Reformulating Englishness: Cultural Adaptation and Provinciality in the Construction of Corporate Identity in Colonial British America

Reformulando a identidade inglesa na América britânica colonial: adaptação cultural e experiência provincial na construção de identidades corporativas

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Few developments have had a greater impact on the *social organization* of the globe than the movement of peoples outward from Europe beginning during the early modern era. At first moving west and south into the Americas and south and east into Africa and Asia, they inaugurated a movement of peoples and cultures that during the nineteenth century extended through Siberia, Australia, Oceania, and Africa. Moving as explorers, traders, mariners, soldiers, prospectors, missionaries, and settlers, these Europeans never represented more than a small fraction of the population of any European cultural area, even those areas--Iberia and the British Isles–which contributed most substantially to the initial population flow. Yet, their numbers were sufficient to make them the agents of a fundamental transformation in human history. In the Americas, their disease pathogens altered the human landscape by decimating the indigenous populations, and their hunger for precious metals, land, and other resources reduced native empires to subaltern status as adjuncts, subjecting the imperial peoples to labor in plantations, ranches, and mines, while driving the less settled peoples deeper into the interior. The Europeans' ravenous demand for labor was the driving force behind the development of a destructive transoceanic trade that brought millions of enslaved Africans to the New World and deeply affected social and political relations within Africa. New trades and flows of products greatly stimulated the economies of western Europe, providing stimulus for domestic economic developments and for the expansion of commerce that by the second half of the nineteenth century would bring Europe to a degree of world economic and political domination never before enjoyed by any segment of the world's population.

The current rage for Atlantic studies has focused historical attention upon the ways these developments refashioned the broader *Atlantic* world. As my colleagues at Johns Hopkins and I quickly discovered when we started the first formal doctoral program in Atlantic history and culture in the late *1960s*, neither the flows of people, goods, and cultures, nor the social processes that characterized the expansion of Europe were ever confined to the Atlantic. From the beginning these developments had a global reach–into the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the littorals surrounding those oceans--and that reach became ever more extensive and intrusive over the centuries. Nevertheless, the Atlantic basin continues to provide a useful and manageable arena for the study of this expansive process during its first three centuries.

My own expertise is limited to just one part of the Atlantic basin, the part that is known among North American academics and their intellectual

auxiliaries as *early America*. For two reasons, I have never found this term satisfactory. First, it is unthinkingly imperial, yet another example of the uncritical expropriation of the term *America* to refer to just a portion of the hemisphere. Nor does the more recent trend to think of "early America" in more inclusive terms render it any the less imperial, because that usage still mostly refers only to those areas that would subsequently become part of the American nation. Second, it is far too vague and general to foster effective critical usage. There was never just one but a great many early Americas, before and after the early modern era. Precisely to address this problem explicitly, Jack Pole and I in the early 1980s used the term *colonial British America* as the title for the volume of essays we organized and edited on the then state of the field.[1] We intended this usage to make clear both that the subject matter of the volume was the broad cultural area that was nominally British, that is, associated with or in alliance with Great Britain and, as I spelled out in several later essays, that colonial *British* America was one of many early modern Americas, including Hispanic, Portuguese, French, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Russian, and of course countless indigenous Americas. Unless the subject matter of *early America* is parochially reduced to nothing more than the *pre-history* of the United States, a tendency against which I have been battling for most of my professional life, any comprehensive history of *early America* would obviously require consideration of the history of all of these many culture areas.

Of course, we have known for generations that none of these entities was composed exclusively of people from the nation with which it was associated. We have known, for instance, that Hispanic America contained many Portuguese and Flemish emigrants as well as vast, largely self-governing, and settled republics of Indians; that the British Empire included thousands of German, French, Irish, and Jewish emigrants; and that Dutch American settlements were similarly polyglot. For an even longer time, we have known–even if most historians chose to ignore it--that Africans constituted large portions of the emigrant and settled populations throughout the Americas. The heterogeneity of these populations and the mixtures that invariably resulted should long since have called into question the adequacy of any scheme of nomenclature that would imply national demographic homogeneity. For British America over the past generation, many fine studies of the non-English populations, whether of European, African, Amerindian, or mixed descent, have emphasized the extent to which these groups managed to hang on to important elements in their inherited cultures and have thereby added even more saliency to the question of who composed "early America." .

The problem that now confronts historians of early modern America is whether the use of such national or ethnic identifications is any longer of much use, and my intention in this talk is to make the case that they are not only still useful but absolutely essential to any effort to understand the transformation of the Americas during the early modern era. In particular, in reference to the British colonies, I propose to make a case for the continuing utility of the phrase Jack Pole and I adopted for our volume in the early 1980s, *colonial British America*.

I want to make it clear at the outset that this advocacy is not meant to excuse the Anglocentrism that has often characterized versions of America's colonial past, much less to repeat or extend it. On the contrary, as a life-long enemy of all sorts of "centrisms," whether of the national,

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Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole., eds., *Colonial British America: Essays in the New History of the Early Modern Era* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

local, religious, ethnic, racial, class, or gender variety, I believe that the most important achievement of my generation of scholars of colonialists was to break out of such boxes and to underline the need for what the *Annalistes* called an *histoire totale*. Accordingly, I begin with the assumption that we need to find a place for all the peoples involved in the transformation of the Americas. The concept *colonial British America*, as I define it, does not imply the irrelevance of those participants who were not British. The continuing presence of indigenous peoples, the increasing number of people of African descent, the growing number of non-British European immigrants, the incorporations of new populations of European, African, and Amerindian descent from the other Americas as a result of war and conquest, and the formation of new social entities in frontier and border areas–all represent an important part of that story.

What I do wish to do by using the concept *colonial British America*, at least in the first instance, is to call attention to and to emphasize the enormous disparities of power inherent in the early modern colonial situation. Even during the long era in which historians uncritically bought into historical constructions, themselves artifacts of the colonial era, that stressed the achievements of settler populations, scanting the effects of those achievements upon other segments of the population and largely ignoring the important roles played by those other segments, historians were always at least implicitly aware of the disparities in power in the transformation of the Americas. Indeed, historical studies operated within a paradigm of power according to which whatever entity had the most power was the most worthy of historical study. In this respect, historians differed profoundly from literary scholars who seem only in the last generation to have taken an interest in the role of power in the formation and operation of cultures. Notwithstanding their late entry into the game, however, literary scholars through the medium of what has come to be called *postcolonial studies* have been most responsible, in my view, for underlining and bringing to the forefront of historical investigation the profound discrepancies of power that are inherent in colonial situations. Perhaps, as I have often heard it said, they have not told historians much that they did not already know, and that certainly is true of those post-World War II historians and other social analysts whose works focused on the effects of decolonization in Africa and Asia and the lingering effects of the colonial experience upon the formerly colonized. Over the past generation, however, the efforts of literary scholars have been critical in attaching new meanings to old historical knowledge, in developing a fuller and more explicit appreciation of the nature and social effects of colonialism, and in undermining or challenging the assumptions that had long inhibited so many historians from developing a similar appreciation.

Postcolonial theory, however useful, cannot be applied uncritically to the study of the early modern colonial Americas. Its practitioners have primarily developed it from, and applied it to, the study of nineteenth-and twentieth-century colonialism in which the colonizers never constituted more than a small fraction of the populations of densely occupied "colonies of exploitation," only infrequently applying it to colonies composed of and dominated by large numbers of settlers. To cite a few examples, in settler colonies the dominant settler population may have been the *colonizers* in their relationships with neighboring indigenous populations, but in their relationship to the metropolitan societies to which they were attached they

were also the *colonized*. Similarly, those indigenous groups who remained outside the settler colonies and resistant to the cultural influences of the settlers were scarcely part of the *colonized*, at least not before their displacement and subjugation. The same is true for those self-governing republics of Indians in Hispanic America which paralleled the republics of Spaniards without coming under the immediate political control of Spanish settlers. Then, there is the question of the masses of non-indigenous enslaved peoples who were forcibly brought into areas of settler control. They were certainly victims of colonialism but were they part of the *colonized* and if so, in what sense?

Despite these terminological problems, the fundamental point that we can draw from the work of the postcolonialists remains valid: namely, that within settler colonies the settlers–the colonizers–quickly came to exert the overwhelming preponderance of power. Of course, this is not to say that that power was neither resisted nor contested. One of the most prominent developments in the historiography of this generation and the former has been the recognition that in almost every set of social or political relationships, even those among masters and slaves, that those traditionally regarded as power-less have had at least some room for maneuver, and that the power-ful have often found it advisable to negotiate their authority with them. To whatever extent this preponderance of power was subject to negotiation, however, its existence is undeniable, and that existence raises the larger questions of how settlers managed to acquire it, how they expressed it, and to what effect. By what process did they go about transforming an indigenous America into a colonial *British* America? These are the questions I propose to deal with in this paper.

To some important extent, settler power derived from superior numbers. As settler population increased, spread through the countryside in any colony, and reorganized existing landscapes, it quickly came to play a predominant role within those landscapes. Yet, simple numerical preponderance was unnecessary for the English/British to establish their supremacy. In several West Indian colonies and in lowcountry South Carolina, free settlers constituted a majority of the emigrant population for only a few decades. Yet, they were still able to establish and maintain their supremacy over the political societies they established there. So it was not just numbers of people but the goals those people brought with them and their success in achieving them that were chiefly responsible for the extraordinary defining power they managed to exert in their new societies. Mostly, if not overwhelmingly English, the settlers of the earliest colonies–in the Chesapeake and New England and in the Atlantic island of Bermuda and the West Indian islands of Barbados and the Leeward Islands–came with the intention of establishing provincial societies along English lines. In later colonies, the proportion of English emigrants was smaller but still sufficient to enable them to pursue the same goal. Conquered colonies fell into a special category. In those in which most of the established settlers left with the arrival of the English, including Jamaica in 1655, and East and West Florida in 1763, English immigrants had a relatively free hand to do what they wanted. But in those in which the majority of established settlers remained behind–and this was the case with New York, New Jersey, and Delaware--English newcomers were no less determined to render their new homes English but it took them several decades and substantial concessions to reach this goal. Conquered colonies to which

English immigration was initially slight, such as Nova Scotia, represented a special case that proves the rule. Without English settlers pursuing the goal of creating English societies, Nova Scotia remained an essentially French colony until British settlement there began in earnest after1748. With an already dense population of French people and only a small number of British immigrants, Quebec remained an essentially French settlement with French laws and a French civil and religious establishment. Wherever English settlers came to dominate the public life of a colony, however, they, operating under broad constraints set down by a weak, distant, and often negligent metropolitan government with little capacity for coercion, became the central agents of turning indigenous into British Americas.

This is to say that most of the agency in the construction of the new polities that comprised early modern empires rested in the hands of the settlers themselves. They settled and reconstructed the new spaces, creating the economic and household structures that enabled them to live in those spaces, and their agents--in the form of representatives and magistrates--largely fashioned the systems of laws and governance that enabled them to regulate social and economic interactions and to govern the acquisition and circulation of property in land, slaves, and material goods. Of course, they were not entirely free agents in this process. In particular, they were restricted by their metropolitan legal and cultural inheritance. In the English colonies, this meant that they were reproducing variants of the common law cultures they had left behind, cultures that, varying from one political entity to another according to local custom, gave them enormous flexibility in adapting the law to local conditions while at the same time marking them as resolutely, even militantly, English.

To the extent that they had any qualms about what they were doing to local indigenous peoples and to Africans, settlers justified their behavior in terms of the story they constructed to explain the larger meaning of their lives. According to that story, which was the same throughout the English and many other parts of the newly colonized worlds of the Americas, they were engaged in a noble enterprise: the bringing of previously improperly exploited territories into a cultivated state. They were constructing outposts of European civility and thereby beginning the work of bringing civilization to a vast new world. This ennobling--and enabling--story provided the rationale for the wholesale expansion of settlement throughout the colonial era, as settlers rushed to establish new political units to bring law and governance wherever they went. The spread of settlement thus represented an astonishing spread of culture as frontiers rapidly became backcountries and backcountries quickly developed into forecountries.

A particularly interesting approach to the study of this broad cultural transformation is through the study of identity: what did English/British colonists do to make their new political societies English or British–and why was that process important? Difficult as it may be to understand now, the study of identity, or character, carried relatively little legitimacy among historians as short a time as a quarter of a century ago. To be sure, scholars in American studies after World War II exhibited a strong interest in studying the American character, and the psychologist Erik Erikson produced an intriguing and influential essay on American identity in the 1950s. But relatively few historians followed suit, regarding such questions as fluff, subordinate to the political, economic, intellectual, and social questions that then lay at the center of the historical enterprise.

My own interest in such questions dates back more than half a century to the early 1950s when, as a young researcher in London, I found myself fascinated by one of the central features of the chorographies, histories, and travel accounts emanating from the early colonies, which I was then reading for the first time: invariably, they included sections, and often substantial sections, on the *character* of the place and the people that the authors were describing. But I did not seriously nor systematically pursue this fascination for another twenty years until I received an invitation to give a set of three lectures in southern history at Mercer University. I was then deep into the study of various features of the development of British plantation colonies, and I decided to give my lectures on the changing corporate identity of three plantation colonies, Virginia, Jamaica, and South Carolina, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. My working title, *Paradise Defined,* was intentionally ironic. These lectures were pretty crude. But in the process of putting them together and later trying–so far unsuccessfully--to expand them into a book, I had to confront a number of questions about the study of corporate identity, and I made a number of significant discoveries, some of which I want to share with you here.

Identity, by which we mean how individuals or collectivities identify themselves to themselves and to others and how others identify them, can be studied on a variety of levels and through a number of different strategies. It can be studied on a individual level and on any of the many other levels on which people organize themselves into collective or corporate entities. Not only every individual but every family, every kinship group, every congregation, every club, every community, every polity, every language group, every denomination, every province, every nation has an identity to which a sufficient number of members conform enough of the time to give it some credibility–and utility. The specific kind of identity that interested me was the corporate identity of colonies, in colonial British America during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, particularly in the three colonies I treated in my original lecture and in Barbados, which I added to the project later.

My first discovery was that each of the colonies I was treating had a distinctive identity and that that identity changed over time. All four places shared several common attributes: they shared a common English/British social, cultural, political, and legal heritage and a Protestant religious heritage, they were incorporated into the same extended polity, they were located in tropical or semi-tropical places, they developed plantation agricultural systems based on unfree white and enslaved black and indigenous labor; a large proportion, if not a majority, of their populations consisted of enslaved people; each place developed valuable export trades to the British isles and elsewhere; their dominant populations shared common economic, social, and political objectives; and they were highly successful economic enterprises. Indeed, metropolitans thought of them as Britain's four most valuable colonies. Yet, they constructed demonstrably different identities for themselves. Obviously the product of generations of living and acting together within the same polity, the distinctiveness of these identities was so pronounced as to render highly problematic any effort to talk about a mainland identity among British North American colonies or a general West Indian identity.

Notwithstanding these differences in outcome, the process of identity formation in these new societies–and this was my second important

discovery–was remarkably similar, and it involved three overlapping stages. Early on, as I pondered what strategy to pursue in investigating my project, I figured out that one might approach the study of identity either through the laws these societies made for themselves or through the contemporary discursive literature emanating from and about them. In many ways, I have subsequently decided, the first approach may well be the better one. Probably nothing reveals a political society's identity, changing over time, so fully as its laws and the judicial actions taken to enforce those laws. Law is the result of the collective action of the lawmakers, who, in the societies under consideration, were representative of the independent people in them, and the laws both represent the values of those independent people and reveal the behaviors by other segments of the population that to some extent provoked those laws.[2] Perhaps largely because I first identified the subject and defined the parameters of the project through extensive reading in the discursive literature, however, this is not the approach I chose. This decision turned out to be a useful one because changes in the nature of the discursive literature enabled me to identify the three phases in the creation of colonial corporate identities.

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I have treated this subject at greater length in Jack P. Greene, "By Their Laws Shall Ye Know Them": Law and Identity in Colonial British America," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 33 (Autumn 2002), 247-60.

In the first phase, the literature concentrated heavily upon describing the physical spaces a given colony was to occupy and on developing proposals for the effective use of that space. Travel reports, sometimes masquerading as histories, and promotional tracts sought to describe and to evaluate for metropolitan readers the nature of the land, the vegetation, the indigenous peoples, the rivers and streams, the harbors, the wildlife, the rainfall, and the climate. They speculated about what products then in demand on the eastern side of the Atlantic might be produced there and imagined how that peculiar physical space might be adapted to English designs. If they often discussed the perils that made life difficult or uncongenial to English people, they tended to emphasize the promise that would make colonization attractive to prospective investors and immigrants. The longer a colony took to develop, the longer this first phase persisted. Relatively short in Barbados, it extended far longer in Virginia, Jamaica, and South Carolina.

In the second phase of identity formation, the focus of contemporary literature, which often took the form of chorographies or histories, shifted from what could be done in a particular physical space to what the settlers had or had not done to render them productive recognizably English places. The principal emphasis in this literature, in other words, was no longer upon a colony's physical attributes, though these were never ignored, but upon the social, economic, cultural, and political changes wrought by the settler population. The authors of this literature, creoles and assimilated immigrants, took pride in and examined in detail the extent to which settlers had been able to adapt English social and cultural practices–including patterns of land occupation, layout of urban, village, and rural settlements, land use, modes of economic production and distribution, family and household structures, housing, domestic and animal husbandry, diet, clothing, political and religious organization, and, perhaps, most important of all, legal structures--to the physical conditions they had encountered in their new places of abode. With few exceptions, they celebrated these adaptations as evidence of the substantial *improvements* that they and their ancestors had wrought upon the social landscapes they had seized from the indigenous inhabitants. In the process, they took the

first steps in creating the rationale by which their descendants and later generations of immigrants would expand around the continent or on to other islands, seeing themselves as engaged in a massive civilizing process by which formerly unproductive and unorganized land was transformed into productive and organized entities along European lines. Often, this literature was exhortatory, urging settlers on to efforts that would more fully realize the physical potential of a given colony and eliminate those features that cast doubt upon the depth and extent of their Englishness.

This focus upon depicting a colony as an improved, improving, and still improvable place, with the definition of improvement resting heavily upon English models, continued into the next stage of identity formation. In this third stage, however, the emphasis shifted to an articulation of the specific emerging identity of the colony and its peoples (principally of course its free peoples). The claim of the authors of the chorographies, histories, and other descriptive literature produced by settlers and their auxiliaries in this third phase was that each of these ostensibly British places had achieved a settled identity of its own, a distinctive identity growing out of and interacting with its specific physical space and the character of the society that had developed there through the collective activities over generations of the people who had resided there and made a history together. This distinctive identity, they suggested, both identified the place and distinguished it from all other similar entities. The implicit suggestion in the commentaries and works that illustrate this third phase of identity formation was that the earliest generations of settlers may have started out trying to recreate little Englands in the Americas, but in every case they had wound up *reformulating Englishness* to suit the specific conditions they had found or created in each province. Evident in just about every aspect of their lives and societies, the process of reformulation, these writers suggested, had wound up creating distinctive provinces with distinctive identities. Moreover, the claim of these writers was not only that a given colony had become a distinctive corporate entity unlike any other similar entity in the British world but also that its residents had become a distinctive people unlike the British people who lived anywhere else. If they had once been all (or mostly) English, they were now Virginian, Barbadian, Jamaican, or South Carolinian variants of English.

But making the case for provincial distinctiveness did not require the rejection of English/British standards and models. The residents of the four colonies had a number of features in common. Building on the achievements of their forebears, they all shared the experience of founding and developing new British entities in the New World. While maintaining a connection with Britain, they also shared the experience of interacting with peoples among them who were not English: indigenous peoples in Virginia and South Carolina, and African peoples in all four colonies. Most of all, however, they shared an identity as English people overseas with a profound reverence for all the characteristics that that identity was thought to entail, including a deep attachment to English forms of consensual governance, to the system of English laws with its emphasis upon the rule of law and the sanctity of private property, to Protestantism, and to the commerce that had long kept them in close contact with the parent society. Indeed, they all saw their provincial identities as variations of this larger English or British identity.

My third important discovery was that two analytically and functionally distinct types of cultural models were at work in the process by which the free settlers in the colonies came to understand who they were. Borrowing from reference group theory, we can call these types of models *normative* and *comparative*. For English colonists, Britain, with its complex and rich culture, provided a normative model from which the founders of the colonies, the charter groups, could draw selectively in their efforts to create offshoots of the Old World in the New and upon which later generations of settlers could model their own schemes for improving their society. Normative models supply standards against which cultural achievements can be measured and social development assessed. In the process of identity formation in colonial British America, however, the mimesis of metropolitan models was always selective. Settlers picked and chose from among the vast store of traits or practices that English metropolitan society provided. Comparative models, which can be either positive or negative, could be used, by contrast, to refer to those people, principally indigenous and African, whose seemingly outlandish deportment and rude and uncultivated behavior provided examples of what settlers hoped not to become. To some extent, non-English residents of the colonies could function in a similar way, while for those colonies situated in close proximity to the colonies of foreign powers, such as South Carolina and Jamaica, the Catholic residents of those places could also function as negative comparative models. Inevitably, of course, the often intimate cultural negotiations that went on between the dominant settler populations and these negative reference groups, these *others*, constituted an important element in the process of reformulating Englishness into distinctive provincial cultures.

My fourth important discovery was that these provincial identities long survived the dismemberment of the British Empire in the 1780s. The American Revolution certainly had an impact upon those identities, providing a new set of heroes and a new frame of reference for the new continental states and a sense of isolation, loss, even impotence among the old West Indian colonies. Provincial identities not only differed one from another over British America, they also changed within themselves over time in response to new conditions. But the core of the identities that had begun to form during the early generations in all four colonies remained intact and important, at least through the 1820s when I ended my study. In Virginia and South Carolina, they survived the incorporation of those states into the American union. In Barbados and Jamaica, they survived the new imperial system that began to emerge in the 1790s and even the metropolitan attack on and eventual elimination of slavery in the early 1830s.

These insights, drawn from a study of four colonies, can, I suggest, illustrate the broad outlines of the process by which colonial settlers and their auxiliaries turned portions of America into a variety of recognizably British–not Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch or French–but British Americas. To describe the essential elements in this process in broad strokes, the overwhelmingly English people who created and organized all of the English or, after 1707, British colonies in America took with them to their new homes explicit and deeply-held claims to the culture they left behind and to the national identity implicit in that culture. Everywhere they went to colonize, they manifested their powerful determination to express and preserve their Englishness by reordering existing physical and cultural

landscapes along English lines, imposing upon them English patterns of land occupation, economic and social organization, cultural practices, and political, legal, and religious systems, and making the English language the language of authority. This was true even of those settlements formed by those who, like Massachusetts Puritans, hoped to improve upon English institutions. Far from being moderated by the contemporary importation of large numbers of Africans and the immigration of significant numbers of people from other parts of Britain, Ireland, France, Germany, and other places in Europe, this anglicizing impulse seems actually to have been reinforced during the decades after 1740 by growing communication and commercial links between the colonies and Britain and by the colonies' important participation in the imperial wars against Catholic, and allegedly despotic, France and Spain between 1739 and 1763. Probably at no time during the colonial era had colonial British patriotism and nationalism been more intense than they were at the conclusion of the Seven Years' War.

For English colonists and their descendants, however, a variety of conditions operated during the long colonial years both to render colonial claims to Englishness problematic and to enhance the urgency of such claims among immigrants and their descendants. These included the colonists' great physical distance from England; the social and cultural contrasts, especially during the colonies' earliest decades, between the simple and crude societies they were constructing and the complex and infinitely more polite society from which they came; their situation on the outermost edges of English civilization, in the midst of populations who to them appeared pagan, barbarous, and savage; the presence, if not the preponderance, in their societies of aliens, in the form of Amerindians and, later, Africans; their frequent reliance upon new institutions, such as plantations and chattel, race-based slavery; their persistent conflicts with the parent state over whether they, as colonists, were entitled to English laws and privileges; and, perhaps most important of all, a general tendency among people in the home islands to regard them as "others" who fell considerably short of metropolitan standards.

Nothing brought home more forcefully to colonists the problematic character of their claims to a British identity than the various measures at issue between the colonies and Britain between 1764 and 1776. At bottom, the colonists objected to being taxed and governed in their internal affairs without their consent precisely because such measures were contrary to the rights and legal protections traditionally enjoyed by free or "independent" Britons--and thus called into question their identity as British people. The vociferousness of their objections, which stretched beyond the revolting colonies to Nova Scotia, the West Indies, and the Atlantic islands, proclaimed the profound importance they continued to attach to maintaining that identity. Indeed, what came to be known as the American Revolution was to a significant degree a direct outgrowth of colonial resistance to those measures and should be understood as a movement by colonial Britons to secure metropolitan acknowledgment of their British identity and to prove to themselves that they were worthy of that identity. Before the winter of 1775-76, when sentiment for independence became widespread, union among the colonies was little more than a means to this end. Separately, they had little hope of fending off the naval and military might of the parent state.

Important as it was, the colonists' shared identity as free-born and Protestant Britons was always mediated through a set of colonial identities. Over the years, each colony, as a separate and semi-autonomous social and political entity, evolved a specific corporate identity peculiar to itself. Rooted in a particular physical space, manifested in a specific form of socio-economic organization, extended, modified, and refined by decades of collective experience, and internalized by several generations of creoles and immigrants, these colonial identities and the loyalties and commitments associated with them had, by the era of the American Revolution, become powerfully intrenched.[3]

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For an elaboration of this point, see Jack P. Greene, "State and National Identities in the Era of the American Revolution," in Don H. Doyle and Marco Pamplona, eds., *Nationalism in the New World* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 61-79, from which this and the next few paragraphs have been adapted.

If the colonists shared a common British identity, that identity thus everywhere existed in symbiosis with another identity that was locationally and socially based, historically grounded, explained, and justified, culturally transmitted from one generation to the next, and prescriptive. *Briton* was thus a category with many subcategories. To be a Virginian was to be different from a Pennsylvanian or a Rhode Islander. If the North American colonists undertook political resistance to defend their claims to a British identity, they also brought to that resistance well-developed and deeply held provincial identities with which they were comfortable, of which they were proud, and about which they could be extraordinarily defensive. If attacks upon their entitlement to a British national identity drove the colonists to resist, the strength of their provincial identities helps to explain why they were not more hesitant in 1776 to give up their British identity. Long before, in most cases, they had found ways to fold their British identity--with its emphasis upon Protestantism, liberty, rule of law, consensual governance, civility, and commerce--into their provincial identities. For that reason, when the colonists abandoned their formal connection with Britain, they did not so much forfeit their national British identity as reaffirm their attachment to and exemplification of its principal components. Secure in their several provincial identities, colonial resistance leaders could relinquish the association with Britain and transform colonies into republican polities without fear of losing their longstanding and psychologically important sense of themselves as free-born Protestant peoples and legitimate heirs to British traditions of consensual governance and rule of law. By asserting their distinctive provincial identities and pointedly carrying them over into the new states they created out of the old colonial polities, Revolutionary leaders everywhere effectively staked out a claim for those states as the genuine repositories of all that was admirable about the British national identity and thereby reiterated their continuing *cultural* identification with the larger British world to which they had so long been attached.

In making these points, I have two larger objectives. The first is to emphasize the variety, strength, and distinctiveness of the identities of the states that came together to form an American national union during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The second is to underline the important fact that in addition to contiguity, a community of economic, political, and cultural interests, and a shared experience in society and state founding over earlier generations, the common British elements in these distinctive identities formed one of the principal preconditions for and adhesive elements in the creation of that union. Which is to say that the political societies that formed the American union were all built upon British cultural, political, social, and legal foundations as they had been

reformulated in different ways over time in response to new conditions and developments.

What do the developments I have been describing may have to tell us about the nature of the American political union formed between 1774 and 1787 and the extension of that union over the next few generations.

As to the first point, throughout the Revolutionary era--and in the founding states probably for several decades thereafter--the provincial identities those states brought with them into the union represented the principal form of collective political consciousness. Although the strong and surprisingly pervasive feelings of identification with the "common cause" in 1774-76 provided a foundation for the early articulation of aspirations for the creation of a broader American identity, such "national" enthusiasm, always tempered by recognition of the incredible diversity among the colonies and was of short duration. Already by late 1776 it had begun to weaken in the face of a variety of conflicts among the states, conflicts which both expressed and sharpened the older provincial identities by which people in all the original states continued to define themselves. This growing awareness of provincial differences provided the foundation for unfavorable comparisons and growing jealousies. As delegates sized up representatives from other colonies and found them wanting, they also developed an enhanced appreciation for what it was about their own provincial society that made it superior to those in other regions, thus powerfully reinforcing the provincial identities that they had brought with them to Philadelphia.

At the same time, the rapidity with which the state governments seized power and established their authority effectively insured that provincial distinctions, with all the specific identities they involved, would gain in intensity. In effect, the composite American federal state in its initial form thus created an arena for the reiteration and sharpening of provincial state identities. The deep attachment to local rights, manners, and identities enormously affected the nature of the national government and dictated that attachments people had to it would be secondary to the primary attachments they had to their own states. Given such attitudes, it is scarcely surprising that the Articles of Confederation upon which Congress eventually agreed left the balance of authority with the states. The overwhelming desire to maintain the separate independence and identities of the states thus dictated that the national government should both have limited powers and command little affection within the United States at large.

The national governments that presided over the war and Confederation periods were too feeble, too much in thrall to the states, and too remote from most peoples' lives to generate a national sense of collective identity strong enough to challenge the identities of the separate states. Formed in the shadows of and coexisting with those older and infinitely more immediate identities, American national identity remained embryonic and superficial. The manifold literary and cultural expressions of American patriotism during and after the Revolution are misleading. In the new composite American national polity, state identities would long continue to be central.

To understand in its fullest dimensions the nature of collective identity in the early republic, then, historians need to come to terms with its colonial roots and provincial variants. The powerful state identities

inherited from the colonial era and the deep-seated provincial loyalties, habits, and prejudices they expressed represented a formidable challenge to those who hoped to create a durable national union. The war-oriented and contingent union thrown together in 1775-76 did little to foster a rival national identity, and the Constitution of 1787 provided a framework in which state identities could easily coexist with an emerging American national sense of self and even retain much of their vitality.

To turn to my last point, what do the developments I have been describing suggest about the expansive American union that emerged in association with the American nation established in 1787-88. As we can surmise from the implications of the work of the postcolonialists, the colonial process did not by any means end with the formation of national entities in the Americas.[4] Indeed, in the United States and Canada, it actually intensified with the colonization of vast new areas of the continent, as swarms of settlers brought new areas under their hegemony and in the process pushed out or confined to unwanted catchment areas thousands of indigenous peoples and, wherever it was legally possible and profitable, made extensive use of African Americans in doing so. From this perspective, it seems, the national story represented just an extension of the colonial story. It was a story of expansion in which settlers, mostly heedless of the lives and rights of those who did not share their culture and did not look like them, rushed pell mell to bring new areas under their control. What could have been more thoroughly colonial?

Neither this colonizing process nor the rationale that sustained it changed much in the wake of the creation of the United States. Rather, national expansion represented an extension of colonial expansion, with a weak American state, instead of a weak British state, presiding over it. As in the pre-independence period, most of the agency rested in the hands of the settlers themselves. They poured into new territories, took the lead in driving out the indigenous populations, introduced slavery wherever legally and economically feasible, aggressively demanded the establishment of the systems of law and governance with which they were familiar, and constructed polities that were every bit as distinctive, one from another, as the early colonies. To be sure, the American national government, itself the creature of the many partially amalgamating polities, provided more help in the colonizing process than the British state had ever done, and colonization after 1790 increasingly carried with it new overtones of an *American* national destiny. In content, however, these overtones varied little from the British nationalism colonial settlers had expressed as they went to war to rescue the continent from the despotic and Catholic French or Spanish.

What I am suggesting is that the new states that took shape in Kentucky, Ohio, Iowa, Texas, Oregon--and all the others--were part of an ongoing colonizing process. If we could begin to think of these new states as colonies of settlers, rather than as creatures of the United States, and if we could reconceive of state history as the history of polity formation at sites, where, like in the old colonies, the settlers created new societies with a collective life revolving around common social patterns, a shared public life, the creation and operation of local legal structures and distinctive corporate identities, how would it reshape our understanding of American national history? This reshaping, I suggest, would produce a much more complicated--and interesting--history, a history that would focus, not just upon the limited collective activities of Americans at a national level,

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These and succeeding themes are developed at greater length in Jack P. Greene, "Colonial History and National History," William and Mary Quarterly, forthcoming.

but on developments in a variety of largely self-governing polities and of their relationships to the weak federal state. It might produce a genuinely *federal* history, instead of the *nationally*-focused, textbook-driven history in which we are presently entombed, a history that would recognize that the sum of the parts is far greater than the whole and that, even with (perhaps even because of) its formal republican structure, the American state, no less than other early modern states, was a tenuous amalgam of diverse parts, each of which enjoyed a vast amount of self-government and largely pursued its own course as locals defined it, and that the American national experience, like the colonial experience before it, was principally a collection of local experiences played out in a variety of similar but distinctive polities.

The key entry point into this massive extension of the colonial perspective into the national era, this, as it were, colonization of American national history, is through governance and law. What legal structures were created, by whom? How did people in these new societies create authority and use it to shape the societies and cultures they wanted to create? When they encountered already functioning systems of (European-style) law in polities with long histories of attachment to different national cultures with different legal systems, what did they do? [5] What were the nature and variations among the collective local identities formed through the process of living in the same polity under the same distinctive local laws? How did these deep-rooted and distinctive state identities affect a broader American national identity? What did it mean for people to have parallel collective identities, state as well as national? These are just a few of the hard and therefore deeply engaging questions that might come to the fore if we began to give the states more weight in the construction of a more fully inclusive national history. In this enterprise, early Americanists will have to take the lead. We are the only ones who have looked closely, if by no means yet closely enough, at the beginning of the story.

Focusing on the area of my specialization, this paper has not been explicitly comparative. But it has endeavored to use the experience of the British colonies to identify some general concepts and processes that may be useful in analyzing other settler colonies established in the Americas during the early modern era. On the basis of this analysis, we might propose a number of testable propositions.

First, individual participants–traders, settlers, fighting men, and missionaries, sometimes organized into expeditions, trading companies, religious orders, or families--not governments or bureaucratic officials, were the primary agents in European expansion and the transformation of indigenous cultural and political spaces into Europeanized ones.

Second, the first generation of European occupants–the charter groups–largely determined the contours of economic, social, political, legal, and religious life in every new colony or province.

Third, these charter groups and their descendants, driven by a desire to maintain their connection to the metropolitan culture from which they emanated and to command the respect of that culture, exhibited a powerful mimetic impulse to transplant metropolitan culture to their new places of abode.

Fourth, in the process of transplantation, colonial groups found it necessary to reformulate, that is, to creolize, metropolitan culture to adapt it to local physical conditions and to emerging socio-economic structures

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This subject is explored at length in Jack P. Greene. "The Cultural Dimensions of Political Transfers: An Aspect of the European Occupation of the Americas," unpublished paper.

and patterns of land occupation and use and to make it accommodate and control populations of different cultural backgrounds.

Fifth, the conjoint processes of transplantation and creolization produced marked cultural variations over time and space and in response to changing historical conditions within spheres of European colonization.

Sixth, these variations–as well as similarities--can best be understood through a study of changing corporate identity.

Seventh, the most promising site for such studies is at the level of the colony or province, at which the collective experience of the inhabitants with landscape reorganization, polity construction, institution building, rule making, law enforcement, and social structuring primarily took place.

Eighth, these provincial units became the principal sites for the negotiation of the distribution of authority between the center and the peripheries of national empires.

Ninth, the remarkably durable cultural hearths formed in these provincial units often became powerful engines for geographical expansion into new provinces, which in turn resulted in the creation of new polities with their own peculiar corporate identities constructed through the same process as had occurred in older provinces.

Tenth, colonialism of the kind represented by the transformation of portions of the New World into at least partially Europeanized units did not end with the achievement of independence.

Eleventh, there were powerful continuities between pre-national and post-national colonialism in terms of both polity building and identity formation within polities.

Twelfth, after independence, as before, public life continued to center in the provinces, not in the nation.

Thirteenth, long after the casting off of imperial connections and the formation of national, often federal, governments, existing provincial identities continued to be the primary form of corporate identity.

Fourteenth, the construction of national histories has operated to obscure the continuing importance of the province as a political collectivity and the weakness of national identity.

Fifteenth, an emphasis on national *styles* of colonial formation has obscured the commonalities in this process over time, space, and culture.

Whether these hypothesis, drawn principally out of my own study of colonial British America, may be useful in organizing historical investigation in other cultural areas must be left to specialists in those areas.