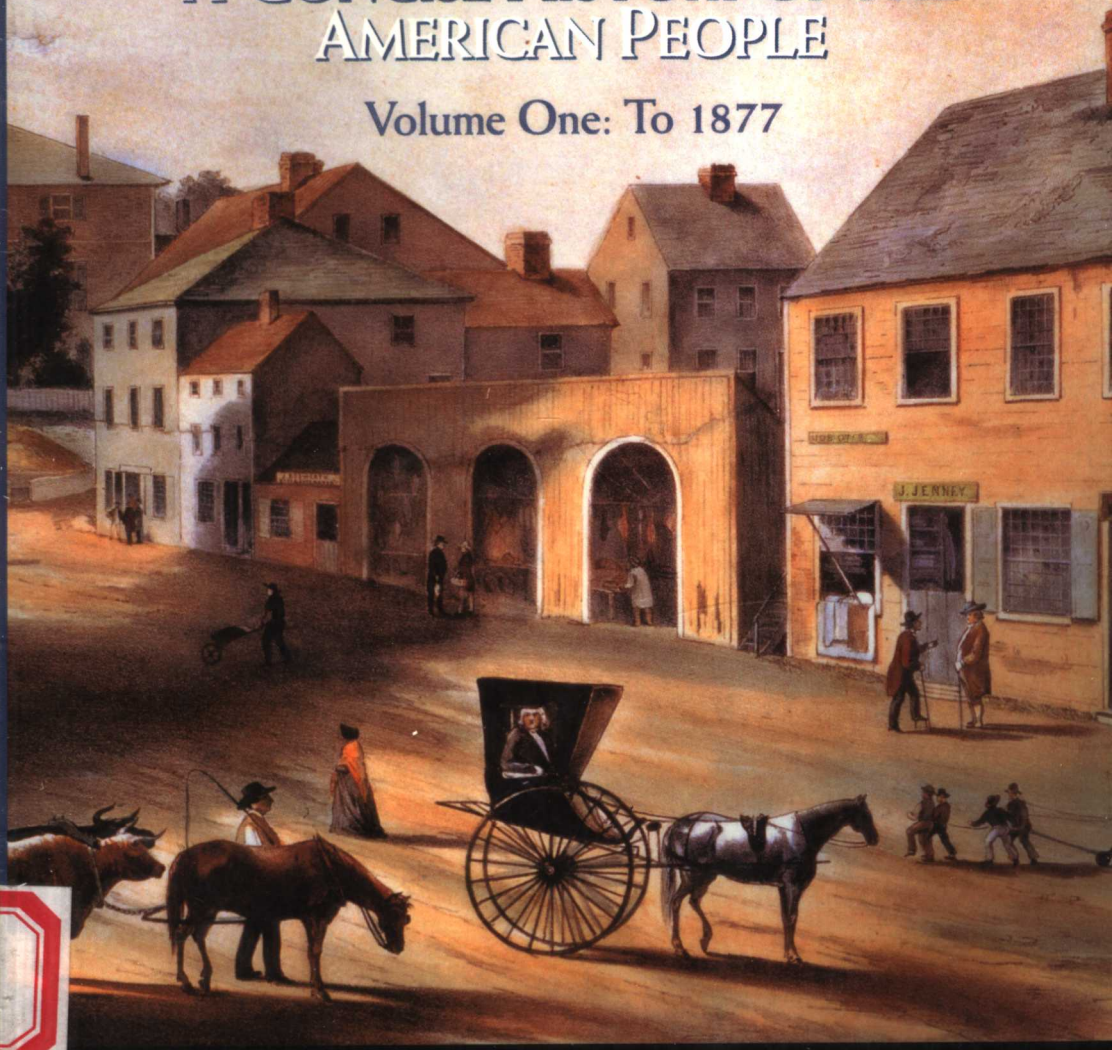


THE UNFINISHED NATION

A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE
AMERICAN PEOPLE

Volume One: To 1877



ALAN BRINKLEY

The Unfinished Nation

A CONCISE HISTORY
OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Volume One: To 1877

Alan Brinkley
Columbia University

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Volume One: To 1877

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Preface



he story of the American past, which is the subject of this book, is as contested today as it has been at any moment in its history. As the population of the United States becomes ever more diverse and as groups that once stood outside the view of scholarship thrust themselves into its center, historians are revealing the immense and, until recently, inadequately understood complexity of their country's past. The result has been the slow emergence of a richer and fuller history of the United States, but also a more fragmented and contentious one. That history offers a picture of a highly diverse people. It also provides a picture of a great nation.

Threading one's way through the many, conflicting demands of contemporary scholars and contemporary readers is no easy task. But I have tried in this book to find an acceptable middle ground between the claims of diversity and the claims of unity. The United States is, indeed, a nation of many cultures. We cannot understand its history without understanding the experiences of all the different groups that have shaped American society, without understanding the particular worlds that have developed within it based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, class, or region.

But the United States is more than just a collection of different cultures. It is also a nation. And as important as understanding its diversity is understanding the forces that have drawn it together and allowed it to survive and flourish despite division. The United States has constructed a remarkably stable and enduring political system that touches the lives of all Americans. It has developed an immense, highly productive national economy that affects the working and consuming lives of virtually everyone. It has created a mass popular culture that colors the experiences and assumptions of almost all the American people, and the people of much of the rest of the world as well. One can admire these unifying forces for their contributions to America's considerable success as a nation, or condemn them for the ways they have contributed to inequality, injustice, and failure. But no one proposing to understand the history of the United States can afford to ignore them.

In the great historical narratives of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the story of America moved smoothly and triumphantly from one

clearly defined era to another, focusing on great events and great men and tracing the rise of national institutions. The late twentieth century has produced a different narrative, with frequent, sometimes jarring, changes of focus and direction. It devotes attention to private as well as public events, to failure as well as success, to difference as well as to unity. And yet it remains, in the end, a narrative, a story—newly complicated, perhaps, by our understanding of the many worlds of historical experience that once eluded us—but no less remarkable and compelling for those complications.

This book is an effort to tell this newer story of America for students of history and for general readers in a single, reasonably concise volume. It has its origins in a considerably larger book by Alan Brinkley, Richard N. Current, Frank Freidel, and T. Harry Williams, *American History: A Survey*, now in its eighth edition. But it is not simply an abridgment of that longer work. I have tried here to craft a new, more thematic, and more selective narrative that preserves the central elements of the larger text but presents a clearer and more readily accessible story. In addition to the central narrative (and the maps and illustrations that accompany it), readers will also find a collection of essays examining major interpretive debates among scholars; and they will find a series of excerpts from important or emblematic American autobiographies, journals, memoirs, and other works. Together, I hope, these elements will serve to introduce readers to enough different approaches to and areas of American history to make them aware of its extraordinary richness and diversity. I hope they will also give readers some sense of the shared experiences of Americans.

The title of this book, *The Unfinished Nation*, is meant to suggest several things. It is a reminder of America's exceptional diversity: of the degree to which, despite all the many efforts to build a single, uniform definition of the meaning of American nationhood, that meaning remains contested and diverse. It is a reference to the centrality of change in American history: to the way in which the nation has continually transformed itself and to how it continues to do so in our own time. And it is a description of the writing of American history itself, of the way historians are engaged in a continuing, ever unfinished, process of asking new questions of the past.

Many people contributed to this book: Chris Rogers, David Follmer, Niels Aaboe, Larry Goldberg, Roth Wilkofsky, and Peter Labella at McGraw-Hill; Ashbel Green at Knopf; Yanek Mieczkowski, my research assistant at Columbia; and several anonymous scholars who read and commented on the manuscript and saved me from many errors and inelegancies. I am grateful to them all. I will also be grateful to any readers who wish to

offer comments, criticisms, and corrections as I prepare future editions. Suggestions can be sent to me in care of the Department of History, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027; I will respond to them as fully and constructively as I can.

ALAN BRINKLEY

Contents

List of Illustrations	xiii
List of Maps	xv
Preface	xvii
 CHAPTER ONE: The Meeting of Cultures	 I
AMERICA BEFORE COLUMBUS	I
<i>The Civilizations of the South 2 ~ The Civilizations of the North 2</i>	
EUROPE LOOKS WESTWARD	5
<i>Commerce and Nationalism 6 ~ Christopher Columbus 7 ~ The Spanish Empire 9 ~ Cultural Exchanges 13 ~ Africa and America 16</i>	
THE ARRIVAL OF THE ENGLISH	18
<i>Incentives for Colonization 18 ~ The French and the Dutch in America 21 The First English Settlements 22</i>	
 CHAPTER TWO: The English "Transplantations"	 25
THE EARLY CHESAPEAKE	25
<i>The Founding of Jamestown 26 ~ Reorganization and Expansion 27 Maryland and the Calverts 31 ~ Turbulent Virginia 32</i>	
THE GROWTH OF NEW ENGLAND	34
<i>Plymouth Plantation 34 ~ The Massachusetts Bay Experiment 36 Spreading Settlement 39 ~ Settlers and Natives 42</i>	
THE RESTORATION COLONIES	43
<i>The English Civil War 44 ~ The Carolinas 44 ~ New Netherland and New York 46 ~ The Quaker Colonies 47 ~ The Founding of Georgia 49</i>	
THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMPIRE	51
<i>The Drive for Reorganization 51 ~ The Dominion of New England 51 The "Glorious Revolution" 52</i>	
 CHAPTER THREE: Life in Provincial America	 55
THE COLONIAL POPULATION	55
<i>Indentured Servitude 56 ~ Birth and Death 58 ~ Women and Families in</i>	

<i>the Colonies</i> 59 ~ <i>The Beginnings of Slavery in English North America</i> 62	
<i>Later Immigration</i> 64	
THE COLONIAL ECONOMY	66
<i>The Southern Economy</i> 66 ~ <i>The Northern Economy</i> 68 ~ <i>The Rise of Commerce</i> 69	
PATTERNS OF SOCIETY	71
<i>The Plantation</i> 71 ~ <i>The Puritan Community</i> 73 ~ <i>Cities</i> 76	
THE COLONIAL MIND	77
<i>The Pattern of Religions</i> 77 ~ <i>The Great Awakening</i> 78 ~ <i>Education</i> 79	
<i>Concepts of Law and Politics</i> 82	
 CHAPTER FOUR: The Empire Under Strain	 85
ORIGINS OF RESISTANCE	85
<i>A Loosening of Ties</i> 85 ~ <i>Intercolonial Disunity</i> 86	
THE STRUGGLE FOR THE CONTINENT	87
<i>New France and the Iroquois Nation</i> 87 ~ <i>Anglo-French Conflicts</i> 89	
<i>The Great War for the Empire</i> 90	
THE NEW IMPERIALISM	93
<i>Burdens of Empire</i> 93 ~ <i>The British and the Tribes</i> 95 ~ <i>The Colonial Response</i> 96	
STIRRINGS OF REVOLT	98
<i>The Stamp Act Crisis</i> 98 ~ <i>The Townshend Program</i> 100 ~ <i>The Boston Massacre</i> 102 ~ <i>The Philosophy of Revolt</i> 103 ~ <i>The Tea Excitement</i> 105	
COOPERATION AND WAR	107
<i>New Sources of Authority</i> 108 ~ <i>Lexington and Concord</i> 109	
 CHAPTER FIVE: The American Revolution	 112
THE STATES UNITED	112
<i>Defining American War Aims</i> 113 ~ <i>The Decision for Independence</i> 114	
<i>Mobilizing for War</i> 115	
THE WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE	116
<i>The First Phase: New England</i> 117 ~ <i>The Second Phase: The Mid-Atlantic Region</i> 118 ~ <i>Securing Aid from Abroad</i> 122 ~ <i>The Final Phase: The South</i> 123 ~ <i>Winning the Peace</i> 126	
WAR AND SOCIETY	127
<i>Loyalists and Minorities</i> 127 ~ <i>Native Americans and the Revolution</i> 129	
<i>Women's Rights and Women's Roles</i> 130 ~ <i>The War Economy</i> 132	

THE CREATION OF STATE GOVERNMENTS	132
<i>The Assumptions of Republicanism</i> 133 ~ <i>The First State Constitutions</i> 134	
<i>Revising State Governments</i> 134 ~ <i>Toleration and Slavery</i> 135	
THE SEARCH FOR A NATIONAL GOVERNMENT	136
<i>The Confederation</i> 136 ~ <i>Diplomatic Failures</i> 137 ~ <i>The Confederation and the Northwest</i> 138 ~ <i>Indians and the Western Lands</i> 141 ~ <i>Debts, Taxes, and Daniel Shays</i> 142	
CHAPTER SIX: The Constitution and the New Republic	147
TOWARD A NEW GOVERNMENT	148
<i>Advocates of Centralization</i> 148 ~ <i>A Divided Convention</i> 149	
<i>Compromise</i> 151 ~ <i>The Constitution of 1787</i> 151	
ADOPTION AND ADAPTATION	153
<i>Federalists and Antifederalists</i> 153 ~ <i>Completing the Structure</i> 155	
FEDERALISTS AND REPUBLICANS	157
<i>Hamilton and the Federalists</i> 157 ~ <i>Enacting the Federalist Program</i> 159	
<i>The Republican Opposition</i> 160	
ASSERTING NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY	162
<i>Securing the West</i> 162 ~ <i>Maintaining Neutrality</i> 164	
THE DOWNFALL OF THE FEDERALISTS	165
<i>The Election of 1796</i> 166 ~ <i>The Quasi War with France</i> 166 ~ <i>Repression and Protest</i> 167 ~ <i>The "Revolution" of 1800</i> 169	
CHAPTER SEVEN: The Jeffersonian Era	171
THE RISE OF CULTURAL NATIONALISM	172
<i>Educational and Literary Nationalism</i> 172 ~ <i>Religion and Revivalism</i> 174	
STIRRINGS OF INDUSTRIALISM	178
<i>Technology and Transportation in America</i> 178	
JEFFERSON THE PRESIDENT	181
<i>The Federal City and the "People's President"</i> 181 ~ <i>Dollars and Ships</i> 183	
<i>Conflict with the Courts</i> 184	
DOUBLING THE NATIONAL DOMAIN	186
<i>Jefferson and Napoleon</i> 186 ~ <i>The Louisiana Purchase</i> 187 ~ <i>Exploring the West</i> 188 ~ <i>The Burr Conspiracy</i> 189	
CHAPTER EIGHT: War and Expansion	193
CAUSES OF CONFLICT	193
<i>Neutral Rights</i> 194 ~ <i>Impressment</i> 194 ~ <i>"Peaceable Coercion"</i> 195	

<i>The "Indian Problem" and the British</i>	196	~	<i>Tecumseh and the Prophet</i>	198
<i>The Lure of Florida</i>	199			
THE WAR OF 1812				200
<i>The Course of Battle</i>	200	~	<i>The Revolt of New England</i>	204
<i>Settlement</i>	205			
POSTWAR EXPANSION				206
<i>Economic Growth and the Government</i>	206	~	<i>Westward Migration</i>	209
<i>The Far West</i>	211	~	<i>The "Era of Good Feelings"</i>	212
<i>and Florida</i>	213	~	<i>The Panic of 1819</i>	215
CHAPTER NINE: A Resurgence of Nationalism				217
AMERICA'S ECONOMIC REVOLUTION				217
<i>The American Population, 1820-1840</i>	217	~	<i>The Canal Age</i>	220
<i>The Early Railroads</i>	223	~	<i>The Expansion of Business</i>	224
<i>Factory</i>	225	~	<i>Men and Women at Work</i>	226
SECTIONALISM AND NATIONALISM				230
<i>The Missouri Compromise</i>	230	~	<i>Marshall and the Court</i>	232
<i>and the Tribes</i>	235	~	<i>The Latin American Revolution and the Monroe Doctrine</i>	236
THE REVIVAL OF OPPOSITION				238
<i>The "Corrupt Bargain"</i>	238	~	<i>The Second President Adams</i>	240
<i>Triumphant</i>	241	~	<i>Jackson</i>	
CHAPTER TEN: Jacksonian America				242
THE ADVENT OF MASS POLITICS				242
<i>The Expanding Electorate</i>	243	~	<i>The Legitimation of Party</i>	245
<i>of the Common Man</i>	246	~	<i>President</i>	
"OUR FEDERAL UNION"				247
<i>Calhoun and Nullification</i>	247	~	<i>The Rise of Van Buren</i>	249
<i>The Webster-Hayne Debate</i>	249	~	<i>The Nullification Crisis</i>	250
<i>The Removal of the Indians</i>	251			
JACKSON AND THE BANK WAR				255
<i>Biddle's Institution</i>	256	~	<i>The "Monster" Destroyed</i>	257
<i>Court</i>	258	~	<i>The Taney</i>	
THE EMERGENCE OF THE SECOND PARTY SYSTEM				258
<i>The Two Parties</i>	259			
POLITICS AFTER JACKSON				262
<i>The Panic of 1837</i>	262	~	<i>The Van Buren Program</i>	265
<i>The Log Cabin</i>		~		

Campaign 265 ~ *The Frustration of the Whigs* 266 ~ *Whig Diplomacy* 267

CHAPTER ELEVEN: The North and the South: Diverging Societies 271

THE DEVELOPING NORTH 272

Northeastern Industry 272 ~ *Transportation and Communications* 273
Cities and Immigrants 274 ~ *The Rise of Nativism* 275 ~ *Labor in the Northeast* 277 ~ *Wealth and Mobility* 279 ~ *Women and the "Cult of Domesticity"* 280 ~ *The Old Northwest* 282

THE EXPANDING SOUTH 283

The Rise of King Cotton 285 ~ *Southern Trade and Industry* 286
Plantation Society 287 ~ *The "Southern Lady"* 288 ~ *The "Plain Folk"* 290

THE "PECULIAR INSTITUTION" 291

Varieties of Slavery 292 ~ *The Slave Trade* 295 ~ *Slave Resistance* 297
Slave Religion and the Black Family 299

CHAPTER TWELVE: An Age of Reforms 304

THE ROMANTIC IMPULSE 305

An American Literature 305 ~ *The Transcendentalists* 306 ~ *Visions of Utopia* 308 ~ *Redefining Gender Roles* 309 ~ *The Mormons* 310

REMAKING SOCIETY 311

Revivalism, Morality, and Order 312 ~ *Education and Rehabilitation* 313
The Rise of Feminism 316

THE CRUSADE AGAINST SLAVERY 318

Early Opposition to Slavery 318 ~ *Garrison and Abolitionism* 319 ~ *Black Abolitionists* 320 ~ *Antislavery Abolitionism* 321 ~ *Abolitionism Divided* 321

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: The Impending Crisis 325

EXPANSION AND WAR 325

Manifest Destiny 326 ~ *Texas and Oregon* 326 ~ *The Westward Migration* 328 ~ *Polk and Expansion* 330 ~ *The Southwest and California* 333
The Mexican War 335

A NEW SECTIONAL CRISIS 337

The Sectional Debate 339 ~ *Taylor and the Territories* 339
The Compromise of 1850 341

THE CRISES OF THE 1850S 345

The Uneasy Truce 345 ~ *"Young America"* 346 ~ *The Kansas-Nebraska*

<i>Controversy</i> 347 ~ <i>"Bleeding Kansas"</i> 349 ~ <i>The Free-Soil Ideology</i> 350	
<i>The Proslavery Argument</i> 352 ~ <i>Buchanan and Depression</i> 353 ~ <i>The Dred Scott Decision</i> 355 ~ <i>Deadlock over Kansas</i> 356 ~ <i>The Emergence of Lincoln</i> 357 ~ <i>John Brown's Raid</i> 359 ~ <i>The Election of Lincoln</i> 360	

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: The Civil War 363

THE SECESSION CRISIS 363

<i>The Withdrawal of the South</i> 364 ~ <i>The Failure of Compromise</i> 365	
<i>The Opposing Sides</i> 366	

THE MOBILIZATION OF THE NORTH 367

<i>Economic Measures</i> 367 ~ <i>Raising the Union Armies</i> 369 ~ <i>The Politics of Wartime</i> 369 ~ <i>The Politics of Emancipation</i> 371 ~ <i>The War and Society</i> 372	
--	--

THE MOBILIZATION OF THE SOUTH 374

<i>The Confederate Government</i> 374 ~ <i>Money and Manpower</i> 375 ~ <i>States' Rights Versus Centralization</i> 377 ~ <i>Social Effects of the War</i> 378	
--	--

STRATEGY AND DIPLOMACY 378

<i>The Commanders</i> 379 ~ <i>The Role of Sea Power</i> 381 ~ <i>Europe and the Disunited States</i> 382	
---	--

CAMPAIGNS AND BATTLES 384

<i>The Opening Clashes, 1861</i> 384 ~ <i>The Western Theater</i> 385 ~ <i>The Virginia Front, 1862</i> 388 ~ <i>1863: Year of Decision</i> 391 ~ <i>The Last Stage, 1864-1865</i> 394	
--	--

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: Reconstructing the Nation 402

THE PROBLEMS OF PEACEMAKING 403

<i>The Aftermath of War</i> 403 ~ <i>Issues of Reconstruction</i> 405 ~ <i>Plans for Reconstruction</i> 405 ~ <i>The Death of Lincoln</i> 407 ~ <i>Johnson and "Restoration"</i> 408	
--	--

RADICAL RECONSTRUCTION 409

<i>The Black Codes</i> 409 ~ <i>The Fourteenth Amendment</i> 410	
<i>The Congressional Plan</i> 411 ~ <i>The Impeachment of the President</i> 412	

THE SOUTH IN RECONSTRUCTION 413

<i>The Reconstruction Governments</i> 413 ~ <i>Expanding Budgets and Services</i> 415	
<i>Landownership</i> 416 ~ <i>Incomes and Credit</i> 418 ~ <i>The African-American Family in Freedom</i> 419	

THE GRANT ADMINISTRATION 420

<i>The Soldier President</i> 420 ~ <i>The Grant Scandals</i> 421 ~ <i>The Greenback Question</i> 422 ~ <i>Republican Diplomacy</i> 423	
--	--

THE ABANDONMENT OF RECONSTRUCTION

424

The Southern States "Redeemed" 424 ~ *The Compromise of 1877* 425

The Legacy of Reconstruction 427

AMERICAN VOICES

WILLIAM BRADFORD: Safe Arrival of the Pilgrims at Cape Cod 37

GOTTLIEB MITTLEBERGER: An Indentured Servant's Voyage from
Germany to America 57

JOSEPH P. MARTIN: A Soldier's View of the Battle of Long Island 119

LEWIS AND CLARK: Exploring the Louisiana Territory, 1804-1806 190

MARY PAUL: Letter from the Lowell Mills, 1845 227

JAMES L. BRADLEY: An African-American Describes His Bondage, 1835 295

J. J. HILL: The 29th Connecticut Colored Infantry Enters Richmond,
April 1865 398

DEBATING THE PAST

The Origins of Slavery 83

The American Revolution 144

Jacksonian Democracy 269

The Nature of Plantation Slavery 302

The Causes of the Civil War 400

Reconstruction 429

APPENDICES

MAPS A-2

The United States in 1990 A-2

United States Territorial Expansion, 1783-1898 A-4

DOCUMENTS AND TABLES A-5

The Declaration of Independence A-5

The Constitution of the United States of America A-10

Presidential Elections A-30

Population of the United States, 1790-1990 A-37

Employment, 1870-1990 A-38

Production, Trade, and Federal Spending/Debt, 1790-1990 A-39

Suggested Readings SR-I

Illustration Credits IC-I

Index I-I

List of Illustrations

Indians of New France	5
Cortés in the New World	10
Roanoke	23
Recruiting for the Colonies, 1609	26
Metacomet, or King Philip	41
Africans Bound for America	62
Selling Tobacco	67
<i>Accusation of a Witch</i>	75
A "Dame School" Primer	80
Recruiting for the French and Indian War	91
<i>The Boston Massacre</i> (1770), by Paul Revere	102
The British Retreat from Concord, 1775	110
Revolutionary Soldiers	116
Little Turtle	142
The Inauguration of George Washington, April 30, 1789	156
Washington in Command, 1794	163
Burning John Jay in Effigy	165
Congressional Pugilists, 1798	168
The Camp Meeting	176
Slater's Mill	180
Thomas Jefferson	183
The Battle of New Orleans	203
The United States Capitol in 1824	207
The National Road, 1827	210
Capturing the Seminoles	214
<i>Fourth of July Picnic at Weymouth Landing</i> (c. 1845), By Susan Merrett	218
The Port of New York, 1828	220
Racing on the Railroad	224
The Assorting Room	228

John Marshall	232
Jackson's Inaugural Levee, 1829	244
John C. Calhoun	248
<i>The Trail of Tears</i>	254
Whig Headquarters	264
Leaving for America	276
New England Textile Workers	278
Returning from the Cotton Field	293
Harriet Tubman with Escaped Slaves	297
Walt Whitman	307
<i>The Drunkard's Progress</i>	312
Frederick Douglass	320
<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>	323
The Oregon Trail	329
Scott's Army in Mexico City	336
The Lincoln-Douglas Debates, Illinois, 1858	357
John Brown	360
The U.S. Sanitary Commission	373
Confederate Volunteers	376
Ulysses S. Grant	379
Robert E. Lee	382
Charleston, 1865	403
Abraham Lincoln	406
The Burdened South	414
After Slavery	417

List of Maps

- Principal Subsistence Patterns of Early Native People of North America 4
- European Journeys of Exploration and Conquest 8
- Spanish America 12
- Growth of the Chesapeake, 1607-1750 29
- Growth of New England, 1620-1750 35
- Dominant Immigrant Groups in Colonial America, c. 1760 65
- Overseas Trade During the Colonial Period 70
- The Thirteen Colonies in 1763 94
- The First Battles of the Revolution 108
- The Revolution in the North, 1775-1776 118
- The Revolution in the Middle Colonies, 1776-1778 121
- The Revolution in the South, 1778-1781 125
- State Claims to Western Lands and Cessions to National Government, 1782-1802 139
- Land Survey: Ordinance of 1785 140
- Exploration of the Louisiana Purchase, 1803-1807 191
- The War of 1812 201
- Canals in the Northeast, to 1860 222
- The Missouri Compromise, 1820 231
- The Expulsion of Indians from the South, 1830-1835 253
- The Growth of the Railroads, 1850-1860 274
- Slavery and Cotton: The South in 1820 and 1860 284
- Settlement of the Oregon Boundary Dispute, 1846 331
- Western Trails to 1860 332
- The Mexican War, 1846-1848 338
- American Expansion into the Southwest, 1845-1853 340
- Slave and Free Territories According to the Compromise of 1850 344
- Election of 1860 361