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Poetry in Notion: The Hartford Wits and the Emergence of an American Identity

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Although a Revolutionary War figure and a close friend of George Washington, Colonel David Humphreys is not a familiar name to Americans. He belonged to a group of poets called the Hartford Wits, mainly John Trumbull, Timothy Dwight, and Joel Barlow. These men, through satire and poetic verse, gave voice to their dissatisfaction with English rule and, later, to the struggle to ratify the U.S. Constitution. Why has history forgotten them, and are they now more deserving of study? The Hartford Wits faded from memory because they were judged on artistic rather than political merits. Given the success of the Broadway musical *Hamilton*, with its hip-hop perspective, one could say that the Hartford Wits were the rap artists of their day. Espousing a message in defiant tones and delivering it in a regular meter, these social commentators were the voice of the disenfranchised in the Founding Fathers' generation. Writing about such topics as Columbus, anarchy, and strong versus weak government, their poetry points to the inadequacies of successive governments. When they are seen as crafters of a new American identity in the years immediately following the Revolutionary War, it becomes much easier to appreciate their true role as political activists.

(Developed for United States History, grade 8; recommended for United States History, grade 11, and Civics and Government, grade 12)

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