In a 1612 essay titled “Of Marriage and Single Life,” Francis Bacon argued that families were an “impediment” to men’s greatness. Wives and children distracted men from public affairs and made them reticent to take risks essential to performing great deeds. That was why “the best works . . . have proceeded from the unmarried or childless men which, both in affection and means, have married and endowed the public.” However, family men were notable for one crucial virtue. They were husbands and fathers who exhibited “the greatest care of future times, unto which they know they must transmit their greatest pledges.”

The American founders urged some men to greatness. However, given fears of democratic disorder, they used the grammar of manhood to encourage most men to devote themselves to family life. They agreed with Bacon that marriage catalyzed caution and motivated young males to mature into sober, orderly adults responsible for protecting and provisioning dependents. A common cure for male license was a marriage license.

The founders generally agreed that the Bachelor’s tendency toward licentiousness intensified America’s democratic distemper and invited men to abuse women. They also agreed that the single young man should be encouraged to resist the Bachelor within by settling a piece of land and marrying a respectable woman to share affection, carry his seed, nurture his infants, and contribute to his estate. He thereby assumed responsibility for family protection, productivity, and posterity; exchanged self-interest for family interest; and sacrificed personal pleasure to provide property and patrimony for his heirs, educate them in “the moral character of the man,” and prepare them to perpetuate the family dynasty.

The founders drew on the grammar of manhood to endorse enthusiastically the Family Man who honored his debt to ancestors, fixed a respectable place for himself in the community, and developed a dynastic stake in the future.

The Family Man’s presumptive caution, maturity, responsibility, sobriety, and orderly conduct legitimized his power over women and earned him republican citizenship. A worthy man committed himself to protect rather than
persecute women. A proper husband and father wielded patriarchal authority in private and public life to govern female dependents for their own good and to defend his family and community from dangers that included women’s disorderly conduct and men’s licentious behavior. Patriarchal protection was preferable to persecution, though it still amounted to a protection racket. Furthermore, the Family Man’s concern for the future suggested that he could exercise liberty with restraint and participate in politics with moderation. He was not apt to indulge passion or act on impulse lest he imperil his dependents and family dynasty. Many founders felt that the Family Man’s sense of self-restraint and caring for posterity qualified him as a trustworthy man and deserving citizen.

**Better Than Bachelorhood**

Young American males pondering marriage could anticipate four benefits from it. The first was love and happiness. A seventeen-year-old Alexander Hamilton rhapsodized, “Believe me, love is doubly sweet in wedlock’s holy bands.” He later described marriage as “a state which with a kind of magnetic force attracts every breast to it in which sensibility has a place,” though “the dull admonitions of prudence” might tempt young men to resist it. Ideally, the tension was resolved in favor of sensibility over prudence by a virtuous woman. Hamilton explained that his betrothed, Elizabeth Schuyler, was such a woman: “The most determined adversaries of Hymen can find in her no pretext for their hostility, and there are several of my friends, philosophers who railed at love as a weakness, men of the world who laughed at it as a fantasy, whom she has presumptuously and daringly compelled to acknowledge its power and surrender at discretion.” Hamilton echoed the emerging belief that men could achieve true happiness only in companionate marriages.

What was the relationship between men’s happiness and marriage? Contemporary writers believed that the fiery passions that drove many men into marriage ideally gave way to feelings of benevolence and friendship within marriage. Judith Sargent Murray prescribed that a young man “tranquilize his deportment” and show “a dignified and manly manifestation of tenderness” as he anticipated his nuptials, and then exhibit manly moderation and mildness when he became a husband. His betrothed and then wife was to use all means at her disposal to inspire in him rectitude. Alice Izard asserted that a good wife “guides where she does not govern” and leads her husband “to worthy pursuits.” Furthermore, a married man could expect to achieve a sense of mean-
ing and immortality by siring legitimate heirs. One American magazine quoted John Milton: “In the existence of a married man, there is no termination.” An anonymous poet added that wives suffered a “loss of freedom” but were compensated by husbands’ love and by being “renew’d immortal in a filial race.” The model republican family was constituted by a husband and wife who fostered benevolence and friendship, made a joint commitment to righteousness and virtue, and experienced a reassuring sense of intergenerational continuity that contributed to their enduring happiness.4

Second, marriage was an opportunity for a young male to prove his manhood by governing a woman. The challenge was to ply a narrow pathway between the Bachelor’s slavery to passion and a husband’s potential subordination to his wife. Initially, a young husband was expected to demonstrate manly self-discipline by giving up promiscuity, itinerancy, drinking, gambling, and other selfish vices associated with his bachelor years. Next, he was to exhibit manly merit by achieving family mastery. George Washington hinted at the difficulty when congratulating Marquis de Chastellux on his marriage: “I can hardly refrain from smiling to find that you are caught at last [by] that terrible contagion, domestic felicity.” Washington’s mirth mirrored a general sense that new husbands were easily enslaved by love and subordinated by domineering wives. What was a young husband to do? Benjamin Franklin announced, “Any man that is really a man is master of his own family.” Manly mastery meant wielding authority without tyranny. A “man that really is a man” restrained his wife’s lust lest her adulterous behavior undermine his family dynasty; controlled her profligacy lest it destroy his estate; and monitored her intemperance and negligence lest she had “no longer that prudent care for their family to manage well the business of their station nor that regard for reputation which good women ought to have.” Law and custom supported a husband’s dominion over disorderly wives, but it was a man’s own ability to govern effectively without becoming a “he-tyrant”—to rule firmly but lovingly—that enabled him to sustain conjugal affection and win other men’s respect.5

One guidebook identified “a wise husband” as one who “by knowing how to be a master” did not let his wife “feel the weight of it” because his “authority is tempered by his kindness” along with his tenderness and esteem. Several writers suggested that a truly masterful husband could cement his authority by choosing an educated woman for a wife or by allowing his wife to be educated. Judith Sargent Murray explained that men benefited from marrying educated women who possessed “invigorated” judgments that prevented “an unhappy Hymen.” Mary Fish Noyes drew up a “Portrait of a Good Husband”
that praised the spouse who gratified his wife’s “reasonable inclinations,” especially her desire to read books “for [her] perusal and improvement.” An anonymous poetess instructed men, “Be generous then, and us to knowledge lead / And happiness to you will sure succeed / Then sacred Hymen shall in triumph reign / And all be proud to wear the pleasing chain.”6 The traditional patriarch ruled by virtue of near absolute authority, but modern norms of republican manhood indicated that male dominion could be fortified if men practiced a hegemonic masculinity that mostly relied on kindness, consideration, and respect to win a wife’s consent to her own subordination.

Third, marriage was the primary means by which young men matured into adult responsibilities. Benjamin Franklin announced that marriage was “the cause of all good order in the world and what alone preserves it from the utmost confusion.” A young man “could never thrive” until married. Then he became “more firmly settled.” He minded his “business better and more steadily” and was “sooner trusted . . . than if he is single.” His sense of responsibility and his industry were augmented by a “good and faithful helpmate” who kept his house, assisted in his business, bore his children, and helped transmit his estate to them. Franklin told this story about a printer’s patrimony: “On his decease, the business was continued by the widow who [was] born and bred in Holland, where . . . the knowledge of accompts makes part of the female education.” Concerned about family welfare, many American men agreed that women should be educated to contribute to family enterprises, protect family estates from “crafty men” who preyed on widows, and maintain family businesses “til a son is grown up, fit to undertake and go on with it, to the lasting advantage and enriching of the family.”7 Marriage challenged men to assume adult responsibility for managing a family economy and dependents, and planning for future contingencies, including death and dynastic longevity.

The fourth anticipated benefit was that marriage gave men a familial stake in the community. A married man had a family to provision and protect and, therefore, a family interest to join with neighbors in mutual-aid projects that promoted family prosperity and in military ventures against enemies who threatened family welfare. Silas Downer urged communal protest in 1768 by appealing to family interest when warning that British efforts to quarter soldiers in colonists’ homes would result in redcoats taking “absolute command of our families.” Thomas Jefferson hoped to strengthen patriot solidarity in 1774 by invoking family interest to criticize British attempts to have colonists stand trial in England: “Who are to feed the wife and children whom he leaves behind and who have had no other subsistence but his daily labor?” American
leaders idealized citizen-soldiers as husbands and fathers who fought “for their wives, their children, their liberty, and their all” in order to motivate men to participate in community-based militia units. They also demonized the English aristocracy by exploiting fears that the enemy was targeting patriots’ families as well as their liberties. George Washington reacted to a 1775 rumor that Virginia’s governor was going to arrest his wife, Martha, by declaring, “I can hardly think that Lord Dunmore can act so low and unmanly a part as to think of seizing Mrs. Washington by way of revenge upon me.” The founders condemned the Bachelor’s selfishness, but they condoned the Family Man’s self-interested effort to feed, shelter, and defend his family as a significant source of patriotic cohesion and community good.

Young men who understood that family loyalty, governance, and responsibility were the basis for happiness, manhood, adulthood, and community membership did not necessarily achieve these goals. Many youth failed to restrain lust long enough to choose a proper spouse. “In the composition of human nature,” Washington warned, “there is a good deal of inflammable matter [and] when the torch is put to it, that which is within may burst into blaze.” Even self-disciplined males were easily dazzled by the brilliance of female “beauty” and blinded to the “virtue” that “fades not in seventy years.” The founders counseled young men to choose virtue over beauty but John Adams complicated the choice by observing that a beautiful wife could be a family asset. Franklin’s description of Moravian marriage customs intimated that most matches were serendipitous:

As these elders of both sexes were well acquainted with tempers and dispositions of their respective pupils, they could best judge what matches were suitable, and their judgments were generally acquiesced in. But if, for example, it should happen that two or three young women were found to be equally proper for the young man, the lot was then recurred to. I objected, “If the matches are not made by mutual choice of the partners, some of them may chance to be very unhappy.” “And so they may,” answered my informer, “if you let the parties choose for themselves”—which, indeed, I could not deny.

Questions about the essential ingredients for happy marriages plus awareness of young people’s growing freedom to choose their own mates prompted Thomas Jefferson to suggest that marriage and procreation had become matters of “fortuitous concourse.”

Nevertheless, most founders were convinced that fortuitous marriages were better than bachelorhood. Joel Barlow wanted to reduce the legal age of majority to induce young men into “early marriages [to] encourage purity of
morals.” Samuel Williams applauded “the wishes of parents to see their children settled” into early marriages and set in “the way of virtue, reputation, and felicity.” Simultaneously, law and custom opposed the practice of ending bad marriages. Divorces were difficult and rare. Noah Webster’s reaction to revolutionary France’s liberal divorce laws explains why. He condemned “the decree of the Convention authorizing divorces upon the application of either party, alleging only unsuitableness of temper,” as a manifestation of “the little regard in which the morals of the nation are held” and as an invitation “to infidelity and domestic broils.”

Marriage had to be sanctified if it was to settle down young men, coax them into responsibility, and stabilize society.

William Byrd recalled, “The Spartans had so much regard for marriage that they enacted a law by which they condemned all old bachelors above the age of 24 to be whipped publicly.” The founders’ Spartanlike commitment to marriage was based on their hopes for human happiness and their fears of the Bachelor’s “licentiousness” assuming “the sacred name of liberty.” Stephanie Coontz detects an early American consensus that “individual rights did have limits and that the family was the natural place to establish them.” Public notification of an impending marriage was an affirmation that a young man had volunteered to exchange licentious individualism for the Family Man’s devotion to durable happiness, family responsibility, and the community good. The betrothed male promised to act like a mature adult and thereby earned what “An Impartial Citizen” called “a man’s reputation” to enjoy and pass on as part of his legacy to posterity.

Provisioning Posterity

The Family Man’s highest duty was to procreate and provision posterity. John Demos observes, “All adult men [were] expected to become fathers.” Marriage was the only legitimate outlet for sex, and sex resulted in procreation. Most men aspired to legitimate fatherhood. Mary Beth Norton notes, “Childlessness indicated a husband’s failings as a man,” whereas fatherhood attested to his manhood. Jay Fliegelman adds that fathers hoped to be “immortalized” in their children. The quest for symbolic immortality prompted fathers to provide for children’s current and future needs by accumulating and disbursing property and patrimony to enable sons to perpetuate the family line. Providing for posterity in an era of uncertain economic change was particularly tough. George Mason thought that even wealthy fathers could no longer be confident that their sons would be able to sustain family prosperity: “However
affluent their circumstances or elevated their situations might be, the course of a few years not only might but certainly would distribute their posterity throughout the lower classes.”

The Family Man’s economic strategy was to accumulate a sufficient if not substantial estate. He labored, invested, and sacrificed to amass real and personal property that he could distribute and bequeath to his children. To this end, he might speculate in frontier property. Mason explained to George Jr. that he spent one thousand pounds to acquire western lands because “they will in twenty years be worth forty or fifty thousand pounds to my family.” The larger a man’s estate, the better the chance that his heirs would be able to preserve it, cushion the impact of adverse economic forces, and take advantage of new opportunities. Artisan fathers practiced a variation on this theme. Scholars suggest that artisans aspired to a “comfortable existence” by devoting themselves to building craft skills and small shops. They identified their skills with “manly competence” and used control of apprenticeships to convert their skills into “a form of property” that they passed on to sons. Overall, the Family Man’s economic interest was more a matter of paternal aggrandizement than possessive individualism although, in the late eighteenth century, family loyalties increasingly commingled with an emerging capitalist mentality.

How should the Family Man distribute his estate to his children? Many founders opposed primogeniture on principled grounds. It was unjust for fathers to favor oldest sons. Thomas Paine wrote, “By the aristocratical law of primogeniture, in a family of six children, five are exposed. Aristocracy never has more than one child. The rest are begotten to be devoured.” Privileged older sons “begin life by trampling on all their younger brothers and sisters” while younger sons, “by aristocracy, are bastards and orphans.” Thomas Jefferson added that primogeniture fostered a “brutality” borne of vast economic inequalities and class conflict. For him, “legislators cannot invent too many devices for subdividing property” and distributing it among “all the children or to all the brothers and sisters or other relations in equal degree.” Primogeniture robbed posterity of liberty and equality.

Most founders considered relatively equal distributions of family property useful for perpetuating family dynasties. They agreed that fathers wanted to accumulate sufficient patrimony to make their children “forever independent.” Still, they criticized older sons who received huge inheritances only to become spoiled youth who indulged vice and squandered family fortunes. The founders reserved their highest accolades for young men who received modest family shares and then demonstrated personal merit by cultivating manly virtues and talents advantageous to economic productivity. Writers
used Benjamin Franklin (the youngest son of a youngest son for five generations) as an “illustrious example” of the “self-made man” who transformed a meager family legacy into a substantial estate. Nathanael Emmons instructed young Americans to emulate Franklin and “show yourselves men.” David Ramsay honored the “self-made, industrious men” who “laid a foundation for establishing personal independence,” and who also were “successfully employed in establishing that of their country.” Significantly, this nascent image of self-made manhood was situated in a familial context. It depicted young men who inherited family wealth and merited additional prosperity; and it recognized accumulated wealth as a means to establish, support, steward, promote, and perpetuate family estates.

Ironically, the founders’ support for equitable family distributions made great fortunes seem safe for the Republic. Charles Cotesworth Pinckney argued that egalitarian inheritance laws would encourage a natural, periodic redistribution of wealth. Once instituted, “we may suppose that in the future an equal division of property among the children will in general take place in all the states.” This supposition had two implications. One was that men who owned huge estates probably deserved them because they likely accumulated most of their assets by dint of their own effort and merit. The other implication was that men who had immense holdings posed no great danger to the community because they did not transmit intact riches from generation to generation. Their wealth was safe because it would be subdivided among numerous heirs. This reasoning helped legitimize an economic aristocracy of virtuous, talented, manly heirs able to metamorphose modest patrimonies into magnificent family fortunes.

Where did fathers find manly heirs? Jefferson wanted the pool to be as large as possible. He supported an equal distribution of family wealth to create “an opening for the aristocracy of virtue and talent” among traditionally dispossessed younger sons. He also argued that “females shall have equal [inheritance] rights with males.” That way, fathers could seek an opening for virtue and talent among their sons-in-law—who had legal control of their wives’ wealth. Benjamin Franklin argued that a dynastic diversification strategy made sense during times of uncertainty. A man should “raise a large family” with many sons and launch each boy into manhood with a modest stake. That way, regardless of “contrary winds, hidden shoals, storms, and enemies,” there was a good chance that at least one son would “return with success” enough to perpetuate the family dynasty.

Many fathers had no property or patrimony to pass on to sons, and many young men came of age and married having received no family wealth. Few
American writers saw poverty as an impenetrable barrier to family prosperity and social stability. William Bradford argued that, in Europe, the impoverished “wretch” had little chance to transform his labor into a family estate. With no alternatives, he often engaged in disorderly and criminal conduct to support his family and better his children’s prospects. But poverty was different in America, where “every man is or may be a proprietor” and his “labor is bountifully rewarded.” Even America’s poorest fathers and sons could invest individual effort in economic opportunity to build family estates and even accumulate substantial patrimony for the next generation. John Adams suggested that the realistic prospect of family aggrandizement in America helped defuse discontent among “the idle, the vicious, the intemperate.” Robert Coram added that universal public education would further enlarge men’s economic prospects and secure even greater social harmony.18

The Family Man’s efforts to provision his family and seek prosperity for posterity encouraged him to cultivate “free and manly habits” conducive to family accumulation. His industry and thrift enabled him to feel “the dignity of human nature” and share in the productivity and mobility that contributed to social order. Whether he inherited great wealth or no wealth, he “showed himself a man” by engaging in paternal aggrandizement to support his family and perpetuate his family line. The cautious Family Man was no Baconian hero striving after greatness but, Noah Webster proclaimed, he deserved to be ranked among “the laborious and saving” who were “generally the best citizens.”19

Educating Posterity

The young Benjamin Franklin left home and journeyed hundreds of miles to establish his own business and family. The lines of kinship in his family were distended and frayed, but they did not snap. The aged Franklin approvingly recalled his father: “His great excellence was a sound understanding and a solid judgment in prudential matters. . . . He turned our attention to what was good, just, and prudent in the conduct of life.” Franklin saw a good father as an exemplar and teacher of “prudence” and “temperance” along with virtues such as order, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquillity, chastity, and humility.20 He taught his sons to excel in manly virtues that were essential to perpetuating the family dynasty.

Republican ideals enjoined a father to govern his sons in the same way that a husband governed his wife. Melvin Yazawa explains that he had to strike “a
balance between love and authority” to build a relationship of “affection and
duty, affection energizing duty, duty controlling affection.” Thomas Jefferson
applauded “affectionate deportment between father and son” as a foundation
for teaching “correct conduct.” A wise father appealed to his sons’ innate sen-
sabilities (“pride of character, laudable ambitions, and moral dispositions”) as
“correctives” to youthful “indiscretions.” When these correctives failed, the fa-
ther withdrew affection and used shame to discipline children. Mild measures
had “a happier effect on future character than the degrading motive of fear.”
Nevertheless, most founders did not restrict paternal rule to mildness. They
saw “discretion” as “the soul of ‘fatherly’ administration.” John Dickinson ad-
vocated the “mild features of patriarchal government” but admitted the occa-
sional utility of coercion. “Plough Jogger” argued that a “father . . . may pre-
fer mildness in his family,” but “necessity obliges him sometimes to use rigor-
ous measures.” Peter Thacher concluded that the best guide to paternal
governance was actual results: did sons learn “judgment and discipline . . . to
check their effervescences” even after they left their father’s home?21

Paternal lessons in judgment and discipline were to eliminate the Bachelor’s vices from boys’ behavioral repertoire. John Adams taught his sons to re-
ject libertine “vanities, levities, and fopperies” and instead to practice “great,
manly, and warlike virtues.” He relied on Abigail’s assistance and instructed
her, “Train them to virtue. Habituate them to industry, activity, and spirit.
Make them consider every vice as shameful and unmanly.” The Adams boys
were to become “great and manly.” Fathers who taught manly shame and
pride expected several payoffs. Jefferson believed they would experience “the
most sublime comforts in every moment of life and in the moment of death”
because fathers’ immortality hinged on sons’ manly excellence. At times, Sally
Mason reports, the deepest family feelings shifted from affection “between
husband and wife” to bonding “between son and father.” Americans expected
this male bonding to produce an intergenerational friendship. According to
Jay Fliegelman, the father would be “revered long into his child’s adulthood”
and his adult son would be “loved long after he has left home.”22 The ideal fa-
ther-son friendship transcended intergenerational time and continental space.

The founding generation enjoined fathers to make necessary sacrifices for
their sons’ good breeding and their families’ future prospects. Nathanael Em-
mons called on fathers to elevate their moral words and deeds in order to
serve as proper models for boys: “Let the dignity of man appear in all your
conduct, and especially in your conduct towards your children. Let them see
the dignity of human nature exemplified. . . . Take heed that none of your
words, none of your actions, none of your pursuits be unworthy of men.”
Likewise, Emmons expected sons to give up licentiousness to earn their fathers’ respect. He instructed young men: “Flee youthful lusts which war against both the body and the mind. Shun that all-devouring monster, intemperance, by which so many strong minds have been cast down and destroyed. Avoid bad company and unmanly diversions which are an inlet to every vice. Hold steady contempt for beaus and fops, those butterflies which live upon the filth and dregs of the earth.” Both fathers and sons were to cast aside their egos in order to measure up to mutual expectations and manly aspirations.

Nature and nurture fortified the father-son bond. Jefferson wrote, “Experience proves that the moral and physical qualities of man, whether good or evil, are transmissible from father to son.” A good father might sire base sons but he was more apt to produce virtuous ones. Adams agreed that “Wise men beget fools, and honest men knaves; but these instances . . . are not general. If there is often a likeness in figure and feature, there is generally more in mind and heart.” Most founders thought that fathers transmitted virtues and talents to sons. Thus, when a father achieved an esteemed reputation, people presumed that his sons would earn and merit the same respect. The result was that an eminent man’s son was likely to find that other men were predisposed “to honor the memory of his father, to congratulate him as the successor to his estate, and frequently to compliment him with elections to the offices he held.” What Adams called “the family spirit” denoted a thick father-son bond that supported the transfer of manly virtue, reputation, standing, and even political power from one generation to the next.

The founders reinforced intergenerational bonding when honoring fathers by favoring their sons. Learning Congress had authorized Jefferson and himself to appoint American consuls in Europe, Adams recommended Winslow Warren in familial terms:

Otis his grandfather, the famous James his uncle, his other uncles, and his father have been to my knowledge . . . among the firmest and steadiest supporters of the American cause. I declare, I don’t believe there is one family upon earth to which the United States are so much indebted for their preservation from thralldom. There was scarcely any family in New England [that] had such prospects of opulence and power under the royal government. They have sacrificed all of them. It is true, and I know you act upon the maxim that the public good alone is the criterion, but it is equally true that the public good requires that such conspicuous and exemplary services and sacrifices should not be neglected, and therefore considerations of this sort ever did and ever will and ever ought in some degree to influence mankind.
Jefferson mostly agreed that deserving men’s sons should be rewarded. He responded, “I think with you too that it is for the public interest to encourage sacrifices and services by rewarding them, and they should weigh to a certain point in the decision between candidates.”

This intergenerational reward system was manifested in the practice of providing notable men’s sons with letters of introduction. George Mason sent Patrick Henry his son’s “thanks for the testimonial you were so kind to give him under the Seal of the Commonwealth. It has been of great service in recommending him to the notice of many gentlemen of rank and fortune.” These letters usually highlighted both family standing and individual merit. Jefferson introduced Mr. Lyons to Adams as a “son of one of our judges” and “a sensible worthy young physician.” He recommended Mr. Rutledge by writing, “Your knowledge of his father will introduce him to your notice. He merits it moreover on his own account.” A good father exemplified manly virtues, transmitted a respected family name, and provided appropriate connections; ultimately, however, each young man would be judged “on his own account.”

Among the most important lessons a father taught his sons was how to be judged positively. That required lessons in “civility.” Franklin explained that good breeding involved “searching for and seizing every opportunity to serve and oblige.” He “made it a rule to forbear all direct contradiction to the sentiments of others and all positive assertion of my own.” That made him a more pleasant companion, procured him a ready listening audience, and increased the likelihood that he would prevail in disagreements. Conversely, “He that is displeased with your words or actions commonly joins against you. . . . You have enemies enough by the common course of human nature.” Franklin’s Junto was organized around civility. It consisted of young men who sought to establish reputations for “character and credit” and increase their “influence in public affairs.” Jefferson applauded Franklin’s advice and added that civility, politeness, mild flattery, and the sacrifice of small pleasures gratified and conciliated other men. He emphasized “good humor as one of the preservatives of our peace and tranquillity” and stated that ingratiating oneself with companions was a cheap price for “the good will of another.” A young man who cultivated “unaffected modesty and suavity of manners” would be “endeared” to polite society. Jefferson opposed sending youths to Europe, for fear of sexual corruption, but he did “wish my countrymen to adopt just so much of European politeness as to be ready to make all those little sacrifices of self which really render European manners amiable and relieve society from the disagreeable scenes to which rudeness often subjects it.” Where impassioned men claimed individual liberty, manly civility contributed to social harmony.
George Washington epitomized manly civility. At age nine, he copied 110 “Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation” to help balance “that little spark of celestial fire called conscience” with respect for other people in society. He noted that civility enabled a young male to develop a reputation for being “manful, not sinful,” and he tried to build and maintain such a manly reputation throughout his life. As a soldier, he hoped to walk “in such a line as will give the most general satisfaction.” In his farewell orders to the Continental army, he challenged demobilizing soldiers to do the same:

All the troops . . . should carry into civil society the most conciliating dispositions; and . . . they should prove themselves not less virtuous and useful as citizens than they have been persevering and victorious as soldiers. . . . The private virtues of economy, prudence, and industry will not be less amiable in civil life than the more splendid qualities of valor, perseverance, and enterprise were in the field. Everyone may rest assured that much, very much of the future happiness of the officers and men will depend upon the wise and manly conduct which shall be adopted by them when they are mingled with the great body of the community.29

Twenty years later, Mercy Otis Warren remembered Washington for having exhibited “a certain dignity united with the appearance of good humor.”30

A responsible father who combined love and discipline, transmitted and taught manly virtues, secured a respected family name and useful social connections, and fostered in his sons a habit of civility afforded them maximal opportunity to become trustworthy and trusted members of society. Still, the Family Man’s efforts to provide patrimony, encourage filial merit, and secure social respect for his heirs were all for naught unless he also protected his family, encouraged his sons to participate in family defense, and freed them to merit manhood and grow independent branches of the family tree.

Protecting Posterity

Responsible fathers protected their posterity. In 1776, Thomas Paine pushed patriotism against overwhelming odds by reminding colonists that their cause was not “the concern of a day, a year, or an age” but that “posterity are virtually involved in the contest.” A decade later, an “Officer of the Late Continental Army” rallied voters against the U.S. Constitution by warning fathers to act “like men, like freemen and Americans, to transmit unimpaired to your
latest posterity those rights, those liberties, which have ever been so dear.” The Family Man who protected his posterity exhibited manhood, earned personal honor, and deserved social esteem. He alone could “take his child by the hand and bless it without feeling the conscious shame of neglecting a parent’s duty” because he alone secured his “good name” and left a memorable legacy that “blunts the sharpness of death.”

Most founders saw paternal self-sacrifice to protect posterity as natural. Simeon Howard observed that fathers were bound to their children “by the common tie of nature,” and any man who “has the bowels of a father” felt duty-bound to defend his children against dangers such as “the iron scepter of tyranny.” Paternal vigilance was reinforced by intimations of immortality. “The Preceptor” argued that a man’s willingness to put himself at peril for his children’s liberty “will make him venerable and beloved while he lives, be lamented and honored if he falls in so glorious a cause, and transmit his name and immortal renown to his latest posterity.” Americans agreed that the one force in life more powerful than men’s Hobbesian drive for self-preservation was their desire to preserve their posterity. This agreement was manifested in George Mason’s conviction that a father “will be quickly converted into a soldier when he knows and feels that he is to fight not in defense of the rights of a particular family or prince but his own.”

Nevertheless, fathers had to put their posterity at risk to teach their sons to defend their family dynasties. They required young men to test their manhood by joining with them to bear arms in militia units established to defend liberty and locality. Robert Gross describes the militia muster as a sort of “family reunion.” John Adams affirmed a willingness to put his posterity at risk when he wrote in 1777, “I wish my lads were old enough. I would send every one of them into the army in some capacity or other. Military abilities and experience are a great advantage to character.” Military service challenged youth to show they were not Thomas Paine’s “summer soldiers and sunshine patriots” but citizen-soldiers who merited “the love and thanks of man and woman.” The challenge could be daunting. Paine explained, “Some men have naturally a military turn, and can brave hardships and the risk of life with a cheerful face; others have not. . . . I believe most men have more courage than they know of and that a little at first is enough to begin with.” Jefferson prescribed that young men who found courage, braved hardship, risked death, and survived earned “a quiet and undisturbed repose in the bosom of their families.”

Of course, young men who went to war exposed themselves to disability and death, and potentially imperiled their families’ dynastic futures. If they
served with honor and died, they would be celebrated with “recollections of manly sorrow,” but their deaths would eliminate future branches of their family trees. That was why George Washington was ambivalent about sending into battle a step-grandson who was “the only male of his great great grandfather’s family” and thus the sole hope for dynastic survival. Anticipating war with France in 1798, Washington recommended that the boy become a Cornet of Horse. “If real danger threatened the country,” he wrote, “no young man ought to be an idle spectator in its defense.” But he hoped real danger would be averted. That way, the boy would “be entitled to the merit of prof ered service without encountering the dangers of war” and likely live long enough to perpetuate his bloodline.34

An important challenge of fatherhood was passing liberty to adult sons by allowing them to make their own decisions about family procreation, provision, and protection. Many fathers had an economic stake in keeping older sons dependent on them because filial labor contributed to family farms. Some fathers simply did not want to give up authority. A father might bless a son’s marriage and give him use of land for his family but retain legal title as a means to maintain paternal control. Or a father could use the prospect of inheritance and the psychological lever of intergenerational friendship to pressure adult sons to conform to paternal expectations. Sooner or later, however, fathers were expected to perform what Paine called “an act of manhood” by renouncing paternal authority and freeing adult sons to achieve independence, family status, and governance of their own dependents. Renunciation was risky. Once freed, as Jefferson recognized, a man’s sons could “disavow” him, forsake family obligations, and put personal pleasure above family security and longevity.35 In general, the founding generation was ambivalent about whether fathers should encourage liberty among their children or instead seek to protect posterity from its self-destructive tendencies.

The founders midwifed an “improvement ethic” conducive to the liberty of new generations. Bernard Bailyn argues that this ethic “reflected the beginnings of a permanent motion within American society by which the continuity of the generations was to be repeatedly broken.” Father-son bonds were weakened as more fathers lacked the resources and knowledge needed to guide and assist youth, and as more sons left home in search of independence and prosperity. Some founders did not see this trend as troublesome. Often, sons separated from and even rebelled against their fathers to become just like them, that is, to become independent landowners and farmers. Also, youthful independence was a recognized source of innovation. Jefferson argued that the doctrine that “we must tread with artful reverence in the footsteps of our
fathers’ was a barrier to “the progress of the human mind.” Paine detested the “vanity” of men who sought to govern from “beyond the grave” and applauded the prospect that “children grow into men” who were free to follow the light of their own reason.36

The founders themselves participated in efforts to improve on the world of their fathers and procreate a better world for their sons. They set precedents by denying filial loyalty to Great Britain and by analogizing an independent America to a “young heir arrived at a mature age who, being freed from the restraints of tutors and governors, takes the management of his own estate into his own hands and makes such laws for the regulation of his domestic affairs as he judges will be most conducive to establish peace, order, and happiness in his family.” Federalists rejected the authority of yesterday’s state constitutions and the Articles of Confederation to support the U.S. Constitution. Their attitude was captured in James Madison’s observation that Americans showed “a decent regard to the opinions of former times” but avoided “a blind veneration for antiquity, for custom, and for names.” That enabled them to exhibit a “manly spirit” and produce the “numerous innovations displayed on the American theater.”37

Simultaneously, most founders were troubled by the notion that fathers were fated for obsolescence. Madison praised his generation’s innovations because they promised to suppress the “mutability” of state laws and support a Constitution designed to “decide forever the fate of republican government” and “last for the ages.” He advocated a Bill of Rights that strengthened “the frame” of the Constitution and rendered men’s liberties “perpetual.” Later, he called on Washington’s administration to honor past treaties with the France (though the French government had been revolutionized), claiming that Americans were obliged to keep past promises lest every change or reform constitute a “destruction of the social pact, an annihilation of property, and a complete establishment of the state of nature.”38 Like Plato, Madison tended to praise one-time innovations intended to create a stable and relatively unchangeable legacy.

Most founders shared this tendency. They saw the Revolution and Constitution as one-time affairs that produced enduring institutions. Antifederalists such as “John DeWitt” argued against the Constitution because ratification would not be “temporary but in its nature perpetual,” creating “a government . . . for ages.” Patrick Henry warned, “If a wrong step be now made, the republic may be lost forever.” Federalists such as Alexander Hamilton, arguing for the Constitution, agreed that a misstep now meant that republican government “would be . . . disgraced and lost to mankind forever.” The founders
consistently spoke as if every decision would fix the course of posterity, in John Adams’s estimation, for “thousands of years.” Much of this was political rhetoric, but it was rhetoric that reflected an anxiety, identified by Michael Lienesch, that future generations would seek to “play the roles of revolutionaries and constitutionalists themselves, emulating the example of the framers by destroying their government and preempts their place as founders.”

The founders did not intend to be preempted by their children.

Lienesch suggests that the founders “marched into the future fearfully, and always with an eye to the past.” They articulated an improvement ethic but also recalled that men’s passionate, impulsive, and greedy nature gave rise to public disorders that destroyed past achievements and prevented future advances. They wondered if their sons and grandsons, who had never suffered British tyranny or fought for independence, would appreciate manly freedom and patriotic sacrifice, or instead lapse into selfish, childish behavior that undermined the Republic. Federalists complained loudest about men’s tendency to abuse liberty and practice licentiousness, but even Jefferson and his followers, their faith in human progress notwithstanding, worried about men’s excesses. Jefferson approved of “the spirit” of Shays’s Rebellion but thought the rebellion itself a mistake. He opposed the Alien and Sedition Acts, in part, to counteract policies that were “driving these states into revolution.” He supported protests prior to the French Revolution in the hope that they would spawn modest reforms that averted bloodshed. Often, Jefferson promoted the rhetoric of liberty but was cautious about its practice among masses of disorderly men.

A few founders were explicit about wanting their generation to bind future ones. John Adams saw written documents as an important means to foster order in the ranks of men: “The social compact and the laws must be reduced to writing. Obedience to them becomes a national habit and they cannot be changed but by revolutions which are costly things. Men will be too economical of their blood and property to have recourse to them very frequently.” Adams wanted American men’s liberty to be tempered by a habitual obedience reinforced by marriage and fatherhood, which provided men a family interest in safeguarding their “blood and property” rather than risking them in protest and rebellion. For Adams, the cautious Family Man who protected his family and estate and habitually obeyed the law was the backbone of republican order.

Thomas Paine’s description of a republic as a timeless polity was a creative effort to resolve intergenerational tensions. A republic, he wrote, was “never young, never old . . . subject neither to nonage, nor dotage . . . never in the
cradle, nor on crutches.” It possessed “a perpetual stamina” that presented itself “on the open theater of the world in a fair and manly manner.” A republic did not suffer childish delusions of inevitable progress or senile fears of inevitable decline. Rather, it relied on an understanding that manhood was a source of continuity across time and space. The responsible Family Man pro-created, provisioned, and protected his sons and left behind a manly legacy likely to be remembered by his sons even as they sought to demonstrate their own merit through experimentation and innovation. This promise of filial remembrance was fulfilled in exemplary fashion at the death of Henry Laurens by his son John, who “reared an altar on which he burnt the body of the patriarch and carefully gathered the ashes from the hearth, deposited them in a silver urn, and placed them in his bed-chamber with reverence and veneration . . . at once a mark of the respect due to the memory of both the patriot and the parent.”

The Parent and the Patriot

Significant similarities united the parent and the patriot. Both roles required men to discipline their passions and forgo the Bachelor’s egomaniacal search for gratification. Both roles demanded that men engage in responsible, industrious, orderly conduct that benefited other people. Both roles enjoined men to govern women, ideally, with women’s consent. Both roles called for men to pro-create posterity and devote themselves to the good of posterity. Finally, both roles challenged men to measure up to consensual norms of manhood in order to earn self-respect and social respectability. Most founders were convinced that the self-disciplined, responsible, respectable Family Man was qualified for citizenship and deserved to share in the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Americans inherited the English belief that only substantial freeholders were sufficiently independent and committed to the public good to be trusted with citizenship, but two aspects of the American experience urged flexibility. First, America’s rhetoric of liberty and equality suggested that all men were potentially worthy of citizenship. This created a presumption for inclusiveness. Second, America’s abundance of land seemed to afford every young man an opportunity to acquire property, marry, and raise children. Theoretically, every male could become a modest freeholder and Family Man. While the founders continued to put the substantial freeholder at the center of citizenship, they began to expand citizenship by situating the Family Man near the center of public life.
Benjamin Franklin observed, “A man remarkably wavering and inconstant . . . can never be a truly useful member of the commonwealth.” Unlike the Bachelor, the Family Man was “in the way of becoming a useful citizen.” Poor young men could “begin first as servants or journeymen, and if they are sober, industrious, and frugal, they soon become masters, establish themselves in business, marry, raise families, and become respectable citizens.” Economic opportunity was a basis for marriage; marriage was a foundation for fatherhood; and fatherhood promoted the stability essential to citizenship. Samuel West suggested that “the tender affection that we have for our wives and children [and] the regard we ought to have for unborn posterity” counteracted men’s selfishness and encouraged the manly self-denial, family responsibility, and modicum of civic virtue essential to citizenship. Ultimately, the Family Man’s independence, family loyalty, and commitment to the future encouraged him to exhibit “a gigantic manliness” by provisioning and protecting a family within “a well-constituted republic.”

The close association of the Family Man and citizenship was a recurring theme in the founders’ speeches and writings. In 1776, for example, Thomas Jefferson wrote to Edmund Pendleton, “I cannot doubt any attachment to his country in any man who has his family and peculium in it. . . . I [am] for extending the right of suffrage (or in other words the rights of a citizen) to all who [have] a permanent intention of living in the country. Take what circumstances you please as evidence of this, either the having resided a certain time, or having a family, or having property, any or all of them.” Contemporaries were generally willing to entertain formally and affirm informally the proposition that a man who headed a family had an enduring attachment to the public good. That was George Mason’s reasoning when he proposed enfranchising the Family Man at the Constitutional Convention:

A freehold is the qualification in England and hence it is imagined to be the only proper one. The true idea [is] that every man having evidence of attachment to and permanent common interest with the society ought to share in all its rights and privileges. Was this qualification restrained to freeholders? Does no other kind of property but land evidence a common interest in the proprietor? Does nothing besides property make a permanent attachment? Ought . . . the parent of a number of children whose fortunes are to be pursued in his own country to be viewed as suspicious characters and unworthy to be trusted with the common rights of their fellow citizens?

Franklin added that “the sons of a substantial farmer,” though not yet independent freeholders or family heads, anticipated becoming family men and,
therefore, “would not be pleased at being disfranchised.” Madison hinted at a greater degree of inclusiveness when observing that America had “the precious advantage” of having a male majority of “freeholders, or their heirs, or aspi-rants to freeholds.” Men who owned family estates, those likely to inherit them, and even those who aspired to acquire them might be trusted to com-bine independence and public loyalty to merit citizenship.

Ruth Bloch comments that “American men were advised that good republic-an citizenship . . . would follow ineluctably from true love and marriage.” They were also led to believe that good citizenship was foreclosed to bache-lors, whose vices enslaved them and estranged them from the public good. Thus, when Benjamin Rush made a plea for tax-supported public education in the early republic, he assumed that the Family Man was sufficiently civic-minded to understand the need to subsidize schools that taught young men “virtue and knowledge in the state.” However, he felt compelled to make a special, utilitarian case that appealed to the Bachelor’s self-interest. He argued that public education would reduce crime and disorder and, therefore, “the bachelor will in time save his tax for this purpose by being able to sleep with fewer bolts and locks on his doors.”

The connection between the Family Man and citizenship was loudly pro-claimed by federalists in the debates over the U.S. Constitution. They argued that the Family Man’s self-restraint and family interests guaranteed that he would act the part of a responsible citizen who made reasonable choices. Fisher Ames detested democracy’s “loud clamors of passion, artifice, and faction,” but he supported biennial elections to the House of Representatives “as security that the sober, second thought of the people shall be law.” His faith in voter sobriety and thoughtfulness was based on his confidence in “the calm review of public transactions which is made by the citizens who have families and children, the pledges of their fidelity.” Often, federalists promoted a family-oriented image of voter sovereignty that qualified liberty with family sobriety.

Federalists also employed the image of the Family Man to suggest that the new government was committed to the public good. John Jay tried to cast away fears that the president and Senate would ratify treaties contrary to the public good by noting that “they and their family estates will . . . be equally bound and affected with the rest of the community.” James Iredell did not worry about a government that united the purse and sword because it was improbable “that our own representatives, chosen for a limited time, can be capable of destroying themselves, their families, and fortunes, even if they have no regard to their public duty.” Alexander Hamilton saw no need to be
alarmed by federal control of state militia because “our sons, our brothers, our neighbors, our fellow citizens” manned the militia. Finally, Zachariah Johnston did not see the Constitution as oppressive because federal representatives “will probably have families [and] they cannot forget them.” A representative would not arbitrarily burden citizens because he “will be averse to lay taxes on his own posterity.” Federalists proclaimed that national officials would be trustworthy because they too would be fathers responsible for their families’ welfare.

Federalists also construed family status as a bond of trust between citizens and leaders. Hamilton suggested that the Family Man would trust a leader who, like himself, was the father of “children to whom the ties of nature and habit have attached me.” After all, a father in a position of leadership would not choose “the precarious enjoyment of rank and power” by participating in “a system which would reduce his . . . posterity to slavery and ruin.” Rather, he would approach the future cautiously, with his children serving as “the dearest pledges of [his] patriotism.” Furthermore, the average Family Man was apt to consent to political authority when it was bathed in the benign language of fatherhood. That was James Wilson’s assumption when he argued that just as a responsible father gave priority to the welfare of his children, so too would the new president “watch over the whole with paternal care and affection.” Federalists used paternal imagery to make the Constitution and new government feel familiar and friendly.

David Ramsay summarized the federalist identification of the Family Man with citizenship when he called on the American people to “honor the men who with their own hands maintain their family and raise up children who are inured to toil and capable of defending their country.” These honorable men were sufficiently steady and trustworthy to wield the rights and responsibilities of citizenship; and they were sufficiently respected and trusted by other men to be considered for positions of political leadership and authority. The federalist faith in the Family Man who voted in elections and consented to be governed by other family men prompted Timothy Pickering to express a father’s ultimate plea for ratification: “If I were now on my dying bed and my sons were of mature age,” he wrote, “my last words to them would be adopt this constitution.”

This connection between the Family Man and citizenship effectively foreclosed the possibility of identifying the Family Woman with citizenship. In large part, the founders believed the Family Man was sufficiently trustworthy to participate in politics because he was responsible for governing, as well as provisioning and protecting, a spouse and children. A dutiful husband settled
down into patriarchal responsibility. He learned to differentiate authority and tyranny by governing his wife. He exercised family mastery to control disorderly female tendencies. He claimed an exclusive sex right to his wife’s body to guarantee his paternity and secure his dynastic stake in the future. The result, according to Linda Kerber, was that “formulations of citizenship and civic relations in a republic were tightly linked to men and manhood.” A whole new language had to be devised even to contemplate women’s citizenship. That language focused on the role of the republican wife and mother who served as a moral monitor and civic educator for her family. Whether this role afforded women significant influence in an informal “fourth branch of government,” as Kerber suggests, or kept them “locked in step behind the legal status of men,” as Joan Hoff argues, it certainly reflected the founders’ consensus that the Family Woman was excluded from public deliberations and suffrage, as well as jury service and the militia muster.51

The founders’ faith in the Family Man as a citizen was substantial—but still limited. He manned the front lines of authority. He headed a family, provisioned and protected it, ruled dependents, and taught lessons in benevolence, productivity, civility, and deference to authority. Ideally, he lightened the burden of women’s subordination and prepared young males to practice good citizenship. His family was a crucial building block for a stable republic. However, the founders did not forget that the Family Man was still a male creature who often failed to restrain passion, fulfill responsibility, or reconcile family interests with the public good. Like western Massachusetts farmers or Philadelphia artisans, he sometimes claimed that his family’s welfare justified disobedience to established political authority. The founders presumed that the Family Man would be a trustworthy citizen, but they also sought security against his lapses from good citizenship.

The Limits of Family-Based Citizenship

Most founders agreed that family ties were a powerful source of unity and stability among men. Antifederalist “Cato” explained, “The strongest principle of union resides within our domestic walls. The ties of the parent exceed that of any other. As we depart from home, the next general principle of union is among citizens of the same state, where acquaintance, habits, and fortunes nourish affection and attachment.” Federalist Alexander Hamilton concurred “that a man is more attached to his family than to his neighborhood, to his neighborhood than to the community at large.”52 The Family Man’s affec-
tions, loyalties, and interests radiated out from his family to neighbors, community, state, and nation. Family ties bound men to the larger public; but they also promoted parochial loyalties that potentially conflicted with the public good.

In the 1760s and 1770s, radical artisans argued for the right of family men to vote and hold office. They also invoked their status as independent householders to legitimize their participation in political rallies, clubs, campaigns, petition drives, and elections. Gary Nash argues that American civic leaders were horrified by this “crumbling of deference.” A more modest outlook on the Family Man was better attuned to the founders’ desire for orderly politics. Joseph Lathrop stated, “He that practices every virtue in private life and trains up a family in virtuous principles and manners is no useless or unimportant member of society.” Lathrop implied that the Family Man achieved a sort of plateau. He was not a disorderly bachelor; thus, he could be a citizen. Nonetheless, his virtue was not necessarily sufficient to qualify him for political action and leadership. Why not?

The founders had limited trust in the Family Man for several reasons. First, a thin line separated the Family Man from the Bachelor. The Family Man vowed to control his appetites and fulfill his responsibilities, but his practice often fell short. Benjamin Franklin made a good living writing about the foibles and failings of weak and bumbling husbands and fathers. Many were guilty of licentiousness; many did not settle down into family life; many proved themselves social misfits. Joel Barlow went so far as to suggest that fathers were sometimes “too ignorant and often too inattentive or avaricious to be trusted with the sole direction of their children.” Recalling common Puritan practice, he suggested that the state should supervise the Family Man’s governance of his dependents.

Second, even the most benign Family Man had the potential to act against the public good. Benjamin Rush advocated a system of public education that taught each young man “to love his family but . . . at the same time that he must forsake his family and even forget them when the welfare of his country requires it.” The sheer strength of the Family Man’s attachment to his closest relations diminished the likelihood that he would forsake or forget his family for the public good or allow his sons to do so. George Washington’s constant complaint against militiamen was that they quickly demobilized or deserted to return to their families rather than contributing to the public good by fighting for the duration of the war. In 1783, Washington attributed the threat of a military insurrection to the fact that unpaid officers were forced “to participate their estates” to support themselves while in the service. They had “con-
tracted heavy debts” and “spent their patrimonies.” Even honorable gentlemen would act in rebellious ways when they felt their families, estates, and posterity were threatened by undue sacrifices for the nation.

Third, the founders felt the Family Man’s interests could be a source of political corruption. Antifederalists such as Melancton Smith worried that “pride of family” was so infectious and commanded so much influence among all classes of Americans that voters would elect to public office only men from noteworthy families. The likely result, according to “Brutus,” was that “large family connections” and mutually profitable combinations among “the well-born and highest orders” would create a political monopoly among aristocrats who were ignorant of the sentiments and interests of “the middling class.” Federalists such as John Adams agreed that family pride played an inevitable role in American politics. His fear was that men’s family loyalties stopped short of the public good. The majority of men “confine their benevolence to their families,” and “very few indeed extend it impartially to the whole community.” The consequence was that Americans suffered from a parochialism powerful enough “to blind our eyes, darken our understandings, and pervert our wills.” For Adams and others, men who could not overcome family partiality lacked the virtue and talent necessary to be ranked among the Better Sort of men who were qualified to lead society and fill public offices.

Finally, many founders feared that the Family Man, who devoted his life to building and perpetuating a family dynasty, harbored an unspoken admiration for Europe’s powerful aristocratic families, which had sustained themselves over many generations. The Society of the Cincinnati, an exclusive organization of Revolutionary War officers that perpetuated itself by making membership an inheritance of eldest sons, attracted many critics who considered its existence evidence that American officers and gentlemen were infatuated with aristocratic corruption. John Adams went so far as to suggest that Europe’s aristocratic families attracted the secret devotion of virtually all Americans. He wrote to Jefferson, “If the duke of Angoleme, or Burgundy, or especially the Dauphin should demand one of your beautiful and most amiable daughters in marriage, all America from Georgia to New Hampshire would find their vanity and pride so agreeably flattered by it that all their sage maxims would give way; and even our sober New England republicans would keep a day of Thanksgiving for it, in their hearts.” Alas, the Family Man often preferred family pride and prejudice to the public good.

The founders’ limited faith in the Family Man prompted them to construct for him a truncated conception of citizenship. On the one hand, the Family Man was sufficiently procreative to start a family, provision depen-
dents, and prolong his family dynasty. He was relatively sober, safe, and predictable, and could claim liberty and equality without automatically lapsing into anarchic libertinism or democratic leveling. He could be trusted to become what Michael Lienesch describes as a “private citizen”—someone who cultivates a farm, pursues family interests, contributes to his community, and occasionally votes for public officials. On the other hand, the Family Man’s procreativity was parochial. His family interests did not necessarily encourage him to exhibit the elevated manly virtue and talent needed to cultivate social harmony or generate the public good. Nor did he demonstrate the political potential to resolve major crises, found new nations, or build a better future for humankind. Guilty of familial parochialism and innocent of Baconian greatness, the average family man was a private citizen in need of public leadership.

Indeed, the founders could not imagine a simple republic of men based solely on the exclusion of the Bachelor and the inclusion of the Family Man. Democratic disorders persisted. Internal exigencies were a daily occurrence. External dangers were omnipresent. A crucial question was whether the average family man would continuously conform to norms of common decency and contribute to the public good. Most founders believed that the Family Man needed strong leadership. They sought men of great virtue and talent, even a few heroic men, to calm democratic disorders, make and administer law, resolve crises, defeat enemies, and lead the citizenry down the path of providence.

Even before the Revolution, a “gentleman” could not automatically claim standing as a natural leader of men. After the Revolution, the rhetoric of liberty and equality reinforced patriots’ refusal to recognize any man’s natural superiority or authority. Consider this exchange between two “servants” in Royall Tyler’s play, The Contrast:

JESSAMY. I say, Sir, I understand that Colonel Manly has the honor of having you for a servant.

JONATHAN. Servant! Sir, do you take me for a neger? I am Colonel Manly’s waiter.

JESSAMY. A true Yankee distinction, egad, without a difference. Why, Sir, do you not perform all the offices of a servant? Do you not even blacken his boots?

JONATHAN. Yes, I do grease them a bit sometimes; but I am a true blue son of liberty, for all that. Father said I should come as Colonel Manly’s waiter to see the world, and all that; but no man shall master me. My father has as good a farm as the Colonel.
If all white male property owners and their heirs were true blue sons of liberty, not servants or slaves, why would they recognize or comply with men claiming leadership authority? Tyler’s play suggested two answers. First, compliance was a matter of contract. Jonathan waited on Colonel Manly who, in return, provided his waiter an opportunity to see the world. This was a relatively weak basis for consent because it was contingent on both parties’ satisfactory performance. Second, compliance was a function of respect. Jonathan deferred to Colonel Manly because he recognized, admired, and deferred to the Colonel’s exceptional manly virtues and talents. Arguably, this was a stronger, more enduring basis for consent because it was built on consensual norms of manhood and reputed character rather than on utility and performance.

The founders’ political discourse often focused on rationality and contract as a basis for legitimate leadership, but it also centered on evolving norms of manly respectability and deference. In the aristocratic past, commoners were expected to value and obey gentlemen’s authority. In the revolutionary present, gentlemen’s status was suspect and democratic equality defied deference. The founders became obsessed with reestablishing order in the ranks of men. They needed to identify “an alternative form of male cohesion” in order to sort out and stabilize what Nancy Cott calls “shifting hierarchies” among men. They turned to the grammar of manhood to foster male cohesion. They applied it to put the Family Man at the center of citizenship and then to encourage the sober citizenry to comply with the leadership of the Better Sort of man.