

Project Goals/Scope

Stories about the birth of nations in the Americas breaking free from European colonial empires have inspired the narratives of historians and other authors since the very inception of said nations.¹ These early histories were mostly focused on the historical trajectory of individual countries and on the heroic accomplishments of “founding fathers.”² Their conventional historical wisdom, still held today, views the nations born in the Americas during the late 18th and early 19th centuries as the products of elite action and holds that the territories, peoples, and states—the sovereignty of nations—that eventually comprised them by the mid-nineteenth century as the inevitable results of natural and autonomous historical trajectories.³

Academic historical scholarship has in the last fifty years complicated this conventional approach.⁴ But presumptions about the primacy of elite political action and the inevitable configurations of national sovereignties largely remained untouched. Only recently has historical research challenged such entrenched presumptions. New scholarship has unveiled the impact of everyday peoples (not just elites) on processes of nation-making, especially African-descended peoples and indigenous communities.⁵ New currents are also finding that the results of these processes were just one single set of many possible historical contingencies. That is, other configurations of post-colonial sovereignty—monarchies, slave regimes, fleeting nations that disappeared or fragmented—were not only possible but tried. New research is also finding how the birth and consolidation of nations in the Americas comprised highly fluid practices of territoriality, citizenship, constitutionalism, and the everyday business of rule and being ruled.⁶

This project engages these historiographic currents as they have emerged in studies about the histories of Latin America and the United States, but with an innovative twist. It examines the Americas as a common space where the first grand stage of global decolonization and its

resultant configurations and reconfigurations of post-colonial sovereignties played out—as opposed to thinking about the trajectories of individual countries and regions separately. Indeed other studies have begun to do this.⁷ The Atlantic World—understood as an expansive space encompassing the Americas but also Western Europe and the western coasts of Africa—will thus serve as the larger analytical framework of this project.

To examine how sovereignty construction played out in one corner of the Atlantic World, this project will explore the perspectives of people that occupied the middling southern elite of the Early Republic United States (1770 to 1820). They consisted of landowners, slave owners, and political actors involved in the construction of sovereignty on the state level via participation in constituent assemblies and congresses, and service as officials in frontier territories. Our central problem is this: *How did the views of sovereignty among the middling southern elite impact the actual construction of that sovereignty in the Early Republic United States?*⁸ Rather than sustain a parochial focus on just the United States, this project will maintain the Americas-wide, Atlantic-world framework at the forefront of analysis upon exploring collections held in the Southern Historical Collection of the Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This repository includes family papers, business ledgers, drafts of state constitutions, and correspondence between state and regional legislators, and slave petitions, especially from the US South, that will serve as key pieces for solving the historical puzzle stated above. The expanding slave societies of the Early Republic US South most resembled slavery-bound, frontier-oriented, plantation-centered and racially-stratified societies of early postcolonial Latin America; they lend themselves to this analytical approach. And the Southern History Collection is the foremost archival repository on the history of US South in the country. It will serve as the main repository of primary sources for this project.

References

¹ Recent studies by theorists and literary scholars identify how the writing of such stories early in the political lives of said nations actually helped to breathe life into them, at least within the imaginations of those lettered elites leading these states, during their shaky years of postcolonial infancy. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991) and Craig Calhoun, “Nationalism Matters,” in *Nationalism in the New World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 16-40. For the case of Latin America, see John Charles Chasteen, “Introduction: Beyond Imagined Communities,” in *Beyond Imagined Communities* ed. Sara Castro-Klarén and John Charles Chasteen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), ix-xxv, and Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

² For Latin America, see the historiographic essay by Jeremy Adelman, “Independence in Latin America,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 153-80.

³ For the United States, see David McCulloch, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001). In Latin America, approaching the topic of independence through the framework and trajectory of the nation and its autonomous national history remains typical fare even in sophisticated scholarly works and editions. This is especially the case with the slew of bicentennial celebrations occurring throughout the region. See Adelman, “Independence in Latin America,” and, for specific example in Paraguay, *Paraguay 1813: La proclamación de la República*, eds. Ignacio Telesca, Liliana M. Brezzo, and Herib Caballero (Asunción: Taurus, 2013).

⁴ This scholarship initially moved focus toward the economic and material bases of the political shifts producing independence and questioned whether political independence even made much difference in the lives of most people living in societies that remained highly stratified. See Adelman, “Independence in Latin America,” 157-59.

⁵ For Latin America, see: Florencia Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Sarah C. Chambers, *From Subjects to Citizens: Honor, Gender, and Politics in Arequipa, Peru 1780-1854* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). Peter Guardino, *Peasants, Politics, and the Foundation of Mexico's National State: Guerrero, 1800-1857* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996). Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005). For the United States see: Kathleen Duval, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 2016) and Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

⁶ Jeremy Adelman, *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). James E. Sanders, *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World: Creating Modernity, Nation, and Democracy in Nineteenth-century Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). Jeffrey D. Needell, *The Party of Order: The Conservatives, the State, and Slavery in the Brazilian Monarchy, 1831-1871* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). Fabricio Pereira Prado, *Edge of Empire: Atlantic Networks and Revolution in Bourbon Rio de la Plata* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015). Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche*

Empire (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). Steven Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders: The United States and its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830-1910* (New York: Viking, 2016).

⁷ Works on the colonial period have done this substantially. See J.H. Elliot, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). For the postcolonial period, see the collection of essays in *Nationalism in the New World*.

⁸This construction of sovereignty involved the definition of state and national boundaries, constitution making, definitions of rights and citizenship, the exercise of property ownership (which included ownership of people), interactions with Native American groups, and relations among other provincial territories.