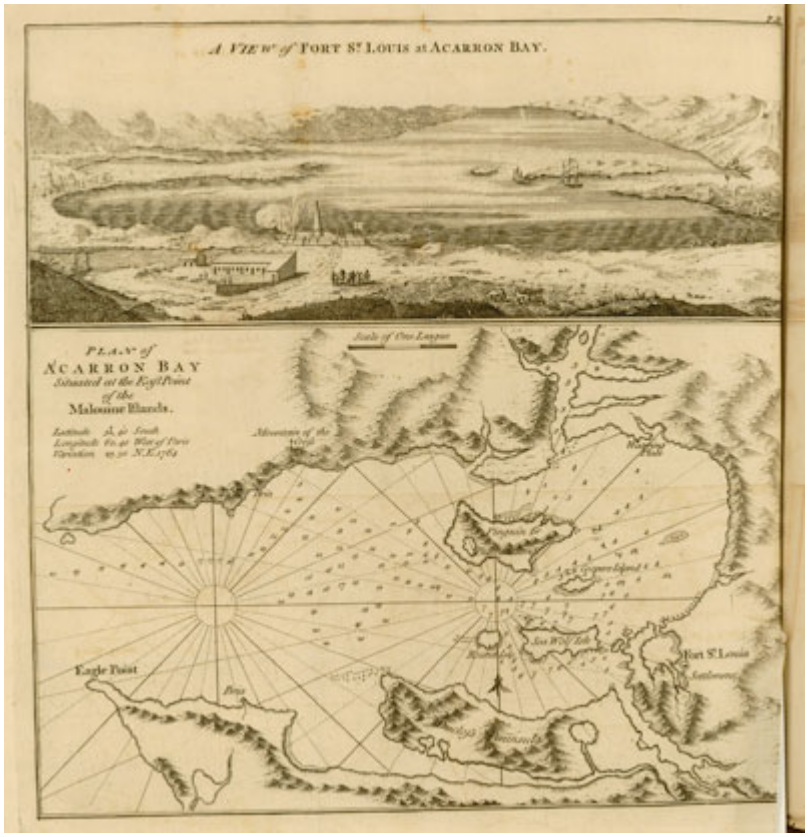
What He Did For Love: David Claypoole Johnston and the Boston Irish, 1825-1865



Human love, not a wrenching religious conversion or spiritual journey, determined Johnston’s trajectory.

The Annunciation of Big Bubba: Or, reflections on writing history in two worlds



In truth, I run with the Atlanticist crowd for a selfish reason: because Atlantic history allows me to be in two places at once. And by “be,” I mean “be,” as in “exist or live,” or better yet, “belong.”

[Civil War Site: A blogger’s increasingly successful effort to open new fronts in the historical profession]



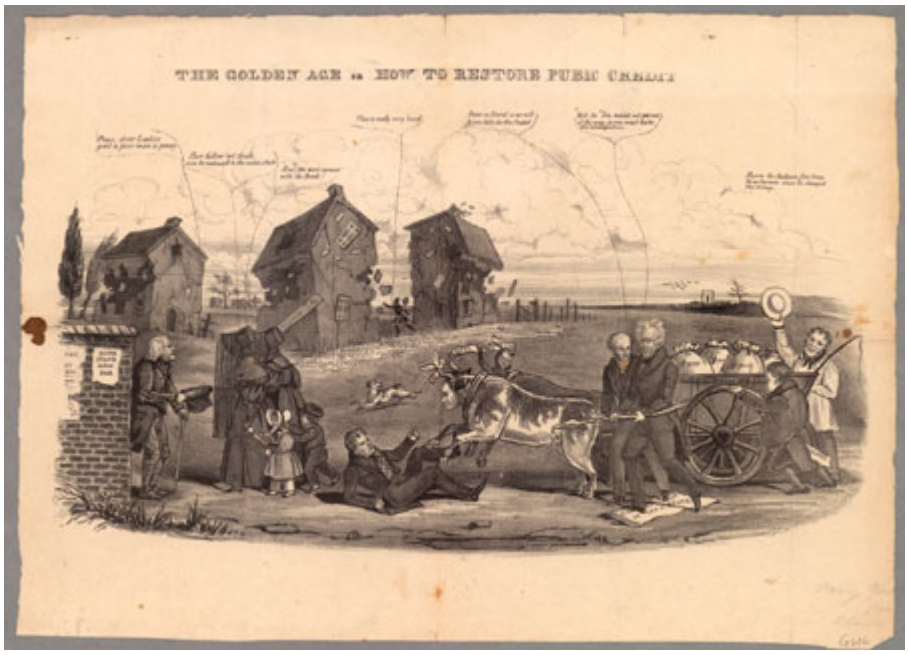
The questions and subjects that bring professional historians together at academic conferences deserve to be discussed in wider circles.

Beyond Words: Sylvia’s Diary



Why did I leap into this project—and why did I stick to it?

When Banks Fail: Creating money and risk in antebellum America



Through what mechanism do actual people suffer when a bank fails? To the modern ear, the very question sounds naïve, at best.

On The American Jeremiad



The American Jeremiad passes at least one test of really important work: it forces you to reconsider beliefs that you took for granted. I'd like to focus here on the particular belief of my own that Bercovitch's book most forced me to rethink, though not without resistance.

It's the belief that, though the United States repeatedly betrays its founding ideals of justice and fairness, it is uniquely willing to measure its betrayals against those ideals and to try to change itself accordingly. For Bercovitch, the ideological function of this belief is to provide a kind of no-fault insurance for the American dream: if America does the right thing, we demonstrate our essential goodness; but if America does the wrong thing we show we are even better because we are so willing to condemn our own crimes. The greatness of America, then, is nowhere better reaffirmed than in our negative jeremiads—including our politically radical self-critiques—a process Bercovitch describes in the book as "the Americanization of dissent." In his preface to the new anniversary edition of the book, he urges the need to "open the possibility of contemplating injustice and conceiving democracy *outside* the framework of the Real/True America" (emphasis mine).

> Why is it so bad to measure ourselves against an ideal America if doing so leads at times at least to correcting our evils?

It’s a brilliant demonstration of how for us all roads, however oppositional they may seem, lead inevitably back to a celebration of America’s unique greatness, from the Puritans’ confusion of godliness and Americanness on down to the present day. I admit, however, that at first I had my doubts about this argument. Why is it so bad to measure ourselves against an ideal America if doing so leads at times at least to correcting our evils?

What convinced me, however, that Bercovitch is indeed onto something important is an example he offers in the new preface, where he updates his argument by listing instances of jeremiad-like rhetoric on the current political scene. Bercovitch quotes a dissenting slogan from the 2012 Occupy Wall Street protests: “The American Dream has been stolen…” one protestor asserted. “The 1% has destroyed this nation and its values.”

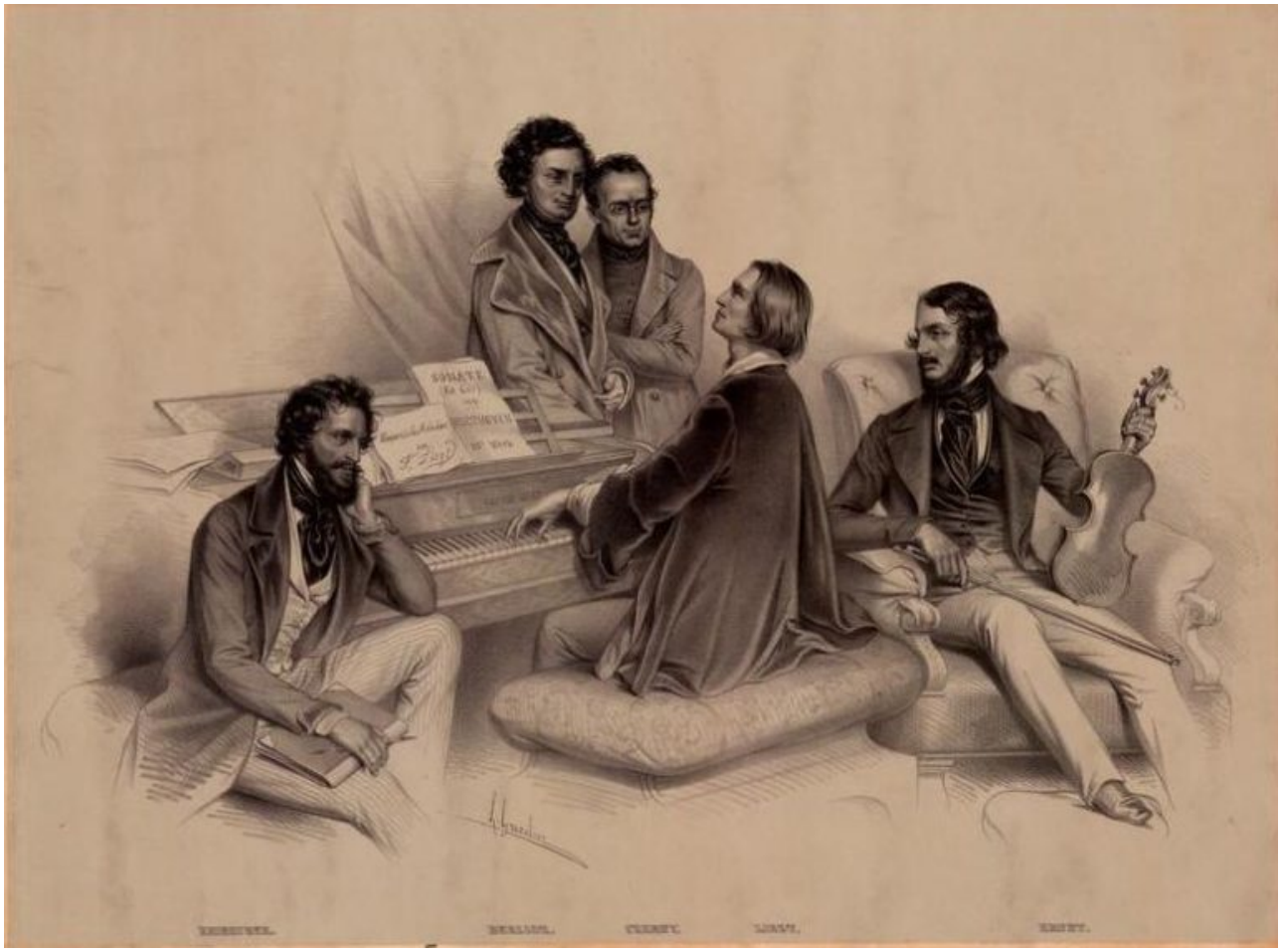
On first encountering this example and Bercovitch’s critical attitude toward it, my thought was, wait a minute—what’s the matter with that? What’s wrong with accusing the one percent of hijacking the American Dream and betraying our nation’s values? I felt confirmed in this thought after the November 2012 U.S. elections, where it seemed that this sort of appeal to economic fairness had been very effective in deciding the outcome. For once, a populist critique of plutocracy had persuaded the American mainstream, and it was the appeal to American values that had helped turn the tide.

But on reflection, I saw Bercovitch’s point more clearly and felt its force: the American habit of acting as if we *invented* values that are not peculiar to us at all drapes a cloud of nationalist and exceptionalist mystification over our every public discussion—in this case, the swindling of the ninety-nine percent by the one percent. If that swindle is wrong, its wrongness has nothing to do with whether it is un-American or not. But here is Bercovitch’s biggest point: until the nation frees itself from this confusion, it is probably never likely to wise up to such swindles.

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Unrecouped



Having been to more than my share of very sparsely-attended indie rock shows and history conference panels in recent years, the thought has occurred more than once that “mid-career” academic historians have much in common with a lot of the veteran indie musicians I go to see: well-known within a certain dispersed circle of cognoscenti, perhaps even established in certain way, but doing something too particular in its appeal to ever achieve more than the most modest sort of popularity.

Curiosity Did/Did Not Kill the Cat: The Controversy Continues



Presented as part of the special issue: “A Cabinet of Curiosities”

“Our authors help us notice that men and women who are curious are themselves sometimes turned into curiosities.”

Naming the Pacific: How Magellan’s relief came to stick, and what it stuck to



Presented as part of the Special Issue: Pacific Routes

[I]n the days when wind and sail provided the fastest means of travel, when continental and global circumnavigations lay far in the future, there was no obvious way to test whether widely separated seas, such as those that lay off the Arabian Peninsula and those of the Mediterranean, were in any way contiguous.

American History on Other Continents



The archive is small but so is the country, and because of that it remains manageable.