

**The Theory and Practice of Memory:
Perspectives in the Early American Republic**

Remarks By

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Historians of the early American Republic are clearly exemplifying that “turn to memory in the humanities” with which this conference is concerned. Yet, for all of the attention that they are lavishing upon memory, they have not yet met—nor, to my knowledge, are any attempting to meet—an important goal that Alan Confino has prescribed for all historians of memory. Confino maintains that we must go beyond using “memory” as a “heuristic” concept.¹ We must, he contends, “historicize memory” itself, asking whether memory “was indeed a contemporary metaphor,” and examining “memory as part of the mental equipment of a society” or “age.”² The “real problem,” to ponder, he has suggested, may be why “people construe the past using the term ‘memory’ at all.”³

In this presentation, drawing primarily upon periodical literature published in America between 1775 and 1840, I wish to take a first step toward historicizing memory. My approach will be to use these sources to briefly describe examples of the theory and practice of memory in the Early Republic with particular regard to Native Americans, women, and the use of physical “props” to aid memory.⁴ This approach reveals an ensemble of valences of “memory” that were available to discussants in the era of the New Republic. I contend that it is only by registering these valences that we can begin to understand any particular discourse about memory in the New Republic, or the inter-relationships of contemporaneous memorializing discourses to each other.

During his 1824-1825 visit to Nashville on a nationwide memorializing tour, the Marquis De Lafayette reportedly dined with Timothy Demundrune, denominated “the first white man in

¹Alan Confino, “Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method.” *American Historical Review* 102 (December 1997): 1403.

²Ibid. 1403.

³Ibid. 1403.

⁴Cf., reference to “the props of our memory” in “National Poetry.” *The North American Review* 8 (December 1818): 174.

Tennessee”—a designation hinting that remembrance in the early republic could serve to delineate the boundaries of the social community.⁵ To what degree was this true where Native Americans were concerned? In an era in which U.S. government policy toward Native Americans culminated in the forced removal of the Cherokees in 1838-1839, in what instances and ways might the dominant white culture’s perceptions of the social fitness of Native Americans have relied upon evaluations by whites of the propriety of Native American memory and memorialization?

One of the major associations of the word “memory” in the new republic was with a public petition or pleading, as in a “memorial and remonstrance.”⁶ A Native American group that overtly deployed memory in its remonstrances was the Cherokee Nation. In 1827, the Cherokees adopted a constitution closely paralleling the wording of the Constitution of the United States. Plainly, the Cherokees hoped that by doing so they would evoke sympathetic memories in the United States of what it meant to be a politically developing nation. Four years later, an editorial in the *Cherokee Phoenix* drew upon memories of “the promises of Washington and Jefferson as it protested the United States government’s plans to force the Cherokees to move west of the Mississippi.⁷ However, in his 1830 State of the Union Address, Andrew Jackson dismissed as irrelevant to the issue of removal memories of either U.S. or Cherokee Founding Fathers. Declared Jackson: “Doubtless it will be painful [for the Cherokees] to leave the graves of their fathers; but what do they more than our ancestors did, or than our children are now doing....Our children by the thousands yearly leave the land of their birth to seek new

⁵Review of *Lafayette in America in 1824-1825; or Journal of a Tour in the United States*, by A Levasseur. *The American Quarterly Review* 6 (December 1829): 490.

⁶Cf., Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), s.v. “memorial.”

⁷Elias Boudinot, Editorial in the *Cherokee Phoenix*, 12 November 1831, as reprinted in Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green, eds. *The Cherokee Removal: A Brief History With Documents* (New York: Bedford University Press, 195), 136.

homes in distant regions.”⁸ In other words, the Cherokees should imitate the willingness of U.S. citizens to remove themselves from land associated in memory with their own political forbears. Interestingly, in 1839, as the removal of the Cherokees was forcibly completed, a school reader, published for the dominant white culture, expressed fear that the memory of violence against Indians by their fathers was having a deleterious moral influence on the rising generation of boys:⁹

There is one trait of character in our American boys, which...deserves to be checked;...that...disposition which leads to an incessant warfare on familiar birds and the lesser quadrupeds. As soon as a boy can hurl a stone, he becomes a Nimrod, and goes forth as a mighty hunter against the blue-birds, cat-birds, swallows and robins.... Why is it...? Have we derived from our fathers a spirit of extermination? Because [they]...slaughtered the Indians...have we derived...a spirit...which...lives in our children, and vents itself on cats and birds?

Of course not all memory talk regarding Native Americans was so transparent. To understand more obscure references we must go deeper into the nuances of memory discourse in the New Republic.

In 1790, a Philadelphia periodical printed an article that quoted Thomas Jefferson on his excavation of a Native American burial mound. Jefferson had written that the bodies within the mound showed every appearance of having been “emptied promiscuously from a bag or basket, and covered over with the earth, without any attention to their order.”¹⁰ Human bones “of the most distant parts were found together; as, for instance, the small bones of the foot in the hollow of a skull.”¹¹ The scene was one of “the utmost confusion,” and yet Jefferson knew of no other “monument” from Native American culture, for he would not “honor with that name [of

⁸Andrew Jackson, State of the Union Address, as excerpted in *Ibid.*, 120.

⁹Samuel G. Goodrich, *The Third Reader: For the Use of Schools* (Louisville, KY: Morton and Griswold, c. 1839), 100.

¹⁰Thomas Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, as quoted in Noah Webster, “Letter from Mr. Noah Webster to the Rev. Dr. Stiles, President of Yale College, on the remains of the fortifications in the western county (concluded from vol. VI., page 234).” *The American Museum or Universal Magazine*.... 7 (June 1790): 324.

¹¹Thomas Jefferson, as quoted in *Ibid.* 324.

‘monument’]...arrow points, stone hatches” and other less substantial remains.¹² Contemporary readers of Jefferson’s appraisal may have discerned in the emphasis on the disorderliness of the mound an accusation more severe than that Indian memorists had been untidy. Readers might have understood Jefferson to be suggesting that the natives’ performance of memory perverted memory itself. Discussants of memory in periodicals in the New Republic regularly insisted that memory and order were properly coeval. As, an essayist in an education journal explained, “we” should not “throw in” to the “storehouse” of memory “all of the broken and useless furniture that we can find room for.”¹³ A Methodist minister told congregants that “when notions are heaped incoherently in the memory without order..., they confound and overthrow the memory,” and teachers of mnemonics in the early republic—drawing upon techniques that hearkened back to Simonides in ancient Greece—instructed students to imagine rooms in their minds in which they were to mentally organize memory-producing mental images, thinking of each image with reference to a specific room or *loci*.¹⁴ For readers of Jefferson’s appraisal who assumed an affiliation between order and proper memorialization, the disorderly burial mound could hardly have been seen as an example of the latter.

No less central than “order” in the dominant white culture’s conception of proper memory was “understanding.” In this vein, a religious periodical asserted that if catechisms are only to be learned by rote, and understanding them is optional, they might as efficaciously be

¹²Thomas Jefferson, as quoted in *Ibid.*, 323.

¹³William B. Fowle, “Boston Monitorial School.” *American Journal of Education*. 1 (February 1826): 78.

¹⁴“Extracts from Dr. Samuel Annesley’s Sermon on a Good Memory in Spiritual Things.” *Mutual Rights and Methodist Protestant*. 1 (November 1824): 158.; “Life of Simonides.” *The New York Magazine, or Literary Repository* 1 (May, 1796): 245-249, especially 246, where the anonymous author specifically states that Simonides demonstrated an awareness of “how necessary order is” in memory; cf., the reference to “apartments...in which memory stores its merchandize [sic]” in “Dacanthus,” “Essay on Imagination and Memory.” *The Massachusetts Magazine* (Boston: July 1792): 440. More generally on Simonides, mnemonics, and the concept of *loci* see Daniel L. Schachter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 46-47.

repeated “backwards” as forwards.¹⁵ An Education journal maintained that memorization without understanding was only appropriate for a “brute,” and an essayist in the *Philadelphia Repository and Weekly Register* stressed that what distinguished human memory from the memory of “brutes” was superior human understanding.¹⁶ Given the ubiquity with which contemporary writers made such assertions, one may read an 1829 review of Frenchman Auguste Levasseur’s *Lafayette in America* as portraying Native Americans as brutish memorists.

As that review summarized Levasseur’s narrative, it related several examples of Lafayette’s encounters with Native Americans during the general’s 1824-1825 memory tour. In one of these, a group of Canadian Indians had sung memorized Christian hymns. The *Review* editorialized: “[It] is pitiable to behold these poor wretches, singing through the nose psalms, and performing a worship which they do not understand.”¹⁷ Elsewhere, an Indian woman “called Mary,” was reported to have shown Lafayette a half-century old letter he had written to her father, a letter that Mary now carried in a pouch in her bosom “as a powerful charm to secure for her the protection of the Americans.”¹⁸ The emphasis on Mary using the letter as “a powerful charm” conjures irrationality, and readers may have interpreted both the Native choir and Mary as exemplifying a brutish dissociation of rational understanding from memory and memorialization.

Perhaps Mary’s performance as a memorist raised questions for some readers about gender and memorialization in Native American societies. Years before, Benjamin Franklin—as extracted in *The Massachusetts Magazine* in 1791, a year after his death—had marveled that

¹⁵“Abuse of Chatechisms.” *The American Sunday School Magazine*. 6 (June 1829): 167.; cf., “Rules for Composing Catechisms for Children.” *The American Sunday School Magazine*. 2 (September 1825): 264; “An Address to Parents and Ministers on the Importance of Chatechistical Instruction and the Duty of Teaching Children the Assembly’s Catechism.” 3 (October 1811): 296.

¹⁶“Common Education.” *American Journal of Education*. 2 (March, 1827): 162; “Of Memory.” *Philadelphia Repository and Weekly Register*. 5 (April 27, 1805): 130.

¹⁷Review of *Lafayette in America*..., 473-474.

“The Indian women...hand down to posterity the memory of public transactions,” and doing so is considered “natural and honorable” for them.¹⁹ No less amazing to Franklin was the women’s skill in fulfilling their obligations as memorists: “...They preserve the tradition of the stipulations in treaties a hundred years back; which when we compare with our writings, we always find exact.”²⁰ Franklin’s surprise at the prominent role of female memorists in Indian culture suggests that women in the dominant white culture in the era of the Early Republic had a comparatively minor role as memorists. In fact, both the place of women in collective memory in white culture and their role as memorists changed between 1790, when Franklin died, and 1835. Reflecting and encouraging this change were evolving references in periodical literature of the Early Republic, beginning in the 1830s, to “Mary, Mother of Washington”--an appellation perhaps intended to conjoin civil and Christian religion by correlating Mary Washington with Jesus’s mother.²¹ As late as the 1820s, Mary was “little known” to the nation.²² Then, in 1831, the *Ladies Magazine and Literary Gazette* offered readers an essay portraying her as a “pious,” “lofty-minded and intrepid” woman with “one weakness alone:” she “was afraid of lightning,”²³ The magazine stressed that Mary “held in reserve an authority which never departed from her,” and to which her son, the general, offered “dutiful and implicit obedience” to the day of her death, long after he had achieved fame.²⁴ This portrayal of Mary as an authoritative “model” of “female excellence” was circumscribed by the assertion that Mary’s life demonstrated that: “The Character of woman becomes distinguished much oftener by the reflection of her great and good

¹⁸Ibid., 490.

¹⁹ Benjamin Franklin, “Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America.” *The Massachusetts Magazine or Monthly Museum*. 3 (November 1791): 686.

²⁰Ibid., 686.

²¹“Mary, the Mother of Washington.” *The Christian Watchman*. 6 (June 1833): 266-269.

²²“The Mother of Washington,” *Ladies Magazine and Literary Gazette*. 4 (September 1831): 384.

²³Ibid., 390.

²⁴Ibid., 393.

qualities, in...men with whom she is...connected or associated [than by]...extraordinary achievements in her own person.”²⁵

One should not read this last caveat as simply nullifying the picture of Mary Washington as a powerful woman. Readers were being encouraged to understand that Mary Washington’s nurturing of young George had been a private act with profound public implications. In 1833, *The Christian Watchman* asserted that the lesson of Mary Washington’s life was that mothers have power as memorists: “Impressions made in infancy, if not indelible, are effaced with difficulty and renewed with facility; and upon the mother therefore, must frequently, if not generally, depend the fate of the son.”²⁶ Two years later, in 1835, an essayist in *The Knickerbocker*, noted that “the mind of Washington” was “formed” by his mother, underscoring that mothers are the keepers of the “heirloom” of American history, conveyors of the nation’s collective memory to its rising generation.²⁷ The next year, apparently to show that mothers could successfully transmit this heirloom, *American Ladies Magazine* published a fictional narrative in which a jurist explained that his decision to become a judge had stemmed from his mother having “one evening told me of Patrick Henry....”

What were the reasons for this emphasis in periodicals from about 1830 on the role of mothers as keepers of the national memory? Historian Nancy Cott has shown for New England that between 1780 and 1835 the social role of men was being defined as working outside of the home, and child-rearing was increasingly seen as women’s work.²⁸ What I want to stress is that at the same historical moment, there was heightening anxiety about the cultural imperative of conveying the nation’s collective memory to its children. By the 1830s, the last survivors of the

²⁵Ibid., 385.

²⁶“Mary, the Mother of Washington,” *The Christian Watchman*. 6 (June 1833): 269.

²⁷Female Character,” *The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine* 6 (September 1835): 214.

Revolutionary generation were being laid in their graves, and with them the last direct memories of the Revolution. To use the language of memorists in that era: the rising generation might willfully “recollect,” or reconstruct, the collective memory of the Revolution, but it would not have the “involuntary,” direct, unmediated memory of the Revolution that the now-dead veterans had known.²⁹ Henceforth, “memory” of the Revolution would be metaphorical, artificial, second-hand memory, not personal reminiscence. Such artificial memory would have to be inculcated into children. They would have to be educated into it. By 1830, educating children was women’s work. Mothers as teachers thus became crucial in the project of conveying the collective memory of the nation.

In 1833, *The Christian Watchman* dubbed a memorial built to that icon of home education Mary Washington “the first Public Monument ever raised to the memory of a Woman in the New World.”³⁰ When President Andrew Jackson, speaking at its dedication, expressed hope that the monument would “convey practical lessons to the world,” he exemplified a determination that had been gaining ground in the United States since the first decade of the nineteenth century to find instructive new physical foci for the Revolution’s memorialization. Previously, the living bodies of members of the Revolutionary generation had been the most poignant cues to remember the Revolution. Now new memory props and sites would be needed.

At the same time that the rising generation was seeking and creating alternative physical instantiations of collective memories, memory itself was coming to be understood in more

²⁸Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman’s Sphere’ in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), especially 19-62.

²⁹Cf., the distinction that is expressly made between “recollection and memory” in Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), s.v. “memory,” and note Webster’s example of the American Revolution as “within the author’s memory,” contrasted with the Revolution in England being “before my memory.”; cf., the distinction between “voluntary” and “involuntary” memory in Z.L.D., “Philosophical Outlines.” *The New York Magazine or Literary Repository*. 2 (January 1791): 38; note also the distinction between “active and passive remembrance in “Of Memory.” *Philadelphia Repository*... , 130.

³⁰“Mary, the Mother...,” 267.

physicalist terms. Physicians, for example, were associating memory with specific anatomic loci. Thus, an article in the 1815 *New-England Journal of Medicine and Surgery* noted that “Unusual pressure of the skull upon...both anterior lobe of the brain” was associated with “loss of memory,” and an 1808 issue of the *The Medical Repository* reported on a physician in Paris who conceived of the remembering brain as extending outward through the body’s nerves, and insisted that strong memories were simply those that resulted from highly effective transmissions of physical sensations to the brain.³¹ Phrenologists had their own elaborate theories about the loci of different sorts of memory and knowledge, and their schematized mappings of skulls resembled nothing so much as the medieval “memory houses” that located individuated memories and associations in specific imagined rooms.³² In education journals too, there was a growing emphasis on the utility of physical memory props. An 1837 essayist in *The American Annals of Education* writing on memory and teaching went so far as to confess: “Of late [in my own teaching] I have sometimes substituted Natural History for Civil History, because the former can be best be illustrated with sensible objects.”³³

Far from substituting natural for civil history, American settlers in New Hampshire’s White Mountains willfully conflated the two. In 1820 a group of seven men ascended the highest peak in the range. Naming it “Mount Washington,” they proceeded to christen the others: Mount Adams, Mount Jefferson, Mount Monroe, Mount Franklin and Mount Clay. Next, they drank a home-made brew called “Oh-Be-Joyful,” offering toasts “in honor to the great

³¹Everard Home, “Observations on the Function of the Brain.” *The New-England Journal of Medicine and Surgery and Collateral Branches of Science* 4 (October 1815): 350; “Craniology.” *The Medical Repository of Original Essays and Intelligence, Relative to Physic, Surgery, Chemistry, and Natural History* (February-April 1808): 438-439.

³²Cf., John Bell, “On Phrenology, or the Study of the Intellectual and Moral Nature of Man.” *The Philadelphia Journal of the Medical and Physical Sciences* 4 (1822): 73-74; Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory...*, 46-47.

³³“Use and Abuse of Memory.” 11 *American Annals of Education* (1837): 491.

men.”³⁴ More than just an opportunity to imbibe spirits, their ceremony was the dedication of a memoryscape that annexed political memories to specific loci. Nearly a decade later, an essayist in Boston’s *Ladies Magazine* related that on a visit to the mountains he had chanced upon an elderly man sitting at a wayside. The older gentleman engaged him in conversation.³⁵

I remember when they gave that highest peak the name of Washington! You look as if some of those rougher and steeper summits were higher;--just so it was with the man; some said that others were greater men, but we are easily deceived; and see that cloud which has swept the tops of the other peaks as it sailed along; it did not rise near to his! I love to look at that mountain, because it reminds me of my old commander....

Another traveler’s account in *The New England Magazine* in 1835 personified Mount Washington:³⁶

Mount Washington, indeed, looked near to Heaven; he was white with snow a mile downward, and had caught the only cloud that was sailing through the atmosphere, to veil his head. Let us forget the other names of American statesmen, that have been stamped upon these hills, but still call the loftiest —WASHINGTON. Mountains are Earth’s undecaying monuments. They must stand while she endures, and never should be consecrated to the mere great men of their own age and country, but to the mighty ones alone....

This view that mountains are ideal civil monuments echoed the opinion of an anonymous writer in *The Freemason’s Magazine* in 1811 who argued that as mountains make the countryside more “distinctive” they foster an attachment to the land by its residents, which explains why “inhabitants of hilly countries are more patriotic than those that dwell upon plains.”³⁷

The same author, insisted on the value of man-made monuments to honor memories of dead patriots, and reported that: “The backwardness of our nation, in erecting [such] monuments

³⁴Morse Stearns, *Lucy Crawford’s History of the White Mountains* (Hanover: Dartmouth Publications, 1966), 5-6.

³⁵C, “Legend of the White Mountains.” 1 *Ladies Magazine* (March 1828): 135.

³⁶“A Pedestrian,” “Sketches From Memory. No. I.” *The New England Magazine*. 9 (November 1835): 322-323,

³⁷“Valley Forge.” *The Freemasons Magazine and General Miscellany*. 2 (October 1811): 53.

to those who trod the fields of danger in the revolutionary war, is universally reprobated.”³⁸ In rectifying this monumental shortfall, the author asserted that the nation should take care to selectively distribute new markers so that “Mountains[,] valleys[,] plains[,] forests [,] rivers[,] cities[,] and villages[,] which saw our fathers fight for independence” will be recognized for their “nobility,” while “those ignoble mountains[,] valleys[,] plains[,] forests [,] rivers[,] cities[,] and villages[,] which have never witnessed the feats of our heroes will remain neglected and unknown.”³⁹

By enunciating this plan to use monuments to inscribe judgment on the landscape itself, the essayist effectively brought into focus one of the central valences of memory in the new Republic: its discriminating aspect. In 1828, Noah Webster—himself deeply implicated in the project of managing national memory—had defined “memorable” as “worthy to be remembered.”⁴⁰ While the term may still be used with such a connotation in view, in the Early Republic that nuance was less elective. As already observed with reference to Jefferson’s explication of an Indian burial mound, discussants of memory in the Early Republic held that “orderliness” was essential to memory. This entailed that memory be discriminating. Thus, one writer exulted that “In proportion as the memory of small men and small things is lost, that of the truly great becomes bright,” another insisted that a good memory is like a net “so made as to confine all the great fish, but to let the little ones escape,” and a theologian aptly titled his article on memory “The Judgment Register.”⁴¹

³⁸Ibid., 51.

³⁹Ibid., 47-48.

⁴⁰Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), s.v. “memorable.”

⁴¹“Austin’s Life of Gerry.” *North American Review* (January 1829): 38; “On the Improvement of Memory,” *The Universal Asylum and Columbian Magazine* 2 (July 1792): James Floy. “The Judgment Register.” *The Methodist Magazine and Quarterly Review* (April 1838): 165-176.

The counterpart to judging where monuments should go was determining whom they should honor. By 1840, an article in *The Merchant's Magazine and Commercial Review* could—and did—list numerous monuments to those deemed heroes of the Revolution, but it questioned whether the right people were being honored. Given that there was a monument to “Spurzheim, a foreigner” at Mount Auburn in Cambridge, and that “the PARENTS of Franklin” were similarly honored in Boston, did not John Hancock, merit a monument too?⁴²

Mount Auburn, the cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts to which the essayist referred, illustrated complications that were arising by 1840 in the use of monuments as social judgment registers. Established in the early 1830s, Mount Auburn's orderly and often elaborate monuments and markers-- set amid picturesque, spacious grounds--were designed to “teach the community to pay more respect to the dead.”⁴³ However, by 1834 *The American Quarterly Observer* was complaining that Auburn illustrated how “the grave-yard is too often a place of melancholy deception.”⁴⁴ “Distinguished talents, or virtues or public services would seem to be the requisition by which the question of erecting a monument is [properly] decided,” but Mount Auburn “will always” be a place where relatives will purchase “the loveliest resting-places in the enclosure” for the deceased regardless of the departed person's true character; “nothing will meet the eye in this cemetery to make one feel that there is” a “distinction of character among the dead.”⁴⁵ In sum, as the economic expansion of the Jacksonian era was commercializing memorialization, monuments were becoming less effective for demarcating the community's sense of whom among the deceased ought to be remembered.

⁴²“Merchants Biography—John Hancock.” *The Merchant's Magazine and Commercial Review* 3 (December 1840): 525.

⁴³“Mount Auburn Cemetery.” Report of the Massachusetts Historical Society Upon the Establishment of an Experimental Garden and Rural Cemetery.” *The North American Review* 33 (October 1831): 405.

⁴⁴“Mount Auburn.” *The American Quarterly Review Observer* 3 (July 1834):162.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 162-163,

Certainly, such a change in the valences of monuments was not simply necessitated by the internal logic of contemporaneous understandings of “memory” itself. Nor did those understandings mechanically determine other major social transformations that I have noted—such as the designation of mothers as memorists in the early 1830s, or the removal of the Cherokees in 1838-1839. Yet, those changes were registered by contemporaneous discussants in language that partook of a cultural understanding of “memory” affiliated with connotations of “order,” “understanding,” “discrimination” and “judgment,” to name only a few. “Memory” was a contemporary metaphor in the New Republic, and we cannot understand how people in that era construed their own or others’ practices of memory without recovering such contemporaneous understandings of “memory” itself.