PART FOUR

PAST AND PRESENT
The question of a public versus a private past opens up some new vistas in considering history in the United States, as the public/private polarity is not one American historians conventionally apply to our national past. Founded largely as a chain of speculative economic ventures, and then established by the overthrow of royal authority on behalf of popular government, the United States neither inherited nor created the cultural structures associated with European royalty and nobility. The constitutional ban on established churches, moreover, nullified any role for monastic or clerical power in amassing collections or controlling historical narratives. While the development and the erosion of royal, noble, and monastic authority in Europe profoundly shaped American experience, by 1800 those authorities had been mostly pushed out of the United States. There could be therefore no nationalist, anti-clerical, or class payoff involved in redistributing authority, artifacts, or archives that had never been effectively hoarded in the first place.

What could easily be dismissed as structurally irrelevant, however, should not be. History in the United States has actually been fraught with questions of public and private authority, despite the absence of centralized aristocratic or religious wealth and power. The stakes have been just as high though the contestants are different. Manipulations of the past in American life have arisen principally as assertions of regional and factional power. Among the most striking of these assertions are New England’s long-standing conviction that Puritans provided the dominant strain of American culture, the South’s armed defense of its pro-slavery reading of the Constitution, and the claims of contemporary Christian fundamentalists for a Christian myth of US national origins. Americans, like Europeans, have used understandings of history incessantly to define themselves as a people, to justify the inclusion and exclusion of newcomers, to dispute public policies, and to measure each other’s patriotism. A variety of such narrowly ‘private’ visions of the past have competed for public credibility and