

## INTRODUCTION

### REMEMBERING THE FOUNDERS

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*Sex and the American Quest  
for a Relatable Past*

LIVING AS WE DO in an era in which public figures are subjected to extreme scrutiny in the form of media intrusions, we tend to think of our interest in reconciling public images with private sexual conduct as uniquely postmodern. In fact, Americans have long invested national heroes with superior moral status and at the same time probed into their private lives. If the Founding Fathers seem remote to us now, that distance persists despite the efforts of generations of biographers who attempt to take their measure as leaders and tell us what they were really like in their most intimate relationships. From the early years of the Republic till now, biographers have attempted to burnish the Founders' images and satisfy public curiosity about their lives beyond public view. At the same time, gossips and politically motivated detractors, claiming to have the inside track on new information, have circulated scandalous or unpleasant stories to knock these exalted men off their pedestals. Looking back at the stories and assessments that have proliferated in the two and a half centuries since the Founders' generation, we see the dual nature of these accounts and how they oscillate between the public and the private, between the idealized image and actions in the intimate realm. We see how each generation reshapes images of the Founders to fit that storyteller's era.

On the one hand, the Founders appear desexualized. The images of the Founding Fathers that we regularly encounter—as heads on money, as reference points in discussions about political ideology, and as monuments at

tourist sites—assert their status as virtuous American men. They typically appear either disembodied—as heads or busts—or in clothing that reminds us of their political or military position. Their flesh is covered from neck to wrists, with only hands and face exposed. Typically, the men are frozen in advanced age—generally gray-haired, if not topped off with wigs—further confirming their identities as desexualized elder statesman for generations of Americans who associate sexual activity with youth.<sup>1</sup>

On the other side of the coin, curiosity about their “real” lives has continued seemingly unabated into our own time. In 1810, Mason L. (Parson) Weems, originator of the cherry-tree myth, emphasized the importance of discussing George Washington’s personal life. Weems argues that “public character” is no “evidence of *true greatness*” and calls for a spotlight to be shined on his “private life.” Weems gives the compelling example of Benedict Arnold, who could “play you the *great man*” “yet in the *private walks of life*” reveal himself to be a “swindler”—including not only his political deception but his use of the “aid of loose women.” For Weems, the Founders’ intimate relationships should not be off-limits for Americans: “It *is* not, then, in the glare of *public*, but in the shade of *private life*, that we are to look for the man. Private life is always *real* life.” To truly know them, their conduct in that realm is an important piece of the puzzle.<sup>2</sup>

By tracing how intimacy has figured in popular memory of the Founders from their own lifetimes to the recent past, *Sex and the Founding Fathers* shows that sex has long been used to define their masculine character and political authority and has always figured in civic and national identity.<sup>3</sup> Each generation has asked different questions about the Founders and their private lives, but Americans have consistently imagined and reimagined the private lives of the Founders through the lens of contemporary society. As Michael Kammen and others have argued, countries “reconstruct their pasts rather than faithfully record them” and “do so with the needs of contemporary culture clearly in mind.”<sup>4</sup> Gore Vidal has referred to our selective national memory as “The United States of Amnesia.”<sup>5</sup> It is true that we tend to embrace the national narratives that we desire and “forget” those that we prefer to hide away. Stories about the Founders’ lives have always been told in ways that make use of the norms and ideals of the time period. Founders can never be embraced in their late-eighteenth-century context, for, as the saying goes, the past is a foreign country—and the Founders lose their cultural utility when viewed as foreigners. Americans want to see themselves in their images, because these men, the men who created America, are by their actions the embodiment of the nation and of our national identity.

Scholars have shown how the Founding Fathers have been central to our sense of national identity. The Founders created the nation and can never be divorced from our understanding of it. They embody the nation, its principles, and even its founding documents. In this sense, they are unchanging and can always serve to connect Americans with American identity.<sup>6</sup> Today, the Founders generate both vast book sales and daily reference by politicians, jurists interpreting the Constitution, schoolteachers, and ordinary citizens—each of whom holds up the Founders’ historical significance because of their roles in establishing the political structure of the nation and in shaping our national identity.<sup>7</sup> By examining how their most intimate thoughts and actions figure in popular imagining of the Founders, we are able to deepen our understanding of how sexuality and gender are important components of civic and national identity.

Today, Americans still trade in stories about the sexual escapades of the Founding Fathers. The topic is often used to draw a contrast between distinct private and public worlds.<sup>8</sup> Consider the following examples. A farcical article, written in the straight-faced style of *The Onion*, reports on the recent discovery of raunchy letters written by Washington to a woman he desired;<sup>9</sup> the article is accompanied by a lurid portrait of Washington with a grotesquely large bulge in his pants. A popular author visits *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* to promote his recent book on Thomas Jefferson: “It’s a book about our founding fathers as if they had penises,” he tells the audience. “Most founding-father books omit the cock. I put it in.”<sup>10</sup> Such self-consciously irreverent cultural expressions draw on the assumption that the authors are making a compelling contrast by placing that which is sexless (historic, public, proper) alongside open sexuality (modern, private, crude). They rely on a particular notion of the Founders as popularly repressed and mock our culture for denying them, and all Americans, their sexuality.

Some authors have focused entire studies on the intimate lives of the Founders.<sup>11</sup> Journalist Thomas Fleming has published a collection of biographies on the “intimate lives” of the Founding Fathers as a way to personalize them for a modern audience.<sup>12</sup> But he is certainly not the first to do so. Historian Charles Tansill published his book on the romantic lives of the Founders in 1964, basing it upon lectures he gave to his students as a way to “humanize” the political leaders of the American Revolution. Others have included chapters on the Founders in their books on the “sex lives” of the American presidents.<sup>13</sup> *Hustler* publisher Larry Flynt has teamed up with historian David Eisenbach to write a book that argues that the presidents’ sex lives have, in fact, shaped the development of the nation. Management con-

sultant Wesley O. Hagood has written a book on the sex lives of presidents in part to contextualize President Bill Clinton's impeachment trial. Michael Farquhar has similarly written his best-selling collection of "American scandals" in part so that "the first three centuries of American scandal" could "put a little perspective on the relatively minor sins of recent memory."<sup>14</sup>

Many Americans are already familiar with anecdotes about the Revolutionary War era's leaders' sex lives precisely because they are the topic of a long-running discussion. To provide two immediate examples, Jefferson's long affair with Sally Hemings and Benjamin Franklin's "flirtation" with Parisian ladies during his tenure as diplomat continue to fascinate. At the time of the nation's founding, political enemies used such information to smear the Founders' characters. In cultural memory, many Americans use such stories to emphasize the flaws, foibles, or vanities that make the Founders more fully three-dimensional and relatable.

Recent studies have shown that Americans today embrace history but "reject nation-centered accounts" that do not allow them to "build bridges between personal pasts and larger historical stories." Americans want to "personalize the public past."<sup>15</sup> As Lois W. Banner points out, the lives of the Founders "have become sounding boards for what the nation thinks of itself."<sup>16</sup> The National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, just steps away from the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall, promotes this kind of personal connection in an online eleven-question quiz titled "Which Founder Are You?" The landing page for the website declares that the Founders had "many different personalities" and encourages the Web surfer to "Discover which Founding Father you're most like!"<sup>17</sup>

Every generation likes to say that it has finally learned the truth about the Founders and that by examining their private lives, their loves, and their desires, it has exposed the real men. With few exceptions, revelations do not come from the discovery of new documents. The "breaking news" that authors like to assert is most often based on (sometimes) novel interpretations of familiar sources, the diaries and letters that we have regarding the Founders' loves, families, and marriages. More often, new interpretations are possible because of gaps in the record that conveniently have lent themselves to readings that suit generation after generation of Americans seeking themselves in their Founders. In general, academic historians are rigidly tied to the rule that claims must be directly supported by existing documentation that is analyzed by understanding the historical context in which it was produced. Academic historians are more accepting of the fact that history is full of unanswerable questions, of nuanced and contradictory settings, and

of holes in the record. In contrast, popular biographers and filmmakers are often compelled by their respective media to fill in those gaps.

By proffering new readings of old men, popular biographers are, of course, able to create straw men that allow them to sell their books as something fresh—but more than just this strategy is at work here. By claiming to lift the veil for the first time on the private life of a Founder, they enable us to feel that we are getting closer to the perceived truth about ourselves and the nation. And by believing that the private man is being revealed for the first time, readers can see themselves as modern, having made a true break from the past. Sex is central to this understanding of modernity, as is evidenced by our understanding of modern sexuality as being somehow more liberated than the sexuality of previous times.<sup>18</sup>

Museums and popular biographers, if pressed, might concede that they use sex opportunistically; a titillating message draws in a wider public for the real history that they want to teach. In my view, the role of sex in history should not be so easily dismissed. The element of sex heightens interest in the histories of the Founders because learning about their intimate lives also personalizes abstract notions of political citizenship and connects Americans to their nation and their own identity as Americans. Current stories increasingly use *sexual personalizing* of the Founders not simply because sex is more openly displayed in the media but because Americans increasingly need to know what is American and see themselves in that definition. Many Americans get that reassurance from the Founders.

To understand how popular memory takes shape, this book makes use of a wide range of materials, including print sources, such as books, magazines, newspapers, poetry, published songs, eulogies, cartoons, and caricatures, as well as portraits, statues, memorials, popular films, musicals, websites, and museum exhibits.<sup>19</sup> Because of their immense popularity in the past and today, popular biographies are also an ideal source for looking at changing ideas about sex and the Founding Fathers, and they make up the core of the book. Throughout American history, biographies have remained the most important source for communicating to Americans information about the personal lives of the Founding Fathers. “Phenomenally popular” in nineteenth-century America, biographies were “regarded as a method of moral teaching.”<sup>20</sup> Today, exposure to biographies is still one of the main ways that most Americans learn about history.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to academic histories written to shed light on the past on its own terms, popular biographies are usually written with an eye toward showing how a life story can resonate with present concerns. These “life stories” can tell us a great deal about the cul-

tural moments that produce them. Together, all these sources, through their circulation and as products of the thinking of their time, both popularize and reflect understandings of sex and masculinity.

We can recognize the contours of the history of sexuality in America in the chapters that follow.<sup>22</sup> Each chapter begins with an examination of public discussion of the personal lives of the Founders while they lived. The Founders often cultivated their own public reputations around sexuality in response to cultural norms of the day. In the personally charged political climate of the early Republic, the press operated in what today would be considered a tabloid style, making hefty use of rumor and innuendo and relying on the public's thirst for sordid details and voyeuristic thrills. This approach meshed well with political standards of the day, which, as Nancy Isenberg reminds us, indicated that "political figures were expected to virtually embody the well-defined traits of republican virtue in their personal and public demeanor, speech, and lifestyle."<sup>23</sup> The sexually charged, scandal-mongering political climate of the American Revolution and early Republic also generated public discussion about personal lives. Americans did not exempt the Founders from this examination, discussing Jefferson as a slaveowner who indulged in intimacy with enslaved adolescent Hemings, Alexander Hamilton as a repentant adulterer, and John Adams as a prickly prude.

As the Founders passed from life into memory, their public reputations lay entirely in the hands of Americans. The sexualized political climate of the early Republic waned. By the nineteenth century, public memory of the Founders struggled to reconcile Victorian modes of sexual morality with the elite sexual cultures from which the Founders came. The earliest biographies written about the Founders seek to establish a permanent respectability for the individual political leaders of the Revolution and nation's founding. In the hands of biographers, many of the Founders serve as role models for American boys and men. To accomplish this goal, of course, life details are handled carefully, because many of today's most revered Founders suffered from early scandalous reputations: Franklin was branded as immoral, abolitionists labeled Jefferson a child rapist, and Gouverneur Morris's private life had to be whitewashed for Victorian audiences.

The sexual revolutions of the 1920s and 1960s breathed new life into sexual and romantic details of the Founders' lives. Throughout the twentieth century, sexual desires increasingly became viewed as a psychologically healthy part of a man's life. As the writings of Sigmund Freud and his ilk have made their mark on American culture, sexual expression has become an important part of being "normal," and the Founders are no exception. In addition to being ever more sexually explicit, American memory also yokes

nationalist concerns about domesticity to our image of the Founders, and writers push ever harder to depict the Founders as exceptionally happy in their marriages and homes, despite the lack of evidence to support such claims.

In the twenty-first century, we have seen best-selling books about the Founders and a renewed interest in the moral and virtuous exceptionalism of the Founding generation. A changing political and demographic world has increasingly made the Founders—slave-owning, elite white men—seem irrelevant, but Americans have used sex to relate to them and connect in a way that parades itself as universal. From museums to political stump speeches, the Founding Fathers are as publicly prominent now as they have ever been. American memory in this moment uses sex to connect eighteenth-century men with contemporary concerns. Jefferson, for example, has emerged as a multicultural hero, Washington is seen as a virile father, and Morris and Franklin are considered as delightfully modern in their approach to sexuality.

The book is organized into this introduction, six numbered chapters, and a conclusion. Chapters focus on specific political leaders of the American Revolution and Founding of the nation. Although the term “Founding Father” was coined in the early twentieth century, even in his own lifetime, Washington was called the “father” of the nation.<sup>24</sup> Different generations have quibbled over who belongs in the pantheon, but few would dispute that the men featured in this book—Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton, and Franklin—are some of the most significant of the group. Morris, although less well-known, operates in the book as a prime example of how the connections between sex and manliness in cultural memory of the Founders are not limited to the top tier. Indeed, many others will come to mind for readers as a good fit for this study—Benjamin Rush wrote about masturbation; James Madison, hardly considered an ideal model of masculinity, fathered no children with Dolley yet is remembered as the father of the Constitution; and Aaron Burr, who shot and killed Hamilton in that famous duel, was early vilified as a libertine and seducer, only to be recently recast as an early feminist. The list goes on.

Structuring the book along biographical lines rather than topically allows it to engage with the construction of public memory of these individuals as well as to consider the ways that biography itself participates in defining manliness and appropriate sexualities more generally. We can see how over time reputations shift, as the public emphasizes aspects of a Founder’s biography that have been ignored and dismisses others that have loomed large in earlier tellings. We can see too how one generation’s portrayal is no more or less “true” than another’s and how each shapes the narrative to fit its cultural moment. Chapter 1 examines how Americans have remembered Washing-

ton's virility. As the "father of the nation," Washington invokes a masculine ideal and has done so for as long as Americans have been remembering him. That he fathered no children of his own puts particular pressure on cultural memory to shore up his image as a model of heroic manhood. Chapter 2 examines Jefferson's legacy, which today is most notably associated with his intimacy with Hemings. By examining how his portrayal morphs from that of a chaste widow to that of a man with passionate relationships, we can see just how important the sexualizing of his image has been for laying the groundwork for today's understanding of him as a man with two families, black and white. Chapter 3 examines how Americans have remembered Adams. In his own lifetime, he wore his moral code on his sleeve and did not hesitate to castigate his fellow Founders for their sexual immorality. The extraordinary number of surviving letters between him and his wife, Abigail, has led many to cast them as uniquely matched and "modern" in their loving bond. Today, Adams is also uncomfortably embraced as a prickly, cranky, prude—a man who embodies the Puritan core of American national morality. The avuncular elder statesman, Franklin, is the focus of Chapter 4. Franklin is today remembered as the nation's "foxy grandpa," and his sexual appetites have become celebrated in a way that puts the lie to a line between sex and political life.<sup>25</sup> Chapter 5 focuses on Hamilton, the man on the ten-dollar bill, who is most famously remembered for being killed while in office as secretary of the Treasury in a duel with then-Vice President Burr. Less often recalled is Hamilton's extramarital affair and the very public pamphlet that he authored to fully explain the circumstances. Chapter 6 examines the least-known of the men in this book, Morris, who has recently been called the "rake who wrote the Constitution."<sup>26</sup> A bachelor for most of his life, Morris is the only Founder for whom extraordinarily revealing sources came to light long after his death. His detailed diaries remark on sexual intimacies with married and unmarried women, providing a treasure trove for some biographers and an embarrassment for others.

The Founders lived in a world that fit neither the stereotyped image of a Puritanical past nor a more modern sexual culture that makes them "just like us." The problem with using sex to make the Founders relatable is that sex is not transhistorical: It can't be used in this manner any more than medical or racial understandings of the day can be used to connect readers from early America to today.

Remembering the intimate lives of the Founding Fathers with simple tropes, hyperbolic superficialities, and meaningless romanticized generalizations prevents us from meaningfully engaging with eighteenth-century sexual variance. Doing so also trivializes sex, perpetuating our own discomfort



with the topic, a discomfort with a long history. Superficial glosses relegate the subject of sex to the status it held in previous generations—one of titillation, shame, and humor—all of which rely on a certain assertion of the transhistorical or *human* understanding of sexuality. But the ways in which Americans have ordered their sexual lives and their sexual identities have changed greatly over the centuries. Viewing the Founders' intimate lives and identities as somehow accessible to us through surface descriptions, such as "love at first sight" or "healthy sexual appetites," prevents us from taking historical sexual identities and sexual expressiveness seriously. By focusing in a sustained way on the manner in which Americans have asked and answered their own questions about sexual intimacy and the Founders of the nation, we can examine how Americans have both broached and obscured sexual realities and the cultural connections between sex and nationalized masculinity in the public memory of these men.

Collectively, these stories show how gendered sexuality has long figured in our national identity via the public memory of the political leaders of the American Revolution. By tracing these histories of public memory, we are confronted with how blurred the line has long been between sex and politics in memories of the Founders and how sex has helped tie an ever-diversifying American public to a handful of staid, elite, white, eighteenth-century men.