

ENGL 2604/HIST 2104
American Books / Books in America
Fall 2024 Prospectus

Class meeting time: Thursdays 1:45-4:45pm
Instructors: James Green & John Pollack

For questions about this course, please email John Pollack: jpollack@upenn.edu.



Samuel Saur's Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania, printing shop, 1792

Overview

How did Benjamin Franklin strike it rich in the printing business? Did *Common Sense* really start the American Revolution? What does it mean to read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on a deck of playing cards? This course will investigate book histories, and the worlds of readers, writers, printers, publishers, and libraries in the Americas. It focuses on the colonial period through the nineteenth century, with a concluding look at the modern era.

Each week we will look at early American books, newspapers, pamphlets, pictures, broadsides, or manuscripts—big and small, famous and forgotten. We will think about how books work, not just as texts but as cultural artifacts, and we learn to decode their languages, from title pages to typography to bindings. Our area of study is sometimes referred to as “book history,” and we will try to define this field together. We will examine sources now considered to be “literature” and those that tend to be more studied in “history,” and we won’t be particularly finicky about the differences.

We will discuss a range of topics and questions, including:

- What is a book? How were American books printed, published, bound, bought, sold, collected, and read? And by whom?
- Colonization, missionization, and printing
- Writing and revolution: the place of printing in politics
- Black and Indigenous print cultures
- Gender, women’s reading, and book history
- Newspapers, pamphlets, and almanacs

- The mechanics and technologies of printing and book production (with a visit to the Common Press)
- Changing practices of printing and reading in the industrial era
- Bookselling and marketing
- Continuities and changes in the 20th century

Authors whose works will be part of our discussions include Thomas Hariot, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Phillis Wheatley Peters, Olaudah Equiano, Harriet Beecher Stowe, John James Audubon, Walt Whitman, and others. We will also mention many little known and less familiar writers.

Location:

The seminar will meet at the [Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts](#) in Van Pelt Library, and we will introduce collections during each class. For several seminar meetings we will visit the [Library Company of Philadelphia](#) (1314 Locust Street), an extraordinary research library founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1731. We will see examples from their collections during these visits. (Travel time will be factored in.)

Class structure and format:

This course is a 3-hour seminar meeting once a week. Class engagement and participation are central to its success. We encourage participation with weekly (brief) discussion posts and through class conversation. Learning together and question-asking are skills we will all practice.

Assignments:

- Weekly seminar discussion and participation
- Discussion posts (in Canvas)
- Two brief “exercises” involving close study of original documents.
- A final research project on a topic related to our subject. The final project includes an in-class presentation followed by a research paper of approximately 10-12 pages. Final project submissions may take other forms as well, subject to approval.

Schedule of weekly topics (draft, subject to change)

- Encountering the Book in the Americas
- Colonial Books and their Readers
- Franklin’s World, parts 1 and 2
- Printing the Revolution
- Authors and Activists: Black Print Culture
- Technology and Power: Making Books in the 19th century
- Big and Little, Fancy and Cheap: Popular print and luxurious books
- Harriet Beecher Stowe and Walt Whitman
- Selling books
- Into modernity? American books in the late 19th and 20th centuries