

AMERICAN LITERATURES AND CULTURES

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ANNOTATION

The Thirteen Colonies have often been regarded as the center of early American literature. However, the first European settlements in North America had been founded elsewhere many years earlier, and the dominance of the English language in American culture was not yet apparent.

Key words: strongest colonial literary traditions, American literature commonly include texts

The first item printed in Pennsylvania was in German and was the largest book printed in any of the colonies before the American Revolution. Spanish and French had two of the strongest colonial literary traditions in the areas that now comprise the United States, and discussions of early American literature commonly include texts by Samuel de Champlain alongside English-language texts by Thomas Harriot and Captain John Smith. Moreover, a wealth of oral literary traditions existed on the continent among the numerous different Native American tribes. Political events, however, would eventually make English the lingua franca as well as the literary language of choice for the colonies at large. Such events included the English capture of the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam in 1664, with the English renaming it New York and changing the administrative language from Dutch to English.

Only about 250 separate items were issued from the major printing presses in the American colonies. This is a small number compared to the output of the printers in London at the time. London printers published materials written by New England authors, so the body of American literature was larger than what was published in North America. However, printing was established in the American colonies before it was allowed in most of England. In England, restrictive laws had long confined printing to four locations, where the government could monitor what was published: London, York, Oxford, and Cambridge. Because of this, the colonies ventured into the modern world earlier than their provincial English counterparts.

Back then, some of the American literature was pamphlets and writings extolling the benefits of the colonies to both a European and colonial audience. Captain John Smith could be considered the first American author with his works: *A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Noate as Hath Happened in Other writers of this manner included Daniel Denton, Thomas Ashe, William Penn, George Percy, William Strachey, Daniel Coxe, Gabriel Thomas, and John Lawson.*

The Revolutionary period also contained political writings, including those by colonists Samuel Adams, Josiah Quincy, John Dickinson, and Joseph Galloway, the last being a loyalist to the crown. Two key figures were Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine. Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack* and *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* are esteemed works with their wit and influence toward the formation of a budding American identity. Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis* writings are seen as playing a key role in influencing the political tone of the time.

During the Revolutionary War, poems and songs such as "Nathan Hale" were popular. Major satirists included John Trumbull and Francis Hopkinson. Philip Morin Freneau also wrote poems about the War.

During the 18th century, writing shifted from the Puritanism of Winthrop and Bradford to Enlightenment ideas of reason. The belief that human and natural occurrences were messages from God no longer fit with the budding anthropocentric culture. Many intellectuals believed that the human mind could comprehend the universe through the laws of physics as described by Isaac Newton. One of these was Cotton Mather. The first book published in North America that promoted Newton and natural theology was Mather's *The Christian Philosopher* (1721). The enormous scientific, economic, social, and philosophical, changes of the 18th century, called the Enlightenment, impacted the authority of clergyman and scripture, making way for democratic principles.

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The increase in population helped account for the greater diversity of opinion in religious and political life as seen in the literature of this time. In 1670, the population of the colonies numbered approximately 111,000. Thirty years later it was more than 250,000. By 1760, it reached 1,600,000. The growth of communities and therefore social life led people to become more interested in the progress of individuals and their shared experience in the colonies. These new ideas can be seen in the popularity of Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography.

Even earlier than Franklin was Cadwallader Colden, whose book *The History of the Five Indian Nations*, published in was one of the first texts published on Iroquois history. Colden also wrote a book on botany, which attracted the attention of Carl Linnaeus, and he maintained a long term correspondence with Benjamin Franklin.

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