

# Timely volume takes a good look at Founding Fathers and slavery

## SLAVERY, PROPAGANDA, AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

By Patricia Bradley  
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Reviewed by Robert Gregg

In light of recent revelations supporting the likelihood of intimate relations between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings and the spectacle of Jefferson scholars being forced by DNA testing results to acknowledge the strong possibility, according to the journal *Nature*, that an American president had a child with his slave, Patricia Bradley presents us with a timely volume.

*Slavery, Propaganda, and the American Revolution* reminds us that we need to widen our consideration of questions about the Founding Fathers' relationship to slavery beyond their sexual dealings, to consider how, in the context of slavery, they came to their understanding of the meaning of liberty.

Historians have long recognized that the desire for freedom among colonists owed a great deal to their acute awareness of the nature of slavery. But, in part because of Edmund Morgan's path-breaking study, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975), this has generally been seen as a Southern "peculiarity." Indeed, Morgan focused on the early years of colonial settlement in Virginia, precisely to counteract the self-serving tendency of some Americans to read their history as a saga beginning with the Mayflower and continuing down through Boston's Tea Party and Massacre.

Patricia Bradley now reveals that Morgan did not need to go South to find links between slavery and freedom. Her examination of the colonial press leading up to the Revolution highlights the importance of the metaphor of slavery in shaping patriots' attitudes towards the "enslavement" they felt was being inflicted on them by Great Britain.

Historians have tended to take Boston patriots' claims about slavery at face value. The *Boston Gazette*, the patriots' premiere organ of propaganda, was frequently required to respond to the charge "that Americans were calling for freedom while denying it to others." It did so by asserting that to build an inter-colonial revolutionary movement, patriots needed to downplay the issue of slavery.

While past historians have tended to accept this view, Bradley believes it is inadequate. By focusing on the *Gazette's* function as a propagandist newspaper, she shows that its relationship with slavery was more complex.

The *Gazette* was not merely silent on the issue of slavery, it was selective in its discussion of the institution. The *Gazette* provided



Phillis Wheatley was overlooked by the *Boston Gazette*, a patriot paper.

misleading reports of important court cases; it rallied to the side of slaveholders in the face of potential slave uprisings; and it used silence in the "face of continuing public and legislative calls for abolition," thereby downplaying the work of the burgeoning antislavery movement. Further, it manipulated the racial identity of Crispus Attucks, the African American who in 1770 became the first colonist killed in the American Revolution when he was slain by British troops during the Boston Massacre. The paper gave him the status of an honorary white. It also overlooked the writings and achievements of African American poet Phillis Wheatley. The paper tended to conflate blackness and crime.

All the while, men like Samuel Adams were using slavery as a metaphor to stoke the fires of indignation among the colonists towards Britain.

The Somerset case of 1772 plays a pivotal role in Bradley's analysis. When the English courts released James Somerset, a runaway slave who was on the verge of being returned to the West Indies and slavery, the *Gazette's* coverage of the case was misleading. The paper suggested erroneously that the decision was a direct threat to the existence of slavery, and implied that this was another British usurpation of colonists' rights (thereby promoting Virginia planters' views of the decision).

But of equal importance to Bradley, the *Gazette's* implicit suggestion that the Somerset case proved that "the British regarded colonists on the same level as slaves" required that its readers have an intimate acquaintance with slavery and its meanings.

In order to establish the importance of this metaphor, Bradley questions the assumption that slavery in the north was unimportant. This assumption has survived in histories of the period in

part because northeastern states abolished slavery during the years following independence. Bradley reveals, however, that abolition in Massachusetts was not automatically linked to the achievement of independence — it came after considerable delay. She also shows that although the number of slaves in Massachusetts was much lower than in the cash crop-producing southern colonies, slavery itself was still an important institution.

But the metaphor of slavery exerted its influence over white people even when slavery was not essential to the local economy and African descendants were not present in large numbers, Bradley argues. White Bostonians had anxieties about slaves and slavery that they shared with other whites from Virginia to Haiti. They followed slave uprisings carefully, remained watchful for rebellious behavior among their slaves, and read the same slave advertisements published throughout the colonies.

Anxiety, deriving from fears about slavery, became a characteristic of Boston society as a whole. This is seen most clearly in the writings of Samuel Adams, "the single most important individual in establishing the Revolution's public voice." Adams is revealed as typical of many colonists who, in the words of historian Michael Zuckerman, were "driven to define others as their adversaries, as if to vindicate their uncertain worth by assaults on those around them."

In Adams' case, this resulted in a status anxiety, which motivated him to safeguard white American privileges both from above (combating British encroachments) and from below (by restraining slaves). In describing this, Bradley reveals an early manifestation of the creation of white privilege described by historians such as David Roediger for white workers in the late-19th century.

Finally, having established slavery and the slave metaphor at the heart of revolutionary propaganda, Bradley shows how these affected the course of the war, most particularly in the patriots' reactions to Lord Dunmore's decision to free any slave in Virginia who would take up arms against rebellious owners. The anxieties that Dunmore's policy produced united patriots from Boston to the Carolinas.

Schoolchildren must wonder, as they are taught the story of the American Revolution, what happened to the slaves in this saga of the coming of liberty. Reading *Slavery, Propaganda, and the American Revolution* may help their teachers explain it to them.

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