INTRODUCTION

Next to Christianity, the central intellectual project in America before the late nineteenth century was classicism. Given our devotion to more modern concerns today, it is difficult for us to grasp how dazzled Americans were by the ancient Greeks and Romans, how enthusiastically they quarried the classical past for more than two and a half centuries. From the time of the first European settlements in Virginia and Massachusetts to the era of the Civil War, reverence for ancient models helped to structure ethical, political, oratorical, artistic, and educational ideals, sometimes overtly, sometimes subtly. Then, in the last third of the nineteenth century the classical world quite rapidly receded from its important position in American intellectual and civic life, pooling instead in the esoteric byways of elite, high culture, where it remains today. This book tells the story of how and why that happened. It is less a story of decline than one of transformation, charting how Americans over the course of the nineteenth century fundamentally changed their relationship with classical antiquity, seeking in the remote past new guides for modern life.

Curiously, for all the debates about the degree to which classical ideals shaped the ideology of the American Revolution, no one has systematically investigated the group of Americans who knew the most about the classical world: classical scholars. This study focuses on those scholars and on the intellectual world they helped to create in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It focuses especially on the colleges, which were the most classically saturated venues in America for more than 250 years. From the founding of Harvard College in 1636 to the 1880s, when colleges across the nation began to drop their Greek and Latin requirements, classical learning formed the core of college education in America. While
other subjects, such as mathematics, rhetoric, and moral philosophy, figured importantly in the curriculum, higher education in America through the antebellum period became synonymous with the term *classical college*. In fact, until the late nineteenth century American college students spent roughly half their time in classical studies, a program that rested on a similarly concentrated classical preparation in the grammar schools. Regardless of the classical reading that many educated Americans pursued in their adult lives, a good portion of their classical orientation rested upon the education they had received as youths. The study of Greek and Latin dominated the American college curriculum during this period, an example of extraordinary intellectual continuity during a time of wrenching ideological change. Moreover, classical scholars, who might easily make up half the faculty in the days of small colleges, formed an influential corps for the dissemination of ideas about antiquity. During a lifetime of teaching, a single professor of classical languages trained hundreds of boys and also broadcast his erudition in lectures, pamphlets, journal articles, and books directed to a broadly learned public. The schools and colleges were the nurseries of classicism until the late nineteenth century; they therefore stand as the obvious place to begin to examine the American imagination of ancient Greece and Rome during that time.

Werner Jaeger has called the educational ideal among the ancient Greeks *paideia*, defining it as the process of realizing the full potential in human nature through education. His definition reminds us that classical education was at no time a narrow concept, however cramped and deadly a curriculum might look on paper, but instead a process of molding that touched on ideals of selfhood, morality, and intellect. Since the Renaissance, Europeans had imagined the study of Greek and Latin in broad terms, as fundamental to forming ethical human beings and upright citizens. European education positioned the study of the ancient languages at the center of the curriculum because the example of antiquity was the primary path to forming individuals, a goal implicit within any pedagogy. Anyone who aspired to be truly educated in the republic of letters had to be steeped in the tradition of character formation through the study of ancient letters. This classical educational tradition resonated powerfully in America, running through the thought of ministers, statesmen, lawyers, artists, and other educated citizens. Nor was this classical influence confined only to men. American women were denied access to higher education until the second half of the nineteenth century, and only a small proportion in the antebellum era learned the ancient languages in seminaries or academies or from private tutors at home. Yet so pervasive was the habit of looking to antiquity that we find classical motifs and images forming a part of the ideological vocabulary of educated American women even in the eighteenth century. Finally, much art and civic iconography drew from a rich fund of classical imagery, part of a convention of looking to the Greeks and Romans to make sense of the present.

Within this broadly disseminated culture of classicism stood classical scholars, who arguably thought more deeply about the place of antiquity in American life than any other Americans during the nineteenth century. Classicists are routinely cast as the great villains of nineteenth-century higher education—as shuffling pedants, dull pedagogues, quixotic defenders of arid traditionalism. Their apparent deficiencies have helped to banish them to the fringe of American intellectual history, although their counterparts in England and Germany are receiving ample attention. We can find dreadful teachers and shoddy scholars in any sample, of course, and American classicists are no exception. But far from being bastions of intellectual conservatism, nineteenth-century American classicists were among the most innovative of American scholars during that century of change. First, they were among the earliest Americans to popularize the new historical scholarship from German universities between 1820 and 1860, when that scholarship was truly avant-garde, and to embed the new historicism into American colleges, where it helped to shape the modern ideal of a liberal education so familiar to us today. Second, as early as the 1830s they created some of the first postcollegiate training programs in America. Finally, and most importantly, they confronted some of the wrenching transformations of the nineteenth century—industrialization, materialism, democracy, specialization—and fundamentally reimagined how classical antiquity might mitigate the worst effects of those changes. I have tried to recapture the centrality of their concerns for our understanding of the nineteenth century, positioning classicists both as scholars and as Americans grappling with the momentous and troubling developments of that era.

The major argument of the book is as follows. During the antebellum
era, classical scholars and other educated Americans turned from a love of Rome and a focus on classical grammar to a new focus on ancient Greece and the totality of its society, art, and literature. This shift from Rome to Greece and from words to worlds was at the most basic level a pivotal transformation in the American college curriculum. For the first time a recognizably modern canon—with new texts of old authors and a new way of reading them—appeared in higher education, gradually changing the old college of mental discipline into the post–Civil War college of liberal culture that we retain, in more or less its original form, today. More broadly, the infatuation with ancient Greece marked a change in American concepts of the formation of self and citizen. Ancient Greece, and more specifically, fifth-century B.C. Athens, grew in appeal as democracy itself became more palatable during the first half of the nineteenth century. Yet just as they embraced Greek democracy, Americans recruited classicism for a radically new purpose: antimodernism. Rather than looking to antiquity as a guide to the present, they now looked to the remote past as a way to combat such cancers of modernity as materialism, civic decay, industrialization, and anti-intellectualism. The new way of reading texts in the classical classroom was a way for students to enter fully into the classical past, to shed their modernity and imbibe the purifying, ennobling spirit of antiquity. The creation of classicism as antimodernism during the antebellum era likewise brought into sharper relief the class tensions inherent within classical study. Long viewed as the critical ingredient in the creation of the Christian gentleman, classicism by the Jacksonian era appeared especially unsuited to a flourishing market economy with an increasingly populist ethos, a dilemma that classicism’s new focus on Greek democracy failed to resolve.

These trends continued in the decades after the Civil War as the small religious colleges of the antebellum era yielded influence to the great universities of the Gilded Age, with their large faculties and student bodies, their graduate programs, their scientific, quasi-secular, and cosmopolitan outlook. As the natural and social sciences gathered adherents and ideological force in the late-nineteenth-century universities, classicists were the first to propose a major critique of the ideal of social utility that many scientists advocated. Arguing that scientism and utilitarianism in education could devolve into crass materialism and an aloofness from civic concerns, classicists proposed a new ideal of culture as a form of secular perfection, a kind of truth higher and therefore more valuable than the mere getting and spending encouraged by the industrial age or the pragmatic concerns of science. Many classicists remained deeply and openly ambivalent about the business culture of the day and about intellectual specialization; they favored older conceptions of civic duty and a generally educated citizenry and promoted classicism as a cure for the cancers of modernity. Yet it was precisely these modern trends that helped classicism to weather the Gilded Age. New museums housing classical artifacts depended in part on opulent new industrial fortunes, while machinery enabled large numbers of classical artifacts to be manufactured for a growing middle class eager to acquire the patina of high culture it associated with a vanished, classically educated aristocracy. Likewise, the democratization of higher education in the late nineteenth century at once helped to consign classical study to a small province of the ever-growing curriculum while also opening it to a larger, more diverse spectrum of students than ever before. Women and blacks, for example, long denied the benefits of a gentlemanly education, turned now to classicism both as self-perfection and as social ladder.

Classicists’ invocation of high culture in the last third of the nineteenth century was partly an exercise in self-preservation, a way of arguing for the ongoing inclusion of Latin and Greek in a curriculum increasingly crowded with new disciplines. In this, classicists failed: they lost their once central place in the academy, and year after year (with some exceptions) the percentage of students enrolling in Latin and Greek dropped off. Hardly anyone studies Latin or Greek anymore, and even on college campuses classical scholars are regarded as purveyors of the most truly arcane knowledge. What is more, the new historical spirit of classical inquiry that took root in the early nineteenth century ultimately helped to erode the place of the ancients in the American imagination by the end of the century. By emphasizing the cultural and chronological remoteness of antiquity—the very traits demanded by modern historicism—nineteenth-century classical scholars paradoxically enabled the abandonment of antiquity. No longer the mirror of modernity, antiquity became its antidote, a refuge from the present rather than a fund of immediately relevant political instruction. Classicism simply could not win a battle for utility
and relevance anymore, for historicism and the ideal of high culture had now made classicism valuable precisely for its uselessness.

But classicists' idea of the cultured person, fluent in the humanities, represented nothing if not a huge ideological victory. The rationale for studying antiquity adopted by nineteenth-century classicists, that it ennobled the self and formed the conscientious citizen, was adopted by the other disciplines in the newly constituted humanities—modern literature, history, music, philosophy, art history—becoming central to the ideal of liberal learning we articulate today. Rather than casting classicists, the purveyors of dead languages, as the defeated armies of the nineteenth century, we should see them as the scholars who bequeathed an enduring legacy to American intellectual life: the use of classicism as a critique of modern materialism and civic degeneracy, an idea embedded in higher education through the new humanities.

This study requires us to chart a few of the more remote byways in American intellectual life. First of these is that most neglected backwater, the classical classroom. The disregard for pedagogy as a window onto the scholarly life of the past is a result of our own preoccupations with scholarship rather than teaching, our concern for the publications of professors rather than the ideas they convey to their students. These concerns, however, are anachronistic. Until the late nineteenth century, American professors would not have made such distinctions between scholarship and teaching. Their chief avenues for scholarly output were college textbooks, articles in literary and popular journals, and lectures directed at the learned public. In these venues they did not display the results of their own new research; rather, they distilled the fruits of German and English scholarship for a broadly educated American readership. Sometimes they just copied books or passages outright, with little or no attribution. It is tempting to dismiss this practice as shoddy or incipient scholarship, but this ignores the broad function of much nineteenth-century classicism. Classicists considered their output to be legitimate scholarship because it raised the level of general knowledge among students and the public.

It is thus to the archaeology of the classroom—students' marked-up textbooks, their lecture notes, and memoirs and obituaries by students and scholars—that we must look to recapture the flavor of the textual study of antiquity in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. But classroom learning is difficult to recover. What professors say they teach is often different from what students hear, or what they write in their notebooks, or what they say they remember learning through the rosy haze of alumni nostalgia. What is more, the classroom represents only a portion of the student's experience in college, and not always the most important part, at least by students' reckoning. It is far easier, of course, to ascertain what professors hoped to teach students, and so my efforts have largely been focused here. My sources include published college curricula, lectures and journal articles on classical learning and the classical past, histories and grammars, and finally, archival materials such as faculty diaries and internal college correspondence. Among classicists, the expectation that the study of the classics would mold ethical, knowledgeable, and eloquent future citizens always loomed large. Why should students study the texts of the classical world? How should they read them? The justifications for classics teaching changed significantly between 1780 and 1910 in a way that reveals the study of antiquity to have been of momentous concern to many American scholars throughout the nineteenth century.

Besides teaching, another major branch of the classical tradition in America was classical scholarship. In Renaissance and early modern Europe some of the greatest scholars had been classicists because knowledge of Rome and Greece was believed to lie at the core of true erudition. The ancients attracted the attention of Europeans like a magnet. Anthony Grafton, Joseph Levine, and Francis Haskell, among others, have shown the passion with which topics from antique coins to pots and vases were discussed in Europe. Among the most compelling aspects of the study of antiquity was classical philology, the critical study of ancient texts. Newly attentive to the texts inherited from the ancient world, scholars in Renaissance and early modern Europe attempted to reconstruct them in their ancient authenticity by paying attention to textual clues and linguistic guides. Some of these scholars came to embody erudition in the early modern world. Joseph Scaliger, Isaac Casaubon, and Richard Bentley, for example, stand out as giants of early modern scholarship.

The practice of classical scholarship was inseparable from the debate over the nature of erudition and knowledge. Such debates among classicists and other scholars illuminate the contours of scholarship in this
formative era. Americans knew that erudition was a two-edged sword, for it was easy to cross the boundary between learning and pedantry. The faults of classical scholars—their vanity, their aridity, their swollen and forbidding tomes on remote subjects—were legendary in the republic of letters. It is no surprise that George Eliot chose the name Casaubon for the passionless, pedantic classicist in her novel Middlemarch (1871–72). But what was the nature of the good scholar? Should he confine himself to a narrow field of learning or cast generously about? What was the correct way to present erudition to others, and which ways were insulting? What was the function of the scholar in his narrow coterie of colleagues, and what were his duties to himself and to the larger society? These questions engaged the learned community in Europe and America for centuries and frequently found expression in discussions of classical scholarship. The content of scholarship and the duty of scholars were overlapping discourses, and they can reveal the transformation of American ideals of scholarship from the general learning valued in the eighteenth century to the specialization so prized in the twentieth.

For classical scholars, these were especially critical decisions because knowledge of Greek and Roman antiquity had stood for so long at the center of learned European and American discourse. When the example of antiquity began to recede in the popular and scholarly imagination during the late nineteenth century, classical scholars struggled with the implications of the retreat from generalism and the classical learning that had been so integral to the ideal of the citizen. Yet they did not snub specialization, for they recognized its benefits for the study of antiquity. The fate of classical antiquity in the late nineteenth century, then, complicates our understanding of the shift toward modern scholarship, where classicism is so often painted as a dinosaur lumbering inevitably toward extinction. For a while in the late nineteenth century a number of classicists advocated models of advanced training in higher education that blended specialization and generalism in a way that they hoped would preserve older models of learning while also welcoming the exciting new results of modern scholarship. These models failed, but they represented a compelling alternative to the specialization advocated by many of the other university builders and point to a critical moment in the renegotiation of models of scholarship.

Finally, Americans' changing approach to the classical world can illuminate another important shift, from the religious colleges of the eighteenth century to the secular universities of the twentieth century. Christianity had emerged in the classical world of late antiquity, and thereafter erudition had combined, albeit uneasily, reverence for Greek and Roman pagans with Christian ends in a synthesis known as Christian humanism. This complex was transferred to American higher education in the seventeenth century and remained integral to it until the late nineteenth. However zestfully they might read the ancients, the majority of American Protestants until the late nineteenth century were committed to the literal truth of the Bible and the superiority of Christian revelation to the paganism that had preceded it. These two traditions, the Christian and the pagan, the biblical and the classical, nevertheless coexisted in American higher learning throughout the century. Athens and Jerusalem had everything to do with one another, although they occasionally conflicted. In the pages that follow I examine some of the encounters between religion and classicism in higher education. Significantly, there was a change in the approach to both classicism and religion in American higher education in the mid-nineteenth century. The secularization of the academy resulted from a number of forces that also altered the way Americans viewed classical antiquity. Modern historical scholarship undermined both the idea of biblical literalism and the insuperable authority of classical texts, lessening the immediate relevance of the biblical and classical traditions by the beginning of the twentieth century.

We no longer live in a classical world as Americans did until the late nineteenth century. Our concerns now lie elsewhere, even though the remains of the Greeks and Romans are more abundant and accessible than ever. The ancients have stayed with us in more subtle ways, however, most especially in the modern ideal of the cultured citizen. If we no longer gaze into the mirror of antiquity as earlier generations did, we remain nonetheless illuminated by its example.