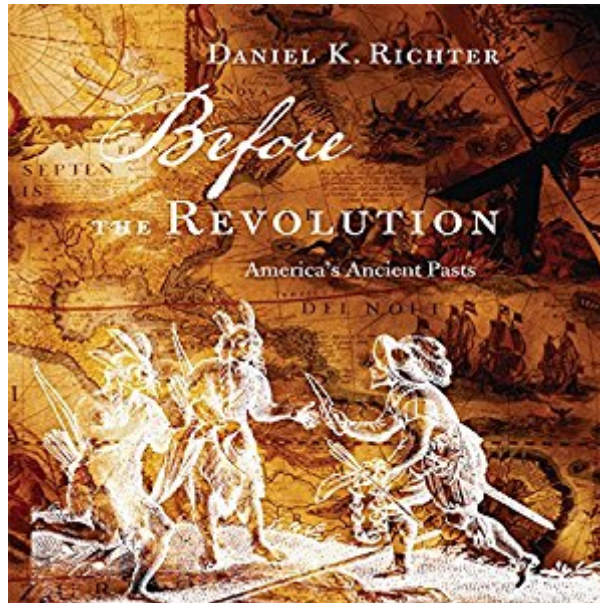




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# Before The Revolution: America's Ancient Pasts



## Synopsis

America began, we are often told, with the Founding Fathers, the men who waged a revolution and created a unique place called the United States. We may acknowledge the early Jamestown and Puritan colonists and mourn the dispossession of Native Americans, but we rarely grapple with the complexity of the nation's pre-revolutionary past. In this pathbreaking revision, Daniel Richter shows that the United States has a much deeper history than is apparent - that far from beginning with a clean slate, it is a nation with multiple pasts that stretch back as far as the Middle Ages, pasts whose legacies continue to shape the present. Exploring a vast range of original sources, *Before the Revolution* spans more than seven centuries and ranges across North America, Europe, and Africa. Richter recovers the lives of a stunning array of peoples - Indians, Spaniards, French, Dutch, Africans, English - as they struggled with one another and with their own people for control of land and resources. Their struggles occurred in a global context and built upon the remains of what came before. Gradually and unpredictably, distinctive patterns of North American culture took shape on a continent where no one yet imagined there would be nations called the United States, Canada, or Mexico. By seeing these trajectories on their own dynamic terms, rather than merely as a prelude to independence, Richter's epic vision reveals the deepest origins of American history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

History is not a discreet collection of independent events. What happens in one epoch, such as the Victorian Era or the Revolutionary Period, is not divorced from earlier events in the same epoch nor from events in previous epochs. Historical events are not blank slates--rather, there are always

traces and artifacts left on the slate from what was writ before. And so with *Before the Revolution*, by Daniel Richter, it is refreshing to read a historical text that takes these "conditional events" into consideration, leading to perhaps one of the most nuanced and reliable accountings of the Pre-Revolutionary period of American history. The basic strategy Richter uses in constructing and telling this part of American history is to divide the years 900-1765 CE into rough categories or "layers" of history, semantically labeled "Progenitors," "Conquistadores," "Traders," "Planters," "Imperialists," and "Atlanteans." For example, in the Progenitors time period, from about 900-1500 CE, Richter details the histories of both medieval Europe as well as medieval North America by comparing and contrasting the medieval periods on both continents. Cultures on both continents were greatly affected by the Medieval Warm Period and the Little Ice Age, and both cultures evolved into stronger agricultural societies dominated by religious and military elites who concentrated power in a harsh top-down model. Constant Indian-against-Indian and European-against-European military aggression was also the main method both cultures used to establish dominance and power. However, the cultures differed in that in Europe, the commercialization and ownership of land, as well as the growth of a strong merchant class within large cities, led to a feudal culture, as rulers needed vast monetary and military resources to enable economic and political growth, thus giving to indentured servitude as a way to secure and stabilize dependable workers necessary for land development and tax/tribute revenues. With this first layer of history established, in the next layer, Conquistadores, Richter shows how the social, economic, military, and religious concepts of power in both Indian as well as European cultures played into the synergistic relationships that developed between the Indians and the early Europeans coming to North America. Rich economic ties were established between these cultures, but so too did harsh military conflicts develop. These relationships, both supporting and conflicting, were fostered when the early European explorers turned into colonizers in the "Traders" period. Thus, the Progenitors period greatly influenced the Conquistadores period. Richter continues throughout the rest of the book this layered, nuanced pattern of showing Indian as well as English and European perspectives, influenced by a rich layered history between the two cultures. How does *Before the Revolution* differ from, say, *A Kingdom Strange*, by James Horn? Superficially, the books are different in that *A Kingdom Strange* covers a narrow slice of time and scope, focusing primarily on the colonization efforts of North America by the English during the time period of about 1500-1700 CE. *Before the Revolution*, as previously mentioned, covers a much broader swath of time and includes Indian as well as European perspectives. The intent of each book is different in that the Horn writes a close, almost character-driven account of the English who made those initial colonization attempts, whereas

Richter takes a step back to consider, with a history-driven account, the American Indian, English, and Continental Europe perspectives and motivations. Thus, it becomes clear that unpacking the causes of a particular historical event becomes very difficult due to a deep and complex prior history. Newspaper headlines often desire to have clear "villains" and "heroes" regarding historical events, but as is demonstrated in *Before the Revolution*, as in real life, historical events are rarely so easily categorized and labeled, due to webs of economical, religious, military, and cultural relationships between cultures that were created over long periods of time.

What is meant by the term "colonial America"? This is a question which is addressed very elegantly in Daniel Richter in *Before the Revolution: America's Ancient Pasts*. Richter argues "The American Revolution submerged earlier strata of society, culture, and politics, but those ancient worlds remain beneath the surface to mold the nation's current contours." As a teacher and professional in the field of history, the implication of this and other recent research is that the history of the United States does not start in 1776, but rather much earlier. In order to understand not just ourselves, but the world of the colonists in the mid 18th Century it is important to delve deeper into the ancient pasts of those very colonists we are studying. Reflecting upon the way in which I was taught US history, and which it is still often taught today, most teachers/professors brush over the colonial experience in the United States up until approximately the time of the French and Indian war, an act which gives on the impression there is nothing which can be learned from the previous time period(s). Richter does a marvelous job reminding us that the United States has been built upon layer after layer of previous cultures and peoples, some of which are not so deeply buried as to justify their being ignored. Instead they should be studied because they are with us today. As a teacher of history this book has not simply raised questions, but it has answered them. The fact is not only does US history not start with the signing of the Declaration of Independence, but there are numerous America's and, in order to understand them, it is important we do not start simply with 1776 or the immediate years leading up to that date. As Richter himself says, "This peculiar lure of land for urban planters wove seamlessly with puritan piety and political localism in the world the New Englanders created." He then mentions the fact that these three themes are found again in the Virginia area even though in many other ways it is completely different than that of the Massachusetts colony. As teachers we can use this framework to compare and contrast these two English colonial areas with other areas in the New World (the Spanish colonies in Texas and New Mexico spring to mind). If you are looking for a book which sticks to the standard narrative and conventional conclusions, then this one isn't for you. If you are looking for something different,

something new and something which will challenge your standard view of American history, then this one is just what you've been waiting for.

Very readable history of the settlement of the North America (mostly U.S.). The book covers the relationship between Native American tribes and the differences between that and the European relationships and how the English (mostly) took advantage of the situation and differences in the understanding of relationships.

Well documented history that creates a great perspective for readers interested in the history of what became the United States.

I order this for another person however he did say it was good

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