

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHORS

Rebecca McLennan and David Henkin

Q. Why a new U.S. history survey—and why now?

A. We wrote *Becoming America* in and for a new century, inspired by recent shifts in historical scholarship and the interests and learning styles of a new generation of students. Today's students live in a world where cultural, technological, and environmental transformation are palpably experienced and keenly debated. Paralleling this reorientation, the topics of environmental change, religious ritual, mass communications, technological innovation, and popular entertainment have become central and compelling subjects of historians' research and teaching. *Becoming America* seamlessly weaves these fascinating dimensions of the past into the core narrative of American history to produce an account that we believe students will find exciting, memorable, and relevant.

Q. What's different about your approach?

A. Key to our approach is an appreciation for how much the study of the past entails learning about the beliefs, attitudes, and mentalities of historical actors and about the worlds of communication and information exchange within which historical events acquired meaning. When we study a war, for example, we need to know more than its political causes and practical course; we also need to understand how different groups of participants, observers, and victims experienced the conflict. How long did it take military leaders in one part of the world to receive messages from civilian authorities in another? How did soldiers experience and make sense of war and demobilization? Did city dwellers read war news in newspapers reporting telegraphed messages from the front? Did voters watch live broadcasts of artillery fire while sitting in their living rooms? How were the dead commemorated? And in what ways did war and the memory of war change American culture, politics, and the economy?

Q. Where does the incorporation of the history of culture, media, technology, and the environment leave the political, social, and economic narrative that is essential to understanding the American past?

A. We have neither thrown out political, social, and economic history nor simply tacked on new subjects. Instead, we have innovated in a way that respects the need for chronology, narrative unity, social inclusiveness, and canonical coverage. For instance, the evolution of the British colonies after the

Stuart Restoration, which many surveys identify narrowly as a project of imperial regulation or a pattern of demographic movement, emerges in these pages through broader shifts in folkways, foodways, sexual ethics, consumption, home design, and religious outlook (Chapter 4). Instead of isolating southern plantation slavery in a single chapter on the Old South spanning multiple periods, we spread the discussion of slavery across several chapters, showing how human bondage infused and influenced economic, political, and cultural developments in multiple regions through many different eras. We broaden the conventional treatment of southern Reconstruction as the story of political and economic struggle by exploring the parades, conventions, and “grapevine telegraphs” through which African Americans formulated and relayed their demands for full and meaningful freedom (Chapter 16). Our discussion of the political functions of saloons, urban machines, and women's clubs enlivens the story of Gilded Age government and helps students understand the roots and significance of mass politics (Chapter 19). And rather than painting a picture of the affluent 1950s solely as a period of conservative consensus punctuated by an increasingly assertive civil rights movement, we also explore the cultural and intellectual ferment that preceded and primed the upheavals of the 1960s (Chapter 27). Every chapter weaves new scholarship of this nature into the narrative.

Q. How does integrating old and new approaches enhance students' learning experience?

A. The new synthesis offers distinct advantages. First, students are excited by history that connects to their experience of contemporary life. Mass media, popular entertainment, technological innovation, religious ritual, material culture, and environmental change all capture their imagination, and consequently they come to class engaged and ready to learn more. *Becoming America* shows them how those subjects have developed over time and how earlier patterns of living have informed or differed from the pleasures, frustrations, dangers, and mysteries that students encounter in their own worlds.

Second, our updated survey of the American past helps students relate imaginatively to this rich history by actively drawing upon their interests, passions, and skills as both readers and creators of contemporary culture. We show for instance how nineteenth-century Americans experienced new kinds of connection through the postal service, cheaper newspapers, telegraph wires, sales catalogs, networks of religious instruction, and commercial entertainment. We encourage readers to grasp

the historical significance of slang, fashion trends, marketing strategies, spectator sports, and news scandals. Throughout the narrative, our visual program asks students to analyze the way in which engravers, photographers, cartoonists, advertisers, and other visual artists in both early and later eras created, affirmed, or disrupted public perceptions.

Finally, our approach teaches students to understand and ask questions about the cultural, political, and economic circumstances under which certain new media and technologies find—or fail to find—traction. Why did printing play such a prominent role in the politics of the American Revolution? Why, in the 1920s, did radio quite suddenly become a mass medium after years of relative obscurity? By demonstrating how to analyze these phenomena as historians do, we give students new critical tools with which to recognize and analyze the deep connections that bound—and still bind—culture, politics, and economics. Questions probing these connections are included in our Connect History program.

Q. History is more than a grand narrative. How do you incorporate fine-grained details of the sort that enliven the story for students?

A. Boxed essays throughout the text show students in detail how historians analyze the past, while also creating a vivid image of different periods in American history. Every chapter includes features entitled *Hot Commodities* and *Singular Lives*, as well as either a *States of Emergency* or a *Spaces and Places* selection. A set of questions encouraging students to analyze and contextualize the selection rounds out each essay. In addition, the Hot Commodities feature is included in Connect History as a gradable exercise. Descriptions of these learning features appear in the visual walk-through of the text that follows this interview.

Q. These features take the narrative deeper, but how do you guide students through the process of interpreting and analyzing primary sources?

A. Each chapter offers students the opportunity to examine historical evidence through an *Interpreting the Sources* selection. The primary sources in these boxed features include public and private documents, visual sources, material artifacts, and transcripts of oral traditions and stories. A headnote puts the source in context, and a series of questions after the source challenges students to think deeply and analytically about its significance. The *Interpreting the Sources* feature is included in our Connect History program; students can complete the exercise and submit it online for grading.

Q. What will students take away from *Becoming America*?

A. For all of our readers, whether *Becoming America* is their gateway to further studies in history or the only account they will read on the subject, our goals are the same. Our attention to the connections and discontinuities between past and present make it easier for students to grasp both the distinctiveness and the familiarity of bygone eras and to recognize themselves and our own time in the great sweep of American history. Students should come away with a contextualized understanding of the deep cultural changes that have characterized the American past; an appreciation for the interconnections among culture, technology, society, politics, economics, and the environment; and the analytical skills associated with rigorous interpretation of diverse sources. We want them to look with different eyes at the design of their own homes and neighborhoods, to actively interpret the meaning of mass spectacle and social media, and to think in a historically informed way about the urgent questions of our times. We hope that both our narrative and its lessons in critical thinking will help students participate fully and creatively in our diverse and culturally vital democracy.

Q: Is *Becoming America* available as an e-book?

A. Yes, in fact, it's available as a Smartbook, which means that students not only can read it online but can quiz themselves after every section. The Smartbook then adapts to their response, highlighting areas in the narrative that they need to study more.