

The Reader's Companion to American History

Eric Foner and
John A. Garraty,
Editors

*Sponsored by the Society of
American Historians*

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Introduction

An encyclopedia, the dictionary tells us, is a reference work containing articles on a variety of topics, arranged alphabetically. Our *Reader's Companion to American History* certainly fits this description. But it is much more than a place to look up the date when Millard Fillmore was president of the United States, or to get a brief rundown on the causes, course, and consequences of the War of 1812, or to find out what the "Ashcan school" was, or to settle a bet about whether Alaska is the forty-ninth or fiftieth state. As its title suggests, this is primarily a *reader's* encyclopedia, a book to be read for enjoyment and — like the famous encyclopedia of the eighteenth-century philosophes — for enlightenment. We believe that this work offers a fresh, up-to-date overview of the main themes and significant personalities that have made up the American experience, presented in a manner that will engage the interest of a broad public.

Of course, nearly all encyclopedias are enlightening in one way or another. But most are meant to be used mainly for reference; like dictionaries and telephone books, they are sources where people can locate information on a subject they want to know more about. Individuals have been known to read through the vast *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from beginning to end. There are even said to be some who enjoy working their way systematically through a telephone book. But doing so is like winning a pie-eating contest or climbing the stairs to the top of the Empire State Building. The pleasure, if there is any in such an accomplishment, is in having done it, not in the doing. Put differently, the

whole of the typical encyclopedia is no more than the sum of its many parts.

The Reader's Companion to American History, on the other hand, offers those who consult it a great deal more than a series of discrete facts and ideas. While keeping in mind the necessity of allowing readers to locate essential information easily, we have tried to bring out the relationships between topics separated from one another not only geographically and in time but in most encyclopedias by the vagaries of alphabetical or chronological organization. Scattered through our book, for example, are articles on Bacon's Rebellion, which occurred in 1676, the New York City draft riots that erupted during the Civil War, and a number of other civil disturbances. But there is also a general article on "Rebellions," which puts all these uprisings and a number of others into a single context that makes the significance of the individual uprisings clearer. These longer articles are intended to function as windows into the American past. They are meant to show relationships, to explain as well as describe, to be interpretive essays rather than mere compilations of data.

The word *history* has two quite different meanings. *History* can mean both "what happened" in the past and what people who experienced or otherwise learned about past events have said or written about them. No one can describe "what happened" even in a small area and during a brief time. Too much is going on at once, even in the life of an individual, for a complete description to be possible, let alone comprehensible. Historians impose order on the past

by selecting those elements of what happened that are relevant to their purposes. Like sculptors, they explain meaning and create understanding as much by what they leave out as by what they include. Give ten sculptors identical blocks of marble and the same model and no two of their statues will be exactly alike. Ask ten historians to write about the same subject and their accounts will be equally individual.

No one knows better than a practicing historian that the past is more complex than any narrative can suggest and that the order historians impose on it to make it comprehensible is an artifice, not true reality. Indeed, one of the most exciting experiences that historians encounter in their work is the discovery of significant connections between superficially unrelated data. In this encyclopedia, we have tried to make this experience available to readers by giving them a sense of how the pursuit of knowledge about the past is not a matter of following a guide from point A to point B but rather an open-ended exploration, full of unexpected discoveries and sudden insights.

To build this concept into our book we have commissioned three types of articles. Some closely resemble the short entries in conventional encyclopedias. They contain essential information about specific topics and events. There are, for example, entries on every presidential election, and each provides the name and party affiliation of the candidates for president and vice president, the main issues of the campaign, and the popular and electoral votes. These short articles have been written by Columbia University graduate students and recent Ph.D.'s under our supervision.

The second type of article makes up the heart of the encyclopedia. These are longer, interpretive essays on broad topics. They have been written by authorities on the subjects and offer incisive introductions to the key periods, concepts, and themes that have made up the American past. Each of these essays directs the reader to other entries, long and short, that elaborate on aspects of the subject at hand.

A third group of articles is composed of biographies. Although these, which are also written by authorities, include such essential facts as

the dates of the subject's birth and death, they are based on the assumption that users of an encyclopedia designed to be read for pleasure will profit more from reading an expert's overall estimation of the person's significance than a dry recitation of dates and facts. There are articles on all the presidents and on the more historically significant vice presidents, for example, and these add depth and detail to both the short and long entries. A reader may not know a great deal about President Millard Fillmore, but someone looking him up will find a biographical account of his career and that can lead to such articles as the essays on American nativism and the Whig party, as well as the major essays about the presidency, the vice presidency, and so on.

In a one-volume encyclopedia, needless to say, it has been impossible to cover American biography fully. The famous *Dictionary of American Biography* describes the careers of 18,110 Americans, but it requires twenty-eight large volumes to do so. We have had to be much more selective. First of all we have limited ourselves to persons readers are likely to come across either because of the positions they held or because of the significance of their achievements. Thus, we have included all the presidents — even Millard Fillmore.

The biographical entries, however, move well beyond the most familiar government officials. We have made a special effort to include women and members of minority groups, partly because such people have often been neglected in encyclopedias, but more because the rapidly expanding body of knowledge about the history of women and minorities means that readers are ever-more likely to run across unfamiliar names and because so many of our longer essays deal with subjects in which women and minorities have played important roles. Of course, we could have profitably included many more people than we have found room for, but we are confident that each individual represented has made a critical contribution to American life, whether in politics, the arts, sports, business, entertainment, or some other endeavor.

Examples of how the different kinds of articles relate to one another come to mind almost