Readership in the American Enlightenment
More than a decade ago now, a distinguished American historian wrote, "With something of a shock, I have lately realized how little we know about the literacy and actual reading (not book-ownership) of the eighteenth-century Americans. How few Americans of that age are there whose reading we can describe with any confidence!" In the field of French-American intellectual relations, I too must confess to a similar puzzlement—mine running back over many years. Would that there were statistical standards on which to rely! Unfortunately there are none. Hence I for one am skeptical, for example, of ex cathedra pronouncements as to the influence of various thinkers on "the Americans" of the formative years of the nation's history. He who would play the pontiff should possess a modicum of sound knowledge concerning the American reading public in the early years. And this, as one will see, is not easy to come by.

I propose, then, to probe in this essay the matter of readership during that movement of ideas in this country known as the Enlightenment. I take as my definition of readership one from The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: "the readers of a publication or publications." And for all practical purposes, the period of the American Enlightenment is here understood to be the last half of the eighteenth century. I shall deal first with the question of literacy, then with the readers and their number, and hardly at all with the titles of things read.
John Adams did not beat about the bush. "A native of America who cannot read and write," he said in 1765, "is as rare as a comet or an earthquake. . . . And I have good authorities to say, that all candid foreigners who have passed through this country, and conversed freely with all sorts of people here, will allow, that they have never seen so much knowledge and civility among the common people of the world." Distinguished contemporaries backed up Adams’s opinion. In 1793 Noah Webster affirmed that "a greater proportion of the people are readers than in any other country." Royall Tyler, who was to become a chief justice of the Supreme Court of Vermont, maintained in the preface to his novel, The Algerine Captive (1797), that "in no other country are there so many people, who, in proportion to its numbers, can read and write." And in 1800 the French economist, Du Pont de Nemours, in a treatise on education in the United States written at Jefferson’s request, said this: "Most young Americans can read, write and cipher . . . while in Spain, Portugal, Italy, only a sixth of the population can read; in Germany, even in France, not more than a third; in Poland, about two men in a hundred; and in Russia not one in two hundred." Du Pont grounded his opinion of young Americans on the large number of primary schools here and on "paternal affection [which] protects young children from working in the fields . . . a condition which does not prevail in Europe."

Present-day research findings tend to substantiate the opinions of Adams, Tyler, Webster, and Du Pont. With reference to New England, J. H. Shera wrote that "there is abundant correlative evidence to indicate that the proportion of the public able to read and write was very large. The school had become entrenched in the Colonial folkways, and in countless homes patient mothers and fathers pored with their children over crude primers and spelling books." In Philadelphia, according to the Bridenbaughs, the "spread of education brought an increasing demand for textbooks, and it is prob-
able that in actual number of copies printed this category exceeded all others combined." In a study devoted to the principal southern colony, investigators state that though "Virginia did not provide as much educational opportunity for the people as did a colony such as Massachusetts, there were educational facilities available even for the poor." There are many problems concerning education and literacy in eighteenth-century America, and we shall never have all the facts and figures needed. But there is another barometer by which one can, to some extent, measure literacy: the ownership of books, however few.

Michael Kraus writes that "recent studies show that a considerable proportion of New Englanders of all classes owned books." In Maryland an investigator found "that nearly sixty percent of the free white population possessed books. Although three-quarters of the book collections contained less than ten books, often only a Bible and a few religious books, there were colonists who owned comparatively large and interesting libraries." And in Virginia, according to T. J. Werthenbaker, "large collections could be afforded only by the wealthiest, while the small planters and even the moderately well-to-do had to content themselves with from ten to a hundred volumes."

There were, here and there, large private libraries, but not many. At the very end of the century, there are dolorous complaints from two prominent Americans concerning libraries generally. Noah Webster wrote in 1800 that "as to libraries, we have no such things. There are not more than three or four tolerable libraries in America, and these are extremely imperfect." And the well-informed Samuel Miller expressed himself in this manner: the American student, he said, "has often to spend as much time and thought to obtain a particular book, as the reading it ten times would cost. Our public Libraries are few, and, compared with those of Europe, small. Nor is this defect supplied by large private collections; these are also rare." My immediate concern, how-
ever, is with broad-scale readership, not libraries. A vast amount of research has been done on the various types of libraries in the early days, and one can pursue the study in excellent books.\textsuperscript{15}

Literacy, it goes without saying, does not imply readership. But the growth and spread of the reading habit in eighteenth-century America was revolutionary.\textsuperscript{16} In the 1920s Bernard Fay, the French historian, called attention to the “great demand for books and newspapers in America” and expressed the opinion that in the last thirty years of the century “the average man seems to have read more than was the case in Europe.”\textsuperscript{17}

The American penchant for newspapers did not escape sharp-sighted French visitors who were here in the time of Enlightenment. Brissot de Warville came to the United States in 1788. He was impressed by the number of gazettes in Boston and Philadelphia. Moreau de Saint-Méry carefully recorded in his \textit{Voyage aux Etats-Unis, 1793-1798} that Philadelphia had “14 gazettes” including one French and one German. And La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, who traveled here in the years 1795-97, noted that at his stopping place in Marlborough, Massachusetts, “from the landlord down to the housemaid they all read two newspapers a day.”

With reference to the eastern states, and speaking of the diffusion of knowledge among the working people, Noah Webster wrote in 1800 that “they read not only the Bible, and newspapers, but almost all read the best English authors.”\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt had commented only a few years before on the habit of referring to the United States as “the most enlightened nation in the world.”

But paradoxically, “the great majority of the people seldom saw a letter or even a newspaper,” Albert J. Beveridge wrote in his book \textit{The Life of John Marshall}. Beveridge was referring precisely to the years 1783-90, the years that John Fiske denominated the critical period of American history. Even those Americans who did read newspapers were more
or less wasting their time, in the opinion of Henry Adams. For in his *History of the United States during the First Administration of Thomas Jefferson*, he voiced vigorously his lack of appreciation of the American gazette around 1800. In Adams's view "the education supposed to have been widely spread by eighteenth-century newspapers was hardly to be distinguished from ignorance."

All these assertions and counterassertions concerning the reading of Americans in the formative years of the Republic shed little or no light on readership. Where, one wonders, were all those readers reported by John Adams's "candid foreigners"? Who was Fay's "average man"? The broad-scale identification and number of readers of newspapers, pamphlets, magazines, and books, should be matters of great consequence to the intellectual historian.

The phrase "average man," as used in the context above, seems to imply a more or less homogenous mind. And it does not suggest the possibility of what has been called "cultural cleavage." There was no uniform mind in eighteenth-century America. There were aristocrats and artisans, businessmen, bakers and candlestick makers, farmers and frontiersmen, sailors, scholars, and soldiers. Reading opportunities varied extremely. A few facts and figures will show the impossibility of anything approaching cultural unity in the early days.

In 1790, the year of the first census, the population of the United States totaled 3,929,625. This figure included whites, free negroes, and slaves. The white population amounted to 3,172,444. The southern states had 48.5 percent of the entire population, the remainder being distributed almost equally between the New England and the Middle Atlantic states. Virginia had the greatest number of people. Massachusetts was second and Pennsylvania third in the number of inhabitants. Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Charleston, and Baltimore were, in order, the five largest cities. Along with Annapolis and Williamsburg, they were, to use an expression of Thomas J. Wertenbaker, "crucibles of culture." Merle Curti
has indicated the importance of the way towns had grown for the development of intellectual life in America. “The towns were the chief centers of intellectual activity because they enjoyed closer relations with Europe and because they offered great opportunities for social contacts and the discussion of events and ideas.”\textsuperscript{19} The startling fact, however, is that in 1790 only 5.4 percent of the people lived in towns. The combined population of the five largest cities came to 123,475.\textsuperscript{20} The urban population was trifling in comparison with the rural and rustic.

One can but wonder who and where were the “hundreds of thousands” of men whom John Dos Passos mentions in his book \textit{Tom Paine} as having bought \textit{Common Sense} (1776). This calculation of the number of copies of Paine’s pamphlet sold brings us directly to the problem of readership. To say that pamphlets were cheap is in no way a denigration of the powerful appeal of \textit{Common Sense}, about which more later. It seems to me, however, that the only way to get an idea of readership in bygone days is to gather a few statistics on the output of the presses. And this I have endeavored to do, not as an authority on such matters but simply as one anxious to clarify a subject that is extremely murky.

The production of the early American printing presses seems astonishing, even though the majority of books, until the nineteenth century, were imported. For the years between 1639 and 1800, Frederick R. Goff writes, there were “more than 50,000 recorded titles in the Evans-Shipton-Bristol bibliographies . . . books and pamphlets, newspapers and journals, broadsides and other ephemera.”\textsuperscript{21} As to sizes of editions at the beginning of the American Enlightenment, Lawrence C. Wroth wrote, “If there needs to be stated an average figure for editions of books and pamphlets of a literary or political character in the early and middle years of the eighteenth century, it would not be far out of the way to suggest 300 to 500 copies as probable. Such a figure does not apply to the exceptional books, long awaited and of known general inter-
It would be both tedious and pointless to consider here sizes of editions of pamphlets, almanacs, and broadsides. Statistics on some of these can be found in Wroth's first section in *The Book in America*. The almanac and the Bible, presumably, were ubiquitous. As time moved on, the reading habit, as already noted, grew rapidly and spread popularly. What, then, of the readership of newspapers, magazines, and books at the end of the American Enlightenment?

The newspaper is certainly one of the least expensive forms of reading matter. One is almost tempted to make it a common denominator of culture. Newspapers were published from Maine to Georgia. Frank Luther Mott found that “in all, 202 papers were being published January 1, 1801.” According to Mott, “Circulations were still small, however. The semiweekly *Columbian Centinel* probably topped the list, with over 4,000. *Porcupine's Gazette*, a daily, claimed over 2,000 early in 1799; this was as large a circulation as that of any English daily. . . . But the average for dailies, semi-weeklies, and weeklies was very low even at the end of the [eighteenth] century—perhaps between 600 and 700.” The *Centinel* was published in Boston, which had a population of 18,038 in 1790. *Porcupine's Gazette* was published in Philadelphia, the capital of the United States and the country's largest city, with a population in 1790 of 42,444. The following observation by the editor of another Philadelphia newspaper of that time may come as even more of a shock. John Ward Fenno declared in the powerful federalist *Gazette of the United States* on 4 March 1799 that “more than nine-tenths of the scanty literature of America is made up of newspaper reading.”

The magazines provided a second form of fairly inexpensive regular reading matter. Mott states that “there were about seventy-five different magazines begun during the years 1783-1801, inclusive. Most of them were short-lived, and only a few had any considerable importance.” Concerning circulation figures, Lyon N. Richardson, in *A History of
Early American Magazines, 1741-1789 (1931), writes that “only occasionally did subscription lists attain one thousand to sixteen hundred names, and probably the average list did not exceed beyond five hundred; so doubtless the total copies of magazines printed at any one time did not exceed twenty-five hundred until the decade of the 1780s, when the lists expanded rapidly and the number of magazines increased.” Mott thought it “extremely doubtful if the aggregate number of copies of magazines circulated in America reached five thousand at any one time in the period under consideration [i.e., 1741-1794].”

Eighteenth-century Americans could acquire books in a number of ways. They were to be had not only in the bookstores but from the printers, from peddlers, at book auctions, and by subscription. In passing, I might mention an instance of publication by subscription and a proposal for publication that are germane to the matter of readership. Rousseau’s Social Contract was published in Albany in 1797. A count of the names in a copy preserved in the Peabody Library shows 207 subscribers, not including two people who ordered six copies each, another person who took seven, and two others two copies each. An advance order of only two hundred and thirty copies! Montesquieu’s Spirit of Laws did not fare so well. This book had become an “American” classic by 1787. But a proposal to publish it in the United States in 1775—300 subscribers in “various parts of the country” were desired—came to naught. The first American edition of the Spirit of Laws did not appear until 1802.

Bookstores were not lacking in the cities and towns. Russel B. Nye writes that “Boston in the 1770’s had fifty bookstores, Philadelphia probably thirty or more, and peddlers hawked almanacs, chapbooks, broadsides, and standard books through every city street and backwoods hamlet.” In the latter part of the eighteenth century, “every sizable town had one or more booksellers,” according to E. B. Greene. And Noah Webster wrote in 1793 that “the booksellers are
everywhere extending their business—a sure proof of increasing demands for books."

The majority of books sold during the American Enlightenment were imported. This fact, coupled with the common practice of borrowing and lending books, makes the problem of readership exceedingly complex. The mind boggles at the thought of arriving at any meaningful conclusion with regard to the number of books sent here from abroad. But there are a few figures available—not nearly enough—concerning the sizes of editions and sales of books published in the United States.

Mathew Carey, born in Dublin, began in Philadelphia about 1790 what turned out to be a fruitful and influential career as publisher and bookseller. Rollo G. Silver has supplied information as to sizes of editions of publications by Carey in his first ten years of business. Among nineteen items was John Bunyan's *Divine Emblems: or, Temporal Things Spiritualized. Fitted for the Use of Boys and Girls*. This book led with 4,250 copies. In one of the years Carey published two editions of Susanna Rowson's novel *Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth*. The number of copies in the first edition was 1,000, in the second, 1,500. This novel was later to enjoy a great vogue. The sizes of the editions of the nineteen titles averaged 1,565 copies. Presumably, Carey printed as many copies as he hoped to sell.

Especially pertinent to any study of readership is Frank Luther Mott's book *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York, 1947). His concern is with the first editions of books published in America. As a criterion for the designation of a book as a best seller, he sets the sales figure at one percent of the entire population of the continental United States for the decade in which the book was published. To be an "over-all best seller" in the decade 1790–99, he stipulates as a requirement total American sales of 40,000 copies. Eleven books are judged to have had such a sale in this decade. They include Franklin's *Autobiography*,

367
Paine’s *The Age of Reason*, Mrs. Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (but see Hart, *The Popular Book*, p. 63), Shakespeare’s *Plays*, and Volney’s *The Ruins*, a deistic book and the only French work to achieve the best-seller distinction here in the eighteenth century.

The most successful best seller during the American Enlightenment was not a book, however, but a seventy-nine-page pamphlet: *Common Sense; Addressed to the Inhabitants of America*. In making this statement, I exclude the Bible, for which I have no figures. Paine’s pamphlet was published initially by Robert Bell in Philadelphia. Mott states, “It appeared within the first few weeks of 1776, and was very soon reprinted in the leading cities and towns. Within a year probably 150,000 copies had been sold; reckoned on the basis of increased population, that would represent a distribution today [i.e., about 1947] of close to eight million copies.”

Hart estimates that “one copy was sold for every twenty-five people in the colonies—men, women, and children—Whigs and Tories alike.” Paine himself, A. Owen Aldridge writes, “believed that 150,000 copies were sold in America—the greatest sale that any performance ever had since the use of letters,—exclusive of the great run it had in England and Ireland.” Aldridge adds, “There may be more self-satisfaction than truth in this declaration.” Be that as it may, *Common Sense* was an extraordinary success. But even more successful in the United States—phenomenally so with the passing of the years—was Noah Webster’s *American Spelling Book*. It first appeared in 1783. In 1791 the author wrote that the sale of it by a Philadelphia printer “has been about 7000 a year.” Just twelve years later, in the preface to an edition of the work—a preface dated 1803—Webster affirmed that “the sales of the *American Spelling Book*, since its first publication, amount to more than three millions of copies, and they are annually increasing.” This statement sheds more light on literacy, of the high degree of which in eighteenth-century America I am
convinced. But the succès de librairie of both the American Spelling Book and Common Sense leave us in the dark—except for the best sellers previously mentioned—as regards readership generally. What can one deduce from the data assembled here, data that I have reason to think are representative and comprehensive? The statistics hold significance for all who write about the influence of authors and books. For the number of readers of a publication or publications is, or should be, a meaningful factor in the final decisions of the intellectual and literary historians.

Readership of newspapers, magazines, and books at the very end of the first half-century of the American Enlightenment was small and restricted. The total white population, according to the second census in 1800, had grown to approximately 4,415,000. Mott’s optimum figures for the circulation of newspapers at the close of the century come to 141,400. There were, of course, more readers than subscribers. But if we can assume that ten persons read every issue of a paper, the readers would still number less than a third of this population. And “thousands who read them read nothing else,” William Cobbett had declared when announcing in the Gazette of the United States on 1 February 1797 his intention to publish Porcupine’s Gazette to combat the pro-French journals.

Even though the great majority of Americans did not read them, the newspapers played a considerable role, as did the pamphlets, in the development and crystallization of thought in those critical years. I do not share Henry Adams’s opinion that the papers were educationally ineffective. The articles that dealt with political matters were endless. Quotations of key ideas of many thinkers lighted up their pages. Informative paragraphs here and there helped fan an interest in the writings of foreign and native authors. The gazettes are studied with the advertisements of booksellers who itemized their offerings. Editors printed literary extracts for the edifi-
cation and amusement of their subscribers, and sometimes, one suspects, to fill space. Newspapers and magazines frequently reprinted articles and essays from one another.

Among the subscribers to newspapers there was a smaller, more select group—the readers of pamphlets, magazines, and books. Mott, to my way of thinking, makes an important point when he says, "There is doubtless some difference in the quality of a readership concentrated in time—and that of a readership dispersed over a long term." The first part of this statement reminds me of Schopenhauer's wish to assign every writer to one of three categories: shooting stars, planets, and fixed stars. Paine was a "shooting star," and Common Sense, with its ardent appeal to all sorts and conditions of Americans, was an example of "a readership concentrated in time." What needs to be said, then, concerning "a readership dispersed over a long term"? The general run of pamphlets and magazines reached a limited audience, and they require no comment. And only a few remarks seem necessary, in light of the figures already presented, as regards the readership of books. We shall forever be in the dark about the sum total of readers of books in the nonprivate collections. These include the circulating, college, and social libraries. The circulating library became increasingly important in the second half of the century. Kraus found that by 1800 there were more than a hundred libraries of this type in Connecticut alone. The growing interest in novels was responsible in part for the flourishing of the circulating library. The social libraries were of two sorts, the proprietary and subscription or association. The latter was more democratic than the former, which appealed to more wealthy patrons. According to J. H. Shera, "the 1780's produced more new social libraries than the entire previous half-century." Books were not cheap, and private libraries usually were not large. Mathew Carey, one of the nation's principal publishers and for whom "Parson" Weems peddled books in the
south, limited extremely the sizes of his editions, as was seen, even at the end of the century. Carey, of course, imported and sold books published in Europe. But the number of copies in his own editions published in the 1790s was insignificant when compared with the population. On the other hand, the sales of the best sellers on Mott's list, in the same period, are most impressive, and especially so if compared with the distribution of books in the United States today.

There were, obviously, different levels of readers during the American Enlightenment. These levels were not, however, mutually exclusive. But "cultural cleavage" did exist. Most of those readers reported by John Adams's "candid foreigners" lived, by and large, in the cities and towns. So did Fay's "average man." And "the Americans," whom inquirers into literary influences write about, were for the most part urban residents, those who were able to purchase books or who had fairly ready access to them—doctors and lawyers, merchants and ministers, scholars and statesmen, tradesmen and members of the middle class generally.

The Enlightenment was one of history's greatest ideological revolutions. It began in seventeenth-century Europe and stopped at no frontiers. Its "seeds," wrote one scholar, were present in England, France, and Germany, but the time and manner of their germination were different. It is difficult to generalize about this highly complex revolution in thought. At the risk of oversimplification, one can say that its leaders deposed faith and enthroned reason and science. Eighteenth-century France was its principal theater. Rationalism passed through that country like a tidal wave, followed by a heavy ground swell of sensibility.

In America, the Age of the Founding Fathers was the Age of Enlightenment. The climate of ideas here in the second half of the eighteenth century differed greatly from that of the first half. There are many reasons for this radical shift in opinion. The spreading of literacy and an ever-widening
readership were in part responsible. These factors strengthened the forces that, between 1750 and 1800, badly breached the dike of orthodoxy—religious, political, or whatever.

Readership in the American Enlightenment had far-reaching consequences. Everyone was involved in this rupture with the past—the users of almanacs in which, as Hart writes, “significant public documents and political tracts were synopsized, economic grievances were cited,”\(^4\) as well as those who availed themselves of *Common Sense*, other pamphlets, and of newspapers and books. From aristocrats and planters to city dwellers, farmers and frontiersmen, from all this varied readership—coupled with experience—came a political Declaration of Independence and the “Miracle at Philadelphia.”

8. See, for example, Bernard Bailyn’s *Education in the Forming of American Society: Needs and Opportunities for Study* (New York, 1960).

372


27. See Wroth in *The Book in America*, pp. 50-59.


42. According to Aldridge (p. 41), there were 1,000 copies in the first edition; it was exhausted in two weeks.


37. Return of the Whole Number of Persons within the Several Districts of the United States (Washington, 1802).

38. Golden Multitudes, p. 10 n.


40. Foundations of the Public Library, p. 68. I am indebted to Shera for this information concerning the social libraries. This book has also a chapter on the circulating library.

41. The Popular Book, p. 42.