

Napoleon's Ghost

Napoleonic Memory and Popular Culture in Early America

By Mark Ehlers

The United States had existed as a nation for just over thirty years at the time of Napoleon Bonaparte's death in 1821. As the nineteenth century entered its third decade, the new republic found itself on the cusp of change. Twin revolutions occurring in transportation and in the marketplace allowed an increasingly mobile population to flood across the Ohio and Mississippi valleys and allowed many Americans to buy new consumer products for the first time. Simultaneously, the Second Great Awakening set the stage for a host of reform movements and prefigured a rising democratic tide in the young nation. As the founding generation passed away, their sons and daughters began to develop a strong sense of American nationalism not present in the first three decades of nationhood. They found some inspiration in the unlikely source of Napoleon Bonaparte. Between 1821 and the end of the Mexican War in 1848, Americans used the image and memory of Napoleon to make sense of their past, to define an American character and to celebrate a national future.¹

Despite the formidable barrier of the Atlantic Ocean, Americans watched the rise and fall of Napoleon with interest. Support was based primarily, but not exclusively along party lines.

1. The United States was only one of many nations that used the image of Napoleon to develop a sense of identity. This phenomenon in the United Kingdom is developed well in Stuart Semmel, *Napoleon and the British* (New Haven, CT, 2004); also see Stuart Semmel, "The British Uses of Napoleon" *Modern Language Notes* 120, no. 4 (September 2005): 733-746. Understandably, the French also used Napoleonic memory to develop their own sense of nationalism throughout the nineteenth century, see Sudhir Hazareesingh "Napoleonic Memory in Nineteenth Century France: The Making of a Liberal Legend." *Modern Language Notes* 120, no. 4 (September 2005): 747-773. A good overview of the use of Napoleonic memory in other parts of the world can be found in John C. Hirsch ed. *Napoleon: One Image, Ten Mirrors* (Washington D.C., 2002).

Federalists and conservative Republicans initially applauded as Napoleon seized power and finally ended the bloody excesses of the French Revolution. Support quickly waned among the mercantilist members of the Federalist Party, however, when, in 1803, Napoleon declared war on Great Britain, the United States' primary trading partner. The more liberal Jeffersonian Democrats cheered Bonaparte's initial military victories for the infant French Republic and cautiously supported the liberal civil reforms in the Napoleonic Code. But in 1804, most Republican support fell away when Napoleon reestablished a hereditary monarchy in France and declared himself emperor. Despite his negligible American support, Bonaparte very nearly managed a major foreign policy coup with the establishment of the Continental System.² This strategy caused the British, Napoleon's only remaining foe, to step up their blockade of Europe's ports and to search American flagged merchant vessels at sea. Americans saw this as a blatant attack on neutral maritime rights. A retaliatory American embargo of Great Britain and the series of diplomatic debacles that followed eventually led to a half-hearted war between the United States and Great Britain in 1812. Yet, even if the British could count the United States among their foes, Napoleon could not count the United States among his allies. By the time the Anglo-American war ended in 1815, Napoleon had already been defeated and exiled by the British and their allies twice.³

2. Napoleon's Continental System, established in November of 1806, forbade French allies on the continent of Europe from trading with Great Britain.

3. This paragraph is synthesized from the arguments of Peter Hill, *Napoleon's Troublesome Americans Franco-American Relations 1804-1815* (Washington D.C., 2005) and Joseph I. Shulim, *The Old Dominion and Napoleon Bonaparte: A Study in American Opinion* (New York, 1952).

On May 5, 1821, Bonaparte died in exile on St. Helena. His death occurred as the last of the American founding generation was passing away. Many eulogists found the temptation to compare the great Napoleon to the founders of their own republic too strong to resist. These comparisons played a major role in shaping Americans' understanding of their collective past. For an author in *The Village Post*, George Washington and Bonaparte made for an easy contrast, "both arose from humble parentage, and both reached their elevated stations by their own unaided efforts." However, the author continued, Bonaparte fought not, "to free an unoffending people from the shackles of a tyrant." Instead, "his Ambition, that fell destroyer of mankind led him to grasp at the dominion and power of all the kinds on the Continent." Washington, on the other hand, "arrayed himself to establish Justice in place of iniquitous despotism."⁴ Eulogistic comparisons throughout the United States held to the basic theme juxtaposing Napoleon's ambition with American civic virtue. In his popular *Eulogium on Thomas Jefferson*, Nicholas Biddle asked his audience to contrast the fevered ambition that characterized the "turbulent existence of Napoleon," with "the peaceful disinterested career of Jefferson."⁵ In 1845, *The American Whig Review* explained the vital difference between John Jay and Napoleon in similar terms. "[Bonaparte's] career...exemplifies on a splendid scale the effects simply of selfishness," whereas Jay's civic career exhibited, "the tendencies and results of a self-sacrificing spirit."⁶ Second generation Americans often asked themselves the fundamental question: why had the American republic succeeded where the French republic had failed? By comparing Napoleon to men like Washington, Jefferson and Jay, many Americans found their answer in the virtue and unselfish

4. "Bonaparte and Washington," *Village Post* 2 (April 22, 1834): 2.

5. Nicholas Biddle, *Eulogium on Thomas Jefferson: Given Before the American Philosophical Society* (Philadelphia, 1827), 50-51.

6. "Life and Character of John Jay," *The American Whig Review* 2, no. 1 (July 1845): 63-64.

character that they ascribed to their founding generation.⁷

A visitor to any bookshop in the United States between 1820 and the start of the American Civil War could have browsed through at least a dozen biographies of Napoleon Bonaparte, but the most popular by far was Sir Walter Scott's *Life of Napoleon*. Scott's mammoth, multi-volume narrative, published in 1827, had an enormous impact on the American perception of Napoleon during the Jacksonian and antebellum period. Its popular style and thrilling depictions of battle scenes made it a favorite of young men throughout the country. As a result of Scott's sentimental prose, a flood of Napoleon-themed romantic poetry and short stories filled American literary journals for a generation.⁸ More important to American identity, however, was the sympathetic portrait that Scott drew of his subject. In Scott's hands, Napoleon's "selfishness and self-love" was not of the "ordinary and odious character." Instead, it was founded in Bonaparte's patriotic love for his nation. That led Scott to assert that Napoleon's faults were "those of the sovereign and the politician," rather than those, "of the individual."

Perhaps most significant to a generation of young Americans in a nation experiencing a rising tide of democracy, Scott argued that Napoleon's journey from unknown provincial to ruler of Europe demonstrated the French Revolution's ultimate democratic act. As emperor, according to Scott, Bonaparte, "lay the foundation of his throne on the democratic principle which had opened his own career." This meant Napoleon threw "open to merit...the road to success in every department of the state."⁹ Scott's egalitarian Napoleon clearly affected the thinking of young Americans like feminist leader Margret Fuller. In 1847, she mimicked Scott's words almost verbatim when she wrote to *The New York*

7. Also see "Napoleon and Adams" *Christian Inquirer* 2, no. 29 (April 29, 1848): 116.

8. For a particularly terrible example see, J.P.C. "Lines on Reading Scott's *Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*" *Casket* 9 (September 1829): 429. The impact of Napoleon on Romanticism is fully discussed in, Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge, 1995).

9. Walter Scott, *The Life of Napoleon* (Philadelphia, 1839), 665-666.

Daily Tribune. "Through Napoleon," she declared, "career had really been open to talent."¹⁰ In his *Life of Napoleon*, Scott exposed countless young Americans to a patriotic and brave liberal democrat.

Scott's critics also played a role in how Americans perceived Bonaparte. What he read in Scott's *Life of Napoleon* deeply troubled the influential Unitarian minister, William Channing. Shortly after its publishing, he penned a series of articles in the *Christian Examiner* that outlined his objections to Scott's analysis. *Analysis of the Character of Napoleon Bonaparte* proved quite popular among former Federalists and the upper classes of American society. For example, the son of President John Quincy Adams, Charles Francis Adams, wrote highly of the essay in his diary and noted discussing it over dinner with friends and arguing its merits in debating society.¹¹ Channing admitted that he could not deny Napoleon's greatness. However, he suggested that there were three orders of greatness and that Napoleon's was the least of these three. Napoleon, according to Channing, had neither moral nor intellectual greatness. Instead, the greatness of Napoleon was in "action." Channing described this quality as "the sublime power in conceiving and executing bold and extensive plans." With these mighty objects as their goal, men possessing greatness of action then brought a "complicated machinery of means, energies and arrangements...[to] accomplish great outward effects."¹²

10. Margret Fuller, *These Sad But Glorious Days: Dispatches from Europe 1846-1850* ed. Larry Reynolds and Susan Belaco Smith (New Haven, CT, 1991), 120.

11. Charles Francis Adams, *Diary of Charles Francis Adams*, ed. Aida DiPace Donald and David Donald (Cambridge MA, 1964), II, 182, 188, 343. The young lawyer and future Supreme Court Chief Justice, Salmon P. Chase also wrote favorably of Channing's essay in his diary, "Undazzled by the blaze of military and civil glory which has surrounded the Hero, [Channing] has deeply penetrated and faithfully exposed his real character." See Salmon P. Chase, *The Salmon P. Chase Papers*, ed. John Niven (Kent, OH, 1993), I, 10.

12. William E. Channing *Analysis of the Character of Napoleon Suggested by the Publication of Scott's Life of Napoleon* (Boston, 1827), 40.

As he concluded his essay, Channing introduced his own take on American exceptionalism by comparing the American Revolution with the French. Those who saw the greatness of the American republic in the virtue founding leaders were only partially right, Channing argued. The French Republic, wrote Channing, failed through the want of "moral preparation" for liberty. This failure of the French people allowed great men of action like Napoleon to seize power. The greatness of the American people, on the other hand, was too much to admit the "overshadowing greatness of leaders." Thus, while Washington might be rightly called the father of his country, he was not its "saviour." The American had no need of such things. Americans never spoke worshipfully of Washington, "as the French did of Bonaparte." The American people, according to Channing, never "lost their self respect." By comparing the moral greatness of the American people to the corruption of Napoleon's France, Channing explained the success of the American experiment by appealing to the virtuous character of the American people.¹³

What Channing failed to take into account was that many Americans of the middling and lower classes idolized great men of "action" just as much as their French counterparts. Naming children after great men occurred regularly during the nineteenth century, and an analysis of naming trends gives some sense of the men that Americans considered "great." Men who fought in the Civil War fell almost exclusively between the ages of fifteen and forty. Thus, Civil War muster rolls provide an idea of who men and women were naming their children after between 1820 and 1845. This reveals an interesting trend.¹⁴ Of children named after historical figures,

13. *Ibid*, 47-49.

14. For this paragraph I picked ten random Civil War regiments from different areas of the country (four Union, four Confederate and two regiments of United States Colored Troops) and examined the muster rolls using the National Park Service's Soldier and Sailor System ([www.http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/](http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/)). For the purposes of this essay, my methodology here is admittedly unscientific, however, I do think that the general conclusions are valid.

Benjamin Franklin, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson remained very popular through the mid-nineteenth century, but Napoleon Bonaparte took a close fourth place. Napoleon even edged out Lafayette, the French hero of the American Revolution. The name Napoleon appeared more popular in the western states and (excepting Louisiana) more popular in the North than the South. Even more interesting, the name Napoleon held strong popularity among slaves. Why slaves favored the name Napoleon is a vexing question since the emperor actually strengthened the institution of slavery in the French Empire during his reign. Perhaps they did it for the same reason as white Americans—to confer a sense of egalitarian greatness onto their children.

Another name for children that became very popular during the 1820s was Andrew Jackson. Perhaps no American suffered greater contemporary association with Napoleon Bonaparte than the seventh president. While it was not an association that Jackson relished, Old Hickory's detractors found the similarities too easy to miss. Both men rose from obscurity through their military talents. Both men had a reputation for acting outside the letter of the law to accomplish their means, and the lower classes acclaimed both men as their heroes. "The Siren-song of popularity has led the train of fallen republics from Nero to Napoleon," warned anti-Jackson pamphleteer Joseph Colwell shortly after Jackson's nomination for president in 1828.¹⁵ One of the most effective avenues of attack for Jackson's detractors was to raise the specter of a Napoleonic military dictatorship. In a popular cartoon that appeared during Jackson's presidency titled "The Model of a Republican President," Jackson stands before a mirror with a large statue of Napoleon by his side. As his lackeys dress him in Napoleonic garb Jackson remarks, "I find that I like Napoleon! Down with the Revolution! Down with the Senate! Glory!"¹⁶ Even though Scott made Bonaparte a heroic, egalitarian

15. Joseph Colwell, *An Address to the People of the United States* (New York, 1828), 29.

16. Anthony Imbert, "The Model of A Republican President." New York, n.d. Image no. 2003-19832, The Harry T. Peters Collection, Behring Center, National Museum of American History.

figure for many Americans, the notion of a military dictatorship in the United States as personified by Napoleon remained unsettling to the national psyche.

Despite the attacks, Jackson's supporters did not shy away from presenting a Jackson that shared many of Napoleon's qualities. In *A Vindication of the Character and Public Service of Andrew Jackson*, Henry Lee, one of Jackson's former soldiers, described Jackson's character in terms that most Americans would have associated with Bonaparte, thanks to Scott and Channing. According to Lee, Jackson possessed "A vigorous judgment...a generous sensibility to merit...and a valiant heart." All qualities these appeared in Scott's sympathetic summary of Napoleon's character.¹⁷ "The rapidity and strength of his reasoning faculty, and the fervor of all his conceptions," Lee continued, "constitute him decidedly as a man of genius."¹⁸ These qualities of character came almost verbatim from Channing's description of Napoleon's "greatness of action." Once stripped of the name Napoleon, these qualities became hallmarks of popular American character.

Lee also made an unusual defense of Jackson in response to direct accusations of military dictatorship. "Who can say that France was free when Napoleon effected the revolution of the eighteenth of *Brumaire*?" Lee asked, "Were not the corruption and imbecility of [Murat's] directory the proximate causes of Bonaparte's success?" According to Lee, these causes made "his iron rule a relief to the French people."¹⁹ Here was a unique defense indeed. Instead of denying the charge of military dictatorship, Lee turned the charge on its head and blamed those men already in power. For Lee, and probably for many more Americans, a potential Napoleonic dictatorship held less danger than the civil dictatorship of a Robespierre and Murat!

As Americans spread westward across North America, they kept the memory of Napoleon before them. The French Emperor himself sold the vast

17. We know that Lee read Scott's *Life of Napoleon*, as he quotes from it at length in another part of the tract.

18. Henry Lee, *A Vindication of the Character and Public Services of Andrew Jackson* (Boston, 1828), 21.

19. *Ibid*, 20.

Louisiana territory (which encompassed most of the western half of the country) to the United States in 1803. They used this memory to connect American expansion with the idea of destiny and to draw a sharp contrast between the violent French conquest and American expansion. The idea of destiny was deeply engrained in nineteenth century American culture. Nearly every author wrote of Napoleon in this context. "Child of Destiny"²⁰ and like phrases appeared multiple times in Scott's work and Channing referred to Bonaparte as, "The child and favorite of fortune and, if not the Lord, the chief object of destiny."²¹ Americans liked to think of national expansion across the North American continent as their manifest destiny. Many Americans attempted to link the idea of Napoleonic destiny with American expansion. One way they accomplished this was through naming settlements in a Napoleonic tradition. There were at least six towns named Napoleon or Napoleonville incorporated in the United States between 1820 and the start of the Civil War.²² Settlers named other towns after Napoleon's victories such as Austerlitz, Ulm and Marengo.²³ These towns provided a physical reminder of national destiny and greatness as Americans moved farther west. Residents of these settlements took the destiny associated with their names quite seriously. A journal correspondent traveling through Arkansas in 1839 wrote, "I am now at Napoleon—a place

destined they say here to be a great city."²⁴ For residents of Napoleon, Arkansas, Austerlitz, New York, and Marengo, Ohio as well at least a dozen other settlements across the western part of the United States, the idea of destiny attached itself to the idea of American expansion through Napoleonic memory.

If French expansion under Napoleon was the work of destiny, it came at an incredibly high price. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers became casualties during the Napoleonic wars and a quarter century of warfare left the European landscape in ruins. Americans recoiled in horror at such waste and often contrasted their own nation's "peaceful" western movement with the bloody French conquest of Europe. In a charming article titled "Napoleon and Franklin" one author imagined a dialogue between the French Emperor and that quintessential American, Benjamin Franklin. Bonaparte starts the conversation by pointing out the weakness of the American grasp on North America. "Why do you not take Mexico and Cuba?" Bonaparte asks, "And why do you let the Russians keep a foot on your continent?" Franklin patiently explains that Americans have no need to conquer such places and points out that "the peaceful possession of all the really valuable part of the continent," would have been more effective in fulfilling Napoleon's European ambitions. To this, Napoleon balks. In response, Franklin then tells the Emperor that the Americans "have founded an empire destined to be wider than the Roman," and that through "peaceful colonization and expansion" the language of liberty has already been spread, "through vast regions." Americans have no need to impose their empire on conquered people as Bonaparte does with his "iron legions on Europe." Even the arrogant Bonaparte struggles for words to contradict the brilliance of the American sage, and finally settles for, "Enough, Doctor, this philosophizing is worse than Moscow."²⁵

In 1851, the transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson provided one of the best analyses of what

20. Scott, 257, 508.

21. Channing, 33.

22. David H. Burr *A New Universal Atlas* (New York, 1835) Hill Memorial Library Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

23. Sometimes these names could be amusingly contentious. The following anecdote appears in Franklin Ellis, *A History of Columbia Country, New York* (Philadelphia, 1878), 381. "Martin Van Buren, then a State Senator, and who, being an ardent admirer of the great Napoleon, was somewhat incensed at one of his political opponents (Elisha Williams, if we mistake not), who had succeeded in having a town in Seneca county christened 'Waterloo,' leaped to his feet and moved to amend by calling the new town 'Austerlitz.' Having carried his point, he retired to his seat, saying 'There's an Austerlitz for your Waterloo.'"

24. "Near Home" *Spirit of the Times* 9 no. 37 (November 16, 1839): 438.

25. "Napoleon and Franklin" *U.S. Literary Gazette* 3 no. 9 (February 1, 1826): 340, 344.

the memory of Napoleon Bonaparte meant to an increasingly democratic nation. Emerson neatly blended Scott's egalitarian hero and Channing's flawed great man of action into a penetrating American democrat thesis. Emerson divided American society into two categories: conservative or "those who had made their fortune," and democrat or "the young and the poor with fortunes to make." According to Emerson, democrats of the United States had made Napoleon Bonaparte their idol, and Emerson thought he knew why. Emerson explained that not only did Napoleon have the virtues and the vices of the American democrat, but also their "spirit or aim." In other words, said Emerson, "Bonaparte was the idol of common men because he had in transcendent degree the qualities and powers of common men." Like American democrats Napoleon began in obscurity with nothing more than his citizenship. From there, "the times, his constitution and his early circumstances combined to develop this pattern democrat," and vault him to the throne of France. For Emerson, this explained why "every species of merit was sought and advanced under his government." Emerson agreed with Channing in that Napoleon was no hero, "at least in the high sense." But he understood that the draw of Scott's Napoleon for the democrat was in his heroic egalitarianism. Napoleon was the idol of the democrat "throng who fill the markets, shops, counting houses, manufactories, [and] ships of the modern world, aiming to be rich" because he was a "democrat incarnate." He was one of them.²⁶

Midway through the American Civil War the use of Napoleon to define the American character sharply decreased. A mixture of reasons can explain this cessation. The bloody reality of Civil War combat certainly rendered the romantic prose of Scott's *Life of Napoleon* hollow and the those American generals whom the press styled the "Napoleon" of their day uniformly failed to achieve the expected results. National expansion took a back seat to waging war and the Maximilian puppet government set up by France's new Emperor, Louis

Napoleon rendered the Bonaparte family a threat to the United States. Yet, perhaps the greatest reason of all was because Americans both North and South discovered that their earlier definitions of American character were obsolete and that a new definition would be forged on the battlefields of the Civil War.

26. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Napoleon or Man of the World" in *Representative Men* (Boston, 1876), 223-24, 227, 230, 239, 252.