

The Black Cockade and the Tricolor: Space and Place in New York City's Responses to the French Revolution

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Early in the morning of 29 July 1793, off Sandy Hook, the spit marking the entrance to New York Bay, the French frigate *Embuscade* fought a naval duel with the British frigate, *Boston*. After the bloody engagement (with eleven British and ten French seamen killed), the working people of New York's waterfront and supporters of the Tammany Society received the crew of the *Embuscade* were given with a rapturous welcome at the Tontine Coffee House.^[1] (<https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/humanities/staff/michaelrapport/>) This reaction was an expression of one side of the American response to the French Revolution. It was part and parcel of the Genet Affair, in which the young French diplomat, Edmond Genet, travelled up the east coast of the United States trying to drum up support for France in its struggle against Britain in the French Revolutionary Wars.^[2] (<https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/humanities/staff/michaelrapport/>) There were further crises entangled with the French Revolution: the controversy over the Jay Treaty of 1795 that led in turn to French privateering attacks on American shipping in an undeclared naval war between the two countries, the “XYZ Affair,” and the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798.^[3] (<https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/humanities/staff/michaelrapport/>) The impact of the French Revolution acted on the deep political divisions within the young American republic, the central questions being the country's political future as well as its social direction and its identity, as Americans debated the significance of the French Revolution and how, in practical terms, the U.S. should respond.

Very briefly, Federalists argued that the elites (who tended also to belong to the established churches) should safeguard political and social stability within the boisterous clamour of republican politics by controlling the levers of government, with a stronger central government, including a central bank. Their vision of the American future was one in which commerce, finance, and manufacturing would evolve under the protection of this stronger political order. Their Democratic-Republican opponents feared that a powerful federal government would threaten the rights of the states and the individual citizen; they tended to argue that power should reside closer to the people and laid greater emphasis on states' rights, partly because some of their prominent figures were southern slaveholders. Their ideal vision was for a nation of small producers, for the Federalist aim of a commercial and industrial powerhouse might concentrate wealth in the hands of a few and create an urban underclass of impoverished workers unable to embrace the civic virtue that republican citizenship demanded.^[4]
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U. S. politics in the 1790s presented an elaborate mosaic of geographical, social, and ideological interests. The clash of different world views played out at many levels in response to the French Revolution, including diplomacy (the question of U.S. neutrality in the French Revolutionary Wars, whether it should lean more favourably to the French or to the British),^[5] (//58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftn5) constitutional questions and rights (not least in the era of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798),^[6] (//58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftn6) economic questions such as manufacturing, trade and commerce (what kind and with whom?), the westward expansion of the United States,^[7] (//58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftn7) and slavery and abolition.^[8] (//58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftn8) But it also played out in political culture.^[9]
 (//58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftn9)

This article focuses on one expression of that political culture: the uses and appropriation of urban space. My own work these days is on revolutionary Paris, namely how the revolutionaries appropriated the buildings and spaces left by the Ancien Régime, adapted them to accommodate the institutions of the new civic order and in the process embellished them to convey their political messages. As Henri Lefebvre, the doyen of spatial theory, argued, space can be appropriated in both material and symbolic ways. For Lefebvre, *representations of space* are how space is envisaged and ordered by planners, architects, and proprietors. Conversely, *representational spaces* involve the ways in which people take over the space in symbolic and material ways, subverting the original intentions behind the site's construction.^[10] (//58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftn10) This appropriation can in turn be challenged: the conflicts arising from the uses of space are itself part of the process of revolution.

The French Revolution had a direct impact on how American political actors used and embellished American urban space. The broader importance of this point is that it suggests how responses to the Revolution in France inscribed itself in material and symbolic ways on the urban landscape in the United States, intersecting with American politics and historical memory. New York City is a particularly apt choice because it had been devastated by fire and was a loyalist hub while under British military occupation.^[11] (//58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftn11) Afterwards it was briefly the capital of the young Republic (1783-90). So, its people and cityscape had undergone a cycle of trauma and renewal. Meanwhile, as a maritime city, its social and political geography saw a close mixing of neighborhoods of varying character and purpose which made it an intricate social and political mosaic crammed into a compact area on the southern tip of Manhattan.^[12] (//58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftn12) All this almost certainly sharpened the bitter partisanship that shaped the response to the French Revolution.

The spatial dimension in New Yorkers' contentious reactions to the French Revolution operated at two levels. One was within establishments arising from civil society, such as the Tammany Society, the Tontine Coffee House, and the City Hotel. The other was over sites of memory from the United States' own revolutionary struggle from 1776.



“A new and accurate plan of the city of New York in the state of New York in North America.”

Source: The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1797.

The Tammany Society, founded in May 1787, met in the Exchange on Broad Street and had two purposes.^[13]—(//58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftn13) The first was the political education of the people. It established an “American Museum” in the Exchange and held parades on key anniversaries, such as 4 July, Evacuation Day, Washington’s birthday, and the anniversary of its own founding.^[14]—(//58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftn14) At these events, Tammany members dressed in Native American costumes, which may also have reflected their own ‘nativism’, since the artisanal membership was profoundly concerned by the influx of new arrivals from Europe (the Irish, in particular), which also reignited old Protestant fears of “Popery”. So, Tammany projected its views of American history and its sense of American identity by creating its own civic space – the American Museum – and by periodically appropriating the public space of the city’s streets. The second aim was to oppose what it saw as the expanding power of the city’s elites, the Federalists and former Loyalists – these last reflecting anxieties arising from New York’s role as a Loyalist refuge during the revolutionary years. All this led the society to welcome the French Revolution enthusiastically. When the news came that National Guard units and Parisian militants had overthrown the monarchy in France on 10 August 1792, a Tammany dinner toasted “the Union and example of France and America” to “enlighten and bless Mankind.”^[15]—(//58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftn15). Shortly afterwards, its members took to parading wearing the red Phrygian bonnet. When *L’Embascade* first arrived in New York on 10 June 1793, Tammany members marched down to Peck Slip singing the *Marseillaise* and greeted the French crew with tricolor cockades: the Federalist response would later be to sport the black cockade in mourning for Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette (hence this article’s title).^[16]—(//58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftn16) In 1794, Tammany’s American Museum displayed a model of the guillotine, complete with a beheaded doll which perhaps took its educational mission a little too far.

The Tontine Coffee House took its name from a tontine, a business venture where each participant put in a share of the investment in return for a lifetime annuity. This was how the three-storey coffee house and meeting place was funded as it rose on the corner of Wall and Water Streets, opening for business in early 1793. Its investors were stockbrokers who had famously met beneath a buttonwood tree on Wall Street. The Tontine Coffee House became their venue for trading and for merchants to gather, its large public room becoming New York's stock exchange. It was a venue for the mercantile elite that provided the Federalist backbone in the maritime cities of the north-eastern United States.^[17] Yet, the Tontine became a disputed public space. It also had a large assembly room for meetings and balls. On 14 June 1793, the Tammany Society took it over to celebrate the arrival of *Embuscade* – and at one point in the festivities, one member clambered onto the rooftop and planted a huge red Phrygian bonnet, which would soon be joined by a French tricolor flag.^[18] Later, after *Embuscade* had returned from its lethal encounter with *Boston*, the crew was feted in the assembly room of the Tontine, which was decorated with the interwoven flags of the two republics. It was also where the French representative, the hellraising Genet, was feted by his American admirers when he arrived on 7 August.^[19] When news came on 9 March 1794 that Toulon had been retaken by French forces, Democratic-Republicans gathered at the Tontine to draft a letter of congratulations to the Convention and to sing the *Carmagnole*.^[20]

The next day, some 800 New Yorkers marched up to the City Hotel – a new enterprise covering an entire block on Broadway between Thames and Cedar Streets and that, like the Tontine, was supposed to serve the financiers and merchants who came to the city to buy, sell, and make deals. Yet, the marchers carried the red cap of liberty and the entwined flags of France and the United States, while the order of procession celebrated 'our brave Republican Friends and Allies'.^[21] So, the eminently respectable establishment was turned into another site of political contest.

The response to the appropriation of such spaces for Democratic-Republican, pro-French demonstrations shows how contentious it was. One night in May 1795 – in the fraught weeks before the ratification of the controversial Jay Treaty – the tricolor was torn down and the lamps illuminating the Phrygian bonnet smashed, an act of iconoclasm that provoked the Democratic Society to offer a 150 Dollar reward to whoever managed to catch the culprit. It also acted quickly to replace the bonnet, this time 'suspended upon the point of an American Tomahawk' between the French and American flags. Toasts were raised, including one to the American, French and Dutch Republics, and the celebrations continued as participants danced the *Carmagnole* in the Tontine's upstairs assembly room. The whole event offered a defiant transatlantic melding of symbols.^[22]

While turning some of the city's new organs of commercial vitality into radical spaces, the Democratic-Republicans also appropriated spaces connected with the heritage of the American Revolution as they demonstrated support for France. As part of the celebrations of *Embuscade* on 14 June 1793, a group of French sailors and their New York sympathizers marched down to the Bowling Green with axes and shovels. The Bowling Green had been a site of symbolic regicide back in 1776, when, after hearing a reading of the Declaration of Independence while mustered on the Common on 9 July, Washington's troops joined civilians in toppling the statue of King George III and filed off the crowns that topped the iron railings around the small park. Now the French sailors and their American friends prised up the remains of the statue's plinth and smashed it into rubble, connecting the United States' struggle for liberty with the French Revolution.^[23] Federalists denied this connection, for whom, like Alexander Hamilton, the American Revolution had been "free, regular and deliberate," while the French Revolution was "sullied by crimes and extravagancies."^[24] For Federalists, American identity involved moving beyond the revolutionary heritage and building the

kind of economic powerhouse and stronger state that they envisaged. For Democratic-Republicans, however, American citizenship entailed keeping the revolutionary inheritance on the boil and being vigilant against the dangers of what they saw as 'aristocracy'. To underscore the point further, after the Jay Treaty had been negotiated with Britain, protests erupted in New York in July 1795: the Democratic Society again connected the American Revolution with the French struggle by organizing a march of revolutionary war veterans on 18 July, again bearing the interwoven French and American flags, burning a portrait of John Jay, the American negotiator, at the remains of a small redoubt (dubbed 'Bunker Hill'), constructed to defend New York City against British attack back in 1776.^[25] ([/58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftn25](https://58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftn25)).

Revolutionary and contentious politics are, among other things, struggles for the physical and symbolic control of space. This is true even of the internet age: one thinks of Tahrir Square in 2011 or the Euromaidan and Revolution of Dignity in 2013-14.^[26] ([/58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftn26](https://58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftn26)). This is because, to demonstrate power and to claim legitimacy, protest needs to be more than just verbal and symbolic. It demands a demonstration of both individual personal commitment and of its collective power by gathering people around the same messages and symbols. That demands command, however temporarily, of material space. The symbolism is even more powerful when that appropriation of space – Lefebvre's *representational spaces* – subverts the original purpose and meaning of its designers (*representations of space*). In demonstrating their support for the French Revolution, Tammany and New York's Democratic-Republicans did just this, both by appropriating sites intended primarily for the city's mercantile elites and by protesting at places closely associated with the memory of the American Revolution, a reading of the past that, moreover, was reinforced by Tammany's creation of a new site, the American Museum. Struggles for the physical control and the symbolic embellishment of material space are therefore an essential part of the process and culture of revolutionary and contentious politics. Moreover, the spatial dimension of partisan politics demonstrates how events in one part of the Atlantic world – revolutionary France – could be etched on the physical landscape of another – early republican New York City.

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Title Image: "The New York Public Library. "Tontine Coffee House, N.Y.C., 1820" The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1903. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e0-d6cd-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>' (<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e0-d6cd-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>).

Endnotes:

[1] ([/58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftnref1](https://58328FC1-C427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522C#_ftnref1)) *Greenleaf's New York Journal and Patriotic Register*, 3 August 1793; *New-York Journal*, 31 July 1793 and 3 August 1793.

[1]—(/#58328FC1=€427=459D=BCE6=991B336E522€#_ftnref2) On this affair, see H. Ammon, *The Genet Mission* (New York: Norton, 1973).

[3]—(/#58328FC1=€427=459D=BCE6=991B336E522€#_ftnref3) For the politics of this period generally, see F. D. Cogliano, *Revolutionary America, 1763-1815: A Political History* (London: Routledge, 2000); S. Elkins and E. McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); R. Horsman, *The new republic: the United States of America, 1789-1815* (Harlow: Longman, 2000); J. R. Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation in Crisis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993); Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[4]—(/#58328FC1=€427=459D=BCE6=991B336E522€#_ftnref4) For a very helpful analysis of the partisan divisions, see Cogliano, *Revolutionary America*, 137-44.

[5]—(/#58328FC1=€427=459D=BCE6=991B336E522€#_ftnref5) On the challenges of neutrality, see S. Moats, *Navigating Neutrality: Early American Governance in the Turbulent Atlantic* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2021); A. DeConde, *Entangling Alliance: Politics and Diplomacy under George Washington* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1958).

[6]—(/#58328FC1=€427=459D=BCE6=991B336E522€#_ftnref6) J. C. Miller, *Crisis in Freedom: The Alien and Sedition Acts* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951); W. Bird, *Criminal Dissent: Prosecutions under the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

[7]—(/#58328FC1=€427=459D=BCE6=991B336E522€#_ftnref7) R. Kluger, *Seizing Destiny: The Relentless Expansion of American Territory* (New York: Vintage, 2007); R. Horsman, *The Frontier in the Formative Years, 1783-1815* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1970).

[8]—(/#58328FC1=€427=459D=BCE6=991B336E522€#_ftnref8) Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC, and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); G. W. Van Cleve, *A Slaveholders' Union: Slavery, Politics, and the Constitution in the Early American Republic* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[9]—(/#58328FC1=€427=459D=BCE6=991B336E522€#_ftnref9) S. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

[10]—(/#58328FC1=€427=459D=BCE6=991B336E522€#_ftnref10) H. Lefebvre (trans. D. Nicolson-Smith), *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 33, 38-9. The limitations of Lefebvre's conception of space include a lack of consideration of how the very materiality of space shaped human behaviour. On this point, see L. Jerram, 'Space: A Useless Category for Historical Analysis?' *History and Theory* lii, No. 3 (2013), 400-419. For a wide range of spatial approaches, see Riccardo Bavaj, Konrad Lawson, Bernhard Struck, *Doing Spatial History* (London: Routledge, 2022) and, by the same authors, 'A Guide to Spatial History: Areas, Aspects, and Avenues of Research' (June 2021) online at the Saint Andrews University's Institute for Transnational and Spatial History: <https://spatialhistory.net/guide/> (<https://spatialhistory.net/guide/>).

[11]—(/#58328FC1=€427=459D=BCE6=991B336E522€#_ftnref11) On loyalism in New York, see C. F. Minty, *Unfriendly to Liberty: Loyalist Networks and the Coming of the American Revolution in New York City* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2023); R. Chopra, *Unnatural Rebellion: Loyalists in New York City during the Revolution* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011); J. L. Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalists in Revolutionary New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

[12]-(#58328FC1-E427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522E#_ftnref12) For New York's urban context and social geography in this period, see C. Abbott, 'The Neighbourhoods of New York, 1760-1775,' *New York History* vol. 55 (1974); P. A. Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 12-13, 100-1; G. B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: the unruly birth of democracy and the struggle to create America* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 223-232. For a panoramic yet richly textured narrative of New York's evolution, see E. G. Burrows, and M. Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[13]-(#58328FC1-E427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522E#_ftnref13) *The Daily Advertiser* No. 1951 (May 21, 1791).

[14]-(#58328FC1-E427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522E#_ftnref14) 'Society of Tammany or Columbian Order: Committee of Amusement Minutes, October 24, 1791 to February 23, 1795', New York Public Library, Division of Rare Books and Manuscripts, 305-C-3.

[15]-(#58328FC1-E427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522E#_ftnref15) 'Society of Tammany or Columbian Order: Committee of Amusement Minutes, October 24, 1791 to February 23, 1795', New York Public Library, Division of Rare Books and Manuscripts, 305-C-3.

[16]-(#58328FC1-E427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522E#_ftnref16) Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 318.

[17]-(#58328FC1-E427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522E#_ftnref17) For descriptions see H. Wansey, *An Excursion to the United States of North America in the Summer of 1794* excerpted in B. Still, *Mirror for Gotham: New York as seen by Contemporaries from Dutch Days to the Present* (New York: University Press, 1956), 65.

[18]-(#58328FC1-E427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522E#_ftnref18) I. N. Phelps Stokes, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909, compiled from original sources*, 6 vols (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1915-1928), v, 1297.

[19]-(#58328FC1-E427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522E#_ftnref19) H. Ammon, *The Genet Mission* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 116-17.

[20]-(#58328FC1-E427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522E#_ftnref20) Phelps Stokes, *Iconography*, v, 1305.

[21]-(#58328FC1-E427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522E#_ftnref21) *Daily Advertiser*, 10 March 1794.

[22]-(#58328FC1-E427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522E#_ftnref22) *Greenleaf's New York Journal and Patriotic Register*, 23 May 1795; *American Minerva*, 19 May 1795; *The Argus, or Greenleaf's New Daily Advertiser*, 19 May 1795.

[23]-(#58328FC1-E427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522E#_ftnref23) Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 318.

[24]-(#58328FC1-E427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522E#_ftnref24) Quoted in R. Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 434.

[25]-(#58328FC1-E427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522E#_ftnref25) Phelps Stokes, *Iconography*, v, 1323.

[26]-(#58328FC1-E427-459D-BCE6-991B336E522E#_ftnref26) On Tahrir Square during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, see, among many other sources, the BBC's day-by-day chronology with images and interactive map: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12327995> (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12327995>); and Jehane Noujaim's 2013 documentary film, *The Square (El-Maydan)*. On the Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-14, see, among others, the *Kyiv Post*'s timelines and 'live' updates as well as its series 'Voices of EuroMaidan',

archived at <https://archive.kyivpost.com/hot/euromaidan>
(<https://archive.kyivpost.com/hot/euromaidan>), and Evgeny Afineevsky and Den Tolmor's 2015
documentary film, *Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom*.

