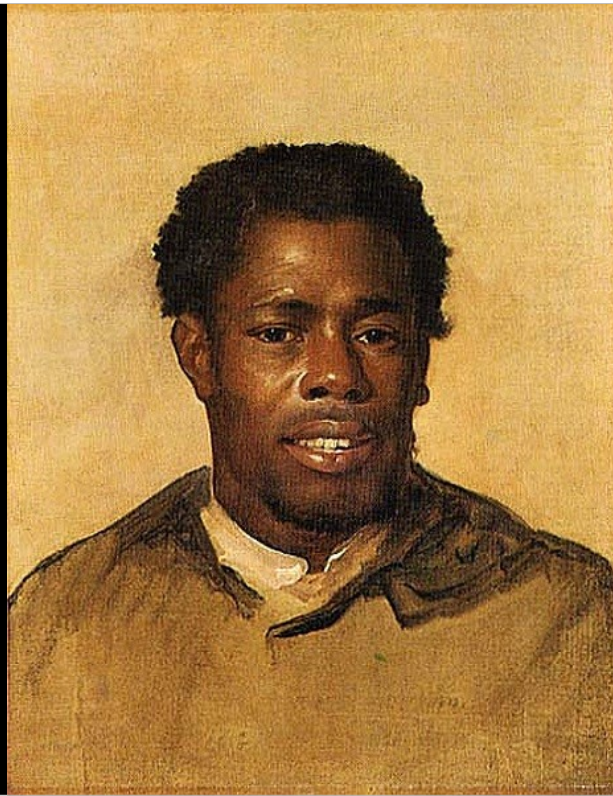
## Paul Revere



- There's a change in Copley's style that seems to mirror the social changes of the American Revolution.
- Here Copley celebrates one of its heroes.
- This isn't just about heroes: there is a world of social difference in these pictures: the wife of a British officer, whose sons became counts, and an artisan in working clothes, displaying his creation.
- In the new nation, people were judged not by heredity, but by ability.

(Jonathan Copley, Paul Revere, 1776, Museum of Fine Arts Boston)

Anonymous



- Here's a Copley painting that most believe was left unfinished at his death in 1815.
- The subject is unique, and the portrayal has none of the European lighting or formality.

(Jonathan Copley, unfinished portrait, 1777, Smithsonian Institution)

Charles  
Willson  
Peale  
  
(1741-1827)



- Another angle: Charles Willson Peale could be described as another da Vinci, with no end of interests.
- A painter, he also operated the first public museum in the US (1784).
- This self portrait shows his collection of “natural curiosities.” He opened them to the public to provide education, one of the bulwarks of virtue.

(Charles Willson Peale, The Artist in his Museum, 1822, Philadelphia Museum of Art)

Charles  
Willson  
Peale



- Peale also painted Native Americans, mirroring the American interest in the “Noble Savage”: the inherent goodness of humans living in contact with the land and the corruption of European civilization, along with the vastness of the west, also portrayed as an uncorrupted land

(Charles Willson Peale, Joseph Brant, 1797, Independence NHP)

# P. T. BARNUM'S Greatest Show on Earth.

SEASON OF 1878.



Comprising a World's Fair, Immense Museum and School of Marvelous Mechanism, a Score of Imported Royal Stallions, and a Grand European and Native Circus, all combined in

## ONE VAST UNDIVIDED SHOW,

Owned by me exclusively and under my own individual and personal direction, assisted by Messrs. BAILEY, JUNE, NATHANS, and several other well-known Managers of experience and ability

EXHAUSTIVE, EXTENSIVE, MAGNIFICENT, MARVELOUS AND COSTLY as many of my previous exhibitions have been, I hereby pledge my Honor, Reputation and Fortune that the present **Grand Exhibition of 1878** excels them all.

More than **ONE MILLION of DOLLARS** are invested in this unparalleled collection of the **World's Wonders**. It is transported through the country on **100 railway cars** of my own.  
This Colossal, Moral, Movable

- P. T. Barnum bought parts of Peale's museum and later turned it into a traveling show, famous for its exhibits of anything unusual.

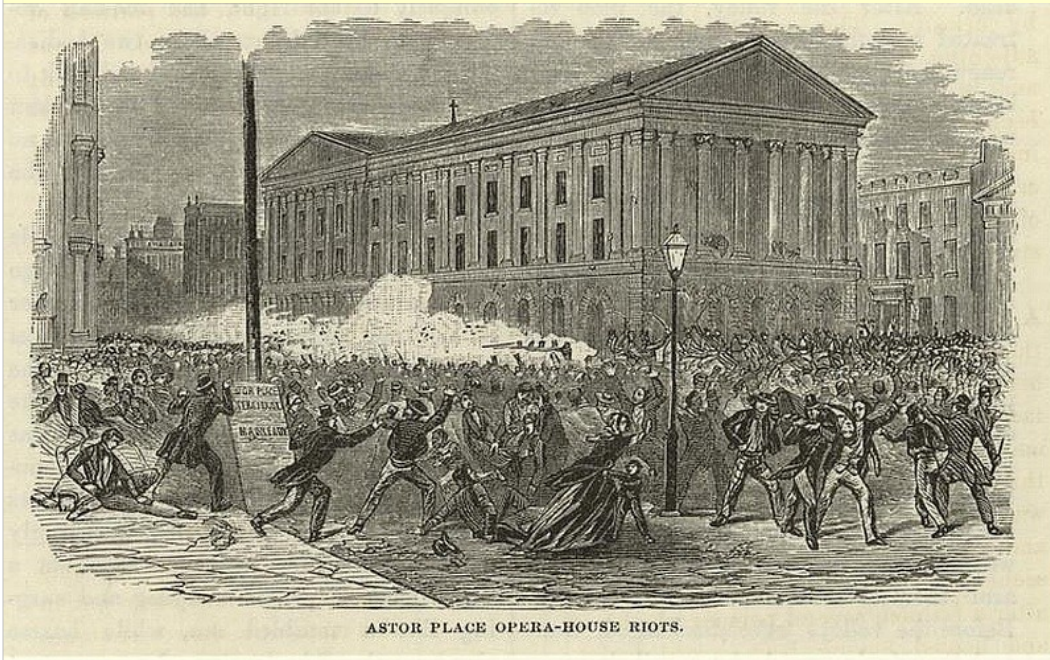
(LoC LC-USZ62-45853)



- This may strike us as odd, but we've forgotten that Andy Warhol's poster of soup cans is not a new direction. For centuries, what we now call "crossover" was the order of the day: composers borrowed popular melodies for their Masses, as did Bach for his chorales.
- The distinction that we often think of between "art" and "useful" or "popular" only came about in the late 1800's.

([http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:MET\\_entrance.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:MET_entrance.jpg), PD)

## The Astor Place Riot



- In early America, crowds flocked to hear Shakespeare and Beethoven, along with popular songs—in the same event.
- In 1849, probably the most disruptive (and definitely most deadly) civil disturbance between the time of the Revolution and Civil War occurred between groups of theatergoers at the Astor Place Opera House—it was over whether an American actor, popular with the crowds, was better than a British actor.

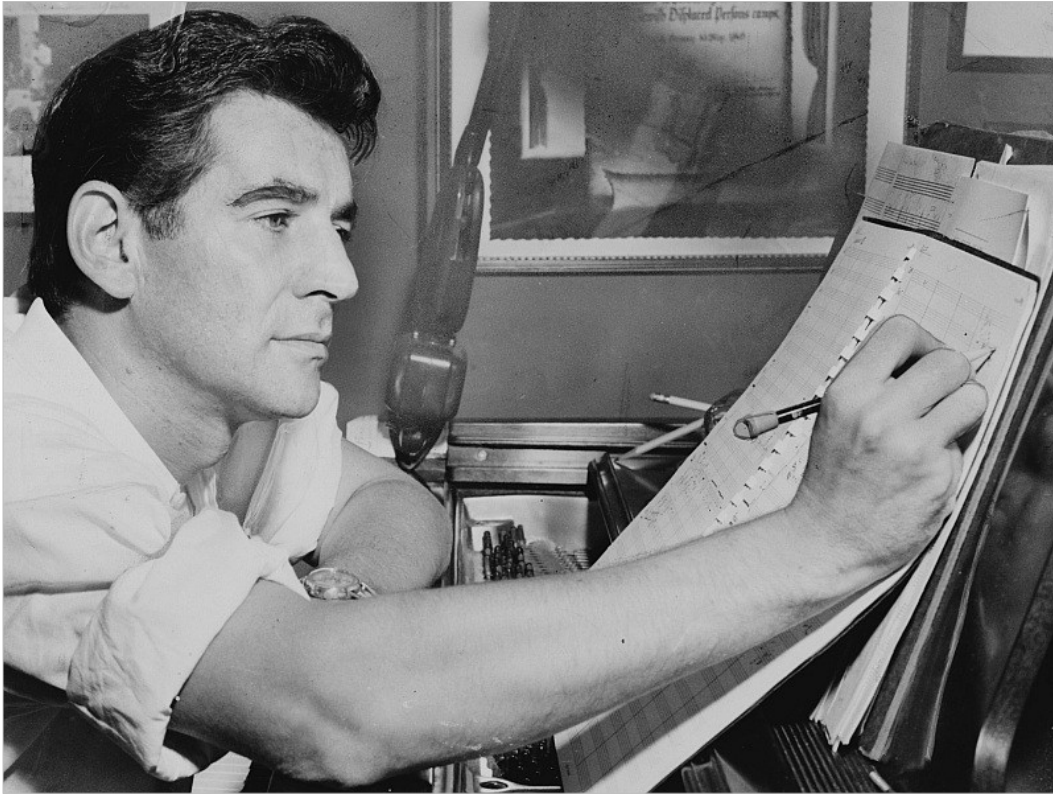
(1849, New York Public Library 715982)



- When the Metropolitan Museum of Art first opened in 1872, its board decided to close on Sundays—the only day when working people could attend.
- The result was a series of widespread protests.

(Opening of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* March 9, 1872)





- A good deal of the controversy stemmed from a then-emerging attitude toward European art that borders on worship of divinity (note how some museums and concert halls resemble churches or other places of worship).
- Not surprisingly, then, that an American, Leonard Bernstein, who became an international artistic figure, also worked against the image of art as elitist. His 1950's *Omnibus* and *Young People's Concerts* for CBS insisted that the treasures of art were available to all.

(Al Ravenna for New York World-Telegram, 1955, LoC LC-USZ62-127784, PD)

“O beautiful, for spacious skies”



- I'd like to conclude with two ideas of what brings us together. They are important, but hardly exhaustive.
- Katharine Bates lived in Connecticut. As a young woman, she took a trip to Pike's Peak with some friends. At the top, the sight was so breathtaking that she stood in awe, and composed a poem in 1893 (later revised).
- It seems to this writer that something about the land defines American culture.

(Katharine Bates, 1904).

(Grand Canyon, Tim Vermande, 2003, CC-SA)

# William James Bennett

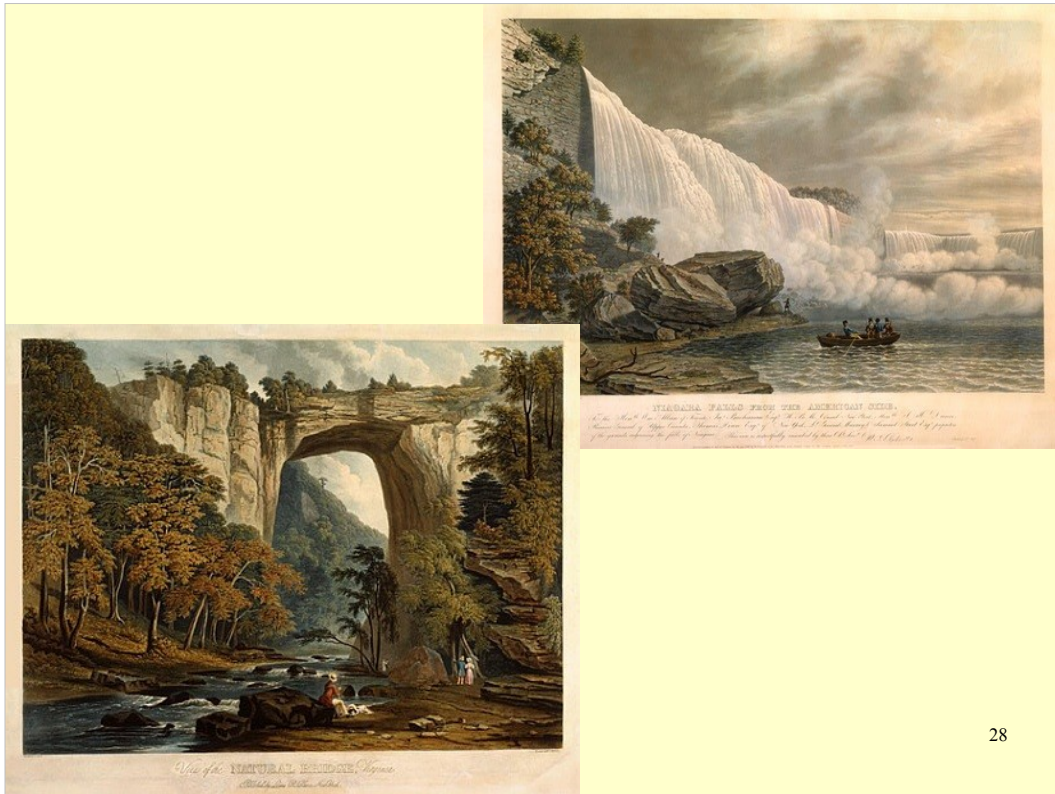


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- Her poem brings to mind the works of William James Bennett, 1787-1844, whose early pictures show bustling American cities, using the latest (American) technology.

(William James Bennett, City of Washington: from beyond the Navy Yards, 1835, National Gallery of Art 1985.64.125)

(William James Bennett, Buffalo from Lake Erie, 1836, National Gallery of Art, 1985.64.123)

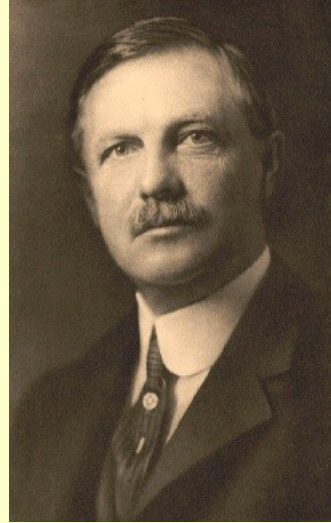


- Bennett's later paintings generally show small figures against the vast land and natural wonders. The land forms are distinctively American, and the small but heroic figures are challenging or taming the land.

(William James Bennett, *View of the Natural Bridge*, 1835, National Gallery of Art, 1985.64.134)(  
William James Bennett, *Niagara Falls from the American Side*, 1840, National Gallery of Art,  
1985.64.127)

## Frederick Jackson Turner, 1893

The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development.



- In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner wrote that the frontier, with its free land, had produced economic growth through individual effort. It also developed character: the sense that there was always something new to try.
- The validity of his observation has been disputed, but our ongoing fascination with the west and vast land spaces seems to indicate some truth.

(Frontispiece, F. J. Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, New York: Holt, 1935,  
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/TURNER/>)

## In Memoriam



343

- Bennett and others celebrated heroic figures, as well.
- What do heroes mean to us?

(FDNY Engine 61, 2003, Tim Vermande, CC-SA)

**THE  
END**



([http://etc.usf.edu/clipart/18800/18849/bow\\_18849.htm](http://etc.usf.edu/clipart/18800/18849/bow_18849.htm))