

Redeeming the Almanac: Learning to Appreciate the iPhone of Early America



The almanac gets no respect. It's the whipping boy of early American literature. Few Americans today would guess that an almanac was actually the second publication to come off the first American printing press. In 1639! Every year after that up through the American Revolution, the almanac enjoyed a readership unmatched but for the Bible. It was, year in and year out, a guaranteed bestseller. We can thank Moses Coit Tyler, the nineteenth-century critic who characterized the almanac as "the very quack, clown, pack-horse, and pariah of modern literature," for sealing its demise. Nothing much has happened since to restore the almanac's reputation despite the perennial appearance of a modern-day descendent.

The Old Farmer's Almanac, introduced by Robert B. Thomas in 1792, gets credit for one of the longest publishing runs in American history, but its enduring popularity has more to do with nostalgia and its quirky weather predictions than real respect. Perusing the Table of Contents of the latest edition for 2010 may confuse more than enlighten those interested in understanding the almanac's status in early America. Among the offerings are "Maddening Mind-Manglers," "Anecdotes and Plesantries," "Great Moments in the History of Laughter," and a "Special Report" entitled "The Old (and New) Farmer's Essential Manure Manual." Such lowbrow, if harmless, "amusements" have little to do with the almanac's *raison d'être*. Today's audience does not know what to make of the colonial almanac because most people, historians included, have never really known how to talk about it. Was it a calendar? A collection of essays? A rudimentary calculator? A political commentator? A timepiece? A local directory? A diary? Uh-huh. It was all that and more. It could be different

things to different people. The problem with Tyler's assessment, and those of many scholars thereafter, was that he categorized the almanac as literature. That placed the almanac at a real disadvantage. It simply does not belong in the same category as *Moby Dick*. As literature, the humble annual could never measure up. A friend recently hit on a much more appropriate analogy when he likened the almanac to an iPhone. I know, it sounds ludicrous and seriously farfetched. But give me a chance to prove just how apt a comparison it is.

Like an iPhone, the almanac was portable. The size of a long billfold at about 4-by-7 inches and typically containing 24 to 36 pages, it was slim enough to slip into a pocket or lady's reticule. Although some almanacs held an honored position hanging by the hearth to allow every family member easy access to it, publishers intended the almanac to be carried along as a customer went about his or her day. Avid users pulled them out again and again, accidentally tearing pages or wearing down the ink, all the while praying that the almanac would last until the next year's edition. Another risk was losing the almanac during one's travels, perhaps left behind on a shop counter or on a bench at a local tavern. So devastated from the loss of his almanac (not to mention his paper money), a subscriber to the *Virginia Gazette* placed an advertisement in the December 12, 1777, issue offering a \$10 reward to anyone who found his "small red pocket book containing a blank almanack, and the following bills, viz. One twelve pounds of the James river bank, one eight, one six and one five dollar bill, a four and one shilling bill with two parcels of needles." It's amazing that some of those almanacs survived, tucked reverently away in today's archives, many with nail holes or loops of string still intact.



Fig. 1. David Brown, 1791 diary: a "table" Brown created in his almanac-diary to keep track of the days he worked for a customer called "Mr. Lord." Courtesy of the Manuscript Collection at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. [Click to enlarge in a new window.](#)

Even though its features were characteristically low-tech, the almanac had many applications. More ready reference than literary repository, many almanacs contained few words at all, or at least few words that when strung together

comprised anything resembling prose. Almanacs were more about tables, lists, and, most critically, a calendar. Take, for instance, the 1792 edition of *The Universal Calendar, and the North American Almanack*. Consisting of only 12 pages front to back, the first half of the pamphlet was devoted entirely to a monthly calendar. Aside from offering a breakdown of the days of the month and week, the calendar was chockfull of useful information if one knew how to read it. Compiler Samuel Stearns supplied customers with a key that explained the data organized into eight columns. The first and second columns listed the day of the month and week. The third column was the widest and offered occasional weather predictions, religious observances such as Advent or Saints days, and historical trivia mostly tied to the country’s recent Revolution. The remaining columns would be the most foreign to today’s readers, all grounded in astronomical calculations performed by Stearns, including the moon’s phases, the times of the moon’s and sun’s rising and setting, and a column obliquely referred to as the “clock Equations.” I’ll explain just what customers did with all this information in a moment.

Aside from the calendar, Stearns included a tide table for Boston; a list of the annual meetings of Friends (or Quakers) in New England; a list of court days in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Vermont; and two-and-half pages devoted to a list of popular roads from Boston to various towns as far distant as New York “With the Names of those who keep Houses of Entertainment.” On the back page, strategically placed for easy reference, was a “Table of Simple Interest, at Six per Cent per Annum.” The only feature in Stearns’s almanac that might be considered prose was a recipe containing an egg yolk mixed with “clear water” to relieve cramping in the joints. Once the concoction was beaten, Dr. Fordyce, the author, recommended: “Rub with a finger, every night going to bed, the moisture under the toes.”

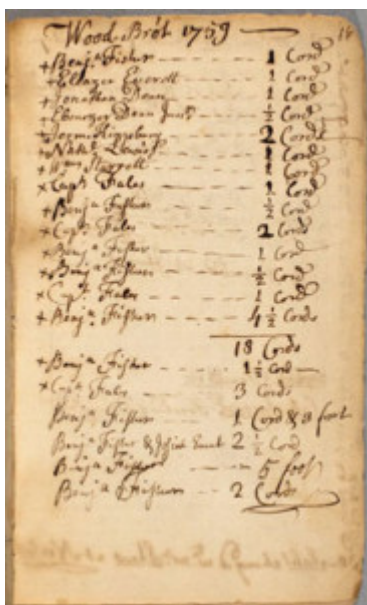


Fig. 2. Thomas Balch, 1759 diary: on one of the blank pages in his Ames almanac-diary, Balch listed the cords of wood he had received from his

parishioners over the year. Courtesy of the Manuscript Collection at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Although it could hardly match the number of offerings in an iPhone app store, *The Universal Calendar and North American Almanac* was pretty versatile. It helped calculate interest on an outstanding loan. It predicted the weather and, by extension, told farmers the best time to plant their crops. It told users when, and in the case of the Quakers where, to go to church. A virtual map, it directed travelers to and from Boston via the best roads and taverns. It performed a civic duty, for defendants and spectators alike, by publishing the days county courts met in all of New England. It indicated the best time for captains to set sail from the port of Boston. It even cured toe cramps. And, last but not least, it told the time.

Returning to that cryptic column of “clock Equations” listed in the calendar, the data enabled any Bostonian to calculate the local time. All one had to do was add or subtract, depending on the time of year, the number of minutes listed in the column from the natural time as told on a sundial. For instance, if a reader wanted to know the local time on Sunday, September 23, 1792, she could consult her sundial at noon and subtract “7” minutes, as listed in her almanac, to determine the local time of 11:53. For this reason, and because the era’s clocks were so temperamental, many admirers boasted that the pamphlet made for a more accurate timepiece than its mechanical cousin. One could even perform such calculations at night, according to almanac-maker Nathanael Low. Low famously claimed that “Twenty gentlemen in company will hardly be able, by the help of their thirty-guinea watches, to guess within two hours of the true time of night. One says it is nine o’clock, another half after eight—a third, half after ten; whilst the poor peasant, who never saw a watch, will tell the time to a fraction, by the rising and setting of the moon, and some particular stars, which he learns from his almanack.”

With so many uses, the almanac, like an iPhone, was truly interactive. The proof is in the margins where owners left crosses and dashes alongside the calendar to signal important dates or scribbled notes about matters both trivial and momentous. In 1764, William Stickney penned a note in the margin of his calendar marking the day “Elizabeth and Abigail went to Scool [sic] town Hall.” Country doctor Aaron Wight drew a tiny coffin beside December 12 in the calendar of his 1770 almanac and wrote “Uncle John Wight Died.” More often owners left only a word or phrase such as “ten wood bery” or “ox back” making the meaning more difficult to decode. But one does not have to know exactly what the writer meant to appreciate how such notes played off the calendar’s temporal features. By adding one’s own data, the generic calendar turned into a personal datebook setting the events of one’s life in time.

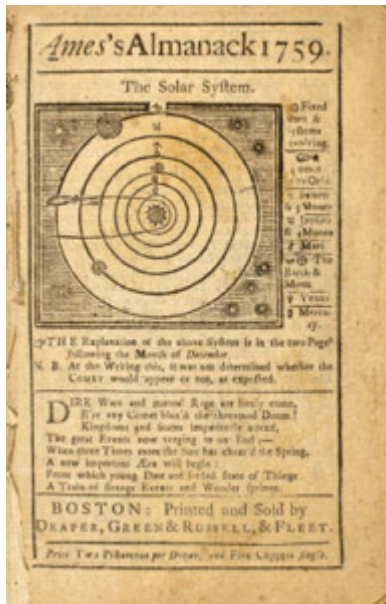


Fig. 3. Ames included a diagram of Copernicus's "Solar System" on the title page of his 1759 almanac. "Title Page," Ames's Almanack 1759..., by Nathaniel Ames, Boston, 1758. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Just as its calendar encouraged users to convert the almanac into a personal timepiece, its financial features prompted them to think of it as an ad hoc account book. In addition to interest tables, almanacs served up tables and charts to assist customers in knowing how much money they had in their pockets. That could be an especially complicated proposition in the decades following the American Revolution when paper money, both as U.S. dollars and English pounds, mixed with gold and silver coins as legal tender. Almanac compiler Andrew Beers responded accordingly offering his customers in his 1799 *Beers's Almanac*, no fewer than four tables, with copious footnotes, to assist in those conversions. Among them was a table "Shewing the value of any number of Cents in Lawful Money, from 1 to 100" and another "Shewing the value of any number of Pence from 1 Penny to 6 Shillings, in Cents and Mills." On the next page, Beers reserved the bottom half for two more tables, one displaying the value of Portuguese and English gold in dollars and cents and the other the same conversion for French and Spanish gold. These financial tools help explain the other most common type of personal graffiti sprayed across title pages and squeezed into margins: numbers. Often no more sophisticated than simple addition or subtraction, such equations tell us that an almanac was a critical accessory in matters of money, as notepad as well as calculator.

Inspired by the almanac's approach to organizing such financial data, customers occasionally added their own tables. Tailor David Brown tracked the days he worked "at Mr. Lord's" in his 1791 edition of *Bickerstaff's Massachusetts Almanack*, assembling all of the information into his own "table" with columns marking the days worked and the sums he paid for meals, washing, and lodging (fig. 1). In a more rudimentary table, parson Thomas Balch made a list on a blank page inserted in his 1759 *Ames Almanac* recording the "cords" of wood he

had received from each member of his congregation that year (fig. 2), a form of “payment” familiar to any eighteenth-century minister.

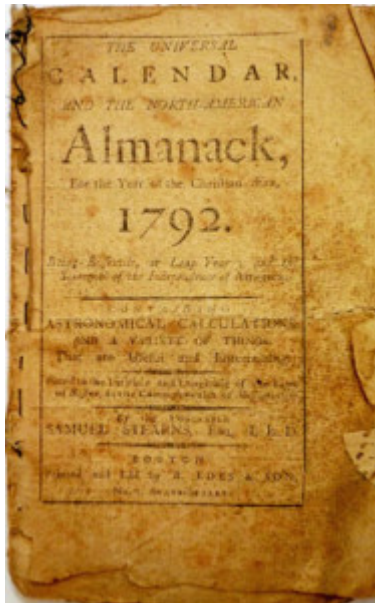


Fig. 4. Title page from *The Universal Calendar and North American Almanack* for 1792. Courtesy of the author.

Though I may be in danger here of taking the iPhone analogy too far, there is one colorful customer who even liked to “talk” to his almanac. One such virtual conversation began when Jeremy Belknap, then a Harvard theology student who years later went on to found the Massachusetts Historical Society, perused the preface of Nathaniel Ames’s 1761 almanac in which the almanac-maker announced his intention to “decorate” his pamphlet with “poetry of my own composing.” Apparently, Belknap considered Ames a better almanac-compiler than a poet, for Belknap took an entire page to offer his response to Ames’s proposition:

Fie, Doctor, I’m ashamed of you to print such a Sentence as this in your almanack,—Decorate the almanack, Doctor, This beats all Nature, Decorate the almanack with Poetry of your own composing, It seems you have a great opinion of your self to think that Poetry of your composing can decorate an almanack, I’ll assure you your opinion is wrong, Doctor, for all of Poetry that you ever made, if it be like this, can never decorate but disgrace your Almanacks.

The exchange between Belknap and Ames continued as Belknap replied to Ames’s poems printed atop each calendar page. In January, Belknap accused Ames of “false grammar.” In March, Belknap summed up Ames’s verse as “very poor sense & worse poetry.” By November, Belknap’s patience was wearing thin. Belknap appeared to cut off Ames in midstride after reading his opening lines: “When SOL descends a down the Midnight Way/The Atmosphere holds up the falling Day.”

“Where’s the midnight way, Doctor Nonsense,” Belknap demanded.

Like a customer who takes his coffee black, Belknap preferred an almanac that stuck to essentials.

Dozens of patrons in early America, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, took such interactivity to its next logical step and turned their almanacs into daily diaries. The practice was so commonplace that publishers often advertised that an almanac could be “interleaved” with blank pages for an extra sum. In 1758, bookseller Hugh Gaine of New York advised his clientele to order their almanacs early, for “Many Gentlemen were disappointed of the Use of this Almanack, for the Year 1757, by their not sending for the same in Time: ‘Tis therefore requested that they wou’d be less dilatory this Year. It is properly interleaved with fine Paper, on which Memorandums may be made for every Day in the Year.”

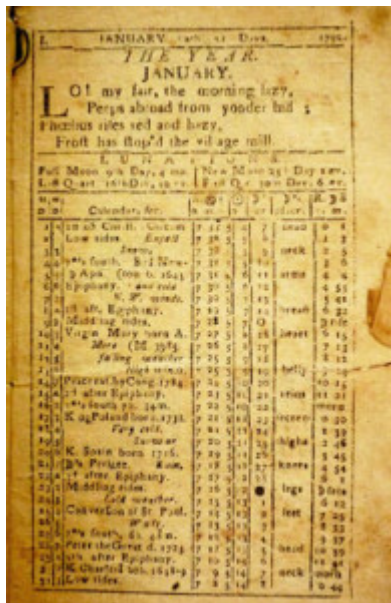


Fig. 5. Sample calendar page from *The Universal Calendar and North American Almanack* for 1792. Courtesy of the author.

Even though they did not have to confine their notes to the margins, customers who chose to insert blank pages inside their almanacs remained cramped for space. It was standard for a diarist to have a single sheet, inserted opposite a monthly calendar page, for an entire month’s worth of memos. For that reason, and because such daily notes followed strict conventions, one almanac-diary looked much like another. Even those of George Washington. Not surprisingly, Washington turned to the annual edition of *The Virginia Almanac* for his diary. Aside from assigning a heading for his memoranda pages that read “Where & How my time is Spent,” Washington’s entries resembled those of most of his contemporaries, especially in the days before the Revolution when he was

preoccupied with managing his large Virginia estate. In a typical glimpse, Washington recorded the first few days of July 1771 as follows:

1. Rid into the Neck to my Harvest People, & back to Dinner. Mr. Robt. Rutherford came in the Afternoon & went away again.
2. Rid to Harvest Field in the Neck & back to Dinner.
3. Rid to the Harvest Field in the Neck by the Ferry & Muddy hole Plantations. In the Afternoon Mr. Jno. Smith of Westmoreland came here.
4. At home all day with Mr. Smith. In the Afternoon Jno. Custis came.

Do not be fooled by the brevity or dullness of the entries, for when added up over months, years, and often decades, they assumed more weight and significance than one might suppose. More than a portable memory aide, the almanac-diary helped users feel they were in control by imposing order on their daily experiences.

By now, I hope you'll forgive the ahistorical slip that led me to enlist the iPhone as a way of imagining just how resourceful an early almanac could be. It was so much more than a book. Comparing it to the iPhone helps expand our vision about how an almanac worked and what it could do for its buyers. It wasn't simply a compendium of reading material. Just as an iPhone connects users to an outside world and provides a feast of tools designed to make our lives easier, the almanac held the same promise. More than that, it was central to early American life and culture because it had so little competition. There was nothing at the local book shop that could do all the things the almanac did.

I don't mean to suggest that almanacs did not contain anything worth reading. After all, Benjamin Franklin's most famous parable linking time and money first appeared in the 1758 edition of his *Poor Richard's Almanac*. And even if Jeremy Belknap did not consider Dr. Ames's poetry any good, almanac-makers routinely borrowed material from the great English poets to "decorate" their almanacs. Others, including Ames and Franklin, sprinkled the calendar pages with proverbs and aphorisms.

When circumstances warranted, publishers did not shy away from weightier subjects including science and politics. Copernicus's sun-centered universe was especially popular and encouraged Ames to reprint an engraving of the "The Solar System" on the title page of his 1759 almanac accompanied by a two-page essay explaining its workings (fig. 3). Ames advised his readers to rely not on their senses but on science: "To the naked Eye, the Aether, appears like a solid Arch, the Stars like the Heads of brass Nails, the Sun flat and about as big as a Cheese, but our reason informs us better." In 1765, the passage of the Stamp Act drove many almanac-makers into politics as they found ways both subtle and radical to protest the tax. *Poor Richard* urged colonists to find native substitutes for molasses, sugar, wine, and rum, even going so far as to

offer tongue-in-cheek instructions for doing so. Once the act was repealed, Benjamin West in *The New England Almanack ...for 1767* rejoiced in America's escape from "an Act, in its nature detestable; plotted and contrived by a set of wicked designing men." Enlisting a bit more humor and inventiveness, almanacs played a critical role alongside colonial pamphlets and newspapers in moving public opinion towards rebellion in the decade leading to the American Revolution.

ROADS to Towns in the United States, from Boston, - With the Names of those who keep Houses of Entertainment.		
To Plymouth and Cape Cod.	Ditto, Rice	comb, Freeman,
Towns. Towns.	Bingham, Cushing,	and Fessenden
Roxbury, Kent	Sciuate, Colmore	Barnstable, How-
Milton, Glover	Haver, Wales	land, Chipman
and Pierce	Fembroke, Baker	Ditto, Loring,
Braintree, Brack	Kingdon, Little	Gray & Crocker,
et 2	Plymouth, Barter	Yarmouth, Basset
Ditto, Cowin	and Witherell	and Thatcher
Weymouth, Ar	Ditto, Cornish	Hawch, Silk
gold	Ditto, Ellis	Ditto, Chapman
	Sandwich, New	Ditto, Atwood

Fig. 6. A list of roads from *The Universal Calendar and North American Almanack* for 1792. Courtesy of the author.

If the almanac was indeed such a central player in early America in politics and the obligations of every day, how then could it sink as low as it did when Moses Coit Tyler in 1878 compared it to a "clown"? Part of the answer can be attributed to the printing and communication revolution of the early nineteenth century. Almanacs were no longer the only game in town. There were plenty of products that could now perform the functions of an almanac. Newspapers printed currency and interest tables and weather reports, updated on a weekly rather than an annual basis. Pocket diaries, stripped of much of the almanac's literary clutter, replaced the almanac as portable calendar and account book. Farming periodicals delivered advice and recipes once exclusive to the popular annual.

But what may have doomed the almanac to the dungheap of American culture more than such competition was its exploitation by the patent medicine man. Advertisers found the almanac by the mid-nineteenth century the perfect vehicle for peddling their cures to the American public. Among the first was *Bristol's Free Almanac: for 1844* touting the health benefits of sarsaparilla. By the 1860s, nearly half the advertising budget of David Hostetter's empire, about \$100,000 a year, went to producing *Hostetter's United States Almanac for the Use of Merchants, Mechanics, Farmers and Planters, and All Families*, a shameless pamphlet promoting Hostetter's Bitters. James C. Ayer, inventor of Ayer's Cherry Pectoral, even surpassed Hostetter's ambitions by constructing a printing plant that by 1889 could produce 100,000 almanacs a day in 21 languages that were shipped around the world.

Just before Christmas every year, local druggists all over the nation received a shipment of patent-medicine almanacs and strategically placed them on

counters or beside cash registers as free giveaways. In characteristic one-upsmanship, advertisers struggled mightily to set their annuals apart by offering what the competition could not: a pamphlet the size of a postage stamp, an almanac dedicated to the works of Shakespeare, or an issue composed by a leading humorist. Full of such marketing pitches that homed in on the elimination of “Humiliating Eruptions” or foul breath, almanacs never recovered their previous status in American culture.

A historical interest table from 1792, titled "TABLE of SIMPLE INTEREST, at Six per Cent per Annum." The table is organized into three main sections, each with columns for "Princ." (Principal), "Int." (Interest), and "Time" (Time). The first section is for "Pcts. 12 weeks 3 months 6 months 9 months 1 year". The second section is for "Pcts. 12 weeks 3 months 6 months 9 months 1 year". The third section is for "Pcts. 12 weeks 3 months 6 months 9 months 1 year". The table contains numerical data for various principal amounts and interest rates.

Fig. 7. A simple interest table from *The Universal Calendar and North American Almanack* for 1792. Courtesy of the author.

If only Ayer and his ilk had not sullied its image, perhaps today’s audience might be able to appreciate, without too much imagination, the real power of the early American almanac. Equipped with the latest issue, you always knew what day and time it was, how much money you had, where you were going and how to get there. As a bonus, you also could rely on your almanac for something to read along the way. Who could ask for anything more?

Further Reading: Moses Coit Tyler’s quote appeared in *A History of American Literature, 1607-1765* (reprinted Ithaca, New York, 1966); Nathanael Low’s in Milton Drake, *Almanacs of the United States* (New York, 1962); and Hugh Gainé’s in Paul Leicester Ford, *The Journals of Hugh Gainé, Printer* (New York, 1902). On the almanac’s role as revolutionary propaganda, see Allan R. Raymond, “To Reach Men’s Minds: Almanacs and the American Revolution, 1760-1777,” in *The New England Quarterly* (September 1978). For more on the almanacs of the patent medicine era, see James Harvey Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires: A Social History of Patent Medicines in America before Federal Regulation* (Princeton, 1961). Marion Barber Stowell’s study of the genre remains the classic: *Early American almanacs; the colonial weekday Bible* (New York, 1978).

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