

A Hard Act is Good to Follow



Changing of the guard at *Common-place*

There have been some changes here at *Common-place*. As of January 1, founding editors Jane Kamensky and Jill Lepore have passed on their editorial duties to me (they remain active members of our editorial board). In turn, Stephen Mihm, a historian of nineteenth-century America who teaches at the University of Georgia, has taken my place as editor of our “Reviews” column. And Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, who teaches early American history at Harvard University, has replaced John Demos (who also remains a member of our board) as the new “Ask the Author” editor. The sponsorship of the journal has also changed. The history department at my home institution, Florida State University, has

replaced the Gilder Lehrman Institute as the journal's co-sponsor.

So much change presents a number of challenges. Greatest among these is insuring that you notice very little difference—at least for now. We plan to maintain the same passion for innovative writing, the same high editorial standards, and the same interest in creative, substantive research that Jane and Jill brought to *Common-place*. We also expect *Common-place* to maintain its much-coveted ability to reach beyond the usual bounds of historical scholarship. And I mean this in all its various implications: *Common-place* has been, and will remain, a place for writing that reaches into multiple disciplines and that challenges readers to think across the familiar boundaries of academic history. Similarly, we will uphold Jane and Jill's initial ambition of reaching the broadest possible audience, from academic historians, teachers, archivists, curators, and public historians to students, genealogists, and the generally interested reader.

When it comes to *Common-place*, continuity is a good thing. But when it comes to the Internet, continuity is something else altogether. No need to rehearse all the familiar platitudes about technology and modern life; suffice it to say that much about our medium has changed in the five years since *Common-place*'s inception. As we pursue our mission, the evolution of Internet technologies presents us with some exciting new opportunities. In particular, the word "interactive" has acquired a much more literal meaning. It is now more economical for us to build a truly interactive Website that is visited less by *readers* than by *participants*.

In coming months we plan to strengthen the interactive qualities of *Common-place*. You will see this first in a revamped version of "Object Lessons," our popular material culture column. Using Flash technology, it is now possible for authors to do much more than simply write about an object. They will be able to provide virtual tours, integrating text and image to afford a truly multidimensional excursion into past material worlds.

We are also exploring ways to strengthen our classroom presence. It has become routine in my own classes for students, unprompted by yours truly, to rely on *Common-place* as a reference. When they begin their research on Ben Franklin or New World slavery, their search engines regularly point them to *Common-place*. This is all well and good. But I often wish my students would look beyond whatever essay they happen to light upon and spend a bit more time using our site. One way to accomplish this is—once again—to provide more interactive content. To this end, we are developing a column that presents a specific document or set of documents and that, through a series of prompts, takes the reader on a tour of the document. Such tours will offer commentary and interpretation, so that a document such as a probate inventory, for example, will reveal to students the sorts of things it has revealed to historians.

In our July issue, you will see a new, full-length column entitled "Common-Reading." The idea for the column is to provide a more flexible forum for

writing about books than the usual book review. In "Common-Reading," authors will discuss a book or books—old or new, good or not so good—that, for some reason, have influenced their thinking. As the column evolves, we plan to add an interactive component that allows readers to add their own additional reflections.

Some other things to look forward to are a special issue on money, to appear next spring, and, in the spring of 2007, one on the early history of the cartoon. Among my own editorial leanings is an interest in the ways contemporary artists represent and interpret the American past. As our capacity to incorporate sound, video, and other media into our site grows, so grows our ability to present the American past, and *representations* of the American past, in ever-more innovative ways. We can now bring film, performance, multimedia, and other modes of expression to our viewers. Look for features that do this and look for more contributions from the makers of these art forms.

In sum, *Common-place* is as vigorous and innovative as ever. We hope you will agree that it promises to continue on the same exciting path blazed by the founding editors five years ago.

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