

# Citizen Makers All? Tomorrow's Early American History and the Future of Humanistic Basic Research

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*The New American Antiquarian*, the only American historical journal founded with an explicit commitment to publishing basic research,<sup>1</sup> strongly disagrees with recent decisions by the United States government to defund basic research across all academic disciplines.<sup>2</sup> Below are a few words on what we believe is specifically at stake for early American scholarship.

It is clear which way the wind is blowing. In the wake of severe funding cuts, American university departments and historical institutions will face tremendous pressure to direct dwindling funds toward scholarship on the past that promotes republican citizenship and civic identity. The traditional, patriotic vision of history's civic purpose is now federal doctrine. While future administrations will undoubtedly reject the naïve substance of that vision, they are likely to respond to it by directing funds toward projects that serve to revise and rehabilitate popular understanding of the American past for similar civic ends. This trend will be further accelerated by a growing sense among Americans of the imminence of state failure in the United States and the hope that promoting national histories, of either conservative or revisionist varieties, can help stave off this failure. American history will find significant support in this circumstance only to the extent that it can be applied to provide buttressing for the nation's decayed templates of citizen formation. This project, in which history and historians are conscripted as inputs in the manufacturing of citizens, will necessarily be as riven with contradiction and omissions as it was in decades past. And its ascendance will mean fewer opportunities than ever

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<sup>1</sup> Research pursued to advance fundamental knowledge without regard to predetermined valuations of that knowledge's relevance in practical applications, see Peter Jakob Olsen-Harbach, "Towards a New American Antiquarianism: Basic Research, Aesthetics, and the Irrelevant Early American Past," *The New American Antiquarian* 1 (Fall 2022): 3–7.

<sup>2</sup> In the year that has passed since the 2024 publication of the third volume of *The New American Antiquarian*, nearly 1,500 grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) were cancelled by the executive branch of the United States government. A partial list can be found here: <https://impact.ach.org>. Similar rescissions were made to National Science Foundation (NSF) grants, as summarized here: <https://nytimes.com/interactive/2025/05/2/upshot/nsf-grants-trump-cuts.html>.

for scholars whose work aims principally at the generation of new knowledge without special concern for that knowledge's application in our present.

The humanistic basic research of tomorrow will not be predominantly conducted in institutions backstopped by federal dollars. It will instead be wrought, as it has nearly always been, by individuals and private associations toiling with minimal resources and without any expectation of remuneration or broad recognition. These quiet stalwarts never attracted the sustained attention of benefactors principally committed to citizen-making, and we should not be so credulous as to believe that the state agencies of decades past were much invested in history as anything other than a store of munitions for legitimation.<sup>3</sup> Yet the situation is now decisively worse.<sup>4</sup> There is no longer ambiguity about the kind of institutions and actors that can be relied upon to further humanistic basic research. The best stewards of this research have always been and will always be individuals operating within institutions free from the state and its apparatus of dependent universities. *The New American Antiquarian* intends to be just such an institution.

This outlet remains committed to maximizing our collective factual understanding of early America through the empirical study and peer-reviewed publication of all its surviving evidence. We will continue to be a venue for basic research on the entirety of hemispheric early America, regardless of how obscure or irrelevant its artifacts are to contemporary imperatives. In a word, we will continue to be antiquarian, even in perilous times. We can offer this guarantee due to our fully independent publication model. Our efforts to further the research enterprise of American history are not contingent on the support of those whose interest in the past extends only so far as its utility. We will go onward, steadfast in our conviction that all the treasures of the past are worthy of study, and we will do so undaunted by those who diminish scholarship done for scholarship's sake. We welcome and sincerely appreciate your interest in joining us as we advance basic research in early American history for decades to come.

<sup>3</sup> In its announcement of fiscal year 2026 grants, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) of the National Archives stated its intention to fund "projects that promote access to America's historical records to encourage understanding of our democracy, history, and culture," the exact language it has used since at least 2014: <https://web.archive.org/web/20251129222109/https://archives.gov/nhprc/announcement/editions.html>; <https://web.archive.org/web/20140721000646/https://archives.gov/nhprc/announcement/editions.html>. The NEH's Scholarly Editions and Translations grant—the federal fund whose scope is most sympathetic to humanistic basic research—steadily increased its demands for the predetermined significance of funded works for years prior to the 2025 funding crisis. As late as 2012, the NEH was still willing to generally fund "editions and translations of pre-existing texts and documents that are currently inaccessible or available in inadequate editions," <https://web.archive.org/web/20120418232248/https://neh.gov/grants/research/scholarly-editions-and-translations-grants>. But by 2021, this scope had narrowed to "editing, annotating, and translating foundational humanities texts that are vital to learning and research," <https://web.archive.org/web/20210117022512/https://neh.gov/grants/research/scholarly-editions-and-translations-grants>.

<sup>4</sup> This year, the Scholarly Editions and Translations grants will reserve "Chairman's Special Awards of up to \$1,000,000 for exactly five years" for "projects on topics in American history and culture with exceptional significance and audience reach," <https://web.archive.org/web/20251122112345/https://neh.gov/grants/research/scholarly-editions-and-translations-grants>. Antiquarians, we may safely assume, need not apply.