the Ionic style of classical architecture, while adjoining ones are imprinted with the marks of the Tuscan, Doric, and Corinthian styles.

The colonials named their horses and their enslaved humans after classical figures. A bit down the hill from Jefferson's house, a stable housed Caractacus, Tarquin, Arcturus, and Diomede. This naming habit resulted in asides in correspondence such as one in which Adams instructed his wife that "Cleopatra ought not to be fed too high—she should have no Grain." Among the enslaved, one who worked on contract for Madison was called Plato, while Jefferson held title to Jupiter, Caesar, and Hercules, and Washington to Neptune and Cupid. Even people such as Washington who had not attended college were familiar with the names and stories of the Romans, especially of the heroes whose lives and values were seen as worthy of emulation. Many decades later, after Emancipation, one of the grievances listed by freedmen was that they had not been allowed even to keep their own names.

The ancient world was present in their lives in ways that, because they gave the country its shape, echo down the corridors of time, mainly in ghostly ways that people today tend not to notice. Our "Senate" meets in "The Capitol"—both references to ancient Rome. Most of its members are either "Republicans," a name derived from Latin, or "Democrats," a word of Greek origin. Just east of the Capitol building, our Supreme Court convenes in a marbled 1935 imitation of a Roman temple, with great bronze doors at the entrance weighing twenty-six thousand pounds apiece. To the west in the Federal City stands the Lincoln Memorial, which resembles the Parthenon of Athens, turned sideways, and the Jefferson Memorial, which borrows from Rome's Pantheon. Reach into your wallet, take out a one-dollar bill, and on the reverse side you will see three Latin phrases: On the left, *annuit coeptis* (more or less, "our undertakings are favored") and *novus ordo seclorum* ("new order of the ages"), and on the right, the more familiar *E pluribus unum* ("Out of many, one"). Ironically, on the obverse side is the image of George Washington, the only one of our first four presidents not to read Latin.

The proverbs offered in Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack* often were updated versions of Greek and Roman sayings. "He does not possess Wealth, it possesses him," for example, comes from the Greek philosopher Aristippus. *The Moral Sayings of Publius Syrus*, a collection of about a thousand aphorisms that appeared in the first century BC, particularly influenced Franklin. Among them was one that Franklin quoted, a saying that lives even today in the names of a pop culture magazine and a rock music group—"A rolling stone gathers no moss."

The early Americans also nodded to the ancient world in naming their settlements. In upstate New York, it is possible to drive in one day from Troy to Utica to Rome to Syracuse to Ithaca, while passing through Cicero, Hector, Ovid, Solon, Scipio Center, Cincinnatus, Camillus, Romulus, Marcellus, and even Sempronius, who didn't exist—he was a fictional character in Addison's *Cato*. Downstate, overlooking New York City's great harbor, towers a statue of a Roman goddess, though few today might recognize Miss Liberty, or *Libertas*, as such. Her upheld torch soars 305 feet above the saltwater lapping her little island.

The Pursuit of Virtue

THE BEST PLACE TO BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND THE VIEWS OF THE REVOLUtionary generation is with a look at the word "virtue." This word was powerfully meaningful during the eighteenth century. Today it is a mere synonym for morality, and also, anachronistically, a signifier of female chastity or the lack of it, as in the euphemistic phrase "a woman of easy virtue." But for the Revolutionary generation, virtue was the essential element of public life. Back then, it actually was masculine. It meant putting the common good before one's own interests. Virtue, writes the historian Joyce Appleby, was the "lynchpin" of public life—that is, the fastener that held together the structure.

It is worth dwelling on the word for a moment, because it runs

like a bright thread through the entire period of the Revolution and the first decades of the new nation. The founders used it incessantly in their public statements. The word "virtue" appears about six thousand times in the collected correspondence and other writings of the Revolutionary generation, compiled in the U.S. National Archives' database, *Founders Online (FO)*, totaling some 120,000 documents. That's more often than "freedom." The practice of virtue was paramount, which is one reason George Washington, not an articulate man, loomed so large over the post-Revolutionary era.

A Different Ancient World

IN RECOGNIZING THE IMPACT OF CLASSICISM ON THE FOUNDERS, WE also need to see that their conception of the ancient world was not the one we have now. They favored different subjects and people than we do in the modern era. One good cultural marker is the Harvard Universal Classics, a collection of essential works of world literature, designed to offer the basic building blocks of a liberal education. Published in 1909, it selected works from twice as many Greeks (Homer, Herodotus, Plato, Epictetus, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes) as Romans (Virgil, Cicero, Marcus Aurelius, and Pliny the Younger). It also included Plutarch, who had a foot in both worlds. A similar project, Great Books of the Western World, which grew out of the University of Chicago in the 1940s, emphasizes the Greeks even more heavily, with four times as many of them as Romans.

But for the Revolutionary generation, Rome stood well in front of Athens, with the Greek world pushed to the background, seen sometimes as a bit obscure and impractical. "It is impossible to read in Thucydides, his account of the factions and confusions throughout all Greece, . . . without horror," John Adams wrote.

They did on occasion look with admiration on the Greeks, but when they did, it was more often toward Sparta than Athens.

They saw the Spartans as plainspoken, simple, free, and stable, while they disparaged the Athenians as turbulent, factionalized, and flighty. They knew that the Greek historian Polybius had criticized the people of Athens for being like a ship without a commander. "The history of Athens abounds with instances of the levity and inconstancy of that unsteady people," Edward Wortley Montagu warned in 1759. By contrast, John Dickinson, in his influential pre-Revolutionary *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, called the Spartans "as brave and as free a people as ever existed." John Adams reported that the two ancient republics he most admired were Sparta and Rome. His second cousin, the determined revolutionary Samuel Adams (Harvard, 1740), desired that their city of Boston would become a "Christian Sparta."

The founders' conception of ancient literature was also unlike ours. Here again, the Romans stood in the forefront. Sallust and Tacitus were their preferred historians. The Epicurean poet and philosopher Lucretius was far more popular then. Most of all, the Roman orator Cicero enjoyed a far higher profile in their world than he does in ours. His luster has faded in modern times, to the point where he is seen, if at all, as a kind of pompous ass. Not so in the eighteenth century. Edward Gibbon, that era's great chronicler of Rome's decline, recommended that any young scholar begin with "Cicero in Latin, and Xenophon in Greek." The hierarchy was different then; the founders refer to Cicero in their correspondence and diaries about five times as often as they do to Aristotle. The Roman's prominence was noted at the time by the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume, who observed in 1748 that, "The Fame of Cicero flourishes at present; but that of Aristotle is utterly decay'd." These preferences extended across national and cultural boundaries—the generation that made the French Revolution owned a remarkably similar bookshelf, with Cicero again in the lead.

The great Greek tragedians stood far in the background of the colonial view, with Jefferson as an exception, especially in his reading of Euripides. Appreciation of the Greek dramatists as major figures in world literature would come only in the nineteenth

century, spurred generally by the rise of Romanticism, and specifically by German academics and critics.

The sole ancient dramatist widely read in early America was not a Greek. Rather, it was Terence, a Roman comic playwright who is little read today. Thucydides also did not figure largely in their commentaries, although John Adams liked him. There were other exceptions to the general disregard for the Greeks. One whose reputation loomed larger at the time was the philosopher and military memoirist Xenophon. Adams, for example, saluted him as "my favourite author." Jefferson also was a fan.

Their attention to Rome was itself uneven, focused heavily on the demise of the Republic in the first century BC. Their readings ranged over more than a thousand years of ancient history, all the way from the *Iliad* to Justinian's *Codex*, but came back again and again to that crucial period of the decline of the Republic. That decades-long process of republican erosion provided their political context, their point of reference, and much of their civic language. "What gripped their minds, what they knew in detail, and what formed their view of the whole of the ancient world," the historian Bernard Bailyn concludes in his classic study of *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, "was the political history of Rome from the conquests in the east and the civil wars in the early first century BC to the establishment of the empire on the ruins of the republic at the end of the second century AD." It was not just their core narrative, it was their lodestar. Alexander Hamilton, for instance, flatly asserted in the thirty-fourth of the Federalist Papers that "the Roman Republic attained to the utmost height of human greatness."

And so they focused on just a few texts by a handful of key authors about the Roman Republic—Livy, Sallust, Plutarch, Tacitus, and, most of all, Cicero. Their heroes were the orators portrayed in those books defending the Republic, led by Cato and Cicero. Their villains were those who brought it down, especially Catiline and Julius Caesar. John Adams considered Caesar a destructive tyrant, the man who "made himself perpetual dictator."

This conception of the classical world seeped into the popular

culture of eighteenth-century America, as with that play about Cato. Two of the most influential English political commentators of the era, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, published their weekly essays under the title *Cato's Letters*. One of their major themes was the necessity of being skeptical of the exercise of state power. Their articles became central to the political debate in mid-century America, says Bailyn, who found in his study of the pamphlets of the time that they were "the most frequently cited authority on matters of principle and theory." In 1722 in one of those *Letters*, notes another historian, they "first gave unreserved endorsement to free speech as being indispensable to 'Liberty, Property, true Religion, Arts, Sciences, Learning, Knowledge.'" Later in life, Gordon went on to produce popular translations of Cicero and the historians Sallust and Tacitus.

The Colonial Colleges

WHO WERE THESE COLONIAL MEN, PROFICIENT IN THE LITERATURE OF late Republican Rome, who would go on to design and lead a new republic? They were an economic elite, but a new one. They were emphatically not products of a long-standing aristocracy. Of the ninety-nine men who would sign the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, only eight had fathers who themselves were college-educated.

The colleges they attended were hardly the sprawling factories of mass higher education we see today. Rather, they were tiny outposts of learning, having more in common with medieval seminaries. In the early eighteenth century, there were just three of them—William & Mary in Virginia, Harvard in Massachusetts, and Yale in Connecticut. In 1746 they were joined by the College of New Jersey, later known as Princeton, and then in 1754 by King's College, later known as Columbia, established by New Yorkers in conservative reaction to the radical politics of Princeton. Each had just a few score of students and a handful of faculty

members. Many of the students were in their late teens; many of their teachers were just a few years older. At William & Mary, Jefferson wrote, they lived in brick buildings, "rude, mis-shapen piles" that provided "an indifferent accommodation." Their academic diet consisted mainly of the best-known works of Latin literature, history, and philosophy, with some Greek works thrown in, usually for the more advanced students.

These campuses also could be surprisingly rowdy, with college life interrupted by riots that involved not just students but some of the younger, more outspoken faculty members. Many of those teaching were recent graduates of Scottish universities, educated there in the new skeptical, probing way of thinking coming out of Edinburgh and Glasgow. Jefferson and Madison were the most influenced by these young Scots, Adams somewhat, and Washington least. Even in Puritanical New England, Adams picked up the disruptive new attitudes about freedom of religion and expression emanating from this remarkable new generation of Scottish intellectuals. Here they developed their ideas of liberty, of freedom, and of the proper ("natural") relationship of government to man.

Where Classical Republicanism Went Wrong

FINALLY, AND CRUCIALLY, IT IS ESSENTIAL TO NOTE THAT THEIR CLASsical knowledge ultimately steered the founders wrong on three crucial issues:

- First, on whether the new nation could subsist on "public virtue," relying on the self-restraint of those in power to act for the common good and not their personal interest, a proposition that would be tested almost instantly during the War for Independence.
- Second, on party politics, which the classical writers taught them to regard as unnatural and abhorrent. Their misunderstanding of partisanship, or "faction," as they tended to call it, nearly wrecked the new republic in the 1790s.
- Third, and most troubling, was their acceptance of human bondage, which would prove disastrous to the nation they designed. Often seeing it a natural part of the social order, they wrote it into the fundamental law of the nation, and so sustained a system that was deeply inhumane and rested on a foundation of physical and sexual abuse, including torture.

On this last, it is vital to remember that, despite the Southern images of moonlight and magnolias, of gracious living and mint juleps on the porch, Washington, Jefferson, and Madison all came from what the historian Annette Gordon-Reed calls "a society built on and sustained by violence, actual and threatened." For example, one of the penalties an owner legally could impose on an enslaved person who ran away and then was captured was cutting off that person's toes. The Virginia planter Robert Carter reported that "I have cured many a Negro of running away by this means." Some punishments were explicitly designed to intensify pain, with those who were flogged sometimes then "pickled" with brine, to inject salt into their wounds. Six years before James Madison was born, his great-uncle burned a woman at the stake for attempting to poison her owner. Madison's own grandfather, Ambrose Madison, was supposedly murdered in 1732 with poison by three enslaved people. One of them, Pompey, from a neighboring estate, was executed. Some of George Washington's "famous false teeth," notes the historian Henry Wiencek, came from enslaved humans, and had been pulled from their living jaws. At Jefferson's Monticello, Wiencek adds, "A small boy being horsewhipped by a visitor was just part of the background of the bustling plantation scene." When Jefferson was president, he received a report from his son-in-law that the output in the plantation's lucrative nail-making shop had improved after "the small ones" working there, boys aged ten to twelve, had been whipped.

Americans, and especially Southerners, were fond of noting that both the Greeks and Romans embraced systems of slavery.

But in leaning on classical justifications, they neglected the fact that their system of slavery tended to be harsher than ancient forms. A particularly malign aspect of this was the racial justification for American slavery. The Greeks and Romans held that being enslaved was a matter of misfortune. The people they owned had a variety of colors and nationalities. "Roman slavery was a nonracist and fluid system where the places from which slaves came varied considerably from one period to another," concludes one historian. Roman slavery could be very cruel, but generally, states legal historian David Bederman, it was "not as harsh and exploitative as its modern analogues." Indeed, under Roman law, slaves had the right to petition the emperor for help against abusive owners, while freed slaves could become citizens and their offspring could hold public office.

In the New World, slavery became more pernicious, with those enslaved defined as less than human. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1857, in the Dred Scott decision, that black people, whether enslaved or free, were social outcasts who were not citizens and in fact could *never* become so. Chief Justice Roger Taney wrote that they were "beings of an inferior order" who "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." Because the founders failed to find a way to address the entire issue of race-based chattel slavery, less than a century later the nation they built would fracture into civil war and undergo a long and halting reconstruction that continues even today.