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# Jeremy Belknap and the Origins of American Exceptionalism

Agnès Delahaye

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- 1 In his notes about the founding of the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS) in 1791, Jeremy Belknap proposed a seal for the corporation that showed “a flying eagle, a ranging wolf and a shark, all seeking their prey” (Tucker, 1990 59). The Boston minister never explained why predation was so central to his vision for the MHS, yet the method and the arguments he developed over the course of his wider historical project are consistent with an understanding of history as an acquisitive and vindictive practice. Belknap followed in the filiopietistic footsteps of his predecessors, such as William Hubbard, Cotton Mather, and Thomas Prince, collecting and mobilizing the existing New England archive as the region’s heritage, and extolling the exceptional historical role of New England in biblical terms. But he was also a fervent federalist, who dedicated his historical career to articulating the significance of the long history of settlement in the present and the future of the United States. Exceptionalism is “the belief in America’s unique role in human history” (Roberts and DiCuirici ix). Belknap practised history in order to enable American historians to appropriate the sources surrounding the formation of their towns, counties, and states, and to write a coherent story of the emergence of the American character.
- 2 The events and publications surrounding the founding of the MHS point to Belknap’s understanding that it was necessary to provide institutional structure for the archive to be preserved and used by later, increasingly professionalized generations of New England historians. This paper demonstrates that in the early 1790s, Belknap developed an exceptionalist textual and institutional strategy, through which he engaged, on his own scientific terms, with transatlantic intellectual discussions about the historical role of America in western expansion. He sought critical recognition and acclaim by developing a network of correspondents and associates among whom he could expand his reputation and spread his methods, theories, and findings. This network constitutes the intended readership of the “Four Dissertations” he published in appendix to his 1792 *Discourse Intended to commemorate the Discovery of America by Christopher Columbus*, a

sweeping history of the origins of American development that served as the outspoken scientific purpose of the Massachusetts Historical Society. As Eileen Ka-May Cheng has demonstrated, early national historians “anticipated the ‘modern’ doctrine of objectivity” (Cheng 4). I argue here that exceptionalism was a form of historical practice, to be distinguished from the romantic historical myth and story of America’s model for the world, or the symbolic origins and purpose of the United States, so strikingly different from Belknap’s institutional and expansionist narratives of the development of local settlements and the corporations that sustained them, the sum of which constituted what he believed was American history.

- 3 In his four 1792 essays, Belknap demonstrated an ability to contribute positively to European and American knowledge about the New World and its place in western history. In the first dissertation “On the Circumnavigation of Africa by the Ancients,” he engaged with the Scottish historian William Robertson on the knowledge to be gathered from Greek and Roman classics (*Discourse* 59-83); in the second, “An examination of the pretensions of Martin Behaim to a discovery of America prior to that of Columbus,” he crushed the arguments for a German discovery of America presented to the American Philosophical Society (APS) by the French *Chargé d’affaires* in the United States at the time, Louis-Guillaume Otto, comte de Mosloy (85-115); in the third, he challenged Thomas Jefferson’s “Notes on Virginia” “On the question, whether the Honey-Bee is a native of America” (117-124); and, in the last, “On the Colour of the Native Americans, and the Recent Population of this Continent” (125-132), he ridiculed the climatological arguments based on the opinions of “the celebrated naturalist, Buffon,” published in the “American Museum, 1790—p. 78” (125), and offered his own alternative racialized view of the place of Indians in the history of human migration.
- 4 I will first discuss Belknap’s editorial and publication strategies of the 1780s as the context in which he founded the MHS in 1791, to appropriate the New England archive and control the means of its diffusion. The institutional and political role the MHS was intended to play in later historiography explains both the publication setting and the historiographic content of his “Four Dissertations” of 1792, analysed in the second part of this paper. Belknap intended to engage his readership in discussions about the failure of European historians to understand the specificity of American settlement and the nature of American liberty. They were Belknap’s lessons in scientificity and objectivity, to validate American sources and the science developed by its more dedicated chroniclers. Belknap’s historical exceptionalism focused on the American experience, which required its own historians, private archive, and chronology. It was a form of historical truth, a scientific method and outlook, which explains its enduring legacy in New England and American historiography, and also accounts in part for Belknap’s problematic role in these traditions, which concludes this contextual study of early national historical writing.

## Competition and exceptionalist historical writing

- 5 Belknap began his historical career in relative isolation, but he ambited to be published. While a minister in Dover, a hinterland settlement in New Hampshire, between 1768 and 1786, he collected, copied and catalogued a vast array of primary sources, on which he based the first volume of his *History of New Hampshire*, a coherent and compelling narrative of colonial formation. A true Harvard man, he returned to his

native Boston in 1786 and worked as both a minister in one of the city's most prestigious congregations and as a historian of New England. He continued to solicit individuals for papers and information, and he published historical essays in periodicals, as well as two additional volumes of his *History*, a satire, and a collection of biographies of significant actors of early expansion.

- 6 Not only was Belknap relentless in his acquisitive pursuit of a scientific library of New England development, he also framed his document search within a cohesive method that gave precedence to official gubernatorial sources and the correspondence and private papers of the most significant actors of the highly contentious settlement of Massachusetts and New Hampshire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He shared this political take on colonial formation with his closest friend and correspondent, Ebenezer Hazard, who never wrote a history of early America, but whose *Historical Collections* are the most extensive corpus of letters tracing the history of the negotiations of Massachusetts, Plymouth, Connecticut, and New Hampshire—as well as Virginia, New York, and Delaware—with one another, and with metropolitan authorities and other stakeholders of English expansion in the Northeast, over 150 years. Hazard was obviously intent on writing some form of constitutional history of the New England colonies, in line with John Adams's conception of “the first period” of American history (Adams 493). Both Belknap and Adams were Bostonians and practiced history in addition to other professional pursuits, but Belknap was a local minister and enjoyed none of the power and prestige of the future President of the United States. Nevertheless, like his better-known peers, he understood history as public service, part and parcel of the liberal education provided in the colleges and universities where these men had trained and with which they maintained close social and professional connections. Historical practice was a public act for the constitution of an American archive, and the publication of a set of tropes and narratives expressing a common American outlook on the origins and formation of the Republic.
- 7 Belknap's volume on this first period had already shown that the Boston historian had mobilized his deep knowledge of New England politics to set his own narrative of colonial development within a new chronological framework, one that reduced the imperial relation to “a game” played on the margins of settlement (Belknap Papers vol. 2 14). The real subject and purpose of Belknap's historical project was not the breakdown of the colonial relation, but the long history of expansion over American land. This narrative followed the ebb and flow of expansion, or the processes through which the New England settlers had built the institutions and practices most suited to satisfy their need for land, trade, and labour. Throughout the pre-revolutionary period, there had been many conflicts over sovereignty and resources among the various actors of the colonizing process, but also many opportunities for the settler population to cohere. The New England institutions and elites had shown remarkable consistency in their negotiations with metropolitan authorities throughout their history, and in their arguments in favour of their own ability to enforce a violent, punitive policy of western expansion into Indian land. They had secured their borders and stabilized their settlements by enjoining all stakeholders to commit to expansion. Their actions reflected the powerful sense of place that led them to give their unconditional loyalty to their shared local interests, to the detriment of their imperial connections, which Belknap discredited at every turn.

- 8 The theoretical core of Belknap's historical project was to focus on the settlers' experience of "carry[ing] their sovereignty with them" and normalizing their authority and power over the land and its peoples (Reid and Peace 360). He relied on a large corpus of promotional material dating back to the founding of Massachusetts, some of it the official record of local governance serving as precedents for later generations of magistrates and deputies, some published abroad to inform and attract metropolitan interest and support in the colonizing venture, and some the private collections of leading New England families. Andrew Fitzmaurice has defined promotional literature as the sum of "numerous tracts and pamphlets in particular, but also histories, verse and plays" produced in Elizabethan and Stuart England, which aimed at "debating the virtues of colonisation" (Fitzmaurice 2003 9). A distinction should be made, however, between promotion addressing colonization from a metropolitan perspective and the writings of permanent colonists, in which these virtues continued to be debated, but were anchored firmly in the place where these texts were composed. Belknap followed the tradition established by his predecessors, for whom historical writing, in the colonial context, implied a degree of advocacy, often understood by him as a show of force. He and his correspondents loved a "full-bloodied historian, as rapacious as a wolf" (Belknap Papers vol. 2 21), and they were aware of the necessity to defend and protect their work against disrepute or ridicule, which reflected badly on their country.<sup>1</sup> They worked together to build their collections, they shared contacts and recommendations, and they dialogued over the possibilities that scientific publications and societies afforded them to spread their sources and their commentaries.
- 9 Financial considerations weighed strongly upon Belknap's strategy to pursue his scientific practice. In the first half of the 1780s, he was a congregational minister on the margins of New England whose income had long proved insufficient to maintain his large family and finance his historical work. In Dover, his lack of funds had momentarily carried the humiliation of forcing him to subsist as "a common labourer," whose wife endured exhaustion and physical disabilities from the labour of feeding the family (Belknap Papers vol. 2 428). Undoubtedly convinced by the efficiency of Belknap's method, in 1780 Hazard had encouraged his friend to "[c]arry [his] enthusiasm in favour of America as [he] please[d]" (34), and paid for the publication of the first volume of the *History of New Hampshire*, which he partly revised. The two men were joined "intellectually and spiritually" (Mayo 184) in a financial partnership that lasted throughout the 1780s, when Hazard repeatedly mobilized his position as Postmaster General and his business connections as an insurance broker to sustain Belknap's publications and reputation among their shared network of printers and distributors. By 1790, Belknap had been admitted to the American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia and the American Academy of Arts and Science in Boston, was widely published in literary magazines, and continued to work on his own American project.
- 10 For Belknap, history was no leisurely pursuit. It cost money to collect, copy, or print original documents, and money to print, bind, and distribute one's own historical productions. Returns on the latter, however, were never sufficient to cover expenses. The broad range of literary forms Belknap produced and published through his northern network of printers and magazine editors has been studied (Kirsch 156-169) in the context of the highly competitive nature of intellectual productions in the early national period, when the market for literary and press productions was limited and unreliable. Readers who could afford books expected high standards of scholarship, yet,

Robb Haberman has argued, localism remained “a central trait of American print culture” (Haberman 170). Writers professed they ambioned to serve national and federal goals and purposes, yet they published works of local history and interests, destined to restricted local markets. Magazines were more lucrative than bound volumes, but their readership expected to be entertained as well as instructed (Lawrimore 370). Belknap had ample quantities of both good repute and wit, the institutional and social requirements for marketability, but he was repeatedly frustrated by the absence of a reliable paying readership for regional, book-length history, which he believed was most conducive to bringing American history onto the global stage.<sup>2</sup> He solicited the men of influence of both New Hampshire and Massachusetts to sponsor his work, as was customary for colonial promoters, but he had no faith in “speechifying” politicians’ ability to understand the potency of history as a force of legitimation, and he criticized the clergy for showing “nothing but fear and superstition” in those times of tremendous historical change (Belknap Papers vol. 2 44, 55).

- 11 Although his return to Boston in 1786 enabled Belknap to become a full member of the class of “urban moneyed men and women” striving for economic and political hegemony on the north-eastern seaboard (Lawrimore 361), he was remarkable in his dedication to *historical* work, as opposed to religious or entertaining compositions, as the channel through which to formulate and extoll the uniqueness of the American experience of colonization. Both Belknap and Hazard have been called “pioneer nationalists” (Cole 743) whose history carried “a vein of nationalistic pride for the new America” (Kaplan 37), giving it its energy and forcefulness. Indeed, they entertained the “pretty thought” of “a Congress of Philosophers” across the new nation, whose “useful discoveries”, among the “treasure, yet untouched” of America’s “natural curiosities” would contribute to the improvement of “the common good” (Belknap Papers vol. 2 34, 40).<sup>3</sup> But they also experienced the competition among their peers as a contest between historical, grounded knowledge as a force of advocacy and political cohesion, and other scientific endeavours they deemed too weak to convey their vision.
- 12 When Hazard sponsored Belknap for membership in the American Philosophical Society in 1784, he reassured him that his remote location absolved him from paying his fees and that, although attendance at a meeting of the Society, being so young, would relieve him of his fear of inadequacy, it was hardly worth the bother. “What a set of wags, you have at Philadelphia,” Belknap replied, who had had a good laugh at reading “the experiment to prove the inflammability of bowel-air” (Belknap Papers vol. 2 322-323). The New Hampshire minister had no patience for pointless speculation, yet he complied with the Society’s instructions and disseminated documents and knowledge through this particular network. He valued his scientific reputation as the key to his credibility and hence the realization of the performative nature of his settler project—to establish American experience as a form of reliable knowledge.<sup>4</sup>
- 13 Belknap’s method is in fact ill-served by the concept of nationalism, the chronology of which commonly dates back to the beginnings of the imperial conflict in the 1760s. His perspective was much wider than the breakdown of the imperial relation, the subject of the most popular historical narratives of his days, such as David Ramsay’s 1789 *History of the American Revolution*, which focused on trade and the commercial and cultural relations between the British colonies and their metropole. The narrative and thematic core of Belknap’s work was the settler experience of appropriating and transforming



American land, which had begun with the founding of the first settlements. He understood from his accumulated knowledge of colonial sources that New England societies had been shaped, from the onset of settlement, by the permanent conflicts between the settlers and their competitors on the ground, and by their dealing with the inconsistent policies of aspiring proprietors and governors in the metropole. His subject was the often violent experience of settlement on American land as the common denominator of all early American lives. This was their common heritage, recorded in the colonial writers' "simplicity of style" (Belknap Papers vol. 2 346), which American historians were to endorse in order to highlight the clarity, constancy, and longevity of the process of American expansion. This sense of place conveyed by the common experience of land appropriation also pervaded his popular religious poetry and his press articles on the future of American expansion, including a particularly uncompromising take on Indian survival published in 1798.

- 14 Belknap abided by the learned tradition of his time that anchored historical practice in Antiquity, that is why he published his historical pieces in the *Columbian Magazine* as the "American Plutarch." But he wrote *The Foresters*, his satirical narrative of the imperial crisis and the Revolution, under the pseudonym of Amyntor, whose historical significance lay not in his writings but in his actions. Amyntor, son of Phrastor, was a settler, a Pelasgian, driven out of Greece by political pressure, who consequently devoted his energy to appropriating and colonizing Etruria. Never one to retract from a powerful metaphor, Belknap signified that he, too, had read his classics and was therefore entitled to suggest comparisons could be made between settlement in America and the long history of western conquest.
- 15 Driven by his lifelong acquisitive passion for collecting and protecting the New England archive, Belknap pursued his relentless ambition to produce scientific and reputable American history on solid scientific and material grounds and founded the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS). The MHS was initially an offshoot of the *Boston Magazine* founded by his close friend John Eliot in December 1787. Its editorial committee, the Boston Magazine Society, composed exclusively at first of Harvard graduates, contributed to the longevity of this periodical by including surveying reports, or town surveys, as recurrent features of the publication. These surveys were provided by voluntary contributors who mapped and described their places of birth or residence, they signalled there was clear public demand for public documents tracing the evolution of local expansion. When the *Boston Magazine* was reformed in 1786 to avoid folding over like its Philadelphian equivalents, the Society promised the New England public a new publication dedicated to this practice. Their ambition was to produce, in time, a "general description of the Commonwealth," followed by equivalent surveys of other northern states (Haberman 187), a federalist project anchored in the material and landed history of expansion.
- 16 Land was central to the founding of the MHS, as it had been to Belknap's overall historical project since the publication of his *History*. Practising history, collecting sources and writing narratives interpreting their meaning was a collective endeavour, involving residents concerned with the delineation, appropriation, and topography of their locality. Belknap's work therefore is best understood as part of the chorographic tradition of New England "grounded histories" built on "local attachments, vernacular knowledge, and a powerful sense of place" (Halttunen 532). For Belknap and his associates, the MHS was the answer to the conundrum posed by regional competition



and a limited, unstable readership. It provided the private corporate structure necessary to finance the gathering of a gubernatorial and topographical archive, which would be preserved, copied, and printed in parts, in order to allow New England historians and politicians to produce verifiable historical accounts of New England expansion and settler sovereignty, for the instruction and the satisfaction of the local readership. Belknap welcomed immigration and western expansion into the North and the West as a continuation of the expansionist process inscribed in the long history of settlement (*History* vol. 1 282).

- 17 This was the institutional grounding of Belknap's settler history—local, solid, and built for the purpose of preserving and promoting the region's heritage, in the hope that the structure would be replicated in other areas of the United States. Belknap directed the agenda of the MHS and its press organ, *The American Apollo*, printed by his son Joseph, who had trained as a printer with his father's Philadelphia publisher, Robert Aitken. In full control of the means to produce American history on his own terms, Belknap proceeded to give his European and American peers a lesson in historiography and historical practice.

## Lessons in exceptionalist history

- 18 Now that Belknap's historical project has been delineated and contextualized, the paratext surrounding his essays on global human and natural history in his published *Discourse* of 1792 becomes clearer. He had been interested in scientific competitions for years, but he had never directly entered one. He may have lacked the confidence to do so in his early career, but by the early 1790s he was ready to engage directly with international scientific discussions about America. He therefore published his "Dissertations" himself, as appendixes to his *Discourse* on the "discovery" of America, written for, and printed by, the Massachusetts Historical Society.
- 19 Belknap had privately complained that the American Philosophical Society, the country's most eminent scientific network, neglected the unfathomable source of facts and information that American expansion represented, even though its founders claimed in their *Regulations* to seek American treasures of knowledge, and included, in last position, a committee on "Husbandry and American Improvements" (APS XII). Belknap believed "ingenious tradesmen" and "intelligent masters of ships" would be "useful members" of the American scientific community, "by communicating experiments and observations in their respective occupations," a precious form of practical knowledge about the natural world "speculative men might be glad to be acquainted with" (Belknap Papers vol. 2 88-89). His discourse argued for the exceptional character of the settler type, tracing a genealogy of great men, from Columbus onwards, whose genius—a mix of enlightenment and manly energy—had initiated the motion of American development.
- 20 It was the outspoken responsibility of the MHS to "preserve authentic monuments of memorable occurrence," "not only names, dates and facts" to be "thus handed down to posterity; but principles and reasonings, causes and consequences, with the manner of their operation and their various connexions," that could thereby "enter into the mass of historical information." The first New England settlers had been "early attentive to this important subject," and had left their descendants ample evidence upon which to articulate their long political heritage and adapt it to changing political circumstances

(MHS 7). In Columbus's wake, settlers had carried western technology ever further west. In fits and spurts, they had built self-governing, perpetually increasing settlements, out of sheer ingenuity and constant labour. Early national historians had the duty to carry on this recording and publishing of their local histories, and to inscribe their narratives in the wider historical significance of American settlement.

- 21 In line with New England ministerial productions since the beginnings of settlement, Belknap ended his *Discourse* on Exodus and God's promise to make his people righteous and let them "inherit the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hand that I shall be glorified" (*Discourse* 55). Then followed an "Ode" to "Great Columbia! Favored Soil!" whose "fields," "shores," and "clime" brought "toil," "wealth," and "health" respectively to its people, who "partook together in their virtuous plan [...] to vindicate the rights of man" (56-58). New England historians and their audiences attending the event during which the *Discourse* was pronounced were asked to continue, in this *commemorative* volume, to praise their collective endeavours as owners and beneficiaries of American land and its resources. Throughout his *Discourse*, hymns, and scientific dissertations, Belknap consistently extolled the power of the land and of the settlement that had transformed it since the founding. These actions had shaped American colonial societies and the land was still the future of the new state formation they had gathered under.<sup>5</sup> New England was exceptional for its literary heritage and its tradition of Biblicism and literacy, but the processes of settlement applied to all areas of British America, where other historical institutions could be created to pursue the same strategies. Frustrated with the practices of his peers, who neglected creole sources and arguments in favour of an imperial view of American expansion, he appended four dissertations on the practice of American history to his commemorative discourse, which delineate the nature and method of his own exceptionalist form of historical thinking. They were a direct attack on the practices and methods of those members of the APS who diverged from his conception and disparaged American evidence to please European audiences.
- 22 The first dissertation was a lesson in historical creativity and imagination. It reviewed the historiography surrounding the question of the circumnavigation of Africa, to assess the plausibility of the first voyage around the continent having been the work of Africans rather than Europeans. Belknap focused on the Phoenician voyage ordered by Necho II of Egypt, in the seventh century BCE, told by Herodotus, "the most ancient historian, except the sacred writers, whose work has come down to our times" (*Discourse* 60). He compared the ancient Greek positively to Ptolemy and Pliny, his nemeses in the Common Era, who had deemed his sources and findings unreliable, and had therefore condemned western historians to disregarding these events until Diaz sailed around the Cape of Good Hope in 1488. By negating the validity of Herodotus's sources, Ptolemy had hindered historical inquiry into shipping and navigation in the age which preceded Columbus's westward navigation and arrival in America.
- 23 To an American, Belknap argued, the existence the New World obviously challenged Ptolemy's latitudinal division of the world's climatic zones and required new thinking on the relationship between climate and civilization. Herodotus was the only credible source on long-distance navigation in the pre-Christian era, because he alone had shown critical thinking and creativity when deciphering his sources. He alone had envisaged the possibility that ancient tribes had indeed circumnavigated Africa, a technical and logistical feat that was beyond his understanding, but he could

nevertheless imagine was possible. The European writers who had endorsed Ptolemy's theory had been hindered by their own lack of creative thinking. They could not comprehend the Phoenicians' choice of cabotage, which included seasonal planting and long-term stays on the African coast, waiting for changes in the coastal winds. Because they had only used "ships of great burden in their trade to India and China" (*Discourse* 71), they failed to see the innovative dimension of the Phoenician southern and eastern trades.

- 24 The freighting and use of small vessels, combined with momentary subsistence-planning in a foreign land, made perfect sense to an American historian, who had knowledge of his predecessors' experiences in maritime trade and coastal settlement and could therefore construct an understanding of these ancient, ill-known practices initiated, like the American colonies, "for the sake of discovery" (*Discourse* 65). As the Phoenicians before them, Belknap inferred, settlers in America had learnt to adapt to the constraints of new environments, and had devised a mode of exploitation and exchange "perfectly agreeable to the genius of the people by whom it was performed" (67). They had conceived and mastered, for their own benefits, the managerial and technological innovations that settlement entailed, which he considered a fully-fledged explanatory factor of American history, the fruit of reason, science, and, most importantly, the actions of the settlers on the ground.
- 25 Belknap repeatedly paid tribute Scottish historian William Robertson throughout the third volume of his *History of New Hampshire*, which demonstrates his ambition to engage with historical debates at the highest international level. Robertson understood the centrality of New England political culture in the breakdown of the British Empire. He had "pointed out that the colonies had developed their own spirit ever since their foundation and repeatedly emphasized the 'spirit of independence' that typified New England's first settlers" (Petroff 26). Such an homage deserved to be returned. Belknap therefore praised the professionalism and creativity of a man able to consider that new ideas could emerge through historical research, even if they carried the risk of forcing an intellectual community to diverge from established narratives.<sup>6</sup> A true historian of their enlightened age had to be able to pick up on the smallest details found in credible sources, while taking a long view of history in order to overcome the technical and ideological limitations of each scientific age and community.
- 26 Belknap proposed that historians should not only be creative and open to new ideas, but also abide by shared codes of scientificity, which alone could guarantee the quality of historical productions and the relevance of the debates they contained. The basic premise of his method was that history consisted primarily in the use of original sources, to be apprehended with a critical eye for their validity, when, holding them in his own hands, the historian could demonstrate they conformed to established criteria of reliability. Belknap used footnotes and clear references to available editions and translations to support his argument for the historical power of settlement, and he used citations expertly, expansively, and politically, to define American historical practice as a separate field of global history.
- 27 In line with the chronology he had followed in his *History of New Hampshire*, he chose to base his claims on a wide historiography, which clearly aimed to be international in scope, but excluded English historians of the empire. He cited not only Scottish, but also French authors, such as Bougainville, "in the 26<sup>th</sup> volume of the *Memoirs of the Royal Academy of Inscriptions and Belles Lettres* from a French translation from the

Greek from the original Punic” (*Discourse* 78), and German historians such as “Gesnez, Schlozer and Michaelis” (80), and the skilful Dr Forster, “a German author of much learning and good credit” (88). They too had provided credible explanations as to the plausibility of Phoenician voyages circumnavigating Africa, which anchored expansionist pursuits and innovation in Antiquity, as opposed to modern imperial Europe. The history of American settlement both predated and trumped the view that made the British Empire the epitome and engine of liberty.

- 28 The core of Belknap’s historical project was the idea that settlement was entrepreneurial action for improvement, be it in husbandry, shipping, or armed defence. He found similar traits in sailors and settlers in both the ancient past and the future of the early United States, to build a chronology based on American events and individuals, as opposed to European national origins. Settlers were individuals endowed with remarkable intellectual energy. They were curious about the technological and commercial findings of their age, and were able to take stock of the existence of new, distant lands and devise the means of making them their own. Through their ingenuity and actions, settlers had transformed the land into self-governing societies and developed the material and managerial skills to relentlessly claim even further lands, sustaining their model to provide for their many children. Discovery and settlement were not national endeavours to be claimed by the metropolises of Europe, but the fruits of local labour, ambition, and innovation, processes of settlement and state-formation recorded in the original sources.
- 29 Belknap argued for seamless continuity in the history of expansion across ancient and modern times until the American present. As an archive and narrative, American history belonged solely to “Great Columbia” (*Discourse* 58), whose treasures its historians were committed to appropriate and own. Ancient Persia or Greece compared favourably enough, but Belknap found “insuperable” a chronology that refused to make the Columbian discovery the founding moment of American settlement. In his second dissertation, “An Examination of the Pretensions of Martin Behaim, to a Discovery of America, prior to that of Christopher Columbus,” he critiqued the work of the French *Chargé d’affaires* Louis-Guillaume Otto, the author of “a Memoir appeared in the second volume of the Transactions of the American Philosophical Society at Philadelphia” (85). He carefully demonstrated the fallacy of Otto’s chronology, for the latter had invented an interregnum in the Duchy of Burgundy to justify Behaim’s political affiliation, through sheer ignorance of existing and respectable works to the contrary—Robertson and Forster, again, but also “the *Memoirs* of the French Philippe de Comines, Mezeray’s and Henault’s *History of France*, and Collier’s *Dictionary*” (86).
- 30 Not only was Otto’s research poor and misguided, but he also claimed to rely on letters held in an archive in Nuremberg, Germany, which Belknap argued was evidently “too deficient in accuracy to be depended on as authorities” (*Discourse* 87). The Bostonian concluded uncompromisingly that, “as letters [had] not [been] produced, no certain opinion [could] be formed of them” (90). His methodological lesson to Otto was thus that history required research, accuracy, and the writer’s ability to produce, copy, or reference crucial sources, if he knew these were not widely known or available. This had been his own method from the onset of his career: “Suppositions without proof will avail little; and suppositions against proof will avail nothing” (93-94). The practice of American history was a forceful endeavour, whose power resided in its scientificity, even if it challenged European chronologies and national affiliations. Belknap argued

that American history belonged solely to Americans, who wrote from a specific place and from their own particular set of sources, which the MHS has only begun to collect and institutionalize.

- 31 Not only a foreigner, but also an aristocrat, Otto had made the double mistake of questioning the American ownership of discovery and relying on a foreign archive to bring American history back into the European fold. Benhaim had discovered Congo, not America, and Otto's claim that he had spoken of America to the Portuguese monarch as "a new continent which offered him only barren lands, inhabited by unconquerable savages" (*Discourse* 95), was adding insult to injury. Benhaim had lacked the vision that would carry Columbus across the Atlantic Ocean a year later, in pursuit of a ten-year dream that was the only undeniable beginning of American development. The point of discovery was not that it brought glory and sovereignty to one superior European nation over another, but that it had triggered considerable changes to American land, in the form of expanding settlement. Belknap had spent his entire career collecting material to build the story of these changes, and he was not going to tolerate other historians claiming to hold a similarly relevant and powerful archive on the history of America. He published letters by Columbus and a chronology of his life in appendix to his appendix, to restore the symbolic potency of the Columbian moment, whose significance on the global scale his peers continued to ignore (101-114).
- 32 Scientificity and exceptionalism were the two faces of Belknap's historical project. In the third dissertation, "On the question, whether the honey bee is a native of America," Belknap reflected on "Mr. Jefferson's Notes on Virginia," in its "American edition" (*Discourse* 117). Jefferson was a Founding Father and a prominent member of the APS, who had written a narrative description of his own state to counter French theories of natural philosophy that considered New World environments and people inferior to the Old (Jefferson 45, 61, 69).<sup>7</sup> The Bostonian felt the need to engage with the highly popular work of his renowned Virginian predecessor to point to the weaknesses of his method. He did not wish to contradict "this respectable author" (117) about his claim that Americans were indebted to Europe for this "useful tribe of insects" (120), but he proposed an alternative interpretation, which was both a lesson in the use of Americana and a thinly disguised criticism levelled at one of the most famous American men of letters, for neglecting to measure the symbolic implications of his remark.
- 33 Any learned individual knew the importance of honey bees as symbols of human organisation and labour, including as a "model for colonial design" (Kupperman 272), discussed in narratives of European expansion produced on both sides of the Atlantic in the early modern era. Belknap chose to rely on Samuel Purchas, the last Stuart heir to Richard Hakluyt's intensive Elizabethan promotion of American settlement and the colonial companies that financed it. Purchas's sources provided credible evidence that the Mexican empire used both wax and honey, and that honey bees were known to indigenous Floridians possibly as far north as Georgia (*Discourse* 121-123). Belknap worked on a body of documents and narratives in which knowledge about America and its natural world had accumulated on both sides of the Atlantic, helping settlers to devise and account for their colonial projects in terms their metropolitan audiences could understand. America was inherently productive and abundant, the home of many native species of honey bees. Since Europeans knew about the American honey bees, Belknap deduced, "the sanguine spirit of the first Adventurers would have rather led them to think of finding them in America, than of transporting bees from Europe to

make them” (121). To imagine the land had been barren was to ignore the knowledge and skills of the men who had built these now fruitful settlements.

- 34 Belknap proposed instead to appropriate the American bee as the emblem of settlement. He argued that southern bees had travelled along settlement from Florida and Georgia westward and northward, for “they delight[ed] in the neighbourhood of white settlers”—their abundant orchards and meadows—and enjoyed “availing themselves to the labour of man” (*Discourse* 121). Native species had evolved and adapted to the changes in the land brought by the agrarian expansion of settlement. They may have even mixed with imports to form new breeds altogether. Nevertheless, they remained the symbol of the advance of white settlement over woodland. Just as Otto had invented Germanic origins of the discovery of America, Jefferson had shown weakness in leading his readers to believe the new land had once been barren of this most precious and significant emblem of human politics and industry.
- 35 The worst mistake Jefferson had made, in fact, was to have relied on an indigenous habit as evidence for his claim, for Native Americans called the honey bee “the white man’s fly” (*Discourse* 122). The negative connotation of the expression shocked and repelled the Bostonian, who chose to interpret it as a cry of fear on the part of border tribes, when the coming of the honey bee signified they should run and never return. Belknap had no patience for historical findings based on indigenous knowledge, whether it be language, testimonies, or even archaeological or written sources. He argued publicly and privately that Indian dispossession was inevitable, and the “impracticable methods” of the civilizing process a resounding failure (Belknap Papers vol. 2 227-228). His dissertation on Jefferson’s assertion was a critique of the latter’s willingness to make both Europeans and Indians relevant to American history, to the detriment of American scientific exceptionalism, as he believed it should be practiced.
- 36 The place of Native Americans in the history of mankind was problematic in many political and philosophical respects, but Belknap addressed the issue with the same scientific settler acumen. In the last dissertation “On the blackness of the Native Americans, and the recent population of the continent,” he answered the question raised in “the American Museum of 1790, p. 78,” about the lighter skin tone of “the original natives of America” (*Discourse* 125) living in similar latitudes as other indigenous peoples of the torrid zone. Belknap first took on Buffon’s theory of the belated emergence of the American continent head-on, arguing that while the event had been recent, surely “the laws of hydrostatics” required evidence be produced of its impact on the shores of the other continents. As there was simply no “historical proof of the existence of these effects,” the Antiquity of America could be said to be “equal to the rest of the world” (128). If geography did not explain the lighter complexion of Americans under similar latitudes to the Africans, however, history could. Belknap dated the origins of the peopling of America to the fifth or sixth centuries of the Christian era, when daring navigators had possibly left China and Korea for the southern American hemisphere, where civilization soon flourished. The tribes of the north, however, were different from the southern empires, which may have come “from the more northern deserts of Tarterry.” If this could be proven, he suggested, it would explain “the difference between the inhabitants of those celebrated empires, and the wild wanderers in the northern regions of this vast continent” (130).
- 37 Natural historians and philosophers across the world attached skills, abilities, and virtues to the climate or topography of a place. In attributing different origins to



indigenous nations of the southern and northern parts of the continent, and in assuming these origins implied varied degrees of civilization, Belknap was in accordance with the thinking of his peers. The purpose of his interpretation, however, was not to understand the place of indigenous Americans in the stadial progress of mankind, but to extract the white settlement of America from the rest of global history. If civilization moved by degrees, North American development was the history of a confrontation between two worlds locked in unequal stages of technological and scientific progress, whose outcome was necessarily predicted by the technical superiority of a fringe of European discoverers, and the ingenuity and power of the settlers who had laboured in their wake. Belknap thus built a racist view of the native peoples of North America which expressed his profound intellectual and historical conviction that the “peopling” of America by European migrants was incompatible with the preservation of indigenous titles and indigenous lives (“Observations” 285). He was possibly not the first, certainly not the only historian of the early national era to argue for the inevitability of white expansion trumping native sovereignty, but he was noteworthy in his ambition to establish a scientific method to fit his purpose—a scientifically valid form of American history, both *legitimizing* the settlers’ violent and acquisitive achievements and *driven* by them.

## The legacy of exceptionalist history

- 38 Barton’s reply to Belknap’s essay on the honey bee in the *Transactions* of the APS the following year showed that the members of the prestigious scientific institution were not receptive to his exceptionalism. Barton was both a botanist and a lexicographer, and although he politely praised the overall paper as “ingenuous and well-written” (Barton 242n), he remained unconvinced by its demonstration. Belknap’s knowledge of Hispanic sources was poor, as was his creativity in envisioning the various habitats and habits of the many species of bees and wasps native to America. Barton agreed that American knowledge should be widely shared and that historians had a responsibility to use it to counter the false claims and speculations of philosophers who had never seen America for themselves. But he was also keen to demonstrate his own knowledge of American nature and indigenous languages, as opposed to endorsing the exclusionary fundamentals of Belknap’s arguments as a historiographic program. He did not share Belknap’s need for a specific American chronology and believed indigenous knowledge must be heeded. He therefore sided with Jefferson’s assertion that Americans were “indebted to Europe for this useful insect” (Barton 257).
- 39 Natural philosophers of his era could find Belknap’s American settler history clever and appealing, but they were likely to refrain from endorsing his method. He, too could be partial and inaccurate in his selection and reading of sources, and his paradigmatic use of settlement ran against their preconceived understanding of the role of New World expansion in global history. Europeans wrote about America as a mirror in which to gaze at, and reflect upon, their own imperial progress, and they showed little interest in creole publications that inscribed political and armed resistance to imperial authority at the heart of settlement, as a specific form of colonial occupation. His more genteel peers in the world of American national politics were not unsupportive of his efforts, but they may have considered his endorsement of racial violence incompatible with the benevolent, universalist aspirations of republicanism. His work has



consequently been neglected and he is better known for founding the MHS than devising a settler history of American expansion.

- 40 Belknap's "Dissertations" acquire further significance when compared to the third volume of his *History of New Hampshire*, also published in Boston in 1792, which consists in a catalogue description of the landscape, flora, and fauna of northern New England, in direct continuation of the thematic content and structure of Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*. But Belknap's method and arguments differed radically from Jefferson's. Firstly, he described and listed the advantages and abundance of the American landscape only from the utilitarian point of view of the settler occupants, focusing on navigation, surveying, forest and field production, and minerals, and relegating indigenous life and occupancy to "monuments and relics" of no import in the development of the state and region (*History* vol. 3 63). Secondly, he refrained from countering European arguments of American deficiency and described America as a perpetually transformed space, where natural resources only mattered for the commercial and industrial advantages they brought to the settler societies that were the subject of his *History* from the inception of its first volume. Lastly, whereas Jefferson had painstakingly compared the weight and size of native species to disprove Buffon's notion of American youth and degeneracy, Belknap built elaborate lists and statistics out of information he had gathered among the settler population in the preceding years ("Circular" 1790) to demonstrate the health and productivity of the settler population, their constitutions, laws, and militias, as well as their revenues and taxes. While Jefferson had written as a natural philosopher, Belknap wrote as a historian who considered the impact of settlement on the landscape and endowed it with considerable historical significance. Confident in the stability and flexibility of the corporate, educated New England mode of westward expansion, he predicted that the future of America would be decidedly westward.
- 41 Many signs point to his important contribution to antebellum American historiography. Many colonial histories were produced in the early national period, such as Benjamin Trumbull's *History of Connecticut*, Hugh Williamson's *History of North Carolina*, and David Ramsay's *History of South Carolina*, that followed Belknap's chronology and its promotional tone in support of the long formative history of settlement. In Boston and Cambridge, the members of the MHS assiduously, albeit intermittently, pursued the Society's mission of preserving the New England archive and making it available to historians of colonial and early America, in exclusive collaboration with "senior professors at Harvard University" (Tucker, 1995 356). They published sweeping, enduring narratives of American development embodied in the "character" of its ruling elite from the founding onwards, for whom settling had meant a transition "from the reformation into virtual republicanism" (Bancroft 284).
- 42 Frederick Jackson Turner at the end of the nineteenth century built on the New England archive to enjoin his peers in the West to make their region an object of study, and collect and peruse original documents for others to later write the history of the events they witnessed. His knowledge of Belknap's work is obvious, not only in his concern for the constitution and ownership of an original western archive, but also for his conviction that "a study of aboriginal survival" would not help and that practitioners should concentrate their "widely extended and earnest historical inquiry" on "the development of a Western society" (Turner, 1897 108). He argued for the formative and explanatory power of settlement behind the impetus of American

history since the New England founding, the actions of “New England’s sons,” for whom he was writing, “the organizers of a Greater New England in the West, captains of industry, political leaders, founders of educational systems, and prophets of religion, in a section that was to influence the ideals and shape the destiny of a nation in ways to which the eyes of men like Cotton Mather were sealed” (Turner, 1920 66). The legacy of the founding generation lived on in the expansionist and industrial achievements of further generations of New Englanders.

43 History had slowly evolved from a learned pursuit to a professional practice over the course of the nineteenth century. Because the MHS held the most cohesive body of colonial archive and so many of its historians contributed to making sense of it, “the history of Massachusetts took priority as a national template” (Wright v). The interwar and post-war years at Harvard and the MHS were crucial to the resurgence of this historiographic tradition of devising “a usable past” for the nation (Gordon 671) in the works of such MHS members as Perry Miller, Bernard Bailyn, Robert Middlekauff, or Sacvan Bercovitch, who have returned again and again to the Puritan sources of the founding in order to argue for the religious, New England, origins of American identity. <sup>8</sup> Belknap plays no part in their research, because he never considered Providence and religion as the engines of New England history. His history was political, institutional, and expansionist, even though he recognized the contribution of the ministry, to which he belonged, in expressing the settlers’ common purpose and encouraging improvement, literacy, and scientific pursuits. His concern was for the settlers’ actions, not their English origins, their creeds, or their projected ideals.

44 The more fundamental reason behind the marginality of his publications in the corpus of New England historians, in spite of his reputation as a public figure, is his endorsement of racial violence, which jarred with the more genteel scientific methods of his peers, who preferred to engage with the issue of indigenous survival in philosophical terms. But his racialized view of colonial formation should be read again and compared to other creole historiographies, including in Hispanic America, in order to uncover “the contradictions and tensions of Creole consciousness, posed between an external world characterized by European arrogance and a world within riven by the tensions of secular social injustice and racism” (Cañizares-Esguerra 5). Belknap’s fascination for the manly heroism of the Frontier generations is one aspect of this consciousness that also influenced the promotion of antebellum westward expansion and the historical method of twentieth-century historians like Daniel Boorstin, another member of the MHS, who believed there was such a thing as the American experience. Writing about Jefferson and Jackson’s settler ideology of expansion, Mathew Crow has recently argued:

Their operating assumption was that labor and exchange of the fruits of labor integrated the nation, establishing consent to have one’s history wrapped up into a larger uniform project, and those histories that did not fit or could not be safely made part of the legitimating narrative of American expansion needed to be transformed, exercised or eliminated. (Crow 431)

We have seen that Belknap’s historical project operated along the same assumption and methods, pushing the chronology of settler colonial history further back in time, before the Revolution, and beyond the chronology imposed by the intellectual history of early nationalism and republicanism (Chaplin).

## Conclusion

- 45 As a historical construct, exceptionalism feeds on the tension between ideas and reality, between lofty aspirations and goodly material ends, which makes it remarkably amenable to symbolic or mythical invocations of America's colonial past (Rodgers, 2018). But as historical practice, exceptionalism entailed the ownership and preservation of reliable sources about the formation of settlements, and the search for connections between past experiences and present challenges. Belknap's "Four Dissertations" of 1792 demonstrate the scientific methods and scope of the Bostonian's historical project, driven by his attachment to the land and a desire for intellectual recognition as a proponent of American science. His search for a form of historical truth about America led him to elaborate the groundings it required to be accurate, reliable, and therefore meaningful. He built on the existing New England political archive to legitimize the settlers' practices from the beginnings of their enterprise, demonstrating how cohesive they had been since the onset of settlement and how they had followed their own historical trajectory.
- 46 Belknap's appropriation of American sources and his exceptionalist take on American history are not well-known, because he anchored American development in the shared actions and interests of individual settlers, and wrote a grounded history of Native American dispossession and colonial violence, a far-cry from the Republican culture and universalist ideas of his more prestigious peers. While he aspired to the material comforts of a successful intellectual career, he refused to emulate European scientific methods or to look for European origins and connections. His writing and his papers offer a rare vantage point into the practice of settler history in New England in the late eighteenth century, with promising comparative perspectives with other histories of settlement in the rest of the Atlantic World.

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## NOTES

1. See for instance John Eliot's comments on the disgrace of "Poor Pater West," duped into believing he had found a way to filter salt water through sand. He was at present "the glory of Massachusetts among the literati of Europe," but the latter would "soon deal out satire as liberally as they have dealt out their praises" (Belknap Papers vol. 2 309).
2. The publication of the *History of New Hampshire* in London had been envisaged, in the footsteps of Thomas Hutchinson in 1764-1767 and William Gordon in 1788, but Belknap was deterred by issues of copyright and ownership over his own precious works, and clung to his own preference for "American workmanship" (Belknap Papers vol. 2 214). Once the first volume was printed and bound, Hazard wrote that "print and all," it looked "like London work" (Hazard 382).
3. Hazard expressed his vision of American science as follows: "Why may not a Republic of Letters be realized in America as well as a Republican Government? Why may there not be a Congress of Philosophers as well as of Statesmen? And why may there not be subordinate philosophical bodies connected with a principal one, as well as separate legislatures, acting in concert by a common assembly? I am so fat an enthusiast in the cause of America as to wish she may shine Mistress of the Sciences, as well as the Asylum of Liberty" (Belknap Papers vol. 2 255).
4. He travelled to the White Mountains on an exploratory expedition and his Report, published in 1856 by the MHS, was presented to the APS by Hazard in September 1784, with a copy of the *History of New Hampshire*, with good reception of both (Belknap Papers vol. 2 404).
5. Belknap saw no end to American expansion. He wrote the following comment to George Washington in 1793: "I beg leave to lay before you a specimen of a monthly publication in which you will find an account of a new discovery in the pacific ocean, by one of our citizens who has given the names of the principal characters in the United States to several islands between the tropics. It is a pleasing reflection that our countrymen carry their zeal and patriotism into the most remote regions, and that the names of those who have been instrumental in establishing the liberty of America will in future be inscribed on the map of the globe" ("Jeremy Belknap to George Washington").
6. Experience could explain why the Phoenicians knew where they sailed in spite of their limited astronomical knowledge. Robertson admitted this possibility and followed the Greek in mentioning it, the sign of a humble, yet scientific mind. "The modest doubt of Herodotus is another argument in favour of the truth and genuineness of it ; for as he had no experience to guide him, the idea was new, it was very proper for him to hesitate in admitting it, though he showed his impartiality by inserting it in his relation" (*History* vol. 3 75).
7. Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* were privately printed in Paris in 1784, translated into French in 1786, and printed again in London in 1787 ("Thomas Jefferson"). The

American edition of 1788, by Pritchard and Hall in Philadelphia, had not been authorized by the author (“Notes on the State of Virginia”).

8. “As long as there is a United States of America, there will be a need for the Massachusetts Historical Society” is the conclusion of the institution’s 1995 commemorative history (Tucker, 1995 467).

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## ABSTRACTS

This paper analyses the commercial and institutional context in which Jeremy Belknap founded the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1791-1792. It reads his “Four Dissertations” of 1792 as a series of methodological and theoretical arguments in favor of the unique chronology and thematic content of proper American history. It argues that Belknap’s overall historical project is the origin of American exceptionalism as a historical practice, based on an exclusive focus on settlement and expansion as the engines of history, and on the experiences of American settlers since their arrival on the continent, as the only sources on which to build a relevant paradigm of the American character. His legacy is problematic, but it represents a crucial avenue of postcolonial inquiry, in which the structuring effects of exceptionalist historiography can be studied.

Jeremy Belknap est un historien méconnu de la période révolutionnaire américaine, mais son projet historique pour la jeune Amérique représente un élément important de l’émergence de l’exceptionnalisme étatsunien, étudié ici dans le contexte institutionnel de la création de la Société historique du Massachusetts à Boston, dans les années 1790. Cet article analyse la stratégie mise en place par Belknap et ses associés pour rassembler et préserver les archives politiques de l’expansion coloniale en Nouvelle-Angleterre, afin de permettre aux historiens américains de mesurer l’impact de l’expérience de colonisation sur leur héritage social et politique. Les « Dissertations » de Belknap, publiées en 1792, représentent une série d’arguments méthodologiques et théoriques pour la défense d’une chronologie, d’une méthode et d’une thématique proprement américaines, parce que motivées par la quête scientifique d’un paradigme qui saurait rendre compte des actions, des innovations et des pratiques expansionnistes des colons. Son œuvre constitue une source historiographique importante mais problématique de la période postrévolutionnaire, qui doit figurer dans la recherche sur la pensée exceptionnaliste du long XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Jeremy Belknap, exceptionalism, New England, historiography, early America, Atlantic history, settler colonialism

**Mots-clés:** Jeremy Belknap, exceptionnalisme, Nouvelle-Angleterre, historiographie, Jeune Amérique, histoire atlantique, colonisation, colonialisme



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