A Growing Sense of Nationhood

13.1 Introduction

From a distance on that rainy night of September 13, 1814, you might have mistaken the bombardment for thunder, because sometimes the fuses burned too fast and the bombs burst in air. But Maryland lawyer Francis Scott Key knew better. He huddled in a boat in Baltimore harbor and watched as British warships fired on Fort McHenry.

Fort McHenry had a flag so big "that the British would have no trouble seeing it from a distance," boasted the fort's commander. It was 30 feet high and 42 feet long. Key knew that if the flag came down, it meant that both the fort and Baltimore had been lost. But when the sun came up, the flag was still there, and the British were retreating.

Key celebrated by writing a poem called "The Defence of Fort McHenry." Six days later it was published in the *Baltimore Patriot*. Before long, Key's poem had been reprinted across the country. In October 1814 it was set to music and sung as "The Star-Spangled Banner." This song stirred the pride of Americans for generations. In 1931 it was proclaimed the national anthem.

Inspirational moments like these during the War of 1812 helped give Americans a feeling of national identity. But what did being American mean? How was it different from being European? Alexis de Tocqueville, a French nobleman who toured the United States in 1831 and 1832, had an answer. "I do not know a country where the love of money holds a larger place in the heart of man," he wrote in his book *Democracy in America*. The pursuit of wealth was an important element of the emerging American identity. But there were other elements as well. And not all Americans wanted to be alike. In this chapter you will learn how a growing sense of nationhood developed during the early 19th century in spite of significant regional differences.

13.2 Developing a Nation in a Land of Differences

The United States of the early 1800s was a very young country. Older adults could still remember when they were British subjects—and proud of it. (George Washington had once yearned to be a British officer.) Even after the Revolution, America seemed less a single nation than a collection of states.

A surge of patriotism following the War of 1812 helped forge a new national identity. The opposition of many Federalists to the war—a stance which their opponents denounced as disloyal—all but killed off the Federalist party. Leaders like James Monroe hoped that partisan strife (bitter fighting between political parties) was a thing of the past. Most Americans looked with pride on a rapidly growing country whose brightest days, they believed, lay ahead.

The American Landscape in the Early 1800s Americans' image of their country in 1800 was very different from what it is today. Two out of every three Americans still lived within 50 miles of the Atlantic coast. Fewer than one in ten lived west of the Appalachians. These round-topped, forested mountains stretched like a bumpy spine from Maine through Georgia. They made travel between east and west very difficult.

Beyond the mountains the land flattened out, but was covered by dense woods. More and more settlers crossed the Appalachians in the early 1800s, felling trees and starting farms and mills. For Americans of the day, this land between the eastern mountains and the Mississippi River was "the West." Across the Mississippi lay a vast, unexplored wilderness.

Everywhere, travel was difficult and slow. Nothing moved faster than a horse could run —not people, not goods, not messages. News could take weeks to travel from one city to another, as the post office labored to deliver letters and newspapers over rutted, muddy roads.

In part because of the geographical differences, distinct regional lifestyles developed. This led to stereotypes, or exaggerated and sometimes scornful images of different groups. The "Yankees" of the Northeast, with its growing cities and bustling trade, were seen as enterprising, thrifty, and (in the eyes of southerners) quick to chase a dollar. The rich plantation owners of the South were seen as gracious, cultured, and (in the eyes of Yankees) lazy. The frontiersmen who sought their fortunes in the West were deemed rugged, hardy, and (in the eyes of easterners) crude. Many of America's leaders knew they would have to overcome geographical obstacles in order to truly unite the country. Among other ideas, they favored an ambitious program of building roads and canals to make transportation easier and faster.

Symbols and Values Uniting America required more than roads and waterways. It required citizens to *feel* American. One way to accomplish that was to build on Americans' pride in their government. After the British burned Washington, D.C., during the War of 1812, Congress hired architects to rebuild the White House and the Capitol in a style that would rival the grand, stately buildings of Europe. Congress complained about the cost, but not about the result. These magnificent buildings are revered to this day as national symbols.

Another national symbol was born during this period—Uncle Sam. Legend has it that the name came from Sam Wilson, a New York butcher. "Uncle Sam," it was said, had provided the army with meat during the War of 1812. More

likely the name was made up to match the initials *U.S.*, for United States. After the war, Uncle Sam became a popular nickname for the federal government. (The cartoon figure of Uncle Sam came later.)

A national identity required more than symbols. There had to be shared values as well. White American men saw themselves as devoted to individualism and equality. Their commitment to these values may not have extended to slaves, Native Americans, or women. Still, they were united in the belief that they were different—and better—than Europeans.

Alexis de Tocqueville sensed this feeling just four days into his visit. "The Americans carry national pride to an altogether excessive length," he noted with irritation. By the end of his trip, however, he had come to admire this distinctly American spirit. That spirit was reflected in every aspect of life, from politics to art, music, and literature.

13.3 Politics: The Era of Good Feelings

After being elected president in 1816, James Monroe went on a "goodwill tour." Huge crowds greeted him so warmly that a newspaper proclaimed an Era of Good Feelings. Monroe's eight years as president are still known by this name today. To many Americans at the time, it seemed that a new period of national unity had dawned.

Economic Nationalism The swelling of nationalist spirit was reflected in proposals that the federal government take a more active role in building the national economy. One of the leading supporters of such measures in Congress was Henry Clay of Kentucky.

Clay was a tall, slender man and an eloquent speaker, full of charm and intelligence. Driven by ambition, Clay longed to be president. He campaigned for the office five times, but never succeeded. A man of principle, Clay once stated proudly, "I would rather be right than be president."

Clay believed that America's future lay in **capitalism,** an economic system in which individuals and companies produce and distribute goods for profit. But he also believed that the national government had a role to play in encouraging economic growth. His "American System" called for high tariffs to protect industry, as well as federal spending on transportation projects like roads and canals.

A third part of Clay's plan was a new national bank to standardize currency and provide credit. Congress adopted this idea in 1816 when it created the second Bank of the United States. (The first national bank had been allowed to lapse in 1811.) The bank was a private business, but the federal government owned one fifth of it and deposited government funds there.

Another early champion of economic nationalism was South Carolina's John C. Calhoun. At six feet two inches, Calhoun was extremely tall for his time. He looked even taller because his thick black hair stood up as if he had seen a ghost. In Congress, Calhoun supported the national bank, a permanent road system, and a protective tariff. Yet in other ways he resisted federal power. By the 1830s, he would become the leading spokesman for states' rights, largely to protect slavery in the South. His career illustrates the tensions between nationalism and the pull of regional differences.

A third proponent of nationalism was Daniel Webster of Massachusetts. Nicknamed "Black Dan" for his dark hair and eyebrows, Webster served several terms in both the House and Senate. Unlike Clay, who was a War Hawk, Webster bitterly opposed the War of 1812. After the war, however, he voiced strong support for Clay's American System. "Let us act under a settled conviction, and an habitual feeling, that these 24 states are one country," he urged in 1825. Later, Webster would strongly debate Calhoun's claim that states had the right to defy the federal government.

Judicial Nationalism Both nationalism and commerce had a friend in the Supreme Court's Chief Justice, John Marshall. Appointed by John Adams in 1801, Marshall wrote some of the most important court decisions in American history.

Marshall's decisions had two major impacts. First, they strengthened the role of the Court itself, as well as federal power over the states. Second, his rulings encouraged the growth of capitalism. Several specific cases show how. In *McCulloch v. Maryland* (1819), the Court confirmed Congress's power to create a national bank that was free from state interference. This strengthened the federal government's position. In another case, Marshall's Court ruled that business contracts were inviolable—they could not be broken, even by state legislatures. This ruling gave contracts a fundamental place in constitutional law. And in *Gibbons v. Ogden* (1824), the Court further reduced state powers. This case struck down a monopoly that New York State had granted to a steamboat company operating between New York and New Jersey. Only Congress, the Court said, had the authority to regulate interstate commerce. Besides strengthening the power of the federal government, this decision promoted business growth by limiting the ability of states to regulate transportation.

The End of the Era of Good Feelings In 1824, four candidates (including Clay) competed to succeed Monroe as president. As you will learn in the next chapter, none of the candidates won a majority in the Electoral College. As a

result, the election ended up in the House of Representatives. The House elected John Quincy Adams, the son of John Adams.

The House's action enraged the candidate who had received the most votes on election day, war hero and Indian fighter Andrew Jackson of Tennessee. Jackson vowed to renew the fight in the next election. The voters who rallied around him in 1828 would become the heart of a new political party, the Democrats. The Era of Good Feelings was over. "Partisan strife" was here to stay.

13.4 Early American Art

Americans had brought European art traditions with them to the colonies, but by the 1800s they were developing styles all their own. Not all artists were professionals. Ordinary people produced many kinds of **folk art.** Men carved weathervanes and hunting decoys. Women sewed spare bits of cloth into quilts. Untrained artists created signs, murals, and images of national symbols like the flag. Such folk art was simple, direct, and often very colorful.

Most professional artists made a living doing portraits. The best-known portrait artist was Gilbert Stuart. The picture of George Washington on a dollar bill is adapted from a Stuart painting. When the British attacked Washington, D.C., during the War of 1812, President Madison's wife, Dolly, saved Stuart's painting of Washington from the burning White House.

Strangely enough, it was an Englishman whose work led to a uniquely American brand of fine art. When Thomas Cole arrived from England in 1818, he fell in love with America's immense and varied landscape. His most famous works feature both storm clouds and sunny skies over broad stretches of unspoiled land. The glowing light made a striking contrast to the stormy darkness. Fellow artists followed Cole's example and started what became known as the Hudson River School of painting. These painters focused on nature rather than people, often choosing to paint broad, scenic vistas. The gorgeous light in their paintings had an almost religious quality, as if God were smiling on America.

Other artists portrayed more particular aspects of nature. John James Audubon painted 435 finely detailed portraits of birds. In some respects, Audubon was more a naturalist than an artist. He made accurate, realistic studies of the species he observed in the fields and woods. No one in America would print his four-volume book, so he found a publisher in England. The Birds of America made him America's first internationally famous artist.

Philadelphia's George Catlin turned his eye on the natives of the American West. He saw that Native Americans' traditional ways were disappearing. For years Catlin crisscrossed the West, drawing the native people. He captured in rich colors their villages, their hunts, and their rituals.

By choosing as their subject the wondrous features of their new country, Americans gave their art a distinct identity. At times they may have presented dangerous landscapes in deceptively warm tones. Still, the vividness and optimism of their work accurately reflected the national outlook.

13.5 Early American Music

Until the 19th century, music in America was performed and heard mostly in church. There were popular songs, too, but they were usually old tunes with new lyrics. The music for "The Star-Spangled Banner," for instance, came from an English drinking song.

With growing prosperity came an outburst of musical activity. In the North, orchestras played classical music from Europe. They also provided the music for the *cotillion*, in which groups of four couples danced together with elegantly coordinated movements. Dancers swirled through ballrooms, performing lively minuets, gavottes, mazurkas, and waltzes. Sometimes female dancers lifted their floor-length petticoats to show off their footwork. Displaying their ankles was considered quite daring.

In the South, slaves combined the hymns of white churchgoers with African musical styles to create **spirituals.** They also entertained themselves, and sometimes their masters, with rowdy folk songs accompanied by violin, drum, and banjo (an African American invention). In the South and West, square dances became common. These were less formal versions of the popular cotillion. As the fiddles played, a "caller" told dancers which steps to perform.

As demand for popular songs grew, composers answered with a stream of patriotic anthems. The best known is "America," written in 1832 by Samuel Francis Smith. It begins "My country, 'tis of Thee" and is sung to the tune of England's "God Save the King."

White composers from the South, inspired by the music of black slaves, created a type of music known as *minstrel songs.* The songs honored black music by mimicking it. But at the same time, the performers mocked African Americans by blackening their white faces, wearing shabby clothes, and singing in exaggerated African American dialects. In 1828 Thomas Dartmouth Rice caused a national sensation with his song "Jump Jim Crow":

Weel about and turn about and do jis so
Ev'ry time I weel about I jump Jim Crow.

The racist phrase “Jim Crow,” which came from Rice’s black minstrel show character, had a long life. Many years later, laws that discriminated against African Americans would be known as “Jim Crow laws.”

Minstrel shows became the most popular form of entertainment in America. They inspired composer Stephen Foster to write such famous songs as “Old Folks at Home,” “Camptown Races,” and “Oh! Susanna.” Foster earned nationwide fame, proof that a truly American musical tradition had arrived.

13.6 Early American Literature

In 1820, a British writer sneered, “Who reads an American book, or goes to an American play, or looks at an American picture or statue?” In the eyes of Europeans, the United States was a culturally backward nation. Yet America was finding its cultural voice, especially in literature.

Like the painters of the Hudson River School, writers began to use uniquely American subjects and settings. One of the first to achieve literary fame was Washington Irving. He drew on German folklore for his colorful tales of “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” but set them in the wilds of upstate New York. Irving’s enchanted stories were an immediate hit.

The nation’s first novelist was James Fenimore Cooper. In books such as *The Pioneers* and *The Last of the Mohicans*, Cooper wrote about the adventures of rugged frontiersmen venturing into the wilderness. His descriptions of frontier life and Native Americans attracted worldwide interest. In France, 18 publishers competed to publish *The Pioneers*.

Davy Crockett was a real-life frontiersman who spun tall tales about his life as a hunter, scout, soldier, and explorer. His election to Congress from Tennessee horrified Alexis de Tocqueville. The Frenchman described Crockett as a man “who has no education, can read with difficulty, has no property, no fixed residence, but passes his life hunting, selling his game to live, and dwelling continuously in the woods.” But that very image captivated Americans, who saw Crockett as the fictional frontier hero come to life. Crockett’s autobiography, which was full of his plain backwoods speech and rough humor, helped give popular literature a new, distinctly American accent.

New England’s Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was one of the first serious American poets. He wrote America’s first epic poem, *The Song of Hiawatha*, based on stories of Native Americans. Other poems, like his famous “Paul Revere’s Ride,” touched on patriotic themes. In “The Building of the Ship,” Longfellow celebrated America’s growing importance to the world:

…Sail on, O Ship of State!
Sail on, O Union, strong and great!
Humanity with all its fears,
With all the hopes of future years,
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!

In both subject matter and style, writers like these helped nurture the growing sense of national identity. In particular, they encouraged the myth of rugged individualism that for many people—at home and abroad—best characterized America.

13.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you read about the growing sense of nationhood in the United States after the War of 1812. You used an illustration of the American flag to organize information about the art, music, politics, and literature that helped define the American identity.

People in the United States during this time were extremely proud of their country. Despite regional differences, it seemed that Americans were building a nation unlike any seen before. Rulers served the people, rather than the other way around. Men who started with nothing became wealthy merchants or powerful statesmen. That was what it meant to be *American*. It was what made you different from a European.

But was it really true?

Yes, answered Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville—but it was not the whole truth. African slaves and Native Americans, he wrote, “both occupy an equally inferior position in the country that they inhabit; both experience the effects of tyranny.” Still, de Tocqueville was impressed with the spirit of equality and national pride among white men of different classes.

The growing sense of national identity was reflected both in politics and culture. Congress and the Supreme Court took action to strengthen the national economy and the power of the federal government. Distinctly American themes and styles developed in art, music, and literature.

Yet, beneath the surface, inequalities in wealth and regional differences—especially over slavery—threatened national unity. How much longer could America remain united? Not long, concluded de Tocqueville. “Slavery, in the midst of the

democratic freedom and enlightenment of our age, is not an institution that can endure…. One must expect great misfortunes.” Later on you will learn just how tragically right he was.