ABSTRACT

AN EVOCATION OF THE REVOLUTION: 
THE PAINTINGS OF JOHN TRUMBULL AND THE PERCEPTION OF THE AMERICAN 
REVOLUTION

by Cody Nicholas Hefner

This paper utilizes the paintings of John Trumbull, an artist who served in the Revolutionary War and rubbed elbows with the most influential men of the Revolutionary generation: John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington. These paintings, shaped by the social and political atmosphere they were created in, have shaped the perception and memory of the American Revolution in a very particular way. This paper seeks to determine that perception by analyzing Trumbull himself, the political culture of the 1780s to 1820s, and the art world of the same period to better understand Trumbull’s most influential paintings and the effect they had and still have on American memory. Through the examination of John Trumbull’s paintings and their impact on the memory of the American Revolution, this paper serves as a case study for the use of images in historical understanding.
AN EVOCATION OF THE REVOLUTION:
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THE PERCEPTION OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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Introduction

“Historical Understanding is Like a Vision, Or Rather an Evocation of Images”

As footsteps echo on the marble floor of the United States Capitol’s Rotunda, visitors crane their heads towards the large dome above them, taking in the image of an immortal George Washington, flanked by the goddesses Liberty and Victory and surrounded by thirteen maidens amongst the clouds. Below Washington’s watchful eye is a frieze of American history, beginning with the landing of Christopher Columbus and ending with the American invention of flight. In between are significant events including the tale of John Smith and Pocahontas, the battle of Lexington during the Revolutionary War, the death of Tecumseh, and Confederate and Union soldiers shaking hands at the end of the Civil War. Far below the frieze are massive gilded frames surrounding scenes that shaped the American nation. To the left is Robert W. Weir’s *Embarkation of the Pilgrims* and beside it John Gadsby Chapman’s *Baptism of Pocahontas*. On the opposite side of the room are John Vanderlyn’s *Landing of Columbus* and William H. Powell’s *Discovery of the Mississippi*. The paintings evoke memories of stories of the first Thanksgiving, the romance between Pocahontas and John Smith, and the song “In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.” But across the room, directly opposite the visitor entrance, are paintings of the nation’s founding that have permeated our memories through textbooks, movies, posters, and even our currency.

Of the four paintings memorializing the nation’s beginning, the most famous is *The Signing of the Declaration of Independence*. In a crowded but neat room, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston present the Declaration of Independence to John Hancock and the members of Congress. To the painting’s right is *The Surrender of Burgoyne*, depicting the American victory and British surrender at Saratoga in 1777. *The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis* depicts the American victory that precipitated the end of the war. Finally, the last of the paintings depicting events from the American Revolution, in a room of civilian and military onlookers, General George Washington resigns his commission in the Continental Army in *The Resignation of General Washington*. These paintings, each portraying a significant moment in the American Revolution, were painted by John Trumbull, a veteran of the Revolutionary War and America’s earliest history painter. He may also have been America’s first and most vivid public relations representative for the American Revolution as a whole.

In a time where few in the population were literate, images were a powerful mode of conveying messages. People were exposed to cartoons and caricatures in newspapers, pamphlets, and flyers pinned to trees and posts that carried a political message. Trumbull’s paintings may not have been as widely accessed as these cartoons and caricatures, or even as widely viewed as newspapers and textual documents, but they have an element to them lacking in more conventional modes of conveyance. The vividness of Trumbull’s paintings evoke a sense of awe from its viewers; the representation of well-known events make viewers nostalgic of an age fading away; and the inclusion of prominent figures inspire an adoration for heroes that have ascended to an American pantheon. He hoped to awe and inspire the American people, to
“give to the present and future Sons of Oppression and Misfortune such glorious Lessons of their rights and of the Spirit with which they should assert and support them.”

In fact, by examining these paintings of events from the American Revolution one is better able to gain a sense of what the Revolution meant to the early American people. Historian Peter Burke views images as “historical evidence” that “have their place alongside literary texts and oral testimonies.” He also believes that images are reflections of specific historical meanings and influences. Cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt described images as “witnesses of the past stages of the development of the human spirit,” and objects “through which it is possible to read the structures of thought and representation of a given time.”

Aby Warburg, art-turned-cultural historian, views culture as a whole “within which artistic vision fulfills a necessary function.” Where the imagination falls short in envisioning certain historic events, images pick up the slack by presenting an often vivid scene of that event that written texts cannot do as readily. Trumbull’s paintings brought Revolutionary events to life, moving some viewers to cringe, shiver, and “feel a faintness” in their heart when they witnessed such lively scenes. Even his most persistent critic, William Dunlap, admitted that “the composition, coloring, and touch of Mr. Trumbull’s [paintings] are admirable.”

Regardless of Trumbull’s merits as an artist, he possessed an ability to capture in one image the popular sentiment and values of a culture or nation that writers could not do as easily. Such is the benefit of using images as historical evidence. The value and importance of images in historical understanding can be gained by general observation. Looking over a classroom of students or at customers in a bookstore one notices several people flipping through pages pausing on the images in a textbook or monograph. These people are indulging their short attention span by sparking a more visual interest in the material, trying to gain as much knowledge from an image and a caption with the minimal effort of reading. Though just an indulgence of a desire for more color than the black and white of text, this habit can yield some information from those images, given the proper background. In a sense, images are valuable and intelligent eye candy.

A trap that one must avoid, however, is letting images stand alone as evidence. Art historians may disagree, but for our purpose the aesthetic value of Trumbull’s artwork is minor. Both Burke and Warburg emphasize the importance of supporting images with textual evidence. “By studying all kinds of documents that by methods of historical criticism can be connected with the image in question,” Warburg states, “one must prove by circumstantial evidence that a whole complex of ideas...has contributed to the formation of the image.” Burke has pioneered the field of using images as historical evidence while supporting them with textual evidence. However, Michael Kammen serves as a mediator between Burke’s work and the examination of

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3 Ibid, 11.
6 Wind, “Warburg’s Concept of ‘Kulturwissenschaft’ and Its Meanings for Aesthetics,” in The Art of Art History, 211.
Trumbull’s paintings as facilitators for the memory of the American Revolution. Kammen examined the shifting meaning of the American Revolution in American memory by utilizing poems, plays, myths, and other elements of popular culture. He argues that the “role of the American Revolution in American tradition...has evolved and altered markedly since 1776.”7 While the social and political atmosphere of the nation has certainly shaped the interpretation of America’s creation, John Trumbull’s paintings have ensured that each shift is accompanied by certain unwavering values.

Through his paintings Trumbull hoped to diffuse “the memory of the noblest series of actions which have ever presented themselves in the history of man.”8 Trumbull’s paintings are his interpretations and his memories of those events. Aby Warburg believes that “all human products, and artistic works in particular, [are] expressions of human memory...”9 At its basest, memory is simply “the power or process of remembering.”10 The significance of memory, accurate or not, is that it helps to reinforce and promote certain values illustrated by particular historical events that form a person’s, a people’s, or a nation’s identity.

The debate between history and memory is long and complex. To many historians the two are not synonymous, as I would have to agree. History, in its simplest terms, is a past event. History, with the help of historians, is the facts of what happened. Historian Pierre Nora defines history as “the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer.”11 Historians interpret facts to give the past meaning based on those facts, but historians’ influence on the public’s mind is often limited. In the historian’s way is memory. Memory, for our purposes, is what those past events mean in a more practical, presently tangible sense. Memories imbue the past with virtue and values. If the past has no meaning, then it has no reason to be remembered. Thus, in a way, history and memory are perpetually linked. The trouble for historians is that the past can have multiple meanings, and those meanings are not always derived from the facts. American history, as all history, is populated by myths and legends that distort actual events for a larger meaning. Daniel Webster commented that “human beings are composed not of reason only, but of imagination also, and sentiment.”12 Webster acknowledges the human tendency to alter fact to imbue it with a larger moral value. One example of this tendency is Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, a political move that did very little to free a single slave or improve their condition. However, in American memory it is often seen as a moral statement about the ills of slavery and the principle of freedom. Paul Revere’s ride, a legend popularized in the nineteenth century by poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, exploits a small, in some ways failed, adventure to take the form of a metaphor for patriotism. A common man braves personal danger to save his neighbors and countrymen, and does so in daring form. Alon Confino warns that “the often-made contention that the past is constructed not as fact but as myth to serve the interest of a particular community may still sound radical to some, but it cannot

(and should not) stupefy most historians.” Such is memory, and despite its bastardization of historical fact, it holds a powerful place in the hearts and minds of the American people.

Kammen calls this shared memory tradition. Tradition, Kammen believes, “is a shared historical interest” that is composed of values and memory. Confino argues that “many a national memory succeeds to represent, for a broad section of the population, a common destiny that overcomes symbolically real social and political conflicts in order to give the illusion of a community to people who in fact have very different interests.” A communal and shared concept, tradition is informed and shaped by popular media such as stories, plays, poems, anecdotes, myths, and, in this particular case, images. History, to the common person, is simply an evocation of memories and traditions. And historical understanding, historian J.H. Huizinga argues, “is like a vision, or rather like an evocation of images.” In the wake of the American Revolution the new Americans had no heritage, no tradition of their own. They had been “liberated from the past: alike from the incubus of Old World history and from their own colonial heritage.” With no heritage of their own, one had to be created. The American Revolution served as a lumberyard for building a national tradition. John Trumbull’s brush and canvas were the tools that utilized the Revolution’s events to construct a heritage that concealed “through symbols real friction in their society.”

Trumbull’s role in the creation of an American heritage, or tradition, fulfilled the goal he explained to Thomas Jefferson. The American Revolution as Trumbull saw and portrayed it was conservative and rational, free from chaos and unnecessary bloodshed. His paintings romanticized turbulent, disruptive, divisive, and disastrous events. Ordered, civil, diplomatic, unified, and conservative; that is the American Revolution as Trumbull paints it. Gordon Wood’s The Radicalism of the American Revolution confirms much of what Trumbull’s paintings depict. “The American revolutionary leaders do not fit our conventional image of revolutionaries—angry, passionate, reckless, maybe even bloodthirsty for the sake of a cause.” Washington, Jefferson, and Adams seem to belong in “drawing rooms or legislative halls,” Wood writes. Trumbull depicts these very revolutionaries in legislative chambers of Philadelphia and Annapolis, or attending a formal military surrender where courtesy and civility take the place of bloodshed and calamity. There are no inflammatory or propagandistic paintings such as Jacques-Louis David’s The Death of Marat, Francisco Goya’s The Third of May, 1808, or even Paul Revere’s depiction of the Boston Massacre. The Signing of the Declaration of Independence, The Surrender of General Burgoyne, The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis, and The Resignation of General Washington all champion rationality and civility over bloodshed and radicalism. Trumbull sought not to enflame the passions of the American people but to inspire them and commemorate the events of the nation’s founding.

The radicalism of the American Revolution, Wood argues, lies in the substantial and “radical” social change that took place as a result. Radical in terms of most revolutions, however, generally evokes images of violent mobs, the storming of prisons, impassioned

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14 Kammen, A Season of Youth, 7-8.
16 Kammen, A Season of Youth, 77.
17 Ibid, 5.
executions of officials, and a general disarray of government. The American Revolution, in those terms, was far from radical. As Trumbull’s paintings make very clear, the American Revolution was a controlled movement by a group of leaders who concerted many of the revolutionary acts. Even the more radical acts in Boston had an almost aristocratic and respected group of leaders behind them. Samuel Adams, John Hancock, and Joseph Warren helped organize events such as the dumping of thousands of pounds of tea into Boston harbor, as well as inflammatory commemorations of the Boston Massacre. But these events were downplayed outside of Boston after the Revolution and replaced by more acceptable and conservative acts. The “meteoric glare and horrible blaze” of the French Revolution eclipsed the “calm splendor” of the American Revolution.²⁰ In response, the American Revolution became increasingly conservative, thanks in large part to a conscious effort by Trumbull.

Trumbull painted his scenes of the American Revolution in the midst and wake of the French Revolution. The chaotic and turbulent events in France in the name of revolution caused many Americans to recoil from their own revolutionary past, a response seen in Trumbull’s depictions. In the time they were painted, Trumbull’s paintings could even be called anti-revolutionary in theme. He does a very poor job of championing the people over aristocracy or the elite. There is no symbolic overthrow of British monarchical authority embedded in his paintings. They stand in stark contrast to the events, paintings, and stories of the French Revolution, the revolt in Haiti, and the Latin American revolutions. And that accomplished Trumbull’s goal of memorializing the “calm splendor” of the American Revolution.

Events in America also pushed some Americans towards a more conservative lean. Radicalism and extreme democracy were good for revolution but ill-suited for running a stable government, as America’s early leaders found out. In the wake of the Revolution, banks and merchants called in their debts on poorer farmers, threatening many with debtor’s prison. In response, many evoked the principles of 1776 and threatened revolt. One particular group of farmers in western Massachusetts did just that, marching on the federal arsenal at Springfield in 1786. Under the leadership of Revolutionary War veteran Daniel Shays, the disgruntled debtors were finally dispatched by a large group of militia raised by the state government and frightened merchants. A similar uprising took place in Pennsylvania in 1794 after farmers were charged a tax on transporting the whiskey that was their livelihood. Alarmed at their acts of violence and growing animosity, President George Washington called out a militia 13,000 strong and rode at its head to put down the uprising. The so-called Whiskey Rebellion disintegrated quickly but wealthier Americans worried about the implications that it and Shays’ Rebellion had.

Historian Joseph Ellis described the events of the Whiskey Rebellion that were especially troublesome to many conservatives and peace-loving Americans. The rebellious farmers “claimed fraternal ties with the French Jacobins,” the radical, bloody party that launched the Terror in the French Revolution and popularized the guillotine as a political tool. The farmers of the Whiskey Rebellion went so far as to set up mock guillotines and warned that the “leaders of any federal force that came after them would be executed as would-be aristocrats.” They declared their allegiance to the Republican Party, essentially the Anti-Federalist or Jeffersonian

party, and “regarded themselves as the militant cutting edge of the reborn revolutionary ethos.” While more radical revolutionaries like Jefferson liked “a little rebellion now and then,” believing that “the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants,” many others preferred security, stability, and conservatism. One proponent of a more stable government was George Washington. The man who helped fight for the nation’s existence took great interest in its future. As the ratification of the new Constitution and the strength and authority of the national government lay in limbo, Washington remarked, “The situation of the General Government is shaken to its foundations. In a word, it is at an end, and unless a remedy is soon applied, anarchy and confusion will inevitably ensue.”

The revolutionary zeal of the 1760s and 1776 were well and good because it helped liberate American merchants and wealthier individuals from oppressive British taxes and oversight, as well as the litany of democratic and republican virtues Americans felt they were being denied. Once the Revolution was won, however, wealthier and well-to-do Americans feared further rebellion and democratization. Self-consciously fearful of losing their own authority, American, particularly Federalist, leaders feared also the destruction of an orderly world necessary for republican liberty. The American Revolution was fought for a better, more right form of government by its own people. But once established, that form of government had to be defended from overzealous democrats and radicals, including Jeffersonians. The battle between radicals and conservatives played out in the political arena between the opposing Federalists and Jeffersonians, as well as earlier in the debate over the Constitution. By the end of John Adams’s presidency in 1801 “the Federalists got their nationalism,” historian David Waldstreicher states, “and further legitimized their quest for order.” He continues, arguing that “in America, as in England, it was the conservatives who defined the nation and a newly empowered state against internal and international threats to national character.”

Though Jefferson liked a little rebellion now and then, even his own presidency saw an increasing lean away from radicalism. Even in arch-Jeffersonian central Virginia Fourth of July toasts to “The American Youth” transformed from may they “never lend their aid to enslave their countrymen,” to may “he grow wiser as he grows older.” The nation had been through its first transfer of power from one political party to another and had done so peacefully. By 1801 France had also seen its own revolution fall into the hands of a dictator, casting doubt on the successful export of America’s revolutionary ideals. Through the presidencies of James Madison and James Monroe the threats of external attack and the need for domestic defense further strengthened national power and the aging revolutionary generation and its successors pushed the revolutionary zeal of ’76 into the annals of history.

The internal radicalism seemed to have been tempered by the end of the eighteenth century, but the manifestations of the dangers of radical revolutionaries in France and Haiti only furthered American conservatism. That conservatism is evident in Trumbull’s paintings, himself a well-connected Federalist.

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24 Ibid, 164.
While Gordon Wood argued for the radicalism of the American Revolution, John Trumbull argued for the conservatism of the American Revolution. The reality falls in between, the American Revolution spending time at each end of the spectrum in a complicated and layered event. In the fifty years following the signing of the Declaration of Independence the American Revolution was interpreted in many ways, radical, conservative, and in between. But to Trumbull the marks of our revolution were simple; it was one by right, by legal justification, and by a conservative group of men who tempered the passions of the mob. By examining his paintings we can see how the times they were painted in, the political leanings of their creator, and the events taking place throughout Europe and America’s southern neighbors all shaped the face of the paintings.

In the following pages the life and works of John Trumbull will be examined to shed light on his famous paintings and to discern their influence on the American memory of the American Revolution. The memory of such a momentous and critical event in American history was, and still is, shaped by a variety of factors including more contemporary textual documents, myths, folktales, and poems. Images ranging from political cartoons and sketches to grand canvasses have also had a serious, and undervalued, impact. The examination of John Trumbull and his paintings will be a case study in the use of images as historical evidence, but it will also seek to answer the question of where the images in our minds of the American Revolution stem from. Burke, a leading proponent of the use of images as historical evidence, argues that “although texts also offer valuable clues, images themselves are the best guide to the power of visual representations in the religious and political life of past cultures.”25 In an era that saw men become demigods and where the world of politics was revolutionized, John Trumbull’s paintings speak volumes about the heroes, the great battles that were not always fought with muskets and cannon, and the meaning of the American Revolution.

25 Burke, Eyewitnessing, 13.
Family, health, and patriotic duty strained John Trumbull’s early career as an artist. Nevertheless, he pursued the formal study of art, pairing the tools and techniques of painting with the family and military obligations that had long hampered his attention to painting. Combining his training with pressing personal concerns allowed him a style of painting and a selection of subjects that eventually brought him fame.

The Trumbulls of Lebanon, Connecticut, were descendants of the Turnbulls in Scotland. John Trumbull’s flair for the dramatic that would serve him well in his artistic pursuits began with his construction of his lineage. According to family legend the king of Scotland was on a hunting party when he was attacked by a bull and his life was endangered. Suddenly, “a young peasant threw himself before the king, and with equal strength, dexterity and good fortune, seized the bully by the horn, turned him aside, and thus saved the royal life.” Grateful, the king gave the young man an estate south of Edinburgh and the name Turnbull. By the time the family had moved to the Americas in the middle of the seventeenth century, they had changed their name to Trumbull.

John Trumbull’s American ancestors also distinguished themselves. His father, also named John, was elected governor of Connecticut in 1769, a post he held until 1784. Unlike many other colonial governors, John Trumbull was not appointed by the British king, thus earning him the trust of Patriot leaders. Acting as governor throughout the American Revolution, Governor Trumbull corresponded frequently with General George Washington. Washington often turned to the Governor in times of great need, “whether the desperate need was of men or of meat,” and was most successful in securing aid from “Brother John” as he was often called. The governor had three sons, including John, who also served their new nation in the course of the Revolution in various ways. The eldest son, Joseph, was a commissary general from 1775 to the spring of 1777 and performed admirably through the rough winter of 1776. Jonathan Jr., another older brother of John, served as the army’s paymaster.

Though afforded less of an opportunity to distinguish herself than the Trumbull men, John’s mother Faith Robinson boasted one impressive ancestor. Daughter of a Massachusetts minister, Faith was the great granddaughter of John Robinson. John Robinson, Trumbull wrote in his autobiography, was “the father of the pilgrims, who led our Puritan ancestors (his parishioners) out of England in the reign of James V, and resided with them some years at Leyden in Holland,” until they emigrated to Plymouth in 1620.

John grew up a frail and awkward child. Born June 6, 1756 in Lebanon, Connecticut, John was the victim of severe convulsions through the first nine months of his life. A doctor determined that his convulsions were the result of the bones in his skull slipping one under the other, compressing his brain. Asked if the young Trumbull would survive, the doctor replied that the only cure was the daily care of his mother gently applying her hands to Trumbull’s skull, drawing apart the bones in hopes that they had not already adhered too strongly. “Medicine is

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“useless,” the doctor advised, “and if relief cannot be obtained by this method, I know no other; and the poor child must either die early, or if he should live, become an idiot.”29 That Trumbull survived was nearly a miracle by eighteenth century medical standards. That his mental capacity was not severely damaged or limited was certainly a miracle. At the age of five or six Trumbull could not avoid permanent damage from an accident that would have a serious impact on his future. The result of a headlong plunge down a flight of stairs, he had lost the sight of his left eye. “The optic nerve must hav been severely injured,” he recalled, “for although the eye recovered entirely its external appearance… vision was so nearly destroyed that, to this day, I have never been able to read a single word with the left eye alone.”30

At a young age Trumbull attended the school of Nathan Tisdale, just a short walk from Trumbull’s own home. Whether Trumbull’s “mind which had so long been repressed by disease, sprang forward with increased energy so soon as the pressure upon the brain was removed” or not, he excelled in Tisdale’s school, mastering the ability to read Greek by age six, just the beginning of the classics he was inundated with in his schooling.31 By age twelve he had read Homer and the New Testament in Greek, and Vergil, Cicero, Horace, and Juvenal in Latin. The knowledge of epic poetry by Homer and Vergil instilled in Trumbull a sense of epic heroism paired with Cicero and Horace’s political righteousness and patriotic sacrifice.

It was around this time that Trumbull acquired his love of art. Through her education at a school in Boston, his oldest sister Faith had gained some knowledge of drawing. The only other “artist” in the Trumbull family, Faith painted two heads and a landscape in oil that hung prominently in the family parlor. Fascinated by these “wonders,” Trumbull passed many days sprawled out on the sanded hardwood floors of his home, scrawling rude imitations of his sister’s paintings into the floor.

Trumbull’s poor health contributed to his study of drawing. By Trumbull’s own accord he did not live up to the physical prowess of his Scottish ancestor. “Although my mind was clear, and the body active,” he recalled, “it was never strong. I therefore seldom joined my little schoolfellows in plays or exercises of an athletic kind, for there I was almost sure to be vanquished.”32 Instead Trumbull retreated to his room. There he read books and studied drawing, exhibiting strength through his pencil and brush. He became increasingly silent, bashful, and awkward in society, further forcing him to seek refuge in his study of drawing. His teacher, Nathan Tisdale, helped to alleviate some of Trumbull’s gloom by varying his studies to include classics such as Cicero, Virgil, and Homer, as well as a study of the ancient world through Rollin’s History of Ancient Nations, Arts and Sciences of the Ancient Nations, and his history of the Roman republic. Trumbull also mastered the subjects of geography (which would serve him well later) and arithmetic, though with great difficulty.

In 1772 Trumbull left Tisdale’s school determined to further his study of art. His father, however, favored an education at Harvard. He wanted his son to become a distinguished minister or respectable lawyer. The younger Trumbull argued that the expense of a college education would be inconvenient because when it was over, he would still need to study a profession in order to support himself and his household. Trumbull suggested, “if he [his father]
would place me under the instruction of Mr. [John Singleton] Copley, the expense would probably not exceed that of a college education, and that at the end of my time I should possess a profession, and the means of supporting myself.”

Unswayed, his father made his sentiments very clear in a letter to one of Trumbull’s instructors. “I am sensible of his [Trumbull] natural genius and inclination for limning; an art I have frequently told him will be of no use to him,” the elder Trumbull wrote to Doctor William Kneeland. He continued, “I have mentioned to him the study of the mathematics, and among other branches, that of perspective, hoping to bring on a new habit and turn of his mind.”

Young Trumbull began his studies at Harvard on February 2, 1772 as a junior based on his prior education.

Entering later than many of his classmates and being socially awkward, Trumbull struggled to make lasting friendships. But he excelled at his studies at Harvard, including more Latin and Greek, logic, rhetoric, geometry, philosophy, astronomy, and ethics, so much so that he had no problem finding time to peruse the library for paintings and engravings to copy. Despite his father’s objections, it was at Harvard that Trumbull’s real quest for an education as an artist began. Among the paintings that Trumbull copied were versions of Peter Paul Rubens’ paintings and classical scenes as well as several portraits by John Singleton Copley and a view of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. He copied an engraving of Rebecca at the Well based on a painting by Antoine Coyel in oil that was so admired by his fellow students and professors that he showed it to Copley. Trumbull was pleased to hear his painting “commended” by Copley, swelling his confidence in his own abilities and prompting him to attempt a more original painting. Such a compliment was significant for an aspiring artist in eighteenth century America. Most artists traveled to Europe to study in Italy or work in France and Britain where royal and aristocratic families patronized artists. Eighteenth century art had a classic feel and influence to it, borrowing themes, virtues, and scenes from the Greeks and Romans as adapted by Renaissance artists. In America, however, Copley was alone in accomplished artists in 1773, making a living from portraits and limited historical paintings. Copley soon realized that a better chance for success lay in Europe and he, too, left for London by 1777.

Upon his graduation from Harvard in July 1773, Trumbull painted the death of Paulus Emilius at the battle of Cannae, a motif he would return to regularly. He selected figures from various engravings that suited his purpose, “coloring them from [his] own imagination.” “One thing I attempted which I should now hardly venture upon,” Trumbull writes, “the clouds of dust by which the distant objects were obscured.” An admirable attempt by an untrained artist, Trumbull’s earliest painting lacked the refinement and technique that would only come to him through careful study. However, for an American artist such training was hard to come by. America lacked any serious artists, and those Americans who did find success did so in Europe where aristocratic patrons could afford to pay an artist for their time and skill. The more traditional track for an aspiring artist was a trip to Italy to study the masters such as Raphael, Correggio, and Michelangelo before attempting entrance into one of the few art academies in

33 Ibid, 10.
Britain or France. Without the money or support for such a venture, Trumbull contented himself with copying those copies of the Italian masters that he could find.

After an ambitious and promising start, Trumbull’s art career was put on hold for another seven years. His early teacher, Nathan Tisdale, suffered from paralysis in the fall of 1773 and asked Trumbull to take over his duties. From fall 1773 through the spring of 1774, Trumbull educated seventy to eighty students ranging in ability from those just learning their letters to young men preparing for college. After his short teaching career, the Renaissance man from Connecticut donned another cap, that of a soldier.

In 1774 the tensions between Great Britain and her American colonies began to heat up. “As the low growling of distant thunder announces the approach of the natural tempest,” Trumbull wrote with his Presbyterian and classics-trained flair for the dramatic in vogue at the time, “so did these discussions give evident notice that a moral storm was at hand.” Whether out of patriotic fervor or family obligation, Trumbull began studying military tactics and drilling with a local company. The son of Connecticut’s new governor, Trumbull was on the march to Boston with a regiment of Connecticut militia by May 1, 1775, less than a month after the opening shots were fired in Lexington.

Trumbull’s military career was short and sporadic. While he gained little useful military experience, he acquired valuable artistic experience that he would utilize in his most famous paintings. Thanks in large part to his father’s ties with Washington as a provider of men and supplies to the Continental Army, young Trumbull occupied relatively safe places and rubbed elbows with the top officers of the Continental Army. His first post was as the aide-de-camp to the commander of Connecticut’s forces around Boston, General Joseph Spencer, a close family friend. Positioned in Roxbury, four miles on a direct line from Charlestown, Trumbull awoke to the sound of cannon fire on the morning of June 17, 1775. Peering through fieldglasses he could see smoke rising from the buildings in Charlestown and two lines of smoke moving slowly up a hill just outside of Charlestown. Though he could not even make out the faint forms of the troops in the battle of Bunker Hill, Trumbull would use the battle and its participants to memorialize the universal courage and sacrifice of the war in the first and most famous painting in his Revolutionary series.

George Washington took command of the forces around Boston just weeks after the battle of Bunker Hill. Arriving on the scene, Washington desired information on the British works in front of him. Trumbull’s brother Joseph, the commissary general of the army, advised Trumbull to attempt to draw the works for General Washington as a means of introduction. Rankless and nameless in the eyes of the army, Trumbull leapt at the opportunity and was soon creeping through tall grass close enough to the British line that he could count the number of cannon, utilizing his knowledge of geography to sketch a rough map. Although he was initially successful in his small act of espionage, his “farther progress was rendered unnecessary by the desertion of one of the British artillerymen, who brought out with him a rude plan of the entire work.” Washington no longer needed the drawing by the time he got it. Still the close similarity to the British deserter’s sketch proved that Trumbull was accurate and reliable. Impressed by Trumbull’s talent, Washington appointed him his second aide-de-camp on July 27, 1775. Trumbull found himself in good company as Thomas Mifflin served as Washington’s first aide-de-camp.

37 Ibid, 15.
38 Ibid, 22.
aide-de-camp, Joseph Reed as secretary, and Horatio Gates as adjutant general. Of these three men in Washington’s close military family, three of them (and Washington himself) would serve as prominent figures in Trumbull’s later paintings.

Trumbull’s close association with Washington lasted less than two months as he was “appointed Brigade Major to [General] Spencer’s brigade” on August 15, 1775. Trumbull and his comrades idly passed the dull monotony of camp life through fall and winter until in March, 1776 Colonel Henry Knox arrived with nearly sixty cannon and mortars from Fort Ticonderoga. The guns were transported from Fort Ticonderoga to Cambridge, a journey of almost three hundred miles, in the dead of winter. However Knox, the rotund but animated twenty-five year old bookseller-turned-artilleryman, strapped the artillery pieces onto sleds and dragged them over frozen lakes, up and down mountains, and into Cambridge intact, a spectacle that attracted scores of onlookers along their route. In an effort to repeat Bunker’s Hill with a slightly different ending, Trumbull and others were put to work constructing works atop Dorchester Heights overlooking Boston from the south. Knox’s new artillery would be positioned atop Dorchester Heights to fire down upon the British in Boston below. Waking up to the sight of American artillery looking down on them, the British prepared for an attack on the American position. However, in the Congregationalist mind of Trumbull Providence intervened, and “the rain… increased to a violent storm, and heavy gale of wind, which deranged all the enemy’s plan of debarkation, driving the ships foul of each other… and thus put a stop to the intended operation.” With their attack foiled, the British evacuated Boston soon thereafter. The theater of military operations shifted southward, taking Trumbull with it.

Trumbull and his brigade arrived in New York in April 1776 to oppose the British, who were expected to launch an assault in the summer. Encamped on the lower East Side of Manhattan Island, Trumbull passed the months of April, May, and June erecting works and drilling troops to improve discipline. On June 28 Trumbull was sent to Albany with General Horatio Gates. Appointed the commander of the northern department including the forces around Fort Ticonderoga and Crown Point on the Canadian border, Gates remembered the young major from their services on Washington’s staff. The accuracy of Trumbull’s returns as major of his brigade impressed Gates and Trumbull “became in some degree a favorite with him.” On June 28, Trumbull departed for Albany with Gates.

Trumbull arrived to a northern theater in complete disarray. American attempts to capture major Canadian cities and forts in an effort to turn Canadian support against the British were unsuccessful. The American forces under General Richard Montgomery and Colonel Benedict Arnold had been nearly eliminated in a midnight attack up the rocky slopes of Quebec on December 31, a scene Trumbull would paint years later. Montgomery had been killed in the assault and Arnold was severely wounded, leaving a shell of an army to retreat to Crown Point with poor leadership, few supplies, and no morale. Upon his arrival in Crown Point Trumbull was charged with acquiring an accurate count of troops. Unable to test his mettle as a soldier, he did demonstrate his precision and his eye for detail that would serve him well as an artist. At Crown Point Trumbull found “not an army but a mob…ruined by sickness, fatigue, and

41 Ibid, 23.
desertion, and void of every idea of discipline or subordination.”

Trumbull’s final count was five thousand two hundred men of which only two thousand eight hundred were “healthy” in a very liberal sense. The army was subsisting on “raw salt pork, which was often rancid, and hard biscuit or unbaked flour,” and the men had nothing to drink but the dirty water of Lake Champlain and bad rum. Trumbull was appalled at the state of the men. “I can truly say,” Trumbull recalled years later, “that I did not look into tent or hut in which I did not find either a dead or dying man.” With the army in such disarray and poor health, Trumbull advised Gates that Crown Point was untenable. Gates ordered his army to fall back to Fort Ticonderoga.

A decrepit and run-down fort when Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys captured it from the British in 1775, Ticonderoga had undergone little repair since it had fallen in the first days of the Revolution. Gates ordered the fort and the French lines around it—built during the Seven Years’ War two decades earlier—repaired in order to prepare for a likely British assault. Gates expected Canada’s governor-general, Sir Guy Carleton, to travel down Lake Champlain to attack Fort Ticonderoga. To contest the lake a small American fleet was constructed by New England shipbuilders under the supervision of recently-promoted General Benedict Arnold of Connecticut. Claiming as much credit as a staff officer could, Trumbull wrote, “in this, as well as in every branch of the various duties, I had my full service.”

With or without Trumbull’s “full service” in constructing the fleet, once completed the small armada boasted over one hundred guns. Arnold’s naval skill was tested by Carleton’s fleet on October 11, 1776. After the melee known as the Battle of Valcour’s Island ended, all the American ships had been run aground, sunk, or captured. Only Arnold, his crew, and a handful of others escaped capture. The attempt to hold Lake Champlain had failed but the delay it caused the British was invaluable. It forced the British to abandon their campaign against Fort Ticonderoga and it allowed Trumbull to escape New York with Gates on November 18. Trumbull would miss yet another battle by leaving northern New York but he was on his way back to Washington’s army and an opportunity to be a part of a scene he would later immortalize with his brush.

At Albany Gates received an order “from General Washington to hasten on with all the disposable troops, and join him behind the Delaware River.” His stay in Washington’s camp was brief. In response to reports of enemy movement in Rhode Island, Trumbull was sent with General Arnold to Providence to prevent any British movement there. Just days later, Washington completed his iconic crossing of the Delaware and achieved a “glorious success” at Trenton while Trumbull entered winter quarters at Providence. His military career was cut short in a flare of insult and arrogance soon thereafter.

Trumbull’s days of soldiering ended with his resignation on February 22, 1777. An altercation between Trumbull and John Hancock, president of the Continental Congress, exhibited Trumbull’s flair for the dramatic, his fragile ego, and sense of entitlement. Trumbull knew he was taking part in something that, if successful, would be enshrined in the memories of future generations. The young colonel, only twenty, viewed himself in one of Homer or Vergil’s epics, joining a new pantheon of American heroes through his service to his country. However,
like so many of the figures in the stories he loved, Trumbull fell victim to hubris, that overbearing arrogance and pride that often had fatal consequences. In February 1777 he received a letter from Hancock dating his commission as deputy adjutant general of the northern department and the rank of lieutenant colonel to September 12, 1776. Insulted that his commission dated from September, he fired off a letter to Hancock expressing his discontent. “I find the commission is dated the 12th of September, 1776,” Trumbull wrote on February 22, 1777, “which, sir, is an insuperable bar to my accepting it… I have served in that office since the 28th of June, by the appointment of the honorable Major General Gates…” Trumbull argued that not only was he appointed by Gates on June 28, but that his service in such desperate circumstances warranted the earlier date. “When length of service, an unimpeached character, and a forwardness to serve in a quarter where success was despairs of, is rewarded by neglect, we have reason to complain. But, sir, there was no occasion to add insult.” Unabashedly self-promoting, Trumbull figured himself a sort of martyr to the American cause, as did many other American and foreign-born officers who were slighted for promotion, driving some to resignation and at least one to treason. Benedict Arnold summed up the sentiments of many officers who felt slighted for promotion. “I have no favor to ask for myself,” Arnold wrote to Washington in 1780, “I have too often experienced the Ingratitude of my Country to Attempt it.”

All of twenty years old in 1777, Trumbull, a career staff officer, demanded from the Continental Congress this insult be corrected. “I expect, sir, to be commissioned from that date, if at all. A soldier’s honor forbids the idea of giving up the least pretension to rank.” As if exiting the stage of a Shakespearean drama, Trumbull ended his letter and his military career as he knew it: “From this day, therefore, I lay aside my cockade and sword, with the fixed determination never to resume them until I can do it with honor.” Trumbull’s absence from the military lasted little more than a year.

During his hiatus from the military, Trumbull spent time in Boston where he hoped he could pursue his study of art with more success. America’s preeminent artist, John Singleton Copley who Trumbull had met years before, had left for the richer artistic grounds of Europe. Trumbull lamented that “there remained in Boston no artist from whom I could gain oral instruction.” Undeterred, he rented a room in Boston that had belonged to John Smibert, “the patriarch of painting in America.” Smibert had been born and Scotland and traveled to Italy to study painting before arriving in the American colonies in 1729. Once in America he made a living by painting portraits of prominent citizens. Among mid- to late-eighteenth century American artists Smibert was influential for providing an early link between the art of Europe and that of the colonies. Using several of Smibert’s paintings—themselves copies of celebrated paintings from Europe—Trumbull embarked on the only kind of art study he could get: imitation. According the influential eighteenth century painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, founder and first president of the Royal Academy in London, imitation was a necessary part of training

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46 Ibid, 38.
48 Ibid, 44.
49 Ibid, 45.
50 Ibid, 44.
for any successful artist. In his *Discourses on Art*, Reynolds presented the summation of eighteenth century art theory. An artist “must be as necessarily an imitator of the works of other painter...and no man can be an artist, whatever he may suppose, upon any other terms.” In fact, Reynolds contended that no artist could succeed without imitating others. “Even genius, at least what generally is so called,” Reynolds wrote, “is the child of imitation.”

Trumbull’s success, then, would ultimately lay in who he imitated. Beginning in the spring of 1777, he spent a little over a year copying Smibert’s works in order to hone his skills. Among the works he copied were detailed portraits painted by fifteenth and sixteenth century masters Sir Anthony Van Dyck and Raphael, and the continence of Scipio by Nicolas Poussin.

The Poussin copy seems to have made quite an impression on the self-taught student as its themes appeared prominently in many of Trumbull’s historical paintings. The scene is one of civilized diplomacy in the wake of battle. Every participant has a unique and clearly discernible face and the central figures are a benevolent victor and the humble defeated. Flanking the scene on the left side are civilian observers while soldiers carrying spears and wearing plumed helmets and battle armor stand in a background shrouded in shadows. The central figure of a woman kneeling with her head bowed is illuminated while the rest of the figures are minimally obscured by shadows. Classic, grand-style paintings were the norm in the late eighteenth century, often borrowing themes from the ancients in Greece and Rome. Fellow artists Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley likewise used grand-style elements in their works, highlighting the major figures through lighting and placement as Trumbull would and Poussin had. Trumbull was doing nothing new or revolutionary in his technique, only attempting to do it better than others. He would incorporate all of these features, including portraiture on a smaller scale, in his historical paintings.

After a brief and personally uneventful return to the army as General John Sullivan’s aide-de-camp in August 1778, in Rhode Island, Trumbull’s friends persuaded him to undertake a business speculation in Nantes, France. Born into a merchant family, Trumbull seemed a logical choice for a business partner but the venture never materialized. Trumbull writes little of the business venture but the trip proved much more valuable for his artistic career. Before embarking for Europe he received a letter from John Temple, the consul general of Great Britain who Trumbull had met during his time in Boston. Temple knew Benjamin West, the Pennsylvania painter who had since gone to London where he produced the immensely popular *The Death of General Wolfe* in 1770, a painting that would heavily influence Trumbull. Temple urged Trumbull to study with West and assured him that he could get permission from the British government to study under West despite Trumbull’s service against the Crown. Temple spoke to Lord George Germain, the secretary of state for America in Great Britain and therefore in charge of the war with the colonies. Germain, though determined to teach the American colonists the supremacy of the British Parliament, assured Temple that if Trumbull “chose to visit London for the purpose of studying the fine arts, no notice would be taken by the government of [his] past life.” However, Trumbull recalled “that I must remember that the eye of precaution would be constantly upon me, and I must therefore avoid the smallest indiscretion.”

Thus in May 1780,

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the Connecticut Yankee, a former American officer and son of a rebel governor, set sail for Europe. Unconcerned that the business venture would likely fail, Trumbull was more excited about his backup plan: an opportunity to study with the most recognized historical painter of his time.

After a month long passage Trumbull landed at Nantes, France in June. Traveling on to Paris, he met Benjamin Franklin, his son Temple, John Adams, and his son John Quincy. In the presence of Franklin, sole plenipotentiary to France, and Adams, commissioner to France, Trumbull was again among the most powerful and influential of Americans, again to his benefit. Franklin wrote a letter of introduction to West on Trumbull’s behalf, and with it in his pocket, Trumbull set off for London. Arriving in July 1780, Trumbull was kindly received by West and began his first official training as an artist.

The art world of London was flourishing by the time Trumbull arrived. Unlike his predecessors, King George III took a keen interest in the arts and commissioned an academy for the arts under royal patronage. That academy, the Royal Academy, had been founded in November 1768 and was headed by Sir Joshua Reynolds, an artist that George III knew and respected. The Royal Academy offered students an education in the arts that was out of reach for some and more convenient for others. Rather than travel to Italy and study the old masters such as Raphael and Michelangelo, students were instructed secondhand by artists who had themselves studied in Italy. The Academy held annual exhibitions that were extremely popular and annual dinners attended by prominent artists and statesmen alike. Artists’ works were reviewed in newspapers, sometimes with bitter jealousy and animosity by anonymous writers. The patronage of wealthy and aristocratic families supported many artists, including Trumbull’s mentor Benjamin West who held the position of King George III’s court painter.

Upon his arrival West asked Trumbull if he had brought any specimen of his work so that West could evaluate his talent and progress. When Trumbull replied that he had not, West instructed him to “look around the room, and see if there is anything which you would like to copy.” Looking around West’s painting room Trumbull finally selected “a beautiful small round picture of a mother and two children.” When asked if he knew what he had chosen, Trumbull replied that he did not, a confusing answer given Trumbull’s prior work. “That, Mr. Trumbull is called the Madonna della Sedia, the Madonna of the chair,” West informed him, “one of the most admired works of Raphael.” It was the same painting Trumbull had copied in Smibert’s room in Boston. Trumbull’s seeming ignorance of it may have been an attempt to try his hand at a familiar painting without West knowing it, thus increasing his chances of producing a better copy. Or perhaps West’s copy bore little resemblance to Smibert’s. Regardless, West was impressed by his selection, calling it “a good omen.”

With the copy of Raphael in his hand, Trumbull was led into a room where he met his “classmate,” Gilbert Stuart. Stuart, originally from Rhode Island, was only a year older than Trumbull but had been studying with West for two years. Stuart was a portrait artist who would gain considerable fame in years to come. A perfect antithesis to Trumbull’s reserved and proper nature, Stuart was flamboyant and sarcastic. The two became quick and lasting friends.

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Trumbull’s next test would be copying a work by Antonio Allegri de Correggio, a sixteenth-century Italian painter whose work gained popularity during the Romanticism movement of the eighteenth century. When Trumbull had first seen one of Correggio’s paintings he was deterred by the “number of figures and complexity of the composition.” But with West’s earlier encouragement Trumbull felt confident that he could attempt it with success. Shortly after he had begun, events occurred in America that would put his artistic training on hold again.

On November 15, 1780, news reached London of Benedict Arnold’s treason. General Nathanael Greene briefly described the events in his general orders. “Treason of the Blackest dye was yesterday discovered,” Greene wrote. “General Arnold who commanded at West Point, lost to every sentiment of Honor, of private and publick obligation, was about to deliver up that Important Post into the hands of the Enemy.” The British public was less shocked by Arnold’s treason than they were by the execution of Arnold’s agent in the plot, Major John André, the adjutant general to British General Sir Henry Clinton. Engaging, charming, and affable, André, a former actor, was hanged as a spy after his capture unveiled Arnold’s betrayal. Despite the prominent role he played in such a plot, André’s death affected even American officers. Alexander Hamilton wrote loftily of André. André “united a peculiar elegance of mind and manners, and the advantage of a pleasing person,” Hamilton wrote. “His sentiments were elevated and inspired esteem. His elocution was handsome; his address easy, polite and insinuating.” The outrage over the ignominious death of a prominent British officer prompted some in London to become suspicious of Americans living among them. Trumbull and André had both served as deputy adjutant general of their respective armies and in light of this information Trumbull felt that he was a prime candidate for retaliation. After information was given to the British secretary of state a warrant was issued for the arrest of Trumbull’s housemate, Major John Tyler. The warrant was distributed with additional instructions indicating that living with Major Tyler was another American “who there are strong reasons for believing to be the most dangerous man of the two.” Whether the British government deemed Trumbull a “dangerous” spy or Trumbull fancied himself such, officers were ordered to “secure Mr. Trumbull’s person and papers for examination.”

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learned of the warrant and escaped capture. Trumbull, unaware that he was suspected of being a spy, returned home one evening to find police waiting for him. He spent the rest of the night in jail and had to put his training under West on hold.

In various interrogations Trumbull readily admitted to the crime of which he was accused: bearing arms against the king. He was sentenced to imprisonment in the overflowing Clerkenwell prison. In response to his appeal to Lord Germain himself, however, he received a verbal reply expressing his “regret for what had happened, as being entirely unknown to him, until it was too late to interfere… [and] that he was disposed to grant any alleviation which was in his power.” Rather than being surrounded by “bloods, bullies, and pimps,” Trumbull spent his seven month captivity in the pastoral house of Tothill-fields Bridewell. His hat, clothes, and shoes were brushed daily by the turnkey and he was permitted to walk in the garden.

Hearing the news of Trumbull’s incarceration, West hurried to Buckingham Palace to speak with King George III. West first cleared his own name to ensure that he was not guilty by association. The king reassured him. “West, I have known you long, and have conversed with you frequently. I can recollect no occasion on which you have ever attempted to mislead or misinform me, and for that reason you have acquired my entire confidence.” West then hoped to secure a better fate for Trumbull than André’s. “West, go to Mr. Trumbull immediately,” George advised him, “and pledge to him my royal promise, that, in the worst possible event of the law, his life shall be safe.” West immediately delivered the news, and a few days later the unfinished Correggio copy to Trumbull, housed a short distance from Buckingham Palace.

Passing his time finishing the Correggio copy and attempting other drawings and paintings, Trumbull soon tired of his captivity and began to seek a trial for his release. To assist him in his upcoming legal struggle he sought out John Lee, king’s counsel and future solicitor general and attorney general. Through Lee’s acquaintance Trumbull also met Charles James Fox, a member of Parliament and leader of the opposition to the government of Lord North, and Edmund Burke, a supporter of the Americans and an influential member of Parliament. Soon after speaking with Burke, Trumbull received word that the king had approved Trumbull’s release on bail with the stipulation that he leave the country within thirty days and not to return until after peace was restored. After Trumbull posted a £200 bail, West and fellow artist Copley posted £100 each to secure his release on June 12, 1781.

He left London for Boston via Holland. While en route he received a letter from his father authorizing him to negotiate a loan from Dutch bankers of the estates-general for the state of Connecticut. He again met John Adams, on a similar mission to secure a loan for the United States. However, the summer of 1781 was an unfavorable for a bunch of revolutionaries in dire straits to seek money. News of the fall of Charleston in the spring of 1780 and the American disaster at Camden in the summer of 1780 meant that there was only a shadow of an American army to oppose the British in the Carolinas. Washington remained in a stalemate in New York. Charles Cornwallis’s surrender at Yorktown was months away and he was just as likely to be rescued by the British fleet as he was to be trapped by the Franco-American army and French navy. Realizing that no European power but the French would dip into their treasury to fund a failing revolution, Trumbull boarded a forty-four gun frigate headed for Boston.

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61 Ibid, 68.
63 Ibid, 72fn.
Trumbull arrived in Boston in the midst of a January snowstorm in 1782. At home in Lebanon he lamented his time spent overseas. “I had thrown away two of the most precious years of life—had encountered many dangers, and suffered many inconveniences, to no purpose.” After closing all accounts regarding the failed mercantile venture that took him to London two years earlier, Trumbull was “seized with a serious illness” that confined him to his bed through the summer into autumn. While ill he received an offer from his brother that would again put Trumbull in the army. His brother David was engaged in a contract to supply the army and needed “a perfectly confidential agent residing with the army, to superintend the faithful execution of the contract there.” Once his illness had finally passed, Trumbull set off for the army then encamped at New Windsor, New York. He passed the winter of 1782-1783 overseeing the execution of his brother’s work, feeding and clothing an army whose fighting days were behind them. Talks of peace negotiations began early in 1783 and Trumbull was headed back to Lebanon to vacillate on his future career once more.

Family pressure prevented an immediate decision to again take up his brush and palette, and he was compelled to consider life as a merchant. Though he grew up in a family with a merchant background, Trumbull realized that if he “entered upon regular commerce, I must come in competition with men who had been educated in the counting-house, and my ignorance might often leave me at their mercy.” Rejecting the career of a merchant, his father again suggested a profession in law, noting that in the new republic it would lead to a path of great distinction. Reflecting on this possible career path, Trumbull mustered all of his dramatic flair and refused such a path on principle. “Law was rendered necessary by the vices of mankind,” he wrote, “I had already seen too much of them, willingly to devote my life to a profession which would keep me perpetually involved, either in the defense of innocence against fraud and injustice, or to the protection of guilt against just and merited punishment.” Trumbull pined for the arts and the glory accorded it by the ancient Greeks. Governor Trumbull, in response to his son’s impassioned appeal for the life of an artist, gave his tacit approval, remarking to his son, “You appear to forget sir, that Connecticut is not Athens.” In December 1783 Trumbull left for London on a trip that would finally result in Trumbull completing his training and beginning his career as an artist.

Arriving in London in January 1784, Trumbull immediately paid a visit to his friend and mentor Benjamin West. He resumed his study under West, copying paintings and attempting some originals of his own. Trumbull supplemented his training under West with more formal training at the Royal Academy School at Somerset House in the evenings. The Royal Academy’s president at the time was Sir Joshua Reynolds, the dominant figure in British painting at the time and a person with whom Trumbull would have a difficult relationship. Trumbull’s tense relationship with Reynolds, like a similar one with John Hancock, was the result of youthful pride and imprudent arrogance.

In 1784 Trumbull’s friend Jeremiah Wadsworth and his son asked Trumbull to paint their portrait. Despite a lack of experience in portraiture Trumbull attempted the painting, which was,

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64 Ibid, 81.
65 Ibid, 81.
66 Ibid, 82.
67 Ibid, 82.
68 Ibid, 82-83.
in Trumbull’s own words, “bad enough.” However, he had the confidence to show the portrait to Reynolds and seek advice on how to improve it. Reynolds’ comment, “[in a quick sharp tone, was] ‘that coat is bad, sir, very bad; it is not cloth—it is tin, bent tin.’” An indignant Trumbull burst out with excuses and defiance. “I did not bring this thing to you, Sir Joshua, merely to be told that it is bad; I was conscious of that, and how could it be otherwise, considering the short time I have studied; I had a hope, sir, that you would kindly have pointed out to me, how to correct my errors.”

Grabbing his painting, Trumbull bowed and withdrew, determined never to show his imperfect works to Reynolds again.

In the summer of 1785 Trumbull assisted West in finishing Battle of La Hogue, a busy historical painting depicting the 1692 naval battle between the English and Dutch forces and the French fleet. Familiar with West’s penchant for historical scenes from copying West’s popular Death of General Wolfe, Trumbull gained valuable experience in his collaboration with his mentor. The smoke and carnage of battle litter the background as ships burn and smoke from cannon clouds the background. To the right fighting continues with sabers and muskets as men engage in hand-to-hand combat while men to the left of the painting watch. Center stage, however, sailors are trying desperately to pull wounded comrades from the water into a small skiff, oblivious to the fighting around them. Trumbull regarded his work on the painting as being of “inestimable importance” and the skills and techniques he practiced would serve him well in the next decade.

His confidence bolstered by the successful completion of Battle of La Hogue, Trumbull began an original historical painting of his own, finishing it in 1785. Priam Returning with the Body of Hector was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1786 and was reminiscent of West’s Death of General Wolfe in that it depicted the death of a prominent and courageous military figure. Unlike West’s Wolfe, Trumbull’s painting regressed to a more traditional subject in depicting a classical figure in death. Death scenes were a popular undertaking among American artists in this period as the dignified death of a person in battle or in service to their country had strong moral undertones. Traditionally, however, even contemporary figures were presented in ancient dress to resemble a Greek or Roman hero to complete the theatrical staging of their death. Sacrifice for one’s country was a pillar of the Roman ethos and West’s break with tradition made his Death of General Wolfe both controversial and revolutionary. Trumbull’s Priam Returning with the Body of Hector was a safer choice for a first painting but it served as a sort of template for his more popular historical paintings. Center stage is Hector’s limp but muscular and perfectly-proportioned body, carried by a servant and a soldier in ornamental armor. Hector’s father, Priam, stands behind the body as onlookers fill the sides and edges of the painting. To the right is Hector’s wife Andromache, another woman (presumably Helen of Troy), and some of her servants. To the left are soldiers in plumed helmets and battle armor holding spears that reach far above their heads. Crouching by the soldiers is a woman holding a child, a figure that was a favorite of both West and Trumbull. The lighting of the painting is focused squarely on the center with Hector’s body being the most illuminated.

Although Trumbull’s first independent attempt at historical painting is more static than his subsequent works, it was well-received. A comment in The Artist’s Repository and Drawing Magazine praised Trumbull’s use of color and had high hopes for his future works. “No. 132, Priam returning with the Body of Hector, by Mr. TRUMBULL, is a considerable advance on his

69 Ibid, 86-87.
picture of last year; the colouring is more brilliant, and we think we foresee much improvement of this young artist in character, which will greatly assist his pencil.” The “painting of last year” referred to is *The Deputation from the Senate Presenting to Cincinnatus the Command of the Roman Armies*, a painting that Trumbull does not mention; it contained “four small figures.”

Trumbull would again return to the story of Cincinnatus years later with America’s own general assuming the title role.

In the autumn of 1785 Trumbull took a week’s vacation in Kent with West’s eldest son, Raphael. There he attempted his first military scene, a depiction of the death of General Simon Fraser at Bemis’ Heights in October 1777. Since lost, it was Trumbull’s first effort to capture an event of the Revolutionary War. It is interesting to note that the first sketch in a projected series of paintings to celebrate the American Revolution featured the valor of a British general dying in battle. The impetus for Trumbull’s subject selection was likely the British audience that would surely see it and also an attempt to please the masters at the Royal Academy. The young artist may also have hoped for patronage from a wealthy aristocrat, turning his passion into profit. The subject selection is also influenced, either intentionally or subconsciously, by West’s *Death of General Wolfe*. As Reynolds advised in his *Discourses*, an artist must be “an imitator of the works of other painters…. No man can be an artist, whatever he may suppose, upon any other terms.”

Trumbull was much more the imitator than the innovator. Where he hoped to be original, however, was in his Revolutionary series that would depict events not yet committed to canvas.

In fact, Trumbull’s famous series of paintings depicting events of the American Revolution may not have been his own idea. For aspiring American artists the American Revolution was the first chapter in their own classic history, full of epic tales, heroics, and drama. With the art in America in such an infant state, such a series presented an excellent starting point for an illustrious career in the new nation. In a letter to his brother on March 10, 1784, Trumbull wrote, “The late war opens a new & noble field for historical painting.” But West had expressed a similar opinion in a letter to Charles Willson Peale a year earlier. West asked Peale to send him drawings of the uniforms of the Continental Army “to enable him to form a few pictures of the great events of the American contest…which I propose to have engraved.” West never pursued the idea, likely out of deference to his patron King George III.

Trumbull did not acknowledge that West suggested such a series to him but it seems more than likely that West would pass such a ripe subject on to his young protégé with a penchant for historical painting and an eagerness to please his teacher. Regardless of its exact origin, Trumbull began his series of paintings depicting events of the American Revolution in the summer of 1785 with the only scene that he himself witnessed: the battle of Bunker Hill.

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70 Ibid, 87fn. Italics original.
Chapter 2
“Who Shall Write the History of the American Revolution? Who Can Write It? Who Will Ever Be Able to Write It?”

On a winter morning in 1785 John Trumbull set up his twenty by thirty inch linen canvas in Benjamin West’s London studio. On a stone slab he mixed his dry, powdered colors with boiled linseed oil, then carefully laid them out on his palette with a palette knife, a flexible steel knife angled so that if it were resting on the flat side of its blade on a table the handle would angle up at nearly forty-five degrees. On his wooden palette he arranged six colors carefully: “flake white, Naples yellow, Venetian red, vermilion, raw umber, and blue black.” Next to his canvas were several round brushes, soft bristles made out of hog’s hair and fashioned into pointed brushes. As Trumbull approached the canvas he applied the colors thinly and evenly, mixing Naples yellow and plenty of flake white to produce a light yellowish flesh tint or Venetian red and ample amounts of flake white to render a rosier, light reddish flesh tint. Working meticulously to portray accurate representations of the figures in his painting, he displayed his ability to render accurate and admirable miniature portraits, paying attention to every detail of his painting, not letting any participant whose face could be seen by the viewer to be simply a stock image. As he worked through the winter into early spring Trumbull produced a painting he hoped would cement the memory of the American Revolution in the minds of posterity.74

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In the winter of 1785 Trumbull was starting the first painting in what would become his Revolutionary series. The series would depict military, diplomatic, and political scenes that would illustrate what Trumbull believed was the “real” Revolution and its legacy. His first subjects were the battle of Bunker Hill and the American attack on Quebec as “these were the earliest important events in point of time.” Trumbull’s motivation for choosing these subjects was that he “not only regarded them as highly interesting passages of history, but felt, that in painting them, I should be paying a just tribute of gratitude to the memory of eminent men, who had given their lives for their country.”75

Benjamin West had produced a painting for similar reasons in 1770. In his Death of General Wolfe West depicted the death of General James Wolfe at the battle of Quebec. The swirl of battle fills the background while Wolfe is surrounded by friends and comrades in his glorious death. As a soldier delivers the news of victory from the left of the painting Wolfe lies in the arms of a comrade, gazing skyward with a peaceful and serene demeanor. The furled British flags above Wolfe, combined with the primary lighting of the painting cast upon him, highlight Wolfe as the central figure of the scene. West’s painting was seen as revolutionary because he painted a contemporary scene borrowing from classic scenes and virtues, yet he dressed his figures in contemporary dress. The depiction of heroes at the moment of their death was a common theme in the mid- to late eighteenth century. Depicting a military hero’s death

74 Ibid, 100-101.
was a way of personifying “national loyalty and selfless sacrifice.”

There were two cardinal rules of eighteenth-century classicism: “the use of realistic human figures in place of emblematic abstractions, and the portrayal of a hero in the guise of an antique god.”

A national hero was expected to be portrayed nude to show that the subject exemplified ancient ideals of courage, valor, and strength.

The fact that West dressed Wolfe in contemporary clothing made his painting revolutionary. When Sir Joshua Reynolds tried to dissuade West from clothing Wolfe in contemporary garb, West replied, according to his 1816 biographer John Galt, “The event intended to be commemorated took place on the 13th of September, 1758 in a region of the world unknown to the Greeks and Romans, and at a period of time when no such nations, nor heroes in their costume, any longer existed…. If, instead of the facts of the transaction, I represent classical fictions, how shall I be understood by posterity!”

While West does an excellent job of conveying emotion and presenting miniature portraits of the central figures, the background of his painting holds elements that highlight the British victory, not just Wolfe’s personal sacrifice. The smoke of battle drifts from left to right, away from the city of Quebec and the British victory. In the right background are British ships at anchor in the St. Lawrence River, crucial to the overall British victory for their superiority on the sea that allowed British reinforcements and supplies to reach North America.

West not only created a very loose interpretation of Wolfe’s death and his personal sacrifice as a martyr to the British cause; he also created an apotheosis of the British empire in 1770 with his painting. The British ships at anchor demonstrate the island nation’s naval superiority. The men surrounding Wolfe are not just British officers of varying ranks but also a simple British grenadier clasping his hands in prayer and both a Scottish officer, with his plaid kilt barely visible, and a colonial soldier in his green jacket. Quite conspicuously there is a Mohawk Indian in a posture of contemplation viewing the scene. All figures and nationalities were crucial to the British empire. Scotland and Britain had just formally united and the influx of Scottish troops in the army were often the army’s finest. Colonial troops bolstered British numbers and added local knowledge and support to the British cause during the French and Indian War. And the Indian allies were crucial to the British effort.

West’s Death of General Wolfe was wildly popular in Britain and his stock as an artist skyrocketed. Trumbull hoped to have the same success for both himself and his country.

Finished in March 1786, Trumbull’s Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker’s Hill was received with mixed, though generally good, reviews. It exhibited many of the characteristics of Trumbull’s later battle scenes and also borrowed many aspects from Benjamin West’s Death of General Wolfe. The scene is a swirl of fluid action and controlled chaos painted on a diagonal line as the action proceeds from the bottom right of the painting up through the top left. Smoke and flames from the burning buildings of Charlestown creep into the scene from the right, adding to a sense of tumult and chaos and also helping to outline the diagonal nature of the

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77 Ibid, 179.
78 Ibid, 180.
painting. The British regulars stand out brilliantly in their red jackets in contrast to the pell-mell mix of uniforms and outfits worn by the American militia who sport unbuttoned hunting shirts and unkempt jackets and are hatless and shoeless in many instances. The attire of the Americans lends itself to the nostalgic notion of Minutemen from humble homes heading off to war without proper training or supplies to oppose the well-trained regulars of the British army.

Among the many prominent figures that Trumbull painted into his Death of General Warren is General Israel Putnam, a veteran of the French and Indian War and Pontiac’s War. Putnam was in overall command at the battle of Bunker Hill though how close to the fighting he was is debated. In the thick of the action is also Colonel William Prescott, another French and Indian War veteran and commander of the forces directly involved in the battle. It was Prescott who supposedly gave the legendary command “Do not fire until you see the whites of their eyes.” After the battle he commanded troops in General Horatio Gates’ victory at Saratoga before resigning due to an injury. Alongside Prescott in Trumbull’s painting is Captain Thomas Knowlton whose men helped resist the British attack and cover the American retreat at Bunker Hill. Knowlton would later gain fame as commander of Knowlton’s Rangers, in some regards America’s first intelligence gathering unit. Knowlton would fall in battle in New York in 1776. In a letter to Trumbull’s father, the governor of Connecticut, Washington wrote, “Our loss in number was very inconsiderable, but must be regarded as great, in the fall of Lieut. Colo. Knowlton of your State…and who was a brave and good Officer.”

The inclusion of these men in Trumbull’s first Revolutionary painting demonstrates his skill in painting miniature portraits into larger historical scenes but more importantly created a cast of American heroes in such an early stage of the war.

Central in Trumbull’s Death of General Warren is Joseph Warren, a young doctor from Boston and close colleague of Sam Adams and John Hancock in the Sons of Liberty. After John and Sam Adams left for the Continental Congress, Warren remained in Boston as president of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress. On June 14, 1775 the Provincial Congress commissioned Warren a major general and on the morning of June 17, 1775 when Warren rode to Bunker Hill Putnam and Prescott insisted that Warren was their superior and should command the American troops in battle. Warren, having no prior military experience, refused, choosing to fire a musket in the main breastworks as a private alongside farmers and shopkeepers-turned-soldiers. In the third and final British assault Warren was killed by a musket ball to the head, dying instantly. Trumbull, who witnessed the battle from Roxbury, four miles away, depicted Warren in all white, slumped into the arms of a fellow soldier. Warren gazes skyward with a peaceful look on his face. The main light source in the painting shines down on Warren’s body adding to the angelic, almost divine aura of his figure.

Trumbull’s The Death of Warren was well-received and achieved his goals of evoking emotions of patriotic sacrifice. Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams and acquaintance of Joseph Warren, wrote to her husband of the painting, “I was frozen, it is enough to make ones hair stand on End. The moment of the Piece is when General Warren is slain and the scene, is dreadfully beautifull, or rather, dreadfully expressive.”

speak of its merit,” she wrote, “I can only say; that in looking at it, my whole frame contracted, my Blood Shivered and I felt a faintness at my Heart.” Of Trumbull she wrote, “He is the first painter who has undertaking to immortalize by his Pencil those great actions; that gave Birth to our Nation. By this means he will not only secure his own fame, but transmit to Posterity Characters and actions which will command the admiration of future ages…. Most importantly, Abigail Adams understood the larger goal of his painting. It teaches “that it is not rank, or titles, but Character alone which interest Posterity.”

By clothing Warren in plain dress without the epaulets or trappings of an officer Trumbull emphasizes that it is Warren’s actions that are admirable, not his rank of general or title of doctor.

Such praise must have been comforting to Trumbull who wrote to Thomas Jefferson on June 11, 1789 that the “most powerful motive I had or have for engaging in, or continuing the study of painting has been, the wish of commemorating the great Events of our Country’s Revolution.” Trumbull sought to “diffuse the knowledge and preserve the Memory of the noblest series of Actions which have ever dignified the History of Man: to give to the present and future Sons of Oppression and Misfortune such glorious Lessons of their rights and of the Spirit with which they should assert and support them…. “

Abigail Adams believed that Trumbull succeeded in his goal of both memorializing the events of the Revolution and also in giving future generations models to exemplify.

One particularly gratifying, though suspect, piece of praise came from Sir Joshua Reynolds, president of the Royal Academy of Art and a critic of Trumbull’s 1784 portrait of Jeremiah Wadsworth saying that Wadsworth’s clothing looked like a piece of “bent tin.” In an anecdote told by Trumbull West invited Trumbull to a dinner party with fellow artists. When Trumbull arrived he found The Death of General Warren situated prominently in the room and Reynolds among the party. Reynolds “immediately ran up to my picture,” recalls Trumbull, “'Why, West, what have you got here?—this is better colored than your works are generally.' ‘Sir Joshua,’ (was the reply,) ‘you mistake—that is not mine—it is the work of this young gentleman, Mr. Trumbull; permit me to introduce him to you.”

Though this conversation is more likely an attempt by Trumbull to even the score with Reynolds, Trumbull’s coloring was often praised in others’ own writing rather than his own. William Dunlap, a biographer of American artists at the turn of the eighteenth century, wrote that “the composition, coloring, and touch of Mr. Trumbull’s ‘Bunker Hill,’ are admirable.”

Despite Abigail Adams’s, Jefferson’s, and possibly even Sir Joshua Reynolds’ high praises, others gave Trumbull’s work a very cool reception. William Dunlap, author of A History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States, was a one-time painter who had studied with West but never fully flourished as an artist. Dunlap exercised his talent better as a playwright and artistic historian than as an artist, and his unflattering estimation of Trumbull was likely a combination of jealousy and personal animosity. Trumbull’s success and government patronage were coveted by Dunlap, a largely unimpressive artist. However, an

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83 Abigail Adams to Elizabeth Smith Shaw, March 4, 1786, in ibid, 7:82.  
encounter with Trumbull in 1824 caused Dunlap to resent him even more. By 1824 Trumbull had become president of the American Academy of Fine Arts, the only such academy for young artists in America. Trumbull’s presidency, however, was seen as dictatorial by fellow academy members Dunlap and Samuel F. B. Morse. When two students arrived early at the academy they found the doors locked and were unable to enter. They had so often been disappointed in their efforts to study art that they decided to give up. Dunlap had just arrived when the students were about to leave and convinced them to lodge a complaint with the director of the academy. Just as the students were doing so, Trumbull arrived and heard their complaint. According to Dunlap, Trumbull growled to the group, “These young men should remember that the gentlemen [the academy’s stockholders] have gone to a great expense in importing casts, and that they (the students) have no property in them.” Before leaving the disappointed students, Trumbull concluded, “They must remember that beggars are not to be choosers.”

Dunlap, Morse, other disgruntled members of the American Academy of Fine Arts left in 1826 to start the rival National Academy of Design. Given their rocky history, Dunlap’s criticism of Trumbull is somewhat valuable in Dunlap’s regard of Trumbull’s artistic ability but much less so in regard to the artist’s personal life.

Dunlap’s criticism of The Death of General Warren rests more with Trumbull’s presentation of the subject matter than his early artistic ability. “I saw this beautiful picture in various stages of its progress,” Dunlap wrote. Where Trumbull failed was in presenting both the death of Warren at all and in his favorable treatment of the British in the painting. As Warren lies on the ground dying a British soldier attempts to bayonet Trumbull’s fallen hero. The man cradling Warren attempts to push the bayonet away but it is British Major John Small who grabs the British soldier by the arm and pulls him away. This can be perceived as some level of civility on the battlefield or, in an extreme reading, as an act of British brutality. However, as Dunlap sees it, Major Small “is in fact the hero of the piece” as he is “arresting the bayonet of an English grenadier who is about to stab a dying man.”

Despite Abigail Adams’s emotional experience after viewing the painting, the more moving figures in the painting are British. Major John Pitcairn is mortally wounded and as he is falling is caught in the arms of his son, Lieutenant William Pitcairn. Marked by the British flag above them, the scene of the last moments between a father and son is almost designated by the flag to help draw attention to it. Thus, Warren’s sacrifice does not stand alone in the piece nor are the Americans portrayed as the sole moral and sentimental victors.

Trumbull’s next painting in the Revolutionary series was also a battle scene that occurred in the first year of the war. The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec, Canada depicts the ill-fated American attack on the fortified city of Quebec on the night of December 31, 1775. In a miserable winter storm Richard Montgomery led a detachment of three hundred men against the British defenses outside Quebec. Montgomery, a courageous but unskilled tactician, was born in Ireland and served in the British regular army during the French and Indian War before selling his commission and moving to America. At Quebec the courageous Irishman led a dozen men against the British breastworks, charging through a narrow corridor. Under a hail of cannon and musket fire Montgomery was killed instantly by a bullet to the head. As the men around him also fell, Montgomery’s second-in-command, watching the disastrous assault,

withdrew the rest of the men from battle. A scene of personal heroics in the middle of a cold, dark, stormy night, Montgomery’s assault on Quebec was a prime choice for an artistic composition.

Trumbull’s *The Death of Montgomery* is a dark painting commemorating heroism and sacrifice. Again set on the diagonal, Montgomery takes center stage as he collapses into the arms of two of his men behind him. The lighting of the painting illuminates Montgomery while the edges are considerably darker. At Montgomery’s feet are two of his aides-de-camp, both killed in the battle. Flags billow above Montgomery’s head marking the focus of the painting and storm clouds provide another dramatic element to the scene. Men in hunting outfits to the left of the painting turn to look at Montgomery as he falls and the men around him appear to hesitate and fall back after the death of their leader. As a final aesthetic and loose historical element, an Oneida Indian stands just left of center, possibly borrowing another theme from West’s *Death of General Wolfe*. Though Montgomery’s death is diminished, to some extent, by being placed on a barren and rocky ledge rather than among the British ramparts, Dunlap ranks this painting as superior to *The Death of General Warren* despite his harsh criticism.

Dunlap makes a useful comparison between Trumbull’s first two Revolutionary paintings and West’s *Death of General Wolfe*. Trumbull was familiar with West’s depiction of the death of Wolfe, and influences of that familiarity can be seen in both *The Death of General Warren* and *The Death of Montgomery*. West’s painting portrays the dying hero illuminated as the central figure of the painting in the arms of his comrades. A flag above the hero emphasizes the focus by drawing the eye to it, just as they do in both of Trumbull’s death scenes. Clouds obscure the top right half of the painting suggesting the chaos of battle, as both clouds and smoke do in Trumbull’s paintings. Spectators fill the frame and one soldier to the right of the painting holds his hands as if praying, adding to the saintly nature of the dying Wolfe. Wolfe’s face, like Warren’s and Montgomery’s, is serene and gazing skyward; as with Montgomery, all eyes are on the dying hero. And as in Trumbull’s *The Death of Montgomery* an Indian ally sits just left of center. Despite Trumbull’s superior coloring and ability to better represent the action and movement of battle, Dunlap felt that his paintings failed to capture the emotions and commemorate the moment as West’s did.

Dunlap’s primary complaint against Trumbull’s two paintings is an undeniable fact: they portray American defeats. West “represented the triumph of his heroes, whereas Trumbull chooses for his picture the moment of the overthrow of his countrymen, and the triumph of their enemies. The death of Doctor Warren… is an incident of minor consequence compared with the repeated defeats of the veterans of Great Britain….” Any of these moments of triumph, Dunlap felt, would have been more appropriate choices to depict. “Then Prescott, Warren, and Putnam would have been the heroes, instead of Small, Howe, and Clinton.” Perhaps Dunlap’s harshest criticism is that Trumbull’s death scenes failed to achieve his goals. “Wolfe died triumphant, surrounded by his friends in the moment of victory,” Dunlap wrote.89 Reverend Robert Bromley, a friend of West’s, reported in 1793 that we “behold him [Wolfe] a hero in death; not by struggling against it, or shewing any contumacy of mind, but by the placid serenity which great minds only can possess, and which must be inseparable from him whose sense of duty and of service to his country had found themselves in that instant so gloriously accomplished.”90

89 Ibid, 2:33-34.
Warren and Montgomery in Trumbull’s painting “are nothing more than—dying men.”
Dunlap’s assessment ran counter to Adams’. Dunlap felt that Trumbull failed to pay “a just
tribute of gratitude to the memory of eminent men, who had given their lives for their country.”
As sensitive as Trumbull was to the criticisms of fellow artists and overly critical biographers in
closed circles, he knew his work would not be relegated to the halls of museums or stuffy
aristocratic parlors alone. The true judges of his success would be the American people.

Like all painters, Trumbull wanted to be respected by his peers; more important he
wanted to earn a living by painting. With the Revolutionary series Trumbull hoped to capitalize
on the popular memory of recent events and earn fame and fortune in the process. Taking
West’s advice to have *The Death of General Warren* and *The Death of Montgomery* engraved
and thus sold to the wider public for profit, Trumbull traveled to France in the summer of 1786
in search of an engraver. The market for copies of paintings depicting the war Great Britain had
just lost to her American colonists was, as was to be expected, small in Britain, compelling
Trumbull to make his trip across the channel. His trip to Paris proved extremely beneficial to
Trumbull in other areas as well.

While traveling through Paris with his paintings in hand Trumbull met and befriended
several influential individuals including artists, art dealers, and art connoisseurs. One was
Thomas Jefferson, then the United States ambassador to France. Jefferson “had a taste for the
fine arts” and invited Trumbull to stay at his house during his time in France. Trumbull
recalled, “My two paintings, the first fruits of my national enterprise, met his warm
approbation,” so much so, perhaps, that Jefferson suggested Trumbull’s next painting
commemorate the Declaration of Independence. A logical choice in terms of both chronology
and significance for Trumbull’s Revolutionary series, Trumbull began the composition for his
*The Signing of the Declaration of Independence* with the “information and advice” of Jefferson,
who regarded him “a young painter of the most promising talents.”

After an artistic sightseeing trip through France that resulted in Trumbull meeting
Jacques-Louis David, a renowned French artist. Initially supporting the French Revolution and
painting scenes in support of it, including a scene of the Tennis Court Oath and *The Death of
Marat*, David was imprisoned after the radical revolutionary Maximillien Robespierre was
killed. However, David soon aligned himself with Napoleon Bonaparte, the French dictator who
took power away from the people and invested it in himself. Serving as Napoleon’s court
painter, David produced a number of celebratory paintings of Napoleon including *Napoleon at
the Saint-Bernard Pass* and *The Coronation of Napoleon*. David became nineteenth century
France’s most influential painter in the words of many of his students. In an 1800 pamphlet
dedicated to David’s teacher Joseph-Marie Vien, David’s students wrote, “David, your pupil (the
Greeks would have called him your son) held up the torch you handed to him with a new energy,
spread and distributed a light which grew brighter and brighter. He taught, he produced, and

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93 Ibid, 92.
94 Ibid, 93.
95 Ibid, 93, 98 fn.
every day his new masterpieces augmented your glory and his own.” The meeting between Trumbull and David brought together two of the most influential history painters of two revolutionary countries, each with very different motives and messages. Of the two Jefferson wrote, “I pretended not to be a connoisseur in the art myself, but comparing him with others of that day I thought him [Trumbull] superior to any historical painter of the time except David.”

Trumbull returned to London in November 1786. He spent the next six months preparing sketches and compositions for five more paintings in his Revolutionary series. As his painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence would require several small portraits of eminent men, he could progress only so far in London. Trumbull painted many of his historical scenes in this manner, taking time to carefully compose the scene and then collect miniature portraits of the primary figures. Dunlap has the highest praises for Trumbull’s ability to paint miniature portraits, or heads, stating of those in The Signing of the Declaration of Independence that “the heads painted in 1787-9… very beautiful,” and that the heads of Washington and Major William Stephens Smith in Capture of the Hessians at Trenton were “jewels.”

In the spring of 1787 Trumbull began work on a painting that was to depict Lord Charles Cornwallis’s surrender at Yorktown in October 1781. This subject was important because it essentially brought about the end of the war and secured victory for the Americans, thus forming the bookend to his Revolutionary series, although he would later choose another subject to close out his Revolutionary series. The American “found great difficulty” in composing this painting. “The scene was altogether one of utter formality,” Trumbull reflected, “the ground was level—military etiquette was to be scrupulously observed, and yet the portraits of the principal officers of three proud nations must be preserved.” The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia, 19 October, 1781 was not his first military scene but unlike his two previous paintings, which depicted chaotic scenes of combat, the scene of Cornwallis’s surrender was more formal and stately.

Trumbull also worked on compositions for paintings depicting the victories at Trenton and Princeton in 1787, paintings that were almost a hybrid of The Death of General Warren and The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis, and the surrender of General John Burgoyne to Trumbull’s former chief Horatio Gates at Saratoga. While 1787 was a busy year for Trumbull’s work on the Revolutionary series, Trumbull took a curious sabbatical to “give the Devil his due.” Upon hearing of a Spanish night assault on Gibraltar that was successfully repulsed by the British on November 27, 1781, Trumbull sketched a quick rendering of the scene. Trumbull’s painting, The Sortie Made by the Garrison of Gibraltar, on the Night of 26/27 November, 1781, seems to add credence to Dunlap’s criticism of Trumbull’s preference for British victories. Trumbull, however, considered himself an American patriot. His reason for painting the British victory at Gibraltar was “to show that noble and generous actions, by whomsoever performed, were the

objects to whose celebration I meant to devote myself.”

Despite Trumbull’s noble statement, he hints at the more practical impetus for pursuing this subject. By painting events of the American Revolution Trumbull realized he “had given offense to some extra-patriotic people in England,” and, hoping to regain favor, chose a more British-friendly subject. Financial motivation had a strong influence as well, for the strapped artist was hoping to cash in on the popularity of a subject that might be better received than the American Revolution. Still painting in Great Britain, Trumbull’s scenes glorifying a democratic revolution were not well-received in monarchical Europe. Patronage of the arts smacked of monarchy and Trumbull was unlikely to find support from the American government. Though he was still determined to complete his Revolutionary series, Trumbull dabbled in painting other subjects and in pursuing other work as well.

In the fall of 1787 Trumbull returned to Paris to gather portraits for the many canvases he had in progress. At Jefferson’s house Trumbull painted the portrait of Jefferson into his unfinished The Signing of the Declaration of Independence alongside John Adams’s portrait which Trumbull had completed months earlier while Adams was serving as ambassador in London. Trumbull also took this opportunity to paint many of the prominent French officers he intended to include in The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis including General Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau; Admiral François Joseph Paul, comte de Grasse; and General Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Matier, marquis de Lafayette. He then returned to London to finish The Sortie Made by the Garrison of Gibraltar before returning once more to Paris in the summer of 1789 where he dined with Lafayette and witnessed the fall of the Bastille. In June Jefferson offered Trumbull a position as his personal secretary. Trumbull turned down his offer, declaring the necessity and expediency “to preserve and diffuse the memory of the noblest series of actions which have ever presented themselves in the history of man....” His patriotic duty compelled him to lose no time, he felt, as the memory of the Revolution was fading fast. “The most serious reflection,” Trumbull wrote to Jefferson on June 11, 1789, “is that the memory and enthusiasm for actions however great, fade daily from the human mind.”

With work still to be done on several paintings in his Revolutionary series, Trumbull sailed for America in October 1789.

Arriving in New York in November 1789, Trumbull’s next twenty-seven years were split between America and Great Britain as he finished the Revolutionary series paintings he began in 1786 and dabbled in a career as a portrait artist. Arriving in New York Trumbull found “all the world was assembled” in the seat of the new government. He began gathering portraits for The Signing of the Declaration of Independence, The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis, The Capture of the Hessians at Trenton, and The Death of General Mercer at the Battle of Princeton, and also received subscriptions for engravings of The Death of General Warren and The Death of Montgomery, including subscriptions from Washington, Adams, and several members of Congress. In July, the city of New York asked Trumbull to paint a full-length portrait of Washington to be hung in City Hall. Trumbull first painted a small-scale portrait twenty by thirty inches of the president and gave it to Martha Washington as a gift. He then expanded his original portrait to life-size, depicting Washington in his general’s uniform leaning on a white

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102 Ibid, 159-160.
103 Ibid, 164.
horse atop a bluff overlooking New York City as the British evacuated it at the end of the Revolutionary War. It was the first of many official portraits Trumbull would paint.

Between May 1790 and May 1794 the artist traveled the eastern seaboard collecting portraits for the four works he had in progress. He made various stops in Philadelphia, New York, Boston, New Hampshire, and Connecticut before traveling to the southern states. After some time in South Carolina he stopped in Yorktown, Virginia to sketch the ground where General Charles Cornwallis’s army surrendered to Washington on October 19, 1781. In his travels he painted the portraits of many eminent men including several signers of the Declaration of Independence for his painting of that event. He even found time to ride with Pierre Charles L’Enfant, the French engineer who was laying out the new capital of the United States on the border of Virginia and Maryland. Despite the sightseeing and socializing Trumbull did in his tour of the eastern United States, the artist took time to carefully sketch and paint the portraits of prominent men that he would include in his larger paintings. In painting “the noblest series of actions which have ever presented themselves in the history of man,” Trumbull took great care to ensure that the likenesses of every major actor were accurate.104

While Trumbull collected sketches for his paintings the United States and Great Britain nearly came to blows over issues left unresolved by the end of the Revolutionary War. Great Britain had promised to evacuate its military posts west of the Appalachian Mountains but, as of 1794, had yet to do so. Southerners were still angry about slaves they had lost to “liberating” British armies during the Revolution. New England merchants were pushing to open the West Indies to American trade despite British resistance, not to mention the high tariffs Britain imposed on goods to and from America. Those who were most upset, however, were American sailors themselves who risked attack by and impressment on British ships. Rather than risk another war when America was ill-suited for one, Washington appointed a delegation to negotiate with Britain. He selected John Jay, chief justice of the Supreme Court, to head the delegation. Trumbull’s brother Jonathan, Jr., a member of Congress and fellow Federalist, suggested that Jay offer the position of secretary to Trumbull, a position Trumbull gladly accepted. On May 12, 1794, Trumbull, Jay, and the other members of the delegation embarked for London from New York.

It seems curious that in 1794, at the height of his ability and with promising paintings waiting to be finished, Trumbull would leave America and painting to pursue a diplomatic career. Trumbull explained that his reasoning was mostly financial in a letter to the Marquis de Lafayette. “My native country, pillaged on all sides, is no longer in the state of easy and affluent tranquility,” Trumbull lamented, “which is so indispensably requisite to the prosperity of the fine arts.”105 His engravings for The Death of General Warren and The Death of Montgomery had not yet arrived and subscriptions for it were not as numerous as he hoped. He told an aspiring painter, “I would have been a beggar had I wholly relied on painting for my support.”106 Serving as Jay’s secretary provided him with an income and gave him an opportunity to try his hand at diplomacy and politics, a logical choice for the opinionated Trumbull.

104 Ibid, 159.
When the treaty was signed in 1795 and Trumbull’s official business was over, he remained in Europe as a commissioner for adjustments to the treaty. He traveled Europe, inquiring about the engravings of *The Death of General Warren* and *The Death of Montgomery*, finishing four other works in his Revolutionary series at the time as well. After engaging in various failed land speculations in Europe, Trumbull finally prepared to return to America in 1804 with Sarah Hope Harvey, his wife of four years. Trumbull wrote very little of his English wife and leaves her out of his autobiography entirely. While Trumbull left little information about his wife he does mention in a letter to his brother in 1801 that his wife was “the Orphan daughter of Parents in middle life. She lost her mother at a very early time, before She remembers, and remained for several years in the Country under the Care of a good notable Woman, who regarded reading, writing & Housewifery, as the essentials of Female education.”

Friends of Trumbull felt that he was a loving husband and enjoyed the company of Sarah Hope Harvey Trumbull, but there is some speculation by Trumbull’s biographer Theodore Sizer that the marriage strained the relationship between Trumbull and his family. In a letter to Trumbull’s fellow student under West, Washington Allston, Gulian Verplanck was less than flattering in his estimation of Sarah Hope Harvey. “I see little of Col. Trumbull,” he wrote in May 1819, “but you knew his misfortunes. His terrible wife repels all society from his house and he lives in a sort of stately misery.”

Trumbull’s love life produced interesting results. Some critics unfairly viewed his British wife as another example of his pro-British sentiments. More interesting, however, is the product of another of Trumbull’s love interests. Trumbull described the affair himself in a letter to his friend James Wadsworth. “When I was last in America an accident befell me, to which young Men are often exposed,” Trumbull wrote in 1799. “I was a little too intimate with a Girl who lived at my brother’s… the natural consequence followed, and in due time a fine Boy was born;-- the number of Fellow labourers rendered it a little difficult to ascertain precisely who was the Father; but, as I was best able to pay the Bill, the Mother using her legal right, judiciously chose me.…” The illegitimate son of Trumbull’s affair with a woman he described so unflatteringly was John Trumbull Ray and would rise to become a lieutenant in the British army during the War of 1812. Trumbull, however, referred to Ray as his nephew, and Ray viewed Trumbull and his wife as his aunt and uncle.

Returning to New York on June 27, 1804, Trumbull intended to travel to Boston to pursue a career as a portrait artist. He had finished *The Signing of the Declaration of Independence*, *The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis*, *The Capture of the Hessians at Trenton*, and *The Death of General Mercer* but they met with little commercial success. However, his earlier peer under West, Gilbert Stuart, had already moved to Boston. Stuart, charismatic and talented, had been engaged in portrait painting for twenty years and had found great success by the time Trumbull arrived in Boston. “Boston was then a small town,” Trumbull wrote, “and did by no means offer an adequate field of success for two rival artists.” With little hope of success in

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Boston, Trumbull settled in New York, earning a living and keeping busy through private and government patronage. The city of New York commissioned him to paint full-length portraits of John Jay and Alexander Hamilton. Jay, in addition to serving as chief justice on the Supreme Court and as head of the treaty delegation to Britain in 1794 was also the governor of New York from 1795 to 1801. Trumbull had met Hamilton just two weeks before his fatal duel with Aaron Burr. Hamilton was a celebrity in America, a prominent member of the Constitutional Convention who led the support for ratification and served as the first Secretary of the Treasury under Washington. He had also served throughout the Revolutionary War on Washington’s staff and led a brave assault on a British redoubt at Yorktown. Both Jay’s and Hamilton’s portraits were well-received and hung in the governor’s room at City Hall.\footnote{Trumbull’s 1804 portrait of Hamilton is the one frequently seen on the ten dollar bill.}

After four years of mild success as a portrait artist in New York, Trumbull again sailed for London, arriving in January 1809. Although he was warmly received by his friend and mentor West, his reception in general was cool. Jefferson’s presidency and his favoritism for France soured relations between America and Britain at the time. Finding little patronage in Britain, Trumbull tried to return to America in 1812 but war between the two countries prevented his departure. Despite Trumbull’s and John Jay’s efforts years earlier with the Jay Treaty, the United States and Great Britain went to war over still unresolved issues: British forts in the west stirring up Indian attacks on American settlers; British ships attacking American merchant vessels and impressing American sailors; and America’s too close ties with France. Trumbull’s time in Britain during the war is interesting as he was confined to a country America was at war with despite his efforts to avert war as a member of the Jay delegation years earlier. In addition, his only son, John Trumbull Ray, was a lieutenant in the British army during the war. Trumbull made his loyalties very clear to his son upon hearing that Ray intended to join the British army in 1811. “You have chose, of all times, to enter the British Army at the moment when a war with America is almost inevitable,” Trumbull wrote, “and when of course your entering the military service of this Country may be regarded...as an Act of Treason to your native Country.”\footnote{John Trumbull to John Trumbull Ray, July 10, 1811, in Trumbull, The Autobiography of Colonel John Trumbull, 341.}

Trumbull’s time in Britain during the War of 1812 and his son’s service in the British army did not escape the criticism of William Dunlap. “In 1816 Mr. Trumbull returned to America,” Dunlap wrote, “after having passed, for the second time in the enemy’s country, a period of warfare successfully terminated by his fellow-citizens.”\footnote{Dunlap, History of the Arts of Design in the United States, 2:55.} Trumbull had spent the duration of the War of 1812 in Britain, where he had spent a significant part of the Revolutionary War, but he sailed for the friendlier surroundings of America on August 18, 1815, just months after peace between the United States and Great Britain had been declared.

Again settling in New York, Trumbull received word from a friend that the city of Baltimore had wished to procure two paintings depicting events of the recent war. The first was the death of Robert Ross, a British general, in an attack on Baltimore and the second was of the attack on Ft. McHenry. To assist him in the details of the events, Trumbull was introduced to former congressman Judge Joseph Nicholson, who described the events to him and showed him the scenes of action. Trumbull took some of his Revolutionary series paintings, but city officials decided not to pursue the project due to a lack of funds. After his proposals for paintings
commemorating the War of 1812 were rejected. Trumbull’s financial situation was bleak. He felt
that the American people “care no more for the actors in the Revolution than you would for a
parcel of oyster-shells after the oysters are extracted." Nicholson suggested that Trumbull go
to Washington where Congress was then in session and offer his paintings of the Revolution.
Trumbull offered to paint large-scale paintings depicting events of the American Revolution to
decorate the halls of the Capitol after it had been successfully rebuilt following its burning by the
British army in 1814. His offer was enthusiastically received by many members and the issue
was debated by both chambers of Congress.

To ensure his success Trumbull enlisted the help of his old friend Thomas Jefferson. On
December 26, 1816 he wrote to Jefferson, “The Memory of your kindness & of the interest
which you formerly took in this work is too strongly in my memory, to suffer a doubt to intrude
of your powerful protection at this time.” Relations between the two had cooled during
Jefferson’s presidency when the two found themselves on different sides of the British-French
debate and earlier because of Jefferson’s opposition to Washington, whom Trumbull
“revered.” Trumbull, like Jay, Hamilton, and Washington, aligned himself with the
Federalists who believed in a stronger central government and felt that the democratic impulses
of the American Revolution had started to go too far. The ordered and unchaotic nature of
Trumbull’s Revolutionary series speaks to his Federalist loyalty and his effort to distance himself
from the democratic radicalism of the American Revolution. In the 1790s Federalists and
Jeffersonians (Anti-Federalists) held separate Fourth of July festivities. Jeffersonians held public
readings of the Declaration of Independence whereas the conservative Federalists favored
prayers and hymns, shying away from Jefferson’s radical document. Jefferson, on the other
hand, took the side of the more democratic Republicans, favoring stronger state governments
over the national government. Trumbull made his political sentiments about the Republican
administrations very clear in a letter to his son in 1811. “America with all her follies and vices is
still my Country and yours,” Trumbull lectured. Patriotism, he continued, “should lead us not to
abandon America because the ruling party of the day is composed of worthless and unjust
Men.” The grudge apparently entirely resided in Trumbull, however, as Jefferson’s quick
support of Trumbull’s Capitol project showed. On January 19, 1817, Jefferson wrote to James
Barbour, a senator from Virginia, in support of the artist. “The subjects on which Col. Trumbull
has employed his pencil are honorable to us,” he wrote, “and it would be extremely desirable that
they should be retained in this country as monuments of the taste as well as of the great
revolutionary scenes of our country.” The debate in Congress was not over Trumbull’s talents
which the Congressional Record states “were acknowledged on all hands, and the excellence of

114 Genin, Selections from the Works of the Late Sylvester Genin, Esq., 36.
those paintings… was generally admitted."120 The opposition came from those questioning whether the federal government should be a patron of the fine arts, a practice that smacked of monarchy and an age America hoped to leave behind. “It was questionable how far it was just or proper for the Government of the United States to become the patron of the fine arts,” the Congressional register reads. Congressmen felt that “no such expense ought to be authorized until the faith of the Government was redeemed by the fulfillment of all its pecuniary obligations,” including the payment of all debts from the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. “A nation, like individuals,” it was argued, “should be just before it was generous.”121

Despite some apprehension over granting patronage to a particular artist, on February 6, 1817, Congress passed a resolution “That the President of the United States be, and is hereby, authorized to employ John Trumbull, of Connecticut, to compose and execute four paintings commemorative of the most important events of the American Revolution, to be placed, when finished, in the Capitol of the United States.”122 For each painting he would be paid eight thousand dollars. Trumbull was convinced that he owed his new commission to Jefferson and thanked him in a letter on March 3, 1817. “The kind approbation which you was so good as to express contributed powerfully to my Success—and I beg you to accept my cordial thanks.”123 Jefferson’s support certainly could not have hurt Trumbull’s chances but it is interesting to note that James Barbour, the recipient of Jefferson’s letter endorsing Trumbull, was one of fifty who voted no on the resolution.124

Trumbull suggested the paintings each be six feet high by nine feet long, but was overruled by President James Madison, who preferred twelve feet high by eighteen feet long. For Trumbull it was the size that proved the greatest difficulty. He was accustomed to painting miniature portraits within scenes that were twenty by thirty inches, but his monocular eyesight hampered his ability on such a large scale. The specific subjects of the paintings were also left to Madison. Madison’s first choice was the battle of Bunker Hill, either based on Trumbull’s admirable painting of the event or because of its significance as one of the first battles of the war, and one the Americans performed well in. Trumbull felt otherwise. “If the order had been for eight paintings,” he wrote, “I should have named that first; but as there were only four commanded, I thought otherwise.”125 According to Trumbull there were two military events that were paramount to all others, the two occasions on which an American army made prisoners of a British army: Saratoga and Yorktown. Meeting Madison’s approval, Trumbull then suggested two civil scenes to adorn the walls of the Capitol. A natural choice to both him and Madison was the signing of the Declaration of Independence. When asked about the fourth painting Trumbull replied, “Sir, I have thought that one of the highest moral lessons ever given to the world, was that presented by the conduct of the commander-in-chief, in resigning his power and commission as he did.” Trumbull had chosen the moment when Washington preserved the republic by turning the command of the army over to the government, rather than turn the new nation into a military dictatorship as some feared. After some reflection Madison agreed, saying, “I believe

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120 Annals of the Congress of the United States, 14th Congress, 2nd session, January 27, 1817, 761-762.
121 Ibid, 762.
122 Annals of the Congress of the United States, 14th Congress, 2nd session, February 6, 1817, 1348.
you are right; it was a glorious action.” With the subjects settled, Trumbull spent the next seven years working on the large paintings he hoped would cement the memory of the Revolution in the minds of the American people.

Trumbull first worked on enlarging his earlier The Signing of the Declaration of Independence which he had finished in 1790. In a spacious rendition of Independence Hall, Jefferson stands just left of center handing the document to a seated John Hancock. Flanking Jefferson is Benjamin Franklin to his left and John Adams to his right with fellow committee members Roger Sherman and Robert Livingston standing just behind him. Members of Congress are seated or standing along the walls to the left, right, and rear of the painting as light from an unseen window filters in from the bottom left to illuminate the scene. The faces of all forty-eight participants are recognizable and distinct, the artist again displaying his penchant for miniature portraiture. Aside from the obvious civil-military differences between his The Signing of the Declaration of Independence and The Death of General Warren and The Death of Montgomery, Trumbull’s Capitol paintings shared certain uniform characteristics that set them apart from his earlier works.

His civil scenes are more formal and deliberately composed. They are static with no sense of movement or activity unlike his tempestuous battle scenes. Trumbull’s battle scenes were often fixed on a diagonal whereas his four paintings for the Capitol were on a level, more central axis. The molding of the ceiling and two doors on the back wall level the scene, as do the various uniformities of height among the members. The drum and flags hanging on the back wall center the painting and the primary actors are positioned just to the right of the flags. The coupled sets of curtained windows on both the left and right walls, the pair of doors on the back wall and the flags between them instill a sense of symmetry in the scene that is often lacking in his earlier military scenes. Though The Signing of the Declaration of Independence was enthusiastically received, critics did have their say.

Among Trumbull’s loudest critics was, as always, William Dunlap. Trumbull had taken artistic liberty with the scene, composing a full room of quiet and unified onlookers, many of whom were not present. Dunlap felt men would say, “Is history thus to be falsified, and is this record to be placed in the capitol to contradict the minutes of Congress and the truth?” John Randolph from Virginia gave his scathing opinion of Trumbull’s work on the floor of the House of Representatives. On January 9, 1828 during a debate on whether to commission more historical paintings for the Capitol Randolph declared that “he hardly ever passed through that avenue (the Rotunda) to this Hall without feeling ashamed of the state of the arts in this country.” He added, “As the pieces of the great masters of the art have…acquired a sort of nom de guerre, so ought… the picture of the Declaration of Independence to be called the Shin-piece, for, surely, never was there, before, such a collection of legs submitted to the eyes of man.” John Quincy Adams, son of John Adams and Secretary of State between 1817 and 1825, was disappointed by Trumbull’s painting. “I cannot say I was disappointed in the execution of it, because my expectations were very low,” he wrote, “but the picture is immeasurably below the dignity of the

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126 Ibid, 258-259.
128 Congressional Debates, 20th Congress, 1st session, January 9, 1828, 942.
subject.”

Despite its critics, Trumbull’s *The Signing of the Declaration of Independence* was popularly received by the public and delivered to the Capitol on March 4, 1819.

On November 13, 1820 the aging Trumbull, now sixty-four, submitted *The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis* to be hung in the Rotunda. Trumbull’s original miniature of the scene was finished by 1797 and again takes on many of the same characteristics of his *The Signing of the Declaration of Independence*. At the exact center of the painting British General Charles O’Hara, Cornwallis’s second-in-command, is ready to present his sword in surrender to Benjamin Lincoln, Washington’s second-in-command. The ranks of both the French and American officers are filled with prominent and familiar faces including Washington, Lafayette, Rochambeau, de Grasse, Henry Knox, Anthony Wayne, and Alexander Hamilton. In a touch of familial loyalty the artist included his brother, Jonathan, Jr., among the ranks of officers.

The scene is presented on a level plane, the heads of the French officers to the left and those of the American officers to the right being nearly uniform in height. The French and American flags hem in the central actions of the painting. The billowing smoke drifting left to right in the sky and the fluttering flags are reminiscent of *The Death of General Warren* and *The Death of Montgomery*. Despite pawing horses and the wind that moves both flags and smoke, the scene remains static. Again the portraits are accurate and recognizable and again Dunlap accuses Trumbull of violating the truth “by introducing Lord Cornwallis in the scene of the surrender.” Here, however, Dunlap’s criticism is unfounded. Though Cornwallis’s name appears in the title of the painting he is absent from the scene. Dunlap fails to acknowledge Trumbull’s accuracy in presenting Lincoln, rather than Washington, accepting the surrender of the British officer.

After finishing *The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis* Trumbull began work on the surrender of General John Burgoyne at Saratoga. Without a miniature to work from, Trumbull’s twelve feet by eighteen feet painting had to be completely constructed from scratch. Organizing his figures again on a level plane, Trumbull’s one-time commander Horatio Gates takes center stage as Burgoyne offers him his sword in surrender. As in all of his paintings, onlookers crowd the fringes of the painting, almost all of them American officers. Clouds roll in from the right of the painting and an American flag waves gently to the right of the scene. Trumbull’s skill at landscape painting is exhibited by the rolling hills in the background and the rocky outcrop in the foreground. Although the scene takes place on a bluff, the figures are all on equal standing with only a lone officer of dragoons on horseback standing above the rest. As in *The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis* the scene is one of civility, formality, and peace in a time of war. However, Trumbull’s failing eyesight begins to be apparent as the figures are less clearly and ably painted, perhaps the worst being Daniel Morgan dressed in a white hunting shirt just right of center. Dunlap considered *The Surrender of General Burgoyne at Saratoga* to be “a lamentable falling off,” but this time he made no mention of historical accuracy or inaccuracy despite the apocryphal inclusion of the former commander of the Northern Department, Philip Schuyler, in the scene.

On December 24, 1824 Trumbull, now sixty-eight, finished the final painting for the Rotunda. In a cavernous room Washington stands in the center dressed in his Continental Army

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131 Ibid, 2:59.
uniform with his resignation in his outstretched hand. Behind him stand six other officers including Generals William Smallwood and Otho Holland Williams. The scene is again level, with the moldings of the ceiling and two doors on the back wall forming straight lines to level the painting. Spectators line the fringes of the painting with the members of Congress filling the space from the left edge of the painting to Washington and Washington’s fellow officers and civilian spectators filling the space from Washington to the right edge. Among the spectators filling the left half of the painting are Jefferson, Madison, Thomas Mifflin, and James Monroe. Washington’s action is highlighted by light coming from above that illuminates the ceiling and wall above him but, interestingly, not Washington himself. The scene is, like Trumbull’s previous three, one of civility and formality. Dunlap considered *The Resignation of General Washington* the worst of the four Capitol paintings most likely because it lacks the emotion of Trumbull’s earlier Revolutionary scenes.

A new addition to Trumbull’s Revolutionary scenes was the women in *The Resignation of General Washington*. A concept borrowed from his mentor West, the inclusion of women was intended to add to the moral sense of the scene. Women were often seen as embodiments of morality in eighteenth and nineteenth century painting. They also accentuate the sense of patriotic duty. Two young girls stand under the protection of their father to the right of the painting. More than artistic motifs they are symbols of the patriotic duty to defend one’s home, which Washington did ably in the Revolutionary War. As an added touch of drama, Martha Washington and her three grandchildren watch the scene from a pillared balcony at the top right of the painting.

Though his four paintings for the Capitol were finished and he was thirty-two thousand dollars wealthier, Trumbull was anxious to fill the final four spots in the Rotunda. Before a trip to Washington he wrote to Charles Tait, former senator from Georgia, on October 25, 1825, “I intend to take with me my original Studies...of Bunker’s Hill, Quebec, Trenton & Princeton and place them for a few days in view of the Members of Congress, in the vacant Niches.” He hoped Congress would decide to commission him to enlarge those four paintings and complete the “Hall of the Revolution,” which he felt “would be one of [the] most magnificent & interesting Rooms in the World.” After lengthy debate, however, Congress decided to fill the remaining spots with paintings from John Vanderlyn, William H. Powell, John Gadsby Chapman, and Robert W. Weir, seeking to expand the national heritage of the United States. That Trumbull’s four paintings hanging the Rotunda fell slightly below Congress’s expectations also affected Congress’s decision.

Although only four of Trumbull’s paintings were hung in the Capitol despite his efforts otherwise, on February 28, 1817 a debate began in Congress to commission Trumbull to paint a fifth before he had even finished his first. A resolution was proposed that would have Trumbull produce “a painting, the design of which shall be to commemorate the patriotic conduct of Paulding, Williams, and Van Wert, in capturing Major Andre, the British spy, during the American Revolution.” The painting, when finished, would hang alongside Trumbull’s four

other paintings in the Rotunda. Without any explanation in the Congressional Record, the resolution was “read and ordered to lie on the table,” and Trumbull never began work on a painting to commemorate the capture of John André.135 That Trumbull did not even produce a sketch of the event may indicate that he was never aware he was considered for such a project. Or perhaps he preferred not to celebrate an event that resulted in his own troubles and imprisonment in London almost forty years earlier.

As he finished each painting he exhibited them in major cities throughout the country so that the public could see them before they went on display in Washington, DC. They were often well-received; the most popular was The Signing of the Declaration of Independence which netted “in three weeks, 17 hundred dollars by its exhibition.”136 Evaluations of each, as shown, were a mixture of positive and negative. A Philadelphia magazine, The Port Folio, printed a comment from one reader in February 1819 saying, “The errors in point of fact, with which [The Signing of the Declaration of Independence] abounds, ought to exclude it from the walls of the capitol…”137 Mid-nineteenth century art critic John Neal wrote that Trumbull’s paintings were “altogether, a reproach to the country; and – I say it deliberately… were I in Congress, I would move for their being set fire to, before the great front of the building, which they help to make ridiculous.”138

Peter Lanman, a relative of Trumbull’s living in New York, felt otherwise. Writing to his daughter in July 1824 he acknowledged that the exhibition of Trumbull’s The Resignation of General Washington in New York City did not meet the artist’s expectations but at no fault of Trumbull’s ability. “The truth is our City of Gotham, has been the Theatre of…a thousand and one Pictures of no value—the Gothamites are tired of the shows. The Picture has been much admired, & some of the Colonels friends, consider it among his best.”139 Trumbull also found admirers in the generation after his paintings were finished. A conversation between novelist William Makepeace Thackeray and Senator Charles Sumner is quoted by poet Richard Henry Stoddard in 1853. Thackeray was, according to Sumner, “an artist by birthright, and his judgment was beyond chance or question.” Upon a visit to the Capitol Rotunda Thackeray said to Sumner, “Trumbull is your painter, never neglect Trumbull.”140 Whether Thackeray meant that Trumbull was the pre-eminent painter of talent and production or that he was America’s painter is unclear but for over one hundred and eighty-five years visitors to the Capitol have been unable to neglect Trumbull.

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135 Ibid, 1041.
Chapter 3
“Diffusing the Memory of the Noblest Series of Actions Which Have Ever Presented Themselves in the History of Man.”

John Adams asked Thomas Jefferson “Who shall write the history of the American revolution? Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?” Jefferson answered, “Nobody.”¹⁴¹ John Trumbull attempted to answer Adams’ question through painting. Trumbull tempered his instinctive flair for the dramatic to offer a reasonably accurate representation of the events of the Revolution, using his mentor Benjamin West’s words as guidance: “the same truth that guides the pen of the historian should govern the pencil of the artist.”¹⁴² The events that Trumbull painted did indeed occur. As happens with a writer, the painter’s opinions and the larger social context shaped his interpretation, even of the smallest detail. But to millions of Americans and beyond Trumbull’s images have become a Gospel version of the nation’s founding, a series of stories emphasizing the importance of heroic Founding Fathers who not only risked everything to found the United States but did so with grace, calm, and reason.

Trumbull’s America in 1817 was very different from that of 1787 when he began to paint events that occurred as early as 1775. The three decades that intervened between when he started his paintings and their arrival on the walls of the Capitol witnessed major changes nationally and globally that had affected both Trumbull’s and President James Madison’s decisions on what scenes would adorn the walls of the recently refurbished Rotunda. War, revolution, and politics helped determine what image Americans wanted to portray of themselves and their legacy.

Trumbull had composed most of his paintings of the Revolution in Great Britain, far from the audience he hoped would give him success. Indeed, he often presented America’s British enemies as gracious in defeat during a formal military surrender in The Surrender of General Burgoyne and in victory, as in The Death of General Warren and The Death of Montgomery. Not surprisingly, these two paintings were never suggested and rarely considered for the Rotunda even though The Death of General Warren is often considered his best canvas.

Trumbull’s paintings in the Capitol show America moving forward. The Signing of the Declaration of Independence depicts the moment Americans declared independence, throwing in all their chips and taking the first step in building a new nation. The Surrender of General Burgoyne and The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis are moments when American fortunes turn, first when the war finally appears winnable and the French commit to a military alliance, and then when the Americans finally defeat the British and force treaty negotiations, securing American independence. Washington’s action in The Resignation of General Washington secures the United States as a republic under civil authority as it begins operating free of military rule, as many feared it might. America is triumphant in various ways. Though The Death of General Warren and The Death of Montgomery were quite popular, and were among President Madison’s suggestions for paintings to be installed in the Rotunda, they depicted American defeats. Bunker Hill was a moral victory for the Americans but, as William Dunlap noted, Trumbull had chosen “for his picture the moment of the overthrow of his countrymen, and the

¹⁴² Quoted in Charles Harrison, et al., eds., Art in Theory, 650.
triumph of their enemies.” The sacrifice and humanity of these paintings were universal, not just American. They were reverses America had suffered and they influenced one’s memory of the Revolution by demonstrating the persistence of the character of the men involved.

Though they depict American defeats, as Dunlap noted, *The Death of General Warren* and *The Death of Montgomery* serve a larger purpose than to commemorate an American victory. In each painting the principal actor lies dying in the arms of a comrade. Joseph Warren, a politician-turned-soldier who had been a close compatriot of the Adams cousins and John Hancock, sent Paul Revere and William Dawes on their famous midnight rides to warn of the British troops marching through Lexington towards Concord, Massachusetts. When Hancock and John and Sam Adams joined the Continental Congress Warren stayed in Boston becoming president of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress. A physician before the war, Warren was commissioned a major general just days before the battle of Bunker Hill but he refused to acknowledge the commission at the battle, choosing instead to fight in the breastworks alongside common farmers and dockworkers he may never have associated with before the war. An embodiment of the American ideal, Warren is dressed in white, lying mortally wounded in the arms of a soldier behind him as a British soldier is about to bayonet him in *The Death of General Warren*. An American soldier attempts to deflect the bayonet as British Major John Small also arrests his own soldier’s bayonet. The combined effort to spare a dying man further mutilation and pain adds a touch of universal humanity and civility to the battle and the American Revolution in general, a civility supposedly lacking in other wars. Warren’s clothing and the light that illuminates him above all other figures in the painting present him as an angelic figure, clearly a martyr. Through the mid-nineteenth century he was seen as the nation’s first martyr, dying while fighting for independence despite the fact that a formal declaration of that independence was more than a year away. Abigail Adams said of Trumbull’s *The Death of General Warren* that “he teaches mankind that it is not rank nor titles, but Character alone, which interests Posterity.”

Richard Montgomery is cast in a similar light. A veteran of the British regulars in the French and Indian War, the Irish-born Montgomery joined the American cause as a brigadier general and captured Montreal before laying siege to Quebec. As he is struck by an enemy bullet his face is projected skyward and he collapses back into the arms of a soldier that Trumbull’s key lists as a “volunteer.” As in *The Death of General Warren*, soldiers ahead of Montgomery stop and turn toward Montgomery, reaching to hold him. No flags billow triumphantly, a nod to the disaster that the attack on Quebec turned out to be. Despite the defeat, the painting has elements within it that were instrumental in the formation of a popular mentality about the American Revolution. Montgomery’s death on the cold, stormy night of December 31, 1775 was an act of sacrifice, like that of Warren. He gave his life for his country, as all patriots were expected to do in order to obtain and preserve liberty. At Montgomery’s feet lie his two aides-de-camp, dead in the snow in an act of fealty. These two men died not only for their country, but for their commander, who they served dutifully and faithfully to their death, falling before their commander did. Not only was Montgomery brave, but he was inspirational, the sort of man others would die for, the sort of man America needed during the war and after. Self-sacrificing,

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144 Abigail Adams to Elizabeth Smith Shaw, March 4, 1786, in Margaret A. Hogan, et al, eds., *Adams Family Correspondence*, 7:82.
courageous, and common were the traits that Warren and Montgomery displayed, traits that had defined the American spirit from the start.

The dying hero, even bordering on martyrdom, was a staple in the battle scenes of Trumbull’s Revolutionary series. In *The Death of General Mercer at the Battle of Princeton, New Jersey, 3 January 1777* Trumbull again presents a brave commander facing death. Hugh Mercer, a Scottish physician who had been at the disastrous battle of Culloden and fought skillfully in the French and Indian War, is shown wounded lying against his horse, sword in hand. Two British soldiers attempt to bayonet him though he deflects one’s bayonet with his hand and attempts to swing his sword at the other. American and British troops fight all around him, with some British troops between Mercer and his men, indicating that the courageous Scot was ahead of his men when he was struck down. An American flag flutters in the background directly above Mercer, marking the focal point of the painting. As Mercer sacrifices his life for the American cause, Washington strides forward on horseback, sword pointed forward. The dashing bravery of Washington and even army surgeon Benjamin Rush, who is also on horseback, sword held high, exemplifies the necessary courage of every patriot.

Trumbull constructed the American Revolution as an orderly event. None of the four paintings he hung in the Rotunda portrayed actual battles, confusion, chaos, or anything out of order. *The Signing of the Declaration of Independence* shows a room full of men seated or standing neatly in rows, flawlessly dressed despite the intense July heat that filled the closed room. The scene appears calm and tranquil with no signs of agitation, not even from John Dickinson who abstained from voting for independence and refused to sign the document. The little signs of disorder are a disheveled stack of papers on the table between Congressional president John Hancock and Jefferson’s committee. This pile says less about the disorder associated with revolution than it does of the importance of the document presented, that independence trumped all other business on that day. The image that persists of America’s founders is a group of disciplined, restrained, and proper men. However, the American Revolution was not won in the halls of Congress but on the field of battle, a fact that Colonel Trumbull surely knew. And a fact that he committed to canvas.

Trumbull’s *The Surrender of General Burgoyne* and *The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis* depicted two of the Americans’ greatest battlefield victories. The first displayed the American defeat of General John Burgoyne at Saratoga on October 19, 1777 after nearly a month of skirmishing and two major battles. Burgoyne surrendered his army of over six thousand to General Horatio Gates, on whose staff Trumbull served a year before the victory at Saratoga. Gates stands center stage in Trumbull’s painting, receiving the sword of an ingratiated Burgoyne as larger players in the American victory such as Dan Morgan, John Stark, and Philip Schuyler (who was replaced by Gates and not present at the battle) stand in observance. The surrender occurs near the field of a battle that claimed hundreds of American, British, and Native American lives, yet Trumbull omits any scenes of battle. An American flag waves gently in the breeze in front of a backdrop of heavy gray clouds but the horizon to the left of the painting is clear. Dan Morgan, a veteran of the French and Indian War and taken prisoner while leading his elite riflemen at the battle of Quebec in 1775, stands in front of a brass cannon and leans on a sword as William Prescott, commander at Bunker Hill, leans on his rifle. Aside from these instruments of war, however, evidence of battle is absent from the painting. Instead one sees a crowded group of American officers in a line, all nearly the same height, in another of
Trumbull’s attempts to bring order to the scene. A dragoon officer sits atop an impatient horse, its pawing hooves stirring up no dust, maintaining the serene and pristine atmosphere. The scene, from the officers in their spotless uniforms to the gleaming brass cannon without even a spot of mud on its wheels, is immaculate. Only a splintered stump in the left foreground disturbs the American victory. The painting crowns diplomacy, rather than American soldiers, as the victor.

The themes of *The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis* are similar. Occurring almost exactly four years after Saratoga, George Washington and his French allies under the Comte de Rochambeau forced the surrender of Lord Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia on October 17, 1781. The Marquis de Lafayette had been sent to Virginia to combat Benedict Arnold who was conducting raids throughout the state. Cornwallis planned to pursue Lafayette but withdrew to Yorktown when Lafayette was reinforced. Following Cornwallis to Yorktown, Lafayette was soon met by Washington and Rochambeau with the bulk of their forces, trapping Cornwallis on the Yorktown peninsula. The French navy arrived and defeated the British warships that served as Cornwallis’s only salvation. With the noose firmly around his neck, Cornwallis endured a siege of less than thirty days before he asked for surrender. Though he was in command of the British force at Yorktown, Cornwallis did not attend the ceremony of surrender and is therefore not depicted in the painting that bears his name.

At center on horseback is General Benjamin Lincoln, the American commander who had the displeasure of surrendering Charleston to the British in 1780. Cornwallis refused to attend the ceremony in person claiming illness and instead sent his second in command, Charles O’Hara, to surrender his sword. Washington, set right of center but slightly away from the mass of officers, refused to accept O’Hara’s sword and sent Lincoln instead. Flanking Lincoln and O’Hara is a who’s who of American and French officers including Rochambeau, Lafayette, Admiral comte de Grasse, Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, Anthony Wayne, Henry Knox, Alexander Hamilton, and Trumbull’s younger brother Jonathan Trumbull, Jr. Again, Trumbull’s subjects are flawlessly dressed, in neat lines nearly uniform in height. The implements of war are relegated to ceremonial swords and rows of neatly lined cannon in the background. Again there is no evidence of battle: no trenches, no redoubts, no warships, no soldiers but an indistinct line of British troops marching in the distance. Smoke billows from left to right in the sky denoting a fire off canvas to the left. American and French flags flutter to the right and left, respectively. As in his painting depicting the surrender at Saratoga, Trumbull has presented us with an ordered, formal, diplomatic scene devoid of any signs of the battle that has brought about such a moment. The American and French officers are on horseback, above their defeated enemy, clearly indicating that America and her allies had come out on top.

What one notices from these two paintings is how clean, methodical, and civilized they are. Trumbull viewed the American Revolution similarly, most likely in response to events occurring in France where the people’s attempt to create a democratic government resulted in a paranoid body of radicals that stamped out freedom rather than protect it, ultimately resulting in a dictatorship. While French armies defended the loosely-termed French “republic,” the French people tried to defend themselves from fear and the guillotine that claimed the heads of not only the king and queen, but also some of the radical leaders themselves and almost that of Lafayette and Rochambeau. Trumbull’s decision to paint the military formalities of Burgoyne’s and Cornwallis’s surrenders rather than young Alexander Hamilton’s dashing attack over a British
redoubt at Yorktown or the American attacks at Bemis Heights at Saratoga, either of which would be a reversed reminiscence of Trumbull’s dynamic and successful *The Death of General Warren* or *The Death of General Montgomery*, is significant. Americans were victorious in their Revolution not because they shattered an enemy force or ran them from the field but because gentlemen came to terms in a formal meeting. American troops were victorious but the laurels belonged to a singular group of gentlemen who agreed that enough was enough. Neither painting presents the air of triumph and invincibility that paintings of Napoleon did, conquering in the midst of battle or overlooking a conquered battlefield.

Trumbull’s most well-known painting glorifies a document that held an uncertain and still evolving place in American memory. A simple justification for separation from Great Britain, the Declaration of Independence did nothing to establish a government or ensure victory. The Constitution far surpassed it in significance to many people and until after 1815 the Declaration was merely seen as a list of grievances and then a philosophical document enumerating the rights of free men in any country. It was far from the sacred American text we now consider it to be. In fact, the Declaration’s rise in significance was due in large part to Trumbull’s painting. Before its permanent installation of in the Rotunda in 1826 *The Signing of the Declaration of Independence* was exhibited throughout the country, linking an image of unanimous consent and determination with the abstract idea of the Declaration of Independence. The approaching fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration helped facilitate its popularity as did the decline of Trumbull’s own Federalist Party. As Jefferson and his protégé James Madison ascended to the presidency, followed by another Jeffersonian Republican, James Monroe, between 1801 and 1825, the popularity of the more revolutionary Declaration began to rise above the more conservative Constitution. Federalists, however, feared the radicalism tied to the Declaration and the possibility of it stirring up the lower classes to uproot them from power.

Events in the American leaders’ own backyard, or backcountry as it was, furthered the desire for an end to the more radical impulses of the Revolution. In the wake of the Revolution banks and merchants called in their debts on poorer farmers, threatening many with debtor’s prison. In response, the farmers, many of them Revolutionary war veterans, evoked the principles of ’76, echoing the arguments of Bostonians against a taxing British government. Led by Revolutionary War Captain Daniel Shays, one group of disgruntled farmers marched on the federal arsenal at Springfield, Massachusetts in 1786. After a brief exchange of gunfire with a state-raised militia, the would-be revolutionaries disbanded.

Farmers in western Pennsylvania staged a similar uprising in 1794 after the government began to enforce a tax on whiskey that was the farmers’ livelihood. Amid growing acts of animosity against the government, including burning effigies and mock guillotines, President Washington rode at the head of a 13,000 man militia to put down the so-called Whiskey Rebellion. Although both rebellions were quelled quickly, wealthier Americans worried about the implications they had. Fought for liberty and independence, the revolutionary zeal of 1776 sought to rally all groups, including the lower classes, to the American cause. In 1794 it was now the lower classes that many worried about. Americans had seen the danger of the lower classes claiming outright equality in France as the heads of aristocrats rolled in the streets of Paris.
The revolutionary zeal of the 1760s and 1776 were well and good because it helped liberate American merchants and wealthier individuals from oppressive British taxes and oversight, as well as the litany of democratic and republican virtues Americans felt they were being denied. Once the Revolution was won, however, wealthier and well-to-do Americans feared further rebellion and democratization. Self-consciously fearful of losing their own authority, American, particularly Federalist, leaders feared also the destruction of an orderly world necessary for republican liberty. The American Revolution was fought for a better, more right form of government by its own people. But once established, that form of government had to be defended from overzealous democrats and radicals, including Jeffersonians. The battle between radicals and conservatives played out in the political arena between the opposing Federalists and Jeffersonians, as well as earlier in the debate over the Constitution.

Though Thomas Jefferson liked “a little rebellion now and then,” his own presidency and those of his protégés James Madison and James Monroe saw the ideals of ’76 slip further away. The nation had been through its first transfer of power from one political party to another and had done so peacefully. By Jefferson’s inauguration in 1801 France’s revolution had disintegrated into a dictatorship, casting doubt on the successful export of America’s revolutionary ideals. Through the presidencies of Madison and Monroe the threat of external attack and the need for domestic defense strengthened the national government and conservative stability was favored over the realization of 1776’s lofty ideals.

Externally the revolutions through Latin America between 1810 and 1818 caused some conservative Americans to further distance themselves from the radical ideologies of the Declaration and the American Revolution. An orator, future governor of Massachusetts, secretary of state, and the man who warmed up the crowd with a two hour oration before Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, Edward Everett expressed American opinion on Latin American independence in 1821: “How can our industrious frugal yeoman sympathise with a people that sit on horseback to fish?” Latin America’s revolutions were nothing like that of the United States. America’s revolution had been orderly and began only after legitimate petitions for redress had been ignored and denied. No one believed this more than Trumbull, who believed the Latin American countries needed American intervention to establish “wise and just governments [built] on the principles of rational liberty.”

The American Revolution lacks the negative connotations that haunt the French Revolution, nor is it burdened by the primitive connotations of the Latin American revolutions. In more recent years, the despotism, bloodshed, and brutality of the Russian and Chinese revolutions seem to have little in common with the American Revolution. The apparent distance in tone and violence between the American and other revolutions reflects the success of conscious efforts by Trumbull and others to portray the Revolution as an orderly transfer of power. Trumbull had spent time in Paris in 1787 and again in 1789, witnessing the storming of the Bastille on July 14. Of the French Revolution Trumbull declared that it “brought upon France and all Europe such a series of crime, disaster and blood, as the world never before saw,

and all this under the abused names of liberty, equality, and the rights of man." Crimes had certainly been committed by the Sons of Liberty in the American Revolution; disasters occurred in many forms, from the retreat on Long Island to the betrayal of Benedict Arnold; and blood was spilled on and off the battlefield as civilians watched armies on both sides and neither side march past and through their homes. But Trumbull’s canvas ignored those facts.

In the nineteenth century, the radicalism of the American Revolution faded from American memory, thanks in large part to Trumbull’s history paintings. Many Americans recoiled in horror upon hearing that the French mob had murdered sentinels in order to chase the king and his young queen from their bedchambers in the middle of the night. Irish-born British politician Edmund Burke, a lamenter of the entire French Revolution, was appalled by the event. “I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her [the queen] with insult,” the American Revolution sympathizer wrote. “But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever.” A similar event occurred in the early stages of the American Revolution, when a mob of the Sons of Liberty ransacked and burned down Chief Justice and future governor Thomas Hutchinson’s house in Boston just moments after Hutchinson and his family had fled during a meal. Hutchinson stated to his full courtroom the next day, “I hope all will see how easily the people may be deluded, inflamed and carried away with madness against an innocent man.” However, Trumbull did not put his brush to use in capturing those moments. Americans preferred their formal declaration and list of grievances to the king, believing that revolution was forced upon them as a last resort. “The calm splendor of our own Revolution, comparatively rational and beneficial as it had been,” Trumbull wrote, “was eclipsed in the meteoric glare and horrible blaze of glory of republican France.”

Unlike the Latin American revolutions, Congress and the American leadership remained intact and undivided, according to Trumbull’s paintings. In The Signing of the Declaration of Independence Trumbull’s Congress stands united. In The Surrender of General Burgoyne an American force from various colonies achieves victory, evidenced by Gates and others in Continental Army uniforms, Dan Morgan in his hunting shirt to Gates’s left, and William Prescott in his militia uniform behind Morgan. The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis shows how French and American troops were able to work together to achieve the victory that would precipitate the end of the war.

Simon Bolivar had less success in Latin America, constantly beset by rebellions and betrayals that forced him to assume a much more dictatorial role. Unable to instill the centralist government he preferred, Bolivar named himself dictator. The French Revolution also produced a dictator. Trumbull’s acquaintance and fellow artist Jacques-Louis David immortalized the moment Napoleon declared himself emperor in 1804. In David’s The Coronation of Napoleon the French general stands in a crowded palace surrounded by lavishly-dressed admirers including the Pope himself. Napoleon has already crowned himself emperor, taking the honor from the Pope and vesting it in his own authority. Napoleon is dressed like Caesar with a gilded white

toga and golden crown of laurels on his head. In his hands he holds the empress’s crown as he is about to crown his wife empress. The room is overflowing with onlookers and only two altar boys at the right edge of the painting are not looking at the emperor. This was the result of the high-minded French Revolution that cost King Louis XVI his head and nearly that of Lafayette and Rochambeau.

The result of America’s revolution was very different, as Trumbull noted in *The Resignation of General Washington*. In an undecorated hall Washington stands in the center of the room wearing his Continental army uniform. In his outstretched hand is his resignation from the army, which he presents to Thomas Mifflin, Washington’s former subordinate and now president of Congress. A handful of Washington’s officers stand behind him; other spectators gather to the right of the painting. His wife watches from a balcony as the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, victor over the British forces, humbles himself to the collective Congress, the American people personified. The man that many had feared would establish himself as a dictator had willfully given up power in what Madison called “a glorious action,” and Trumbull believed was “one of the highest moral lessons ever given to the world.”

Trumbull’s version of the American Revolution began with a premeditated political, diplomatic act and ended similarly with Washington’s resignation.

John Trumbull’s taming of the American Revolution as a reasonable and noble affair achieved wide popularity in the nineteenth century largely through cheap reproductions that soon adorned the walls of thousands of American homes. In many ways, Trumbull’s enduring influence is due to the lithographs of Currier and Ives. Nathaniel Currier and James Merritt Ives have often been called “printmakers to the American people” for their business of distributing cheap, hand-painted lithographs of popular American artwork and scenes of American life. Beginning in 1840, Currier and Ives produced lithographs for nearly seventy years, passing on, as some critics suggested, “the romance of America to future generations.” Historian Bryan F. Le Beau called the prints of Currier and Ives “a prism through which we may better examine the historical light of that time and place [nineteenth century America].” Among Currier and Ives’s prints depicting average Americans hunting, fishing, farming, and taking sleigh rides in the snow were prints depicting historical scenes from the War of 1812, the War with Mexico, the Civil War, and the American Revolution. Among the prints of the American Revolution were ten that were copied from Trumbull’s paintings.

Trumbull’s *The Death of General Warren* was copied by Currier and Ives for five undated prints, all using as their focal point the death of Joseph Warren. Two of the prints bear the inscription: “The path to liberty is bloody,” leaving no illusion about the cost of victory. These prints portray humbly, but neatly, clad American troops battling British redcoats while Joseph Warren, in blue rather than Trumbull’s white, lays dying as a British soldier is about to bayonet him. The image and the inscription enforce the value of sacrifice in the American Revolution by any and all patriots. In 1852 Currier and Ives produced *Surrender of General Burgoyne at Saratoga*, based on Trumbull’s painting of the same title. Though several renditions of the surrender at Yorktown were produced by the printmakers in 1845 and 1846, none were

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151 Ibid, 258, 259.
153 Ibid, 3.
154 Ibid, 55.
based on Trumbull’s painting. Currier and Ives preferred to envision Cornwallis, flanked by Banastre Tarleton, Charles O’Hara, and a General Chewton, surrendering to Washington, who was surrounded by Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Lincoln, and the Marquis de Lafayette. The lithograph’s better-known heroes and villains were more inspirational than the second-in-commands presented more accurately by Trumbull. No more than thirty years later Trumbull’s paintings hit the presses again when Currier and Ives depicted the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Trumbull’s painting was carbon-copied onto small, gaudy-colored prints and sold for as little as six cents apiece making them accessible to a large public. Of five prints portraying the momentous event of July 4, 1776, four were based on Trumbull’s painting that reinforced the unifying event at Independence Hall.

Produced between 1845 and 1876, Currier and Ives’s American Revolution lithographs presented what some criticized as a too romantic American identity: unanimous support of the Declaration of Independence by Northerners and Southerners; victory by disciplined but rugged American troops led by commanders from both the North and South over well-dressed and more experienced British forces; dignified sacrifice and the firmness of untried colonial soldiers in the face of determined and battle-hardened British troops. This was the history of the American Revolution as John Trumbull saw it, and Nathaniel Currier and James Merritt Ives agreed, especially in a climate that was on the verge of civil war and in the wake of the divisive conflict. Between 1845 and 1876 (and beyond) it was a history Americans readily wanted to accept, if they did not already. They lived in uncertain times. American industry boomed, looming over farmland and the shops of local artisans. Immigration into primarily northern cities left many Americans feeling uneasy and concerned about their identity in the face of Irish Catholic immigrants. The issue of slavery divided the nation and the Civil War tore it apart. Novels, biographies, and histories attempted to evoke a shared American heritage with some success. Visual sources like the prints of Currier and Ives, however, reached a larger audience. They reinforced a romantic image of the American present and reminded people of their shared past. Utilizing Trumbull’s paintings they achieved Trumbull’s goal by instilling a shared American past and identity through images of unified heroism, personal sacrifice, and shared victory. It was a comforting heritage that Americans embraced. These prints were cheaply produced and sold throughout the mid-nineteenth century, finding a place among the walls and tables of various American homes. By the turn of the century many had been pulled down and hidden away in attics and closets to be forgotten until collectors in the 1920s and 1930s renewed interest in them. Currier and Ives again found cult popularity as images of American nostalgia, representing an age people longed for. Amongst these resurrected prints were those of the American Revolution when the young nation was successful against daunting odds. In the uncertainty of economic depression, Americans found comfort in romantic lithographs of American ruggedness and superiority, just as Americans had done when the prints were originally produced.

John Trumbull’s paintings had a major impact on the popular American sense of the details as well as the general character of the American Revolution. In 1815 John Adams claimed that the “The Revolution was in the Minds of The People, and this was effected, from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen Years before a drop of blood was drawn at Lexington.”

However, traditional memory has marked the beginning of the Revolutionary War, and sometimes the Revolution itself, with the “shot heard ‘round the world” at Lexington green. Popular history has bookended the Revolution with the surrender at Yorktown, though members of both the young American nation and Great Britain knew differently in 1781. The war would continue on for another fourteen months with smaller skirmishes in the north and the bitter civil war in the south. Trumbull did his part to dispel the idea that Yorktown ended the war and the Revolution by finishing his Revolutionary series with *The Resignation of General Washington, at Annapolis, Maryland, 3 December 1783*, more than two years after Yorktown.

The scene is one of political formality, with Washington in his military uniform standing out prominently in a room of spectators dressed in plain clothes. The scene transitions nicely into the period of political and governmental testing and tweaking that would take place over the next six years, blurring the fact that it was connected with the Revolution itself at all. *The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis* is a much more clearly military scene. The American and French armies are both present, with only three British officers representing the British army bottled up on the Yorktown peninsula, adding a sense of finality to the scene, that the British had been wiped from the colonies. The rigid, neat, straight lines of officers and all eyes on the scene of the surrender invoke a more formal sense than *The Surrender of General Burgoyne* where American officers gather haphazardly around Gates and Burgoyne, with a cannon clearly present and Dan Morgan, among others, gazing absent mindedly away from the two men. Trumbull furthers the common misconception by making the surrender at Yorktown on October 19, 1781 the final day of the war.

The most memorable of the episodes, however, is “The Shot Heard ‘Round the World,” first aired in 1976. The episode begins with Paul Revere warning the townspeople of Lexington that the “Redcoats are coming! The Redcoats are coming!” The American minutemen meet the British regulars at Old North Bridge in Concord and chase them back to Boston followed by the chorus “It was the shot heard ‘round the world, was the start of the Revolution,” with a banner across the screen that clearly states “The start of the Revolution.” No disclaimer that the event was the start of the Revolutionary War but not the Revolution itself. The episode and the Revolution end with Cornwallis’s surrender at Yorktown with a banner that reads “The end of the Revolution.” *The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis* is clearly Trumbull’s last war painting in the Rotunda, emphasizing the finality of Yorktown. But Trumbull attempts to bookend his Revolutionary series with Washington resigning his commission, that “glorious action.” The makers of *Schoolhouse Rock* and others may have viewed Washington’s action differently, not so much as the end of the Revolution but the start of the republic, when Washington preserved democracy and again saved the country from absolutism.
Despite the importance of the Boston Massacre and Boston Tea Party in the shared memory of the American Revolution, the signing of the Declaration of Independence remains paramount in visions of the Revolution. The civil, orderly, unified beginnings of the revolution and the nation begin with that document and help cast a similar light back on more radical events such as the Boston Massacre and Boston Tea Party. Jefferson’s list of grievances legitimates the earlier acts of vandalism and violence. The radicalism of the French and other revolutions finds no companion in American history. Nor do stories of bitter battlefield defeats, acts of cruelty, and animosity between nations. In fact, Trumbull chose not to perpetuate the memory of death and carnage with his paintings in the Rotunda. His two paintings portraying surrenders show formality and civility rather than animosity. In neither painting is the conquered commander forced to kneel or humiliate themselves in any way. The closest a commander is forced to come to humiliation is in The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis where Benjamin Lincoln is on horseback while Charles O’Hara is on the ground. The focus is on the victorious army rather than the vanquished foe. The Americans are gracious and respectful in victory. But they are still victorious.

Trumbull’s The Signing of the Declaration of Independence created the misconception of the 4th of July as the official date of American independence. In the painting, all members of Congress were present and in agreement. Jefferson and his committee present the document as if for the first time, when in reality it had undergone several revisions. Congress fudged its own record to create a single day for national celebration rather than various celebrations on July 2, July 19 (when the New York delegation finally voted yes), and August 2 (when members of Congress began signing the document). Trumbull provided the image to support the date with his room full of a complete, unified Congress.

When one wonders of John Trumbull’s influence on our memory of the American Revolution they need look no further than our own textbooks. Even in editions that focus on the events from 1865 to the present, what has become the “second half” of American history, Trumbull’s paintings are used to boil the American Revolution into just a handful of pages. In The American Vision: Modern Times, the Revolution is reduced to just eight pages. Among those, however, is a timeline titled “Countdown to Revolution, 1763-1776.” At the right end of the timeline is the date “July 4, 1776 Congress issues Declaration of Independence.” Above that listing is the central scene from The Declaration of Independence. Only a few pages later Trumbull’s The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis appears above a caption that reads: “The British surrender at Yorktown.” The same painting appears in American Nation. However, below this painting it states, “John Trumbull painted this scene of General Cornwallis surrendering to George Washington,” followed by the question, “How does this painting indicate that Washington’s position was more powerful than Cornwallis’s?” Though the authors of this textbook mistakenly identify the central figures in the painting, they still include the painting and encourage students to identify certain elements that are embodied within. Trumbull’s paintings are even utilized in world history textbooks. In World History: Connections to Today the fifth unit is entitled “Enlightenment and Revolution.” The Signing of the Declaration of Independence appears on an introductory page of the unit along with images of women carrying pikes and dragging a cannon during the French Revolution, Simon Bolivar, and Indonesians

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voting in their first democratic election in over forty years. “Americans proclaim the principles of democracy” appears alongside Trumbull’s painting. The pages link various revolutions together, letting the scene of a unanimous Congress in a crowded room in Independence Hall stand for the entire American Revolution.

While Trumbull’s presence in the classroom is significant, the location of his original canvases is the greatest tribute to his influence. To learn American history in a visual sense, one needs only to travel to one city: Washington, D.C. There they can see the influence of great leaders such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Visitors can stand in remembrance of the sacrifice of thousands at memorials dedicated to World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. They can educate themselves in museums dedicated to American involvement in air and space innovations, American art, American Indians, and Americans throughout history. One can even view the original Declaration of Independence and Constitution. In a city designed and built to house the federal government and surrounded by so much history the placement of Trumbull’s paintings in the Capitol Rotunda is significant. His paintings hang in the building where the American people’s opinions and interests are debated, placing them figuratively and literally in the midst of the American people’s hearts and minds.

The Rotunda is the central part of the Capitol, in many ways its heart. Here presidents and other prominent Americans lie in state, an honor reserved for very few individuals. Tours of the Capitol begin in the Rotunda where visitors find themselves surrounded by scenes of America’s creation, the most significant being Trumbull’s paintings. Others added later recognized American superiority over Native Americans and the importance of Christianity in a nation that values freedom of religion and separation of church and state. But Trumbull’s paintings have a resonance that is lacking in John Gadsby Chapman’s The Baptism of Pocahontas, Robert W. Weir’s Embarkation of the Pilgrims, William H. Powell’s Discovery of the Mississippi, and John Vanderlyn’s Landing of Columbus. Within Trumbull’s paintings are figures that are easily recognizable, including Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin. These individuals and an event such as the signing of the Declaration of Independence are more quintessentially “American” than are Christopher Columbus and Pocahontas, present in two of the other paintings, though their significance in American lore can certainly be argued. However, for one to understand the origins of the American nation they look to the Revolutionary era and Trumbull’s canvases. One observer, who visited the Capitol in 1856, nine years after the eighth and final painting had been installed, remarked in a public address: “When we pause before these historical paintings which adorn the great hall of our national capitol. It is well that the eye can take in at a glance the surrender at Yorktown, and the Declaration of Independence; for that crowning triumph of American valor, around which exultant patriotism will ever love to linger, derives all its luster from the earlier and grander victory of peace.”

Perhaps it is good that one can take in all of Trumbull’s scenes for they can take in the history of a revolution begun by a group of men who slowly and methodically voted for independence after

159 These paintings, completed in 1840, 1844, 1847, and 1847, respectively, filled the remaining four slots in the Rotunda.
160 Quoted in Kammen, A Season of Youth, 108.
other options had been exhausted, a revolution won on the field of battle in grand victories, and a revolution that officially ended in democracy with the patriotic resignation of the generation’s largest hero. British novelist William Makepeace Thackeray said to Senator Charles Sumner, “Trumbull is your painter, never neglect Trumbull.” Americans, often without realizing, have failed to neglect Trumbull, conjuring up his paintings and renditions of events to accompany their history of the American Revolution.

Orderly, unified, civil, humane, and conservative; that was the American Revolution, won through the personal heroism and sacrifice of determined individuals. American independence was declared one day in a stuffy room packed with delegates from all thirteen colonies who pledged unanimous support. Independence was won in one final battle at Yorktown, Virginia. And that independence was secured by one selfless act in a drafty room full of Congressmen and onlookers from the various states in unanimous awe of the act they witnessed. The French aspired to come to such a conclusion, as did the various Spanish colonies in Latin America. But all became corrupted and bogged down in rebellions of their own as their revolutions to shake off the grip of absolute monarchy resulted in dictatorships. John Trumbull’s paintings displayed these simple truths about the American Revolution more vividly than Parson Weems’s American myths and James Fenimore Cooper’s novels. His paintings may be less pervasive than Weems’s tale of Washington’s strong moral fiber exhibited by confessing to chopping down a cherry tree. But as the Dutch historian J.H. Huizinga said, “Historical understanding is like a vision, or rather like an evocation of images.”162 Trumbull’s paintings have a power that the words of others lack. It eliminates variance in the conjuring up of images by presenting the image for you. Each painting may have a little different meaning to each person, but they are infused with undeniable imagery that diffuses a certain memory of the events. And, unlike Weems, Cooper, and Hawthorne, Trumbull believed he was creating a documentary in his artwork. The events were chosen for their significance and infused with a certain amount of artistic flair, but they are couched in fact, memorializing drama rather than creating it.

America needed a founding myth. John Trumbull painted it.

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162 Quoted in Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, 77.
APPENDIX
John Trumbull, *The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec, Canada*, 1788, Yale University Art Gallery.
Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770, National Gallery of Canada.
John Trumbull, *The Death of General Mercer at the Battle of Princeton, New Jersey, 3 January 1777*, ca. 1787-1797, Yale University Art Gallery.
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