

DANIEL K. RICHTER

*Before*

THE REVOLUTION

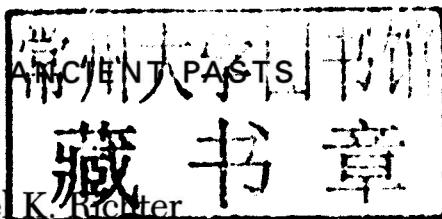
America's Ancient Pasts



*Before*  
THE REVOLUTION



AMERICA'S



Daniel K. Richter

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To the memory of Bud Richter

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## Prologue

A'NCIENT. *adj.* [*ancien*, Fr. *antiquus*, Lat.]

1. Old; that happened long since; of old time; not modern.

*Ancient* and *old* are distinguish'd; *old* relates to the duration of the thing itself, as, an *old* coat, a coat much worn; and *ancient*, to time in general, as, an *ancient* dress, a habit used in former times . . .

“With the *ancient* is wisdom, and in length of days  
understanding.” *Job*. xii. 12.

LA'YER, *n.s.* [from *lay*].

1. A stratum, or row; a bed; one body spread over another.

—Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English  
Language* (London, 1755)







## Layered Pasts

"WE HAVE IT IN OUR POWER to begin the world over again," Thomas Paine wrote in 1776. "A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah." Citizens of the United States have frequently pretended that they lived in a land of fresh starts, a land that hardly had a past that mattered—except perhaps the era of Paine, when godlike Founders created a timeless new order for the ages. Yet Paine himself knew better. Much of his revolutionary pamphlet *Common Sense* is devoted to history lessons: on monarchy in general, on the British monarchy in particular, on the place of North America in the European imperial world, and on why, since the battles of Lexington and Concord, it all had become "superceded and useless."<sup>1</sup>

"Superceded" perhaps, useless Paine hoped—but certainly not gone. According to the Genesis tale evoked by *Common Sense*, Noah's ark had preserved a pair of each type of creature living in the former world. Even as the Creator "blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground," he "remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark."<sup>2</sup> When the vessel came to rest on the mountain, the earth's heights and valleys had been reshaped but not wholly destroyed, and Noah's offspring soon proved that they carried within them the original sin of their antediluvian forebears. At heart, then, Paine's biblical allusion was geological as well as theological. The ancient flood scoured the landscape but could not eliminate what earlier epochs had laid down. The world begun over again rested on—and took its shape from—the remains of what came before.

The history of the United States, this book argues, has a similar quality.

The American Revolution submerged earlier strata of society, culture, and politics, but those ancient worlds remain beneath the surface to mold the nation's current contours. The chapters below explore a geology of six sequential cultural layers defined by people I call respectively *progenitors*, *conquistadores*, *traders*, *planters*, *imperialists*, and *Atlanteans*. Each new layer spread over the older ones, but what came before never fully disappeared. Indeed, the new was always a product of the old, made from bits and pieces retained from deeper strata. The people of these now-submerged worlds may seem as lost to us, and as difficult to interpret, as the shale and fossils undergirding today's cities, farms, and McMansions. Yet to understand fully the society that grew up in North America after 1776, the cultural forms that accumulated before anyone dreamed there would *be* a United States need to be excavated—and understood on their own dynamic terms. The words “old” and “ancient,” the eighteenth-century dictionary compiler and literary wit Samuel Johnson insisted, do not have precisely the same meaning. Something “old” could simply be worn out, but “with the *ancient* is wisdom.”<sup>3</sup>

Ancient cultural layers have been accumulating, of course, since long before the days of Noah, or, as Native Americans might say, since our first ancestors came out of the ground. But the layers most relevant to our story are the ones that produced the peoples who encountered each other in the decades after 1492. The twin strata of *progenitors*—cultural tectonic plates that formed on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean—were themselves already half a millennium old in the era of Columbus. They took shape during a period of global warming that inaugurated what would later be called the “Middle Ages.” Beginning in the decades after the year we now call 900 C.E., strikingly parallel agricultural revolutions produced strikingly different civilizational forms in North America and Western Europe. Distinctive systems of power and authority, of family and kinship, of religion and spirituality, of production and exchange took shape on the two continents. Just as important, as the climate cooled in the fourteenth century, each system began unraveling, and inherent instabilities of the two medieval syntheses came to the fore. On both sides of the Atlantic, powerful traces of the earlier orders, and of their many instabilities, remained, for better and worse, to shape all succeeding layers.

During the century after 1492, descendants of the two progenitors crashed violently together. The associated earthquakes transformed the cultural landscape everywhere from Europe to Africa to the islands of the

Caribbean and, finally, to North America. In crusades sponsored by monarchs assembling primitive states, driven by freelance warriors seeking power and wealth, and justified by zeal for spreading what was called the True Faith, Western Europeans spilled out into the Atlantic basin. The exploits of these *conquistadores*—Protestant as well as Catholic—owed more to the loyalties and beliefs of the Middle Ages than to anything we would recognize as “modern” or “capitalistic,” although they nonetheless contained the germs of those later traits. Honed in late medieval campaigns in places such as Moorish Granada and Celtic Ireland, exported to such islands as the Canaries and Azores, perfected in the Spanish conquests of Hispaniola, Mexico, and Peru, and brought to fruition in disastrous English efforts to colonize at Roanoke and Jamestown, patterns of ruthless violence, enslavement, and oppressive rule of indigenous peoples laid an ugly base for all that would follow.

In North America, cultural debris thrown up from the layer of the *conquistadores* settled in two distinct yet overlapping strata during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The first, the layer of *traders*, drew much of its material from patterns of exchange and political power forged by Native North America’s progenitors. Some enterprising adventurers traveling in the wake of the *conquistadores*—most notably from France and the Netherlands, but also from England and elsewhere—meshed their economic goals with the very different ones of Native peoples. Exchanges of all sorts, from material goods to religious ideas to plants, animals, microbes, and human genes, produced hybrid communities. Yet there was little harmony in the hybridity. While handfuls of Europeans struggled to make a go of it in outposts scattered along seacoasts and rivers providing access to the continental interior, hundreds of thousands of Native Americans perished from unfamiliar diseases inadvertently brought by the newcomers. The epidemics, in combination with wars among indigenous peoples over trade routes, resources, and political dominance, left much of the countryside empty of human habitation. The Native survivors created enduring forms of interdependence with European trading partners and fashioned tools that future generations of Indian leaders would use to help their people maintain autonomy in the face of colonial expansion.

The second layer thrown up by the collisions that began in 1492 drew much of its material from patterns of land use and gendered power inherited from Europe’s progenitors, as filtered through a distinctively English

emphasis on patriarchal control of land and labor. For English *planters*, that emphasis on control gained urgency from religious and political upheavals in the early seventeenth-century British Isles. In the aptly named “New England,” in the Chesapeake Bay region, and on Caribbean islands, waves of voluntary and involuntary exiles from Britain’s troubles imported first their own families, then indentured servants, and finally enslaved Africans to agricultural colonies from which Native people were largely excluded. This exclusion set English planters starkly apart from the Dutch, French, Spanish, and indeed English traders, whose outposts remained deeply entwined with indigenous communities. Wherever Protestant English men put down family roots, agricultural production for global markets on lands held as private property became the key to prosperity and the measure of masculine self-rule. Anyone who stood in the way of these men—Native Americans, landless European newcomers, obstreperous servants and slaves, people of differing religious views, would-be English royal governors—did so at their peril.

In the mid-seventeenth century, as the stratum of the planters settled uneasily over those of the traders and conquistadores, fresh waves of state expansion flowed outward from a Europe still in upheaval. Imperfectly and violently, a new layer of *imperialists* imposed itself atop the constantly shifting colonial mass, smashing and assimilating bits of the older layers as it did so. The English and French states took the lead in this process, attempting to conquer Native Americans, the Dutch, the Spanish, and their own rambunctious colonial subjects along the way. Some Native nations—restive under the pretensions of European planters and traders alike—found common cause with some imperialists, turned competition among European states to their own purposes, and rejuvenated their ability to shape the continent’s history. But for many other Indian peoples, and for many ordinary Spanish, French, and English colonists, the process was a blood-drenched disaster. Historians have given the key events of the process such orderly names as the Pueblo Revolt, King Philip’s War, Bacon’s Rebellion, or Leisler’s Rebellion. But those terms fail to capture the chaotic terror of the imperial transition for all concerned.

Gradually, and unpredictably to most of those who lived through it, by the second quarter of the eighteenth century the violence yielded to temporarily more stable forms. Economic and political networks spanning the Atlantic bound North America ever more tightly to Europe and Africa. Thriving agricultural production rooted in the stratum of planters created

a relentless demand for labor that absorbed hordes of new farmers, families, and servants—not just from the British Isles, but from continental Europe—along with even larger throngs of enslaved laborers from West Africa. The prosperity that these laborers produced for their masters reinvigorated patterns of seaborne commerce created by earlier traders. Atlantic trade became equally vital to Native Americans and to the descendants of European immigrants; the material lives of both depended on imports and exports. Continued imperial competition among Protestant England and Catholic France and Spain, meanwhile, kept alive the crusading religious spirit inherited from the conquistadores. Thus, earlier strata continued to mold succeeding ones.

The polyglot social forms of the eighteenth century defied easy categorization as “American,” “European,” or “African.” Instead, they partook of all three identities, and of the seaborne commercial and imperial networks that tied them together across the Atlantic. The stratum of *Atlanteans* in which all North Americans found their uneasy places in a global British-dominated culture was the one that both produced, and was in turn submerged by, the new layer of the revolutionary generation that created the United States.

The revolutionaries of 1776 labored mightily to assert that the history of the United States had never been truly connected to this former Atlantean world, let alone to all the layers that undergirded it. “America,” Paine insisted, “would have flourished as much, and probably much more, had no European power had any thing to do with her.”<sup>4</sup> North America’s Native peoples certainly would have agreed with the latter sentiment, but in 1750 one would have been hard pressed to find any European-American residents of Britain’s—or France’s, or Spain’s—colonies who could have imagined such an idea. They, and their enslaved workers and their Native neighbors, lived in a transatlantic world dominated by European powers, a world so fully integrated and mutually prosperous (albeit also mutually exploitative) that the revolutionary secession of thirteen British colonies along the North American seaboard would have seemed neither possible nor desirable. By 1765, however, a long, brutal conflict known as the Seven Years War had revealed the fragility of the ties that bound the transoceanic empire, and the future seemed far less clear.

Still, despite the strains of the Seven Years War, the movement for independence from the Atlantic world caught nearly everyone by surprise. Like the antedeluvians Paine evoked in *Common Sense*, the Atlanteans of

mid-eighteenth-century America “were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away.”<sup>5</sup> That revolutionary flood, along with the details of individual lives such as Paine’s, are the subjects of many other books by many other authors. This one traces broad patterns in the lives of generations of people who had no idea that something called an independent United States was in the future but who laid down the substrate on which we stand today. Their stories began a thousand years ago.



# Progenitors

PROGE'NITOR. *n.s.* [*progenitus*, Lat.] A forefather; an ancestor in a direct line.

—Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1755)



