The National Climate in 1816

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American Religion in 1816

The United States of 1816 was an overwhelmingly protestant nation, but under the umbrella of American Protestantism there was a great deal of denominational diversity. A traveler in the young republic on a comprehensive journey would have encountered Baptists, Puritan-influenced Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians (formerly the Church of England in colonial times) and more; one would also have met members one of the more radical religious sects like the chaste Shakers and the relatively prevalent Quakers, whose members made up substantial minorities in Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia, as well as, of course, Pennsylvania, the state with which Quakers are most commonly associated. This ubiquitous protestant presence is not to say that some other minorities were not present as well. There *were* Roman-Catholics in the states, notably in Maryland and Pennsylvania. Jews made up a tiny sliver of the expanding American population (the first federal census, taken twenty-six years before Monroe's election, placed Jews at a miniscule fraction of one percent), but at the turn of the nineteenth century synagogues could still be found in Charleston, New York, Newport, Savannah, Philadelphia, and Richmond.[1]

A particularly pervasive and ascendant brand of American Protestant Christianity in 1816 was Evangelicalism. On the rise once more since the beginnings of the Second Great Awakening in the 1790s, Evangelical theology (employed by groups like Baptists and, notably, Methodists, who would in future decades become the most populous denomination in the United States) based itself in the fundamental idea of being "born again" and living a reformed life.[2] Its proponents preached in the tradition of early American Methodist George Whitefield (of the original Great Awakening), inciting intense passion and evoking images of a brutal hell and its unforgiving fire.[3] Faith for Evangelical Christians was intensely personal, and in some ways worked in tandem with the market values that also proliferated in this period.

The Evangelical brand of Christianity had a particularly strong influence on African Americans in the young United States. The ardency of religious revivals and the emphasis on personal faith had a strong appeal to the enslaved. Richard Allen, a black preacher from Pennsylvania, founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816. Enslaved workers also found inspiration in impassioned style of Evangelical worship. Plantations in the South often had slave preachers who led prayer meetings and spirituals. But, it is important to remember that while both blacks and whites across the nation found solace and spiritual rejuvenation in the revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, white Evangelicalism and black Evangelicalism were often at odds. Richard Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church primarily because he

[1] David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2-5.
[2] Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty!: An American History* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 272.
[3] Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers,* 23.

sought religious autonomy for himself and for his fellow black Methodists who faced intense discrimination in white Methodist churches.[4] And while slaves embraced an enthusiastic worship style and a theology of hope for liberation and an intensely loving and personal God, their meetings often had to be illicit because white Christian masters did not approve; slave owners saw Christianity not as a spirituality of freedom but as a means for social control.

Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church
Image courtesy of http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/images/3alle1784s.jpg

James Monroe is a perfect example of a collision between regional religious normalities and personal spiritual inclinations. Born and raised in Virginia, a primarily Anglican colony (and later, Episcopal State), Monroe attended an Anglican school, Campbelltown Academy, and attended college at William & Mary, whose faculty and administration at the time were primarily Anglican clergy. Throughout his life, Monroe and his family attended Episcopal churches. The marriage ceremony of James and Elizabeth followed the Episcopal liturgy. When Monroe lived through the death of his infant son and, later, his wife, they received Episcopal funerals.[5] And throughout his Presidency, Monroe occupied the Presidential seat at St. John's Episcopal Church, across the square from the White House. But there seems to be a disparity between the culture to which Monroe subscribed and his actual spirituality, because history suggests that he was far from the traditional idea of a Christian.

A character of the eighteenth century as well as of the nineteenth, Monroe appears to have been "an Episcopalian of Deistic tendencies."[6] Several pieces of evidence point to this conclusion. He spent substantial time in the 1790's in France with close friend and outspoken radical Deist Thomas Paine, who very possibly could have influence Monroe's spiritual beliefs. His personal papers (what few are available) make little mention of God or religious practice. When Monroe's son died in 1800, scarcely two years old, Monroe expressed his devastation in letters to friends

[4] "Our History," African Methodist Episcopal Church, https://www.ame-church.com/our-church/our-history/ (accessed April 24, 2016).
[5] Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers, 99-100.*
[6] Ibid, 126.

but made no mention of solace found in God or in scripture.[7] He was also a Freemason, like several of his preeminent contemporaries, and often Freemasons sympathized with the Deist outlook and employed similar language for describing God. It seems that Monroe's real interests were practical ones; he was a statesman, not a spiritual sage, and he had little interest in philosophy. And despite his probable personal leanings and disinterest in active religious experience, the Episcopal Church, again, ministered to him and his family throughout his life, which goes to show the cultural prevalence of Christianity in the nineteenth century, a prevalence that would continue to this day.

Developing American Literature and Mythology

American culture in 1816, and in the decades following the War of Independence, was intensely nationalistic, and this culture of patriotism influenced the burgeoning American literature scene. American writers wanted to create works that rivaled the popular works of English and European literature, and that glorified the new nation. At the time, the novel was a relatively new art form, and few Americans had experimented with it in 1816. One was Charles Brockden Brown, whose gothic and often unsettlingly dark works garnered him little popularity. It would not be until after 1816 when the American novel truly entered the stage of the literary world. But the literary scene in the United States in 1816 was nevertheless active. Charles Frenau was a prevalent poet, popular since the American Revolution, and his works were precursors to the Romantic Movement. Joel Barlow, a member of Connecticut-based writers' group Hartford Wit, wrote a patriotic epic poem called *The Columbiad* that, published in the early nineteenth century, would encourage future American writers.[8] Also in print in 1816 was the newly founded North American Review, the oldest literary magazine in the United States. Its founders created the publication in 1815 to rival popular British publications.

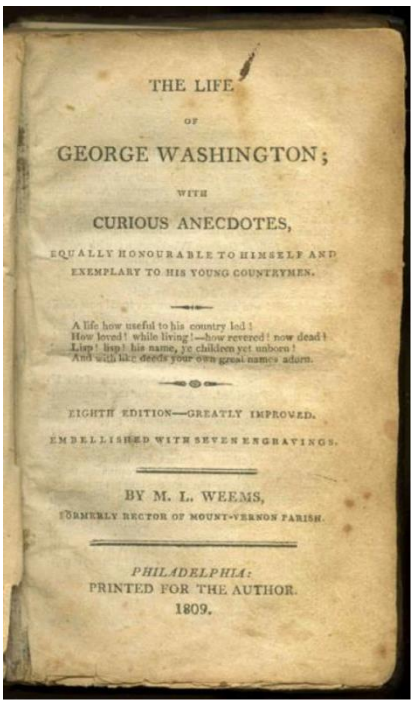
Probably the most prevalent force on the American literary scene in the year 1816, historical writing characterized the nationalism that pervaded American culture. Already, Americans gazed nostalgically backwards towards the heroic actions of the American Revolution and to the example of the republic's Founding Fathers. Influential agitator and playwright Mercy Otis Warren wrote a popular *History of the Revolution,* first published in 1805, that painted the American struggle for independence in a romantic light.[9]

A look at a popular work of children's literature at the time will provide even more insight into the nationalistic, patriotic culture of the early nineteenth century. Mason Weems' nostalgic biography of the first president, *The Life of George Washington, with Curious Anecdotes, Equally Honourable to Himself and Exemplary of His Young Countrymen,* was not so much a historical examination of a life but a statement of ethical teaching. The book's opening leaves, along with the amusingly prodigious title, feature a little poem that epitomizes the sentiment of the children's book:

[7] Ibid, 101.
[8] Alan Brinkley, *Connecting with the Past: American History, AP ed*.(New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 187.
[9] Ibid.

A life how useful to his country led!
How loved! While living-- how revered! Now dead!
Lisp! Lisp! His name, ye children yet unborn!
And with like deeds your own great names adorn.[10]

The first edition of Weems' book was printed in 1800, and the 1809 edition was the first to mention the fabricated fable of George Washington and the cherry tree. In this literary and historical work, we see the collision of ethical indoctrination with patriotic instilment of nationalistic virtues as the American people worked to cultivate an American mythology.


THE LIFE
OF
GEORGE WASHINGTON;
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EXEMPLARY TO HIS YOUNG COUNTRYMEN.
A life how useful to his country led!
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Lisp! lisp! his name, ye children yet unborn!
And with like deeds your own great names adorn.
EIGHTH EDITION—GREATLY IMPROVED.
EMBELLISHED WITH SEVEN ENGRAVINGS.
BY M. L. WEEMS,
FORMERLY RECTOR OF MOUNT-VERNON PARISH.
PHILADELPHIA:
PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR.
1809.

The Inside Cover of Weems' Life of Washington, including the aforementioned poem
Image courtesy of https://lib.stanford.edu/files/images/WeemsLifeofWashTP_975.5J45_2.preview.jpg

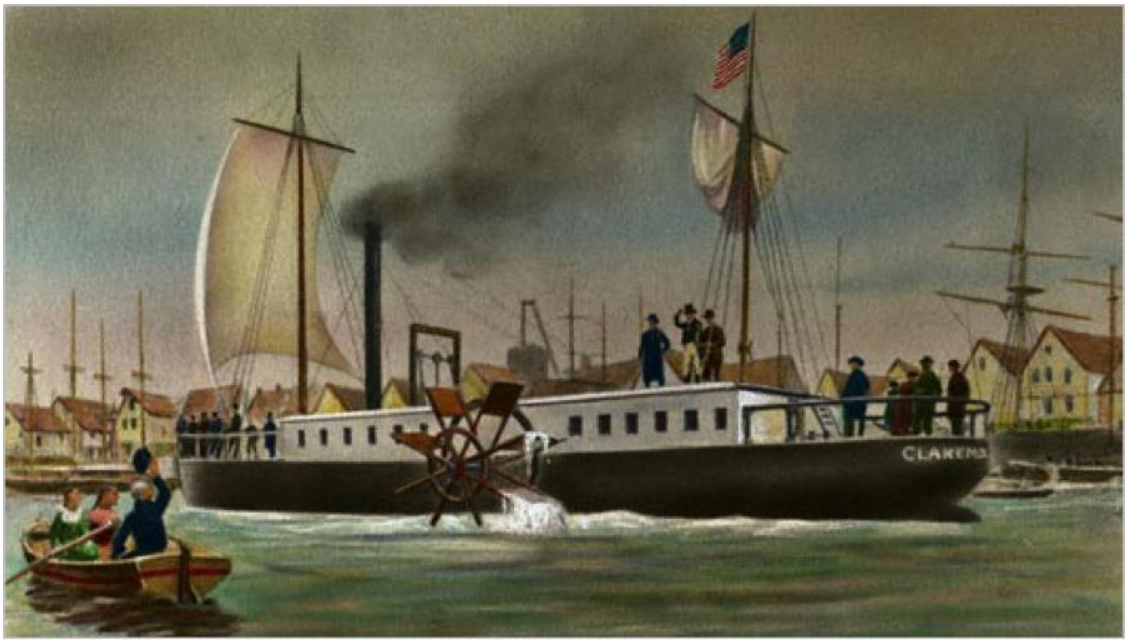
The Changing Economic World and its Effects on Society

Sandwiched between the Revolutionary Era of the late eighteenth century and the intensely industrial era of the mid to late nineteenth and beyond, the early nineteenth century was a time of birth pangs of industry, of the beginnings of economic shifts that already had profound effects on American society. Cotton was commodity king, and the 1794 invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney reinvigorated the Southern economy. The textile industry of the North flourished as well, thanks to swelling cotton production. Between 1807 and 1815, the number of cotton spindles increased from 8,000 to 130,000. Factories, young and few in number at this point in American history went through a revolutionary change in 1813 and 1814 with the work of Francis Cabot Lowell to develop the power loom. Lowell's Boston Manufacturing Company opened the first large-scale power loom factory in 1814, a big step for American industry.

[10] "Children's Literature," Stanford University Digital Collections. https://lib.stanford.edu/american-enlightenment/children's-literature (accessed April 28, 2016).

Eli Whitney, inventor of the revolutionary cotton gin
Image courtesy of https://www.nps.gov/nri/resources/customcf/people/Whitney_inline.jpg

While the defining transportational innovation of American industrialization, the railroad, would not occur until later in the nineteenth century, 1816 was still a year in a time of transportational development, dubbed by some as the Turnpike Era (between 1790 and 1820) because of the proliferation of roads all over the country. In 1816, the famous Cumberland Road was under construction. By 1816, there were steamboats chugging up and down the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, thanks to the vindication of steamboat technology by Robert Fulton, a Pennsylvania native who experimented with steamboat designs while living in France in the 1790s. Fulton's prototype steamboat, the *Clermont,* proved its metal in 1807 when it navigated the Hudson River from New York City to Albany.



Fulton's Steamboat, the Clermont
Image courtesy of http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2007/08/09/nyregion/09clairmont.span.jpg

The expanding of industry in the North contributed to urbanization, while the necessity of producing cotton in the South influenced the overall Southern trend of maintaining an agrarian system. Economic and demographic conditions like overcrowding and soil exhaustion in the Northeast and Old South incited people to move westward. The federal government had to incorporate six new states between 1815 and 1821, including Indiana in 1816.

The Market Revolution of the early to mid-nineteenth century, as it is now called, greatly affected the lives of all Americans. Its era was a time when Americans stopped producing solely for themselves and started to produce for the purpose of profit.[11] It was a time of patriotism and destiny-shaping, defined by a belief among Americans in the power of dedicated hard work. The faith in the prospect of social mobility inspired all sorts of people, but these hopes of the changing economic world of course had their limits. While the Market Revolution saw the beginnings of women entering the workforce, the societal expectations of women were still very against female autonomy. Women were the mothers, the bearers of children, and the supporters of husbands, in the eyes of society; their place was in the home, and this socio-cultural norm would not be overcome until much later in history.

But in the realm of the limitations of economic prosperity during the early Market Revolution, the clearest thing is that if America was newly defined by prosperity and self-determination for its hard-working citizens, then that prosperity and social freedom was not available for African Americans. Slavery was alive and well in the Southern United States, and the slave population grew despite federally enforced end to the slave trade with Africa in 1808; the slave population was 697,624 in 1790 but grew to 1,191,362 in 1810 and in 1816 was well on its way to reaching 1,538,022 in 1820.[12] It was not uncommon for slaves to be subjected to brutal conditions and punishments, as well as miscegenation. Even the majority of Southern whites, the poorer yeoman farmers who rarely owned slaves, shared the racist sentiments of the high class Southerners and believed strongly in the institution of slavery because it united whites against the possibility of being in the lowest social class.

The situation was not much better for the free blacks in the Northern states, who constantly suffered from discrimination at the hands of whites and lived in the very poorest quarters of developing cities. While upward mobility characterized the social theory of the time, in practice blacks experienced anything but. After Northern abolition, there was a wealth of skilled black artisans who had served under white masters, but they rarely received chances to profit from their abilities. 1816 saw the establishment of an organization that epitomized the white sentiment towards free blacks: The American Colonization Society. This gradualist abolitionist organization promoted the deportation and resettlement of freed slaves back in Africa. The ACS would go on to establish the West African nation of Liberia (whose capital city, Monrovia, was named in honor of James Monroe). The fundamental premise of the pro-colonization movement

[11] "The Market Revolution," Crash Course US History. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNftCCwAol0&list=PL8dPuuaLjXtMwmepBjTSG593eG7ObzO7s&index=12 (accessed April 28, 2016).
[12] Foner, *Give Me Liberty!, 417.*

was that America was a white society, and that blacks could never assimilate successfully. African Americans, however, rejected this premise, and the formation of the Colonization Society galvanized free African Americans across the country to fight for their American rights.[13]

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[13] Ibid, 349.