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Benson Lossing: His Life and Work, 1830-1860

BY DIANE M. CASEY

Benson J. Lossing's interest in reaching a popular rather than an elite audience, his journalistic style, and the changing methods of historical research, which began to develop at the end of the nineteenth century, have all led to the current opinion of him—that he was a popularizer of history, and not a historian. However, an examination of his long and varied career suggests that his work deserves consideration in the study of antebellum American life.

Lossing was born on February 12, 1813, in Beekman, New York. His father, John, who died while Lossing was still an infant, was a farmer. Lossing's mother, Miriam, died when he was twelve. Not much is known of these difficult early years except that Lossing received very little formal education. At the age of fourteen, he was apprenticed to a watchmaker in Poughkeepsie, New York, where he spent the next seven years learning his trade by day and studying independently at night.

In 1833 Lossing married Alice Barritt.¹ Two years later, at the age of twenty-two, he abandoned watchmaking to become the editor and joint proprietor of the *Poughkeepsie Telegraph*. In 1836 he became involved with the *Poughkeepsie Casket*, a literary journal. It was while serving as editor of this journal that Lossing learned wood engraving, an art form which he would master and use extensively during his early career.

During the 1840s illustrations became increasingly important in

1. *Dictionary of American Biography*. Alice Lossing died in 1855. In a letter to a friend who had just lost a relative, Lossing confided that his wife was dying of uterine cancer: Lossing to Dr. Francis, Poughkeepsie, New York, February 2, 1855, Benson Lossing Collection, George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University. Lossing was married for the second time on November 18, 1856 to Helen Sweet. By 1872, he had two sons and two daughters. See John T. Cunningham, "Historians on the Double", *American Heritage*, 19 (June 1968): 80.

periodicals. The customary method of production for these ‘embellishments’ was engraving, usually on steel and copper, although wood was also being used. Lossing, with his newly acquired skill, was taken on by the *Family Magazine*, the first fully illustrated periodical in the United States. He worked there, both as editor and illustrator, from 1839 to 1841. From his active involvement during this early period of experimentation, Lossing learned the effectiveness of illustrations in conveying and reinforcing ideas, the possibilities of wide, inexpensive distribution of knowledge, and the need for educating the general public. He described the importance of engraving in his *Outline History of the Fine Arts*:

The value of engraving as it at present exists, and especially that department which is so intimately connected with printing, cannot be appreciated. It may justly be called the great disseminator of information, for it impresses facts upon the memory in a manner more lasting than can possibly be done by letter press description. The record of the historian and the song of the poet, the theory and truth of the philosopher, and the delineations of the biographer, may all be laid before the child or the adult; but without the engraver’s art, his notions of all that they have severally described, are vague and inconclusive. It is to the graphic art that the poor man owes his knowledge of the form of things abroad, whither his circumstances will not permit him to go; and it operates as a mighty lever in raising the mass to an elevated standard of general knowledge, unattainable, by any other power.²

In the early years of the nineteenth century, magazines and newspapers proliferated in response to the market, and Lossing took full advantage of the opportunities the situation offered. As a result of his growing reputation through his work with the *Family Magazine*,

2. Benson Lossing, *Outline History of the Fine Arts* (New York: Harper, 1843; first published 1840), 302-3. In addition to this book and the others by Lossing cited in this article, the George Arents Research Library holds a Benson Lossing collection that includes incoming and outgoing letters, legal documents, several sketches and manuscripts, and copies of material held by Vassar College. The George W. Childs collection in the Arents Library also contains letters concerning Lossing’s work. The major collection of Lossing materials is held by the Henry E. Huntington Library.

Lossing was able to start his own business in 1843. He joined in partnership with William Barritt (probably a relative by marriage) to form the firm of Lossing and Barritt, which would become the largest wood-engraving establishment in New York City. By the age of thirty, with little formal education and limited financial resources, Lossing had become a successful businessman. He now turned his attention to gaining recognition, not only as an artist, but even more importantly in view of his overall career, as a writer of history.

One should examine Lossing's success bearing two things in mind: first, the status of art in early nineteenth-century society; and second, Lossing's own approach to the use of illustration. The antebellum period was a period of transition for artists in America. At the beginning of the century resistance to the fine arts had been very strong and so deep-rooted that it would continue to be an important element of American thinking throughout the period. Neil Harris explains in *The Artist in American Society* that "as luxury was the deadly corruption which could poison national virtue, and as the fine arts—foreign, expensive, aristocratic, superfluous—epitomized such luxury, many patriot hearts were sealed against their American existence".³

But there were those who saw value in the fine arts and contended that they could be useful in creating a national image. This utilitarian approach suited the mood of the period. Gradually, the arts began to gain a measure of acceptance, as the government employed architects to design national buildings, sculptors to create statues of national figures, and painters to produce portraits and scenes of America. Lossing, an early supporter of the use of art in creating a national identity, argued that to create a 'popular taste' favorable to the arts, it was "necessary by facts to produce a conviction that to the Fine Arts all civilized nations are greatly indebted for their advancement in political and social greatness".⁴

Lossing was also a firm believer and active participant in the use of art to instruct and control. As early as 1840 he had observed:

The cultivation of the Fine Arts, and a general dissemination of a taste for such liberal pursuits, are of the highest im-

3. Neil Harris, *The Artist in American Society: The Formative Years 1790-1860* (New York: Braziller, 1966), 35.

4. Lossing, *Outline History*, iv.

portance in a national point of view, for they have a powerful tendency to elevate the standard of intellect, and consequently morals, and form one of those mighty levers which raise nations as well as individuals to the highest point in the scale of civilization.⁵

An examination of Lossing's early work as an engraver demonstrates his use of art not only to project generally held nationalistic ideals but also to propagandize. In 1845 Lossing was hired by Edward Walker, a New York publisher, to provide the engravings for the Reverend John Dowling's *The History of Romanism*, an example of the anti-Catholic literature that was prevalent in the nativist movement of the 1840s and 1850s. Nativism, which was an expression of the anxiety Americans suffered as they sought to identify their diverse origins with a single national image, had intensified during the large flux of Catholic immigration (beginning around 1820) with its ensuing economic problems. As emotions ran high, the traditional distrust of Catholicism was exacerbated. Catholics were seen as a threat to American security, not only as foreigners but as people owing allegiance to a foreign ruler, the Pope.

Book publishers naturally sought works to appeal to the public's interest in and fears about Catholicism. *The History of Romanism* was one such book. In his preface, Dowling stated that the work was an attempt to present a comprehensive view "on the subjects of controversy between protestants and papists". Also, he noted that the engravings "are not mere fancy sketches for the sake of embellishment, but are illustrative of unquestionable facts, and intended to impress those facts more vividly upon the memory".⁶ They were, indeed, to be considered an integral part of the book. Lossing, working in New York City where nativist sentiment was extremely strong, must have realized the potential popularity of such a book. Whether he agreed with the sentiments of the book is not known; certainly he must have recognized the opportunity to further his career.

The added engraved title page is a vivid example of art as propaganda (fig. 1). The images are not original and the symbolism would

5. Lossing, *Outline History*, Preface.

6. Reverend John Dowling, *The History of Romanism: From the Earliest Corruptions of Christianity to the Present Time*, 11th ed., (New York: Edward Walker, 1846), Preface; v. The emphasis is Dowling's.

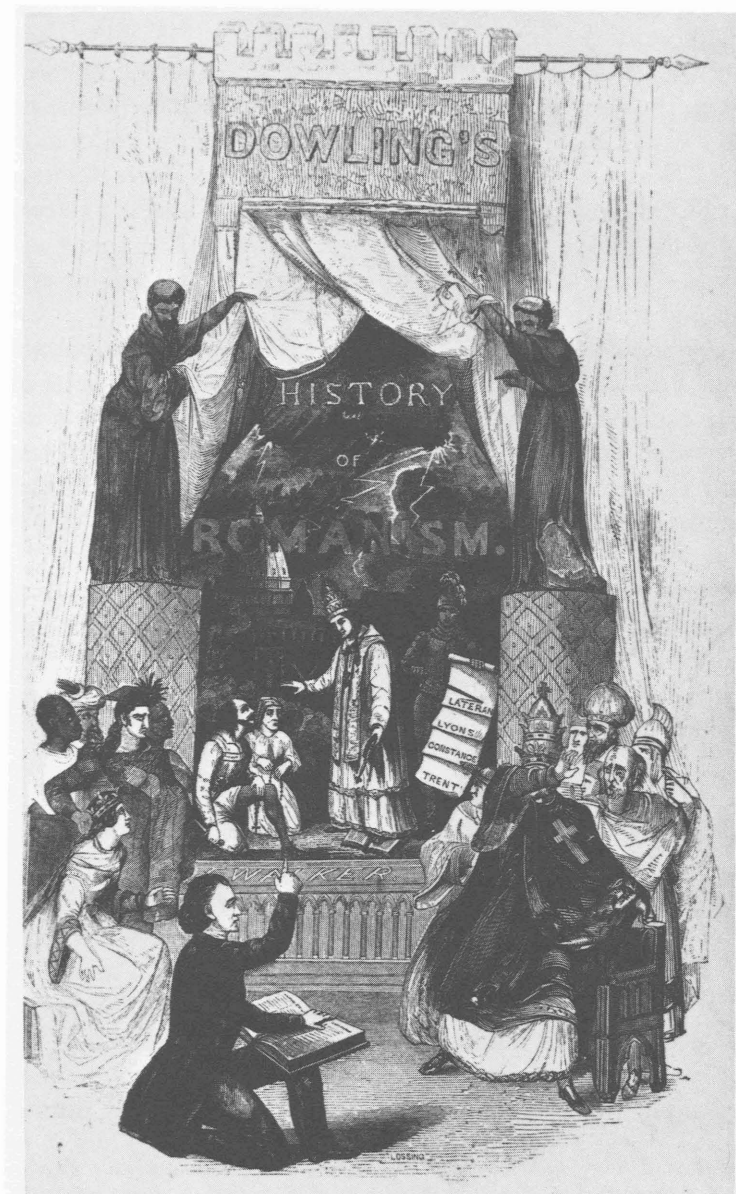


Fig. 1. Added engraved title page, John Dowling's *The History of Romanism*.

have been clear to most nineteenth-century readers; nevertheless, a detailed description was provided for this 'emblematical title page'. The purpose of the engraving was to lend force to Dowling's exposition of the "true" nature of Popery. Two 'enlightened' monks "are lifting up the curtain to exhibit to the world a genuine picture of the Romish Anti-Christ". The Pope is shown "trampling under foot the Bible". "Thus has Popery ever set her own decrees above the inspired word of God, and enforced obedience to those decrees, *wherever she possessed the power, at the point of the sword.*"⁷ The threat of Catholicism was made clear from the outset by the effective use of both images and text.

The publication of *The History of Romanism* had two important results for Benson Lossing's career. First, his use of illustrations correlated to the text became a technique that he would continue to employ very effectively. Secondly, the success of this book prompted Edward Walker to publish Lossing's first book on American history. Walker noted that:

Having experienced the skill of Mr. Lossing . . . in the illustration of Dowling's *History of Romanism* . . . and having full confidence in his ability as a writer, I have entrusted to him both the authorship of this volume and its pictorial embellishment.⁸

With the publication of *Seventeen Hundred and Seventy-Six, or the War of Independence*, Lossing became a writer of history as well as an engraver and businessman.

However, illustrations would remain an integral part of Lossing's work. He wanted to impress "facts upon the memory". Therefore, most of his engravings were of a realistic rather than symbolic nature. In his own books, he made use of illustrations to interpret historical events and to reinforce patriotic ideals. For example, in *Seventeen Hundred and Seventy-Six*, Lossing described the capture of Major John André, the Adjutant-General of the British Army during the

7. Dowling, *History of Romanism*, "Description of Emblematical Title Page". The emphasis is Dowling's.

8. Benson Lossing, *Seventeen Hundred and Seventy-Six, or the War of Independence; A History of the Anglo-Americans* (New York: Edward Walker, 1848), "Publisher's Notice".

Revolution. André had conspired with Benedict Arnold in a plot which would have allowed the British to seize the patriots' fort at West Point. Lossing wrote:

André was paralyzed for a moment with astonishment, and offered them his horse, his purse, his watch, and large rewards from the British government, if they would let him go. But their stern patriotism was inflexible, and he was carried before Colonel Jameison.⁹

To illustrate his text Lossing executed an engraving entitled "Capture of André" (fig.2), in which André is shown offering his watch to a patriot, who has just discovered, concealed in André's boot, papers which disclose the conspiracy. André's dismay is made obvious. Lossing's illustration emphasizes the grandeur of the landscape and at the same time suggests how isolated the area was where the incident occurred. In this way, he underlined the loyalty and incorruptibility of the patriots, who could have easily succumbed to bribery and treachery. The engraving not only depicts a historic event but instructs the reader in how patriotic Americans were not corrupted by freedom.

Another important aspect of Lossing's work as an engraver was his desire to record scenes and objects of the past which he felt were disappearing and would, therefore, be lost to future generations of Americans. While recording the past, he also frequently provided a picture of his own time; for, in the interest of presenting accurately what he observed, he often included information about himself and conditions in his own day. This feature of his work is evident in his best-known book, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution*, where, for example, in illustrating Milford Hill, site of a skirmish between the colonists and British soldiers in Connecticut, he shows the reader how it appeared on the day he was there (fig.3). Rain is falling and the artist is shown working diligently under an umbrella. This engraving reveals more about Lossing and his work methods in the nineteenth century than about the Revolution.

In *The Pictorial Field-Book* Lossing also included two engravings of "the old Raleigh tavern at Williamsburg", where in the Apollo Room

9. Lossing, *Seventeen Hundred and Seventy-Six*, 320.

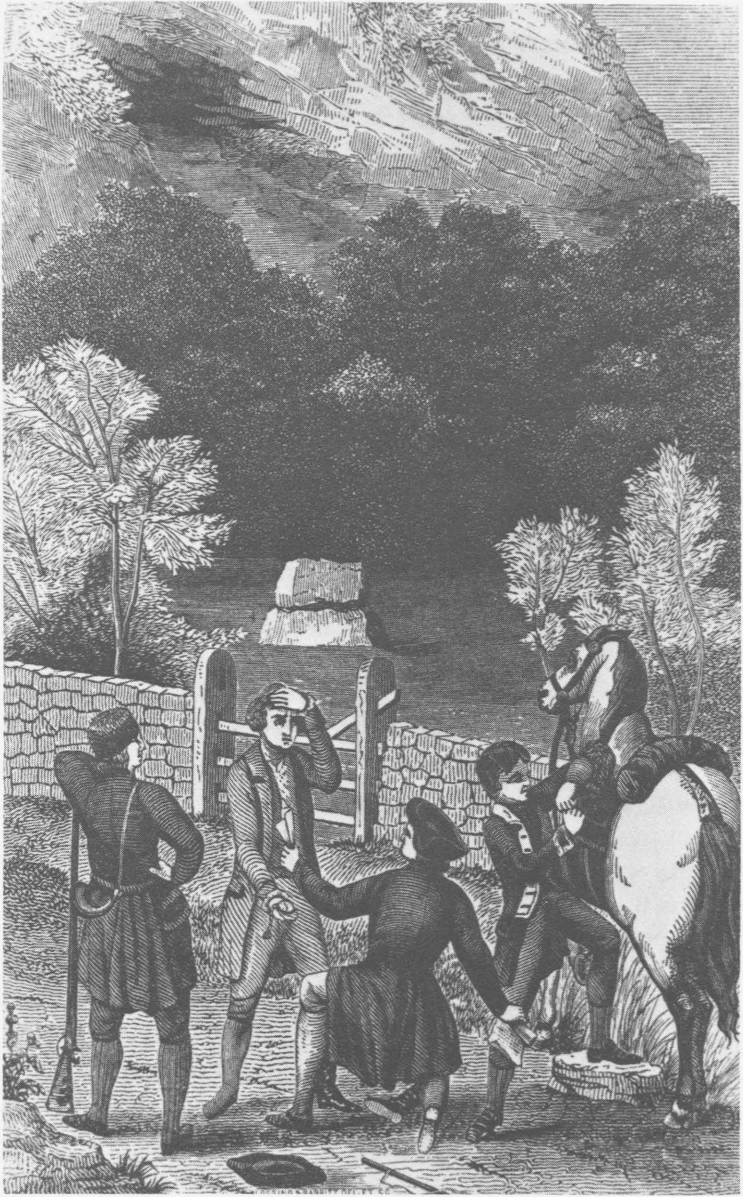


Fig. 2. The capture of Major John André, the Adjutant-General of the British Army during the American Revolution, by a group of patriots.

“the leading patriots of Virginia, including Washington, held many secret caucuses and planned many schemes for the overthrow of royal rule in the colonies” (figs. 4 and 5). When Lossing arrived at the tavern, workmen were preparing to remodel the Apollo Room. He noted: “Had my visit been deferred a day longer, the style of the room could never have been portrayed”. For Lossing that would have been a tragedy. “The sound of the hammer and saw engaged in the work of change seemed to me like actual desecration.” He recorded the room as he found it but also included the workmen’s tools which were soon to destroy it.

Benson Lossing’s work as an engraver is significant for several reasons. First, as an early proponent and practitioner of the use of the fine arts to foster American nationalism, Lossing exemplifies the role of the artist in antebellum America. Second, the fact that he was interested in reaching and educating the general population provides a significant insight into the popular culture of the period. Third, his method of going out into the country and sketching the scenes of American history as they appeared in the nineteenth century makes his work as an engraver and artist particularly valuable. And finally, it is instructive to take notice of what he considered important enough to portray for posterity, for a study of his selected subject matter reveals much about the values that were considered important in the nineteenth century and that have since become closely associated with the American identity.

As important as Lossing’s talent as an engraver was to his initial success, his own ambition was to be a writer, not just an illustrator, of historical works. In the Preface to *Seventeen Hundred and Seventy-Six*, Lossing clearly stated his purpose in writing yet another book about the Revolution. His explanation is interesting for what it reveals about his confidence in his ability as a historian and his attitude about the writing of history. It also suggests that a certain elitism was growing in the field of historical research.

We feel conscious of the apparent presumption for one “unknown to fame” to enter the lists with those historians of the Revolution . . . but none can be so great that “one cubit to his stature” may not be added.¹⁰

10. Lossing, *Seventeen Hundred and Seventy-Six*, Preface.

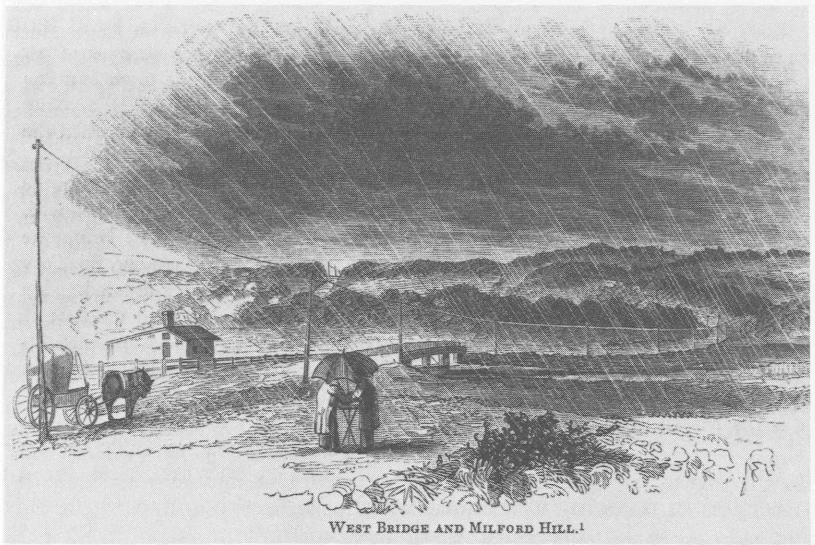


Fig. 3. Lossing at work sketching Milford Hill, the site of a skirmish during the American Revolution.

Lossing felt, even after studying these other works, that he still had something valuable to contribute.

The desire, stated emphatically in 1848, to create a useful work and one that would be of interest to the general public and especially

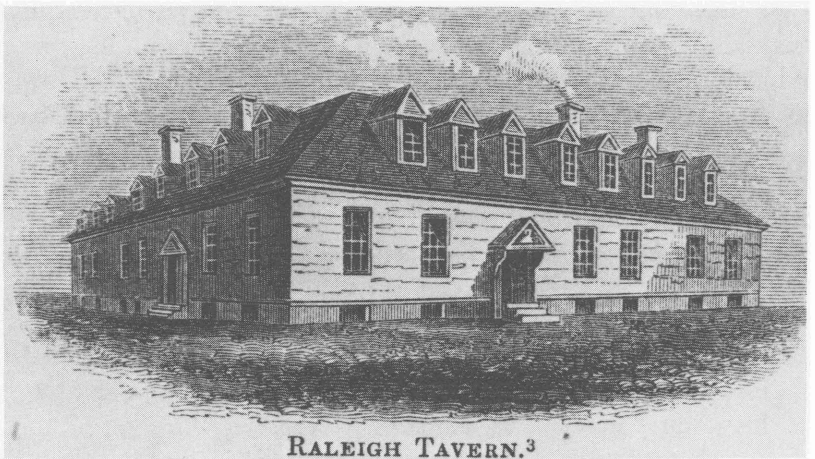


Fig. 4. Exterior view of the Raleigh Tavern at Williamsburg.

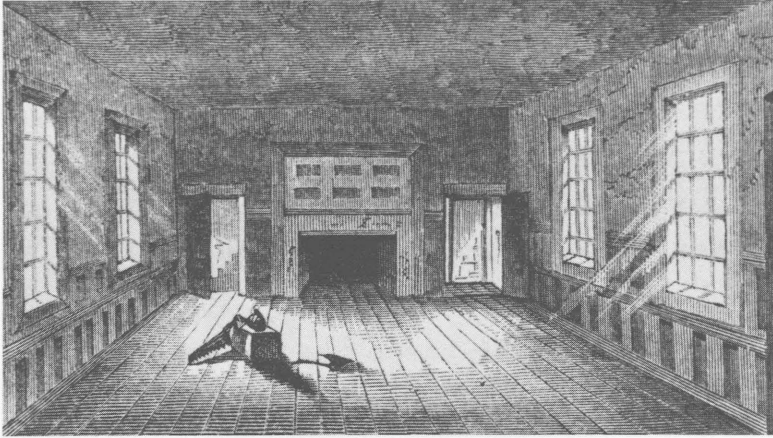


Fig. 5. Interior view of Raleigh Tavern showing the Apollo Room, site of many meetings of leading Virginia patriots.

to the youth continued to guide Lossing throughout his career. In both his art and his writing, Lossing sought to convey the lessons, as well as the events, of history and in doing so to excite patriotic sentiments in his readers. Essentially a self-educated man, he saw education as a crucial tool in developing national pride, and historians as 'national teachers'. His deep concern that the lessons of the Revolution not be forgotten was vividly revealed when he wrote:

Shall this rich inheritance be long perpetuated, and how? The answer is at hand. *Educate every child—educate every emigrant*, for 'education is the cheap defense of nations.' Educate *all*, physically, intellectually and morally. Instruct, not only the *head*, but the *heart*; enlighten the mind, and, by cultivation, enlarge and multiply the affections. Above all, let our youth be instructed in all that appertains to the vital principles of our Republic.¹¹

Until his death in 1891 Lossing worked untiringly to educate the common man through his books and articles. His days were spent, not in political activities or reform movements, but in spreading his view of what it meant to be an American. Throughout his long ca-

11. Lossing, *Seventeen Hundred and Seventy-Six*, 22.

reer, in which he published more than forty books and hundreds of articles, the Revolution would remain in his view the central event in America's history.

In 1848 Lossing conceived the idea for what was to be perhaps his best and most popular work, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution*. His idea for this volume was triggered by a chance meeting with General Ebenezer Mead in Connecticut. Reminded, as they spoke, that Mead had been an eye-witness to the events of the Revolution, Lossing reasoned that other participants must also be alive. Here, then, was a way to make history more interesting and instructive: he would gather his materials by traveling to all the important sites of the Revolution, sketching, collecting information, and talking to eye-witnesses. He did this, and the result was a great success. Lossing's technique of presenting history "as a record of the pilgrimage" he had made among "scenes and things hallowed to the feelings of every American", rather than a chronological account, appealed to the public. His more than one thousand engravings based on sketches done in the field heightened interest in the book. Although Lossing's work was warmly welcomed by the public and amateur historians, it was criticized by the small, emerging group of professional historians. These academic historians found Lossing's journalistic method too personal and informal to be appropriate for serious historical research.

Lossing's books were meant to be didactic as well as informative. Like other men of the period, he assumed there was a basic set of values that were American. As the historian, Rush Welter, points out, "Americans typically believed that the lessons of their nation's history might be summed up in 'Americanism'."¹² While the ideas of liberty, progress, mission, and virtue were all a part of this Americanism, writers like Lossing were actually creating, not describing, the image of a national American identity. Hence, there is a subtle paradox in the work of Lossing and others like him, who believed they were describing a discernible national character. In the new, expanding nation, made up of diverse peoples with different and often contradictory interests, values, and goals, such a national identity did not in fact exist. But through the work of Lossing and others the

12. Rush Welter, *The Mind of America 1820-1860* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1975), 45.

image of a national identity, as they believed it should be, began to emerge. In describing 'American' values and goals, they put before the general public a set of concepts which eventually did contribute to a sense of national unity.

This transition was going on at two levels in this period, as an 'elitist' and a 'popular' culture both began to be evident. The 'elitist' cultural group identified with Europe and European values and sought to modify European institutions to American needs. The 'popular' cultural group was identified with the common man who sought through politics, and economic and social mobility, to create a new democratic society that would be distinctly American. Lossing's work served to bridge these differences, because, while aimed at the general populace and stressing democratic goals, his use of art and history, even as vehicles of his message, was highly acceptable to 'elite' cultural attitudes. Lossing's books had a large readership—a fact that assisted him in spreading his message of national unity. His main objective, however, was always in reaching two specific groups which cut across these cultural differences: youths and immigrants.

Lossing's concern with both groups was that they be educated, especially educated to be good American citizens. Generally, interest in education was widespread in the antebellum period, as evidenced in the public school movement and the popularity of the lyceum associations. Perhaps because he was himself self-educated, Lossing was particularly concerned with the type and quality of material available to young people. He shared a common anxiety that the younger generation, removed from the experience of the struggle for independence, would misuse its freedom. Lossing's outlook reflected a prevalent belief that freedom without restraints was potentially dangerous to the individual and, ultimately, to the country.

The proliferation, in this period, of inexpensive reading materials, especially of novels, appeared to Lossing to be corrupting the minds of the young and turning them away from serious pursuits. Lossing addressed these issues in his Preface to *The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution*. Hoping his work would help counteract these negative influences, he wrote:

The exciting literature of the day, ranging in its intoxicating character from the gross pictures of sensual life drawn by the French writers of fiction, to the more refined, but not less

intoxicating works of popular and esteemed novelists, so cheaply published and so widely diffused, has produced a degree of mental dissipation throughout our land, destructive, in its tendency, to sober and rational desires for imbibing useful knowledge. Among the young, where this dissipation is most rife, and deleterious in its effects, it seemed most desirable to have the story of our Revolution known and its salutary teachings pondered and improved, for they will be the custodians of our free institutions when the active men of the present generations shall step aside into the quiet shadows of old age.¹³

Lossing also sought to reach the ‘humble’—the ‘humble’ being the common man in general, but in particular the newcomer to this country. In his first historical work, *Seventeen Hundred and Seventy-Six*, Lossing explained that he desired to present “a volume of intrinsic value at a cost so moderate, that the head of every family in the land may afford to spread its contents before his children”.¹⁴

By 1850 the great influx of immigrants was generating a major political issue. It was clear that they might, as voters, exert tremendous power. To many Americans, including Lossing, this possibility added an urgency to the need to educate these newcomers in American values. Lossing’s awareness of this need was clear when he wrote:

It is the mission of true patriotism to scatter the seeds of knowledge broad-cast amid those in the humbler walks of society . . . for these humbler ones are equal inheritors of the throne of the people’s sovereignty, and no less powerful than others at the ballot-box where the nation decides who its rulers shall be.¹⁵

Lossing, both as historian and artist, sought to have his work serve a useful purpose. To him the reading of history was not a luxury but

13. Benson Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution*, 1 (New York: Harper, 1851-52), iv.

14. Lossing, *Seventeen Hundred and Seventy-Six*, x.

15. Benson Lossing, *Biographical Sketches of the Signers of the Declaration of American Independence* (Glendale, New York: Benchmark Publication Co., 1970; reprint of 1858 edition), Preface.

a necessity. It was not a subject only for the educated elite, but one of which every man, however humble, must be aware if he was to become a good citizen and true patriot. With this egalitarian approach, Lossing reached a wide audience in the nineteenth century.

Carl Becker, the historian, wrote: "Whether arguments command assent or not depends less upon the logic that conveys them than upon the climate of opinion in which they are sustained."¹⁶ When the climate of opinion changed in the twentieth century, Benson Lossing's patriotic, didactic approach to history no longer seemed relevant. Discounted by professional historians from the outset, and now out-of-style and antiquated, Lossing's monumental achievements have been allowed to slip into obscurity. But it is interesting to note that in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the Bicentennial approaching, a number of Lossing's works, including *The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution*, were reprinted. Suddenly, his themes and ideas seemed appropriate and useful again. His engravings provided detailed, precise visual records of hundreds of events, places, people, and things connected with the struggle for independence. Lossing's willingness to travel thousands of miles in order to record all that he could of a fading past resulted in an important and valuable record of the early years of the American Republic.

As in his own day, Lossing found a twentieth-century following among those who sought a utilitarian application of historical knowledge. Perhaps, however, it is time to reconsider the work of Benson Lossing not as a historical study of the Revolutionary period but as a means of understanding the antebellum period and the development of American nationalism in that period. For, ironically, the lasting value of Lossing's work may well lie in the image he presented of his own life and times.

16. Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1932), 5.