

## 5-1 How Historical Interpretations Change

### Interpreting the American Revolution

How did historians move from the methods and conclusions reached by Parson Weems to the modern works that exist today?

The following five passages introduce you to different interpretations of the American Revolution and the formation of the early American republic.

Using context clues from the passage, identify the interpretation that best describes the passage. As you connect the passage and the historian to the interpretation, consider how the times in which these historians lived affected their interpretation of the past.

Passage 1: Read the passage and select the correct interpretation below.

“From a thorough reconsideration of the Philadelphia Convention, however the following facts emerge. Fully a fourth of the delegates in the convention had voted in their state legislatures for paper-money and /or debtor-relief laws. These were the very kinds of laws which, according to Beard’s thesis, the delegates had convened to prevent. Another fourth of the delegates had important economic interests that were adversely affected, directly and immediately, by the Constitution they helped write. The most common and by far the most important property holdings of the delegates were not, as Beard has asserted, mercantile, manufacturing, and public security investments, but agricultural property. Finally, it is abundantly evident that the delegates, once inside the Convention, behaved as anything but a consolidated economic group.

In the light of these and other facts presented in the foregoing chapters, it is impossible to justify Beard’s interpretation of the Constitution as ‘an economic document’ drawn by a ‘consolidated economic group whose property interests were immediately at stake.’”

-Forrest McDonald, *We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution* (1958)

**Whig Interpretation:** This interpretation of the American Revolution enjoyed popularity throughout the nineteenth century. Whig historians wrote histories of great men and events, and they described the American Revolution as a unified movement with purely democratic motivations that was destined by a greater power to overcome Great Britain.

**Progressive Interpretation:** This interpretation emerged during the Progressive Era, when reformer sought to address the social and economic issues of the late 1800s and the early 1900s. Historians who developed this interpretation examined social and economic divisions during the American Revolution, and paid particular attention to the economic motivations behind the Founders’ actions.

**Consensus Interpretation:** This interpretation came into vogue following WWII and developed during the Cold War Era. Historians who held to this interpretation challenged Progressive historians by focusing on consensus, not divisions.

**Neo-Progressive Interpretation:** This interpretation developed as the Civil Rights Era produced social and political change. Historians who embraced this interpretation focused on the lives of everyday individuals.

**Neo-Whig Interpretation:** The Neo-Whig Interpretation existed at the same time as the Consensus and Neo-Progressive interpretations. Neo-Whigs were interested in how ideology impacted and drove decisions during the American Revolution.

**Correct Answer:** Consensus Interpretation: The Consensus Interpretation directly challenged the Progressive Historians like Beard who focused on class divisions. The Consensus historians focused on the commonality of experience. This excerpt argues that many convention delegates voted against their economic interests out of a spirit of unity. The framers of the Constitution, according to this interpretation, did not vote as an economic bloc.

Passage 2: Read the passage and select the correct interpretation below.

“The hour of the American Revolution was come. The people of the continent with irresistible energy obeyed one general impulse, as the earth in spring listens to the command of nature, and without the appearance of efforts bursts forth to life in perfect harmony. The Change which Divine wisdom ordained, and which no human policy or force could hold back, proceeded as uniformly and as majestically as the laws of being, and was as certain as the decrees of eternity. The movement was quickened, even when it was most resisted; and its fiercest adversaries worked together effectually for its fulfillment. The indestructible elements of freedom in the colonies asked room for expansion and growth. Standing in the manifold relations with the governments, the culture, and the experience of the past, the Americans seized as their peculiar inheritance the traditions of liberty. Beyond any other nation they had made trial of the possible forms of popular representation and respected the activity of individual conscience and thought. The resources of the vast country in agriculture and commerce, forests and fisheries, mines and materials for manufacturers, were so diversified and complete, that their development could neither be guided nor circumscribed by a government beyond the ocean; the numbers, purity, culture, industry, and daring of its inhabitants proclaimed the existence of a people, rich in creative energy, and ripe for institutions of their own.”

- George Bancroft, History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent (1854-1878)

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**Correct Answer:** Whig Interpretation

The Whig Interpretation focused on destiny and the unifying nature of great events like the American Revolution. In this excerpt, Bancroft emphasizes the divine nature of the American victory in the Revolution and the monolithic nature of the rebellious colonists.

Passage 3: Read the passage and select the correct interpretation below.

“Study of the pamphlets confirmed my rather old-fashioned view that the American Revolution was above all else and ideological, constitutional, political struggle and not primarily a controversy between social groups undertaken to force changes in the organization of the society or the economy. It confirmed too my belief that intellectual developments in the decade before Independence led to a radical idealization and conceptualization of the previous century and a half of American experience, and that it was this intimate relationship between Revolution though and the circumstances of life in eighteenth-century America that endowed the Revolution with its peculiar force and made it so profoundly a transforming event.”

-Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967)

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**Correct Answer:** Neo-Whig Interpretation

The Neo-Whig Interpretation was concerned with the effects of ideology on historical events. In this excerpt, Bailyn argued that “the American Revolution was above all else an ideological, constitutional, political struggle and not primarily a controversy between social groups...”

Passage 4: Read the passage and select the correct interpretation below.

“Suppose, on the other hand, that substantially all of the merchants, money lenders, security holders, manufacturers, shippers, capitalists, and financiers and their professional associates are to be found on one side in support of the Constitution and that substantially all of the major portion of the opposition came from the non-slaveholding farmers and the debtors – would it not be pretty conclusively demonstrated that our fundamental law was not the product of an abstraction known as “the whole people,” but of a group of economic interests which must have expected beneficial results from its adoption? Obviously all the facts here desired cannot be discovered, but the data presented in the follow chapters bear out the latter hypothesis, and thus a reasonable presumption in favor of the theory is created.”

- Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913)

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**Correct Answer:** Progressive Interpretation

This excerpt establishes a divide between “the merchants, money lenders, security holders, manufacturers, shippers, capitalists, and financiers” and “the non-slaveholding farmers and the debtors.” A historical interpretation based on class differences is a characteristic of the Progressive historians.

**Passage 5: Read the passage and select the correct interpretation below.**

“Much of this book is about the people occupying the lower levels of urban society, who frequently suffered the unequal effects of eighteenth-century change. This focus reflects my conviction that the best way of measuring the success of any society is not to examine the attainments and accumulation of those at the top but to assay the quality of life for those at the bottom. If this appears to be the approach of a utopian socialist, it was also the notion of an eighteenth century English aristocrat whose essay circulated in Boston. ‘Every Nation,’ wrote Sir Richard Cox, ‘has the Reputation of being rich or poor from the Condition of the lowest Class of its Inhabitants.’”

- Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution* (1979)

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**Correct Answer:** The Neo-Progressive Interpretation was concerned with the lives of everyday people. In this excerpt, Nash argues that “the best way of measuring the success of any society is not to examine the attainments and accumulation of those at the top but to assay the quality of life for those at the bottom.”