One Nation
Divided by Slavery

Remembering the American Revolution While Marching toward the Civil War

MICHAEL F. CONLIN
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Introduction:

Slaves on Bunker Hill

Despite being just 221 feet tall, the Bunker Hill Monument loomed large in the antebellum American imagination. Because that short granite obelisk commemorated not just the North’s greatest victory in the American Revolution but also the iconic battle for the United States, it towered over the North and the South. As construction of the Washington Monument had been interrupted in 1854 at just 150 feet (not to be resumed until 1877 nor completed for seven years after that), the Bunker Hill Monument was the American obelisk. It occupied the symbolic status that the Washington Monument does today. No trip to New England was complete without ascending the 294 steps to the top of the monument. The tourists’ itinerary in Boston has remained remarkably constant in the 150 years since then and now: Harvard Yard, the USS Constitution, Boston Common, Faneuil Hall, and, of course, Bunker Hill. Another constant is vendors hawking patriotic trinkets to the tourists. Indeed, it was so emblematic of Boston—though it was actually in Charlestown—and so emblematic of the battle—though that conflict was actually fought on Breed’s Hill—that visitors were disappointed when they were unable to see it. When time constraints precluded a visit, Julia Marsh Patterson, a Georgia teenager, salved her disappointment with “seeing it afar off.”

The Bunker Hill Monument was a powerful sectional symbol of Northern resistance to tyranny, whose effect extended well beyond the antebellum era. Abolitionists routinely invoked the battle as a talisman in their resistance to slavery. Some used it to galvanize public opinion against the
national reach of slavery, especially in the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Byron Paine, a young Milwaukee lawyer, denounced that piece of federal legislation because it prostrated Northerners’ last vestige of honor by compelling them to assist federal marshals in the apprehension of alleged fugitives. The odious law required the lineal “descendants of those who fell at Bunker’s Hill” to pursue fugitive slaves or at the very least to suffer slave catchers to make that pursuit. The thought of slave catchers roaming the streets of Boston—“in the very shadow of Bunker Hill”—in search of alleged fugitives disgusted Giles Richards, an Ohio textile manufacturer and abolitionist. If fugitives could not find refuge beneath the Bunker Hill Monument, then well and truly the North had not really ended slavery. Not all opponents of slavery used Bunker Hill as a negative symbol. Some used it as a positive example of brave resistance to oppression. By the “logic” of Concord, Lexington, and Bunker Hill, the Liberator reasoned that John Brown was a “hero” and his raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, analogous to those battles. Employing the “same logic,” William Lloyd Garrison’s strident but pacifist newspaper finished its syllogism by concluding that “every slaveholder has forfeited his right to live, if his destruction be necessary to enable his victims to break the yoke of bondage.”

During the sectional conflict that led to the Civil War, the Bunker Hill Monument served as a kind of shorthand for the North. After Congress repealed the Missouri Compromise in 1854 and the Supreme Court ruled in the Dred Scott decision three years later that Congress could not exclude slavery from the territories, conspiracy-minded abolitionists and Free-Soilers fretted that the Slave Power conspired to extend slavery to all the states as well as all the territories. To dramatically illustrate the spectacle of slavery being reintroduced to the North, they claimed that Sen. Robert A. Toombs, a Whig from Georgia, had declared his intention of demonstrating the nationalization of slavery by calling the roll of his slaves beneath the famous obelisk. That act in itself was highly symbolic. On tightly run plantations, overseers called the roll each day before assigning the slaves to their day’s work. Bunker Hill was sacred. The Providence Post claimed that it was second in importance to Americans in their veneration of the Revolution to only the Declaration of Independence itself because it was the site of the “first pitched battle” in the War of Independence. Toombs’s apparent desecration of what Philadelphia abolitionist William Morris Davis called “Freedom’s holiest altar” predictably outraged Northern opponents of slavery. If the Northern states could not exclude slavery
within their own boundaries, the *New York Tribune* reasoned in a rush of Southern iconoclasm at New England patriotic sites, then “slaves can be kept in Boston: Mr. Toombs can call the roll of his chattels on the slope of Bunker Hill; auctions of black men may be held in front of Faneuil Hall, and the slave-ship, protected by the guns of United States frigates, may land its dusky cargo at Plymouth Rock.”

Toombs’s alleged prediction was widely printed in the abolition press and gained currency with each succeeding Southern outrage from the opening of the northern part of the Louisiana Purchase to the possibility of slavery in 1854 to the demand for a federal slave code for the territories six years later. Judge John K. Kane’s notorious ruling in the William Passmore case (1855), the *Liberator* asserted, was part of the Slave Power’s unrelenting campaign to impose slavery on the North. In 1855, Kane determined that the federal Fugitive Slave Act permitted Southerners to recover slaves they had voluntarily brought to Pennsylvania despite an 1822 ruling by that state’s Supreme Court that any slave brought to the Keystone State by his or her master was ipso facto free. According to Kane’s decision, the *Liberator* declared, the slaveholder “may call his roll, not only under the shadow of Bunker Hill, but [also] on the plains of Lexington, at Saratoga, and at Yorktown.” Of course, since Yorktown was in Virginia, neither Toombs nor any other slaveholder would have had difficulty mustering their slaves there. The *National Era* had dismissed Toombs’s prediction as “empty bravado,” only to see the efforts of federal authorities to aid Southerners taking their slaves through the North as the “realization of Toombs’ boast.” Parker Pillsbury, an Ohio abolitionist, believed that Rep. Preston Brooks’s 1856 assault on Sen. Charles Sumner was one of many signs that Toombs’s “prophecy” was to be fulfilled. After the *Dred Scott* decision, Carl Schurz, a Wisconsin Republican, predicted that in addition to the extraordinary spectacle of Toombs lining up his slaves under the Bunker Hill obelisk, Northerners would soon see the everyday indignity of black slaves working beside free white men in corn and wheat fields across the free states. The canny fugitive slave-turned-abolitionist Frederick Douglass publicly dared Toombs to make good on his supposed threat, noting that Massachusetts law might well liberate the Georgian’s slaves.

Douglass notwithstanding, many abolitionists were worried that the law was on Toombs’s side. In 1857, Ellen Grover, a Massachusetts abolitionist, wanted to know if the Massachusetts Supreme Court had affirmed that the *Dred Scott* decision applied to the Bay State. Grover believed such a ruling
would finally settle whether Toombs’s boast was a “vain one or not.” Her interest was not academic. Grover was harboring a Kentucky slave, who had been taken north by her master. What the nervous abolitionist really wanted to know was whether or not she would face arrest if she sent the Kentucky bondswoman to Canada. Of course, the state courts did not have the final say on the application of federal law—the United States Supreme Court did. Other opponents of slavery believed that the Buchanan administration, with or without Congress, would make Toombs’s prediction a reality. Increasing the symbolism, Ohio abolitionist Celestia R. Colby worried that the Georgia senator would celebrate Independence Day in 1858 by taking the roll of his slaves on Bunker Hill.5

Conservative Northerners added insult to the antislavery advocates’ injury when they invited Sen. James M. Mason of Virginia, the author of the Fugitive Slave Act, to Charlestown to participate in the inauguration of a statue of Patriot martyr Joseph Warren near the obelisk in 1857. Abolitionists writhed in fury. Mason’s presence at the base of the Bunker Hill Monument seemed to confirm Toombs’s prediction even if he was a slavemaster, not a slave. The Liberator believed that the Virginian’s presence made good on the Georgian’s boast. At the very least, the Liberator reasoned, the presence of the most despised slaveholder in the United States at the quintessential celebration of freedom in the North only went to show how complete was the Slave Power’s control of the United States. The symbolism was so powerful that Theodore Parker, a leading Boston abolitionist, conflated Toombs with Mason, believing that Boston had realized the Georgian’s boast by hosting the Virginian. Even Free-Soilers took pause at the thought of the author of the Fugitive Slave Act consecrating a statue on the holy soil of Bunker Hill. The St. Louis Missouri Democrat, a Republican newspaper despite its name, decried the Virginian for not just being a pro-slavery propagandist but also for being a “disunionist” when he advocated secession in the event of Republican John C. Frémont’s election as president in 1856.6

When they were not criticizing abolitionists for their rudeness, moderate Northerners rebuked opponents of slavery for allowing politics to rain on a patriotic parade. The Boston Post heralded Mason’s speech for being “appropriate, eloquent, and national.” Ignoring the Virginian’s secession threats made just the year before, the Post believed that Mason’s visit proved that the vast majority of Northerners and Southerners loved the Union more than agitating the issue of slavery. When Boston abolitionists took advantage of the Fourth of July to publicly decry Mason and those who invited
The obelisk at Bunker Hill was the antebellum equivalent of the Washington Monument today—it was the iconic patriotic monument of the United States in the 1850s. (“Bunker Hill Monument, Charleston.” Gleason’s Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion, July 12, 1851.)

him to Charlestown, the Cincinnati Commercial could only scold them for inappropriately allowing partisan harangues to intrude on not just one but two patriotic celebrations.

For the most part, white Southerners ignored the controversy or were unaware of it. The local outrage amused William Cabell Rives Jr., a Virginia teenager attending school in Boston. Rives observed that a cartoon in the New York Tribune portrayed Rep. Robert C. Winthrop, a dough-faced Massachusetts Whig, as one of Toombs’s slaves lining up with the others beneath the Bunker Hill obelisk. This silence is not surprisingly as most Southerners thought that abolitionists’ fevered claims of a Slave Power conspiracy to
foist slavery on the North were risible. The South, as a Georgian reminded readers of the Boston Post in 1856, never forced slavery on the North; rather it was the North that forced antislavery on the South. Privately, Southerners believed that the North’s indulgence in pro-slavery conspiracy theories was, as Georgia rice planter James Hamilton Couper put it, “conclusive proof” of the North’s wild-eyed abolitionism. Couper believed that the Slave Power conspiracy was cynically used by abolitionists to rally naive Northerners to wage political war against the South.8

It seems unlikely that Toombs made this prediction—even though he was certainly a slaveholder, possessing well over two hundred bondspeople at that time, and calling roll would be a plausible way to keep track of his chattels during a trip to the North. Toombs was, after all, a moderate among Deep South politicians, who did not advocate secession until after Abraham Lincoln’s election in 1860. Moreover, when Toombs spoke in Boston on January 24, 1856, at the invitation of conservative textile industrialist Nathan Appleton, he was not asked about the matter—a glaring omission if he had in fact made the boast. In response to local newspapers hurling this already infamous quotation at Toombs, the dough-faced Boston Post corrected the record: “Senator Toombs never made any such boast.” Instead, Toombs argued in Boston that the Constitution sanctioned and even protected slavery in the Southern states. The Boston Herald noted that Toombs’s address was a “candid statement” of the standard Southern pro-slavery interpretation of the Constitution, which “commanded the respect of his auditors if it did not accord with their judgment.” Besides, even fire-eaters realized that slavery could not be imposed on the North. One of Toombs’s biographers dismissed the roll call boast as an “absurd report.” For his own part, Toombs claimed to have issued three published “contradictions” in the newspapers. On February 20, 1860, on the floor of the Senate Chamber, Toombs indignantly denied that he ever made such a statement.9

Indeed, Toombs’s mythical boast revealed more about Northern apprehensions than Southern ambitions. The New Englander extended the premise behind Toombs’s alleged prediction to its logical end: “all legal barriers to the introduction of slavery into the free states must be repealed.” In his memoirs, the aforementioned Winthrop seems to have made the most accurate appraisal: it was “one of those legends fabricated in the ante-bellum period in order to ‘fire the Northern heart.’” It was a classic case of what historian Richard Hofstadter called the “paranoid style” of American politics. As the 1850s progressed, Republicans and antislavery
advocates came increasingly to believe that the Slave Power conspiracy wanted to nationalize slavery. Although historian Eric Foner argues that that fear did not become widespread until after the Southern Democratic majority on the Supreme Court issued the *Dred Scott* decision, reports of Toombs’s alleged boast came three years earlier.\(^\text{10}\)

When Toombs declared that he had never made such a boast in a public speech, his antislavery detractors charged that he had done so in “*private conversation*”—yet another canard that the Georgian denied. Despite Toombs’s protests, one of his colleagues in the Senate claimed to have heard him say something to that effect. John P. Hale, a Republican from New Hampshire and one of the leading opponents of slavery in the upper house, asserted that Toombs had privately said that he believed antislavery agitation had the unintended effect of strengthening Southern commitment to slavery and improving Northern opinion of slavery. “It was in connection with the growth of public opinion at the North, favorable to the institution of slavery,” Hale recalled, that Toombs “made the remark that I should see the slave-holder and his slaves on Bunker Hill.” In 1856, the embattled Georgian privately protested his innocence and charged Hale with willfully misrepresenting him. In 1879—when Northerners persisted in throwing this statement back at him a quarter century later—Tooms publicly declared that it was a “fancy lie” started by Hale.\(^\text{11}\)

Few antislavery Northerners were aware of Toombs’s protestations. Many of those who were in the know joined the *New York Times* in dismissing them. The *Times* sneeringly suggested that Toombs’s denials were evidence of a guilty conscience rather than innocent conduct. Those who were not had no reason to doubt the veracity of Toombs’s Bunker Hill boast. The *Lawrence Republican* believed that nationalizing slavery was precisely what a fanatical disunionist like Toombs favored, never mind that Toombs was a moderate Southerner and the incongruity of nationalizing slavery and then seceding from that nation to protect slavery.\(^\text{12}\)

Although likely a fabrication, Toombs’s Bunker Hill boast had remarkable reach and staying power. In 1863, during the middle of the Civil War, a sailor in the U.S. Navy lamented to his wife that his ship’s crew had not received news for months so that for all they knew, the Confederate ships had shelled New York City or “Toombs may at this moment be calling the role [sic] of his slaves on the crest of Bunker Hill.” In that same year, the *New York Times* mocked Toombs by making a prediction of its own: after the Emancipation Proclamation, the “Georgia rebel” would call the roll of
slaves on his plantation and find that no one answered because they were all free. In 1880, George William Curtis, a Rhode Island Republican, alluded to it in a speech against “Machine Politics,” noting that if the Northern Democrats had not resisted the national party’s stance on slavery, “Toombs would long since have called the roll of his slaves on Bunker Hill.” In an 1899 memoir vindicating Unionists in east Tennessee, Oliver P. Temple referred to Toombs’s mythical prediction (without naming the Georgian) as evidence of the overweening confidence that prompted many Southerners to secede and rebel. “The [Bunker Hill] boast was universal,” Temple remembered, and also the belief that “one Southern man could whip five Yankees.” Indeed, it was a staple of postbellum accounts of the causes of the war written by opponents of slavery precisely because of the special role Bunker Hill and the obelisk that honored the battle played in the hearts and minds of Northern sectional identity. So grating was the image of Toombs lining up his slaves under the Bunker Hill obelisk that even in 2006, former Education Secretary William J. Bennett found the Georgian’s alleged boast to be “wildly offensive.”

At least two black abolitionists used the Bunker Hill obelisk in more or less the same way as Toombs was alleged to have done. While slavery had not been imposed on the North per se, its reach extended all the way to Charlestown. In 1849, William Wells Brown, a fugitive slave and novelist, invoked the Bunker Hill Monument as a poignant symbol to show the national claims of slavery and the hollowness of the American boast of liberty to an enslaved person. Even though he could see Bunker Hill, Brown observed that he remained a Kentucky slave nonetheless, and nothing could protect him from capture by his master so long as he remained in the United States. In exactly the same fashion, Henry Bibb, a Kentucky fugitive who found liberty in Canada and established a stridently abolitionist newspaper, the Voice of the Fugitive, observed that the famous fugitive couple William and Ellen Craft could not hide from slave catchers even in the “shadow of the Bunker Hill monument,” but were forced to flee to England.

To say that the Founding Fathers and their American Revolution loomed large in the construction of national identity in the United States would be understating an obvious truth. However, since the realization of independence in 1783, Americans have argued over what the American Revolution really meant and who the Founders really were. Inevitably these quarrels involved more than just a debate over history. In a very real sense, they
involved efforts to define or redefine the essence of the United States. During the antebellum era, Americans engaged in a thoroughgoing debate over the place of slavery in the United States. As all thirteen original states practiced slavery in 1776, the leader of the Continental Army was a tobacco planter, and the principal author of the Declaration of Independence was too, the role of slavery in the founding of the United States was impossible to ignore. At the same time, however, the Declaration of Independence justified the Revolution in terms of universal natural rights, the Northern states gradually emancipated their slaves, the United States banned the international slave trade and prevented slavery from expanding into the Northwest Territory, and the leading slaveholding Founders took antislavery actions ranging from eloquent denunciations of bond labor to voluntary manumission of their own chattels. The ambiguous legacy relating to slavery that the Founders bequeathed to antebellum Americans provided opponents and proponents of slavery alike with plenty of evidence to support their preferred image of the United States.

In the two decades preceding the Civil War, Americans engaged in what might be called “history wars” every bit as ferocious (and in some ways analogous) to those that have been waged by contemporary Americans over the proposed National History Standards and the commemoration of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum. Like their descendants in the 1990s, Americans in the 1850s did not agree on the essential nature of the United States. To put a fine point on it, antebellum Americans tried to resolve the ambiguities relating to slavery that still haunted the republic some eight decades after its founding. In the 1850s, the United States was poised to be a great industrial democracy, but at the same time, it had become the center of the Atlantic slave system, surpassing Brazil and Cuba in gross number of slaves and staple crop production.

The centrality of the Revolution in American nationalism makes it and its leaders the ideal starting place for the study of antebellum national identity. While many historians have cast the sectional struggle between the South and the North during the two decades before the Civil War as a quarrel over the true legacy of the American Revolution, no one has yet made a sustained analysis of this subject.

In contrast to the numerous studies treating the period immediately following the Civil War, there have been few studies on nationalism during the period immediately preceding it. What little work that has been done
on antebellum nationalism has tended to focus on ideas, elites, and the North. Implicitly, these historians assumed that the North articulated the “American” nationalism or a national nationalism, while the South, if they treated it at all, was engaged in mere sectionalism or a regional nationalism.\textsuperscript{18} Their approach was based on the erroneous premises that Northern nationalism has been well studied and that it was easily distinguished from the Southern variety. This trend was reinforced by “Southern historians and southerners in general,” as Carl Degler noted in a 1987 address before the Southern Historical Association, who “dwell[ed] on southern differences from, and southern conflicts with, the North.”\textsuperscript{19} Most of the work on Southern nationalism in the Civil War era treats the South in isolation in an attempt to explain Southern secession,\textsuperscript{20} the Confederacy’s spirited resistance,\textsuperscript{21} or the Confederacy’s devastating defeat.\textsuperscript{22} While there are recent studies of a distinctly Northern nationalism,\textsuperscript{23} of the distinctly Southern variety,\textsuperscript{24} and how Northern and Southern nationalisms were influenced by the “age of revolution” in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world,\textsuperscript{25} the historiographic pattern remains.

Although there are a few honorable exceptions, such as Charles Sellers and Edward Ayers, most historians regard the South as having what Wilbur Zelinsky calls an “alternate nationality” rather than being part of the mainstream of American nationalism. Indeed, Susan-Mary Grant argues that antebellum Northerners used the South as a “scapegoat” to define American identity based on an “antisouthern ideology.” Larry Griffin and Don Doyle note that many Americans have regarded the South as being so at “odds” with the values and behavior of the United States as to constitute a “special problem.” James Cobb observes that the North’s tendency to view the South as an exotic and barbarous “other” dates back to the 1770s. Liah Greenfield believes that the “nascent Southern ideology bears unmistakable resemblance to the Romantic ethnic nationalisms such as the German and Russian ones” rather than American nationalism per se.\textsuperscript{26}

In contrast to scholars who assert that the South developed its own distinctive nationalism, I argue that slavery was fundamental to the attempts of both Northerners and Southerners to fashion a common national identity in the antebellum era. Indeed, it was the pivot around which the entire debate turned. It is impossible to understand how antebellum Americans fashioned their national identity without a focus on slavery and the Founding Fathers. Nationalism is not simply the positive act of defining what a nation is or who a people are. It is also the negative act of defining what it is not or
who they are not. This essential tension between inclusion and exclusion underlines the history wars of the antebellum as well as the contemporary era. In the case of history it is particularly the processes of forgetting and remembering even if what it is remembered never happened and what is forgotten was essential, e.g., abolitionists claiming the slave-driving Founders were opponents of slavery or even crypto- or proto-abolitionists and fire-eaters holding up the same anxious slavemasters as the archetype of paternalistic slaveholders. Benedict Anderson’s brilliant definition of the nation as an “imagined political community” and Eric Hobsbawn’s apt phrase the “invention of tradition” indicate just how nationalism is actively constructed and how it is often built on mythical foundations.

I demonstrate that the differing notions of antebellum national identity turned on the place of slavery in the American Revolution, the lives of the Founders, and ultimately the antebellum United States. As late as 1861, most Americans, even most Northerners, agreed that the United States was, at least in part, a slaveholding republic. “In a society in which slavery was a well-established institution and in which slaveholders clearly had a privileged position,” Leonard Richards observes about the pro-slavery orientation of the antebellum Democratic Party, “one did not have to be a blatant apologist for slavery to be a defender of slavery.” His point applies equally well to moderates of all political persuasions in the North and the South. For them, the crucial issue was whether slavery would expand with the territorial domains of the nation or be contained in the Southeast. These moderates regarded the half-free, half-slave division of the United States as natural as breathing even if they disagreed on its relative importance. Whereas the place of slavery in the United States was crucial to Southern moderates, it was secondary to Northern moderates. Abolitionists and fire-eaters were shunted to the periphery of this pan-sectional nationalism. From the margins, these sectional extremists attempted to place slavery in the center of American identity: the one regarded slavery as pernicious and subversive, while the other regarded it as beneficent and essential.

If we accept this antebellum consensus and isolate slavery from the analysis, it is clear that the United States was not being pulled apart by distinctive sectional nationalisms in the 1850s. Instead, there was remarkable agreement among most antebellum Americans in the North and the South as to what civic virtues they valued and who displayed them. In other words, excepting slavery, a majority of Americans agreed on what was patriotic and who was a patriot. Even when they disagreed, antebellum
Americans made their criticisms in the common language of American nationalism. In short, there was a shared national culture; where the sections differed was limited to the issue of slavery. The United States was one nation divided by slavery.

Through this study, I will divide antebellum American opinion on the political and moral issue of bond labor into three broad categories: opponents of slavery, moderates, and advocates of slavery. The construction of what might be called antebellum mentalités is an effort to get at the complexity and nuance of the shifting views of millions of Americans on the most vexing issue of the day. Of course, this tripartite division is simply shorthand, providing markers along the spectrum of opinion on what was politely called the “slave question” or the “Negro question,” what one Cincinnatian grimly labeled the “desperate folly of the Negro feud,” what the Memphis Appeal tellingly termed the “abolition question,” or what Thomas Carlyle bluntly described as the “Nigger Question.” The Scotsman’s use of this distinctly American epithet showed that he was a careful observer of the conflict.29

To be sure, this sectional taxonomy is imprecise. On one end, it elides the differences between the various defenders of slavery, ranging from “positive good” apologists to “necessary evil” practitioners, from Southern poor whites to Northern conservatives. On the other, it blurs the distinctions between the various opponents of slavery, ranging from colonizationists to Garrisonians, from fugitive slaves to Free-Soilers. No doubt, the most troublesome category is the one that fills the largest area on the continuum: the moderates. They range from one end of the extreme to the other: from Southern whites who had no stake in the slave system to Northerners who worried more about Catholic immigrants than the Slave Power conspiracy, from planters who clung to the Union in the face of Lincoln’s election to opponents of slavery who were willing to compromise with slavery to placate white Southern fears. At any rate, these categories are flexible and overlapping. They can accommodate dynamism of real people who resist rigid and precise categories. Over time, some individuals moved along the spectrum in one direction or another; others oscillated back and forth. A few remained in place. What this division lacks in precision it compensates with convenience and accuracy.

Each part of the sectional trinity emphasized distinctive aspects of antebellum American nationality, demonstrating the dynamic nature of nation-
alism and self-identity. Abolitionists believed that slavery was fundamentally incompatible with the ideals of the Founders. To them, slavery was an aberration, a regrettable colonial legacy. They were confident that the natural rights ideology that animated the American Revolution would end slavery in the United States. They regarded the Founding Fathers, even those who were slaveholders, as proto- or even crypto-abolitionists, who tried to limit the spread of slavery or end it altogether. While acknowledging that George Washington’s antislavery feelings were not strong enough for him to “free himself of [slaveholding] during his lifetime,” the National Anti-Slavery Standard lauded him for posthumously freeing his slaves.30

At the same time, fire-eaters, emphasizing America’s origins as a slaveholding republic as well as the pro-slavery provisions of the Constitution, argued for the expansion of slavery westward into the Mexican Cession and southward into Latin America. Their radical vanguard theorized that slavery should be nationalized, that the institution should be peculiar to the United States and the Western Hemisphere, not just the South, Cuba, and Brazil. They contended that slavery was the sine qua non of the American republic. Accordingly, they claimed the slaveholding Founders as exemplars of the American ideal. The Richmond Whig adverted to “Washington, the slaveholder” to ridicule the notion that the United States was established on principles antithetical to slavery. Either these pro-slavery advocates ignored the antislavery impulses of the Founders, explained them away, or repudiated them. As far as they were concerned, slavery was inseparable from the founding of the United States.31

In between the sectional extremes were the moderates, who tried to bridge the slavery divide. They acknowledged that the United States was composed of “Slaveholding states” and “non-slaveholding states.” Moderates looked less to the text of the Declaration of Independence than to the “spirit” of the Constitution and the tenor of North-South relations in the subsequent seven decades. They regarded the spirit of compromise that marked the nation from independence as the essence of the United States. They believed it was the Spirit of ’76 in practice. They asserted that the Founders’ legacy was to make sectional compromises that maintained the slavery status quo. They demanded that the compromises that time and time again relieved sectional pressures—in 1787, 1820, and 1850—be renewed. In fact, a special sort of Northern moderate, the doughface, specialized in just this sort of compromising. Indeed, doughfaces were
christened with their inscrutable name during the Missouri Crisis. In 1820, Rep. John Randolph, a Democrat from Virginia, described the eighteen Northerners who ensured the passage of the Missouri Compromise in the House as “dough faces.” Fourteen of them had voted for the Missouri statehood bill without slavery restriction, the key concession to the South, and four more had conveniently absented themselves rather than vote against it. While they were lauded in the South, the first doughfaces were scorned in the North. Only five of the eighteen were returned to Congress in the next election. While this cryptic name—no one really knows what Randolph meant by the epithet—was applied originally to the eighteen Northerners who made the Missouri Compromise possible, it soon was applied to any Northerner who supported the South on sectional matters. In fact, Southerners came to count on doughfaces for moral support and political votes in the sectional controversy. I argue here and elsewhere that doughfaces made common cause with Southern moderates because they shared a common vision of American society and wanted to protect it from radical challenges from abolitionists and fire-eaters. Four months premature, David Outlaw, a North Carolina Whig, rejoiced upon learning “all parties” supported the Compromise of 1850. Outlaw was not surprised by the support of many Northerners. Indeed, it was what he expected due to their “good sense and patriotism.” In saying that “all” supported the Compromise, he deliberately excluded the abolitionists of New England and the “Hotspurs” of the Deep South. These two extremes joined in opposition to the Compromise, forcing him to conclude that they opposed any “settlement” of the sectional conflict over slavery.

Of course, abolitionists and fire-eaters rejected this understanding of American nationality. Unlike the mass of Free-Soilers and proto-Republicans, abolitionists did not mourn the Kansas-Nebraska Act’s repeal of the Missouri Compromise in 1854. It was, after all, a “compromise with crime.” Instead of praising them, they wanted to bury all “compromises with slavery”—even ones that restricted slavery. The first half of Garrison’s famous motto for the Liberator put it in terms, simple and direct: “No compromise with slavery!” It finished by placing slavery beyond the borders of the United States through Northern secession: “No Union With Slaveholders!” At the same time, advocates of Southern secession dismissed any sort of compromise with Northern “fanaticism.” Ruining the Missouri Compromise as a well-intentioned error and arguing against compounding it with the
Compromise of 1850, the *Charleston Mercury* observed, “compromise, compromise, has got to be a great word. What on God’s earth have the South got to compromise?” George M. Dallas, a Pennsylvania Democrat and doughface in good standing, put it best in an admonition to the North and the South to turn to the Constitution to settle the slavery dispute. Elevating slavery to the center of American nationality, Dallas noted, there were “matters compromisable and matters uncompromisable.”\(^33\) If there was one thing on which fire-eaters and abolitionists could agree, it was that slavery was in the latter category.

Chapter 1 covers the different ways antebellum Americans in the North and the South celebrated the anniversary of independence, a topic that is only beginning to receive attention from historians.\(^34\) Although they shared many common practices, Americans developed distinct ways of commemorating the national Sabbath. White Southerners downplayed the Declaration of Independence because its natural rights ideology might inspire their slaves to resist or even rebel against bondage. Instead they emphasized the Constitution, which explicitly protected the property rights of slavemasters, as the founding text of the nation. As the sectional crisis deepened, fire-eaters began to use their Fourth of July speeches to liken the federal government to George III and themselves to their patriotic forebears, hinting or even threatening that they might have to resort to the Lockean right to revolution. Like a lash on their back, enslaved people felt the painful irony of celebrating a day devoted to natural rights in a slaveholding republic. Indeed, fugitive slaves, free blacks, and abolitionists dedicated the Fourth of July to demands for the universal realization of the natural rights hailed in the Declaration. In between the two sectional extremes, moderates reminded all Americans that not so long ago, Northerners and Southerners in the thirteen states had worked together to win independence by force of arms. These Unionists, scorning all who made sectional appeals on the national holiday, held up their half-free, half-enslaved republic as the “model” for oppressed people the world over to follow on the path of liberty.

Chapters 2 and 3 look at how Americans remembered Jefferson’s and Washington’s ambiguous legacies regarding slavery, compromise, and the Union with particular emphasis on the former’s Declaration of Independence and the latter’s Farewell Address. While Merrill Peterson has done a fine job of studying how Americans remembered and used Jefferson
throughout the century and a half after his death, his study lacks my focus on the sectional conflict. One historian has shown that Republicans’ interpretation of the Declaration shaped their political rhetoric in the late 1850s, but does not consider how fugitive slaves, abolitionists, and doughfaces read the document let alone white Southerners as I do here and elsewhere. Another scholar considers how Americans remembered Independence Hall. There is no such overarching study of Washington’s image. Instead, there has been a flurry of studies on how Americans remembered him immediately after his death in 1799 and in the Early Republic. Abolitionists and fire-eaters rehearsed the arguments made about Washington’s slaveholding when debating Jefferson’s. While opponents of slavery proudly asserted that Jefferson would have been an abolitionist if he had been alive in the 1850s; defenders of slavery ignored the Declaration or asserted that Jefferson had erred in stating that “all men were created equal.” Antebellum Americans revered Washington above any other Revolutionary. Abolitionists credited the American Cincinnatus for condemning slavery in life and for freeing his slaves in death, while white Southerners noted that American independence had been won by a slavemaster. Moderates placed Washington above the sectional contest. They adduced his Farewell Address, which warned of the dangers of sectionalism, and his general advocacy of national rather than sectional interests as general and president.

Chapter 4 looks at the ways antebellum Americans remembered the struggle for independence against the British. Historians have begun to study how the Revolutionary generation and the following generation remembered their sacrifices, but with four honorable exceptions they have not considered how mid-nineteenth-century Americans remembered their grandfathers’ sacrifices. Of course, they realized that independence was impossible without military victory. Americans made a few battles into sectional icons: Bunker Hill (June 17, 1775) for the North, and King’s Mountain (October 8, 1780) and Cowpens (January 17, 1781) for the South. These battles served as a kind of ideological formula, conveying the hardships and sacrifices borne by the Patriots during the Revolutionary War. In addition, Americans lionized the military leaders and heroes of the war: the minutemen, Joseph Warren, Francis Marion, and so forth. In the mid-1850s, Northerners and Southerners quarreled over the military contributions of their respective sections to the Revolutionary War. Sensitive to Northern
claims that they shirked their duty, Southerners decried Northern historians and history books, returning the charges to their senders.

Chapter 5 illustrates how these competing ideas of American nationality boiled over under the heat of the sectional conflict in the late 1850s and early 1860s. As the United States started to fracture under the strain of being half free and half slave in the middle of the nineteenth century, abolitionists, moderates, and fire-eaters remembered that seven of the original slaveholding thirteen had either freed their chattels or had begun the process of doing so by the beginning of the century. During the Secession Crisis, all three members of the sectional triumvirate invoked the symbols of the American Revolution. Fire-eaters attempted to preserve slavery by exercising their Lockean right to revolution, moderates in the North and the South struggled to fashion yet another grand sectional compromise on slavery to maintain the Union, and abolitionists came to accept war as the price for emancipation or welcomed the split. After the Civil War began, many Northerners and Southerners attempted to secure their understanding of American nationality through force of arms. Several Confederate states drafted Declarations of Immediate Causes to justify secession, which invoked the Declaration of Independence to protect the natural right to hold bondsmen. Confederate Southerners wanted to forge their own slaveholding republic without the antislavery impurities that weakened the American alloy. Initially, most Americans countered with the preservation of the half-free, half-slave Union. Only a few immediately saw the conflict as a continuation of the Revolutionary quest to achieve natural rights for all Americans and end slavery. Over time, however, more and more Americans accepted that slavery would be a casualty of the war. After the war began, the number of moderates shrank considerably in the North and the South. Nonetheless, they condemned the bloodshed and called for an armistice so that the North and the South could resort to the spirit of compromise that had marked the United States since its beginning.