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

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“The literature of the past - rehumanized in the classroom by teachers with historical imagination and sound scholarship - has a place in the present world...”¹

Introduction

When I first arrived in New Haven for last summer’s Yale National Initiative intensive session, I took a stroll through the Grove Street Cemetery, intent on seeing the gravesites of such notable Americans as Eli Whitney, Roger Sherman, and Noah Webster. Little did I know at the time that this visit would deeply impact my understanding of early American history. While perusing the cemetery’s map of the gravesites, I was intrigued to find the final resting place of Colonel David Humphreys, a figure from the Revolutionary War and a close friend of George Washington. As a colonial historian, it struck me as odd that I had never heard of Colonel Humphreys before. In researching material for this year’s seminar on Poetry and Public Life, my interest was piqued when I came across an entry listing this same Colonel Humphreys as an early American poet. As I read further, I was quite intrigued to find the existence of a small group of individuals called the Hartford Wits, to which Humphreys belonged. These men, many of whom I was heartened to find had met as students at Yale, gave a voice to the rising dissatisfaction with English rule and the eventual struggle to forge a new nation under the U.S. Constitution.

My unit will focus on how these authors of satires and encomia, who, while marginalized and trivialized by the literary cognoscenti of the last 150 years, actually gave rise to the first movements towards establishing not only a cultural legacy, but a political voice as America emerged as a nation. Students will explore the primary concerns expressed by these early American poets and determine how their message was foundational to the identity of Americans as they fought for, and then took their first halting steps toward, freedom. Counter to the claims and sentiments of most historians of American literature and culture, in the end, students will come to appreciate the contributions that the Hartford Wits made to the collective emergence of not only America’s first cultural contributions, but the nascent roots of an American Identity.

Demographics

Located in the heart of Silicon Valley and the third-largest city in California (and the 10th largest in the U.S.), Andres Castillero Middle School serves the Almaden Valley neighborhood of San Jose. The school's numerous performing arts opportunities draw many students from across quite an array of neighborhoods. Although the school is situated in one of the more affluent areas of the city, the diverse student body of approximately 1,300 students (6-8 grade) is a blend of white- and blue-collar families. Castillero's demographic makeup is mainly comprised of White (43%), Hispanic (36%) and Asian (13%), with thirty-three percent of the student body identified as low socioeconomic.² The elective course offerings positively impact the school culture, as students from all economic backgrounds are encouraged to participate, and develop into well-rounded individuals. The majority of students who attend Castillero recognize the value of its social, educational, and extracurricular opportunities and widely embrace them.

Rationale

The goal of my unit, *Poetry in Notion: The Hartford Wits and the Emergence of an American Identity*, is to teach my students to use historical inquiry skills in conjunction with a variety of poetic primary sources to consider how the events set in motion during the colonial period resulted in the emergence of an American identity. Given that there is less time and emphasis devoted to poetry in these frenetic times of pacing calendars and Common Core, this unit will help broaden the scope of my curriculum by introducing poetry into the range of evidentiary analysis that my students encounter in my U.S. History class.

An all-too-convenient misconception has been that early American authors and poets had little cultural impact on the times in which they lived. To counter this, my students will come to understand that, although their cultural contributions have been dismissed by modern literary critics, the Hartford Wits served as invaluable witnesses of the times in which they lived. Most of their work was keenly focused on the perceived injustices that gave rise to their discontent. In this light, it is understandable and expected that these men would be focused on things patriotic, at the expense of making well-crafted poems for the salon. The two genres upon which this unit will focus most closely will be on satire at one end of the spectrum, a useful tool of protest, and panegyric, as either celebratory or apologetic, at the other. This unit will accomplish this by analyzing a few works of the Hartford Wits to discern how their collective body of work would become the basis for the narrative of the rise to rebellion and the ensuing eras of Constitutional Crisis and Federalism.

This curriculum unit will enable me to teach seventeenth-century American history to my eighth-graders at a much deeper and more objective level than hitherto. By navigating the complexities and ambiguities of verse through close readings of particular works from the Hartford Wits, students will gain an understanding of these poets' underlying sentiments, and then connect the passages they read to what we are studying about the historical impact of these times. The works that we will sample during this unit will be: David Humphreys' *Address to the Armies of the United States of America* (Build Up to a Revolution unit of study); John Trumbull's *M'Fingal*, satirizing the loyalists during the revolution (Build Up to a Revolution unit of study); Joel Barlow's *The Vision of Columbus*, a hymn of praise to the promise of the American experiment (Build Up to a Revolution unit of study); and *The Anarchiad*, a collective work by the Hartford Wits criticizing the obstructionist agenda of those opposing the ratification of the U.S. Constitution (Historical Foundations of the U.S. Constitution unit of study). It is expected, even hoped for, that students will have to grapple with these issues, for the highest

level of subject mastery comes as a result of productive struggle, and this is an aspect of literature with which the students will most assuredly struggle.

Since the early adoption of Common Core pedagogy in San Jose Unified School District five to six years ago, my students have grown to appreciate the process of historical inquiry. Under this methodology, each unit of study introduces an open-ended “Unit Focus Question” (UFQ) in response to which the students gather and analyze evidence from an array of primary and secondary sources, and then take a position in agreement or disagreement with the UFQ. This process has proven quite valuable because it requires the students to go beyond mere rote memorization of dates and facts, and actually interrogate the text in pursuit of the relevant pieces of evidence that help them formulate and defend their position in an historical interpretation, in this case their response to the unit focus question. Moreover, because each UFQ dovetails with the overarching course level question, by the end of the year, students will compile their various historical interpretations into a major essay that forms the basis of a summative assessment seeking to answer the question, *An American Identity: How has the definition of being an American changed over time?*

Objectives

The students in my eighth grade class have overwhelmingly responded to studying the lyrics of the Broadway musical, *Hamilton*. It might be somewhat revisionist in some aspects, such as the emotions purportedly expressed by some of the Founding Fathers, yet it is full of interest and possibilities for discussion. Much has been written on this runaway success and rightly so. Central to its appeal is that it is a hip hop narrative, one that for the first time brings a younger generation to the bright lights of Broadway.

In fact, I would submit that the Hartford Wits could be seen as the rap artists of their day. In strong and defiant tones, delivered in a regular and insistent meter, espousing a message that points to the inadequacies of the government, these social commentators were the voice of the disenfranchised and disillusioned in the Founding Father’s generation. It bears noting that their social standing was quite different from that of today’s hip-hop artists. And yet, their revolutionary stance was strong nonetheless. In the introduction to his brilliant book, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, Gordon S. Wood writes:

We Americans like to think of our revolution as not being radical; indeed most of the time we consider it downright conservative. It certainly does not appear to resemble the revolutions of other nations in which people were killed, property was destroyed, and everything was turned upside down. The American revolutionary leaders do not fit our conventional image of revolutionaries – angry, passionate, reckless, maybe even bloodthirsty for the sake of a cause. We can think of Robespierre, Lenin, and Mao Zedong as revolutionaries, but not George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams. They seem too stuffy, too solemn, too cautious, too much the gentlemen. We cannot quite conceive of revolutionaries in powdered hair and knee breeches.³

Radical as this notion may be, rather than turning aside and wishing it a fad that soon goes away, it is immensely helpful to present this image to our students. In so doing, we can help them tap into the emotions

that motivated the Founding Fathers to become political activists.

By the end of this unit, it is my hope that students will further develop their skills in historical inquiry and expository writing. Perhaps the most beneficial aspect of historical inquiry is that because my students have researched the subject in depth, they begin to see themselves as experts, knowing more about that small slice of history than most anyone that they can think of. Armed with this assurance, students soon find their voice as they write from a confident, authoritative perspective. See the subheading below titled “Historical Inquiry Process” for a sampling of the prompts to which the students will be asked to respond.

A few caveats to consider are: first, because the Wits have been so long forgotten, much of my research has had to rely on obscure commentaries that are several decades old. Therefore, some of the quotes may seem misleading when they speak of what is for the authors contemporary times, although for those reading this unit today, that was quite some time ago. Also, as a point of convention, the names by which this group of American intellectuals range from the complimentary, such as the Friendly Club; to the neutral, as in the Hartford Wits, the Yankee Wits, or the Connecticut Wits; to the negative, the Wicked Wits.⁴ To save confusion, I will use the name of the Hartford Wits, unless some other name is used in a quote.

The Hartford Wits

Blogger Andy Piascik recently wrote:

“Poets are sometimes as important in telling the story of a nation as historians. This is especially true of poets and painters who came of age during the revolution that birthed a nation. Such was the case with the Hartford Wits—a talented group of writers greatly influenced by the struggle of the American colonies for independence from Britain.”⁵

Although the Hartford Wits occupied a position of prominence among the Founding Fathers, they have faded all too easily from the annals of Revolutionary America. However, this does not appear to always have been the case. Seventy years ago, in the preface to his book, *The Connecticut Wits*, Leon Howard matter-of-factly stated that “The ‘Connecticut Wits’ are known, by name to everyone interested in the history of American literature...”⁶ If this was true then, it now begs the question, why have they been so easily forgotten, no longer even a footnote to Colonial American history? And perhaps more importantly, if they were to be correctly recast as influential political activists, would that make them more worthy of modern scholars’ attention?

In pursuit of an answer to the first question, “Why, to the individual living in modern times, have the Hartford Wits been forgotten by contemporary historians?”, it must first be understood that in their prime they were an important group of pamphleteers and satirists, closely associated not only with Yale, but with the inner circle of Revolutionary America. As one reads their verse, it is undeniable that they wrote poems that, while by some standards pedestrian or unsophisticated, were highly critical of loyalists and Anti-Federalists during the Revolutionary and Federal eras, respectively. In light of this, this curriculum unit will answer this as well as the second question, “In a more realistic light, are the Hartford Wits now more worthy of attention?”

Have the Wits been cast out of the public eye because of their inferior social standing? Were they of the insurrectionist ilk, like the mobs of rabble-rousers in Boston? Certainly not. A quick perusal would assure all but the most cynical reader that they were men of substance and character. According to Henry Beers,

Among their number were able and eminent men: scholars, diplomatists, legislators. Among their number were a judge of the Connecticut Supreme Court, a college president, foreign ministers and ambassadors, a distinguished physician, and officer of the Revolutionary army, intimate friends of Washington and Jefferson.⁷

And yet, although men of means, they were sufficiently outraged by British policies and actions that they became the voice of the disenfranchised. Perhaps this provides a key to understanding the marginalization of the Hartford Wits. Instead of looking at them as an effective political force, for too long they have been judged simply as provincial artists offering nothing of value. Biographic information on each of the major Wits follows.

David Humphreys was so much more than an epitaph on a gravestone. As he left Yale in 1776 to fight in the war, he composed a poem bidding his friends “Adieu, thou Yale, where youthful poets dwell.”⁸ He eventually rose through the ranks to become a Colonel and an intimate of Washington’s circle of friends and confidants. He was given the honor of delivering Lord Cornwallis’ surrendered colors to the Continental Congress at the close of the Revolutionary War.⁶ Moreover, Humphreys was at Washington’s side for a number of years over the rest of his life, eventually joining him in residence at Mount Vernon, where he served as a personal secretary and close friend. Just as in his military career, Humphreys would continue to rise through the social ranks of early America to become “one of the distinguished men of his generation.”⁹

John Trumbull’s credentials hardly need examination. He was of stout Connecticut pedigree: a cousin of Governor Jonathan Trumbull, and second cousin to Colonel John Trumbull, whose paintings hang in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda and a dedicated wing at the Yale University Art Gallery. As for personal accomplishments, after earning his degree and tutoring at Yale, he moved to Boston to clerk for John Adams, where he would come into personal contact with many of the luminaries of the fledgling Revolutionary movement. After Adams left to attend the Continental Congress, Trumbull began intensifying his attempts at political verse. After the upheavals of the Tea Party, he eventually returned to Connecticut, where he would naturally gravitate to the politically stimulating company of the Hartford Wits.¹⁰

Timothy Dwight could also claim a noteworthy heritage, having one of the brightest lights in the New England galaxy for a grandfather, the fiery preacher Jonathan Edwards.¹¹ While Dr. Dwight himself would go on to prominence as a beloved preacher and President of Yale, his contributions to the Wits were not as noteworthy as others’ and therefore will not be covered in this unit. However, a suggested reading list can be found below under the Resources heading should one desire a deeper understanding.

Of all the Hartford Wits, the most interesting and impactful would have to be Joel Barlow. Coming from humble beginnings, Barlow transferred to Yale from Dartmouth.¹² Barlow greatly changed the narrative arc and cultural roots of American history with his epic poem, *The Vision of Columbus*. This foundational paradigm shift will constitute a good portion of the remaining discussion. After serving as chaplain in the Continental Army and returning to Yale, he took his place alongside these other intellectuals and so began an interesting and productive career that in many ways would outshine those of the other Wits.

Each of these men, primarily David Humphreys, John Trumbull, Timothy Dwight, and Joel Barlow, clearly were members of the upper class and therefore had much to lose in fomenting a revolution. However, as England's oppressive and seemingly random policies obfuscated the colonists' vision of the rights owed them as members of English society, the Wits wrote in increasingly rancorous prose in an effort to point out the absurdity of denying political rights to citizens simply because distance, and not blood, separated them from their motherland.

A clue to their fall from grace in modern eyes can be found in the sentiments of a few commentators. Originally writing in 1926, Vernon Parrington, suggested why:

Their works lie buried in old libraries with the dust of years upon them...The record as they left it, very likely will not appeal to the taste of a far different age. We shall probably find their verse stilted and barren...hopelessly old-fashioned...but though they fell short of their ambitious goal, their works remain extraordinarily interesting documents of a critical period. ¹³

Henry Howard Brownell reveals a similar dismissive attitude in his co-option of a line from the Gospels, "Can anything good come from Hartford?"¹⁴ Moreover, the Cambridge Modern History, Volume 7, asserts:

They were all graduates of Yale College; all men of character, wit, ability, and accomplishment; and all eagerly enthusiastic. But none of them had much originality; and, although their poems and satires were credibly imitative (of verse by British poets such as Pope and Churchill), they revealed, in the end, nothing more than that Americans could imitate skillfully. Except as matter of literary history, they have long been neglected and forgotten.¹⁵

Perhaps those who would criticize the unsophisticated provincialism of the Wits are missing the point. William H. Goetzman writes:

Early American political writers easily reached the level of the universal and sometimes even the sublime. The poets had a much more difficult time. All of the Connecticut Wits - Dwight, Humphreys, Barlow and Trumbull - stumbled through the composition of jerry-built epics that were intended to be American...¹⁶

In light of these misguided assertions, a new appreciation might be gained by taking a closer look at the political rhetoric of the Hartford Wits, without expectations of cultural or artistic contributions. Perhaps re-introducing the Wits into the conversations of today, namely through the historic and not the cultural lens, would recast the Hartford Wits in a more realistic and deserving light.

Part of the problem lies with the historian, who could have been more vigilant in recognizing the Wits in a more favorable interpretation as political activists and not strictly as poets. In doing so, perhaps the historical narrative of the past century wouldn't have so many gaps. According to Lehman and Nawrocki:

Joel Barlow, John Trumbull, Timothy Dwight, David Humphreys and their friends were all inspired

by the Revolution to write the myths of the new nation. Somehow, though, when American literature courses are created they usually skip directly from Jonathan Edwards to James Fenimore Cooper as if the years between were too full of bloodshed and struggle to produce authors. Removing the story might be good for contemporary aesthetic tastes, but it is bad as a matter of historical accuracy.¹⁷

It is precisely those years of struggle that produced the sentiments that drove the Founding Fathers to action. And, the Hartford Wits, along with Thomas Paine and other writers, helped to communicate that discontent in a way that garnered public support and political activism. With regard to Barlow's *Vision of Columbus*, Lehman and Nawrocki add: "it connected Columbus with Anglo-American experience in a way that would shape the future national mythology for two hundred years. The other Wits helped him finish it, and it finally went to press in 1786."¹⁸ In his lecture "Poetry Makes Nothing Happen (Auden): What Does That Mean and Why?", Professor Paul Fry provides a compelling argument for the necessity for poetry in that it can profoundly and positively affect public life.¹⁹ Whether it is something as inspirational as the saving of Athens because the beauty of its poets proved it worthy of merit or as seemingly tangential as, in the purposes of this discussion, the angry satire of dissatisfied colonists, poetry has value because of the subtle ways in which it makes things happen.

Poetry has been described as the language of the soul expressing that for which often simple prose is inadequate. It might play better in poetry anthologies than in a history textbook, but in dismissing the works of poets like the Wits, historians risk doing a huge disservice to the contributions of passionate patriots by mislabeling them as strictly poets and refusing to see them in their proper light as political activists.

Looking Through the Wrong Lens

It seems clear that the Wits enjoyed, at some now distant point, a place of prominence in the American literary landscape. To first understand why they have been marginalized and then to counter these erroneous conclusions, it is helpful to consider that those who have been quick to categorize them in such a manner have largely been literary critics, and therefore, are viewing them through the wrong lens, or perhaps even the wrong end of the telescope. Instead of judging their contributions from an artistic perspective, if one considers, instead their contributions as patriots, or more accurately political activists, a new appreciation emerges. To this end, Annie Russell Marble writes:

For many years the question has been discussed: Has America a literature of her own; and if so, when did it begin? Only within recent times would one venture to affirm the independent existence of such a literature. The specious argument, that everything written in the English language belongs to English literature exclusively, has been nullified. We identify patriots today, by the spirit, not by the letter, of their writings.²⁰

The main focus of the poetry of Hartford Wits is the use of satire and, to some extent, the panegyric as a political means to an end. Although by today's standards, the term "wit" suggests one with a good sense of humor, to those living in previous eras, the term had much deeper connotations. Eric Lehman and Amy Nawrocki explain, "The word implies to modern ears that they were comedy writers, and while occasionally their poetry tickled the funny bone, they were, in fact, very serious about their endeavors."²¹ Indeed, much of the Wits' writings can be classified under the sub-genre of satire. According to Fry, satire is a familiar term

meaning the use of humor or irony to ridicule or criticize (panegyric, a less common term, can be defined as prose that runs to the celebratory or in some cases, the apologetic, often to the point of excess.)²² The Hartford Wits were almost savage in their use of satire. Parrington suggests:

With the demands of partisanship laid upon them they dedicated their pens to successive causes. The war first summoned them, then the contest with populism, then the cause of the federal union, and finally the acrimonious struggle against French romantic philosophies and the party of Jefferson. Their verse became increasingly militant, and the note of satire rose above the occasional bucolic strains. For the serious business of poetic warfare they sought inspiration from Churchill and the contemporary English satirists....satire could be as useful to a gentleman as the small sword, and the literary dueling of rival partisans went on briskly...They sharpened their quills to a needle point, dipped them in bitter ink, and pricked their opponents as mercilessly as English gentlemen were doing.²³

It is for this understandable imitation of the more notable and successful English poets that some, like Parrington, as quoted above, have been quick to dismiss the Wits. However, one has to consider the intent and not the method when placing the Wits in the pantheon of early American poets. That is to say, as Henry Beers has pointed out:

at the close of the Revolutionary War, the members of the group found themselves reunited for a few years at Hartford, they set themselves to combat, with the weapon of satire, the influences towards lawlessness and separatism which were delaying the adoption of the Constitution.²⁴

It was at this point of history, with the inherent weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation, an overreaction to England's tyrannical rule that was so convincingly demonstrated by Shays' Rebellion, that the dangers provoked by an intentionally powerless government frightened the ruling class, including, of course, the members of the Hartford Wits. And so, correct as Beers' assertion may be, they would first have to revise the American creation narrative in order to complete the separation so completely sought by the Declaration of Independence. At the same time, these poet-patriots would also have to recast European prejudices as to the inferiority and unsophistication of the American colonists.

The composition of the Hartford Wits was made up of as many as ten men, yet for the sake of clarity, the unit will focus on four poems, Joel Barlow's *The Vision of Columbus*; David Humphreys' *Poem Addressed to the Armies of the United States of America*; John Trumbull's *M'Fingal*; and *The Anarchiad*, a collaborative effort by the brightest lights of the Hartford Wits. These works will help move the narrative that arcs across two historical periods of early America, namely the revolutionary, and Federalist eras. The most important work of the the colonial era was undoubtedly Joel Barlow's *The Vision of Columbus*. And yet, Columbus' place in the early American narrative was markedly different than it is today.

New Countries Need New Myths

Prior to the Revolutionary War, the colonists assumed themselves to be English citizens in good standing, hence, based their national identity on all that was British. They were proud of the English blood that flowed in their veins and of the good fortune that that entailed. Therefore, in the colonists' founding narrative, the most important explorer of the New World was the English explorer, John Cabot.²⁵ From their pre-Revolution perspective, it was unthinkable that anyone but an Englishman would have played a part in the discovery of these new lands, and certainly not some popish wanderer who may have chanced upon the land while sailing

under the Spanish flag. In short, although images of Columbus are so prevalent across present day United States, back then erecting a monument to him any place in the colonies would have been as absurd a proposition as today placing a statue of the Prime Minister of Australia on the National Mall in Washington D.C. Yet, after winning their independence in the war with England, this loose collection of 13 disjointed, squabbling states was in desperate need of a new national narrative. Separation from England meant much more than a cutting of political ties; cultural and historical ties also must be severed. In doing so, a persistent embarrassing misconception could also be addressed, namely, the notion that America was inferior to Europe and therefore had nothing of cultural value to offer to the world.

This outlook was largely based on European prejudices towards all things American, both indigenous and colonial. Moreover, this view was propagated by the French naturalist Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, who incorrectly theorized that biological degeneration was an inevitable outcome of hot, humid climates, and, given the absence of large mammals such as the elephant in the North American continent, inhabitants of the Americas must be, by default, inferior to Europeans.²⁶ By the same token, colonists had long harbored the suspicion that they were seen by Europe as insignificant provincials. This understandably fostered a sense of inferiority which fueled a competitive nature already present in the Founding Fathers, especially since, as members of the American aristocracy, they had aspirations of being seen as great men of renown and culture. With America's emergence as an independent nation, to fully separate from England would require a new narrative, one that predated the British entry to the New World. What was needed was a way to dispel these misconceptions, and more importantly, replace Cabot with Columbus as the icon of European presence in the New World.

In 1787, as the tercentennial of Columbus was approaching, Joel Barlow, with the help of the other Wits, published his epic poem, *The Vision of Columbus*. Retelling the history of the Americas, it sought to remove the idea of English primacy in the New World as completely as the revolutionaries had toppled the statue of King George III in New York City. Lehman proposes that:

Joel Barlow also attempted to create a national mythology around a hero...he chose an Italian explorer. His epic poem *The Vision of Columbus*, first written in March 1780 and later revised as *The Columbiad*, featured Christopher Columbus as an ancestor and a herald of the Americans of the 18th century.... In 1828, Washington Irving would champion Columbus as part of American tradition with his three volume biography, yet another myth that later authors built on the foundation of the Wits' ideas.²⁷

Although at the time, a new poetics focusing on romanticism was emerging under the masterful pairing of Wordsworth and Coleridge,²⁸ Barlow endeavored to write a traditional epic poem in the hopes that this time-tested form would lend credibility and dignity to his work. His decision would prove to be a successful one.

In *The Vision of Columbus*, Barlow conceptualized a conversation between Christopher Columbus and Hesper, an angel representing the west and the logical culmination of cultural and political advancements that had started with western movement from ancient Rome and Greece and had further developed with each iteration as it spread westward across Europe and then to the Americas. Downcast, and confined to a Spanish prison cell after his third voyage, Columbus is transported by Hesper to a mountaintop in North America to observe all the greatness yet to come from his "discovery" of the New World. The visions his vantage point affords begin with the magnificence of the Aztec and Incan empires (conveniently predating and supplanting

England's presence in the Americas), and extend through the Revolutionary War and the ensuing rise to greatness that Barlow (and the other devotees of the "Rising Glory School"), believed awaited this burgeoning nation.²⁹ The notion of the Rising Glory school of thought was that history had a predictable nature to it, hence the rise and fall of governments and empires. The Wits embraced this idyllic notion to bring the devout, hard working culture of the Connecticut Valley to the entire nation.³⁰ Barlow's epic was a tremendous success, both across the colonies and in Europe. In fact, according to Steven Courtney, "George Washington bought twenty copies, Benjamin Franklin bought six, and King Louis XVI of France, to whom Barlow had dedicated it, bought twenty-five."³¹ But the most important effect of *The Vision of Columbus'* success was that many cities began erecting statues in Columbus' honor. Of these, the most notable was in New York City, where an obelisk dedicated to Columbus featured uniquely Barlowian images such as Hesper and Columbus bursting forth from the prison cell.³² According to Pencak, et al,:

The year 1792 offered Americans a rare opportunity to develop the Columbian theme, to define themselves, as all centenary years since have emerged as invitations to employ the symbolic Columbus in the service of particular notions of Americanism. A number of celebrations occurred throughout the republic...In New York, Pintard's Tammany Society ... erected an illuminated shaft or monument to the memory of Columbus...From its base - a globe emerging out of clouds and chaos - a pyramidal shaft arose, depicting on its four sides mythologized scenes from the Admiral's life...The "Genius of Liberty" (or Barlow's angel) ultimately appears before the dejected Columbus and cheers him - pointing to the Tammany monument itself, "sacred to his memory, reared by the Columbian Order," and allowing him to see the glorious legacy of his discovery, which America now embodied. ³³

To illustrate the impact of *The Vision of Columbus*, an excerpt depicting Hesper's emancipation of Columbus follows:

The growing splendor fill'd the astonish'd room,
And gales ethereal breathed a glad perfume;
Mild in the midst a radiant seraph shone,
Robed in the vestments of the rising sun;...
The Seraph spoke; and now before them lay
(The doors unbarr'd) a steep ascending way,
That, through disparting shades, arose on high,
Reach'd o'er the hills and lengthen'd up the sky,
Op'd a fair summit, grac'd with rising flowers,
Sweet odours breathing through celestial bowers,

Led by the Power, the hero gain'd the height,

A touch from heaven sublimed his mortal sight,³⁴

In *The Vision of Columbus*, Barlow manipulated representations of Native Americans and Native American history to refute European claims to cultural supremacy, to advance American nationalism, and to create a distinct, independent American source for Enlightenment ideals.³⁵ The net effect of Barlow's poem was to shape an entirely new American identity by changing its founding narrative to one that had a completely non-English perspective.³⁶

With deeply religious overtones, this hymn of praise, across the expanse of nine books, is the ideal setting for an epic narrative. Yet this account would be a completely new creation story that went to great lengths to predate the arrival of the Englishman in the New World. According to Danielle Conger:

As Robert Richardson has noted, Barlow hoped "to show that America need not look to Europe or to antiquity for gods, heroes, law or civilization; he aimed, deliberately, to write a poem that would show that there was an American myth adequate to the American adventure."³⁷

As foundational a work as it was, *The Vision of Columbus*, which Barlow later nearly doubled in length and recast as *The Columbiad*, was not the last word that the Hartford Wits would have to say on the conflict between this emerging nation and their English oppressors. David Humphreys would also boldly join the fray.

Answering the Call

David Humphreys continued to climb the ranks of the Continental Army until arriving at a zenith as a trusted member of George Washington's inner circle, on near-equal footing with Alexander Hamilton, a position of which, understandably, he was quite proud. He always found time for self-reflection and poetry. It would be difficult to fault him if occasionally into his prose the scent of hubris mingled with his love of his Commander in Chief and friend. As Howard noted, "Humphreys became a good staff officer, one of very few poets whose writings Washington would read, and a great and persistent admirer of his superior. The appointment was the most influential single event in his life."³⁸ For example, of his adoration both for Washington and self,

Let others sing his deeds in arms,

A nation saved and conquest's charms:

Posterity shall hear.

'Twas mine, return'd from Europe's courts,

To share his thoughts, partake his sports,

And soothe his partial ear.³⁹

In 1780, he penned a verse aimed at encouraging his fellow soldiers in the Continental Army with the dual-

edged sword of patriotism and ambition: love of country on one side, promise of land in the Ohio territory on the other. According to Howard:

The work was called, with conscious dignity, *A Poem Addressed to the Armies of the United States of America*, and its three hundred and fifty lines were designed to inspire the American troops “with perseverance and fortitude, thro’ every species of difficulty and danger, to continue their exertions for the defense of their country, and the preservation of its liberties.”⁴⁰

Humphreys goes on to detail the situation before England recast the colonists from sons to slaves, and then in his two discourses first exhorts his fellow soldiers to advance the fight for independence, then to draw upon the hope of better days that said independence shall produce.

The concluding lines from the poem illustrate not only Humphrey’s patriotic call to arms, but the aforementioned notion of America’s:

And oh may heav’n! when all our toils are past,
Crown with such happiness our days at last
So rise our sons, like our great fires of old,
In freedom’s cause, unconquerably bold...
And thou Supreme! Whose hand sustains this ball,
Before whose nod the nations rise and fall,
Propitious smile and shed diviner charms,
On this blest land, the queen of arts and arms:
Make the great empire rise on wisdom’s plan,
The feat of bliss, and last retreat of man.⁴¹

Lehman and Nawrocki observe that, like Barlow’s *Vision of Columbus*. this poem too, was well received and sold numerous copies on both sides of the Atlantic.⁴² In fact it was reprinted in Paris in 1786,⁴³ and in 1804, his collected works were published “with a list of subscribers headed by their Catholic Majesties, the King and Queen of Spain, and followed by Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and numerous dukes and chevaliers.”⁴⁴

One has to admire the patriotic spirit of Humphreys and his continued production despite the rigors of war. In fact, he, Barlow and Dwight all served in the Continental Army. Of those in the inner circle of the Wits, John Trumbull was the lone holdout from military service. However, as Bulwer-Lytton’s well-known adage would prove, for Trumbull, a pen would prove to be a mightier weapon than any sword could hope to be.

Join or Die

John Trumbull's reputation as a poet and satirist comes predominantly from his epic poem, *M'Fingal*. While at Yale he enthusiastically embraced the satire of the meteoric English poet, Charles Churchill.⁴⁵ He also closely studied the satirical masterpiece by Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*. According to Leon Howard, "His most intimate friends were aware of his talent for verse satire and his considerable skill 'in the Hudibrastic.'"⁴⁶ Yet Trumbull seemed somewhat reluctant at the outset. Adds Howard, to Trumbull:

Satire was justified under three circumstances: preservation of one's self against personal injury, the protection of innocence against open malevolence or secret slander, and the defense of the public good against the vices of particular individuals.⁴⁷

To the political observer, the question may arise, why was satire the chosen genre for so much political rhetoric? According to Annie Russell Marble, it is "because this form was then - and has been ever since one of the most effective weapons in literature."⁴⁸ It also was extremely effective because, in setting the argument at a typical town hall meeting, Trumbull was able to bring the war down to a level to which his entire audience could relate, much like what Thomas Paine accomplished with *Common Sense*. Trumbull's time in Boston under John Adams' tutelage brought him into the center of the political storm that was brewing in New England.⁴⁹ It was here that in publishing one of his first works, "*An Elegy on the Times*", he put himself squarely in Adams' vision as an emerging talent to cultivate for the future of the cause. The following year, at the urging of Adams, John Hancock, and other patriot leaders, Trumbull began writing his magnum opus, *M'Fingal*. Marble suggests that Trumbull carefully crafted his characters:

M'Fingal, the Loyalist is a well-conceived and sustained character...In contrast was the character of Honorius, the staunch Whig, generally considered a portrait of John Adams...Honorius speaks boldly regarding the arrogance and injustice of England and her declining power.⁵⁰

One gets a sense of Trumbull's playful, yet effective satire in these lines from Canto One of *M'Fingal*:

—For ages blest, thus Britain rose,
The terror of encircling foes;
Her heroes rul'd the bloody plain;
Her conqu'ring standard aw'd the main;
Unharrass'd by maternal care,
Each rising province flourish'd fair;
Whose various wealth with lib'ral hand,
By far o'er-paid the parent-land.

But tho' so bright her sun might shine,
'Twas quickly hasting to decline,
With feeble rays, too weak t' assuage,
The damps, that chill the eve of age."
"For states, like men, are doom'd as well
Th' infirmities of age to feel;
"Thus now while hoary years prevail,
Good Mother Britain seem'd to fail;
Her back bent, crippled with the weight
Of age and debts and cares of state:
For debts she ow'd, and those so large
That twice her wealth could not discharge;
And now 'twas thought so high they'd grown,
She'd break, and come upon the town;
Her arms, of nations once the dread,
She scarce could lift above her head;
Grim Death had put her in his scroll,
Down on to the execution roll;⁵¹

Trumbull deftly bestows the name Honorius on the Whig protagonist to suggest that the Tory, M'Fingal, then must be less than "honorable." Leon Howard theorizes that Trumbull actually created two protagonists, one for each side of the argument.⁵² In so doing, Trumbull gained credibility by satirizing both sides of the political aisle, although the Tories bore the brunt of Trumbull's scorn. Trumbull's gift for satire made *M'Fingal* the most popular poem of the Revolution, enjoying a run of more than thirty editions.⁵³

Pick Your Poison: Too Much or Too Little Government?

Up to this point, this discussion has focused on the individual contributions of the Hartford Wits, yet their collaborative efforts produced some of their best work. Of these *The Anarchiad* is certainly worthy of notice. After Barlow replaced Cabot with Columbus on the pedestal of territorial prominence with *The Vision of Columbus*, Trumbull dismantled the Loyalists with *M'Fingal*, and Humphreys rallied the troops in his *Address to the Armies of the United States of America*, the end of the Revolutionary War would bring fleeting moments of

tranquility, but lasting peace seemed yet another thing.

In writing in the *Pleiades of Connecticut*, an article from 1865, F. Sheldon noted:

The times looked gloomy. The nation, relieved from the foreign pressure which had bound the Colonies together, seemed tumbling to pieces; each State was an independent sovereignty, free to go to ruin in its own way. The necessity for a strong central government to replace English rule became evident to all judicious men...The Hartford Wits had fought out the war against King George; they now took up the pen against King Mob, and placed themselves in rank with the friend of order, good government, and union.⁵⁴

It was in these uncertain times that the Hartford Wits stepped forward to produce their best collaborative political satire.

The years following the war found David Humphreys on diplomatic service in Europe. While there, he came across *The Rolliad*, a mock epic that savagely satirized the British government.⁵⁵ When he returned to America in 1786, he came home to a country with astonishingly different attitudes. Gone was the optimism of a new day of freedom, replaced instead by pessimism and uncertainty about the government's ability to protect its citizens' natural rights of life, liberty and property. In light of this upheaval, Jefferson's cautionary words from the Declaration about a nation "exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within" rang especially true.

After over a decade of economic inactivity due to the Revolutionary War and the preceding taxation struggles, the confederacy's inability to settle its debts both to its soldiers and to foreign creditors was foremost on many minds.⁵⁶ Moreover, the intentional weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation provided too little structure for the thirteen states who, like an adolescent for the first time out from under their parent's control, were now ill prepared to experience unlimited freedom without a strong centralized government. In these turbulent times, Washington's fears were understandable, that "the Articles were a recipe for anarchy in postwar America, destined to dissolve his legacy of American independence into a confused constellation of at best regional sovereignties, vulnerable to the predatory plans of hovering European powers,"⁵⁷ seemingly waiting for this experiment in self-government to fail miserably. Washington wasn't alone in his apprehension. For many of the aristocracy, anarchy seemed a very real threat.

This fear would come to bear as Humphreys was travelling from Mount Vernon to his home in Connecticut.⁵⁸ A group of desperate farmers, in an all-too-familiar situation of having to forestall the loss of their property at the dispassionate hands of the taxman, took part in a protracted rebellion across western Massachusetts led by Daniel Shays. Pressed back into military service, Colonel Humphreys commanded a regiment of federal troops to put down the uprising, which, after going on for nearly half a year, had caught the wary attention of many of the upper class. As similar protests broke out on a much smaller scale in Maine, New York, Connecticut and Pennsylvania, those who had amassed a fortune started to realize just how much they had to lose.⁵⁹ Although Shays' Rebellion disbanded at the first sign of federal troops, the die had been cast and much greater attention was given to what up to then had been merely a philosophical question as to the viability of the intentionally weak system of government under the Articles of Confederation.

Commenting on Washington's views on the fragile state of the union, Joseph Ellis comments:

There is no question that Washington wanted the newly independent United States to become a republic in which consensus rather than coercion was the central political value. But he wanted that republic to cohere as a union rather than as a confederation of sovereign states. In his capacity as commander in chief, he could testify that the confederation model nearly lost the war. And if it persisted in its current form, he believed it would lose the peace.⁶⁰

Amid famine, exposure and disease in a brutal winter at Valley Forge, Alexander Hamilton had witnessed first hand the folly of a government lacking the ability to decisively act. Regarding Hamilton's post-war sentiments about the intentionally weak Articles, Ellis adds "By overcorrecting out of fears of despotism, they had carried the country in the opposite direction, which now verged on anarchy. This fear of political power per se had reached epidemic proportions."⁶¹ Ellis further explains:

...(James) Madison had insisted that Shays' Rebellion constituted just that crisis, interpreting the insurrection as symptomatic of looming anarchy or dissolution of the current confederation into a series of smaller sovereignties....Madison stressed the horrific consequences that would ensue if and when the confederation imploded. "The question whether it is possible and worthwhile to preserve the union of the States must be speedily decided some way or other," he wrote to (James) Monroe. "Those who are indifferent to the preservation would do well to look forward to the consequences of its extinction."⁶²

Luckily for Madison, help was on the way, but only if enough interest could be generated among the states and the people. Madison, Hamilton, and, to a lesser extent, John Jay, took the lead in propagating public support for a convention to examine what could be done to strengthen the Articles, or better yet, replace them with an entirely new political structure, featuring a strong central government. To do so would amount to essentially staging a second revolution, this time among a populace that was lukewarm on the idea at best. The three men accomplished this through the publication of a series of newspaper essays that would later become known as the Federalist Papers, as well as through other methods of more personal persuasion and social intercourse.⁶³ Convincing Washington to attend the convention lent credibility to the proceedings, which helped convince the other undecided states that they should attend.⁶⁴

Some of those attending the Constitutional Convention were more afraid of the loss of personal freedoms under too much government than they were of the instability of too little government. These detractors, known collectively as the Antifederalists, would become increasingly more vocal, especially as the Constitution was set before the states for ratification. Those in support of stronger centralized governance were called Federalists who counted among their number, most of the more recognizable and trusted men in America. They therefore had the upper hand and could rally the upper class. However, for the Federalist cause, much of the heavy lifting in swaying public opinion would be done by the Hartford Wits. In light of the ensuing struggle for the future direction of the nation, both sides could see that public opinion would need to be shaped, and that their efforts would help further define the emerging American identity.

Lehman and Nawrocki suggest that, in support of the Federalist cause:

The Wits began to get involved, collaborating on a long satire called *The Anarchiad: A Poem on the Restoration of Chaos and Substantial Night*. They were worried that the new obsession with

individual freedom would lead to a breakdown of society in which “every rogue shall literally do what is right in his own eyes.” And where would this lead? Back to tyranny as it so often does.⁶⁵

Recalling from his time in England the impact of the satirical poem, *The Rolliad*, Colonel Humphreys proposed using a similar strategy to lampoon those obstructing the ratification of the Constitution. He enlisted the help of his friends, Barlow, Hopkins, Trumbull and others to accomplish this. They brought to focus the dangers and inconsistencies of life under the old Articles while trumpeting the advantages of the new Constitution, all the while taking “a prophetic view of the stormy future, if thirteen independent states should divide this territory between them.”⁶⁶

A few excerpts from *The Anarchiad* follow, highlighting some of the rhetoric employed by Humphreys, et al. In response to the perils stemming from such lawlessness as Shays’ Rebellion, the poem begins with the character, Chaos, harkening back to a figure mentioned in the close of Alexander Pope’s masterful satire, *The Dunciad*:

Lo, THE COURT FALLS; th’ affrighted judges run,
Clerks, Lawyers, Sheriffs, every mothers’ son.
The stocks, the gallows lose th’ expected prize,
See the jails open, and the thieves arise.
Thy constitution, Chaos, is restor’d,
Law sinks before thy uncreating word;
Thy hand unbars th’ unfathomed gulf of fate,
And deep in darkness whelms the new-born state.⁶⁷

And in Federalist verse that echoes with Join or Die, the rallying cry of the Sons of Liberty, the poem paints this vibrant picture of centralized government:

But know, ye favor’d race, one potent head
Must rule your States, and strike your foes with dread,
The finance regulate, the trade control,
Live through the empire, and accord the whole
Ere death invades, and night’s deep curtain falls,
Through ruined realms the voice of UNION calls;
On you she calls! Attend the warning cry:

It is unfortunate that the Hartford Wits have faded somewhat from the purview of modern historians because it is difficult to fully ascertain the effectiveness of *The Anarchiad* as well as their other individual works in swaying public support for ratification of the Constitution. However, returning to correspondence of the times, their impact takes on a surprisingly higher degree of importance, not only with regard to ratification, but more importantly in creating a new American identity. Dr. Lemuel Hopkins, a secondary member of the Wits, wrote in regard to *The Anarchiad*, that in Connecticut, the poem had “given a considerable check to a certain kind of popular intrigue in this state.”⁶⁹ Moreover, Humphreys, in correspondence with Washington, relates “I would have sent you several of the late papers ...which contained performances written by Mr. Trumbull, Mr. Barlow, & myself, in a style and manner, I believe somewhat superior to common newspaper publications: but the demand has been so uncommonly great for those papers (in which *The Anarchiad* had been published) that there is not a single one to be obtained. In some instances, the force of ridicule has been found of more efficacy than the force of argument, against the Anti-federalists...It was pleasant enough to observe how some leading Men, of erroneous politics, were stung to the soul by shafts of satire.”⁷⁰ Frank Landon Humphreys speaks of the success that *The Anarchiad* enjoyed because it “...was extensively copied. It at once attracted attention and was read by men of all political parties.” To this end, “The Anarchiad more than served its turn. It did much to hearten the supporters of good government and to render the views of its opponents ridiculous.” Humphreys reported its effectiveness in a letter to Washington “Pointed ridicule is found to be of more efficacy than serious argumentation.”

It is at this juncture of American history that the American identity begins to take on a sense of unity, as for many citizens the perception of the term “United States” evolves into a singular, rather than a plural noun.⁷¹ And yet, in choosing to emulate the mock epic that had proven so effective in English politics in the first decades after the Glorious Revolution as the form for their poetic satire, the Hartford Wits had unfortunately chosen a genre that was already on the wane in Europe. Somewhat ironically, while seeking to make the greatest impact, they greatly hindered the credibility of *The Anarchiad*, and most of the Wits’ individual bodies of work, both for European readers and for those of the modern age. To quote Eric Lehman, “unfortunately, almost all literature based on politics becomes of the moment rather than immortal, personal rather than universal.”⁷²

Passing the Baton

And so, in closing, returning to my original preoccupation with why history has forgotten the Hartford Wits, and whether, reconsidered for their political rather than artistic contributions, they might occupy a more prominent place among modern scholars’ considerations, it is helpful to see the Wits as the fledgling country’s first literary movement. Eric Lehman astutely observes:

Although they seem obvious choices for American Literature classes or anthologies, as either early examples of satire, or simply as the literature of the Revolution, few teachers or editors follow a scrupulous model of literary progression. They usually skip directly from Jonathan Edwards’s sermons and Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography to the 19th century as if the years between were too full of debate and violence to produce literature other than the “creative nonfiction” of Thomas Jefferson.⁷³

In fact, Lehman also notes that Trumbull's *M'Fingal* was once a common piece of satirical verse taught in classrooms for the better part of 50 years, until eventually being replaced by Longfellow's *Hiawatha*.⁷⁴ Clearly, American literature did not go on hiatus during the most formative years of our founding. In fact, the Wits were merely the first wave in a succession of American literary contributors. Following on their footsteps was the Knickerbocker Club, which today rings a bell a little less muffled than that that harkens from Hartford, but still far from the top of most historians' minds. When one considers that this secondary literary movement featured such luminaries as James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving, they emerge much more fully from obscurity, leaving the Wits far in the shadowy past.⁷⁵ The reasons for the Wits' fall from prominence are many.

First, while we can all agree that as each successive generation of educators comes forth, the content that supports the subject matter changes to accommodate their personal tastes, these substitutions should not supersede the historical record. Perhaps an appreciation of the Hartford Wits as the first wave of American poets and writers might help to introduce their works back into the conversation.

As noted before, to those looking solely through the artistic lens, dismissing their poetry as tedious or unsophisticated is easily done. Yet Annie Russell Marble correctly asserts that their contributions were not offered in the spirit of works of art:

the style is often crude and bombastic. The beginnings of aesthetic culture in the later Colonial decades seemed to have suffered a serious interruption. The verse of the Revolution was inspired by no devotion to the fine arts, but rather was a vile weapon for the ridicule of enemies and the encouragement of soldiers in the wearisome conflict.⁷⁶

Perhaps part of the problem lies in the personal responses of educators and historians when encountering the poetry of the Wits, especially given the length and structure of the mock epic, which has long since faded from prominence. Lehman acknowledges:

I have to admit that most of the Wits' poetry is simply not to my personal taste...the question should be, not why don't we like the poetry of the Wits today, but why did the people of that time appreciate it? How did it influence others? What were its successes and failures? How does it shine a light on past and future literature?⁷⁷

Once sensible questions like these begin to be posed in today's classrooms, a more accurate light to be shone not just on the Wits, but the true political tenor of these crucial times will emerge. Moreover, in shifting the conversation from the Language Arts to the History classroom, they may finally be seen as lesser known but every bit as influential Founding Fathers. Our students can only benefit from historical inquiry on this scale.

Another point of consideration, touched upon earlier, is the fleeting nature of political satire in that it must speak to the times in which the intended audience is living. And yet, as Lehman and Nawrocki put it, "Unfortunately, almost all literature based on politics becomes of the moment rather than immortal, personal rather than universal."⁷⁸ Because political writing has such a limited shelf life, to fully grasp its intent one has to delve deep into the record to bring meaning to the barbs and references contained therein. However, again, the effort expended can bring new meaning to our students' understanding of the past.

And so, even though, regrettably, some modern critics may wish to overlook the cultural and historic contributions of the Hartford Wits, this unit will hopefully, in some small way, begin to turn the spotlight back towards a more favorable and appreciative treatment of these early poet-patriots. It is hoped that students will come to a better appreciation of these passionate men who, despite their perceived lack of poetic sophistication, more than made up for this with a patriotic zeal that would help stoke the fires of the early independence and Federalist movements and forge a new American identity far removed from the Colonists' perceived modest beginnings as insignificant English provincials. Perhaps Marble most deserves the final word: "In a survey of this dawning literature, we must confess that it was immature as well as sincere, that the crudities of form often hide the true merit."⁷⁹

Strategies

Utilizing the Google Classroom environment, students will engage in ongoing activities including close reading and annotation of primary sources, mainly works of the Hartford Wits, and secondary sources such as a study of many lyrics from the Hamilton musical (with consideration of what may and may not be of historical value.) It is important for me to get my students talking about what they are learning, and structured academic discourse such as class-wide Keep It, Park It or Junk It discussion activities are of tremendous value. (A quick internet search under the title should reveal a number of videos that illustrate this immensely useful discussion activity.) The discussion is always followed closely the next day with the constructing of their historical interpretations, which are written responses to the Unit Focus and Lesson Focus Questions as discussed in the next section below. Given that multiple choice assessments have no relation to how problems are solved in the working world of which my students will someday be a part, the historical interpretations serve as the summative assessments in my class. I encourage students to see this process as an open book/open note unit final.

The Historical Inquiry Process

My entire 8th Grade U.S. History course is oriented towards answering the Course Level Question, *An American Identity: How has the definition of being an American changed over time?* In a cascading manner, each Unit Focus Question takes this question and breaks it down into a summarizing inquiry that helps to answer part of the Course Level Question. And, within the parameters of the Unit Focus Question, each lesson is further broken down into a series of Lesson Focus Questions, which in turn seek to answer the Unit Focus Question. The beauty of this type of hierarchical organization of the focus questions is that as each student writes their historical interpretation for each unit, they are actually writing what will become a full length, culminating essay on what they have learned across the entire year. As they write in the Google Classroom environment, their work is easily retrievable and, at the end of the year, they can organize their interpretations into a final paper of which they can be truly proud because it provides their answer to the Course Level Question.

The learning objectives and the focus questions found in this unit of study are fully compliant with both the Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects 6 - 12, from the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for the State of California, as well as the California History-Social Science Framework for Grade Eight.

Class Activities

The excerpts contained herein are the four texts that I will teach as classroom activities. Given the remote historical period of these poems, a considerable amount of vocabulary development and other front loading will be necessary to help my students be successful. As noted before, these are lessons with which I am quite certain they will struggle. The following are the Unit Focus Questions that will guide the inquiry of *Poetry in Notion: The Hartford Wits and the Emergence of an American Identity* throughout our course of study.

Course Level Question: An American Identity: How has the definition of being an American changed over time?

Build Up to a Revolution Unit Focus Question: To what extent did the limits on colonial freedoms (i.e., our rights as Englishmen, the Magna Carta, etc.) contribute to the development of an American identity?

Pertinent Lesson Focus Question(s): How did David Humphreys' poem, *Address to the Armies of the United States of America*, affect the outcome of the Revolutionary War, and what it meant to be an American?

How did John Trumbull's poem, *M'Fingal*, help the patriot cause and why was it well-received by Patriots yet also by Loyalists and Neutralists?

To what extent did Joel Barlow's poem, *The Vision of Columbus*, help shape a new American identity? (Although this is not a course in poetry and it will be understood that students are taught how to discuss literature in their Language Arts classes, the emphasis during the discussions that point toward answers to these Lesson Focus Questions will concern the reasons why poetry was chosen by the Hartford Wits as a means of influencing political and cultural opinions.)

Historical Foundations of the US Constitution Unit Focus Question: How did the weaknesses in the Articles of Confederation help frame the definition of what it meant to be an American?

Pertinent Lesson Focus Question(s): To what extent did the Articles of Confederation protect individual rights?

How did the Hartford Wits' poem, *The Anarchiad*, help bring about the ratification of the U.S. Constitution? (Here the discussion emphasis will be similar to that of the pertinent lesson focus discussion above.)

Timing of the Curriculum Unit

Due to the vast scope of this course on American history, the scope and sequence of "*Poetry in Notion: The Hartford Wits and the Emergence of an American Identity*" will actually be interspersed across two units of study, Build Up to a Revolution, and The Historical Foundations of the U.S. Constitution. This unit will first be sequenced in with the colonial era and the factors that contributed to the deterioration of relations between the colonists and their once-loved European relations. A major focus of the unit will be looking at the early colonial period as a time perceived to be idyllic until, after the Seven Years War, English policies would usher in the unrest that would continue to plague the colonists while, unbeknownst to them, a new American identity began to emerge. As the colonists plunge headlong into the Revolutionary War, students will see the heating up of rhetoric in authors like Thomas Paine and also in the panegyric and satirical contributions of the Hartford Wits. Moreover, given the overwhelming success of the Broadway musical, *Hamilton*, the class will also analyze many songs in this runaway success, with the necessary proviso that, unlike the primary sources from the Hartford Wits, much of what is presented in the musical bears little resemblance to actual attitudes

and emotions of the Founding Fathers.

Later, towards the end of the Fall semester, students will learn about the historic events and sentiments that led the newly independent nation to see that, although they may have been free of England's heavy-handed policies, they were far from free of serious "convulsions from within." It will be particularly important to present the work of the Hartford Wits' *The Anarchiad* when students come to consider the impact of the *Federalist Papers* on public opinion.

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Resources for Teachers

Eric D. Lehman - I have tremendous respect for Mr. Lehman, as well as an author with whom he co-writes, Amy Nawrocki. The two seem to have a positive slant on the Wits and their rightful place as political activists more than just poets. Of particular value for those looking for a cogent argument for recasting them as patriots who were poets, Lehman's *Holes in the Canon: The Hartford Wits and Literary History*, which can be found at <http://queenmobs.com/2016/12/hartford-wits-and-literary-history>. The book they co-wrote, *Literary Connecticut*, was also insightful.

Annie Russell Marble - Writing from quite some distance in time, Marble's perspective seems much like Mr. Lehman's. Two of her books, *Heralds of Literature*, and *The Hartford Wits*, were quite helpful in researching this unit.

Michael D. Hattem - I had the good fortune to meet Mr. Hattem during the intensive summer session at Yale this summer, where he is finishing his dissertation called *Past and Prologue: History and the Politics of Memory in the American Revolution*. His insights on the Hartford Wits were nothing short of transformative. Over lunch, we started talking about this subject, especially the paradigm shift from Cabot to Columbus. We were almost still there when the dinner crowd was entering.

Henry A. Beers, Vernon L. Parrington and Leon Howard - Three historians on whose shoulders I've stood on for this unit, they, like Marble, are voices from the past with so much to say on the Hartford Wits and early American history. For those seeking information on Timothy Dwight, whose work is not covered in this curriculum unit, Howard's book would prove especially helpful. Two of Dwight's best-known works are *Conquest of Canaan*, a biblical allegory on the wresting of Connecticut from British control, and *The Triumph of Infidelity*, a scathing indictment of Jeffersonian democracy.

Joseph Ellis - Starting with his book, *Founding Brothers*, which I read near the beginning of my career, I have found his work to always be insightful and thought-provoking. For this unit, I focused more on *The Quartet*.

Pauline Meier - Another favorite historian, her work has a straightforward approach that I always find refreshing and quite readable. Sadly, *Ratification* was one of the last books she wrote before her death in 2013.

Larry Tise - For those looking for early American history from a Yale perspective, I found his book, *The American Counter Revolution*, invaluable. While Phillis Wheatley is relatively well-known for her poetic contributions (and rightly so), I was intrigued to find another African American poet, Jupiter Hammond. Tise includes an entire chapter on *Black American Friends of Order*.

Gordon S. Wood - I read three of his books in preparation for this unit. While I didn't bring in much of his content, he is a historian for whom I have a great deal of respect. The books I read were *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776 - 1787*, and *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different*. These would be of great interest to anyone in search of an in-depth understanding of the political issues and intrigues around the founding of our nation.

William Goetzmann - I found him to be an expert on Enlightenment thought. His book, *Beyond the Revolution: A History of American Thought from Paine to Pragmatism*, contained a very insightful chapter called *The Writer and the Republic*.

Some other works that were of interest, even if some of them did not make it into the unit, would be: *The Miscellaneous Works of Colonel Humphreys* - David Humphreys; *The Life and Times of David Humphreys* - Frank Landon Humphreys; *The First American Satirists* - Olinnifred B. Hind; *The Pleiades of Connecticut* - F. Sheldon in *The Atlantic Monthly* - February 1865; *The Hartford Wits* - Andy Piascik; and for general political poetry, the anthology, *The Faber Book of Political Verse* - Tom Paulin.

Resources for Students

The following texts supply the poems that I am excerpting for my class activities. However, due to the infrequent demand for these books, online resources may prove more convenient.

The *Miscellaneous Works of Colonel Humphreys*. By David Humphreys, New York, NY: Bibliolife, LLC - Originally published by Hodge, Allen and Campbell. This reprinted book contains many of Humphreys' poems. In addition, of course, to "An Address to the Armies of the United States of America," of particular value would be "A Poem on Industry" (among other issues, denouncing the evils of slavery), "The Glory of America" (an excellent example of the Rising Glory school), and "Sonnet XII - On Receiving the News of the Death of General Washington" (an elegy that would sequence well during the study of the Federal era.)

Much of the rest of the Wits' body of work can be found in Parrington's *The Connecticut Wits*. For those wishing to access the works of other influential poets and writers of the period, such as Charles Brockden Brown and Philip Freneau, Marble's *Heralds of American Literature* would prove helpful. Moreover, for a more feminine perspective on the Revolutionary era, the works of Mercy Otis Warren and Phillis Wheatley should be consulted and have considerable value. The additional reading recommended in this paragraph would be of complexity and length most appropriate at the high school level.

Notes

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3. Wood, Gordon S. *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 3.
4. Dame, Frederick William. *America's Indomitable Character Volume II: From the Height of Colonialism to Revolution*, 206.
5. Piascik, Andy. *The Connecticut Wits*. <https://connecticuthistory.org/the-hartford-wits/>.
6. Howard, Leon. vii.
7. Beers, Henry A. "The Connecticut Wits" in *The Connecticut Wits and Other Essays*, 2.
8. Tise, Larry E. "Yale College and World Revolution" in *The American Counterrevolution: A Retreat from Liberty 1783 - 1800*, 131.
9. Parrington, Vernon L. "Introduction" in *The Connecticut Wits*, xli.
10. Marble, Annie Russell. "John Trumbull: Satirist and Scholar" in *Heralds of American Literature; A Group of Patriot Writers of the Revolutionary and National Periods*, 125.
11. Lehman, Eric D. and Nawrocki, Amy. "The Revolution of the Hartford Wits" in *Literary Connecticut: The Hartford Wits, Mark Twain and the New Millennium*, 20.
12. Howard, Leon. 133.
13. Parrington, Vernon. xxiii.
14. Beers, Henry. 2.
15. Brown, Irving. "The Hartford Wits" in *The Cambridge Modern History, Volume 7*, 741.
16. Goetzmann, William H. "The Writer and the Republic" in *Beyond the Revolution: A History of American Thought from Paine to Pragmatism*, 141.
17. Lehman, and Nawrocki, 19.
18. Ibid., 24.
19. Fry, Paul H., "Poetry Makes Nothing Happen (Auden): What Does That Mean and Why?"
20. Marble, Annie. 4.
21. Lehman, and Nawrocki, 24-25.
22. Fry, Paul H., in discussion with the author, July 12, 2017.
23. Parrington, Vernon. xxxviii-xxxix.
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25. Hattem, Michael D. "Past and Prologue: History Culture and the American Revolution", 302.
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28. Conger, Danielle E. "Toward a Native American Nationalism: Joel Barlow's *The Vision of Columbus*." 562.
29. Parrington, Vernon. xv.
30. Ibid., p. xvi.
31. Courtney, Steven, "Hartford Wits - Or Were They?". Hartford Courant, August 4, 2002.
32. Hattem, Michael D. in discussion with the author, July 18, 2017.
33. Pencak, William; et al. "Riot and Revelry in Early America", 214-16
34. Barlow, Joel, "*The Vision of Columbus; a Poem in Nine Books*". Evans Early American Collection.
35. Conger, Danielle. 570.
36. Hattem, Michael D. in discussion with the author, July 18, 2017.
37. Conger, Danielle. 562.
38. Howard, Leon. 123.
39. Humphreys, David. "Mount Vernon: An Ode" in *The Miscellaneous Works of Colonel Humphreys*, 68.

40. Howard, Leon. 120.
41. Humphreys, David. 29.
42. Lehman, Eric and Nawrocki, Amy. 23.
43. Marble, Annie. 176-77.
44. Beers, Henry. 7.
45. Howard, Leon. 25.
46. Ibid., 52.
47. Ibid., 61.
48. Marble, Annie. 2.
49. Parrington, Vernon. I-li.
50. Marble, Annie. 129-30.
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53. Beers, Henry. 3.
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56. Maier, Pauline. "Take This or Nothing" in *Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788*, 104.
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67. Parrington, Vernon. 430.
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69. Marble, Annie. 188.
70. Humphreys, David. 279.
71. Ellis, Joseph. 11.
72. Lehman, Eric and Nawrocki, Amy. 25.
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid.
75. Lehman, Eric and Nawrocki,, Amy.30 & 37.
76. Marble, Annie. 9.
77. Lehman, Eric.
78. Lehman, Eric. and Nawrocki, Amy. 25.
79. Marble, Annie. 15.
80. California Department of Education, California Common Core State Standards English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, 92.

Appendix—Implementing District Standards

This curriculum unit is guided by the *Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects 6 - 12* from the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for the State of California. It also addresses the *California History-Social Science Framework for Grade Eight - United States History and Geography: Growth and Conflict*. Under this heading, *The Development of American Constitutional Democracy*, this unit speaks to the more general guiding questions, *Why was there an American Revolution?* and *What were the legacies of the American Revolution?* The course level question, unit focus questions, and lesson focus questions, are amplifications of these inquiries posed by the Framework, yet tailored more to the specific structure of my classroom.

Pursuant to this objective, students will “Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.”⁸⁰ The standards then call for students to take a position on a given topic in relation to a focus question and support that position with evidence from credible sources, while adopting a writing style consistent with that of an academic paper. Since, as a district, we have been implementing the Historical Inquiry model described in this curriculum unit for the past three years, this unit is fully compliant with the California Common Core Standards as well as the state’s History-Social Science Framework.

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