Considering the Revolution

The Identities Created by the American Revolutionary War

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"Considering the Revolution: The Identities Created by the American Revolutionary War" was the closing public plenary at the May 2022 virtual conference of the National Council on Public History (NCPH). The session, sponsored by the National Park Service (NPS) and NCPH, was the second in a series of five annual scholarly roundtables considering the origins and legacies of the American Revolution, dialogues which will contribute to larger discussions during NPS's commemorations of the American Revolution's 250th anniversary about its changing interpretation and its continuing relevance to the American people. These discussions will be used by NPS staff in their interpretive work with the public regardless of their geographic location or primary interpretive focus, by NCPH members as they prepare themselves and their students for the 250th commemorations, and by members of the public as they consider the relevance of the Revolution to their own lives.

The American Revolutionary War was a seminal event that created new identities, new borders, and new realities for the British, French, African, and Indigenous inhabitants of North America. While the war was foundational in the formation of what became modern American identity, its repercussions go well beyond the citizens of the new republic. The events of 1776 to 1783 not only divided the continent between American and British interests, they also divided families and communities between "Patriots" who supported the Congressional Army and "Loyalists" who supported the British Crown. The establishment of the US–British (later Canadian) border not only defined the territories of the new United States—without any consideration of Indigenous rights or interests—it also divided the peoples of North America into American citizens or British subjects, while imposing a new settler-colonial construct upon Indigenous nations.

Historic sites, such as the Minute Man National Historic Park, Independence Hall National Historic Park, and Valley Forge National Historic Park in the United States, or the Fortifications of Quebec National Historic Site in Canada, play a dual

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role in historical interpretation of the Revolutionary War. These sites not only commemorate and recount the historical events that occurred during the conflict, but also guide visitors towards a very specific idea of who the individuals participating in them were. Whether it be Valley Forge, which prompts visitors to remember the "sacrifices and perseverance of the Revolutionary War generation and [honor] the power of people to pull together and overcome adversity," or Quebec City, where visitors learn that the fortifications allowed "the British and the French colonists who were still living there to resist American rebels," historic sites, as sites of memory, help develop a sense of identity because they are places where the general public can interact with a "collective shared knowledge of the past, on which the group's sense of unity and individuality is based."[1]

As Jan Assamann states in "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," cultural memory, such as the commemoration of the events between 1776 and 1783, is "defined through a kind of identificatory determination in a positive ('we are this') or in a negative ('that's our opposite') sense." In other words, the act of building collective memory through commemoration and memorialization helps shape group identities between those who "belong and those who do not" to those specific groups.[2] Case in point: in 1784, a group of Loyalists from the Mohawk Valley, part of the 1st battalion of the King's Royal Regiment of New York and refugees to Montreal, established a small settlement in one of the new "Royal Townships" on the St. Lawrence River. These townships were specifically set aside to the west of the old French colony along the northern shore of the river as replacement lands for those who had lost their properties by fleeing the new republic but who did not want to live under the seigneurial landholding system in Quebec. A 1784 painting by James Peachy immortalized the origins of this meager Loyalist settlement. Peachy, who travelled with the Loyalist refugees up the St. Lawrence River, painted the scene of the first encampment.

Two centuries later, in 1984, the city of Cornwall in Ontario, Canada (my hometown), celebrated the bicentennial of its founding in 1784 by those Loyalist refugees. A bicentennial commission organized a year-long commemoration that squarely placed the origins of the community's modern identity in the initial settlement of those two-hundred-odd soldiers and families. A commissioned academic history of Cornwall, children's coloring books, a parade, and various promotional materials all reinforced the notion that the Loyalists were the cornerstone of the community and that their "frontier" spirit shaped the last two hundred years of Cornwall's evolution. Peachy's painting was used throughout promotional documents and was even included in a mural depicting different moments of the city's history. As Elinor Kyte Senior states in her history of

1 Valley Forge National Historic Park, https://www.nps.gov/vafo/index.htm; Fortifications of Quebec National Historic Site, https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/qc/fortifications/culture/histoire-history/faq; and Jan Assemann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* no. 65 (Spring-Summer 1995): 125–33, quotation 132.

2 Assemann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," 130.

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"Encampment of the Loyalists at Johnstown (Cornwall)," James Peachy, 1784. (Library and Archives Canada)

Cornwall, *From Royal Township to Industrial City: Cornwall 1784–1984*, the "descendants of the Loyalists" continued to celebrate the Britishness of the first settlers of Cornwall in countless ways—from the name of their hockey team (the "Royals") to the name of the local military regiment (the Stormont-Dundas-Glengarry Highlanders).[3]

Rarely mentioned in the celebration, although constantly inferred, this city and the identity of its citizens were directly created by the American War of Independence. The city was established as a direct result of the Revolution: from the arrival of Loyalists desiring lands, to the British policies to resettle them, to its description as a "Loyalist" stronghold to this day. As Jocelyn Létourneau of the Université de Laval has pointed out throughout his many works, understanding how history shapes and influences "who we think we are" but also "who will we become" is central tenant of public history; as he writes, "the study of history is decisive in the acquisition of civic consciousness and a conscious identity."[4] My identity (not to mention my career as a public historian) has been shaped by this event, as the telling about it was meant to ingrain in me the idea that I am from a community whose core identity is about being loyal to "King and Country" and definitely not "American." I view myself as "Canadian" more because of the outcome of this eighteenth-century war than the actual creation of Canada in 1867.

The role of "identity" in historical interpretation, as in public discourse, continues to be discussed and debated by historians, political scientists, and philosophers around the world. Building on this argument, the 2022 NCPH

3 Elinor Kyte Senior, *From Royal Township to Industrial City: Cornwall 1784–1984* (Belleville: Mika Publishing Company, 1983), 524.

4 Jocelyn Létourneau, *History for the Future: Rewriting Memory and Identity in Quebec* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 6.

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plenary session discussed how the Revolutionary War/War of Independence created new identities, reinforced settler-colonialism, and established not one, but two countries, the United States of America and Canada, and further examined how they have evolved and continue to influence current ideas of being "American" and "Canadian." To flesh out this argument, five practitioners specializing in the lands and peoples at the center of these events were invited to share their perspectives: Rebecca Brannon, associate professor at James Madison University researching American Loyalists who stayed in the new United States after the war; Michael Hattem, associate director of Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute working on the history of the popular memory of the Revolution; Patrick O'Brien, lecturer of history at Kennesaw State University who focuses on loyalist families who fled the rebellious states during the Revolution; Taylor Stoermer, who teaches public history at Johns Hopkins University and is working on the Loyalist experience; and Seynabou Thiam-Pereira, PhD candidate in American Civilization at the Université de Paris 8 (Vincennes Saint-Denis) who focuses on the Black Americans, mostly fugitive enslaved peoples, who fought for the British army during the American War of Independence.

The plenary session's conversation was built around a series of six questions that delved into the intricacies and complexities of different identities that came out of the Revolutionary War—Patriot, Loyalist, Black Loyalist, neutral—and how these colonial-era concepts continue to have ongoing impact in the modern day. The first question addressed by the panelists, "What did it mean to be a 'loyalist' and a 'patriot' in the eighteenth century, and what are the similarities between these two identities?" sought to lay the foundation for the discussion by establishing broader definitions of the core terminology. The panel's second question, "Who were the 'Loyalists' and how did exile impact their decisions and 'final' destination?" aimed to clarify who these Loyalists were and the motivations that drove them to remain in the British camp and ultimately leave the new republic. Building on the previous questions, the third, "What is there to say about those who are neither 'Loyalists' or 'Patriots'—the others in the British colonies/new republic?" was intended to bring greater attention to those most often excluded by the typical Patriot/Loyalist dichotomy of public perception of the Revolution. With the fourth question, "What kind of conflicts did these 'new' identities cause, spur on, or perpetuate?" the panelists turned their attention to how these identities became the basis for long-standing conflicts. The two final questions of the plenary, "How did 'Patriots' become 'Americans' and did this grand political project succeed or fail?" and "How does the Revolution continue to shape identities in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere?" were designed to pull together the various threads of the discussion so as to bring into focus the process of identity-building and consider how the ongoing debates about these identities continue to influence American and Canadian societies.

The conversation was wide-ranging and delved into the facts, perceptions, and myths that shape modern identities not only in North America but also the

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Caribbean and elsewhere. Although the ebb and flow of the conversation demonstrated the complexity of these questions, the panelists began to focus on three overarching themes: "Who did they think they were"; "Who do we think they were"; and "Who do we think we are." The first theme centred on how those involved in the conflict saw themselves as well as how various groups related to one another. The second theme looked more deeply in how historiography has evolved and shaped our understanding of Patriots and Loyalists, while the third theme brought these threads together in discussing how these histories are directly connected to current perceptions and views of identity in North America.

Who Did They Think They Were

A fundamental aspect of this debate is what was meant by the terms "Patriot" and "Loyalist." Although there are common definitions of "Patriots" (colonists favoring independence from the United Kingdom) and "Loyalists" (colonists wanting to remain tied to the King), these overarching descriptions create an impression of clearly defined groups while glossing over the complexity of the motivations and factors of the individuals in those groups and hide how the meaning and usage of the terms changed over the course of the war. As Patrick O'Brien noted, prior to 1774, these terms could be used to describe people with a range of beliefs, and he elaborated that part of the historical debate is also about when is it "fair to call someone a Loyalist [and] when is it fair to call them a Patriot." The concerns and complaints in the American colonies were not unique to that location; they were present elsewhere in the British Empire. For example, protests against the Stamp Act also occurred in Halifax, Jamaica, and Scotland. Building on this point, Taylor Stoermer stressed that the use of "loyalty" could be applied to either "Patriot" and "Loyalist" as they both expressed loyalty—either to a representative democracy or to a king and parliament. In his study on the political positions of John Randolph and his cousin, Thomas Jefferson, in Virginia in the lead up to the war, Stoermer showed how these distinctions were often very thin, and that terms such as "Patriot," "Loyalist," "Whig," and "Tory" were in flux and came to mean "different things to them and those around them."[5] As the conflict progressed, these terms took on increasingly divisive connotations.

As Rebecca Brannon indicated, it was not always ideology that separated Loyalists and Patriots by 1776, "but a lot of it [was] circumstances of life. So you can find people like Samuel Seabury and other early loyalist writers who advocate for a vision of loyalism as a vision of constitutional order in an empire." The motivation of these individuals to side with or against the Patriots was largely motivated by the fear of civil war breaking out across the colonies. In the case of others, the motivation for joining one side or the other was highly situational.

5 Taylor Stoermer, "'The Success of Either Lies in the Womb of Time': The Politics of Loyalty in the Revolutionary Chesapeake," *The Consequences of Loyalism: Essays in Honor of Robert M. Calhoon*, ed. Rebecca Brannon and Joseph S. Moore (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2019), 11.

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Stoermer gave the example of Beverly Robinson in New York who simply "wanted to be left alone on his farm in the Hudson Valley, and he does not choose a side until the Oath Act is passed by the New York legislature [when] he is forced to make a choice as to whether or not he's going to serve with the Patriots or whether he's going to at least contribute" to their cause. For Robinson, this proved to be a tipping point as he saw this imposition as an "infringement of the exact kind of liberty and freedom that the Patriots say that they are there to protect," and pushed him to become a Loyalist. His sons and grandchildren would become prominent Loyalist families in Upper Canada.[6]

Whether someone did make the leap to the Revolutionary camp or remained "loyal" to the King often was due, as Michael Hattem described, to the strength of their individual "cultural sense of Britishness." This linkage to "Britishness" becomes a fundamental part of the "calculus" that an individual had to consider when they chose to identify as "Patriots." Those who could make that break would oppose British rule and be Patriots, while those who could not relinquish their "Britishness" become the Loyalists. This cultural sense of "Britishness" became a defining element of the later identity of the over 60,000 Loyalists who left the new United States of America for the Canadian colonies or traveled to Great Britain.

To emphasize this point, O'Brien drew our attention to a specific painting of Sir John Eardley Wilmot, the Chief Justice of the Common Pleas, the second-highest common law court in the English legal system, by the American-born British painter, and Loyalist, Benjamin West. The painting has another "painting" within it showing the allegorical figure of Britannia receiving the Loyalists of the American Revolution—an image that includes African American Loyalists, First Nations Loyalists, and Loyalist women. The imagery evoked by West's painting underlies one of the fundamental truths about those involved in the events of the American Revolution. It was more than just white Christian men who lived through the war, suffered its consequences and either chose to flee the new republic, or be forced to follow husbands and enslavers. As Brannon reminded us, "white women are presumed to follow their husband's allegiance whether that's true or not."

What is clear is that while there were some ideological differences between Patriots and Loyalists, many were white men who shared many common values and customs, especially with respect to their rights to human property. Seynabou Thiam-Pereira reminded us that Patriots and Loyalists alike "tended to be similar on the practice of slavery," and as has been well documented, the Patriots' republican "ideas of freedom and equality failed to universally reach the Black population despite the fact that free Black communities doubled in numbers especially in northern states" towards the end of the Revolution. The fact that

6 R. E. Saunders, "Robinson, Christopher (1763–98)," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 4 (University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003), http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/robinson_christopher_1763_98_4E.html; Robert E. Saunders, "Robinson, Sir John Beverley," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 9 (University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003), http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/robinson_john_beverley_9E.html.

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John Eardley Wilmot by Benjamin West, 1812. (Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection)

several key founding fathers, such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, who called for freedom from British rule were also enslavers is, of course, widely known, and often discussed by historians and the media.[7] Less well understood is that although the British were often perceived as abolitionists following the 1772 *Somerset v. Stewart* decision, which stated that it was unlawful for an enslaved African to be sold away from England and was generally seen as a step towards abolition in that country, in the American colonies many Loyalists were also enslavers.[8] When these individuals became Loyalists, so to did their "household." As Thiam-Pereira stressed, "a portion of the Blacks with the Loyalists were not 'Black Loyalists' [as] some did not join the British freely [but] they had to serve in the war with their Loyalist masters." In his study "The American Background of Loyalist Slaves," Harvey Amani Whitefield discusses how African Americans enslaved by Loyalists "experienced the massive upheaval of migration coupled with the chaos of resettlement in postwar Maritime Canada" while remaining enslaved.[9] The same

7 For example, Eric Dunbar, *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017); and Leslie Greene Bowman, "Monticello and Honest History," Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, https://www.monticello.org/research-education/blog/monticello-and-honest-history/.

8 William Cotter, "The Somerset Case and the Abolition of Slavery in England," *History* 79, no. 255 (February 1994): 31.

9 Harvey Amani Whitefield, "The American Background of Loyalist Slaves," *Left History* 14, no. 1 (2009): 59.

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applies to those "Loyalists" who chose to leave the new republic for the United Kingdom or the Caribbean Islands after 1873.

The American Revolution was, as underscored by Brannon in the plenary, also the largest rebellion of enslaved people in mainland North America prior to the American Civil War, specifically because the British offered them the opportunity of attaining freedom, making them "Loyalists." Thiam-Pereira noted that the stories, origins, and paths of "Black Loyalists," as they have come to be known, "are multiple, such as their motivations to join the British." Her research has shown that the British were offering freedom to enslaved Blacks in exchange for their enlistment in proclamations from 1775 and 1779, whereas those captured would remain enslaved.[10] Enslaved Africans and African Americans flocked to the British on the specific promise of freedom to escape slavery or racial discrimination. Freedom from enslavement was not, however, the only reason for enlistment amongst the British ranks as free Blacks were known to side with the British although, as Thiam-Pereira indicates, their motivations are less clear.

In the plenary, Thiam-Pereira underscored that the exodus of Black Loyalists also constituted the first and largest migration of free Blacks of the eighteenth century. To a large extent, their hopes of escaping the racial discrimination they experienced in the American colonies were not realized. Those who fled to the Caribbean Islands often faced re-enslavement at the hands of Loyalists. In the case of the Maritime colonies of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, Black Loyalists arrived only to discover that their legal status was not the same as white Loyalists and their political rights to the franchise and elected representation severely curtailed. Basically, despite their sacrifices and calls for equal treatment as other Loyalists, they were "second-class subjects" as colonies, and later Canadian provinces, implemented polices of systemic marginalization towards the free Black populations. And yet, Thiam-Pereira reminded us that their choice to go into exile in Canada had a direct impact on the social, racial, and economic mosaics of the colonies they joined. Although they were largely "excluded from these new Loyalist societies," they were "an entirely visible community that was part of the post-Revolutionary British world."

As her work has shown, the exclusion of Black Loyalists was not limited to their actual experiences; it extended to their place in history. Scholars who were part of the renaissance of Loyalists studies of the 1960s and 1970s did not consider them "Loyalists" and often were silent about their very existence as a distinct group within the Loyalist camp.[11] It would only be in the 1970s during the bicentennial commemoration of the arrival of the Loyalists to Canada that the first broad recognition of Black Loyalists was made—a recognition that has continued to grow.

10 Seynabou Thiam-Pereira, "Les Loyalistes noirs dans les Provinces Maritimes de l'Amérique du Nord britannique après 1792: une histoire marginalisée?," *Études canadiennes/Canadian Studies: Revue interdisciplinaire des études canadiennes en France* 90 (2021): 144.

11 Thiam-Pereira, "Les Loyalistes noirs," 143.

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As O'Brien indicated, there was "fluidity of allegiance and loyalty amongst eighteenth-century colonists." As he described, "these weren't people who defined themselves by a singular identity. They had identities with family, they had religious identities, they had obligations to community, and oftentimes they spoke to one another and shaped their allegiances that changed over time." With identity not being a clearly defined structure, it became the task of the Patriots to convince others to support their cause and ultimately take on their identity. As Brannon noted, the Patriots were the ones asking "people to change their identity, change their orientation to the State, change their political affiliation" and abandon what they had always known. They are the ones calling on people to rise up against what was familiar and to fight for an abstract new republic that may or may not improve their lot in life.

Who Do We Think They Are?

In a letter to Benjamin Rush in 1812, John Adams presented a view of the parties involved in the Revolution, stating that in the years leading up to the Declaration of Independence, the colonies "were about one third Tories, one third timid and one third true Blue."[12] Adams held firm on his understanding of the divisions within colonial American society, repeating his statistics in several other letters to his Revolutionary compatriots, such as in a letter to Thomas Jefferson in 1813 discussing the character of the First Continental Congress: "one third Tories. Another Whigs and the rest mongrels."[13] As Stoermer emphasized during the plenary discussion, "we can all agree . . . that John Adams is absolutely wrong . . . when he wrote that a third were Patriots, the third were Loyalists, and rest that there in between." There is actually no statistical evidence to support Adams's statement—not that this has prevented historians and others from constantly quoting it. This estimate has been quoted and repeated for over a century, such as by Sydney George Fisher in his 1909 book, *The Struggle for American Independence*.[14] The constant repetition of this quote has created a perception that the lines between the "Patriots," the "Loyalists," and "those in between" were clearly defined. As was discussed throughout the plenary, who the "Patriots" and the "Loyalists" were has been discussed and debated for decades, while at the same time little attention has been given to those falling outside of those definitions.

This debate about what drove Patriots or Loyalists to their respective sides has become a core element of modern-day understandings of both American and Canadian identities. As Hattem pointed out during the plenary, this has been

12 John Adams to Benjamin Rush, March 19, 1812, *Founders Online*, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5768.

13 John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, November 12, 1813, *Founders Online*, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-06-02-0473.

14 Sydney George Fisher, *The Struggle for American Independence*, vol. 1, (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1908).

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going on since the end of the conflict itself, with the assumption that "colonists sort of developed an 'American' identity throughout the colonial period and that its maturation was part of the causes of the Revolution," although historians have shown that this identity actually formed after the conflict. His work on the memory of the American Revolution has demonstrated that it was part of the "process of creating a national history for a nation that was only a decade old. The revolutionary generation themselves sought to define the meaning and legacy of the Revolution for subsequent generations" through the publication of histories between 1783 and 1812 that aimed to shape a national understanding of the war.[15] A key factor in understanding this process was the replacement of an identification with "Britishness" with one of "American-ness" because although the Patriots had, as Hattem stated in the plenary, "achieved political independence after the war, [achieving] cultural independence was another thing entirely."

The study of who the "Loyalists" were is not a recent development. Research and writing about Loyalists in Canada has long been a staple of Canadian history, dating at least as far back as 1841 with the publication of Donald M'Leod's *A Brief Review of the Settlement of Upper Canada by U.E. Loyalists and Scotch Highlanders in 1783*. In the United States, the publication of Wallace Brown's *The King's Friends* in the 1960s renewed interest in those who chose to fight for "King and Country." Brown's work, as well as that of Robert M. Calhoon, studies that grew out of the developing field of social history, provided a new way of looking at Loyalists beyond the stereotype of a "patrician elite."[16] O'Brien reminded us that the stereotype of the Loyalists as "members of a small conservative elite, wealthy, educated, and largely Anglican with important economic and political connections throughout the British Empire" is a distortion of who they truly were. As Brown pointed out in 1965, the Loyalists, both those who went into exile and those who remained in the new republic, were mostly "farmers and men of average wealth," as well as free Blacks and enslaved peoples, First Nation warriors, and dislocated women and children.[17] O'Brien brought this point into focus asking what the Loyalists who left after the war shared if they did not share an ideological background: "They didn't share a racial background. They didn't share a singular geographic background. What did they share was that they're all refugees." They were refugees in the new colonies of New Brunswick and in Quebec, as well as refugees in Great Britain, where, as Hattem stressed, many

15 Michael D. Hattem, "Citizenship and the Memory of the American Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Political Culture," *New York History* 101, no. 1, (Summer 2020): 35. See also Cynthia M. Koch, "Teaching Patriotism: Private Virtue for the Public Good in the Early Republic," *Bonds of Affection: Americans Define their Patriotism*, ed. John Bodnar (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1996.

16 Christopher F. Minty, "Re-examining Loyalist Identity During the American Revolution," in Brannon and Moore, eds., *The Consequences of Loyalism*, 33; Warren R. Hofstra, "Afterword: Robert McCluer Calhoon—The Politics of Moderation and a Passion for Teaching," in Brannon and Moore, eds., *The Consequences of Loyalism*, 249.

17 Minty, "Re-examining Loyalist Identity," 34.

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Loyalists "found a very discomforting experience and found that they did not fit in England the way that they thought they would."

As these comments imply, and the work of O'Brien on the women who left after the conflicts has shown, "Loyalist" women, be they the wives, sisters, or daughters of Loyalist men, have often been viewed as part of the broad "Loyalist" category with little regard for their motivations or roles in building new Loyalist communities. As O'Brien shows in his work on Mary Robie and her sister Hetty, two Loyalist refugee women who fled Marblehead, Massachusetts, for Halifax, Nova Scotia, these women played central roles in these places of refuge. In this case study, Mary Robie's diary revealed the "emotional toll of exile and the constant struggle she faced as a refugee" while striving to build a sense of community among the displaced Loyalists.[18] The same can be said of those "Loyalist" women who remained in the new republic to live among their former "enemies." As Brannon described in her study *From Revolution to Reunion: The Reintegration of South Carolina Loyalists*, many women suffered the same fates as their husbands, brothers, and sons, without ever having espoused their cause, but worked to rebuild their communities.[19]

Whereas much of the literature on the Revolution has focused on the Patriot vs. Loyalist divide, less attention has been paid to those who chose not to become involved in the conflict because they did not share the views of either side; who, such as many First Nations, did not wish to become involved; or who were generally pacifists due to their religious beliefs, such as Quakers. As O'Brien stated, this neutral stance did not mean that they were outside of the conflict as both the Patriots and the Loyalists courted these "Neutrals" to join their cause. Quakers, whose beliefs meant that they could not swear allegiance to either side, were targeted by Patriot supporters and some communities were even rounded up and removed from Pennsylvania to Virginia. In her article "Constructing Female Loyalism(s) in the Delaware Valley," Kacy Tillman examined this oppression of Quakers and showed that Quaker women tied their "loyalism" to their identity within their belief system.[20] A large number of First Nations sided with the British, believing that long-standing alliances with the British Crown were the most beneficial to them, a belief reinforced by Patriot raids against them. A smaller number of communities sided with the Revolutionaries, often against their own people, leading to divisions such as the split within the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.[21] Other nations chose to remain outside of the conflict between the "newcomers,"

18 G. Patrick O'Brien, "'Gilded Misery': The Robie Women in Loyalist Exile and Repatriation, 1775–1790," *Acadiensis* 49, no. 1 (Spring/printemps 2020): 41.

19 Rebecca Brannon, *From Revolution to Reunion: The Reintegration of the South Carolina Loyalists* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2016).

20 Kacy Tillman, "Constructing Female Loyalism(s) in the Delaware Valley: Quaker Women Writers of the American Revolution," in Brannon and Moore, eds., *The Consequences of Loyalism*, 48.

21 Karim M. Tiro, "A 'Civil' War? Rethinking Iroquois Participation in the American Revolution," *Explorations in Early American Culture* 4 (2000): 148.

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seeing, as Gregory Dowd described it, that "there was no winning strategy" for First Nations in this war.[22]

Who Do We Think We Are

In 1975 and 1976, amid the flurry of publications on the eve of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution, historian William F. Marina published three articles discussing the significance of the upcoming commemorations and advocating for a patriotic interpretation of the conflict. The first article, "The American Revolution and the Minority Myth" published in the journal *Modern Age*, tackles the often repeated John Adams quote discussed above about participation rates ("one third Patriot, one third Loyalist, one third Neutral") stating that this was one of the greatest myths of the Revolution and that historians of his day continued to perpetuate it.[23] He argued that the conflict was a "people's war" against the "elite" with the aim of forming an egalitarian society without castes. In his second article, "Militia, Standing Armies, and the Second Amendment: Some Perspectives from the American Revolution," Marina asserted that the reaction to the events of the Vietnam War had led to a reassessment of the Revolution that increasingly emphasized that the American victory in 1783 was due to the character of the Patriots and their widespread support amongst colonial society.[24] A third article, published on July 1, 1976, titled "The American Revolution as a People's War," bluntly asked, "Just what is it we are celebrating with the Bicentennial? With a few notable exceptions, much of the reality and significance of the American Revolution seems to have escaped the American people and a large segment of the historical profession, judging from what has been published during the Bicentennial."[25]

In rebuking his "anti-revolutionary" colleagues, Marina called for the return of the view that the American Revolution was a unique event, and consequently, won by a unique and unified people. For him, the American Colonies were a "nation in arms" against the British and its inhabitants viewed themselves as one "people." Marina therefore believed that the Bicentennial should celebrate their achievement; as he wrote, "perhaps the greatest tribute we can pay to the men who made that Revolution, on its two-hundredth anniversary, is to renew our faith in that original purpose, and redouble our efforts to achieve that goal of equality of opportunity and before the law for which they strove."[26]

22 Gregory Evans Dowd, "There Was No Winning Strategy for the Indians," in *Major Problem in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760–1791: Documents and Essays*, ed. Richard D. Brown (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992), 238.

23 William F. Marina, "The American Revolution and the Minority Myth," *Modern Times* 20, no. 3 (Summer 1976): 298–310.

24 William F. Marina, "Militia, Standing Armies, and the Second Amendment: Some Perspectives from the American Revolution," *The Law and Liberty* (Summer 1975).

25 William F. Marina, "The American Revolution as a People's War," *Reason* (July 1, 1976).

26 Marina, "The American Revolution and the Minority Myth."

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The debates about the Revolution raised by Marina over fifty years ago have continued to evolve and change along with American (and Canadian) society. In 1977, David Lowenthal picked up the debate around the Bicentennial's role in defining American identity. In his article, "The Bicentennial Landscape: A Mirror Held up to the Past," he discussed how attitudes towards the American landscape and attachments to the land have influenced national identity. Lowenthal stressed that with respect to the past, "Americans have extended it, reinterpreted it, and reinvented it."[27] As part of John Bodnar's collection on the history of American patriotism, Cynthia Koch discussed how the concepts of American patriotism that form the core of American identity are rooted in interpretations of the Revolution.[28] Whereas Marina pushed the increasingly problematic view that the "people" who fought were a cohesive group and were the ancestors of Americans of the mid-1970s, Hattem pointed out during the plenary, as did Tammy S. Gordon in her introduction to *The Spirit of 1976: Commerce, Community, and the Politics of Commemoration,* that "there was no sense of national identity developed before independence and that instead it was something that came about in the decades after the end of the war."[29] In the years following the conflict, American nationalists made considerable efforts to show that "Americans" were truly culturally independent from the British, and promoted histories that downplayed the role of the British in colonial development by refocusing attention on the "American" colonists.

Elaborating on this point, Hattem added that "one of the greatest legacies of the Revolution is this sort of very malleable role that it's played for over two centuries in shaping political identities. Disparate, often opposing, groups throughout American history have been able to draw on the memory of the Revolution" to help define how they see themselves and others. Americans have been arguing and debating the meaning of the Revolution since its conclusion in 1783—a process that has been a fundamental element of an American democratic society where "no one owns the past"—and it continues to shape identities in the United States to this day. Often lost in this process are those Loyalists who chose to remain in the new republic, as only a small fraction, some 60,000, left for new colonies or Great Britain. As Brannon indicated, the vast majority of American Loyalists who remained had to find a way to live among those who had previously been their rivals, making apologies, rebuilding trust, and contributing to this new American society, and ultimately abandoning their Loyalist identity for an "American" one.

Although the American Revolution is central element of American identity, it plays a somewhat different role in the formation of Canadian identity. The role of the Loyalists' arrival in the "Canadian" colonies in 1783–84, as well as of the

27 David Lowenthal, "The Bicentennial Landscape: A Mirror Held up to the Past," *Geographical Review* 67, no. 3 (July 1977): 255.

28 Koch, "Teaching Patriotism," 41.

29 Tammy S. Gordon, *The Spirit of 1976: Commerce, Community, and the Politics of Commemoration* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 3.

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so-called Late Loyalists in the decades that followed, has been seen as one specific element of Canadian identity that is directly tied to language, and a factor in Canada's never ending "identity crisis." In contrast to the French Canadian identity flowing out of Québec, the Loyalists who came to Canada were considered the "ethnic" core of English Canada by English-speaking Canadians with direct links to Britain.[30] An essential element of this "ethnic core" was the perpetuation of the class elements within British colonial society. In 1907, Beckles Willson, in *Romance of Empire: Canada*, firmly placed this class structure into English-Canadian identity by emphasising that the Loyalists were the elite as they "embraced the most notable judges, the most eminent lawyers, most cultured clergy, most distinguished physicians, most educated and refined of the people, both north and south."[31] In his study of Canadian identity in the 1990s, Eric Kaufmann touched on a similar point raised by Hattem in the plenary: the importance of "Britishness." Most of the Loyalists who came to the Canadian colonies were in effect "ethnically American by virtue of their folk culture and lifestyle" but they perceived themselves as ethnically British through their "communal narrative and symbolic attachments."[32] This perception remains a significant element of Canadian identity, although this has changed considerably since the adoption of the policies of multiculturalism in the 1970s.[33] Despite the linkages to the "Britishness" of Canada, in reality, the role of Loyalists in the formation of identity is really only seen at the regional level today, such as in the statue of the "Loyalist Man," in St. John, New Brunswick, a promotional sign erected in the 1950s meant to represent a Loyalist soldier who settled in the city. Another example is Loyalist College, established in 1967 in Belleville, Ontario, named to reflect the city's original settlement by United Empire Loyalists in the 1780s. Generally speaking, Canadian identity (such as it is) has not been linked to any specific foundational moment—although Prime Minister Stephen Harper did try (but failed) to make the War of 1812 the foundational moment of Canadian identity formation during its bicentennial in 2012—but rather derives from a slow and difficult to define attachment to institutions, shared experiences, places, and common values.[34] Although its Loyalist identity might not be a key element, it does form part of the "not American" aspects of Canadian identity.

Although these identities have played different roles in the shaping of the modern national identities of the United States and Canada, those Patriot and Loyalist identities shared several key elements that have helped define both countries. As Thiam-Pereira's comments have shown, Patriots and Loyalists shared the same views with respect to human property. They shared the same language,

30 Eric Kaufmann, "Condemned to Rootlessness: The Loyalists Origins of Canada's Identity Crisis," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 3, no. 1 (March 1997): 111.

31 Beckles Willson, *Romance of Empire: Canada* (London: T.C. & E.C Jake, 1907), 248.

32 Kaufmann, "Condemned to Rootlessness," 119.

33 "Canadian Multicultural Policy, 1971," Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/canadian-multiculturalism-policy-1971.

34 Matthew Barlow, "Re-manufacturing 1812: Stephen Harper's Glorious Vision of Canada's Past," *History@Work*, https://ncph.org/history-at-work/remanufacturing-1812/.

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and many of the same religious beliefs. Additionally, Brannon told us that they both shared the same conviction in the correctness of their opposing positions: both saw themselves as the "beacon of liberty to the World," each one leading the "right way to structure society, the right kind of politics . . . the right kind of government . . . the right kind of constitutional approach." This belief in being "right" has influenced generation after generation towards a type of exceptionalism based on "fighting for your rights" or "upholding peace, order and good government." The reinforcement of this "exceptionalism" has been a hallmark of commemorations of the Revolution that focus primarily on the "positive" outcomes of the war while often ignoring the uglier impacts, such as increased colonialism and oppressing of Indigenous peoples and African Americans/Canadians.

While Americans and Canadians may well see the foundations of their national identities as fundamentally different, as Hattem noted, they are both extensions of the "cultural components [of] settler colonialism that expanded greatly as a result of the Revolution" perpetuating "civic identities" directly linked to specific spaces. In the new United States, the first American nationalists co-opted the history of the land of North America making it inseparable from the new republic itself. This "nationalizing" of the history of the continent not only replaced the early British history, but also, just as settlers displaced Indigenous peoples from their lands, muted the historical significance of the continent's First Peoples. North of the border, a similar process of Indigenous erasure occurred, but one largely built on the perpetuation of a Canadian connection to "Britishness" rather being distinct from it as in the United States.[35]

As already mentioned above, the use of the Loyalist identity to forge a pan-Canadian identity has not been successful, in large part due to pre-existing French Canadian identity, as well as the promotion of multiculturalism in Canada. But what of the United States? Early nationalists in the new republic made considerable efforts to create a national narrative as part of a grand project of fostering an American national identity. Hattem, who discussed this topic at length in *Past and Prologue: Politics and Memory in the American Revolution*, told us that the grand project was ultimately a failure as it did not create a single American identity, but rather, multiple "American" identities largely based on pre-existing regional identities that have "projected themselves as national identities." Building on this point, in the plenary, he emphasised that these "regional identities . . . projected themselves as national identities." For example, in the 1830s and 1840s, Southerners perceived their identity as both distinctly "Southern" and American but at the same time, "more American" than the "Yankees" in New England. He stressed that this "sort of provincialism in the guise of nationalism," has become a consistent feature of conflicts over national identity throughout American history to this day.

As Stoermer suggested, these competing national identities that flowed out of historic Loyalist and Patriot identities have been tied to specific elements of the

35 Kaufmann, "Condemned to Rootlessness," 125.

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contemporary conflicts and debates, but on somewhat different scales of relevance. He stressed that after 1783, there were two national origin stories that increasingly diverged despite originating in the same historical event. Stoermer noted that the debate about "these identities have become twisted, they've become mythologized and they give so much baggage" to those who visit museums, historic houses, and national sites of the Revolution. One of the core elements of this myth has centred around, as O'Brien mentioned, the simplistic narrative of "winners and losers of the Revolution," repeated in classrooms, historical scholarship, and historic sites. As a result, the historical narrative in the United States has tended to ignore the complexity of the impacts of the Revolution on both Patriots and Loyalists and how this narrative influenced how Americans see themselves. This "Revolutionary myth" has reduced the perspectives and identities of Loyalists to "self-important self-interested royalists opposed to liberty and democracy [and] opposed to any kind of representative government," whether they were the minority who left the new republic or the vast majority who remained to live amongst their "Patriot" neighbors.

As with all commemorations, the 250th of the Revolution is an opportunity for "an honest discussion of what the American Revolution was [about] and [a chance to] break down these mythologies" that have contributed to political strife in both countries. Stoermer reminded us that critical examination of the Revolution and its ongoing impact is needed because of how it influences "modern American identity" and "fuels modern American political behavior." As Brannon suggested in the plenary, the current political discord in the United States—and to an extent in Canada—is largely being molded by these national identity myths and that there are some members of US right-wing groups that cite the "natural inheritance of the Revolutionary Patriots who would have taken to arms and used violence to achieve their ends" to justify their actions. In the lead up to the 250th anniversary, it is important for public historians and practitioners to understand how these origin stories and identities of Patriots and Loyalists are being used in the societal conflicts being experienced in the 2020s, including the storming of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, and the so-called "Freedom Convoy" in Ottawa in February 2022.

National historic sites and parks, such as Minute Man National Historic Park, Independence Hall National Historic Park, and Valley Forge National Historic Park, play a significant role in how Americans and Canadians interpret the American Revolution, define the meaning of Patriot and Loyalist, and understand how these origin stories shape how we see ourselves today. They are sites where the public comes to understand and interact with the past, as well as to validate who they think they are. As discussed above, the American Revolution has had profound impact on the shaping of the political and physical landscapes of North America, and especially in the creation of national identities. By the end of the conflict in 1783, Patriots and Loyalists still needed to find ways to continue living their lives. The new "Americans" now had to pick up the pieces and put their grand experiment into practice and forge a new sense of self for their citizenry. For hundreds of thousands of Loyalists, this meant finding new ways of living amongst

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those whom they'd fought against, or rejecting this new order by leaving their homes and communities for new lives in exile, as did some 60,000 Loyalists.

The semiquincentennial of the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution is an opportunity for public history practitioners to ask new questions about what happened during the conflict, who was involved, what the results of the war truly were and how our current civic and political identities continue to be shaped by the 250-year-old war. The answer to the question "who do we think we are" will never be a static one. How we answer it today is different from how it was answered in 1783, just as it will be different in 2083, but it is fundamentally important that we continue to ask it as this history will continue to shape who we will become.

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