Chapter 14

The End of American Classicism

AFTER JEFFERSON'S "REVOLUTION," THE UNITED STATES FACED TWO great stumbling blocks in the early decades of the nineteenth century. First, there was built into the system a tension between elitism, with an aging aristocracy still trying to tell the rest of the country how to live, and a growing egalitarianism, under which the majority rejected such guidance. That was resolvable.

But there also was a more insidious problem. The republic had built into it a fatal contradiction: It was founded on a faith in freedom yet on the fact of slavery. The founders had made a deal with the devil, and some suspected as much. In a satirical essay published when Jefferson was president, Josiah Quincy, who had deplored what he saw as Republican attacks on classical learning, contended that "democrat" was not actually a Greek word at all. Rather, he joked in a Federalist magazine, it had been discovered to be a word used by a First Peoples tribe in Virginia that meant "a great tobacco planter, who had herds of black slaves." The essential principle of being a democrat, he added rather baldly, was "sexual connection with all women—matrimonial alliances with none." This was an allusion to Jefferson's vow in his first inaugural address to seek "friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none"—and to rumors of Jefferson's sexual liaisons with women both free and enslaved.

Because of slavery, fears of a civil war bubbled constantly under the surface. In his second inaugural, Jefferson had conceded that some feared that by expanding the country, his Louisiana

Purchase "would endanger our union." He countered, Madison-like, that "the larger our association, the less it will be shaken by local passions." As would become evident some fifty-six years later, Jefferson and Madison were wrong. Continuing and irresolvable conflict over whether slavery would be permitted in the nation's new lands, the area acquired during Jefferson's presidency, would spark the bloodiest event in American history, the Civil War.

John Adams said if it came to a choice, he would favor war. "Civil War is preferable to Slavery and I add that foreign War and civil War together at the Same time are preferable to Slavery." And in a characteristic lament, he claimed that he had been warning the country for some "fifty years" about the pitfalls it faced, only to be disregarded. "If the Nation will not read them or will not understand them, or are determined to misinterpret or misrepresent them, that is not my fault." When it came to avoiding blame and dodging responsibility, Adams was nearly as adept as Jefferson.

Jefferson vs. Plato

JEFFERSON LOVED THE IDEA OF A "REPUBLIC," WHICH HE SAW AS A SYSTEM in which power was held and exercised by the people. So it is a bit surprising to learn that he despised the most famous book with that word as its title, Plato's *Republic*. He considered the great Greek philosopher an obscure mystic. Early in the summer of 1814, while at his summer home in isolated southwestern Virginia, "I amused myself with reading Plato's republic," he reported to John Adams. But in the next sentence he corrected that thought. "I am wrong however in calling it amusement, for it was the heaviest task-work I ever went through." He was, he explained, repelled by what he called "the whimsies, the puerilities, and unintelligible jargon of this work," and put it down wondering why the world so respected "such nonsense as this." He had concluded, he said, that Plato's reputation had been kept alive "chiefly by the adoption & incorporation of his whimsies into the body of artificial Christianity."

But he was still high on the classics in general. To a young man starting at Columbia College, he urged studying the sciences—astronomy, mathematics, chemistry—but told him not to disregard the ancient texts:

> *I would advise you to undertake a regular course of history & poetry in both languages, in Greek, go first thro' the Cyropaedia, and then read Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon's Hellenies & Anabasis, Arrian's Alexander, & Plutarch's lives, for prose reading: Homer's Iliad & Odyssey, Euripides, Sophocles in poetry, & Demosthenes in Oratory; alternating prose & verse as most agreeable to yourself. In Latin read Livy, Caesar, Sallust Tacitus, Cicero's Philosophies, and some of his Orations, in prose; and Virgil, Ovid's Metamorphoses, Horace, Terence & Juvenal for poetry.*

It was no secret to his contemporaries that Jefferson had been influenced far more by the philosophers of the ancient world and of the Enlightenment than he had been by Christian beliefs. Indeed, when the ex-president sought to sell his impressive personal library to rebuild the Library of Congress, which had been burned by British forces during the War of 1812, Cyrus King, a Federalist congressman from Massachusetts, questioned whether the nation really would benefit from such an injection of "infidel philosophy." A New Hampshire newspaper complained that many of Jefferson's books were in foreign languages and so "wholly unintelligible to 9/10ths of the members of Congress." It was a sign of how the composition of American leadership had changed.

An "act of suicide": The Missouri Compromise

AS THE QUESTION OF SLAVERY IN NEW STATES GREW MORE URGENT, JEFFERSON emerged a bit from his classical cocoon and began to read newspapers again. He was horrified by what he read about the deal

to allow Missouri in as a slave state, balanced with making Maine a state separate from Massachusetts, along with a line extending westward from the northern border of Tennessee, above which slavery would not be permitted. In this he saw the possible ruin of the nation. "This mementous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror," he wrote after the congressional vote on this Missouri Compromise. "A geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once concieved and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper." Such a division, he added, amounted to an "act of suicide on themselves and of treason against the hopes of the world."

Indeed, it made him question the actions of his entire life. "I regret that I am now to die in the belief that the useless sacrifice of themselves, by the generation of '76. to acquire self government and happiness to their country, is to be thrown away by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons, and that my only consolation is to be that I live not to weep over it."

If he and the other founders had found a way to end slavery, that "fire bell in the night" probably would not have been ringing. Unsympathetically but accurately, Darren Staloff, the intellectual historian, comments that "the paradox he had elided by rhetorical sleights of hand had come home to roost."

In 1821, Jefferson, fearful that imposing federal decisions about slavery on the Southern states would lead to war, cast the issue in classical terms: "if Congress has a power to regulate the conditions of the inhabitants of the states, within the states, it will be but another exercise of that power to declare that all shall be free. are we then to see again Athenian and Lacedemonian confederacies? to wage another Peloponnesian war to settle the ascendancy between them?" That was indeed exactly what would happen four decades later, when a new Confederacy, priding itself on its warrior skills, emerged to challenge the more urban North.

Others were thinking along the same lines. Debating the Missouri Compromise, Senator James Barbour of Virginia, a friend of Jefferson, warned the North to beware of treading on the potent

sensitivities of the South. "Our people are as brave as they are loyal," he averred. "They can endure anything but insult. The moment you pass the Rubicon, . . . they will throw back upon you your insolence and aggression." In the same debate, Senator Richard Johnson of Kentucky seconded the thought, explicitly invoking the prospect of internecine conflict:

> *You will jeopardize the harmony of the Union, which may possibly ultimate in a civil war. Recollect, Greece was destroyed by division, and Rome by consolidation. Then let us be content with our inheritance, and profit by their example. . . . The examples of Greece, of Carthage, and of Rome show us the danger of being moved by a momentary excitement of popular passion.*

South Carolina's William Smith chimed in with another Southern theme, that the Romans, when a republic, had endorsed slavery, but lost their freedoms when they incited slave rebellions. "No human efforts can ever abolish slavery," he assured the Senate. Southerners in Congress were quick to threaten violence against anyone who tried to do so, and sometimes followed through. One chronicler counts some seventy violent incidents between members of Congress in the three decades after 1830.

Jefferson, Adams, and Madison Move On

ON JULY 4, 1826, THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DECLARATION, Adams and Jefferson both died. On Jefferson's bedside table were some French political pamphlets, a volume of Seneca's works, and Aristotle's *Politics*.

Sometime in the early 1830s, James Madison, preparing for his own death, penned his final advice to the nation he had done so much to build. "The advice nearest to my heart and deepest in my convictions is that the Union of the States be cherished & perpetuated," he wrote. He then invoked a figure from the works of the

ancient Greek poet Hesiod, not much quoted by the Revolutionary generation. "Let the open enemy to it be regarded as a Pandora with her box opened; and the disguised one, as the Serpent creeping with his deadly wills into Paradise."

A traveler in Virginia in May 1833 went out of his way to visit Madison because, he wrote, he wished to visit "almost the last of the Romans." He found the former president lying in his bed in a thick silk robe, reading a book, and observed that Madison had realized the "happy old age that Cicero has so touchingly and beautifully described." Madison died three years later.

America Moves West

AT THE SAME TIME AS MADISON WAS FRETTING OVER THE FUTURE OF the country, Alexis de Tocqueville, an observant young Frenchman sympathetic to the American experiment, traveled widely in the United States. The American people, he noted, had moved on from classical models. "Democratic peoples hold erudition in very low esteem and care little about what happened in Rome and Athens," he wrote in his celebrated study, *Democracy in America*. "What they want to hear about is themselves, and what they ask to be shown is a picture of the present." But then Tocqueville himself may have been unsympathetic to Greco-Roman studies, having failed in classics as a schoolboy.

The Enlightenment also was falling into disrepute. In Europe, the disappointments of the Age of Reason—most notably, the butchery of the French Revolution—led to less adulation of rationality and more of feeling. The smoke, slums, and labor abuses of the Industrial Revolution also led some people to question the centrality of reason and to a new appreciation of nature. From these feelings emerged nineteenth-century Romanticism.

The classical world was not abandoned altogether, but there was a distinct shift in how it was regarded. Following Jefferson's lead,

Rome especially receded in the public imagination, and the older world of the Greeks moved up, leading to the Greek Revival, especially in architecture. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, travelogues about Greece boomed. Every literate Englishmen who traveled seems to have left a rapturous record of his first view of Athens, "the sacred city," as one of them called it. The great English Romantic poets—Shelley, Keats, Byron, and Coleridge—all went Greek, each in his own way. "We are all Greeks," Shelley mandated. "Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts, have their root in Greece." Shelley was not correct in this, but accuracy was not the point of such passionate enthusiasm.

Most Americans were not so romantic, and no longer feeling a need to defer to it or to the values and mores of elites, they left the ancient world behind them. And as America changed, with social reformers seeking to discipline behaviors, some of the ways of the Greek and Roman worlds fell into further disrepute. The anti-alcohol "teetotaler" movement, which took off in the 1830s, disapproved of all consumption of alcohol, including the wine of which the Greeks and Romans were fond.

Other Americans expressed horror at the ancients' acceptance of homosexuality, defining it as a "crime against nature," involving acts "not fit to be named among Christians." The legal scholar Edward Livingston (Princeton, 1781), in a set of proposed laws for the state of Louisiana that he compiled in the 1820s, could not bring himself to use the word, let alone define it. "Although it certainly prevailed among most of the ancient nations," he conceded, homosexuality "cannot operate here; . . . the repugnance, disgust, and even horror, which the very idea inspires, will be a sufficient security that it can never become a prevalent one in our country." Simply offering a legal definition of homosexual acts, he worried, "would inflict a lasting wound on the morals of the people." Livingston, who had been mayor of New York City and a member of Congress, would in the following decade be named secretary of state under Andrew Jackson.

The last president to feel thoroughly at home in the classics was

the crotchety John Quincy Adams, a former professor of rhetoric and oratory at Harvard who, before taking his seat in Congress, had spent months reading Cicero for two hours a day.

Political power moved west. In 1828, America ousted John Quincy Adams and elected its first president from the trans-Appalachian states, Andrew Jackson of Tennessee. Jackson was an anti-intellectual who knew what he didn't like, which included secessionists. In 1830, at a Washington dinner celebrating the birthday of Jefferson, a parade of states' rights men criticized the federal government and supported the notion that states could "nullify," or reject, federal rulings. The governor of Georgia stood to denounce the United States government for ruling "with the absoluteness of Tiberius, with less wisdom than Augustus, and less justice than Trajan or the Antonines."

Jackson, though a slaveholder and cotton planter, responded with a powerful rejection of such sentiments, shocking the Southerners present by flatly toasting, "Our Federal Union. It must be preserved." Later, in a formal rejection of nullification, Jackson stated that, "The Constitution of the United States . . . forms a government, not a league." That last word would resonate with anyone familiar with the debates around the time of the writing of the Constitution that examined the leagues and confederacies of the ancient Greek republics.

After being reelected, Jackson was invited to visit Harvard to receive an honorary doctorate of laws. John Quincy Adams, appalled, asked the president of Harvard if the offer could be withdrawn. "Why, no," came the democratic reply. "As the people have twice decided this man knows enough to be their ruler, it is not for Harvard College to maintain that they are mistaken." Adams did not attend the ceremony for Jackson, recording in his diary that he did not desire to witness Harvard's "disgrace in conferring her highest literary honors upon a barbarian who could not write a sentence of grammar and hardly could spell his own name."

The ways of American politics continued to develop along the partisan lines foreseen by James Madison. Jackson's vice president, Martin Van Buren, himself later the president, would lead the way

in developing a mature system of political parties in the 1820s and 1830s, with conventions, platforms, and party discipline. In his autobiography he explained his thinking on the subject, stating that he knew:

> *. . . as all men of sense know, that political parties are inseparable from free government, and that in many and material respects they are very useful to the country. . . . The disposition to abuse power, so deeply planted in the human heart, can by no other means be more effectually checked.*

So, he said, wise heads, when considering parties, should "recognize their necessity" and "give them the credit they deserve." This was a long way from the views of the first two presidents.

The people were quite willing to obey Jefferson's edict to pursue happiness, but they intended to do it on their own terms. Hamilton had been correct back in 1782 when he insisted that the disinterestedness prescribed by classical republicanism would not survive as the model in the United States. And there had always existed a strain of anti-classicism in American politics, especially among the anti-Federalists.

A Free Market in Commerce, Politics—and Religion

AMERICANS IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY—AT LEAST WHITE ones—began to enjoy a competitive free market in three crucial areas: commerce, politics, and religion. In sharp contrast to the ways of Europe, all three of those realms were unregulated, non-hierarchical, and driven by individual decisions. As an inhabitant of a Mississippi River town happily shouts out in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, "You pays your money and you takes your choice!" That may be the most American sentence ever written.

A bit surprisingly, competition became the rule even in religious affairs. With the state no longer involved in churches, licensing their leaders, supporting them financially, and overseeing appointments, sects proliferated. Samuel Stanhope Smith had graduated from Princeton about the time James Madison first appeared on the campus, and had married John Witherspoon's eldest daughter and would succeed him as president of the college. On the eve of the new century, Smith applauded a nation in which people could pick and choose among faiths as they saw fit:

> *In America, a diligent and faithful clergy . . . can secure their favour only in proportion to their useful services. A fair and generous competition among the different denominations of christians, while it does not extinguish their mutual charity, promotes an emulation that will have a beneficial influence on the public morals.*

The few Federalists still around turned up their noses at the new men of religion, often self-selected and relatively uneducated, and more moved by the inner spirit than by the written word. Thomas Green Fessenden wrote a satire that ridiculed these "bawling, itinerant, field and barn preachers." He continued:

> *A stupid wretch, who cannot read,*
> *(A very likely thing indeed)*
> *Receives from Heaven a calling;*
> *He leaves his plough, he drops his hoe,*
> *Gets on his meeting clothes, and lo,*
> *Sets up the trade of bawling.*

This may be awkward poetry, but it is persuasive evidence that the Federalists remained out of step with the new America that was emerging. Yet Fessenden was correct to perceive a destabilizing tendency in evangelism. As the historian Charles Sellers summarizes the new religious approach, "Direct access to divine

grace and revelation, subordinating clerical learning to everyperson's reborn heart, vindicated the lowly reborn soul against hierarchy and authority."

In both politics and religion, adds Gordon Wood, roused Americans could invoke fundamental documents—the Constitution and the Scriptures. And, in a departure, he notes, American evangelism and commercialism would go hand in hand. Thus Tocqueville observed that in America, preachers seemed equally concerned with "eternal felicity in the next world" and "prosperity in this."

There was little room for classicism in this new configuration. These new Americans would turn not to the ancient world but to themselves for guidance through belief systems, leading to a plethora of cults and movements in nineteenth-century America—Shaker communities, Mormonism, Millerite millennialism, utopian socialism, temperance, and most significantly for the nation's future, abolitionism. "By the early nineteenth century, America had already emerged as the most egalitarian, most materialistic, most individualistic—and most evangelical Christian—society in Western history," writes Wood. "In many respects this new democratic society was the very opposite of the one the revolutionary leaders had envisaged." The Revolution, he concludes, had not failed—rather, it had exceeded the expectations of those who led it.

Given the option to do so, Americans in the nineteenth century abandoned the rationalist secularism of the Revolutionary generation. In 1775, there was one minister for every 1,500 Americans. In 1845, there was one for every 500—a tripling of the ratio. Likewise, by that point in the nineteenth century, about a third of Americans were members of churches, twice the fraction at the beginning of the War for Independence. This new religiosity led some to question the morality of heeding examples from pagan Rome. The phrase "In God We Trust" would appear, not in Latin but in English, on American coins in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Those who were not religious were even less bound by the old

ways. Lewis Gaylord Clark, editor of the influential magazine *The Knickerbocker,* declared that, "The present age is emphatically the Age of Fun. Everybody deals in jokes, and all wisdom is inculcated in a paraphrase of humor." An "Age of Fun." One can only imagine the apoplexy such an assertion would have provoked in John Adams, or the cold contempt it would elicit from George Washington.

In 1836, Washington Irving, well attuned to changes in American culture, coined the phrase "the almighty dollar," using it in his short story "The Creole Village." In the same year, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who made his mark by explaining to Americans how to think about themselves and their times, predicted in his journal that "this age will be characterized as the era of Trade, for everything is made subservient to that agency." He delved into that idea: "Superstition gives way; Patriotism; Martial ardor; Romance in the people; but Avarice does not." He also perceived a new similarity between commerce and politics. "Striking likeness in the mode of government and of trade. The fever of speculation in Maine and the prairies is matched by the ardor and restlessness of politicians—reckless experiment."

"Virtue" most of all declined as a cultural marker. In 1828, Noah Webster, a former editor of a Federalist newspaper, published the first edition of his famous *American Dictionary,* a project that had taken decades. Among his 70,000 handwritten entries, along with American novelties such as "skunk" and "squash," was "virtue." His first definition of the word was "strength." His second was "Bravery; valor." This was, he noted, "the predominant signification of *virtus* among the Romans." But then he buried that meaning, stating that "this sense is nearly or quite obsolete." Andrew Jackson would emphasize "virtue" in his farewell address of 1837, but mainly in the course of justifying his ferocious attacks on his political enemies.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Gordon Wood observes, the very meaning of "virtue" had changed, and "at times seemed to mean little more than female chastity."

Classicism Mocked

BY 1839, AMERICAN IMPATIENCE WITH CLASSICAL MODELS WAS ROUtine, even expected. Peter Parley, a widely popular author, in his children's history of Rome dismisses Cato with barely a sentence. "Had I the time, I could say much about Cato and Brutus; by many their characters are highly esteemed, but we must go on with our history." Must go on, indeed.

The following year, a statue by Horatio Greenough (Harvard, 1825) depicting George Washington as a bare-chested Roman was unveiled for display in the U.S. Capitol, only to be greeted with widespread ridicule. It eventually was moved out of the building. Davy Crockett, not generally known for his art criticism, censured another, similar depiction of Washington, commenting that "they have a Roman gown on him, and he was an American; this, ain't right."

Seen in this context, Emerson was probably playing to the crowd when, in a lecture in 1844, he sniped at collegiate study of Latin and Greek as "warfare against common sense." In an earlier lecture, he rejected the foremost writers of the English Enlightenment in favor of more recent authors such as William Wordsworth and Thomas Carlyle: "In contrast with their writing, the style of Pope, of Johnson, of Gibbon, looks cold and pedantic."

One aspect these Romantic new thinkers appeared not to see was that classicism, and especially the common bond of a classical education, had helped the new nation coalesce. It may have been outmoded, old-fashioned, a bit unfeeling, even unrealistic. Yet for all that, it had provided some of the cords that connected elites in diverse regions. Now common vocabulary and shared vision had waned, and so there was one less thing to hold together a growing, divided, and disputatious nation.

In 1854, during the contentious debates over the Kansas-Nebraska Act—that is, over the future of slavery in new states—Michael Walsh, an Irish-born congressman from New York City, stood on the floor

of the House of Representatives to discuss what had helped him make his way in America. It was most certainly not, he said, a classical education:

> *A man can be a man of education without being drilled through college. It is far better to know the men among whom one lives, than to know men who have been dead three thousand years. If I am deficient in classical lore, I am pretty well booked up in the rascality of the age in which we live. . . . I would not barter away all the practical knowledge I have received in lumber and ship-yards for all the Latin that was ever spoken in ancient Rome. I had rather speak sense in one plain and expressive language, than speak nonsense in fifty.*

Deploying Aristotle to Defend Slavery

SOMEHOW THE PROBLEM OF SLAVERY, THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE facing mid-nineteenth-century America, seemed to stir up old memories of classicism. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, in his most famous speech, "The Crime Against Kansas," delivered in May 1856, began by noting that the population of Kansas exceeded that of

> *Athens . . . when her sons, under Miltiades, won liberty for mankind on the field of Marathon; more than Sparta contained, when she ruled Greece, . . . more than Rome gathered on her seven hills, when, under her kings, she commenced that sovereign sway, which afterwards embraced the whole earth.*

He accused one pro-slavery senator, David Rice Atchison of Missouri, of stalking into the Senate chamber, "reeking with conspiracy . . . and then like Catiline he skulked away." He likened the Southerners' approach to Kansas to the plundering of Sicily by Gaius Verres, the Roman provincial governor famously pros-

ecuted by Cicero. But he ended by invoking the Bible and God. Two days later, a South Carolina congressman walked onto the floor of the Senate and nearly beat Sumner to death with a thick walking cane that bore a heavy gold head.

In opposing the spirit of the times, the South clung to the ancient world to defend the institution of slavery. The origins of this lay early in Aristotle's *Politics*, where there is a short passage, almost an aside, that, as one historian put it, had "a far greater influence on nineteenth century America than it ever did on ancient thought." Discussing the basic elements of the structure of society, such as family and village, Aristotle stated that "barbarians . . . have never yet risen to the rank of men, that is, of men fit to govern; wherefore the poets say, 'Tis right the Greeks should govern the barbarians.'" A bit later, he added that the master holds his place not because he is more skilled at the tasks at hand. Rather, he explained, "This authority is founded on the general superiority of his character." These passages, comments one historian, made Aristotle "virtually a sectional American hero. . . . Whenever a writer wished to stress the natural hierarchy of races and the ineradicable differences between types of men, he rushed straightaway to Aristotle's *Politics*."

Pro-slavery Southern academics wrapped themselves in Aristotle's cloak. "It has been contended that slavery is unfavorable to a republican spirit," argued Thomas Dew, president of William & Mary from 1836 to 1846. "But," he continued,

> *the whole history of the world proves that this is far from being the case. In the ancient republics of Greece and Rome, where the spirit of liberty glowed with the most intensity, the slaves were more numerous than the freemen. Aristotle, and the great men of antiquity, believed slavery necessary to keep alive the spirit of freedom.*

Yet even in this unhappy matter, classicism began to take a back seat to resurgent Christianity. The final line of defense for slavery was not ancient philosophy but the Bible. As Dew wrote, "When we turn to the New Testament, we find not one single passage at

all calculated to disturb the conscience of an honest slaveholder." Slavery was doomed to end sooner than any of them thought possible. But its underlying ideology of white supremacy lives on, and in fact in recent years has seen a resurgence, its proponents no longer afraid to appear in public.

The Coming of Industry

THE REMAINING FRAGMENTS OF AMERICAN CLASSICISM WOULD BE steamrollered by the Industrial Revolution.

James Watt's steam engine was devised in Glasgow in 1781. In the course of a few decades in the nineteenth century, human and animal muscle were outstripped by this new power. Placing the power of steam in boats had a liberating effect on the states between the Appalachians and the Mississippi, dramatically cutting the time and money it cost to move grain, cotton, and other farm products to market. It also reduced the prices of the cloth, clocks, plows, and other manufactured goods those riverboats carried back up the Ohio, Tennessee, Cumberland, Wabash, Monongahela, and Yazoo Rivers. In 1817, there were 17 steamboats operating on "western" rivers. By 1855, there were 727, most of them far larger than their predecessors. Rising standards of living alerted people to the causes of such changes.

What the steamboat began, the railroad and telegraph finished. They often were built along the same line. Together they moved people, goods, and information at speeds that were unprecedented and somewhat mind-boggling. The pace of life quickened dramatically. Rarely has a transition between historic periods been embodied as well as it was on July 4, 1828, when Charles Carroll, the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence, laid the first stone of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, which would grow to be one of the earliest great rail systems of the United States.

American colleges began to adjust to the times. The changes they made did not by themselves kill American classicism, which

had been declining for decades, but they certainly underscored that the times were different. "There simply was so much more to know than ever before—in science, politics, economics, philosophy, and in almost any area of knowledge one might name—that the traditional curriculum could not possibly contain it," concludes Russel Blaine Nye in his study of the cultural life of the young United States. The classics lived on in Great Books programs, and in a general belief that earning a college degree in the liberal arts was a ticket to a respectable middle-class life.

In 1831, a speaker at a Yale commencement deemed the steam engine to be equal in its powers to the orations of Cicero. In 1847, Daniel Webster conceded in speech that New Hampshire boasted "no Virgil and no Eclogues." But, he continued, his native state possessed something better: a wave of extraordinary new technologies. "The world had seen nothing like it before. . . . The ancients saw nothing like it." In 1850, Thomas Ewbank, the U.S. commissioner of patents, went even further, exulting that, "A steamer is a mightier epic than the *Iliad*."

Twenty-four years after President Jackson stepped down, another frontiersman, the very different Abraham Lincoln, moved into the White House. Like Jackson, he lacked a classical education, but he had immersed himself in two great reservoirs of the English language—the King James Bible and the works of Shakespeare. He would preside over the biggest and bloodiest split in the nation's history. The Revolutionary generation had worried for decades that catastrophe would be brought by a loss of virtue, corruption, or perhaps foreign intervention. But in fact it was caused by something right in front of their eyes: slavery. Lincoln vowed to prevail in that war, even if, he said in his second inaugural address—one of the most powerful speeches in American history—it meant that "every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword."

In the years after that Civil War, the skeptical Scottish approach to education, made so crucial to American colleges by Witherspoon and others, also began to disappear. "It is a curious fact," observed the intellectual historian Perry Miller, "that one of the

most radical revolutions in the history of the American mind took place . . . without exciting appreciable comment: the philosophy and the philosophers of Scottish Realism vanished from American colleges. . . . and were swiftly replaced by some form of idealism."

By the early twentieth century, a study of American colleges would express surprise at the "peculiar dominance" the classical curriculum had held in the early decades of American higher education. The author seemed to find it both exotic and inexplicable. "The whole career of Latin and Greek, their rise into unexampled prominence, and the strength with which they resisted encroachments on their prerogative, . . . forms an interesting chapter in our college annals," wrote Louis Franklin Snow.

Well into the twentieth century, Yale College maintained a requirement that all students pass a basic Latin examination. Former president William Howard Taft, a member of the Yale Corporation, had stood in the way of dropping it. But he died in 1930, and the requirement followed him to the grave a year later. Finally, in 1961, Harvard stopped issuing diplomas inscribed in Latin. A large part of the American past was not only forgotten, but even when glimpsed in a reference to, say, Cato or Catiline remained unrecognizable to most. The past had been buried.