Early American History often faces the unfortunate challenge, especially in the American public education system, of being simplified to the opinions and visions of the Founding Fathers – their hopes dreams, and aspirations for our nation as it struggled to break away from the oppression of England to form a “more perfect Union”, as our Bill of Rights proudly declares. However important the voices of the Founding Fathers were in the documented history of our nation, it is the voice of the common man that once challenged and continues to challenge American government to improve upon that original vision, which is all but too unified in our founding documents. The truth is that although a great deal of Americans eventually shared the same vision to become a nation independent of Britain, many at first were strongly against revolution, and those who were for it could not agree on how the task of establishing a new civil right should be best accomplished. Before the Revolutionary War, most people envisioned their futures as loyal to the British Empire, however, as their equal rights and trust were violated by the British, the American people began to vision a future independent from Britain, with their own national identity, and what constituted that identity as was questioned by different social classes.

Prior to the American Revolution, many colonists envisioned their futures under English rule, especially wealthy colonists, who wished to protect their way of life, such as having luxuries and race superiority. However, as we grew closer to the revolution, there was a clear unrest, chiefly with the working poor, who feared that the colony’s wealthy would take American back to the political framework of a British monarchial society. The early aristocratic American view is no better personified than through the life of William Byrd, who was arguably the wealthiest man in the colonies between 1709 and 1712, when he constructed his famous diary, which gives a rare glimpse into the Aristocratic colonial age. In his diary, Byrd is free without consequence to beat his slaves and wife harshly, to commit adultery and other crimes and declare himself forgiven by God, and escape nearly all of the condemnation an average man would face if he committed the same acts. Beyond that, Byrd embraces the luxuries of a classical education, and a lavish diet, and a grand house with glass windows and other luxury items, with much of his work being distributed among the slaves and lesser he employed. It is safe to say, given all of the luxury that surrounded Byrd, that he was quite a loyalist, and proud to be of white, English descent. Byrd’s vision of America would have protected these qualities. Nearly half a century later, the vision of a permanent colony was still strong in America. Even our nation’s first president, George Washington, was

1 American Bill of Rights (1789)
2 William Byrd, diary extracts (1709-1712)
3 Lecture notes, 9/30
brought up to appreciate the propriety and customs of British social construct. In his *Rules of Civility & Decent Behaviour*, written sometimes around 1747, he instructs that “When you meet with one of Greater Quality than yourself, Stop, and retire especially if it be at a Door or any Straight place to give way for him to Pass.” ⁴ Even this small excerpt shows Washington’s reverence for the English class system, showing that his early vision of America was similar to Byrd’s, with Aristocrats receiving special respect and privilege. In Benjamin Franklin’s *Observations*, he tends to agree with the popular vision of the age, as illustrated by Byrd’s actions against his slaves, that “tawny” and “swarthy” peoples were lesser than English peoples and ought to be given lesser privilege therefore. In 1751 he writes: “the English make the principal Body of White People on the Face of the Earth. I could wish their Numbers were increased.” ⁵ It is not until the 1760’s that we see great pieces of evidence in favor of the common man’s dream for the future of America. In 1765 John Adams writes, “If it is this principle, that has always prompted the princes and nobles of the earth (…) to shake off, all the limitations of their power; it is the same that has always stimulated the common people to aspire at independency, (…)The poor people, it is true, have been much less successful than the great.” Here Adams begins to describe the aim of the common man – to have some say against the aristocrat that governs him. As the population of the rural working poor such as husbandmen increased in America, in 1770 accounting for as much as 90% of the population, the demanding voice of the common man for his rights grew stronger, and started to rise above that of the loyalist Aristocrat, who aimed to protect his assets with Britain. Here, the American vision of independence was formed for the common person, and the seeds of revolution were planted. ⁶ In words of John Adams, the common man was motivated to fight for his rights, “The People, even to the lowest Ranks, have become more attentive to their Liberties, more inquisitive about them, and more determined to defend them”. ⁷ However, it should be noted that the poor did not all stand together in their fight for liberty. Many were scared of the consequences of standing up against the largest empire in the world. Some non-aristocrats even felt that they deserved special rights that other poor men did not. For example, Minister Charles Woodmason likely would not have found it beneficial to join in the ranks of the people he met at Flatt Creek, as he saw himself far above them. He describes them thusly: “Most of these People had never before seen a Minister, or heard the Lords Prayer(…) They were as rude in their Manners as the Common Savages, and hardly a degree removed from them.” ⁸ It was these kind of social discrepancies that created a disunity against the budding cause of Revolution. Woodmason’s vision of America was likely one of religious purification, such as the puritan colonists before him, but with a

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⁴ George Washington, *Rules of Civility & Decent Behaviour In Company and Conversation* (c. 1747)
⁵ Benjamin Franklin, *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, etc.* (1751)
⁶ Lecture Notes, 9/23
⁷ John Adams, diary entry (December 18, 1765)
⁸ Charles Woodmason, diary and sermon notes (1767-1768)
modern message, such as rang John Greenwood’s lively sermons. He likely saw that revolution would conflict with holy behavior, and would have been against it. In the months leading up to the American Revolution, continental law began to govern it’s self in a way that would prove to start the revolution, in light of the poor man’s vision for a freedom about America, away from Brittan. In 1775, Continental Congress expressed in a negotiations letter with King George III their desire to become a fully righted member of the British Empire, without harsh tax or mistreatment, and expressed no desire to rebel. When the King responded with an accusation of treason, Continental Congress revised their plea, they would now be forced to rebel, in interest of their special rights. Brittan saw a future where their colonies would not have the audacity to rebel, while Continental Congress would see a much different future, as they realized that in order to obtain the common vision among Aristocrats and poor, who were both now over taxed and left with little freedom due to British occupation, they would have to rebel. In 1774 the Continental Association writes “our affection and regard for our fellow-subjects in Great-Britain and elsewhere (...) his Majesty’s American subjects are oppressed; and having taken under our most serious deliberation (...) find, that the present unhappy situation of our affairs (is due to a) ruinous system of colony administration.” Thus, the colonies future is much altered as they choose to rebel.

During the Revolution, most people in the colonies wanted a future separate from Britain: to establish a loyalty to America; but the rich, including founding fathers, wanted the future to extend civil rights to only white men while the common man wanted to extend civil rights to minorities too. American loyalty, which was once an non-existent political stance in the colonies, was defined in 1775 by the Tory Acts: It is the job of “friends to American liberty (...) to treat all such persons with kindness and attention; to consider them as the inhabitants of a country determined to be free, and to view their errors as proceeding rather from want of information than want of virtue or public spirit; to explain to them the origin, nature and extent of the present controversy (...)those very rights, liberties and estates, which we and our forefathers had so long enjoyed unmolested in the reigns of his present Majesty's predecessors.”, or one would be considered treasonous. The Declaration of Independence, which solidified this claim of independence for the colonies, claimed that “all men were created equal” with “certain unalienable rights”, however much consideration must be given to the fact that a “man” does not include a woman, a child, or a non-white slave, who is property. Today we have this great vision of total equality in the eyes of our founding fathers when we read our Declaration, however this was far from the case. Many visions of nationhood were oppressed. Such visions of male supremacy in matters of politics are well expressed

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9 Lecture Notes, 9/25
10 Continental Congress, negotiations with King George III (1775-1776).
11 Continental Association (October 20, 1774).
12 Continental Congress, Tory acts (1775-1776).
13 Declaration of Independence, 1776
through the words of John Adams in regards to women and children, and why they should not vote in his 1776 letter to James Sullivan. “…their attention is So much engaged with the necessary Nurture of their Children, that Nature has made them fittest for domestic Cares. And Children have not Judgment or Will of their own” Instead, Adams proposes to Sullivan that only property holding men who hold personal stake in property and the effects of government should be involved in the affairs of government. 14

Furthermore, letters from many interest groups, such as the Jews who wishes to have a right to hold post in government in 1783,15 and the Connecticut slaves who wished to have rights and freedoms equal to that of their masters in 1779,16 show the struggle for smaller interest groups to obtain the goals of their visions for America during the American revolution. For these groups, the perfect future meant obtaining the same rights as the Christian, white man. Overall, it is vital to remember, yet again, that not all Americans, or even close, were on the side of the Continental Assembly who chose to rebel. In fact, it is estimated that during the revolution, only a third of colonists were for the revolution, another third were loyalists, and another third had no claim.17 As in any war, many colonists were more concerned about the present concerns for supplies and mobility in the war effort to hold a strong political stance, and such people likely only dreamed of survival for the future of their friends and families let alone the nation.18

Not everyone in the colonies felt that they needed to plea for their civil rights, including those who might have fell in to aforementioned interest groups. No two people’s idea of the perfect future for America was exactly the same, and it would be unjust to history not to acknowledge such facts.

After the American Revolution, most new citizens eventually agreed their futures should be uniquely American, focusing on strong themes of nation identity, democracy, and of breaking away from British tradition, while still disagreeing on the issue of civil rights. Such a transition to American loyalty, however, took time to establish. James Madison acknowledges this struggle to trust a new government in 1789 when he wrote “The people are as yet inimical to it. Their future disposition will depend on the measures of the new Government.”, meaning that he realizes that there is a struggle for the government to meet the needs of the people, and that people’s reverence towards their government will depend on how well that government serves them.19 For Madison and many of the other Founding Fathers, such a vision of government would entail paying close detail to avoiding the catastrophes of the British government in the past, such as the British economic crises of 1763, which lead to a great deal of debt and a generation of political instability for both England and the colonies.20 Benjamin Rush adds his vision of the perfect

14 John Adams, letter to James Sullivan (May 26, 1776).
15 Appeals for religious freedom (1783, 1786).
16 Connecticut slaves’ petition for freedom (1779).
17 Lecture Notes, 10/4
18 Lecture Notes, 10/9
19James Madison, 1789; American Founding Era Collection.
20 Lecture Notes, 9/30
nation: which would “prepare the principles, morals, and manners of our citizens, for these forms of
government, after they are established and brought to perfection”\textsuperscript{21}, which he claims was not done with in
the colonies while under British rule. His vision of an America without political influence of the English
is supported by Thomas Jefferson in 1787, who is against industry in American because he believes it will
lead to economic issues like that of Britain\textsuperscript{22}. John Murrin draws not only ideological differences between
the British and new American, but supports Jefferson and Rush in claiming that the physical presence of
slaves, women’s roles in some places, and the position of government were all very different from that of
Brittan after and even during the American Revolution.\textsuperscript{23} Along with the voices of the Founding Fathers,
common Americans supported a free, independent vision of America as they wrote the first American
history book in 1789, the first American cookbook in 1786, and the first American dictionary in 1806.\textsuperscript{24}
The revival of neoclassical housing also illustrated a strong will of the American people to create a future
without British influence, using Greek and Roman architecture to symbolize American strength in
defeating the empire that once controlled them.\textsuperscript{25} Beyond the voices of the people even, stands their
government, which supported them, as hoped by James Madison. The laws dictating the naturalization of
United States citizens makes the requirement for citizenship in the nation clear: no one with any British
royalty or military connections is welcome.\textsuperscript{26} It was a strictly American voice to be heard in the new
nation.

Over time, the American ideal of future has varied from social group to social group. It started as
one of loyalty to our former Mother Country, but did remain progressively, over the course of the
revolution, to be one in favor of American independence, one which supported the interests of its people,
and one careful not to make the same mistakes as Brittan. In 1789 John Trumbell wrote: “…I wish of
commemorating the great Events of our Country’s Revolution:—(I aim to) preserve the Memory of the
noblest series of Actions which have ever dignified the History of Man:—to give to the present and
the future Sons of Oppression and Misfortune such glorious Lessons of their rights and of the Spirit with
which they should assert and support them”\textsuperscript{27} I think to this day, this much can be true about the
American revolution. No matter what future it hoped to promise to the people of American, and to the
world, it presented one of great triumph and in the words of John Adams it provided a “Singular example
in history of man kind” of what a nation of people with different dreams and ideas can do for itself, if it

\textsuperscript{21} Benjamin Rush, “An Address to the People of the United States ... on the Defects of the Confederation” (1787).
\textsuperscript{22} Thomas Jefferson, “Notes on the State of Virginia” (1787).
\textsuperscript{23} Murrin speaks of American Life, pp. 12-17
\textsuperscript{24} Lecture Notes, 10/14
\textsuperscript{25} Lecture Notes, 10/15
\textsuperscript{26} United States Congress, “An act to establish an uniform rule of Naturalization; and to repeal the act heretofore
passed on that subject” (January 29, 1795).
\textsuperscript{27} John Trumbell (1789), American Founding Era Collection
only dares to rebel and stand up for its individuals and their rights.\textsuperscript{28}