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The New, New Political History

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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The New, New Political History

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Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher, eds. *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 448 pp. Illustrations, figures, notes, and index. \$59.95 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

In the winter of 1997, following a doleful listserv exchange on the state of the job market, some historians of the early American republic turned to a less depressing subject. The new thread began with two questions posed by Marion Nelson Winship: Was there a "'new political history' of the early republic"? And, if such a thing existed, might it invigorate the field, as well as the job market for SHEAR's (that is, the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic's) constituents?¹ Winship's questions generated an intense discussion that continued for several weeks. No definitive answer to those queries emerged, but a rough outline of a new political history did begin to take shape. A conference session was subsequently organized, which in turn gave birth to an anthology: *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic*. Such marvelous things sometimes result from cold dark days, dreary career prospects, and major historiographical realignments.²

It is likely that *Beyond the Founders* will constitute the last in a recent wave of books that include "Founding" and "Founders" in their titles. Since 1996, *Founding Father*, *Founding Mothers*, *Founding Mothers and Fathers*, *Founding Brothers*, and *The Other Founders* have all made their way onto historians' bookshelves.³ We have also witnessed the publication of volumes devoted to *Forced Founders*, a pair of *Forgotten Founders*, and a book *Vindicating the Founders* (no *Lost Founders* though, for obvious reasons).⁴ Traditionally, the founding fathers represented an exclusive group of elite planters, merchants, and lawyers. You could have squeezed most of them into a medium-sized room in Independence Hall. Recently, their numbers have expanded to include just about everyone who breathed between 1607 and 1787. When the editors—Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew R. Robertson and David Waldstreicher—write about going beyond the Founders, however, they mean the better-known gentlemen who resided at Mt. Vernon, Monticello, and Braintree. The editors do not discount the **[End Page 314]** importance of the federal government and the figures that dominated it, but they recoil from the idea that we can talk about early American politics as though it were an extended personal conversation between Jefferson, Madison, Adams, Hamilton, and Washington.

With *Beyond the Founders*, Pasley, Robertson and Waldstreicher enter a nearly decade-long discussion on the direction of political history. This is contested terrain, characterized by widely divergent perspectives on the state of the field. In 1999, Joel Silbey's lead article in *The Journal of Policy History* began with the following lament: "These are very hard times for students of American political history."⁵ Yet, just four years later, the editors of *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History* opened their introduction on a decidedly more sanguine note: "We are now in a moment when American political history is flourishing." Who should we believe? It depends on which type of political history we are talking about. If by "political history" we mean the "New Political History" that first emerged in the late 1950s, made extensive use of quantitative data, and focused on parties and elections, then Silbey is right. If, however, we are talking about the "newest" political history—that is, the scholarship produced during the last decade and a half, which borrows heavily from either cultural history or organizational studies in the behavioral sciences and focuses on either symbolic meanings or the significance of policymaking institutions—then the editors of *The Democratic Experiment* are on target (p. 2). Conceived in this latter form, political history is indeed flourishing today. Of course, historians are likely to get back to the subjects Silbey cares about, but probably not for several more years. Scholarly concerns have a tendency to...



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