Chapter 8 Video Script

[[BIG IDEA: In eighteenth-century Europe, the leading principles were aristocracy, patriarchy, mercantilism, arranged marriages, legal privilege, and established churches. What principles would replace those societal rules in America’s new republican society?]]

Hi, I’m James Henretta, the author of Chapters 8 to 14. For many years I taught at the University of Maryland, where I am now an Emeritus Professor.

What does it mean to live in a “republic,” a representative system of government with ultimate power in the hands of citizen voters? Historically speaking, this question is relatively new. Before the American republican revolution of 1776, there were only a few republics and, apart from ancient Rome, they were mostly small city-states. So, as a political entity, the United States was indeed a great, untried experiment.

And that was just the tip of the republican iceberg. What did republicanism mean with respect to economic policy? To marriage and family life? To the long-established system of racial slavery in the southern states? To the relationship between the state and religious institutions? Would the dominant white citizenry continue practices inherited from their European aristocratic societies—mercantilism, arranged marriages, human bondage, established churches? Or would they, could they, forge new republican policies and customs?

The answers are complex. Changes in deeply engrained cultural beliefs and principles occur slowly and often partially. Thus, American states did continue European mercantilist practices. But when they gave legal and economic aid to banks and other chartered corporations, they required those business to contribute to the “common wealth” of society, not merely enrich their owners. Likewise, recognizing that citizens belonged to many Christian faiths, state governments did away with established churches and religious taxes. However, they also welcomed Christian churches as moral guardians—helping to set in motion a massive religious revival, the Second Great Awakening.

Still, some cultural customs and legal rules were so deeply embedded that they resisted change. Notions of patriarchy—male dominance—continued in most families, although a few couples forged “companionate marriages” based on love and republican equality. Similarly, most slaveowners reaffirmed traditional property rights in their slaves. And so the southern states created a system of aristocratic republicanism, based on white supremacy and a powerful landed gentry. As Chapter 8 reveals, republicanism had multiple manifestations and meanings.