The great thirty-year drama that stretched from 1831 to 1861 has understandably dominated historians’ accounts of the politics of slavery and sectionalism in the United States. Historians generally agree that the parallel emergence of immediate Abolitionism and Deep South extremism, punctuated by Nat Turner’s Rebellion, initiated the great sectional conflicts that would overtake American politics after David Wilmot introduced his famous Proviso in 1846. From 1846 onward, state and national politics roiled from one sectional crisis to another, eventuating in disunion and Civil War. By comparison, the politics of slavery and sectionalism in the early republic, the period stretching from the American Revolution through 1830, seem tame, sporadic, even insignificant. Reflecting these differences, the historiography on antebellum and Civil War America is vast and rich, characterized by great diversity in subject matter along with numerous interpretive disputes. Until quite recently – and again, by comparison - the historiography on the politics of slavery and sectionalism for the early republic has been thin, limited in focus to the “founders,” and characterized by consensus on fundamental issues.

As recently as 2000, historians could agree on something like a standard narrative that situated Revolutionary America and early republic in the broader history of sectional politics and slavery. That standard narrative went something like this: Revolutionary challenges to bondage resulted in the gradual abolition of slavery in the North, a brief surge of manumissions in the Upper South, and the passage of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. From this high-point of antislavery fervor, the politics of slavery devolved into a long history of slaveholder triumphs. The Constitution granted slaveholders extraordinary political power that allowed them to protect their institution from outside interference. In the 1790s, political antislavery from the North was repeatedly compromised and thwarted by self-interested political calculations and endemic white racism. After 1800, antislavery politics were confined to back-bencher New England Federalists who could pose only token opposition to policies favored by southern slaveholders and supported by their northern Republican allies.

Consequently, in the 30 years after the implementation of the Constitution, southern politicians quietly fashioned the United States government into a slaveholders’ republic, expanding both their political power and their control over the institution of slavery. The same three decades saw only brief political battles over the closing of the international slave trade and the expansion of slavery in the Missouri Controversy. Though the Constitution structured later conflicts over slavery, and the Missouri Controversy anticipated the sectional politics of the 1840s and 1850s, historians generally agreed that there was no lasting, significant sectional politics through the 1820s. That the furor displayed during the Missouri Crisis subsided as quickly as it appeared confirmed that few white Americans believed that slavery was a pressing political issue. Only in the
1830s did radical abolitionists, Deep South extremists, and rebelling slaves begin to force slavery into the national political agenda.¹

Agreeing on the basics of this narrative, for the past two decades historians have sought to evaluate the roles of various “founding fathers” in both blunting the American Revolution’s implicit threat to slavery, and in turn, creating a functionally pro-slavery constitution and a slaveholders’ republic. In practice, this scholarship often amounts to a moralistic debate where historians contrast the antislavery merits of founding fathers such as John Adams and Timothy Pickering against the hypocritical pro-slavery demerits of founders such as Thomas Jefferson.²

In a few moments, Matthew Mason will explain how, over the past decade, historians have systematically challenged this “standard narrative” of the politics of slavery in the early republic and the “founder-centered” scholarship on which it rests. Before then, however, I would like to examine how historians arrived at this narrative, to examine how historiographical trends and the increasingly narrow specialization of the historical discipline combined to produce a remarkably thin, narrowly focused body of literature on the politics of slavery in the early republic.

So how did historians get to this point? In the 1970s, the politics of slavery and sectionalism in the early republic seemed an especially promising field of historical scholarship. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, historiographical trends and increased specialization within the discipline combined both to reduce the substance of the politics of slavery in the early republic to disputes between “founding fathers,” and to subordinate the early republic to the Antebellum and Civil War periods of American history.

Like all fields of history, the politics of slavery in Revolutionary America and the early republic were fundamentally redefined by the great outpouring of scholarship that began appearing in the 1960s. By the mid-1970s, historians had produced a collection of substantial monographs and articles that both defined the politics of slavery broadly, and recognized the early republic as significant in its own right. Led by David Brion Davis’s volumes on the problem of slavery in western culture and the Age of Revolution, and Winthrop Jordan’s magisterial work on racism in early America, these works established the enduring importance of slavery, anti-slavery, and racism in early American history.³ Historians who focused on the period after 1815 produced a body of literature that seemed just as promising as the work of Davis and Jordan. In a seminal 1966 article, Richard Brown provocatively argued that the entire Jacksonian political system was designed to exclude slavery from national debate. As historians rethought the post-1830 emergence of the sectional crises that initiated the long road to disunion, they located the origins of southern sectionalism in the fifteen year period following the War of 1812. They also placed the defense of slavery at the heart of southern and national politics in the 1820s. At the same time, Abolitionist historians reached back to the 1820s as they searched for the origins of Immediatism. Taken collectively, these works conceived of the problem of slavery in Revolutionary America and the early republic broadly, using social, cultural, legal, and intellectual history in their efforts to understand the politics of slavery from the Revolution through the 1820s. In doing so, they addressed a series of fundamental questions about the perpetuation of black bondage, the solidification of white racism, the halting emergence of antislavery politics, and the concerted effort to create a political system that protected slavery and southern interests.⁴
In the 1980s, however, historiographical trends and the fragmentation of American history into narrow, specialized fields led political historians away from the politics of slavery in the early republic. Beginning in the 1960s, historians of the Revolutionary and early national periods produced excellent social and cultural histories of race and slavery. These works typically centered on topics such as the cultural history of race and racism, the social history of African Americans, the origins of Abolitionism in the 1820s, or the cultural and social processes that accompanied emancipation and racialization in the North. Unfortunately, these works reflected the increasing methodological specialization of the historical discipline. Focused narrowly on the social or cultural history of their subject, their authors displayed little interest in speaking to politics, whether at the local, state, sectional, or national level. By the 1990s, historians working on the social and cultural history of race and slavery could eschew politics altogether. Political historians only added to the barriers that separated political from social and cultural history, at most using the findings of social and cultural historians to underwrite their argument that the founding fathers’ deep-seated racism thwarted antislavery politics in the early republic. Historians Jeffrey Pasley, Andrew Robertson, and David Waldstreicher, editors of Beyond the Founders, have observed that by the 1990s, scholarship on the early republic amounted to “a social history without politics” or “a political history without the people.” Much the same could be said about the scholarship on race, slavery, and politics, where historians had to choose between histories of race and slavery without politics, or histories of the politics of slavery that focused mainly on the founding fathers.

While political and social historians talked past each other for much of the 1980s and the 1990s, historians whose main focus was on the political history of the early republic largely abandoned the politics of slavery and sectionalism. Historians had long divided the early republic around 1815. In turn, the period between 1815 and 1825 became something of an indeterminate period, serving both as the epilogue of the founding era and as the prologue to the Jacksonian era. This chronological division of the early republic produced starkly different methodologies and historiographies, neither of which had much room for the politics of slavery.

In the 1970s, the “republican” interpretation began to dominate the political history of the founding and the first party system. Emphasizing intellectual history, elite ideologies, high politics, and personality, the republican interpretation steered away from the gritty realities of slavery as an institution and as a political issue. At most, the republican interpretation probed the ideological and metaphorical uses of the concept of “slavery” in elite discourse and high politics. Thus, Stanley Elkins’s and Eric McKitrick’s The Age of Federalism – the magnus opus synthetic work of the republican interpretation – contains no entries for “sectionalism” in its index, and only nine entries for “slavery,” this for a work extending to 750 pages of text and a staggering 155 pages of endnotes. The absence of slavery and sectionalism in The Age of Federalism highlights not the shortcomings of this work, but the limits of the republican interpretation. Fascinated with towering political figures and intellectuals such as Adams, Hamilton, Jefferson, and Madison, the republican interpretation simply lacked the methodological means needed to recognize the politics of slavery in the early republic, a contentious politics that regularly animated state, regional, congressional, and even geo-political politics in the period between 1788 and 1815.
For the period after 1815, “party system,” “political culture,” and “market revolution” historians were equally dismissive of the politics of slavery through the 1820s. Party system and political culture historians quickly concluded that slavery and sectionalism were subordinate to economic and ethnocultural issues during these decades. Only when their analyses moved into the 1830s did they include slavery, sectionalism, and abolitionism in their analysis of politics in the 1830s. Even then, the politics of slavery became reactions to abolitionism, with abolitionism becoming one more reform movement that appealed to a few pious Yankees while operating as a negative reference for other electoral groups. The lack of interest in the politics of slavery continued when social control and market revolution paradigms emerged in the 1980s. For Market Revolution historians, slavery and antislavery were incidental to economic and cultural conflicts that pitted market capitalists and social reformers against subsistence agriculturalists, southern planters, and northern workingmen. Regardless of one’s interpretive preference, historians agreed that slavery was an insignificant factor in politics, if not for the entire Jacksonian and second Party era, then certainly for the period between 1815 and 1830.

As historians of the early republic abandoned the study of the politics of slavery and sectionalism, Antebellum and Civil War historians quickly filled the void. Antebellum and Civil War historians who searched for the origins of disunion and the Civil War in the founding of the American Republic adopted founding-era historians’ fascination with high politics and a select group of founding fathers. By 2000, historians such as Don Fehrenbacher, William Freehling, and Paul Finkelman had produced a new interpretation of the politics of slavery and sectionalism in the early republic. Their interpretation – which I’ll call “the founders and slavery” interpretation of the early republic - focused on a small group of founders; their actions, inactions, misdeeds, and racism; the Constitution and political institutions they created, and the high politics and personality clashes that took place within them.

Historians working within the “founders and slavery” interpretation quickly became stuck in a debate about the relative pro-slavery and anti-slavery inclinations of various “founders,” the foundations of slavery in the American political system, and the limits both placed on antislavery politics in the early republic. By the early 2000s, the politics of slavery in the early republic had become a caricatured showdown that pitted the founding fathers who remained steadfast opponents of slavery against the hypocrites who fastened the chains of slavery and racism on both the enslaved and the nation. Looking for villains, historians found them in Thomas Jefferson and the political coalition of southern planters and racist northerners that he led. Searching for counterpoints to the racist, hypocrite Jefferson, historians found them in the Federalists, whose reputations received a much-needed makeover. Once castigated for their smug elitism, leading Federalists emerged as a group of uniquely moral, antislavery paternalists: Timothy Pickering and Gouvernor Morris wailed against slavery and the corrupting influence of planters. George Washington freed his slaves. John Adams aided rebelling slaves on Saint Domingue, and as one historian has recently suggested, Adams might even had negotiated a “free-soil” Louisiana Purchase had he been president in 1803, a real “empire for liberty” unlike the “empire for slavery” created by Jefferson.

Taken collectively, the “founders and slavery” interpretation offered a compelling narrative that explained why so little action was taken against slavery in the early
republic. Led by the racist, proslavery Thomas Jefferson, southern slaveholders allied with racist northern Republicans to exclude slavery from politics, thus protecting southern interests with a functionally proslavery “policy of silent sanction.” The Missouri Controversy briefly challenged both the slaveholders’ republic and the burgeoning empire for slavery, allowing aging founders such as Jefferson, Rufus King, and James Madison to prepare their last stands for or against slavery. But both the Missouri Controversy and the founding generation would soon pass, relegating slavery to its usual place in the politics of the early republic. There it would remain until Abolitionist newspapers and Deep South gag rules revived the issue in the 1830s.

Though compelling, this interpretation was not without its problems. To again borrow from Pasley, Waldstreicher, and Robertson, the politics of slavery in the early republic had been reduced to “comparative founder-worship and demonology.” In addition, the “founders and slavery” interpretation, like its counterpart, the “Neo-Federalist” interpretation, relied on a profoundly impoverished conception of politics. With its narrow focus on personality and high politics in national institutions such as the presidency and Congress, “founders” interpretations overlooked the politics of slavery at the local, state, regional, national, and international level, a politics driven by groups as obscure as they were diverse, including Louisiana planters, Ohio farmers, and Philadelphia free blacks. In addition, the “founders and slavery” interpretation could not recognize, let alone make sense of, the politics of slavery in the 1820s. Finally, while historians disputed the degree to which certain founders were for or against slavery, “founders and slavery” interpretations fundamentally agreed that when it came to the politics of slavery in the early republic, the founders were the only group that really mattered.

By 2000, then, the politics of slavery in the early republic had been reduced to a founders-dominated prelude to antebellum sectionalism. Scholarly debate centered on the racism of the founding fathers and the degree to which their racism and devotion to slavery blunted the implicit antislavery radicalism of the American Revolution. In order to revise that historiography, historians would first have to rethink the nature and character of politics in the “early” early republic, the period between 1788 and 1815. Political historians would also have to rethink the relationship between political, social, and cultural history. In addition, historians would have to look past the chronological and methodological boundaries that first divided the early republic at 1815, and then further subdivided it into a Federalist period stretching from 1787 through 1800, a Jeffersonian period stretching from 1800 through 1815, a transitional period stretching from 1815 through 1825, and a Jacksonian period that burst onto the national political stage around 1825. By the late 1990s, historians had begun to do just that, preparing the way for the scholarship that Matt will now review for us.


5 For the fragmentation of the history of the early American republic into two distinct chronological or specialized fields, focusing on either political history or social and cultural history, see Jeffrey L. Pasley, David Waldstreicher, and Andrew Robertson eds., *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 1-28.


7 For the more general separation of the political history of the early republic from social and cultural history, see Pasley, Waldstreicher, and Robertson eds., Beyond the Founders, 1-28, quote at 2. By the early 1990s, historians of the politics of slavery had become critical of antebellum historians’ tendencies to separate the politics of slavery from the social history of whites and blacks in the South. See James Oakes, Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South (New York, 1990); Freehling, Reintegration of American History(New York, 1994).


9 Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick, The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788 – 1800 (New York, 1993). See also, for example, Drew R. McCoy, The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America (Chapel Hill, 1980). Liberal interpretations overlooked slavery as well. See, for example, Joyce Appleby, Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision in the 1790s (New York, 1984). To the degree that republican and ideological interpretations incorporated slavery and sectionalism into their analyses, they focused on the sectionalism bred by New England Federalists’ increased marginalization in national politics after 1800. See Kerber, Federalists in Dissent, 23-66.


12 The major synthetic works on Jacksonian America that the appeared in the 1990s, Harry L. Watson, Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America (New York, 1990) and Daniel

13 For the “founders and slavery” interpretation of slavery in the early republic, see note 2.


15 Pasley, Waldstreicher, and Robertson eds., *Beyond the Founders,* 2.

16 The works most responsible for forcing historians to rethink the political history of the early republic are represented in Pasley, Waldstreicher, and Robertson eds., *Beyond the Founders.*