

Historiographical Conversations about the Backcountry: Politics

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In his study of the settlement of southside Virginia, *The Evolution of the Southern Backcountry*, Richard Beeman noted that Lunenburg County elected William Byrd III to the House of Burgesses during the early 1750s. On the face of things, this was a strange choice by voters on the southern colonial frontier. Byrd was hardly "representative" of Lunenburg's citizenry. He was the scion of one of Virginia's wealthiest planter families. They were a group of pioneers from a backwoods county. Byrd was not even a resident of Lunenburg. His only ties to the area were the few thousand acres of uncleared forest his family had acquired there. Byrd doubtless had little understanding of Lunenburgers or their problems.¹ Yet this seemingly odd relationship – voters selecting a representative from outside their class and community – no longer surprises historians. Scholars now see it as typical of early America's "deferential" society. In colonial America, they argue, the wealthy elite demanded political office. Raised in Europe's hierarchical societies, ordinary Americans quietly ceded power to this native aristocracy. Believing they needed upper class representation, Lunenburg County's voters surrendered their political voice to the most eminent man available, despite his tenuous interest in their community.²

The study of deference has transformed the way we think about the origins of American politics. Charles Sydnor's seminal 1952 volume, *Gentleman Freeholders: Political Practices in Washington's Virginia*, stripped away the veneer of enlightened liberalism historians had applied to the Old Dominion's revolutionary gentry. Sydnor described the contempt most planter-politicians had for ordinary voters, and detailed their attempts to escape the compromises to gentility demanded by electioneering.³ But he noted that despite the elite's hostility to popular democracy, voters continued to elect members of the upper classes. Throughout the colonies, historians have found too much voter apathy, too many uncontested elections and secure, self-confident aristocrats to describe it all as a bumptious popular democracy. The politics of the nineteenth-century United States required a major

1. Richard S. Beeman, *The Evolution of the Southern Backcountry: A Case Study of Lunenburg County, Virginia, 1746-1832*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 51.

2. For a definition of social and political deference in the English-speaking world, see J.G.A. Pocock, "The Classical Theory of Deference," *American Historical Review*, 81 (1976), 516-524. For a review of early work on deference in colonial America, see John B. Kirby, "Early American Politics – The Search for Ideology: An Historiographical Analysis and Critique of the Concept of 'Deference'," *Journal of Politics*, 32 (1970), 803-838. The classic treatments of the subject are contained in Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 124-139, and in Richard R. Beeman, "Deference, Republicanism, and the Emergence of Popular Politics in Eighteenth-Century America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 49 (1992), 401-430.

3. Charles S. Sydnor, *American Revolutionaries in the Making: Political Practices in Washington's Virginia*, (New York: Free Press, 1952).

shift in the nation's culture.⁴

The society and politics of the southern backcountry are a problem for the deferential model of colonial politics, though. Lunenburg's dutiful William Byrd III was hardly typical of the region. When George Washington took command of Virginia's frontier defenses during the Seven Years' War, he received little deference. While "the King's commission," the young militia colonel held might have commanded obedience in the tidewater, settlers in the northern Shenandoah Valley were unimpressed. George reported back to Williamsburg that his "authority extends no further than the tip of my sword," and that the locals were threatening "to blow out my brains."⁵ By the 1760s and 1770s, the inhabitants of the southern backcountry went from impudence into full-blown civil insurrection. Colonial elites met uprisings like the Paxton march and the Carolina Regulations with aristocratic contempt, demanding that backwoods rioters recognize their social inferiority and leave political matters to their betters. Yet frontiersmen were hardly cowed by these demands, and replied by hurling verbal abuse and physical violence at the civil authorities. During the North Carolina Regulation, colonial official Edmund Fanning condescendingly advised protesting farmers to "make themselves the deserving objects, of the legislative notice, by immediately dispersing to their several habitations by behaving themselves in an orderly and peaceable manner, and by paying a due and proper Obedience to the Laws." They responded, not by doffing their caps and slinking back to their cabins, but by beating Fanning and dragging him through the streets of Hillsborough.⁶

Scholars have offered several explanations for the southern backcountry's undeferential culture. Frederick Jackson Turner, of course, argued that the colonial frontier was the seed bed of democracy. No one should be surprised by the breakdown of aristocratic government in the west, Turner argued, since the rugged life on the frontier bred in pioneers an individualism that balked at external authority. The backcountry rebellion against eastern aristocrats led in time to the removal of property qualifications for the franchise. Turner's environmental explanation for frontier radicalism has lost favor in recent decades. But many historians still draw a straight line between resistance in the colonial backcountry, the American Revolution, Jeffersonian Republicanism and Jacksonian Democracy.⁷

Some specialists in the southern backcountry have abandoned frontier nature as a cause in favor of an argument from Scots-Irish nurture. Unlike the English seaboard communities, the lands along the Great Wagon Road were settled by a motley crowd, with

4. For the latest synthetic statement, see Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), esp. xvii-xxiii.

5. Quoted in Warren Hofstra, "'A Parcel of Barbarian's and an Uncooth Set of People': Settlers and Settlements of the Shenandoah Valley," in Hofstra, ed., *George Washington and the Virginia Backcountry*, (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1998), 89.

6. Edmund Fanning, "Advertisement," 1 May 1768, in William Saunders, ed., *The Colonial Records of North Carolina*, (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 739-40. Alison Olson, "The Pamphlet War over the Paxton Boys," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 123 (1999), 31-55, gives some attention to issues of aristocracy and deference during the Paxton controversy.

7. Frederick Jackson Turner, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," and Other Essays*, (New York: H.H. Holt, 1994), 81-85.

Scots-Irish Ulstermen predominant. Several historians, particularly David Hackett Fischer in his monumental work, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*, have asserted that the inherited culture of these settlers defined the frontier in opposition to the coast. Supposedly, the Scots-Irish were a particularly rowdy, violent crew, hardened in their anti-authoritarian attitudes by centuries on the remote, primitive borderlands of Britain. They brought these attitudes to their American settlements, and kept refusing to defer to English authorities to whom they had never deferred before.⁸

It is also possible that the backcountry became less deferential as it participated in the broader "Americanization" of colonial society. According to Jon Butler, the spread of liberal ideas associated with economic development and social diversity led to a collapse of deference before the Revolution.⁹ In fact, it has been suggested that historians should simply scrap deference as an explanatory model. Recently, Michael Zuckerman has provided evidence that many ordinary colonists aggressively asserted their own self-worth. Certainly, by the latter half of the eighteenth century, the Atlantic ports contained enough impudent apprentices, rioting laborers, and articulate, self-assured artisan-citizens to suggest that any collapse of colonial deference was not unique to the back settlements. We need to consider the frontier freeholders who elected William Byrd III before ignoring deference in the southern backcountry, though. Indeed, Lunenburgers did not shake off political deference as the Revolution approached. In 1769, the county's voters elected Virginia Attorney General John Randolph, another non-resident grandee, to represent them in Williamsburg. Other colonial historians have been reluctant to accept Zuckerman's argument, and the questions risks being trapped in a sterile debate. The search for deference and egalitarianism in colonial America forces us to conclude: sometimes commoners deferred to the elite, sometimes they did not.¹⁰

8. David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways In North America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), esp. 642-650, 765-782. The focus on ethnicity was first popularized by Carl Bridenbaugh, in *Myths and Realities: Societies of the Colonial South*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1952), esp. 131-134. The major general history of the Scots-Irish in James G. Leyburn, *The Scots-Irish: A Social History*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1962). Other works include R.J. Dickson, *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America, 1718-1775*, (London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1966). More recently, Kevin L. Yeager's dissertation, "The Power of Ethnicity: The Preservation of Scots-Irish Culture in the Eighteenth-Century American Backcountry," (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 2000), insists on the long-term vitality and importance of Scots-Irish ethnicity, including in the political realm. In contrast, Patrick Griffin argues that Scots-Irish distinctiveness, particularly religious, quickly dissipated. See Griffin, "The People with No Name: Ulster's Migrants and Identity Formation in Eighteenth-Century Pennsylvania," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 58 (2001): 587-614.

9. Jon Butler, *Becoming America: The Revolution before 1776*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), esp. 89-130. See also, Joyce Appleby, "Liberalism and the American Revolution," *New England Quarterly*, 49 (1976), 3-26. Roger Ekirch argues, in part, that the diversity and interest-group politics of the backcountry made it essentially modern. See Ekirch 'Poor Carolina: Politics and Society in Colonial North Carolina, 1729-1776,' (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 215-220. For a similar perspective that attributes more staying power to a nonetheless declining culture of political deference, see Beeman, "Deference, Republicanism, and the Emergence of Popular Politics."

10. Beeman, *Evolution of the Southern Backcountry*, 124. For a sampling of Michael Zuckerman's work, see "Endangered Deference, Imperiled Patriarchy: Tales from the Marchlands," *Early American Studies*, 3 (2005): 232-252, and "Tocqueville, Turner, and Turds: Four Stories of Manners in Early

Scholars have begun explaining those choices with a more subtle understanding of the place of deference in early American political life. Recently, Beeman and Gregory Nobles have suggested we look at deference as a cultural tool used by many parties in the ongoing negotiation of power relations. For settlers on the southern frontier, deference was less a matter of political psychology than practical necessity. Ordinary men needed elite patronage. Struggling for security, wealth, and social mobility, they were hampered by their poverty, lack of education and experience, or distance from the centers of power. Only members of the upper classes were able to bring outside resources into frontier communities. Such men expected power and status in return. A poor or middling man's pleas for credit, land, military support, legal and legislative assistance, petty local office, and the like, had to be accompanied by pledges of votes, armed support in times of civil strife, and social and economic subordination. Would-be patricians promoted the culture of deference to cement the allegiance of their subordinates. If ordinary men wanted the patronage of the elites, they were expected to offer their support cloaked in deference, acknowledging their betters' just claim on them. But backcountry settlers never saw deference as a matter of social obligation. They rarely questioned that the wealthy and powerful should lead, but their offers of deference carried a demand for noblesse oblige. Ordinary men expected their leaders to use their power to serve the community's interests. Would-be aristocrats who failed to deliver found themselves challenged by competitors for elite status. Worse, their erstwhile clients among settlers felt free to switch allegiance. If the upper class as a whole failed in what the masses saw as the aristocracy's duty, ordinary farmers turned to a long European tradition of extra-legal, but rarely revolutionary, violence.¹¹

Backcountry politics were intensely local, defined by the personal, face-to-face relations men had with their families and communities. A man's essential political acts were to give his loyalty to a local patron and to acquire and discipline subordinates (tenants, debtors, wives and children, servants, slaves, etc.). Before the Revolution, backcountry settlers were slow to see the solution to their problems in democratic politics. Instead, they kept up their expectations of the customary obligations and prerogatives of leadership. Scholars still find it difficult to challenge Carl Bridenbaugh's assertion that the colonial southern backcountry "had not as yet enunciated or even adumbrated a theory of American

America," *Journal of American History*, 85 (1998): 13-42. For recent critiques, see John M. Murrin, "In the Land of the Free and the Home of the Slave, Maybe there Was Even Room for Deference,": *Journal of American History*, 85 (1998), 86-91, and Simon Middleton, "Deference and Class: A Comment on Michael Zuckerman, Gregory Nobles, and John Smolenski," *Early American Studies*, 3 (2005), 303-310.

11. Richard R. Beeman, "The Varieties of Deference in Eighteenth-Century America," *Early American Studies*, 3 (2005), 311-340, and Gregory Nobles, "A Class Act: Redefining Deference in Early American History," *Early American Studies*, 3 (2005), 286-302. For a clear, brief discussion of the links between economic dependence and political deference, see Rachel Klein, *Unification of a Slave State: The Rise of the Planter Class in the South Carolina Back Country, 1760-1808*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 84-89. Jack Greene's classic essay, "Independence, Improvement, and Authority: Toward a Framework of Understanding the *Histories* of the Southern Backcountry during the Era of the American Revolution," Ronald Hoffman, Thad Tate, and Peter Albert, eds., *An Uncivil War: The Southern Backcountry during the American Revolution*, (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia for the United States Capitol Historical Society, 1985), 3-36, remains a subtle treatment of the conflicted relationship between ambition and authority on the southern frontier.

democracy.”¹² The southern backcountry’s resistance to the colonial establishment was aimed more at the shortcomings of its political elite than at the broader idea of deference to an aristocracy. In the southern backcountry, the failures of that elite were frequent and wide-ranging. In the first place, frontier big men lacked the bearing and background to command deference. Euro-Americans expected to defer to aristocrats – men of wealth, education, and distinction inherited through long lineages. Instead, the backwoods lawyers, store owners, and surveyors-for-hire who made up the frontier gentry were men on the make, little removed from those they hoped to lead. Too many of their neighbors knew exactly from where their fortunes had come. Worse, those fortunes were built on shaky foundations of speculation and credit. Every market downturn saw them go bankrupt, or else hunt down their own debtors in a ruthless attempt to stay afloat – breaking the bond of care and obligation supposed to exist between lordly patron and deferential client. Even men who possessed wealth, status, and influence at the colonial level failed to measure up. Royal governors were career army officers, the younger sons of younger sons. Great men of the colonial assemblies were shady land-jobbers and puffed-up gentry perched atop a mountain of speculative debt.¹³

Backcountry settlers also expected their leaders to get outside assistance to help them settle and acquire property. But the frontier elite often lacked the influence to do so. The eastern leaders of most colonies feared the dangers and expense of westward expansion. Despite the appeals of frontier leaders, they were slow to supply the backcountry with military security, local government, tax monies, and land. Part of their caution came from the coastal gentry’s alienation from the big men of the backcountry. As they pushed south through the Appalachian valleys, the diverse crowd of backcountry migrants ran up against the political systems established by coastal settlers a century or more before. Without cultural and familial ties to colonial elites, backcountry leaders struggled to win their trust and assistance – an estrangement embodied by the distinction old Virginians drew between eastern “Tuckahoes” and the alien “Cohees” west of the Blue Ridge. Of course, all colonial

12. Bridenbaugh, *Myths and Realities*, 195. Warren R. Hofstra makes this point for the Valley of Virginia, in “The Virginia Backcountry in the Eighteenth Century: The Question of Origins and the Issue of Outcomes,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 101 (1993), 485-508. Albert Tillson was more aggressive in pursuing a pre-Revolutionary backcountry political culture, but wound up vaguely, but revealingly, explaining the refusal to offer deference as the product of a “localistic, popular political culture.” Tillson, *Gentry and Common Folk: Political Culture on a Virginia Frontier, 1740-1790*, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 45-63, quote on 45.

13. A brief, but classic, explanation of the problems the backcountry elite had in commanding deference can be found in Ekirch, ‘*Poor Carolina*’, 168-175. David Jordan has an excellent piece outlining the problem for the early settlements in coastal Maryland, “Political Stability and the Emergence of a Native Elite in Maryland,” in Thad Tate and David Ammerman, eds., *The Chesapeake in the Seventeenth Century: Essays on Anglo-American Society*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), 243-273. For examples from the southern backcountry of the low status of public officials, see, Alan Watson, “The Constable in Colonial North Carolina,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, 68 (1991), 1-16. For the less distinguished backgrounds of backcountry politicians after the Revolution, see Klein, *Unification of a Slave State*, 153-157. A classic biographical study highlighting the weakness of the claims of the American elite to aristocratic status is Alan Taylor’s *William Cooper’s Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). These works go a long way toward revising Bridenbaugh’s positive assessment of the aristocratic attributes of the backcountry elite, although he did concede that they were very much men-on-the-make, *Myths and Realities*, 136, 170-172.

leaders lacked influence in London, a circumstance that hit especially hard in the west. Whether the 1763 Proclamation Line, or the closing of the Granville District land office, or the appointment of John Stuart as an independent, often unsympathetic Indian agent for the southern colonies – all revealed the American political class's inability to rule the backcountry.¹⁴

In the end, colonial aristocrats could not meet the expectations of deference in the southern backcountry. The scholarly debate over the North Carolina Regulation reveals both the role of deference in frontier political culture, and the failures of elite leadership in the region. For years, historians have been debating the Regulator movement's political and social ideology. James Whittenburg proposed that their vocal contempt for the colony's lawyers and merchants was evidence of an "agrarian" outlook. Roger Ekirch countered by highlighting the Regulators' attacks on official corruption, arguing they were motivated by an old "Whig" tradition of resistance to creeping government tyranny. Marxist scholar Marvin Michael Kay contended that Regulators' scorn for the wealth and privilege of enemies like Edmund Fanning represented straight-forward class conflict.¹⁵ Yet when the Regulators wanted to disparage Fanning, they sang a ditty mocking the "poverty" of his claim to aristocratic status:

When Fanning first to Orange came,
He looked both pale and wan,
An old patched coat upon his back
An old mare he rode on

14. Richard Maxwell Brown introduced this interpretation in his study of the South Carolina Regulation, noting that lack of lowcountry support for civil order in the backcountry stemmed more from ignorance and political weakness than selfish malice. See Brown, The South Carolina Regulators: The Story of the First American Vigilante Movement, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1963). His interpretation has recently been backed by George Lloyd Johnson, The Frontier in the Colonial South: the South Carolina Backcountry, 1736-1800, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997). For other work on weak eastern support for the frontier, see, for example, Leslie Hall, Land and Allegiance in Revolutionary Georgia, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 13-15, John R. Maass, "'All this Poor Province Could Do': North Carolina and the Seven Years' War, 1757-1762," North Carolina Historian Review, 79 (2002), 50-89, James Haw, "Political Representation in South Carolina, 1669-1794: Evolution of a Lowcountry Tradition," South Carolina Historical Magazine, 103 (2002), 106-129, Frank Porter, "From Backcountry to County: The Delayed Settlement of Western Maryland," Maryland Historical Magazine, 70 (1975), 329-349, or Robert Oaks, "The Impact of British Western Policy on the Coming of the American Revolution in Pennsylvania," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, 101 (1977), 171-189. For the ethnic interpretation of the alienation of the backcountry's leadership, see Albert Tillson, "The Southern Backcountry: A Survey of Current Research," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, 98 (1990), 387-422, and Charles Dutrizac, "Local Identity and Authority in a Disputed Hinterland: The Pennsylvania-Maryland Border in the 1730s," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, 115 (1991), 35-61. Carl Bridenbaugh makes the point about the Scots-Irish elite's alienation from eastern, English authorities in Myths and Realities, 133-134.

15. James P. Whittenburg, "Planters, Merchants, and Lawyers: Social Change and the Origins of the North Carolina Regulation," William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd ser., 34 (1977), 215-238, A. Roger Ekirch, 'Poor Carolina', Marvin L. Michael Kay, "The North Carolina Regulation, 1766-1776: A Class Conflict," in Alfred Young, ed., The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism, (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), 71-123.

Both man and mare wa'nt worth five pounds
As I've been often told
But by his civil robberies
He's laced his coat with gold.¹⁶

By the same token, the Regulators' hatred of lawyers and merchants, their political corruption and their over-aggressive pursuit of wealth, looked backward toward an idealized "moral economy" led by responsible gentlemen.¹⁷ During the Revolution, many ex-Regulators showed their displeasure with the North Carolina elite by retreating into another form of deference, Loyalism.¹⁸ Despite the Turnerian tradition, recent researchers have had difficulty linking the western uprisings to revolutionary fervor, particularly south of Pennsylvania.¹⁹ Instead, loyalism, patriotism, and neutrality all found adherents among frontier settlers, and deference seems to have been the main reason people in the backcountry had for their choices about American independence. During the crisis, common men turned to their patrons, followed their decisions and left the southern backcountry a crazy quilt of familial and personal loyalties that soon degenerated into anarchic violence.²⁰

Virginia was the great exception to the chaos of the Revolutionary backcountry, of

16. Arthur Palmer Hudson, "Songs of the North Carolina Regulators," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., 4 (Oct., 1947), 477. It is a revealing lyric, quoted both by Bridenbaugh and Ekirch.

17. Work on the American "moral economy" is very extensive, although not without challengers. See, for instance, Christopher Clark, "Economics and Culture: Opening Up the Rural History of the Early American Northeast," *American Quarterly*, 43 (1991), 279-301. All draw on the classic work of E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), 76-136.

18. Robert Calhoun, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America, 1760-1781*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1973), 442-445. See also Ekirch, "Poor Carolina", 209-211.

19. Most of the work on frontier political ideology focuses on the post-Revolutionary period, particularly Saul Cornell, "Aristocracy Assailed: The Ideology of Backcountry Anti-Federalism," *Journal of American History*, 76 (1990), 1148-1172, Klein, *Unification of a Slave State*, 149-177, and Andrew Cayton, *Frontier Republic: Ideology and Politics in the Ohio Country, 1780-1825*, (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1989). The temptation to make the link between post-Revolutionary class politics with pre-Revolutionary backcountry uprisings remains tempting – see, for instance, Robert E. Shalhope, "South Carolina in the Founding Era: A Localist Perspective," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 89 (1988): 102-113, and studies of North Carolina Regulator leader Herman Husband's reappearance during the Whiskey Rebellion, see Mark H. Jones, "Herman Husband: Millenarian, Carolina Regulator, and Whiskey Rebel," (Ph.D. diss., Northern Illinois University, 1983). The Revolution remains a distinct problem for such an approach, though.

20. Some other in-depth pieces on the politics of frontier loyalism include Albert Tillson, "The Localist Roots of Backcountry Loyalism: An Examination of Popular Political Culture in Virginia's New River Valley," *Journal of Southern History*, 54 (1988), 387-404, Tillson, *Gentry and Common Folk*, 101-116, Peter Moore, "The Local Origins of Allegiance in Revolutionary South Carolina: The Waxhaws as a Case Study," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 107 (2006), 26-41, or the larger work of Rachel Klein on backcountry South Carolina, *Unification of a Slave State*, 78-99.

course. But the Old Dominion was also exceptional in having an elite that gave vigorous leadership to an expanding frontier. The Virginia gentry were confident they could reproduce their rule in the west, and enrich themselves through land speculation while doing it. The great men of the colony provided military support to frontier campaigns aimed at seizing Indian lands. Once they had driven off the native population, Virginia's burgesses quickly extended county government into the backcountry, staffing it with justices, sheriffs, and surveyors drawn from their own families. Once across the Blue Ridge, these young men overcame any prejudice they might have felt toward the Cohees, and made alliances with prominent settler families. The end result was a largely peaceful and loyal backcountry, with the exception of some grumbling war-weariness. It was a victory won more by the aggressive leadership of the Virginia gentry than by any democratic tendencies on their part.²¹

Yet looking to the future of political history in the southern colonial backcountry, the shadow of Turner's attempt to find a democratic ideology in backcountry resistance still stretches out in front of us. Backcountry historians have started analyzing the political implications of the distinctive religion of the colonial frontier. While the upper classes established conservative, hierarchical churches along the Atlantic coast, backwoods settlements were home to a diverse array of dissenters. Religious historians have argued that America's distinctive brand of evangelical Christianity grew in this hothouse of pious radicalism. Evangelicals professed a faith that gave the spiritual experiences of ordinary people authority over the education and status of the professional clergy. Having freed themselves from established churches, some have gone on to argue, backwoods evangelicals rejected the political establishment, as well, drawing emotional strength and a fiery rhetoric from their preachers. This argument undergirds the most recent study of the North Carolina Regulation, Marjoleine Kars' *Breaking Loose Together*, in which she concluded that many

21. An argument originally made by Bridenbaugh, *Myths and Realities*, 156-157, but greatly expanded by L. Scott Philyaw, *Virginia's Western Visions: Political and Cultural Expansion on an Early American Frontier*, (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2005). Philyaw's argument that early Virginia expansion was driven by a confident gentry challenges some earlier, differing interpretations. See, for instance, Patricia Watlington, "Discontent in Frontier Kentucky," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 65 (1977), 77-93, Warren Hofstra, "'The Extension of His Majesties Dominions': The Virginia Backcountry and the Reconfiguration of Imperial Frontiers," *Journal of American History*, 84 (1988), 1281-1312, or Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves & the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1999), esp. ch. 1. Albert Tillson argues that popular opposition to the local elite was widespread in backcountry Virginia, but accepts that personal ties linking the frontier and eastern gentries in Virginia fostered a similar social and political outlook and cemented their power over the frontier – see *Gentry and Common Folk*, esp. 20-44, 64-77. For an excellent local study of the aggressive control of westward expansion by the Virginia gentry, see N. Turk McCleskey, "Rich Lands, Poor Prospects: Real Estate and the Formation of a Social Elite in Augusta County, Virginia, 1738-1770," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 98 (1990): 449-486. For the best study of the expansion of gentry families into the Virginia backcountry, see Gail S. Terry, "Family Empires: A Frontier Elite in Virginia and Kentucky, 1740-1815," (Ph.D. diss., The College of William and Mary, 1992). For the limited instances of resistance to the revolutionary movement in the Virginia backcountry, see Emory Evans, "Trouble in the Backcountry: Disaffection in Southwest Virginia during the American Revolution," in Hoffman, Tate, and Albert, eds., *An Uncivil War*, 179-212, and Philip Ranlet, "Did Revolutionary-Era Farmers Avoid the Draft? The Situation in Virginia and Western Pennsylvania," *Continuity*, 22 (1998), 77-94.

of the movement's participants believed "God-fearing people had a religious duty to stand up against an unjust government at home."²² But studies of the origins of southern evangelical Christianity caution against crediting eighteenth-century evangelicals with too much influence, however dramatic and democratic their rhetoric and ideology might have been. Converts were small in number until well after the Revolution, and their culture intensely congregational. Any consensus finding evangelical religion at the root of backcountry resistance seems open to question.²³

If there is a distinctively backcountry politics to be found before the Revolution, settlers' long wars with Native Americans doubtless played a prominent role. A recent flurry of studies has analyzed several aspects of the collapse of the interracial society of backcountry Pennsylvania during the Seven Years' War.²⁴ Many of the people who settled the pre-Revolutionary southern backcountry brought memories of that conflict, adding them to recollections of the devastating Cherokee wars of 1760-1761. The role of Native American relations in shaping backcountry political culture in the years before the Revolution remains an interesting question. Recent studies of the early South have started placing Indian relations back at the center of political life. Frontier residents themselves quickly turned the Revolution into an Indian war, and won support from the governments of both Virginia and South Carolina. More work on the colonial roots of backcountry race hatred, and that animosity's integration with frontier politics, would be welcome. Native

22. Much of the recent work on the importance of evangelical religion to backcountry politics builds on Alan Taylor, Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier, 1760-1820, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1990), esp. 123-153, as well as Rhys Isaac, The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1984), esp. ch. 11. The theme has been taken up particularly by students of the North Carolina Regulation. See, for example, Andrew C. Denson, "Diversity, Religion, and the North Carolina Regulators," *North Carolina Historical Review*, 72 (1995), 30-53, Alfred C. McCall, "Serving God and Country: Presbyterian Leadership in Civic Affairs in North Carolina, 1750-1800," Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1996, and Marjoleine Kars, Breaking Loose Together: The Regulator Rebellion in Pre-Revolutionary North Carolina, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), esp. 76-129, quote on page 76. Interestingly, Turner presaged these arguments linking backcountry religion to political democracy. See Turner, Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner, 151.

23. The best recent synthesis of work on the limited influence of evangelical Christianity in the early South is Christine Leigh Heyrman, Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), see especially pp. 5-13, 261-266. See also Patricia Bonomi and Peter Eisenstadt, "Church Adherence in the Eighteenth Century British American Colonies," William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd ser., 39 (1982), 245-286. Robert Calhoun's Evangelicals and Conservatives in the Early South, 1740-1861, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988) offers a nuanced study that complicates the straight line some have drawn between southern evangelicalism and frontier democracy.

24. See especially, Matthew Ward, Breaking the Backcountry: The Seven Years' War in Virginia and Pennsylvania, 1754-1765, (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 2004), Jane Merritt, At the Crossroads: Indians & Empires on a Mid-Atlantic Frontier, 1700-1763, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2003), William Pencak and Daniel Richter, eds., Friends and Enemies in Penn's Woods: Indians, Colonists, and the Racial Construction of Pennsylvania, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

Americans can also be integrated into political history more directly – despite our tendency to view the frontier as a civilizational or cultural clash. Despite their growing belief that their races, cultures, and economies were irreconcilable, backcountry settlers and Native Americans were surprisingly familiar with one another, and with the political issues in one another's communities. Further studies of how leaders on both sides of the frontier mixed red and white politics to their own advantage are needed.²⁵

Indeed, closer analysis of backcountry leadership itself may help us find that narrative of frontier political life across the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Too often in recent years, biographical studies of backcountry big men like Joseph Martin, Griffith Rutherford, Alexander Campbell, William Preston, and the like, have been left to local historians. Yet some very revealing work on backcountry politics has followed the careers of such men. Their lifelong struggle to overcome their limitations and establish themselves as a frontier elite must point to what is unique about the politics of the southern colonial backcountry. Which paths did they try to follow to wealth and power in the backcountry? Were they as successful as their eastern models? How did they win (or lose) the support of local clients and colonial patrons in a newly-settled region? How did they use the upheavals in the late eighteenth-century backcountry – the colonial uprisings, the Revolution, the Indian wars and the rise of Jeffersonian republicanism – to acquire power and status? And how did ordinary settlers use their leaders' fight to become a frontier elite to their own advantage? The study of the complex interplay of deference and defiance in the southern colonial backcountry is far from played out.²⁶

25. An excellent recent exploration of some of the possibilities in pursuing this angle is Joshua Piker, "Colonists and Creeks: Rethinking the Revolutionary Southern Backcountry," *Journal of Southern History*, 70 (2004): 503-540. Tom Hatley's study of South Carolina, *The Dividing Paths: Cherokees and South Carolinians through the Revolutionary Era*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), moves beyond the Indian diplomacy of colonial and state officials to consider the broader political and social scene. An interesting briefer example is Gregory Dowd, "The Panic of 1751: The Significance of Rumors on the South Carolina Cherokee Frontier," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 53 (1996), 527-561.

26. The classic study of this type, although still rather Turnerian in its treatment of frontier leadership, is Allan Galloway's, *The Formation of a Planter Elite: Jonathan Bryan and the Southern Colonial Frontier*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989). See also, Edward Cashin, *Colonial Augusta: Key of the Indian Country*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), esp. pp. 29-56. A more complex example is Carol S. Ebel, "First Men: Changing Patterns of Leadership on the Virginia and Georgia Frontiers, 1642-1815," (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1996).