ABSTRACT
“BREAKING UP AND MOVING WESTWARD”: THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN POST-COLONIAL AMERICA, 1787-1828

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This dissertation approaches the early national United States as a post-colonial state, and draws new connections between the country’s westward development and Americans’ ability to detach from their colonial past. At the conclusion of the American Revolution in 1783, the new United States became the first nation built on the ruins of a British colonial foundation; its citizens faced the colossal task of forging an independent national consciousness without being able to draw clear racial or ethnic lines of distinction between themselves and the former mother country. White Americans of the founding generation occupied a unique and tenuous position: in a world of empires and colonies, they were “settler-subjects.” As settlers, they had acted as proud agents of the imperial flag, but they were concurrently second-class citizens living on the wild peripheries of England’s empire. The legacy of this dual identity remained in the post-revolutionary period.

Although the founding generation in the Atlantic colonies had rejected monarchy, it retained a respect for and a dependence on British political principles. Thus eastern Americans held a position of power in a boundless continent, but were simultaneously left with little idea how to define themselves independent of England’s laws and philosophies of governance. Easterners modeled British examples even to the extent of creating an imperial state in the West. Ultimately, and counterintuitively, distinguishing themselves from the mother country required a process wherein white Americans embraced rather than rejected their ethnic roots and the colonial role of “settler.” Easterners and westerners alike ceased to be “subjects” as well only by creating their own unique imperial process and crafting a national identity that exalted rather than marginalized the frontier. Part One of this project examines the post-colonial position of the founding generation using Philadelphia as a primary reference point. Part Two turns west, analyzing the imperial nature of federal territorial policies and the colonial relationship between East and West. Part Three illustrates how changes in that colonial relationship helped break the patterns of post-colonialism, with special emphasis on the War of 1812 and the racialization of American continental imperialism in the nineteenth century.