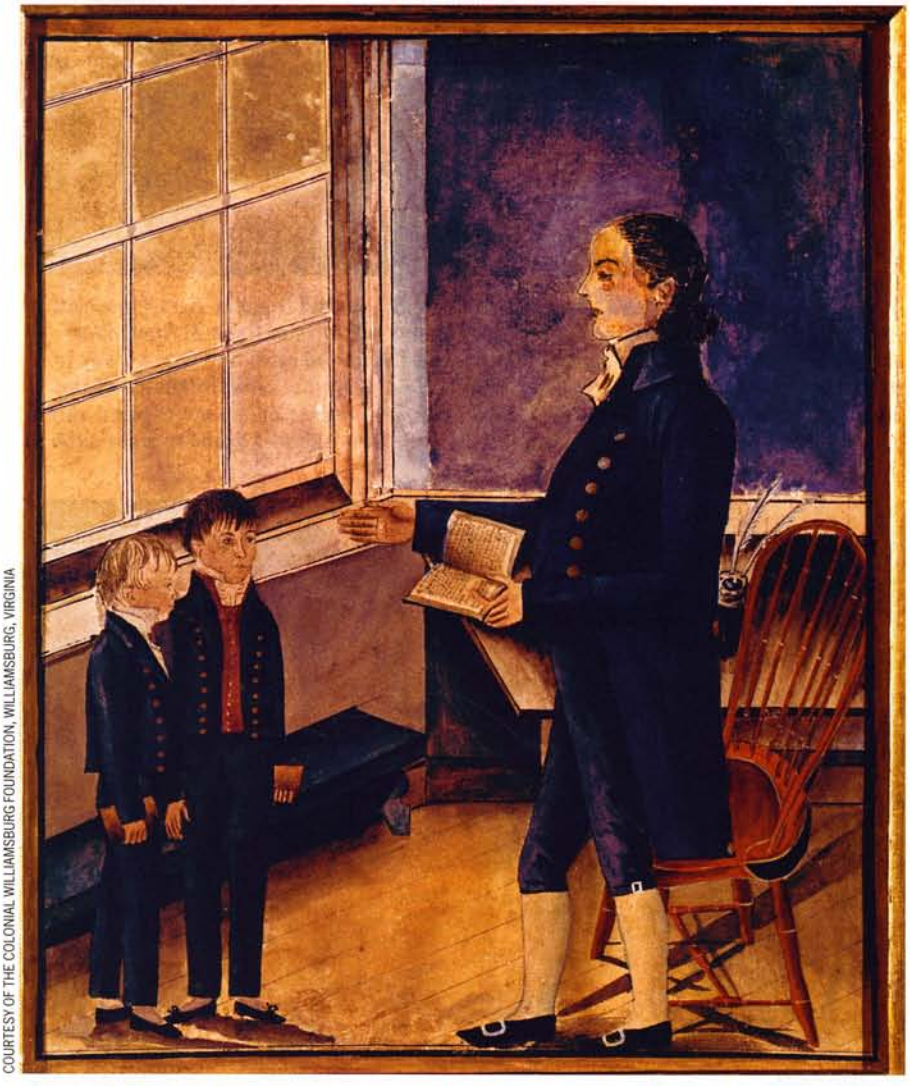
Reading in the Colonies

In a strange and wild land, America's earliest European settlers were devoted and enthusiastic readers who achieved one of the world's highest levels of literacy.



COURTESY OF THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

Parents and churches were responsible for educating children in the German-speaking settlements in Pennsylvania well into the early 1800s. Pastors or church organists often doubled as schoolmasters, teaching students primarily to read Scripture and to lead Christian lives. This c. 1810 painting, attributed to Jacob Maentel (1778-1863), likely is set in Lancaster County. The schoolmaster here is instructing the boys on the Commandments, which are minutely lettered in German in his open book.

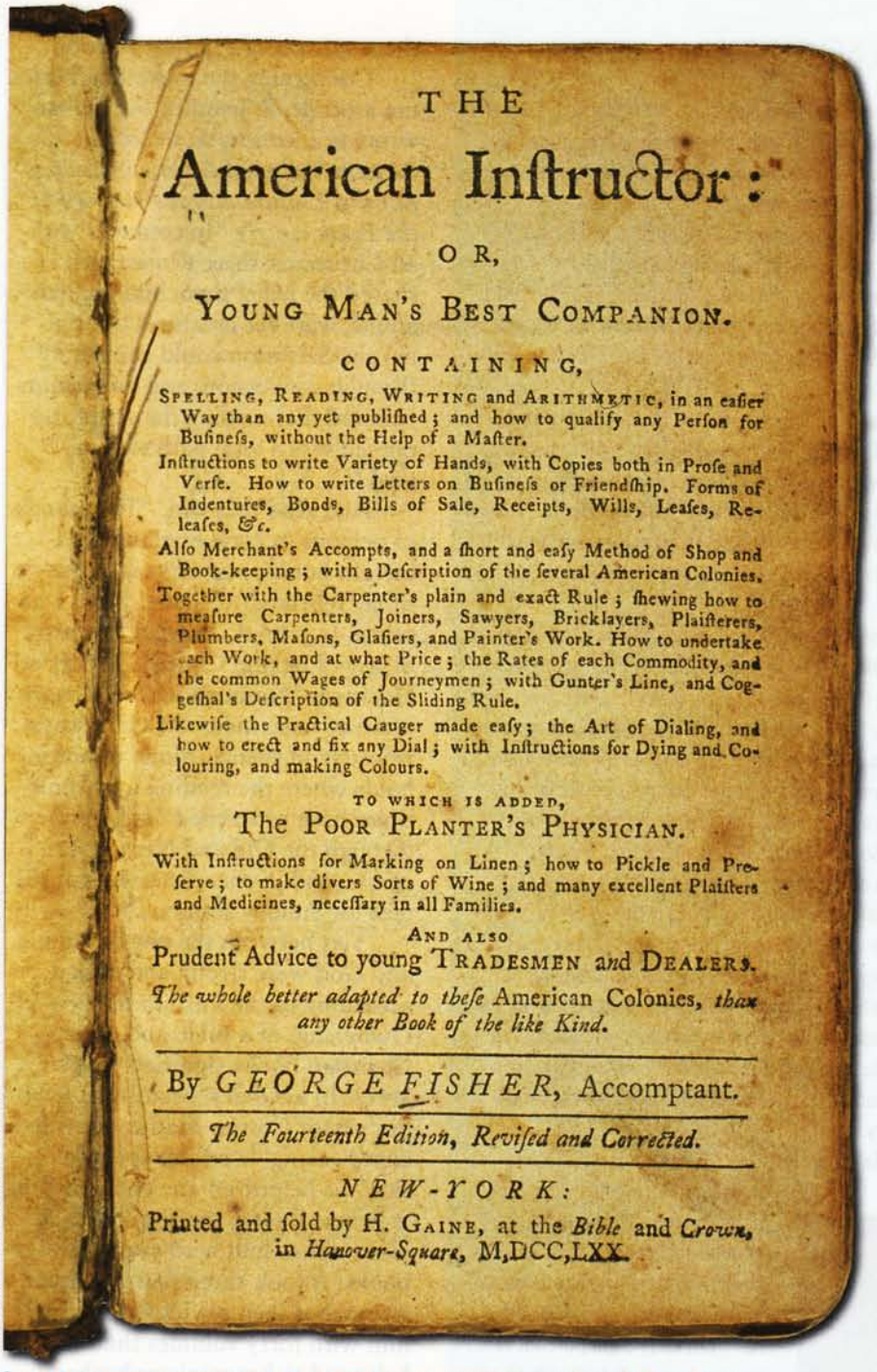
Reading connected the earliest American colonists to everything they held dear. Bibles, Psalters, and printed sermons kept them in touch with their God. Primers taught them how to spell and behave, law books helped them shape their society, and personal narratives gave them courage.

The people who settled the colonies north and south were surprisingly literate. Beginning in the 1640s, they passed laws requiring the ability to read, and by 1668 in Beverly, Massachusetts, for example, town officials could find no child over the age of nine unable to do just that. On the whole, early Americans boasted levels of literacy on a par with—some scholars say higher than—their peers in England.

Spiritual and secular knowledge gleaned from printed materials was vital to men and women carving a new society from a wilderness they saw in both physical and Biblical terms. They were ever aware, as the Puritan fathers had taught, that without reading, people could too easily slip back spiritually into the very wilderness they were conquering.

VALUABLE LUGGAGE

Colonists who set sail for the New World late in the 17th Century were not driven to discard European civilization but to improve upon it as they sought to transform the wilds into a hospitable home. They knew



THE

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CONTAINING,

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Likewiſe the Practical Gauger made eaſy; the Art of Dialing, and how to erect and fix any Dial; with Inſtructions for Dying and Colouring, and making Colours.

TO WHICH IS ADDED,

The POOR PLANTER'S PHYSICIAN.

With Inſtructions for Marking on Linen; how to Pickle and Preſerve; to make divers Sorts of Wine; and many excellent Plaiſters and Medicines, neceſſary in all Families.

AND ALSO

Prudent Advice to young TRADESMEN and DEALERS.

The whole better adapted to theſe American Colonies, *than any other Book of the like Kind.*

By *GEORGE FISHER*, Accomptant.

The Fourteenth Edition, Reviſed and Corrected.

NEW-YORK:

Printed and ſold by H. GAINE, at the *Bible* and *Crown*, in *Hanover-Square*, M,DCC,LXX.

COURTESY OF THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

One of the many reprints of *The American Instructor, or Young Man's Best Companion*, written by Englishman George Fisher (1719-78). A popular basic textbook of reading, writing, and arithmetic, it was revised and reprinted with a new title in 1748 by Benjamin Franklin, who appreciated the secular nature of the instruction. This page is from a 1770 edition printed by H. Gaine in New York.

that, aside from their memories and recollections, the printed word would provide the details for their dream.

"Even the earliest European colonists in America brought books with them," wrote Julie Hedgepeth Williams in her 1999 book, *The Significance of the Printed Word in Early America: Colonists' Thoughts on the Role of the Press*. "Headed across the Atlantic in the cramped quarters of tiny ships, settlers managed to tuck books into their luggage. They would be setting up civilization on the other side of the ocean, and to them, civilization included books."

Tragically, perhaps the earliest mention of books on American soil concerns the failed colony at Roanoke, Virginia. After brutal months in 1587 of trying to sustain the new colony against the threats of angry Indians, the hundred settlers implored Governor John White—grandfather of Virginia Dare, the first English child born in the Americas—to return to England to seek help.

To protect his prized books and some personal items, White buried them in chests until his return. Because of a series of mishaps, nearly three years passed before he landed back in Roanoke to find his colony mysteriously vanished and his chests already "digged up againe ... and bookes, pictures, and all things els were spoyled," White recorded.

The English follow-up at colonization two decades later at Jamestown, Virginia, clearly fared better. According to David D. Hall, a leading scholar on early-American literacy, "Early on, while the Virginia Company was in charge, a remarkable number of educated men made their way to Jamestown. In that unfamiliar and disruptive setting, they attempted to resume the cultural practices familiar to them back in England, practices that, originating in Renaissance humanism, symbolized the condition of being 'cultivated' or 'civilized'."

Hall noted in his 2007 multivolume *History of the Book in America* that the quantity of books carried to the Chesapeake region in the 1600s was considerable. "Referring only to Virginia, one historian has estimated that the total reached 20,000, dispersed among a thousand or more households," he wrote.

While Virginians were amassing books in their new homes in the Tidewater, English immigrants—newly arrived by ship and motivated more by religious than commercial intent—were unloading their Bibles on the chilly shores of New England.

PATH TO SALVATION

No factor played a greater role in early America's reading than religion. From the Puritan standpoint, the Bible and other Christian materials were read for much more than everyday solace. The ability to read

A LITERATE SOCIETY

Questions of literacy in the American colonies have perplexed historians for many years. Not only are the historical records often vague, but the issue of what constitutes literacy itself is muddled. Is literacy the ability to read? Or is it reading and writing? Or is it, as Puritan leaders believed, defined by the ability to read and write English and read Latin?

Whatever the answers, by any measure the American colonists were startlingly literate.

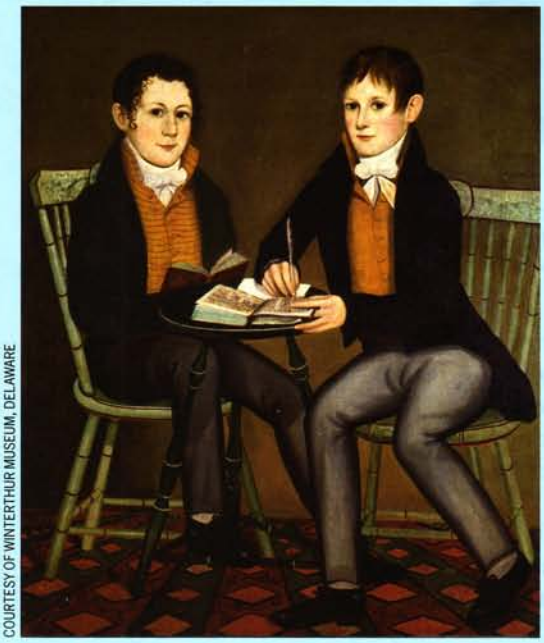
Two of the leading scholars of colonial literacy are Kenneth A. Lockridge, professor of history at the University of Montana and author of several volumes on colonial life, and Harvard's David D. Hall. Also putting forth significant insights was the late Lawrence A. Cremin, an educational historian and Pulitzer Prize winner for his 1981 book, *American Education: The National Experience 1783-1876.*

Lockridge, in his *Literacy in Colonial New England: An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West* (1979), compared statistics for colonists who signed their wills versus those who simply made marks. He thus determined that 60 percent of New England white males were literate in 1660, climbing to 70 percent in 1710, and to 85 percent in 1760. For the same span of time, women leaving wills were judged to be 33 percent literate, but that rate rose dramatically in the ensuing decades. For Boston's more learned merchant and gentry class, Lockridge put literacy at 100 percent.

"Literacy was as high in other colonies as it was in New England, according to Lockridge's measurements," commented Julie Hedgepeth Williams in *The Significance of the Printed Word in Early America: Colonists' Thoughts on the Role of the Press* (1999). "Seventy percent of Pennsylvanians could sign their names to wills by the 1730s, and at the same time, sixty-seven percent of male Virginians could sign their names. Using a similar standard of measure, Richard Beale Davis discovered that in the South, seventy percent or more of the people signing documents could write their own names—and in some cases, the figures suggested that as high as ninety-six percent were able to do so in South Carolina in the eighteenth century."

Hall, however, has contended that Lockridge's methodology underestimates colonial literacy. "We have come to realize that, for early America, studies of literacy based on signature counts underestimate the percentage of persons who could read, but possibly not write," he stated in his *Cultures in Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (1996). "Notwithstanding the limitations of the signature-count method, such studies suggest that by the second half of the eighteenth century, the great majority of adult males in the northern colonies or states were literate in being able both to read and to write. Surprisingly, female literacy in New England, the region for which we have the most careful studies, had reached 80 percent or higher by 1790, after rising steadily throughout the century."

Cremin, in his *American Education: The Colonial Experience* (1970), concluded that white males in the colonies were statistically more literate than their counterparts in provincial England. "At a time when estimates of adult male literacy in England ran from forty-eight percent in the rural western midlands to seventy-four percent in the towns," he wrote, "adult male literacy in the American colonies seems to have run from seventy percent to virtually one-hundred percent."



COURTESY OF WINTERTHUR MUSEUM, DELAWARE

This 1816 portrait, *Sons of James Hasson*, by Maryland artist Joshua Johnson (c. 1763-1832), depicts brothers James Hasson (1803-71) and John Hasson (1806-72). One is reading, the other writing with his quill pen with an open English grammar book nearby.

them was necessary for salvation.

Concerning the prevailing Puritan attitude, E. Jennifer Monaghan wrote in *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America: Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book* (2007): "In common with all Christians, these Protestants shared the belief that children, like adults, were the creatures of original sin. Salvation could come only through conversion, and Protestants believed that reading the scriptures oneself was a vital path to that goal."

And read they did. "Thousands of persons in New England read certain books, and especially the Bible, repeatedly," stated Hall, who serves as John A. Bartlett Professor of New England Church History at Harvard. "No book was read more often or in so many different ways: privately in silence, aloud in households where the reading may sometimes have proceeded 'in course' through the Old and New Testaments, and in church services as the text for Sunday sermons."

Ties between the physical Bible and God were strong and direct, according to the Puritan fathers. Ownership of a Bible and other Christian books signified God's grace. In his diary, prominent Puritan pastor Cotton Mather recorded experiencing "a strange perswasion" as he prayed one cold morning in January 1697, sensing that God was to bless him with even more books. It took three years, Mather wrote, but then a widow surprised him with forty volumes that had belonged to her minister husband. "Behold, how the Lord smiles upon me!" Mather proclaimed.

In the ensuing years he received more gifts of books, and even a man who had mistreated Mather made amends by giving the pastor money to purchase books containing 600 sermons. By 1718, Mather had acquired a substantial library of spiritual tomes. "As my Saviour went up into a Mount to Pray, so would I now every Evening about Sun-sett go up into my Library to pray," the grateful Mather wrote.

THE PURITAN INFLUENCE

Puritans wielded disproportionate influence throughout the colonies regarding books and literacy because of their early laws requiring people to be able to read—with a definite focus on reading Scripture—and their control of the fledgling printing industry. Both the literacy mandates and the Puritan presses combined to push the reading of Christian works well beyond the Puritans' strongholds.

Beginning as early as 1642, Puritans began enacting literacy laws in Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Haven (absorbed by Connecticut in 1665), and Plymouth (absorbed by Massachusetts in 1691). The purpose of these laws, in the words of the New Haven dictate, was to ensure that all people "attain at least so much, as to be able duly to read the Scriptures, and other good and profitable printed Books in the English tongue." Other colonies enacted similar laws and provided the foundation for adoption of compulsory education in America.

The first printing press in the American colonies began operation in 1638 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the first book printed, in 1640, was *The Whole Booke of Psalmes Faithfully Translated into English Metre*, otherwise known as the *Bay Psalm Book*. Although it would be another century before the colonial printing industry gained any size, the focus was clear.

"Due to the fact that Massachusetts Puritans owned and operated American presses for nearly half a century before any other colony got a press, many early American imprints centered on religion," Williams stated.

Although New England's colonies were fairly established by the late 1600s, danger still loomed near. One especially poignant episode illustrating the power of Biblical verse concerns the abduction of a Puritan minister's wife, Mary Rowlandson, and their three children from Lancaster, Massachusetts, in February 1675. For three months, members of the Wampanoag tribe marched

COURTESY OF THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

Books made a popular prop for portraits in colonial America, as in the 1775 wedding painting of Hannah Erwin (1756-1813), who wed affluent Pennsylvania entrepreneur Israel Israel. Two years later he was briefly jailed by the British as a spy, and in 1800 he became high sheriff of Philadelphia. Her high-crowned lace bonnet is of Quaker style, as is the absence of sleeve ruffles, although no Quaker affiliation has ever been documented for her. The artist is unidentified.

Rowlandson and her children through the freezing wilderness.

"I cannot but take notice of the wonderful mercy of God to me in those afflictions, in sending me a Bible," the woman recorded in her memoir, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682). "One of the Indians that came from the Medfield fight, had brought some plunder, came to me, and asked me, if I would have a Bible, he had got one in his basket. I was glad of it, and asked him whether he thought the Indians would let me read. He answered yes."

She read the Bible for strength and consolation when her future seemed especially bleak. "And here I may take occasion to mention one principal ground of my setting forth these few Lines; even as the Psalmist says, To declare the works of the Lord, and his wonderful power in carrying us along, preserving us in the Wilderness, while under the Enemies hand, and returning of us in safety again; and his goodness in bringing to my hand so many comfortable and suitable Scriptures in my distress."

A LAND OF READERS

Whether they were in New England, the Chesapeake region, or the Southern settlements, American colonists were avid readers. "In their personal writings, colonial Ameri-

MANDATING THE ABILITY TO READ

New England's Puritan fathers believed knowledge of Scripture was essential to salvation of the individual and to the well-being of their communities. In quick succession America's northern colonies, beginning as early as the 1640s, required the ability to read.

As the first in a series of colonial edicts, the Massachusetts School Law of 1642 mandated that all children, apprentices, and servants have "the ability to read & understand the principles of religion & the capitall lawes of this country." The heads of households were responsible for this instruction, town officials acted as enforcers, and penalties could be levied.

A second Massachusetts law, adopted in 1647, required towns of fifty or more households to hire a schoolmaster "to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write and read," while towns of 100 or more households must "set upon a Grammer-School, the masters thereof being able to instruct youth so far as they may be fitted for the Universitie."

Thus, Massachusetts set the stage for America's literacy laws. Connecticut in 1650 copied the Massachusetts law almost verbatim, and the New Haven Colony in 1657 adopted similar laws requiring children and apprentices to "attain at least so much, as to be able duly to read the Scriptures, and other good and profitable printed Books in the English tongue."

But two other colonies proceeded more cautiously. New Plymouth, while requiring home schooling for reading, did not approve establishing formal schools and passed its first literacy law as late as 1677. Rhode Island Colony—true to the dissident character of its founders and their attachment to predestination—refrained from adopting the legislation altogether. As historian Jennifer Monaghan pointed out, "Because of its ecumenical character, Rhode Island was apparently reluctant to mandate schooling that took it for granted that children would learn to read by mastering a succession of Christian texts."

Throughout the 1600s, only one boy from Rhode Island attended college.

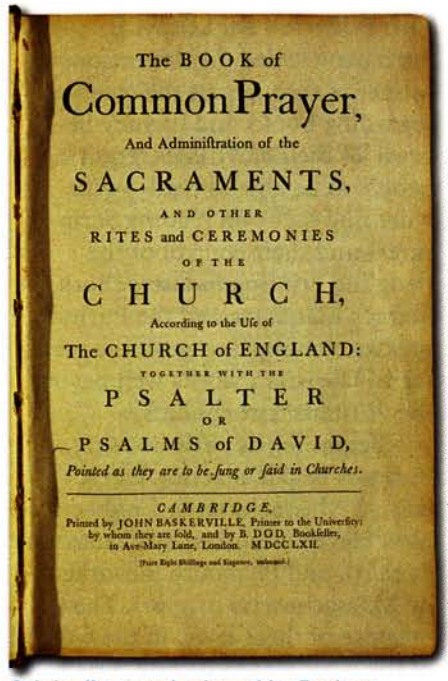
cans spoke fondly and frequently of reading," Williams explained. "Their talk about printed works and their efforts to obtain books, pamphlets, and periodicals illustrate the fact that they were, indeed, readers. Colonial Americans craved the printed word."

In a multi-tiered society such as early America, readership varied considerably by gender and educational strata. In her *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America*, Monaghan effectively groups readers in New England—although her information also applies quite well to the other colonies—into three "spheres."

Women comprised the first and narrowest sphere. "Excluded from any kind of direct participation in public life, with their property subsumed under their husband's, women were defined largely by their relationship to the men in their lives—as wife, mother, neighbor, mistress of servants—or, as Christians, by their relationship to a male deity. The conventional wisdom was that they were as weak in mind as they were in body and, apparently, that their sphere excluded any engagement with the intellect."

Monaghan's second sphere contained ordinary men. "Some were able to read but not sign their name; others could read, write, and perhaps keep accounts. They could read the notes posted on the doors of the meeting house informing townsfolk of straying cattle. They could write to family members left behind in England, sign documents, put their own hand to their wills, record economic transactions, and in general take full part in the life of their community."

In the third and most exclusive sphere were the founding fathers, who were considered part of the larger world of letters. "They and comparable leaders across Europe had had a similar education," she wrote. "Back in England, the spiritual and political leaders of the colonies had been taught to read at petty schools before they attended so-called grammar schools, where


The BOOK of
Common Prayer,
And Adminiſtration of the
SACRAMENTS,
AND OTHER
RITES and CEREMONIES
OF THE
CHURCH,
According to the Uſe of
The CHURCH of ENGLAND:
TOGETHER WITH THE
PSALTER
OR
PSALMS of DAVID,
Pointed as they are to be ſung or ſaid in Churches.
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by whom they are ſold, and by B. DOD, Bookſeller,
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COURTESY OF THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

Originally overshadowed by Puritan influence in early America, the Church of England spread rapidly through the colonies in the 1700s, with its largest concentration in the coastal South. *The Book of Common Prayer*, originally printed in 1549, was instrumental to members' religious life. This 1762 London edition was owned by Catherine Blaikley of Williamsburg, Virginia.

they had learned Latin and Greek and perhaps a little Hebrew. They had attended Oxford or Cambridge (certain Cambridge colleges were famous—or notorious—as hotbeds of Puritanism) and could communicate, writing in Latin, with college graduates all over Europe."

Take, for example, Thomas Jefferson, who wrote to his friend Dr. Joseph Priestley in 1800, "To read the Latin and Greek authors in their original is a sublime luxury. I thank on my knees, Him who directed my early education, for having put into my possession this rich source of delight (Homer) and I would not exchange it for anything."

In fact, the breadth of American readership amazed visiting Europeans, as was the case when German surveyor William Gerard de Brahm explored the then-frontier Georgia Colony in 1762.

"The Author has made a general Observation among all Natives in America: they are in general of very elevated Spirits, and most of

them with very little Education; yea some by reading good Authors only, acquire real Knowledge and great Wisdom," he wrote in his *De Brahm's Report of the General Survey in the Southern Districts of North America*.

"There is scarcely a House in the Cities, Towns, or Plantations, but which have some Choice Authors, if not Libraries of Religious, Phylosophical, and Political Writers." Brahm continued. "Booksellers endeavour to import the newest editions, and take care to commission the best, well knowing they will not incomber their Shops long, but soon find Admirers and Purchasers."

BOOKS AS POSSESSIONS

Another gauge of colonial readership is the frequency of home libraries appearing on household inventories. Hall has documented the frequency of book ownership both in New England and in the Chesapeake region of Virginia and Maryland.

In Massachusetts in the mid-1600s, between 50 and 60 percent of households contained books, depending on the particular county. "Most book-owning households contained five or fewer books, and collections of any size (more than twenty) belonged mostly to ministers or magistrates," he stated.

In his study of late-1600s inventories in Surry and York counties in Virginia and St. Mary's County, Maryland, Hall determined that 35 percent had books. "Clergy and doctors invariably had them," he wrote, "but even 19 percent of the poorest households also had them."

"Comparatively speaking," Hall stated in his third volume of *History of the Book in America*, "these patterns represent an improvement on the situation in some parts of England, though they fall behind the percentages for New England."

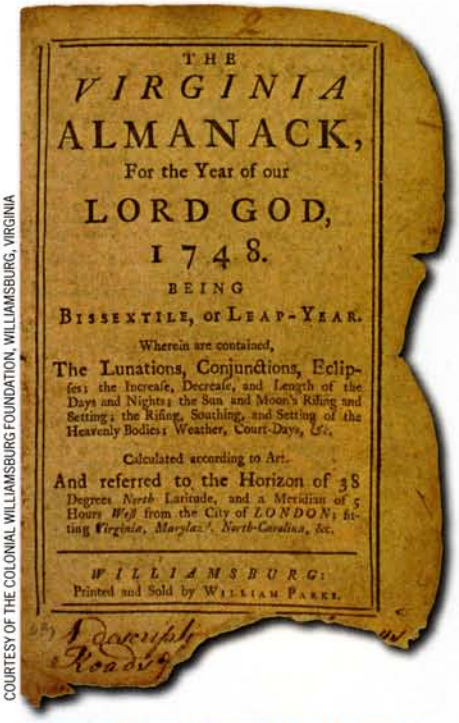
Of course any discussion of colonial libraries must include Benjamin Franklin, a book lover who recalled that when he was twelve, "Often I sat up in my Room reading the greatest Part of the Night, when the Book was borrow'd in the Evening & to be return'd early in the Morning lest it should be miss'd or wanted."

COURTESY OF WINTERTHUR MUSEUM, DELAWARE

A boy emulating an elder's habit of reading a newspaper while surrounded by political books captured the imagination of American portrait painter Charles Bird King (1785-1862) in his 1824 work *Grandfather's Hobby*. The boy sits atop a "debt" ledger, wearing a large cocked hat and spectacles. Books in the background include *Corruption of Government*, *Calamities*, *Art of Political Living*, and *Navy*, along with assorted pamphlets, pointing to the grandfather's main interest.

Moving to Philadelphia, Franklin found readership to be much lower than in his native Boston, a situation he sought to remedy in 1731 by founding America's first subscription library. The people of Philadelphia responded enthusiastically. Of them, Franklin later wrote, "... in a few Years were obser'd by Strangers to be better instructed & more intelligent than People of the Rank genrally are in other Countries."

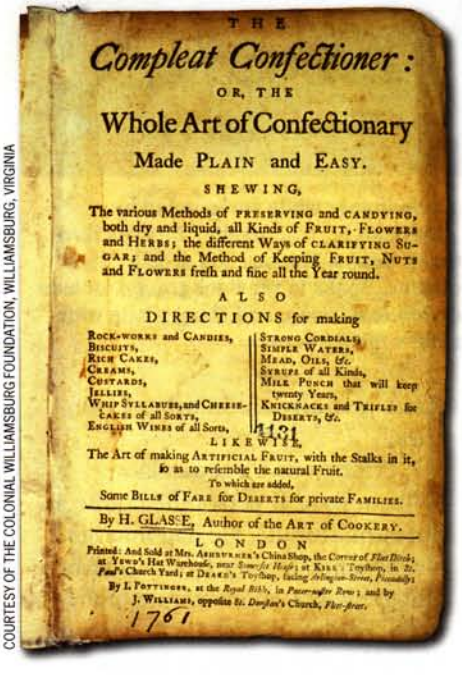
Prestigious Virginia planter William Byrd II personified quite a different attitude. He had inherited a substantial library from his father and grew into an inveterate bibliophile. For hours each day he buried himself in the classics, religious books, poetry, legal and political tracts, and countless newspapers and magazines. He bought books wherever he could, obtained them from estates of deceased friends, and received many as gifts, eventually



THE
VIRGINIA
ALMANACK,
For the Year of our
LORD GOD,
1748.
BEING
BISSEXTILE, or LEAP-YEAR.
Wherein are contained,
The Lunations, Conjunctions, Eclipses; the Increase, Decrease, and Length of the Days and Nights; the Sun and Moon's Rising and Setting; the Rising, Southing, and Setting of the Heavenly Bodies; Weather, Court-Days, &c.
Calculated according to Art.
And referred to the Horizon of 38 Degrees *North* Latitude, and a Meridian of 5 Hours *West* from the City of *LONDON*; fitting *Virginia*, *Maryland*, *North-Carolina*, &c.
WILLIAMSBURG:
Printed and Sold by WILLIAM PARKS.

COURTESY OF THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

Almanacs served as important tools for colonial planters, listing length of days, lunar phases, weather predictions, and a host of other celestial data. This Virginia Colony almanac for the year 1748 was printed and sold in the Williamsburg print shop of William Parks, the first permanent press in the colony.



THE
Compleat Confectioner:
OR, THE
Whole Art of Confectionary
Made PLAIN and EASY.
SHEWING,
The various Methods of PRESERVING and CANDYING, both dry and liquid, all Kinds of FRUIT, FLOWERS and HERBS; the different Ways of CLARIFYING SUGAR; and the Method of Keeping FRUIT, NUTS and FLOWERS fresh and fine all the Year round.
ALSO
DIRECTIONS for making
ROCK-WORKS and CANDIES, BISCUITS, RICH CAKES, CREAMS, CUSTARDS, JELLIES, WHIP SYLLABUBS, and CHEESE-CAKES of all SORTS, ENGLISH WINES of all Sorts, STRONG CORDIALS, SIMPLE WATERS, MEAD, OILS, &c. SYRUPS of all Kinds, MILK PUNCH that will keep twenty Years, KNICKNACKS and TRIFLES for DESERTS, &c.
LIKEWISE,
The Art of making ARTIFICIAL FRUIT, with the Stalks in it, so as to resemble the natural Fruit.
To which are added,
Some BILLS of FARE for DESERTS for private FAMILIES.
By H. GLASSE, Author of the ART of COOKERY.
LONDON
Printed: And Sold at Mrs. ASHBURNER's China Shop, the Corner of *Fleet Ditch*; at YEW's Hat Warehouse, near *Temple Bar*; at KIRL Toyshop, in St. *Paul*'s Church Yard; at DEARE's Toyshop, facing *Arlington-Street*, *Piccadilly*; By L. POTTINGER, at the *Royal Bible*, in *Fleet-street*; and by J. WILLIAMS, opposite St. *Dunstan*'s Church, *Fleet-street*.
1761

COURTESY OF THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

Cookbooks imported from Europe were essential in early America until publication of the first American cookbook in 1796 by Amelia Simmons. *The Compleat Confectioner*, by Hannah Glass, was published in 1770 in London and was available in colonial bookshops.

amassing more than 4,000 volumes—the largest library in the colonial South—requiring a hired librarian to organize and maintain them.

Yet Byrd would not give his wife, Lucy Parke Byrd, free reign of his library. In a blatant example of the prevailing attitude toward female literacy, Byrd often locked his library and denied her entry, especially when she sought a book he considered unsuitable for her. In his diary entry for December 30, 1711, Byrd noted that he and Lucy had quarreled bitterly over the issue of books.

GETTING THROUGH THE WORLD

A good indicator of what colonial Americans read is the number of times volumes were reprinted due to high demand. Russell L. Martin III, curator of newspapers for the American Antiquarian Society, compiled reprint data from the North American Imprints Program (NAIP) for his essay "North America and Transatlantic Book Culture to 1800" in *A Companion to the History of the Book* (2007).

"The NAIP database suggests that early Americans had one overriding concern: how does one get through this world?" Martin wrote. "The answer is found in their surviving books, pamphlets, and broadsides, which cluster under three main headings: religion, the affairs of daily life, and politics."

Religious reading included complete Bibles, Psalters, Testaments, adaptations and abridgements in German and English, accumulating several hundred reprints beginning with the *Bay Psalm Book* in 1640 through 1800.

Other sources indicate the first "bestseller" in the colonies was Reverend Michael Wiggleworth's poem *The Day of Doom*, a fearsome tome in which a vengeful God sentences sinners and unbaptized babies to Hell. First printed in 1662, in most Puritan households it was required reading for children. Of course John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* was an especially popular and kinder book. Published in England in 1678, it had its first American printing three years later.

Almanacs provided crucial weather information for an agrarian society as well as calendars, sunrise/sunset times, tide tables, and other measurements that aided in daily life. Published locally and available to anyone with a few shillings, their popularity in some areas was exceeded only by the Bible. Almanacs numbered more than 1,100 titles between 1639 and 1799.

"Personal experiences, such as Mary Rowlandson's famous captivity narrative, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (16 editions from 1682 to 1800), Eleazar Wheelock's *Plain and Faithful Narrative* (eight editions, 1763 to 1775), and John Williams's *The Redeemed Captive, Returning to Zion* (ten editions, 1707 to 1800) apparently always found an audience," Martin wrote.

Regarding educational reading, Martin found that from 1640 to 1800, the most frequently reprinted American work was the *New England Primer*, followed by Noah Webster's *Grammatical Institute*, and Thomas Dilworth's *New Guide to the English Tongue*. Other best-selling instructional books were Ezekiel Cheever's *A Short Introduction to the Latin Tongue*, Daniel Fenning's *Universal Spelling Book*, and Thomas Dilworth's *The Schoolmaster's Assistant*.

MORE THAN A DIVERSION

As political rebellion began to stir in the American colonies in the mid-1700s, another form of popular reading piqued people's imaginations. In Europe the novel had evolved during the early 18th Century into a more compelling genre, moving away from the idealism of the "romance" to a newfound realism that many found attractive.

"In our own century we tend to think of novels as recreational reading, and undoubtedly they served that function in the eighteenth century as well," wrote Catherine Kerrison in *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South* (2006). "But novels were more than diversion; they contained moral lessons, crucial in the education of southern women, both maid and matron, and this literature comprised

COURTESY OF WINTERTHUR MUSEUM, DELAWARE

Reading was a primary method of education for young women in the American South, with the 18th-Century novel holding special appeal. It is not known whether the book in this painting is a novel, yet it holds a prominent place in the painting's composition. The portrait of Rebecca Pritchard Mills, right, and her daughter, Eliza Shrewsbury, of Charleston, South Carolina, was painted in 1796 by James Earl. While Eliza is shown reading, her mother has her sewing essentials: needle, thread, and thimble.

the core readings of their education."

The first novel written in America would wait until 1789, when William Hill Brown published *The Power of Sympathy*, based on an account of a New England man and woman who fell in love before he discovered she was his illegitimate sister. She fell ill and died and he committed suicide—a morality lesson about the powers of passion and seduction.

Until Brown's novel appeared, colonists depended on English imports. An inventory compiled by North Carolina booksellers William Johnston and Richard Bennehan in 1774 provides a list of popular novels they were importing for sure sale: John Gay's *Fables by Mr. Gay* (1727), Alain-Rene LeSage's *Gil Blas* (1732), Tobias Smollett's *Roderick Random* (1748) and *Peregrine Pickle* (1751), Henry Fielding's *History of Tom Jones, A Foundling* (1749), Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1760) and *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), and Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766).

One novel not on Johnston and Bennehan's list was the very popular *Robinson Crusoe*, first published in 1719 and often regarded as the first novel in English. Its first American edition appeared in 1757 with another in 1774, followed by thirteen more editions from 1784 to 1790 and yet another twenty-nine editions from 1790 to 1800.

"Perhaps it was no accident that the American popularity of Daniel DeFoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (as measured by reprinting and abridgements) reached its peak after the Revolution," Martin observed. "*Robinson Crusoe* is the American book par excellence. After all, it is the story of a man who disobeys his father, builds an empire in the New World, reads his Bible daily, and converts and conquers 'savages.' In short, the novel distilled the religious, practical, and political lessons that had long figured among the staple products of the early American press." ★