



**The Meanings of Independence:
The American Declaration in Global Context, 1776-1826**

2026 HARMSWORTH CONFERENCE

Rothermere American Institute
University of Oxford
19-20 March 2026

Conveners:

Eliga Gould (New Hampshire) and Patrick Griffin (Notre Dame)

Thursday, 19 March
Welcome Reception – 1:30 Coffee and tea
WELCOME — 2:30 to 3:00 pm Adam Smith (Oxford) Opening Remarks: Eliga Gould (New Hampshire) and Patrick Griffin (Notre Dame)
1. Origins — 3:00 - 4:30 pm James Fichter (Hong Kong)- The Breach that Wasn't: The Continental Association Boycotts and the Continuity of Anglo-American Ties, 1774-1776 Eric Hinderaker (Utah)- Ambivalent Independence: The US Declaration in Hemispheric Perspective Christa Dierksheide (Virginia)- "Migration, Sovereignty, and Antislavery in Early Virginia, 1760-1776" Response: Andrew Edwards (St. Andrews)
Break
KEYNOTE — 5:00-6:00 pm Peter Mancall (Southern California) — "What Makes a Revolution?" Response: Nicholas Guyatt (Cambridge)
Wine Reception

Friday, 20 March
Coffee and Tea- 9:00
Reflections on the Declaration of Independence – 9:15-9:30 am Lord Hague of Richmond (Chancellor of University of Oxford)
2. Declarations — 9:30 to 11:00 am Steve Sarson (Jean Moulin)- "[N]ot merely to say things which have never been said before": The Declaration of Independence as an early modern statement of "the common sense of the subject."



<p>Ashli White (Miami)- Words and Things</p> <p>Carine Lounissi (Rouen)- Contemporaneous French Receptions of the Declaration</p> <p>Response: Brendan McConville (Boston)</p>
<p>Break</p>
<p>3. Connections — 11:15 am to 12:45 pm</p> <p>Lisa Ford (George Washington)- The American Revolution and the Prerogative</p> <p>Bertrand Van Ruymbeke (Paris 8)- The American Revolution in France: Translation and Imagination (1775-1783)</p> <p>Ian McBride (Oxford)- Imagining Independence: Irish Presbyterians and the American Revolution</p> <p>Response: Andrew O’Shaughnessy (Virginia)</p>
<p>Lunch</p>
<p>4. Fractures — 1:30 to 3:00 pm</p> <p>William Anthony Hay (Arizona State)- “American Independence and Its Challenge to British Grand Strategy, 1776-1826: Reassessing the Geopolitical Equilibrium.”- bio</p> <p>Grace Mallon (Oxford)- The International Diplomacy of State Governments in the Early American Republic</p> <p>Eduardo Posado-Carbo (Oxford)- The Great Fracture: Revolutions in Spanish America, 1810-1826</p> <p>Response: Emily West (Oxford)</p>
<p>Break</p>
<p>5. Outcomes — 3:30 to 4:45 pm</p> <p>Christopher Brown (Columbia)- What did the American Revolution mean for the Atlantic slave trade?</p> <p>Mark Peterson (Yale)- Why the American Revolution Must End</p> <p>Joanna Innes (Oxford)- Declaring independence: limits to its appeal in a European context, 1776-1826</p> <p>Response: Rosemarie Zaggarri (George Mason)</p>
<p>Break</p>
<p>KEYNOTE — 5:00 to 6:00 pm</p> <p>Annette Gordon-Reed (Harvard): “The Declaration of Independence and American Identity at 250”</p> <p>Response: Francis Cogliano (Edinburgh)</p>
<p>Wine Reception</p>

Abstracts below



Thursday 19 March

WELCOME — 2:30 to 3:00 pm

Adam Smith (Oxford)

Opening Remarks: Eliga Gould (New Hampshire) and Patrick Griffin (Notre Dame)

ORIGINS- 3:00 - 4:30 pm

James Fichter (Hong Kong)- The Breach that Wasn't: The Continental Association Boycotts and the Continuity of Anglo-American Ties, 1774-1776

This paper considers the endurance of Anglo-American economic ties during the Revolution. That revolution did little to upend transatlantic consumerism or capitalism, its bans on trade with Britain were enforced by temporary committees and not enshrined in permanent changes to law. The Association's ban on tea, thought to reflect popular anti-tea sentiment, was actually implemented to stave off popular consumption of that good, with the turn against tea over by independence. The Association's ban on the slave trade, which seemed to stop a far larger commerce between Britain and America, was similarly anti-climactic, as North American planters and merchants reacted to the ban by doubling down on their financial tie to Britain, an empire which would remain economically vital to the post-independence American South.

Eric Hinderaker (Utah)- Ambivalent Independence: The US Declaration in Hemispheric Perspective

The US Declaration of Independence is often taken as a turning point in history. Scholars, in fact, often fail to distinguish between independence and revolution. Taking a hemispheric view, we ask: how important was the US declaration as a precedent, and how revolutionary was US independence in reshaping the Americas?

This presentation is drawn from a forthcoming book by Eric Hinderaker and Rebecca Horn entitled *The Americas After 1492: A New Interpretive History*, which will be published by the University of Pennsylvania Press. Hinderaker and Horn have been colleagues at the University of Utah for 35 years, and this project is the product of a long series of conversations and collaborations.

Christa Dierksheide (Virginia)- "Migration, Sovereignty, and Antislavery in Early Virginia, 1760-1776"

Beginning in the 1760s, Virginia elites' calls for the colony's legislature to regulate the transatlantic slave trade and manumission were rooted in quarrels over Virginia's sovereignty and colonists' property rights. Lawmakers were far more concerned with ensuring a white settler colonial future for Virginia and the province's security than they were in affirming the collective liberation of enslaved people on moral grounds.

Response: **Andrew Edwards (St. Andrews)**



Thursday Keynote- 5:00 pm

Peter Mancall (Southern California) — “What Makes a Revolution?”

From 1675 to 1680 rebellions broke out across North America: an attempted uprising by enslaved Africans in Barbados; a conflict between colonists (and also colonists against Indigenous peoples) in Virginia known as Bacon’s Rebellion; a Narragansett-led wave of battles in southern and coastal New England called Metacom’s or King Philip’s War; and a series of attacks blending religion and politics in New Mexico labeled the Pueblo Revolt. These violent spasms shocked participants and witnesses alike, produced long-lasting consequences, and changed the ways that residents of these regions understood each other and the worlds they inhabited. Taken together, did they constitute a revolution?

Response: **Nicholas Guyatt (Cambridge)**

Friday 20 March

Reflections on the Declaration of Independence – 9:15 am

Lord Hague of Richmond (Chancellor of University of Oxford)

DECLARATIONS – 9:30 - 11:00 am

Steve Sarson (Jean Moulin)- “[N]ot merely to say things which have never been said before”: The Declaration of Independence as an early modern statement of “the common sense of the subject.”

Steve Sarson places the Declaration of Independence in the tradition of early modern declarations, including those of various American revolutionary congresses, as statements of natural law principles related to grievances arising from particular historical circumstances, rather than modern abstract, universal proclamations such as the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights.

Ashli White (Miami)- Words and Things

This presentation considers the interaction between the language of liberty, as put forward in documents like the Declaration of Independence, and the world of things that shaped people’s understanding of those ideals in their everyday lives.

Carine Lounissi (Rouen)- Contemporaneous French Receptions of the Declaration

This paper will address the translation and interpretation of the Declaration of Independence in French writings and newspapers at the time of the American Revolution and before the French Revolution. It will look into the various forms of receptions – diplomatic, political and intellectual – of this founding document of the US.



Response: **Brendan McConville (Boston)**

CONNECTIONS- 11:15-12:45

Lisa Ford (George Washington) The American Revolution and the Prerogative

Drawing on early chapters of *The King's Peace*, this paper explores the way that perceived crises of order in the lead up to the American Revolution articulated into debates about the need to reform the imperial constitution. While the empire's shift to pro-consular government after the Revolution has been well documented, this paper argues that the drive to bolster crown authority rested in part on the unravelling of prerogative power in everyday contests about peace keeping in the North America.

Bertrand Van Ruymbeke (Paris 8)- The American Revolution in France: Translation and Imagination (1775-1783)

The interest for the American Revolution in France from the mid-1770s to the mid-1780s cannot be underestimated. It was closely observed in Versailles, talked about in salons, was the object of essay contests in literary Académies, and was amply discussed in newspapers articles and in books. Translation and imagination were the two vehicles of this interest.

Ian McBride (Oxford) Imagining Independence: Irish Presbyterians and the American Revolution

Abstract tbd

Response: **Andrew O'Shaughnessy (Virginia)**

FRACTURES – 1:30 – 3:00 pm

William Anthony Hay (Arizona State)- “American Independence and Its Challenge to British Grand Strategy, 1776-1826: Reassessing the Geopolitical Equilibrium.”

The Declaration of Independence and French recognition changed the geopolitical challenge Britain faced in lasting ways. Colonies that had bolstered British strength in both the European and colonial balance of power now became a separate factor as a hostile or neutral force. The result shaped how British leaders thought about strategy over the decades following American Independence.

Grace Mallon (Oxford)- The International Diplomacy of State Governments in the Early American Republic

The ambiguous sovereignty of the American states after the ratification of the Constitution is thrown into sharp relief by their continued semi-independent participation in international diplomacy. Although the Constitution forbade them from treating with foreign powers, the activities of state governments continued to shape relationships between the United States and other polities well into the nineteenth century.



Eduardo Posado-Carbo (Oxford)- The Great Fracture: Revolutions in Spanish America, 1810-1826

Abstract tbc

Response: **Emily West (Oxford)**

OUTCOMES – 3:30 – 4:45 pm

Christopher Brown (Columbia)- What did the American Revolution mean for the Atlantic slave trade?

What did the American Revolution mean for the Atlantic slave trade? The age of revolutions long has been understood as transformative, as starting the decline and fall of the Atlantic slave trade over the course of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, the limits of that interpretation become ever more apparent with the last two generations of research. We know now, for example, that the Atlantic slave trade reached its apex in the half-century after the Declaration of Independence. A persistent concern with the aftermath, moreover, has left the war itself overlooked. What happened to the Atlantic slave trade during the American War for Independence? That question gets overlooked and proves difficult to answer while the more general history of European competition on the West African coast during the Atlantic slave trade remains unwritten. This paper presents the American Revolution as one chapter in that much longer story, one that locates the history of the Atlantic slave trade less in the history of morals or economics than in the history of statecraft.

Mark Peterson (Yale)- Why the American Revolution Must End

This paper challenges the common belief that the American Revolution is and should be perpetual, a never-ending unfolding of the “Founders” ideals (often located in the Declaration of Independence) that steadily generates a more perfect union. It argues that the ideological package promoted in the Revolution was grounded in colonial expectations of continuous population growth, territorial expansion, hyper-production and -consumption, practices that today threaten life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness around the globe.

Joanna Innes (Oxford)- Declaring independence: limits to its appeal in a European context, 1776-1826

I want to explore meanings given to independence, liberation and self-government in Europe during decades which were, both in geopolitical and in political-cultural terms, exceptionally turbulent and fluid. Against that background, I will reflect on perceptions of the relevance and of limits to the relevance of the American model.

Response: **Rosemarie Zagarri (George Mason)**



Friday Keynote – 5:00 pm

Annette Gordon-Reed (Harvard):“The Declaration of Independence and American Identity at 250”

The Declaration of Independence was designed to effectuate the American Colonies’ separation from Great Britain. The document set forth the specific reasons the Americans were justified in their decision to make the break. In that sense, it was a document for a particular moment. But the preamble to the Declaration has famously taken on a life of its own as a statement of universal human rights. It has been called “the American Creed” and, in the process, has helped define American identity.

This paper discusses how the Declaration created the content of American identity and argues that it was largely through the the efforts of marginalized Americans. It then considers the future of American identity in an age of growing authoritarianism and the embrace of blood and soil nationalism by Americans at the highest level of government and society.

Response: **Francis Cogliano (Edinburgh)**