Introduction

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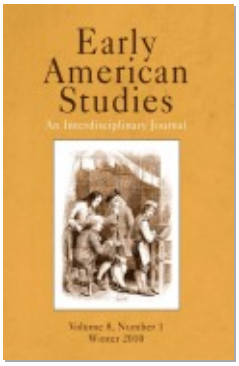

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Introduction

The three-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Benjamin Franklin was celebrated in 2006 by a major exhibition, *Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World*, which originated in Philadelphia and traveled around the country, ending in Paris in 2008, and by a host of other exhibitions, publications, and programs in Philadelphia and elsewhere. The papers in this volume grew out of one of those programs, a scholarly conference, "The Atlantic World of Print in the Age of Franklin," which was sponsored by the Library Company of Philadelphia, the McNeil Center for Early American Studies, and the Penn Humanities Forum. This conference theme was chosen in part because Franklin was such a central figure in the Atlantic world of print throughout his life, which spans most of the eighteenth century. While still a journeyman, he moved from Boston to Philadelphia to London, a degree of mobility that no previous American printer could claim. His newspaper had perhaps the largest circulation in the colonies, and this in addition to his network of printing partners and his position as postmaster put him at the center of an unrivalled intercolonial communications network. He and his partner, David Hall, were also the largest importers of British books in North America. Later, as representative of the United States to the French, he did as much as anyone to establish a postcolonial identity for the new nation and to carve out a place for it in a reconfigured Atlantic community; this too he did in part as a printer, in the persona he presented to the French and in the actual documents he printed on his press at Passy. And finally, back in Philadelphia, he helped draft the Constitution that made the United States the first nation founded on a printed document. Many of the essays in this volume are only tangentially about Franklin, but he is the exemplary figure that links them all together.

The conference theme was also chosen to link two relatively new fields of study, the history of the book and Atlantic world studies. The history of the book, now sometimes called the history of material texts, combines the techniques of Anglo-American bibliography with the work of French historians of the *Annales* School. It considers print as cultural form and as artifact as well as text. This field has generated considerable intellectual excitement in recent years as scholars have begun to investigate systematically the mate-

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rial bases of texts, the technologies of printing, bookbinding, and illustration, and the business of publishing and distribution in order to deepen our understanding of individual texts and to historicize cultures and practices of written, printed, and oral communication. The essays in this special issue of *Early American Studies* are evidence of how rich and productive the dialogue between social historians and practitioners of the new book history has become.

An even more recent development in early American historiography is the rise of the Atlantic world paradigm, which sees the Americas as part of a system of empires through which bodies, commodities, and cultural forms circulated in all directions, not only from the European capitals to their colonies and back again, but also circumferentially around the entire Atlantic rim. This volume of essays brings these two historiographies into dialogue. The circulation of texts was an important part of Atlantic world exchange. As a commodity, printed paper did not compare in value with sugar or slaves or cloth or guns, but as a cultural form, as a transmitter of information and public discourse and an embodiment of ideologies and practices, it had a disproportionate effect on Atlantic world societies, especially in the eighteenth century and especially in the British Empire.

These two burgeoning fields have attracted many younger scholars, who, with their fresh perspectives, have not allowed themselves to be tied down by discipline, genre, method, or research materials. Those asked to contribute to the conference produced pieces that cover a broad range of topics in eighteenth-century print culture. The diversity and quality of the papers, as well as the overflow audiences and lively discussions, encouraged us to put together this volume of essays. Rather than simply publishing the proceedings, however, we have selected seven of the twenty-one papers presented at the conference, chosen because they exemplified what emerged as the dominant themes of the discussion. We have tried to weave them into a coherent collection, in some cases with significant alterations. Although essays for the conference were originally arranged into overarching categories—Almanacs, Readers, Politicization, Subversion, Printers, Booksellers, and Libraries—it became clear to us in organizing this volume that these categories were inadequate to describe the subtlety and nuance of the topics covered here, and the many interconnections between the papers.

For example, in comparing almanacs and primers from Philadelphia, Boston, and London, Patrick Spero is writing as much about popular political perceptions as he is about popular genres of print. His main point is that both the almanac and the primer were politicized in the colonies, but in different ways in different colonies. Popular print culture is much more diverse than one might expect. But even more striking differences appear when

Spero compares these American texts with their British analogues. British almanacs were more varied in their implied readers—ladies, farmers, courtiers, and so on—but politically more uniform, in fact hardly political at all. On the other hand, the primer, first published in England, was embraced not just in New England but in all the colonies, whereas it fell out of use almost completely in Old England. In Ellen Cohn's essay on the obscure and eccentric Pierre-André Gargaz and Benjamin Franklin's role in giving Gargaz's ideas voice through print, she provides a perfect miniature of a world in which revolutionary ideas jostled and competed for air. In sum, printing and book history are deployed here as a kind of methodology, or even a scholarly worldview, for examining many aspects of individual and social experience, from reading to rioting.

In most of these papers the term *print culture* is used in connection with this methodology, but the term is slippery. Printing, publishing, bookselling, and reading do not equate to print culture, but their increasing omnipresence in the eighteenth century made denizens of the Atlantic world participants in print culture. Even manuscript publication became a conscious and political choice—against the backdrop of print culture—when made by people who grappled with the power of print to affect the masses, as Alexander Haskell's essay "Defining the Right Side of Virtue" demonstrates. In two related essays by Nick Wrightson and John Dixon, we see how even those at the center of colonial print culture experienced its limits. Wrightson shows how Franklin's book trade and scientific networks in England and the colonies connected with each other much less smoothly than we might imagine, and that the link between them was a chance meeting on the road with the much better connected American man of science Cadwallader Colden. But as Dixon shows, Colden's experiences as a politician persuaded him that the pervasiveness of print in the colonies undermined the efforts of elites to dominate print culture—a theme Haskell explores, too—but it also posed a threat to scientists who wished to exercise close control over the dissemination of their writings. Colden wished that the Atlantic world of print could be narrower, or at least more containable; and it was to Franklin that he turned for ideas about how to contain it. The trend, however, was in the opposite direction, toward a proliferation of print and a ramification of print cultures. The readers of newspapers and pamphlets discussed in Eric Slauter's essay "Reading and Radicalization" were actively shaping a political culture of print, and so did those who could not read but bore witness to (and participated in) the political firestorms such print could produce. In Richard Newman's essay "Liberation Technology," print culture comprehended everything from the ventriloquism of whites writing in a black "voice" to the impassioned use of

print to set the record straight by late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century black activists.

These remarks are meant only to suggest the range of these essays and the richness of the field of the history of the book for historians of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. In his Afterword, David Hall considers these essays in more detail against the background of new work in the history of the book on both sides of the Atlantic, weaving the essays together with dominant themes in this growing and quickly changing field.

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