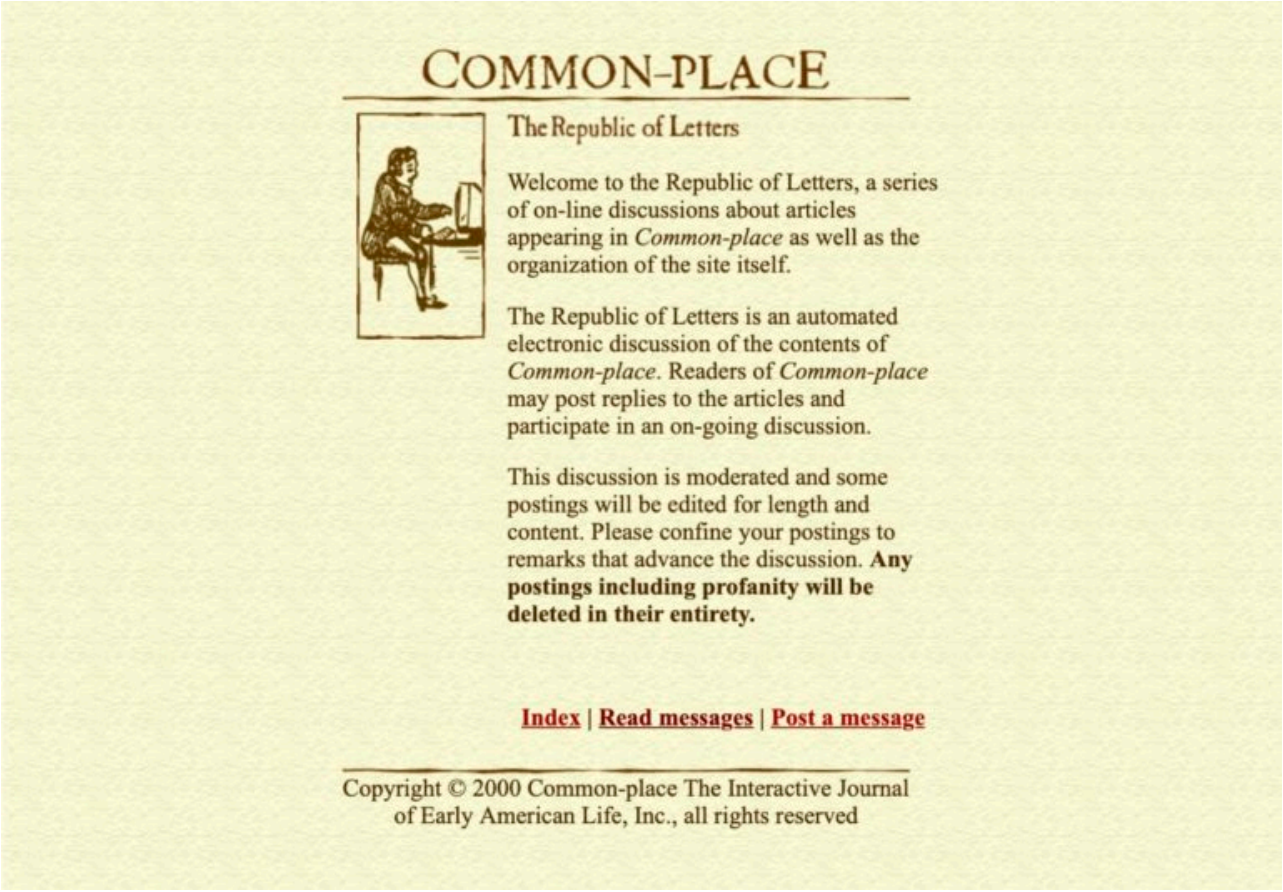
# Editor’s Note – Please Refresh Your Browser For A New Commonplace



COMMON-PLACE

The Republic of Letters

Welcome to the Republic of Letters, a series of on-line discussions about articles appearing in *Common-place* as well as the organization of the site itself.

The Republic of Letters is an automated electronic discussion of the contents of *Common-place*. Readers of *Common-place* may post replies to the articles and participate in an on-going discussion.

This discussion is moderated and some postings will be edited for length and content. Please confine your postings to remarks that advance the discussion. **Any postings including profanity will be deleted in their entirety.**

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Before we move forward, it is a good time to look back on the history of Commonplace and its place in digital humanities over the last two decades.

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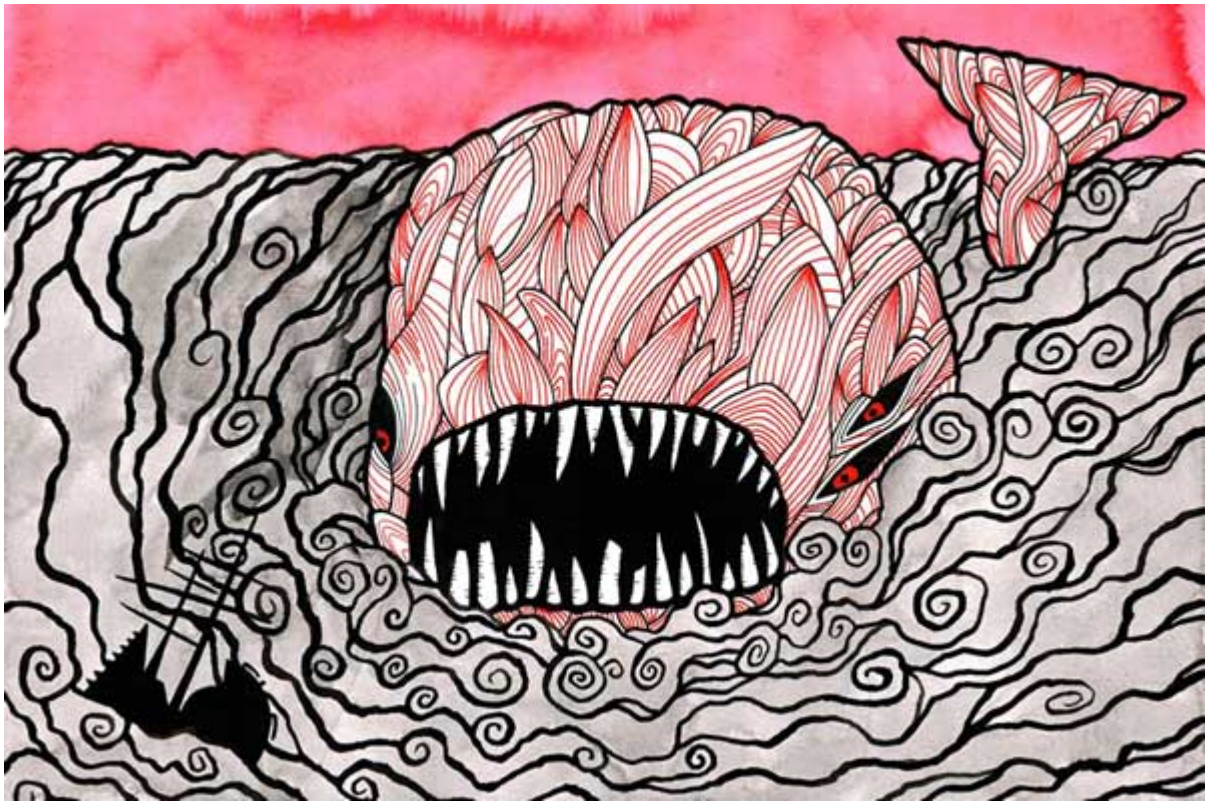
# Blogging Moby-Dick: An artist illustrates every page of The Whale



The set of 552 images is impossible to describe as a single body of work, but the illustrations cohere.

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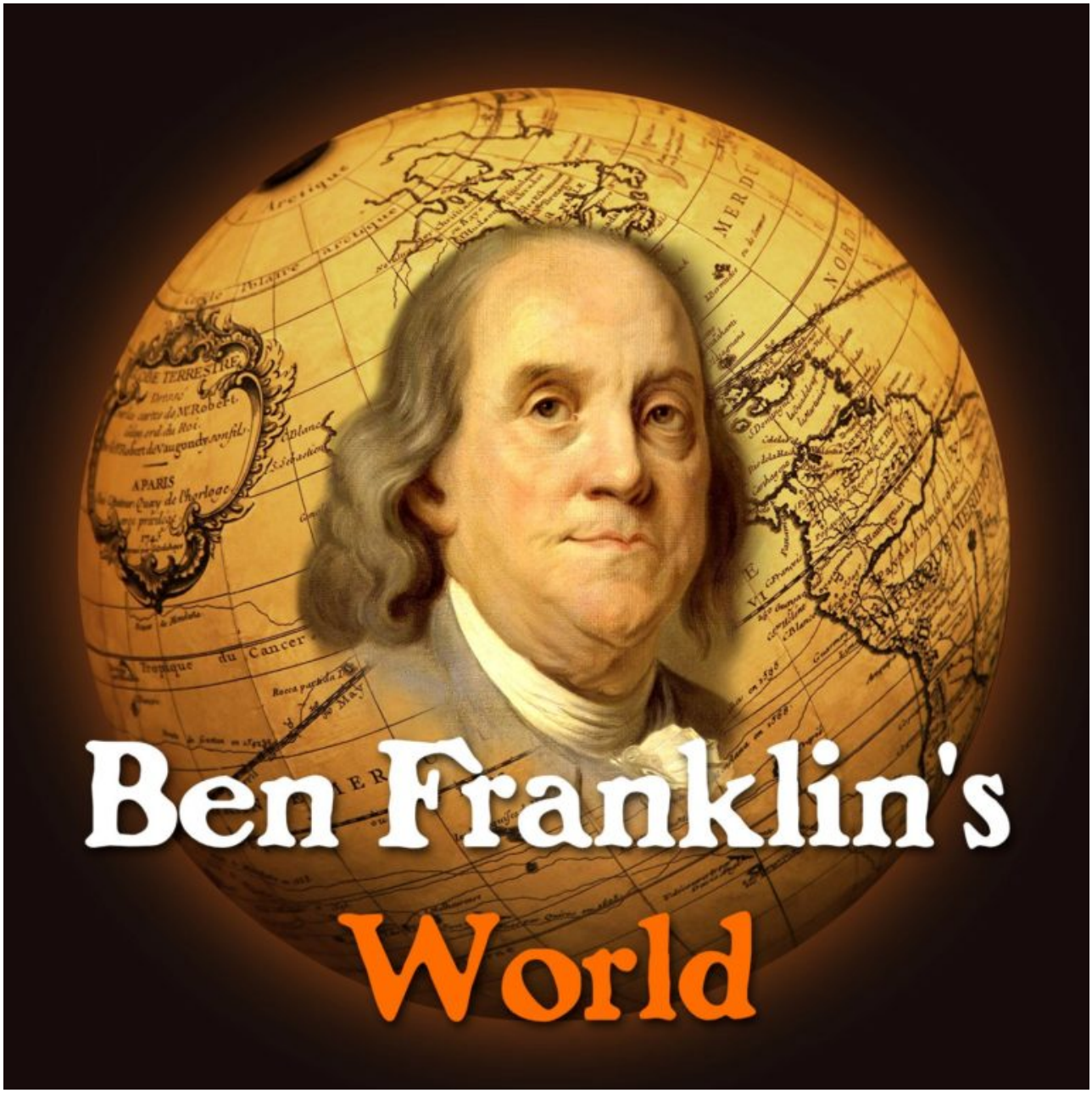
## Ben Franklin’s World




Podcasts serve as a gateway to other media about history, serving as a tool for historians to engage with people who have an interest in the stories they tell.

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## Commonplace Call for Submissions and Applications

We are excited to share some Commonplace news! New update! As of May 26, 2021, we are not accepting any more applications for the editorial position or the editorial board. Thank you so much.

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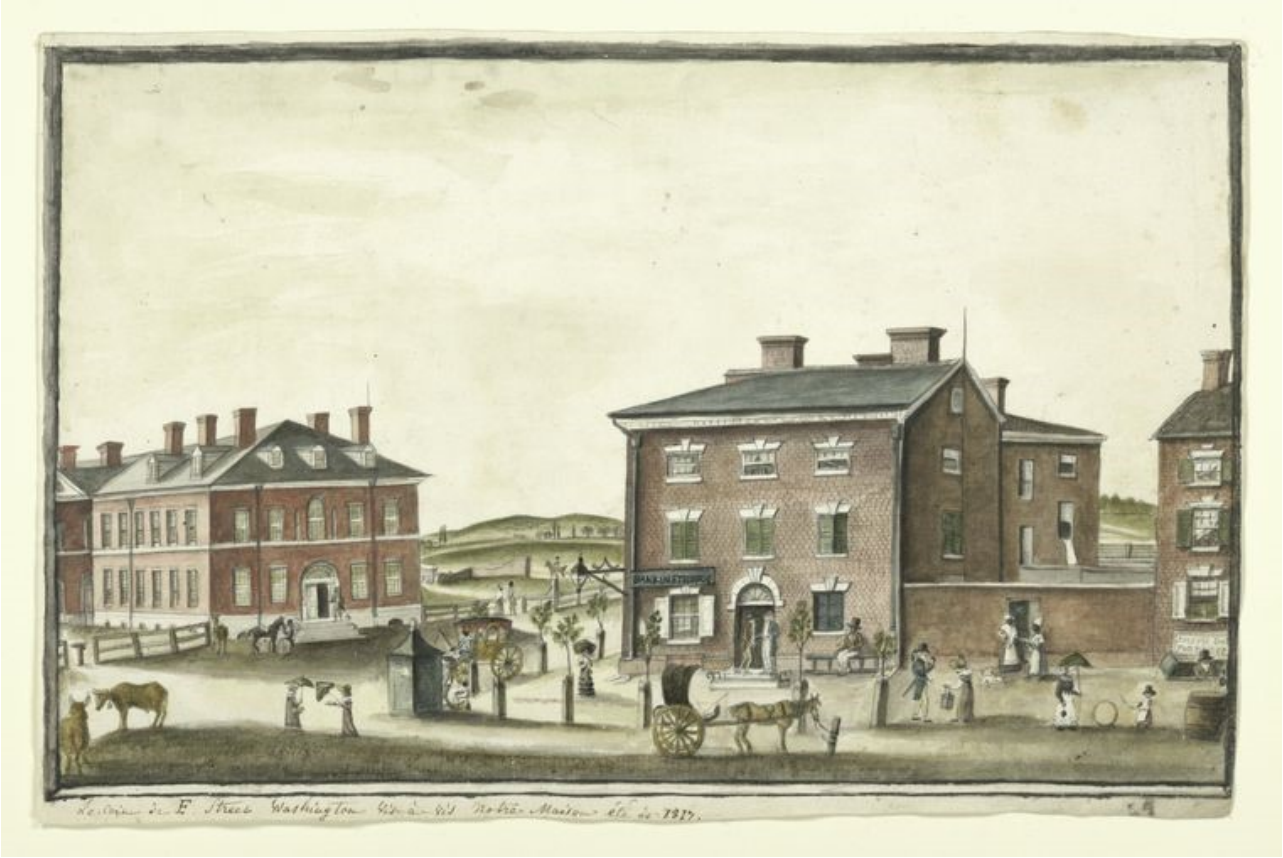
# House of Cards: The Politics of Calling Card Etiquette in Nineteenth-Century Washington



In the early republic, social media had its own crucial importance, although what the media employed was not the tweet, but little bits of pasteboard.

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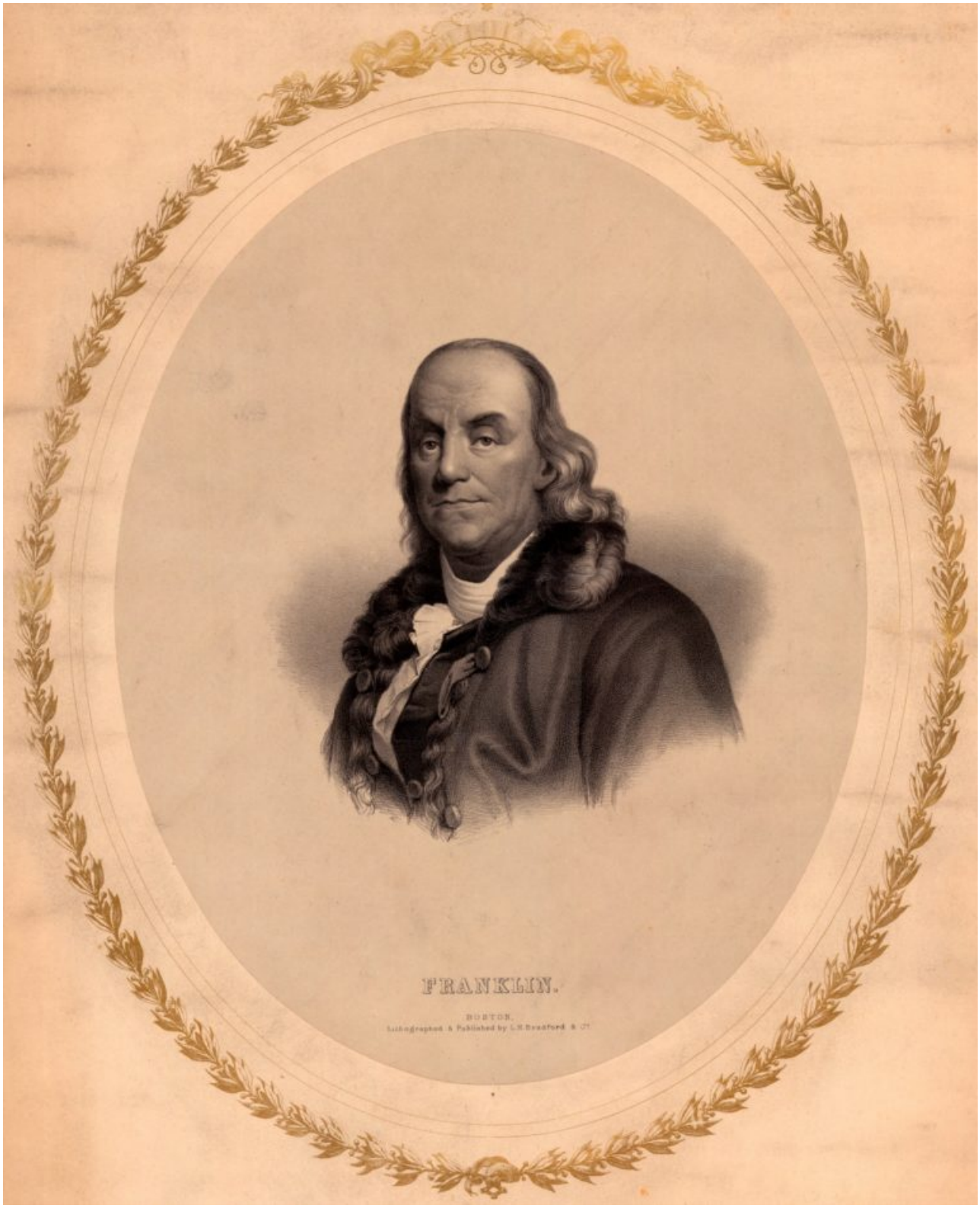
# Silence Dogood Rides Again: Blogging the frontiers of early American history

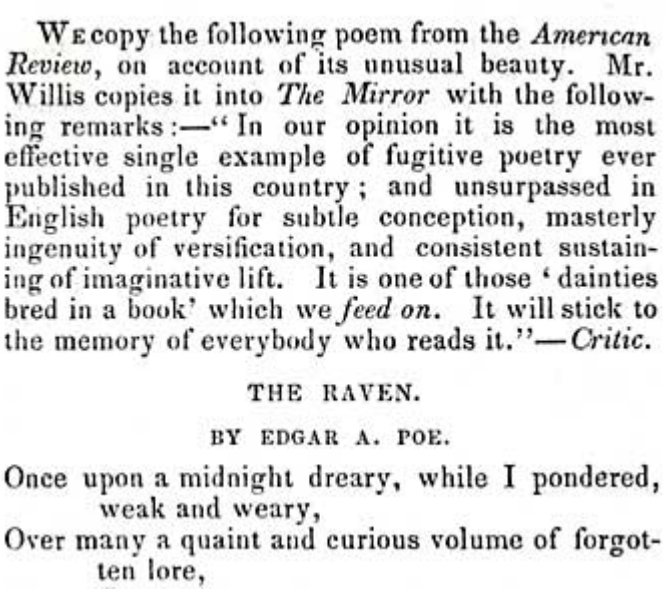



In the crested buttes and slot canyons of the Internet that comprise the academic blogosphere, pseudonymity has been controversial.

# Graduate Training: Where Digital Scholarship and Early American Studies Meet

Insights by four early-career scholars who work at the intersection of early American studies and the digital humanities.

# Lurking in the Blogosphere of the 1840s



We copy the following poem from the *American Review*, on account of its unusual beauty. Mr. Willis copies it into *The Mirror* with the following remarks:—"In our opinion it is the most effective single example of fugitive poetry ever published in this country; and unsurpassed in English poetry for subtle conception, masterly ingenuity of versification, and consistent sustaining of imaginative lift. It is one of those 'dainties bred in a book' which we *feed on*. It will stick to the memory of everybody who reads it."—*Critic.*

THE RAVEN.

BY EDGAR A. POE.

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered,
weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,

The success of miscellanies such as Littell's Living Age depended on the U.S. Congress's repeated refusal to pass an international copyright law and on the cultural prestige of foreign periodicals.

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# Did the Election of Andrew Jackson Usher in the 'Age of the Common Man'?


One of the most persistent myths in American history is the idea that the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828 marks the first “democratic” election in the history of the United States. The dawn of the so-called “Age of the Common Man” supposedly brought forth universal (i.e., white manhood) suffrage and a truly participatory democracy for the first time in the United States.

This mythology obscures the messiness of the actual history of voting in the years following the Revolution and preceding the Age of Jackson. It reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of American voting practice that too often ignores the ways in which American democracy ebbed and flowed – in fact, was redefined and restricted – in the years preceding the Civil War. Poor white men could and did vote in unprecedented numbers in the years following the election of 1800. Free men of color voted not only in New England and Pennsylvania, but also in some southern states, including Maryland and North Carolina. Women who held property in their own right – widows and spinsters – could vote in New Jersey from 1776 to 1808.

Rather than seeing the election of Old Hickory as a landmark event in American democratization, we should recognize that it was the preceding period, from 1800 to 1824, that marked the first efflorescence of American democracy, in all its messy inconsistency. Nowhere in the Age of Jackson could any woman vote; free blacks faced increasing race-based restrictions on their voting, and in

most states voter turnout in the Jacksonian elections of 1828 and 1832 never equaled the peak turnout of the preceding quarter century.

Authorized by the Jacksonian mythology to ignore the elections of the period, historians of high politics have long portrayed the history of the United States from the Constitutional Convention in 1787 to the end of the Virginia Dynasty of presidents as a bright stage upon which great men enter, deliver memorable lines, and exit. This top-down approach is understandable, given the brilliance of the group that Jefferson called an “assembly of demi-gods” at Philadelphia. It diverts attention, however, from the fact that Jefferson and his contemporaries delivered their lines to an audience of ordinary men and women. In so doing, it obscures one of Jeffersonian America’s most enduring contributions to posterity: the emergence of the first truly democratic political culture in an extended republic anywhere in the world.

Contrary to the “Age of the Common Man” myth, my research suggests that the era of mass democratization began 28 years earlier, with Thomas Jefferson’s election to the presidency. The years from 1800 to 1816 saw the most dramatic surge in voting turnout in the nineteenth century, and the greatest expansion of the voting universe until woman suffrage a century later.

**Suffrage Expansion and Electoral Competition, 1800-1820**

In the first years of the nineteenth century, the United States was already a highly partisan, deeply polarized political culture. The Federalists and Republicans were fiercely and increasingly competitive in state elections from the middle of the 1790s to the end of the War of 1812. Thomas Jefferson’s election in the so-called “Revolution of 1800″ was not the culmination of these electoral battles, as he asserted, but it inaugurated a largely forgotten era of intense if uneven democratization.

Many of more conservative Federalists stoutly maintained they would never degrade themselves by pandering to the masses. Nevertheless, when faced with the grim reality of campaigning for votes or facing political extinction, they responded vigorously to the challenge of expanding the voting universe. In the midst of this free-for-all competition, free men of color and women in New Jersey initially had enhanced opportunities to vote, until the institution that allowed their participation, property-based suffrage, fell victim to same democratizing trends.

Beginning in the 1790s, Republicans in the North generally supported the end of property requirements for voting, since this augmented their natural electoral base among the lower orders. In many states, even before the restrictions on voting were lifted, unpropertied white men began voting, and state suffrage property restrictions were sometimes retroactively amended to reflect the reality of “boots on the ground” (or ballots in the box). In most cases the expansion of the unpropertied white male franchise was the result of strenuous

Republican and Federalist competition for votes. What followed this extension of voting rights was remarkable: voter turnout rates in many states exceeded sixty or even seventy percent of the total adult male population.

Historians of the early republic have known about these high rates of turnout ever since the pioneering work of J. R. Pole and Richard P. McCormick nearly two generations ago. The peak figures for turnout are truly astonishing. In the highly competitive election of 1812, for example, New Hampshire and Vermont turnout in the gubernatorial elections amounted to 75 and 80 percent of adult male inhabitants, respectively. That same year Massachusetts gubernatorial turnout was 65 percent of all adult males, and Georgia's congressional election turnout was 63 percent of all adult white men. In the year 1820, the so-called Era of Good Feeling, when party competition was supposedly at its nadir, Maryland registered turnout of 69 percent of its adult white male inhabitants in state legislative elections; in Kentucky's election for governor that year, turnout measured 74 percent of all the adult white male inhabitants.

How do these turnout figures compare with participation in the Jacksonian era? One way to gauge the significance of this pre-Jacksonian democratization is to compare peak turnout before 1824 and again in the Jacksonian elections of 1828-1832.

Table 1: Turnout in Jefferson and Jackson Era Elections (click to see table in new window)

According to Table 1, only New York, Maryland, Virginia, Louisiana, Ohio, and Indiana showed higher turnout in Jacksonian-era elections than they had in the peak races earlier. The apparent voter "surge" in Jacksonian New York, Virginia, and Louisiana is partly explained by the fact that these states, along with South Carolina and Rhode Island, were the only ones that maintained restrictive voting requirements into the 1820s.

**Climbing the Peaks: Presidential Election Turnout, 1808-1828**

Of course, the turnout figures in Table 1 actually compare apples and oranges: state elections pre-1824 and presidential elections post-1828. Peak turnout in the Jeffersonian-era elections happened elsewhere: party competition was focused at the state level, so the highest turnout mostly occurred in state elections. Let us then actually compare apples and apples: turnout in presidential elections. Historians and political scientists who study elections argue that 1828 was a so-called "critical" election. As these scholars have shown, most critical elections generate a spike in turnout because these elections reorient the youngest cohort of voters to ally themselves to a

different political party. The elections of Thomas Jefferson in 1800, Abraham Lincoln in 1860, and Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 each saw a change in voting patterns that lasted a generation and also generated a sharp rise in turnout.

Table 2 shows that in the Northeast, the presidential elections of 1828 actually did not mark a dramatic upsurge in the levels of voter turnout recorded in the presidential elections of 1808 and 1812. Table 2 lists a sample of adult white male turnout (for consistency's sake) in presidential elections in 1808, 1812, and 1828.

Table 2: Turnout In Presidential Elections, 1808-1832

The most striking thing about these figures is that in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, turnout in 1828 was not dramatically higher than it had been in 1808 and 1812. In the sample drawn for this table, at least, only Ohio voters surged in unprecedented numbers to the polls in 1828. Unlike other realigning elections, the presidential election of 1828 does not seem to have caused an unprecedented national surge in voter participation.

Voters did eventually surge to the polls but only after the retirement of Andrew Jackson. Table 3 compares peak turnout in the first party system and turnout in the presidential elections of 1828 and 1840.

Table 3: Turnout In Jefferson Era, 1828, and "Log Cabin" Elections (click to see table in new window)

**The Age of the Lowest Common Denominator Man**

It turns out that the presidential elections were democratized not by Old Hickory, but by his Whig knock-off William Henry Harrison, "Old Tippecanoe." The Age of the Common Man was not introduced by the first "log cabin" president but by the spurious "Log Cabin Campaign," in which Harrison, born on a James River plantation, masqueraded as the nineteenth-century equivalent of "Joe Six-Pack." Though the country was still reeling from the aftermath of the Panic of 1837, Harrison and the Whigs never seriously addressed the critical state of the economy during the 1840 campaign. Four years earlier, when Harrison was first put forward as a candidate, Bank of the United States president and anti-Jacksonian leader Nicholas Biddle forbade "Old Tip" from saying anything at all during the campaign. Biddle issued this chilling directive about Harrison: "Let him not say one word about his principles or his creed – let him say nothing. .

. .Let the use of pen and ink be wholly forbidden as if he were a mad poet in Bedlam."

This marks the salient difference between voter mobilization in the so-called first and second party systems, as historians have designated the Federalist-Republican and Whig-Democrat eras, respectively. Ultimately, the "mature" second party system surpassed its predecessor in mobilizing sheer numbers of voters to the polls, but at what cost? The Federalists did their best to make Thomas Jefferson's character and religious views the major issues of 1796, 1800, and 1804, but debates over foreign policy, trade policy, military spending, separation of church and state, and domestic repression clearly predominated, and almost did the Federalists in. As Philip Lampi will point out later in this series, it was Jeffersonian policy errors, especially the Embargo and the War of 1812, that eventually let the Federalists restore their electoral competitiveness.

Even in the popular political culture that was used in campaigns, the politics of the age of Jefferson seems mostly driven by the issues. The electioneering rhetoric, the rituals, and the songs associated with the Republican and Federalist parties centered on critical questions before the voters.

The Jacksonian era that began in 1828 marks a transitional phase from substantive to symbolic politics, with Jackson's opponents smearing his staid but supposedly bigamous marriage and launching more justifiable character attacks against his record as a military commander. It was the later second party system, the Harrisonian era, that marked the nadir of serious public discussion. The high turnout in 1840 was not generated by a debate or even metaphorical battle over the issues, but by the first fully "symbolic" campaign in American history. The substantive partisan newspapers that had done much of the political heavy lifting in the Jeffersonian era were supplanted for the first time in 1840 by sloganeering campaign-only rags like the New York *Log Cabin* of Horace Greeley.

By examining two popular campaign songs from the elections of 1800 and 1840, we see the transformation clearly. The first election song, "Jefferson and Liberty," was written as an attack on the repressive Alien and Sedition Acts, which the song calls the "Reign of Terror." Here is the last stanza and chorus:

> From Georgia up to Lake Champlain
> From seas to Mississippi's shore;
> Ye sons of freedom loud proclaim,
> The Reign of Terror is no more.
> Rejoice-Columbia's sons, rejoice!
>
> To tyrants never bend the knee;
> But join with heart, and soul and voice
> For JEFFERSON and LIBERTY.

A very different form of “attack music” appeared in the election of 1840. One Democratic “hit” was a song called “Rock-A-Bye Baby, Daddy’s a Whig.” The entire song is an assault on Harrison’s personality. He is a “fake”: the song attacks his war record and his consumption patterns. Harrison exaggerated his war heroism; he would swallow the fancy liquor of his Tidewater forbears rather than drink the hard cider of western frontiersmen. In this song and others like it, the politics of identity, with references to class and consumption, have obliterated references to policy.

> Rock-A-Bye Baby, when you awake,
> You will discover Tip is a fake.
> Far from the battle, war cry and drum,
> He sits in his cabin, drinking that rum.

Our whole trajectory of American democratization has got it wrong by celebrating Andrew Jackson as the avatar of American democracy. In fact, all of the elements that we celebrate in our political culture – mass participation, popular deliberation, substantive discussion of policy alternatives – were launched and in place in the age of Jefferson. Electoral gimmickry and substanceless campaigns dominated by fake identity politics – elite men masquerading as commoners – all awaited the election of a doddering hero from a dubious battle.

American democracy has never entirely recovered from this fateful turn from issue-based to identity politics. Our form of democratic politics assumed its familiar idiosyncratic form, incomprehensible to the rest of the world, and has persisted as our other “peculiar” institution ever since.

**FURTHER READING**

Among the works most heavily informing the discussion above are: Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1970); David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Age of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1965); Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York, Basic, 2000); Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher, eds., *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Andrew W. Robertson, “‘Look on This Picture! . . . And On This!!!’: Nationalism, Localism and Partisan Images of Otherness in the United States, 1787-1820,” *American Historical Review*106 (2001): 1263-1280; Byron E. Shafer, and Anthony J. Badger, eds., *Contesting Democracy : Substance and Structure in American Political History, 1775-2000* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2001); Chilton M. Williamson, *American Suffrage : From Property to Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

1960); and Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). For pioneering examinations of early American voter turnout statistics, see J. R. Pole, *Political Representation in England and the Origins of the American Republic* (London: St. Martin's, 1966), pp. 543-64; and Richard P. McCormick, "New Perspectives on Jacksonian Politics," *American Historical Review* 65 (1960): 292-301.

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# Was Andrew Jackson Really the People's Choice in 1824?

Well, of course he was. American historical narratives have always told us so, and recent prize-winning tomes that agree on little else confirm it. Old Hickory's fame as victor of New Orleans gave him widespread popularity, the story goes, especially with newly enfranchised voters. So when he ran for president in 1824, he came first in the Electoral College but, with four candidates in the race, did not quite win an absolute majority. When the House of Representatives broke the deadlock in favor of the second-placed man, John Quincy Adams, Jackson's supporters screamed that the people had been cheated of their choice by "bargain and corruption" and avenged the old general with a massive victory in 1828.

But was Jackson's "stolen" victory in 1824, the emotional heart of this tale, really quite so clear-cut? In 1884 Edward Stanwood pointed out the problem. In six states the choice of presidential electors was in the hands of the legislature and we have no direct indication of how a popular vote would have resulted. In the states where there was a popular vote, not all the candidates were on every ballot, and in some the overwhelming popularity of one candidate-not necessarily Jackson-resulted in very low turnout. All that can be reported with fair certainty is the vote in the fourteen states where there was a popular ballot, either on the district or the general-ticket system. According to Stanwood, those states gave Jackson 153,544 compared to 108,740 for his nearest rival, John Quincy Adams, who was far ahead of the other two, Henry Clay (47,136) and William Harris Crawford (46,618).

Even in these fourteen states, there is really little evidence of Jackson's nationwide popularity in 1824. He may have won 43 percent of their popular vote, but, as Lee Benson pointed out in 1957, 42 percent of that vote came from winning four-fifths of the popular vote in just three states (Alabama, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania), which together cast 23 percent of the national vote. Local concerns explain his victories in those three states, while his success in the Carolinas followed John C. Calhoun's decision to throw his support to Jackson in return for becoming vice-president. In other parts of the country-notably New England and New York-Jackson received negligible support in 1824, in the face of Adams's evident popularity.

Even in some states where the electors were chosen by the people, Jackson was less popular than appears at first sight. In North Carolina, the popular contest was fought between the Caucus ticket (for Crawford) and the People's ticket (for whoever had the best chance of beating Crawford in the Electoral College), which won by 20,145 to 15,621. The state's electoral votes were duly cast for Jackson, and it is often assumed that they measure his popularity in that state. But in eleven counties voters followed the pre-election suggestion that they mark their ticket for electoral candidates with the name of their preferred presidential candidate. In those counties Adams men supplied about one-fourth of the People's vote, which reconciles with contemporary estimates that about 5,000 of the 20,415 were given by friends of Adams. So we need to

move 5,000 votes from the Jackson column to the Adams column.

In the case of Georgia, Philip Lampi's research reveals a measurable popular vote on the presidential question although the decision was made by the assembly. In the election to choose the assembly, candidates were identified as friends of either Crawford or Jackson, and one ticket representing each side was run in each county. The Jackson men lost to the Georgia candidate, but still attracted (on my arithmetic) 15,478 votes, which need to be added to the Jackson column. That takes the calculation to 164,022 for Jackson to 113,740 for Adams.

But what of the other states that gave the choice of Electors to the legislature? In these cases we have to resort to informed guessing, but the number of votes involved in four of them will not greatly affect our overall calculation. In two states there was fair unanimity (in opposite directions), and that would have greatly reduced turnout. In Vermont, where Jackson was not considered a candidate, the Adams ticket was chosen "by nearly a unanimous vote." In the case of South Carolina-inappropriate as it is to think of a popular vote for president there before the Civil War-it is clear that once Calhoun had thrown his support to Jackson, there was minimal opposition; in the legislature Jackson won 132 to 25. Contemporaneous congressional elections give some sense of the size of turnout in both cases, though we must reduce it since the presidential election was not contested. The effect is to increase Adams's vote by about 11,000 votes, and Jackson's by 18,000.

Delaware and Louisiana divided their Electoral College votes, reflecting an internal division of opinion that is difficult to put numerical values on. The number of voters involved is, however, very small. In the Delaware legislature there was almost no ticket voting, but the Adams candidates won 41 votes compared with 16 for Jackson, suggesting Adams was at least twice as popular. Given that only 6,550 men voted in that year's congressional election, those results suggest Jackson would have won about 1,179 and Adams 2,947 votes. In Louisiana, Henry Clay was the most popular candidate in the legislature but could not produce an absolute majority, and so was outvoted by a Jackson-Adams coalition that managed to split the electoral votes between them, 3-2. If the original balance in the legislature reflected popular opinion and if as many folk had voted as did in the congressional election, then Jacksonians would have received about 1,693 popular votes, Adamsonians 774, and Clayites 2,371.

These penny-ante numbers make little difference to the picture of Jacksonian supremacy. They simply move Jackson to 184,894, compared with 128,461 for Adams. But we have yet to deal with the key state, New York, then the most populous in the nation, which saw a genuine uprising of the electorate, in the form of the People's Party, in 1824. In the gubernatorial election, New York State alone cast 193,354 votes, enough to swamp the entire national vote of the leading candidates.

The presidential election of 1824 in New York has long been a by-word among

political historians for Byzantine intrigue and legislative legerdemain. But what is clear is the commitment of Martin Van Buren and the leaders of the regular (Democratic-)Republicans to the Crawford presidential candidacy as representing the good old party, and the unwillingness of Republicans of New England origin-half the state's population-to go along. Once and future governor DeWitt Clinton had his eyes on the prize at one time but his lack of support elsewhere ruled him out, leaving Adams as the only available northern candidate. When the People's party charged to victory in the state elections, its favored presidential candidates were Adams and, to a lesser extent, Clay. The choice, however, remained in the hands of the old lame-duck legislature, which included a strong bloc of Van Buren-allied Crawford holdovers in the senate. Adams's success in winning the lion's share of New York's electoral votes owed much to newspaper editor-political manager Thurlow Weed's sly and skilful maneuvering, but Weed's influence depended on the fact that he spoke for the largest political force in the lower house, namely the Adams supporters. In the end, the joint session of the legislature gave 25 electoral votes out of 36 to Adams.

By contrast, Andrew Jackson did not appear at all as a candidate in New York. Clinton was partial to him but could not find much outside support in the state. During the legislative maneuvering a Jackson ticket appeared one day as an attempt by some Crawford men to create a diversion, but he did not win a single electoral vote. At the meeting of New York's Electoral College, Van Buren's underhand machinations to reduce Clay's final vote resulted in Jackson receiving one electoral vote, while 26 went to Adams (with five for Crawford and four for Clay). It seems not unreasonable to say that Adams probably had the support of about half the New York voters of 1824, while Jackson had far, far less than a tenth. In other words, Adams with over 96,000 votes probably outran Jackson, who at best would have had well under 10,000. Greater precision is unnecessary to make the point that the undeniable imbalance between the two candidates in New York, and the extent of voter involvement there in 1824, was probably enough to overwhelm Jackson's advantage in the rest of the nation. We are left with a notional guess of about 195,000 votes nationwide for Jackson and at least 224,000 for Adams.

These calculations are not mere idle musings. As the Jacksonians mounted their campaign on behalf of their wronged Hero in 1827-28, their opponents in the North insisted that the congressmen who voted for Adams in the House election of February 1825 had no moral obligation to vote for whoever headed the ballot in the Electoral College; otherwise, why did the Constitution refer the election to the House of Representatives? Furthermore, these northerners claimed, Jackson's lead in electoral votes did not reflect the opinion of voters. After all, Jackson owed the size of his lead to the electoral votes he won through the three-fifths rule, which enhanced a state's voting power if it held slaves, even though slaves could not vote. That reduced the moral force of the argument that the most popular candidate ought to win, as did the fact that he had won some electoral votes in states where he was not the most popular candidate. In Maryland, for example, Jackson ran behind Adams in the whole

state, but the vagaries of the district system gave Jackson seven electoral votes to Adams's three. There was, they claimed, every reason for thinking that Adams had enjoyed more popular support nationally than Jackson, and that therefore Adams's election satisfied every democratic criterion.

If these arguments mattered to contemporaries, so they should influence historians. Our view of Andrew Jackson and his presidency is still too often influenced by the assumption that somehow his candidacy uniquely expressed and exploited the impact of a new democracy on American public life. In fact, elections had long been decided by a broad electorate, and public men had long lauded the moral force of the popular will. The opposition to Jackson did not represent an old elite, even if it enjoyed some elite support in the North, just as Jackson did in the South. To say Jackson won in 1828 because he was more popular is mere tautology. He won because of a range of political forces peculiar to the 1820s, which enabled him and his henchmen to put together a winning coalition. That process deserves the proper analysis that easy generalizations about democracy and popularity tend to inhibit and obscure.

[Click here for .pdf version, with footnotes]

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